



FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE MAJOR MOTION PICTURE
THE TASHKENT FILES

WHO
KILLED
SHASTRI?

VIVEK RANJAN AGNIHOTRI

BLOOMSBURY

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The Tashkent Files

Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In life, sometimes, magic happens.
This book is the outcome of that magic.

A simple tweet, remembering India's second prime minister on his birth anniversary, triggered a journey that helped me discover myself. My purpose. My truth.

As you will discover in the book, an invisible force guided me to chase the truth of Lal Bahadur Shastri's mysterious death in Tashkent. A simple curiosity led to mammoth research, spread over four years. When I reached a dead end, a desperate call for crowd research resulted in thousands of people collaborating with me to discover the truth. When the film, *The Tashkent Files*, ran for 100 days in theatres, despite all odds, it was the success of all those unknown people who had inspired, helped and collaborated with me in this journey. I thank all of them.

We are not professional researchers. Like citizen journalists, you can call us citizen investigators. When we had started, all we wanted to know was what had happened on the night of Shastri's death. By the time we had finished, we had time-travelled from India's ugly defeat to China in 1962, to the ugly Emergency in 1975. Why was there no place for a rooted leader like Shastri in either Nehru's India or Indira's India? Was India for sale? Who sold it? Is that why Shastri was eliminated? That's why it became critical for me to present that ugly period of Indian politics, which may have been the reason behind the mystery of Shastri's death. This may not be the truth but it can help you probe further. Now, it's for you to discover your own truth.

As I said earlier, we are not professional researchers. We studied whatever material—articles, news reports, documentaries, books, parliament records, primary interviews, informal chats, RTIs, etc.—we could find. We even turned whistle-blowers. I had no idea then that someday, I will be compiling all the main research to write this book. If I had known, I would have done better housekeeping with all the well-marked references. Also, another problem I faced was that a lot of articles quote another article which quotes another article which quotes a book that quotes another book. This makes it almost impossible to find out the original source. This could be because nobody took interest in Shastri's death; hence, there is no definite work. Though I have compiled a list of all sources at the end of the book, if I have missed out on any credit for quoted passages, I very sincerely apologise. It's not intentional. I thank all those whose material we have used for our research. I thank Anuj Dhar for his help in accessing the research material including the parliamentary records.

I don't know if we will ever know the truth of Shastri's mysterious death. But one thing is for certain that in independent India, we, the citizens, have no #RightToTruth. This book is an attempt to take you closer to the truth.

This book has reaffirmed my belief that the impossible takes time, but one should keep hope. For, in the end, *Satyamev Jayate*.

I must thank my editors, Shreya, Praveen and Megha, for being so patient and supportive. I thank all the wonderful people at Bloomsbury.

I thank the Shastri family, especially Mahima Shastri, Mandira Shastri and Sanjay Nath Singh, without whose insights this book would have been incomplete. I thank Tripti Sharma who selflessly doctored my line of thinking with high standards of quality control. I also thank Dimple Kaul for being a soul-sister in my journey.

I remember Kuldip Nayar who, just a few months before his death, chose me to disclose all the secrets he never wrote about or spoke.

I was lucky to have three guiding lights in this journey—my father's diary, my wife Pallavi and my assistant Saurabh 'Docsaab'. They not only brought different perspectives and understanding, but they also became my R&D lab for self-discovery. My father's voice helped me whenever I was confused with my life's purpose. Pallavi's earthy honesty became my source of courage. Docsaab helped me connect with my youth, my roots.

There are hundreds of people who have contributed in many ways. I thank all of them.

In the end, I thank the Divine who chose me as a medium to tell this tale.

ACT I

A Father's Diary

Truth is not always a wonderful thing. Truth can lead to a divorce. Truth instigates wars. Truth can divide countries. Truth can also kill. Truth, indeed, is a deadly thing.

It was 2 October. Gandhi's birthday. The man who lived for truth. And died for truth. His truth got us freedom. His truth, also, divided us.

Like every year, I wanted to tweet on Gandhi.

‘How about a quote from *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*?’

When I was 14, my father had gifted me a copy of Gandhi's autobiography. It must be somewhere in my library. In fact, I have two copies. One I had won in an elocution contest at Sevagram, near Wardha, where Gandhi had once made his ashram, a home to Harijans and many freedom fighters. My father was one of them. After his Namak Andolan Padyatra in 1930 from Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat, Gandhi decided not to return to Sabarmati till India had achieved swaraj (freedom). In 1936, he established his new ashram, spread across 300 acres of land, donated by the industrialist Jamnalal Bajaj. The barren land became Sevagram Ashram, about seven to eight kilometres away from Wardha, where Gandhi stayed until his death in Delhi in 1948.

Besides a woollen shawl, a coconut, some books on Gandhi—*The Story of My Experiments with Truth* being one of them—and a trophy, I was also

awarded the princely sum of ₹1,000. That felt like a million bucks. On my way back, via Nagpur, I bought my father a diary.

Anyone not born in the 1960s/1970s will not understand the importance of a personal diary. Well, think about a day without your mobile phone. The devices may be different, but the intensity of attachment and possession is the same.

A diary not just carried your thoughts, it stored important dates, confidential bank account numbers and many sundry records, notes, reminders, etc. Diaries were also very useful in storing between its pages many important photos, bills, receipts and tiny memorabilia.

I walked alleys after alleys, long and narrow, before I found a shop which sold new-year diaries in the month of October. I was hungry, thirsty and a bit lost in the dark alleys, but it was a great feeling as I was buying a gift for my father with the money I had earned from giving a speech on the Father of the Nation.

‘Do you want your name on it?’ the shopkeeper asked me.

‘Yes. A-G-N-I-H-O-T-R-I,’ I said with pride.

‘Gold or silver?’ he asked.

Choice has a problem; especially, if both the choices are equal and untried. The fear to explore the unknown stands at a 50–50 chance. When faced with a choice, most people become confused. That’s because their conscious mind processes the choices. Since the odds are equal, the mind can’t figure out what’s best for the person. The conscious mind has limitations. But there is a faculty in our brains that works at a subliminal level, which always calculates the best for us. It’s called instinct. It’s like *dadi maa ke haath ka achar*. She can’t ever tell which ingredient made it taste the best. I’ve always depended on my instincts. Even then, my instinct started processing fast.

Would gold suit a simple Sanskrit scholar who has translated all the Vedas...? Silver is less ostentatious... Is silver better for a man who spent

his youth in jail on one appeal from Gandhi...? Who took hardened canes from the British jail warden on his back... Who didn't appeal for pardon even when his back was red from blood... Red... Yes, red is the most apt colour for his sacrifices... But the man only wears white Khadi... Also, his hair has turned white ... pure white... In India, if you are an honest, middle-class man, hair turns white at a very young age... His white hair and white kurta-pyjama complemented his aura that radiated peace ... yes, peace ... the colour of peace is white... Chacha Nehru also flew white pigeons as a symbol of peace... But he also adorns a blood-red rose... Didn't he realise red is a colour of violence? Of conflict... Of danger... Of jealousy... Of Ego... If Chacha Nehru loved peace, why did he adorn the colour of ego...? I remembered my father telling me, 'peace unites, ego divides.' But red is also the colour of the communists. The Soviet communists ... the Red October ... the red money ... the red terror... The red...

'GOLD or SILVER?' the shopkeeper yelled. I came back to reality.

When I think, I think a lot. And about lots of things. That's why I am mostly absent-minded. The shopkeeper must have asked me several times without realising that I was making a choice in my mind that will stay forever. Even when my father won't be there, I won't be there, the colour on the diary will remain. It wasn't just a choice of colours. It was about defining an era. The Gandhian era. Giving a colour to a life that is full of struggles and sacrifices. A life which is a thought. An idea as pure as white.

'White,' I said. The shopkeeper was least interested in my choice. He picked up a pencil, which was tied with a thread to his desk, opened the diary and wrote on the first page in Urdu.

'Please don't write on it...'

'Don't worry, it will be erased...'

'But it won't remain new... I want to be the first person to write on the first page.'

‘*To my father...* I’ll write this on the first page of the diary and sign it off...,’ I thought. It’s once in a lifetime feeling... Either you have it or you don’t... For a 15-year-old, fathers can be equal to God or *Rakshas* depending on one’s luck... I was lucky.

‘Buying for a special girl?’

‘No... it’s for my father.’

‘Then how does it matter?’ he said and erased the pencil writing and wrote it on the last page and threw the diary on a stack of diaries. The diary fell with a thud. I still remember the thud that only my heart heard. When you are too invested in an idea or a feeling, your ears shut down and your heart starts hearing. This thud felt as if someone disrespected the diary. From an exclusive diary, it became a part of an assembly line in a thud. Disrespecting the diary was like disrespecting my father ... my feelings... The echo of that thud told me that as a father, this shopkeeper must be a Satan.

‘Will white last?’ I asked him curiously. After all, I was spending my first income earned on merit. I wanted to be absolutely sure.

‘Good choice. Gold and silver fade very fast...’

‘And white?’ I waited curiously as if his answer was going to define my relationship with my father.

‘White never fades,’ he said with a twinkle of experience in his eyes.

‘Why doesn’t white fade?’

‘Because white is not a colour ... colours fade ... not white.’

My father died at 95. After his death, I donated all his books to the needy but brought back some of his books and the diary. It had been eight years since his death but I didn’t see the diary even once. I started to look all over my library to find the diary. I felt like I was walking through the same long, narrow alley of Nagpur and the sun was setting on me. After a long struggle, I found the diary. It was staring at me. It was sitting quietly behind a heap of shining books bought online.

When you ask the house helps to clean your room, they always tend to hide everything old behind the new. Quality, worth, significance or literary values do not matter to them. Newness, cover design and colours matter. Even the shining, embossed titles matter.

The ‘unfaded white’ of the embossed name of my father smiled at me... Exactly like he used to smile every time I won a debate. In four decades, the white colour hadn’t faded. I held the diary and felt exactly like the way one feels under the shade of a banyan tree after a long walk in the scorching heat.

I opened the diary. ‘*To papa*’—written in my handwriting—adorned the first page. On the page immediately after, there was a shloka from Rigveda written in my father’s handwriting. As I turned the pages, I realised that it’s not just full of random thoughts, it had a chronicle of events. A non-linear account of our times. Part history, part philosophy and part politics of his time. In the last few pages, there were also dhobi’s *hisaab* written in my mother’s handwriting. In total, this diary was a compilation of observations and life lessons. Fathers leave wills. My father had left books and life lessons.

For the next few hours, I just kept reading the diary impatiently. There was no order. No continuity. Just a central thought ... a central concern ... Bharat. I got so engrossed that I even forgot that I was actually looking for a Gandhi quote, and realised it only when I read a passage on Lal Bahadur Shastri.

When Lal Bahadur appealed for a voluntary vrat, India was going through a food crisis. Shastri used tyaag as a political shastra to address it besides sowing the seeds of the green revolution. Politics needs optics. Optics which are ingrained in Indian ethos are always the most effective. Vrat is a part of Indian culture. Shastri used it to make a point about the food crisis. Nehru didn’t learn tyaag from Gandhi. Shastri did. How does a country transform? Only when people make small sacrifices we can transform. Tyaag is the highest quality. A door to shuddhi. Without shuddhi, there is no transformation. I discussed this with my colleagues. The temperature rose in the staff room. They think this is Shastri’s political gimmick and a deviation from the Nehruvian ideology. They don’t want to sacrifice even one meal and instead intellectualise their lack of commitment to the national cause. This made me

more committed to fasting every Sunday. If we entrust our destiny in a leader's hands, we must be prepared to be led by him on the path of change. If that path requires sacrifice, then why shouldn't the true followers be ready to sacrifice? If Bharat has to become truly independent, then tyaag has to be mutual. Citizens must always choose tyaag-based leadership over leaders with egos.

This diary opened a myriad of flashbacks in my mind, which had got suppressed after my father's death.

I remembered how on every 2 October my father would ask me, 'Who else was born today?'

'Shastri.'

'Good. Never forget what the world wants you to forget.'

'Oops! How can I forget that today is Lal Bahadur Shastri's birthday too?' I wondered.

I have always liked him for his humble personality. How could a person like me forget Shastri's birthday? But we are all victims of media noise. If nobody repeats goodness for a long time, we tend to forget it.

'Tell me, who was born today?' I asked my 14-year-old son, who was busy on his tablet.

'Gandhi Ji.'

'Who else?'

'Who else?'

'Yes, who else was born today?'

'Who else was born today? I don't know.'

'Didn't anyone tell you in school that today is Shastri's birthday too?'

'Shastri, who?'

I couldn't believe that my son ... yes, MY SON ... didn't know about Shastri. And I kept believing that my children were going to one of the best schools in India. For ₹1 per month in Kendriya Vidyalaya, I knew far more than him. I was disappointed and frustrated with the education system, once again.

Let's not forget today is also Lal Bahadur Shastri's birthday. I typed a tweet and attached a picture of Shastri. I looked at his picture for some time before tweeting. At 60, Shastri's face looked young. His eyes had no conflict, no ego, no stress. He looked like an elderly man to whom you can confess anything. His face gave an assurance that he would sacrifice his own interest to safeguard mine. He came across as a harmless, pleasing, kind, honest and egoless man. One can see the struggle and hard work in his wrinkles. And, of course, *tyaag* and *tapasya*. If one has to paint a picture of an honest and rooted Bharatiya, it'd be of Lal Bahadur Shastri.

Above all, I felt like trusting him.

When I had pressed the blue tweet tab, I had no idea that this one tweet will take me on the journey to discover a truth that will not just change me forever but also reveal the biggest cover-up of independent India.

But not without unsurmountable *tyaag*. And *tapasya*.

The Birth of an Idea

‘Sir, see this!’ Docsaab opened his WhatsApp chat for me, as soon as I entered my creative studio. It was a long chat with his friends on a WhatsApp group. I scrolled down.

Ask your boss to make a film on Shastri’s murder.

Bollywoodians can’t.

He can... he made Buddha...

He was poisoned...

No... heart attack! He had 2 heart attacks...

No. He’s killed.

They were to responding to my tweet.

Ask Vivek Ji 2 make d film...

Truth must come out!

He can’t.

Why?

He is a Bollywoodian.

So?

What does he kno abt India...

‘Sir, don’t go by what they say but there is definitely a film inside this,’ Docsaab told me.

‘Inside what?’ I was curious.

‘About what you tweeted in the morning ... Lal Bahadur Shastri ... so a film on him,’ Docsaab replied softly.

‘A film?’ I couldn’t control my laughter.

‘Sir, if so many people are talking about it, it means they want to know... Sir, everyone wants to know about Shastri... He was a great leader... People love him.’

‘You know that I am not into biopics, Docsaab... There is nothing in his life except for *Jai Jawan Jai Kisan*... No drama... No conflict... Great lives not necessarily make great cinema.’

‘Not about his life, sir ... about his death. That’s what people want to know... Whether he was killed or not... If yes, then who killed him?’

‘That nobody knows.’

‘That’s why not a biopic, sir... A murder mystery.’

There was a spark of confidence in his eyes. It was a special spark. It’s rare. But when it happens, you just can’t ignore it. When innocence and instinct meet, eyes always sparkle like that. Maybe, that spark was the language of conviction.

When I had first met Docsaab, he was a skinny young man with unkempt hair, dirty stubble, sunken cheeks, unironed shirt and dirty shoes. If one had to cast for an undernourished man, who hasn’t taken any protein in years and who survives on two packets of Maggi per day, he would have been a perfect match. It took me no time to guess that he has been struggling for quite some time.

There are two kinds of strugglers in Bollywood—those who drink protein shake to put on muscle and those who drink water to put on muscle. Even strugglers go through class struggle. The protein-shake dudes have big muscles and wear tight clothes whereas clothes hang loose on the water-Maggi guys.

Docsaab’s real name is Saurabh Pandey. He is a skinny young man from Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh. He came to Mumbai to become a lyricist. It’s not easy to become a lyricist in the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood. So, like every other talented person, he worked in a few films

as an assistant director. At some point in time, he ended up in my office to seek the job of my assistant on a film, but the production team rejected him.

‘He is not your type,’ said my executive producer. In the film industry, a lot of recruitment is done depending on one’s ‘type’, not talent. I remember Karan Johar said in an interview that he had once rejected Nikhil Advani because ‘he wore kurta... Not my type’.

‘Have you done any work before?’

‘Sir, I want to learn.’

‘What is it that you can do the best ... like better than anyone else?’ I asked a clichéd question.

‘I can control the crowd better than anyone else.’

In the 20 years I have spent in this field, I have never heard any aspiring assistant give this answer. Normally, aspiring assistants say they can make schedules, write scripts, maintain continuity or very often they say ‘I can do whatever you ask me to do’, but never ever I have met anyone who takes pride in controlling the crowd. Crowd, in India, can get very rowdy. Nobody wants the job of controlling them. It’s not that people are bad. It’s the entire system. Often, cops would collude with some local *gundas*, who would then quietly become part of the crowd. As the shooting would progress, these *gundas* would start creating trouble till the time a fight would erupt between them and the assistants. This is when the police would come and settle the issue in lieu of a hefty bribe. Police and *gundas* are players of the same act. This has been going on since the time filmmakers have been shooting outdoors. Everyone in India feels that *filmwallas* must be extorted. The extortion amount can be reduced considerably depending on the street-smartness and communication skills of the production-direction team. Lacking of which, sometimes, results in assistants getting beaten up by the crowd. Nobody thinks this as corruption. Everyone thinks that it’s a part of the shooting culture. All bad things if not stopped then and there become customs, then traditions and finally become part of the

culture. Lack of respect for art and artists has also become our mass culture. Parents don't want to marry off their daughters to artists. Politicians want to ban all the contrarian art without realising that all art, essentially, is contrarian to someone. Religion hates art as art demolishes gods and myths. Police see them as a nuisance. If you want to create your art peacefully and be respected for it, you must join the nexus of police, politicians and religion. But then again, creating such a nexus is also an art.

Instead of glamorous and impressive jobs, Saurabh opted for the least glamorous, most risky and humiliating job. I found this unique.

‘Why?’ That’s all I asked him.

‘Because only when you are with the crowd, you learn about the society ... about cinema as the same crowd becomes our audience...’ Saurabh’s eyes had the same survival instinct that a pariah dog has when caught alone amongst pedigrees.

I hired him.

Over a period of time, on lazy afternoons, over tea, over lovely sunsets on my studio’s window, we interacted on almost everything—from politics to spirituality. What impressed me about Saurabh is that he has an eye to look at places where people don’t look. If given the right opportunity, such people innovate and disrupt the system. Sadly, middle-class kids from small towns of India have everything going for them except for the right opportunities, just like a pariah dog.

Saurabh has no sense of vanity but his style, his approach and his demeanour makes him look, feel and sound like a serious researcher with headphones in the ears, eyes glued to the screen of his smartphone, hands rolling Drum tobacco in a small rolling paper, lost, absent-minded and often irritating because you ask him something and he answers something else. But that ‘something else’ takes you to a new orbit. That’s why the name Saurabh Pandey doesn’t match his personality. Saurabh is too clean for him. Too general. Whereas, Saurabh is a crowd’s man as if he got his doctorate

in assuming what the crowd thinks. A doctorate without a PhD. That's why I call him Docsaab, short form for Doctor Saheb.

Docsaab is always interested in reading the replies to my tweets.

‘Replies are the mines of ideas,’ Docsaab believes.

It's true. The real idea of India resides in the replies to one's social media posts. Earlier, it was found in ‘Letters to the Editor’. If only leaders start listening to these anonymous voices, India can transform faster.

That day, Docsaab found many people requesting him to ask me to make a film on India's second prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's mysterious death in Tashkent. When I opened my DM, it was flooded with the same kind of requests. It seemed like a bunch of anti-Congress trolls had conspired to force me to embarrass the Indian National Congress because the general belief has been that India's third prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was behind Shastri's death. This is not unusual. Almost always people see motive in the deaths of famous people. When Sridevi died, her fans even accused her husband of her murder. It's part of the funeral culture. Like weddings, funerals are also full of gossip. Every group has a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are like drugs. They give a very different kind of kick. They help a hapless and insignificant existence to believe that he has found the truth. Conspiracy theories manufacture truths where none is available. It's a world of mirage within mirage. These theories give hope in a system that never seeks the truth. Sometimes, these theories come true, but that chance is one in a million. The pathetic ratio for the most sought-after thing in the world—truth.

Later, in the evening, as I sipped tea, wondering about the replies to my Shastri tweet, I flipped through my father's diary.

Shastri died just a few hours after signing the peace treaty with Pakistan. I have been to Tashkent in winter. It gets extremely cold. It is possible that Shastri had another heart attack. It is also possible, like many say, that he was poisoned. Whatever it was, why there was no post-mortem? Why no inquiry? Why didn't we find out the truth? In this age, why is it impossible to find the truth? Everyone fights for equality and justice in a democracy but is it

possible to have a just and equal democracy without seeking the truth first? Shouldn't truth be the first fundamental right of citizens?

The answer is a big YES. But in Bollywood, there is an unwritten rule to never make a film on political figures. That's the reason we have made so many biopics but not even one on any political figure. It's safer to make a biopic on a sports person, a soldier, a criminal, a gangster or even *The Dirty Picture* on the life of Silk Smitha, but not on Nehru, Sanjay Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, etc. Now the problem is whichever politician you make your film on, the Gandhi-Nehru clan is always a part of it. You can't isolate any politics of independent India from this family. Such is the depth and width to which their roots and branches are spread. But then biopics don't interest me. I believe life should feature on this earth only once—in life itself. Else, it becomes a fake replica of the person, just like the statues of the kings and monarchs. Biopics are not real stories; they are multi-layered interpretations of a few professionals of one's life. Biopics, for me, are lies. Biopics are similar to window shopping. They are like mannequins. Real clothes on a fake body. For the new generation, Attenborough's Gandhi is the real Gandhi. A more monumental Gandhi than all his monuments put together. Biopics are like canvases where you can alter a portrait by adding strokes of lies.

Thus, instinctively, I knew I was not interested in Shastri's biopic. But I was certainly interested in knowing who killed him, if he was at all killed. And, if he wasn't killed and died of a heart attack, then why there was no full stop to the conspiracy theories?

In either case, why nobody had ever tried to find out the truth that satisfied all and put an end to this controversy? Wasn't it the government's primary duty to find out the truth? Wasn't it people's right to know the truth?

"Do you think we have a right to the truth?" I asked Docsaab.

'Of course, we have.'

‘Then why don’t we know how Shastri died?’

‘Because there was no post-mortem.’

‘Why there was no post-mortem?’

‘That nobody knows, sir.’

‘Why doesn’t anyone know?’

‘Because no one tried to find out.’

‘Why didn’t anyone try to find out?’

‘Because nobody cares about Shastri.’

‘No. It’s not because people don’t care about Shastri. It’s because we don’t care about the truth.’

‘But, why?’

‘Because nobody taught us that knowing the truth is our first fundamental right. Without the right to truth, no liberty or justice can ever be achieved.’

‘But our constitution says *Satyamev Jayate*.’

‘Only in a motif—neither in spirit nor in practice.’

‘That’s true. We have never known the truth behind even one scam, scandal, political murders or disappearances of scientists. It’s a pathetic situation.’

‘Should we find the truth?’ I asked Docsaab.

‘Shastri’s? Anytime!’ Docsaab replied like a soldier.

‘Will you commit yourself? It might be risky.’

‘I can do anything to find Shastri’s truth, sir ... anything.’

‘Let’s begin the research.’

‘From when?’

‘Now. At this moment.’

Life’s biggest crusades start without any planning. They begin with an instinct. I had no idea then that this instinct will lead us to discover the biggest cover-up of Indian history. And, the truth.

As I laid down to sleep, I opened my father’s diary.

The biggest lie forced on us is that everyone seeks the truth. Modern India is built on lies. Crusade for the truth found us independence but surrender to lies also divided India. After the partition, everyone felt as if there is no truth, no justice in this world. One can't understand today's India without understanding this. Some events can change a nation's psyche, its feelings, its values and its destiny forever. Pains of the partition, loss of Kashmir and humiliating defeat in the Indo-China War further convinced Indians that there is no reward in seeking the truth. Shastri's death only reinforced this belief.

Was the mystery of Shastri's death also one of those events?

The Sino-Indian War

It's cold. Very cold. It's that kind of cold which slowly seeps through your skin into your bones and dissolves into the bone marrow. And then you die.

Subedar Dashrath Singh, lying on his back, is staring at the magazine of AK-47 that is soon going to be emptied in his guts by the Chinese soldier. It's not that he did not fight. He had fired every single bullet and when he was left with nothing to defend, he even used stones to attack the enemy. He could have fought more but all his men were torn apart by the Chinese artillery and there were no stones left. All stones were thrown as the last resort. He was left with nothing except for prayers. But in a war zone, prayers seldom work.

Before the Chinese soldier emptied the entire magazine in Dashrath Singh's stomach, Dashrath Singh smiled. He smiled because he was vindicated. When he had told his seniors that they were not prepared to fight the enemies, everyone had mocked him. He knew that the way they were deployed, they stood no chance when the enemy would come. Today, he lies there with hundreds of bullets melting inside his body, with blood oozing out from every pore of his body, yet, he feels no pain. He is smiling because the nightmare is finally getting over.

To his north lies the land of China that discovered gunpowder and the art of war. To his east lies the land of Tibet that discovered the theory of death. And to his south lies the land of India that discovered dhyana and the theory

of reincarnation. Somewhere between this lies Dashrath Singh, just a few moments away from his final destination—death.

This wasn't the first war that Dashrath Singh fought. He had given five years of his prime youth fighting the Japanese in Burma. He had also fought in Kashmir immediately after India's independence. He knew a thing or two about practical warfare. That's why, when a few days ago, at Bridge 3 on Nam Ka Chu, Lieutenant General B.M. 'Bijji' Kaul presented his aggressive and highly ambitious plan to capture the Thagla Ridge across Nam Ka Chu, not just Dashrath but almost every soldier knew this was an utterly impractical and doomed plan. Most of Kaul's presentation was loaded with complex jargon that was beyond the soldiers' comprehension, but what they easily understood that Kaul's plan assumed that the Chinese did not exist. 'From where does he get such arrogance?' Dashrath thought. When it was pointed out to Kaul that they had very limited ammunition, scarce snow-clothing, inapt canvas shoes and artillery, Kaul brushed it aside calling it 'minor irritants'.

It was apparent to everyone that General Kaul was ordering them to march for a suicide mission. When the General asked if anyone had any question, there was pin-drop silence. It wasn't a silence of agreement. It was a silence of disbelief. It was a silence that engulfs a person who is walking to the gallows.

Dashrath cleared his throat. His sound disrupted the silence, 'This is the first time I am seeing a war where we are in the ridge and the enemy is at the top of the mountain.'

'This is also the first time that a general is standing at the frontline,' Kaul responded with anger.

'Sir, you said your thing but didn't answer my question,' Dashrath said with confidence.

'Arrest him right now and dismiss him from service,' Kaul fumed.

It took other senior officers some time to pacify Kaul. Dashrath was asked to leave the conference.

Dashrath survived but Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru couldn't survive. He died on 30 May 1964 as a shattered, lonely and defeated man, just one and a half years after the humiliating defeat from China.

When Docsaab had narrated this incidence from Shiv Kunal Verma's book *1962: The War That Wasn't*, I had thought that it was, perhaps, written to create a sensation. I had agreed to make this film on Shastri's death but my heart didn't believe in conspiracy theories then. This could be because I come from a simple background where conspiring, scheming and manipulating were alien terms. I tend to take things on their face value. I always loved Nehru. In fact, until very late in school, I didn't even know that he wasn't my real chacha. But as I read more on the Sino-Indian War, every document and account pointed fingers only at one man—Jawaharlal Nehru.

It wasn't difficult to understand that if we had to probe Shastri's death, we must understand what happened before he became the prime minister. What was the country's mood? What was our army's morale? What kind of legacy did he inherit from Nehru? Why did he have to coin '*Jai Jawan Jai Kisan*'? In that context, it became critical for us to understand the Sino-Indian War. It wasn't just any other war. Over 3,000 Indian soldiers died, thousands were wounded, over 4,000 were taken prisoners of war and a couple of thousands went missing in the month-long war between India and China, which began on 20 October 1962. To add to India's embarrassment, an entire division of over 15,000 soldiers retreated disgracefully. Such was the Chinese onslaught in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) or the Northeast.

'How is it possible that everyone misread the situation with the Chinese? There is something definitely not right. Something we don't know,' I told Docsaab.

‘Everybody knows everything, sir,’ Docsaab replied, ‘but everyone wants to be ignorant.’

I instantly recognised Docsaab’s angst.

We may be divided by religion, region, caste, generation-gap, etc., but one feeling that unifies us all is the angst against the total failure of Indian State’s conscience. The gap between our constitution and our contrary actions is ever-increasing. We live in a system where nobody is accountable. Nobody is answerable. Principles of accountability have been systematically erased from the nation’s consciousness. Somebody must be held accountable.

I could feel my own angst.

‘Sir, if you are the PM of the country, would you listen to the advice of your army chief?’

‘I must.’

‘Would you humiliate him and make him redundant?’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘General Thimayya.’

He gave me photocopies of passages from various books and articles.

‘You must read these.’

He handed me five to six books of ex-army men and foreign service officials. The first book I picked up to read was the biography of India’s first commander-in-chief, *Field Marshal KM Cariappa*, written by his son, Air Marshal K.C. Cariappa. Then there was Brigadier John Dalvi’s classic *Himalayan Blunder*; ex-ambassador to China P.K. Banerjee’s *My Peking Memoirs of The Chinese Invasion of India*; veteran journalist and an astute India observer, the legendary Durga Das’ *India from Curzon to Nehru and After*; a wide survey of modern India and *Thimayya: An Amazing Life* by Brigadier C. Khanduri. There was also Henderson Brooks’ report on the Sino-Indian War. I had a few meetings lined up, but my heart was in those

books. My father used to tell me to never leave an interesting book for tomorrow.

After reading the books, what became clearer was that Nehru was known as a pacifier and a statesman. On the one hand, pacifist Nehru gave sermons on Panchsheel and non-alignment, and flew white pigeons. On the other hand, he would fall back on the army during a crisis. When the first commander-in-chief of the Indian Army, General Sir Rob Lockhart, wrote a defence policy for Nehru's approval, Nehru snapped at him and said, 'Rubbish! Total rubbish! We don't need a defence policy. Our policy is of ahimsa. We foresee no military threats. As far as I am concerned, you can scrap the army—the police are good enough to meet our security needs.' Soon, Nehru had to eat his own words when the Pakistani-sponsored tribal people invaded Kashmir. Nehru ordered the army to save the situation. Later, he used the army in Goa in 1961 and during the Sino-Indian War in 1962.

People thought that Nehru was a romantic politician, which means that to control power, he didn't engage in scheming or plotting. But he knew how to sideline his opponents. He had sidelined Subhash Chandra Bose, Rajendra Prasad, Acharya Kriplani, Sardar Patel amongst many. And, of course, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, even at the cost of India's partition. For that reason, many believe that he was an overrated pacifist statesman and underrated manipulative politician. Immediately after the partition, General Cariappa was entrusted with the task of fighting Pakistan over Kashmir in 1947. The war was over soon, but India had lost a big chunk of Kashmir to the so-called tribesmen who were trained and supported by the Pakistan Army. It was difficult for people to digest that we had announced ceasefire without reclaiming the Indian territory that was occupied by Pakistan. Wherever General Cariappa went, he was asked this same question. The General had a standard answer, 'Ask the government. This policy was dictated by them.' It's clear that General Cariappa never wanted the

ceasefire without evicting the Pakistan sponsored tribesmen from POK. 'The Army was quite confident and was going to clear Kashmir. But the orders were to "ceasefire at midnight of 31 December/1 January 1948–49," General Cariappa maintained this in all his media interactions.

Later, when General Cariappa asked Nehru the reasons for the ceasefire, Nehru replied, 'You see, the UN Security Council felt that if we go any further, it may precipitate a war. So, in response to their request, we agreed to a ceasefire.' After some thinking, he further added, 'Quite frankly, looking back, we should have given you 10–15 days more. Things would have been different then.' It's very apparent that Nehru valued a third party's unconcerned opinion more than our own army's invested assessment.

In 1951, 11 years before the real war, some Chinese troops were caught with maps showing parts of the NEFA as a part of China. General Cariappa read it correct and warned Prime Minister Nehru of the likely attack by China. 'It is not for the army to decide who the nation's enemies would be,' Nehru literally ridiculed the army chief for his correct assessment.

Later, in 1959, General Kodendera Subayya Thimayya also warned of the threat from China. Instead of listening to his general's advice, Nehru instead schemed with his defence minister, V.K. Krishna Menon, to discredit General Thimayya that led to a chain of events that resulted in India's humiliating defeat by China.

General K.S. Thimayya, who was known as 'Timmy', enjoyed undisputed goodwill. Timmy was not an ordinary officer. He was the only Indian officer to be awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his role in the Second World War. Thimayya had made no bones about the fact that he was deeply distressed by the continuous neglect of the army. Nehru knew that he could not boss him around. Thimayya was also aware of Nehru's deep distrust in the army. Veteran journalist and an astute India observer, the legendary Durga Das, writes in his collection of a wide survey

of modern India about how Nehru treated General Thimayya in a cavalier fashion 'at a Governor's Conference for even suggesting the possibility of an attack by China'. Nehru saw him as a threat who could challenge his position.

In October 1959, there was a clash between both the armies at Kongka Pass, in which nine Indian frontier policemen were killed. India had to pull back from the disputed areas. Nehru ignored it. On 10 July 1962, around 350 Chinese troops surrounded an Indian post at Chushul and used loudspeakers to convince the Gurkhas that they should not be fighting for India. However, once again, Nehru thought it was a stray incident. Indian Army Chief K.S. Thimayya had been focused on redressing the various problems that the Indian Army faced, especially the evolving civil-military equation, where the army seemed quite removed from the decision-making process on matters relating to defence. However, he found himself up against a wall with the Ministry of Defence, which was either indifferent or hostile towards his moves. Thimayya was visibly upset with both Menon and Nehru and had a heated exchange with Nehru.

Shiv Kunal Verma in his book *1962: The War That Wasn't* writes that Nehru had made a statement in the Parliament about deploying the army at the border because of the ongoing clashes and the construction of National Highway G219. Army Chief Thimayya exchanged angry words with Nehru and told him that his decision of making the army responsible for NEFA, without providing adequate resources, had completely compromised the army. He further added that this gesture might allow the Chinese to claim that the Indians were the aggressors.

After listening to him, Nehru gave V.K. Krishna Menon the task of resolving this matter with Thimayya. However, Menon had a disastrous meeting with Thimayya after which the army chief promptly resigned. Nehru managed to persuade Thimayya to rescind his resignation 'since the problem with the Chinese had flared up'. Soon after, the news of

Thimayya's resignation was leaked to the media which led to the prime minister making another statement in the Parliament castigating Thimayya. He said that the reasons behind his resignation were 'rather trivial and of no consequence' arising 'from temperamental differences'. He further reproached the chief for 'wanting to quit in the midst of the Sino-Indian border crisis'.

'If the prime minister was letting down and humiliating the chief of army staff, he was also ignoring the fact that the general's resignation had sprung from valid grounds which were relevant to the discipline and efficiency of the armed forces at a time when the country's frontiers were being threatened,' writes Durga Das.

'The Chinese had the first laugh, as the Indians had so far played the game just as they would have wished them to. Even according to the Chinese records, at no stage had there been any action that pitted more than an Indian infantry company against at least four to five times the number of Chinese troops,' writes Verma.

Even today, Thimayya's resignation letter remains a highly guarded secret.

What was the reason that despite our glaring military weaknesses, despite warnings from experts, Nehru was so confident of defeating the Chinese? We quickly jotted down some questions on a whiteboard.

1. Why didn't Nehru listen to his generals?
2. Where was Kaul's arrogance coming from?
3. Why didn't Nehru inform the cabinet about Menon's resignation?
4. Why was Biji Kaul given out-of-turn importance?
5. Why his 'forward policy' didn't have the army's approval?
6. Was the decision to give NEFA to army taken by the cabinet? Why wasn't any army officer involved?
7. Why Thimayya's resignation letter not in the public domain?

‘Looks like he ran India like his personal fiefdom,’ Docsaab opined.

‘Just remember we are making a film on Shastri’s death, and not on Nehru. The reason we are analysing this is to find out under what circumstances Shastri took the oath? What was the political culture at that time? Our intention, at no point of time, should be to accuse anyone. All we need to do is find the larger truth.’

‘What do you think is the larger truth in this?’

‘Hmm... I don’t know... We will discover...’

The only thought that kept lingering in my mind the entire week was how a genius like Nehru who wrote *Discovery of India* and formulated the Panchsheel Treaty forgot that the *Art of War*, a gospel on war strategies, was written by a Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu?

Nehru: The Failed Leader

Why do researchers become aloof? Because they have to read so many different and contradicting reports that they stop trusting anyone. That, in my experience, is the best stage. When you stop believing in anything, you develop an objective perspective. A doctor doesn't have to believe in the intensity of pain. His job is to diagnose the reason for the pain.

As we explored more material on Nehru's leadership, it was becoming apparent that when most of Nehru's decisions and policies were visibly working against Indian interests, there was nobody who could oppose him. People who opposed him were made redundant like Thimayya. The spirit of the Indian constitution was failing and authoritarianism was becoming a political culture. But everyone was quiet. The problem was that everyone in India was made to believe that only Nehru knows the best way to shape India's destiny. This has been India's biggest failing—entrusting everyone's destiny in person. There are a plethora of books, academic papers, articles and commentaries available on the Sino-Indian War from both military and diplomatic perspectives. But a very few on why Nehru failed to read the situation. We focussed on two reports—the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report and the CIA Report.

After successfully conspiring against Timmy, Nehru put his trust in Lieutenant General B.M. 'Bijji' Kaul and appointed him as the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Northeast. During the war, Kaul fell ill and was deported to New Delhi. Bijji Kaul, as the army Chief of General

Staff (CGS), refused to increase military spending and prepare for a possible war. When Dashrath Singh raised this issue, Kaul reprimanded him. Needless to say, Bijji was Nehru's relative from Kashmir. According to the famous Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report on the Sino-Indian War, Brooks blamed Kaul for the Indian Army's complete rout in the eastern sector. It's not that Nehru was not aware of our military weaknesses. He had intelligence reports, military's assessment and diplomatic reports, but he didn't want to believe them. It's apparent from his statements in the Parliament.

'I can tell this House that at no time since our independence, and of course before it, were our defence forces in better condition, in finer fettle, and with the background of our far greater industrial production ... to help them, than they are today. I am not boasting about them or comparing them with any other country, but I am quite confident that our defence forces are well capable of looking after our security,' Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, addressing the Lok Sabha on 25 November 1959. He made this statement despite Thimayya telling him otherwise. Did Nehru lie in the Parliament?

Later, General B.M. Kaul, the then CGS, told the US ambassador, John Galbraith, that 'the Chinese were not operating from strength; the Indian Army viewed the Chinese as set in a "mood" for weakness and the Indian policy was to take maximum advantage of this mood by establishing maximum posts? Indian Army is not in a mood to be pushed around.'

According to various media reports, for over half a century, the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report remained a state secret. The only two copies of the 1963 report that clinically analysed independent India's worst military defeat, at the hands of the PLA in 1962, lay buried in the vaults of the defence ministry and army headquarters.

According to this report, Indian leadership was caught on the wrong foot and had completely miscalculated their strength vis-à-vis the Chinese. After

the failure of talks, Indians had adopted a forward policy of establishing many frontier posts along the disputed border resulting in many clashes with the Chinese Army.

Despite a disclaimer to keep individual personalities out of the review, the report specifically mentions General Kaul, who ‘however, must be made an exception, as, from now on, he becomes the central figure in the operations’. Brooks castigates Kaul, who, as the CGS, set up impossible targets for the troops on the ground. As the CGS, General Kaul also bought into the government’s myth that the Chinese would not react to the forward policy. Kaul took over the reins of a newly constituted 4 Corps in the NEFA, leaving the post of the CGS vacant. The reason behind forming the 4 Corps was to enable General Kaul and his key staff officers to direct a quick operation. ‘No one with any military knowledge would have formed or accepted a Corps to direct a major operation on the day of its inception.’

Besides Kaul, Brooks lists the following key people in Nehru’s coterie responsible for the debacle:

1. Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon
2. B.N. Mullick, director of Intelligence Bureau
3. M.J. Desai, foreign secretary
4. Brigadier D.K. Palit, director of military operations

According to the CIA report, ‘What came as a surprise to Nehru and his incompetent aides was a five-year masterpiece of guile, a strategy of persuasion and coercion, executed and probably planned in large part by Zhou Enlai. Zhou played on Nehru’s Asian, anti-imperialist mental attitude, his proclivity to temporise and his sincere desire for an amicable Sino-Indian relationship. The strategy was so well crafted that the Chinese waited for the right moment and struck during the 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis between 16 to 28 October in 1962. With the USA and USSR engaged in this Cold War, India couldn’t have received any military, financial,

strategic, diplomatic or moral support from either of them.’ This corroborates with Nehru’s letters to John Fitzgerald Kennedy pleading for assistance. The Chinese had cornered Nehru.

The CIA report also mentions Nehru telling a source, ‘In certain circumstances, I would not have minded giving away a bit of Ladakh (presumably the Aksai Chin) but I do not want the Chinese to take me for a sucker.’

According to reports published in the media, corroborating the CIA report, China considered India to be a long-term threat and the Chinese leadership wanted to deliver a major blow to India’s political and military leadership, and demonstrate its big power status.

Though it was cooking for a long time, except for Nehru, almost the entire world was aware of this. According to the CIA report, ‘Chinese President Liao Shao Chi told the Swedish ambassador in 1963 that “the attack had taught India a lesson and that for future Nehru and the Indians must be taught that they cannot change the border status quo by force”.’

The report further states that the Chinese leaders’ priority was to damage Nehru’s prestige, credibility and ego, ‘The Vice Foreign Minister indulged in personal attacks against Indian Prime Minister Nehru, Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon and Secretary-General R.K. Nehru ... Liao charged the Prime Minister of India with dishonest dealing ... Nehru was scolded and humiliated like a small boy by Lio Shao-Chi in July 1961 for coming to China only to demand a Chinese withdrawal.’

My Peking Memoirs of The Chinese Invasion of India, authored by P.K. Banerjee, who headed Indian in Beijing between 1961 and 1963, is one of the most underrated books on Indo-China political dialogue.

According to Banerjee, he had seven ‘substantial meetings’ with the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, after the war. In one of his meetings on 7 January 1963, Zhou asked Banerjee to carry his very personal message to Nehru which stated that—‘War never solved any problems, but only created

new ones ... positive steps were urgently required besides public declarations and political statements.’ He told Banerjee that Nehru was a man of high philosophy and great vision, and they had known each other personally over a period of many years. He understood Nehru’s current political predicaments, but Nehru should try and understand his (Zhou Enlai’s) position as well. Nehru should help Zhou Enlai’s hand, a hand extended in friendship and cooperation. He suggested a three-point action plan:

1. For the next three months, Nehru and he would stop making negative statements about each other’s country.
2. Nehru and he should meet as soon as possible with only a small entourage, away from the press and publicity, in an agreed place, in order to exchange ideas for an agreed and joint action to defuse the current situation. This meeting in total privacy should last no longer than two days.
3. After this meeting, which would further ensure in every way the strengthening of the ceasefire line, the two governments would draw up a programme where they could jointly cooperate in areas like trade, science, culture and technology ... when the climate for mutual trust had been created, then the border disputes would be discussed, on a sector to sector basis, by the two countries.

When Banerjee went to see Nehru, he was leaving for his office in South Block and asked him to hop on in his car. Throughout the drive, Nehru kept asking, ‘What went wrong, where did I go wrong?’ Later, when Banerjee gave him a one-page typed message of Zhou, Nehru went over it a few times.

‘It is not possible since matters have gone too far,’ Nehru told Banerjee. ‘You must have met members of the government and the Opposition, press people, as well as ordinary citizens, and surely you must have reached the

same conclusion that no one in India would stand anymore Chinese bluff and all nonsense.'

Nehru read the message again and asked Banerjee if he had told anyone about this message. Banerjee said that he had not. Then Nehru struck a match and held the paper to the flames and burnt it over a large crystal ashtray. He said that from the Indian side, it would take more than a quarter of a century to return to any substantive negotiation, provided the Chinese refrained from another attack on India.

Nehru's response irked Zhou. 'I have done everything within my power... India would be responsible for future stalemates and complications. Now I will write formally to Mr Nehru on this matter,' he told Banerjee, who was soon called back from Beijing. The Chinese premier Zhou never received any other Indian resident envoy.

'Imagine if Shastri's had made the same blunder...'

'They would have killed him,' replied Docsaab, even before I could finish my question. He took a long drag from his freshly rolled cigarette, looking at the setting sun and asked softly, 'Didn't they?'

There was an awkward silence.

'It has not been proved as yet, but I seriously wonder what if Shastri had made this blunder ... how would the historians, political analysts, intellectuals and media have reacted?' I came back to my initial query.

'Sir, Shastri was a peasant, he couldn't have made such blunders.'

'Why do you assume that?'

'Because Shastri knew his earth. Anyone who knows his earth can never compromise with it.'

I understood Docsaab's feelings. They were not new to me. I understood the discrimination that *zameen se jude* (rooted) people have to face from *chaandi ke chammach waale* (privileged) people. I was a victim of it. Rooted people can go utterly wrong, but they can never compromise with the interests of the country. Whereas, privileged people have no loyalty to

the country. They are only loyal to their self-interest, even at the cost of the country. I wanted to know what my father's views on Nehru were as he was an ardent Nehru admirer and also worked with him for a short period during the freedom struggle. I picked up the diary, which I knew was going to be my most insightful companion in this journey.

Nehru was a great visionary. There is no Indian who didn't support him. Even his detractors knew that he was an extraordinary man. But every vision needs effective execution. Execution is always a collaborative process. Collaboration is always between people who contribute. For contribution, their ideas need to be heard. Problem with Nehru was that he was conditioned to believe that nobody knew better than him. His pride, his ego and disdain for other's intellect became his own nemesis.

Nehru was not only just antagonistic to the very concept of the military but also was never at ease with the officers. All his decisions weakened the army's role in building a national defence policy. This resulted in a leadership vacuum in the army and this vacuum was filled by Nehru's confidantes like Menon or Bijji Kaul and loyalists in civil services. The decisions about India's security were taken by people who were simply sycophants or who had no experience on the ground. Thus, started a culture of celebrating non-expert sycophants. Mediocrity started taking over the meritocracy. The culture of consensus that prevailed during Gandhi's time and gave birth to extraordinary leaders in the Congress turned into the culture of authoritarianism. I don't think Nehru was doing it deliberately. He genuinely believed that rooted, rustic leaders had no worldview. They lacked a scientific approach. Therefore, they were not worth consulting. His intellectual paranoia about the army compelled him to take fundamentally wrong decisions that cost India dearly.

The 1962 war took India back by decades. Just one and a half decades ago, one leader fought the mightiest and got us freedom and India emerged as a strong democracy... It's ironical that his protégé compromised with the same freedom. We have four gifts from God—freedom, esteem, pride and hope, which die only when we die. It felt like we had lost all of them. Diehard fans of Nehru also avoided talking about him. People avoided looking at each other in public places. There was darkness everywhere ... till the time Shastri became the second prime minister of India.

The Politics of Dhyana and Ego

By the beginning of the 21st century, most of the ancient civilisations were dead. The only two large and continuous civilisations that survived the test of time were Bhartiya and Mongol, now known as Indian and Chinese civilisations respectively. While India produced great war strategists like Krishna and Chanakya, China produced Sun Tzu and Zhuge Liang. India found its independence from the British in 1947. Just two years later, in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was formed.

India and China, the oldest civilisations, were never immediate neighbours. Between India and China, in the Himalayan region, lies the 'roof of the world', that is, Tibet, which is mainly a Buddhist territory. Buddhism reached Tibet in the 7th century before spreading to China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, besides many eastern Asian countries. It was appropriate that they chose the Dalai Lama, which means an ocean of wisdom, as their spiritual and political leader because spirituality was their politics. Soon, this highest country of the world, rich in forests and grasslands, also became rich in dhyana. Dhyana may have freed their souls but Tibet has never been an entirely free nation. Sometimes the Mongolian Empire and sometimes the Chinese dynasties have ruled Tibet with intermittent periods of sovereignty. China has always maintained its sovereignty over Tibet. That's why, within one year of the formation of the PRC, it invaded Tibet. On 7 October 1950, 'around 40,000 battle-hardened Chinese People's Liberation Army troops, carrying portraits of Mao Zedong, crossed the upper Yangtze River into eastern Tibet', reported *The*

Guardian, ‘which had no paved roads, nobody knew any western language, their 4,000 troops were untrained, ill-prepared and poorly armed as the Tibetan rulers had shunned materialistic transformation, instead, they believed in internal transformation of themselves. For the non-spiritual, it may be difficult to comprehend a nation without a strong army. As the PLA advanced on the eastern Tibetan town of Chamdo, Buddhist monks meditated and prayed hard to avert the crisis. It didn’t work. The Chinese easily took Chamdo and captured more than half of Tibet’s 10,000-man army. In response to this crisis, the Tibetan government enthroned the 15-year-old 14th Dalai Lama. There was jubilation and dancing in streets but all this, and appeals by the United Nations, had little effect on the Chinese advance.’

About 18 years ago, before the invasion, after a long session of deep meditation, the 13th Dalai Lama had written in his will that soon Tibet will be destroyed by ‘barbaric red Communists... Our spiritual and cultural traditions will be completely eradicated. Even the names of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas will be erased... The monasteries will be looted and destroyed, and the monks and nuns will be killed or chased away... We will become like slaves to our conquerors... and the days and nights will pass slowly with great suffering and terror’. Nobody believed it.

In 1959, the peaceful monks stirred an anti-Chinese uprising but it failed as the monks were used to long periods of dhyana, but the uprising against the armed forces is no dhyana. As a result, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet. Indian prime minister Nehru welcomed him in Dharamshala region where the Dalai Lama formed a government in exile. During China’s cultural revolution in the following years, most of the monasteries were destroyed; thousands of Buddhist Tibetans were killed during this period of repression and martial law. While the Dalai Lama became a living god for the Tibetans, for the Chinese, he became a separatist and a threat who had India’s backing. For India, the Dalai Lama became a liability. Giving him

asylum was Nehru's decision that furthered his reputation as a pacifist statesman but the point to be noted is that the army was never asked to assess the repercussions on India's national security. It's not that Nehru had no idea about the repercussions; he did, and that is why he asked the Dalai Lama to engage only in religious activities as to not provoke the Chinese. However, if only he had consulted the intelligence and army officers, he would have known that the Chinese were already provoked.

Politics is both an art and a science, and for both the art and science of politics, one needs to surrender the ego. In politics, you are only answerable to your constituency. You may have a wonderful relationship with your neighbour but you should also be prepared for that rare eventuality when the neighbour can become your enemy. Enhancing one's diplomatic skills at the cost of military strength, eventually, costs dearly.

It's not easy to defeat a man who has controlled his mind. What is mind if not fleeting thoughts? And, thoughts wander, thoughts keep us engaged in things that don't matter. That's why they say mind over matter. Hindus of India understood this complexity of mind. Which is why, while the Western world was conquering the geographical continents of the world, Hindus were conquering the continents of their minds. The West was going beyond their homeland to explore unknown geographical territories rich in natural resources and wealth. At the same time, Hindus were trying to explore the unknown territories of life and beyond. The West was obsessed with wealth and power. Hindus were obsessed with life, death and reincarnation. For the West, physical might became the tool to become supreme. For the Hindus, spirituality and meditation became tools to reach the super divine.

Hindus called this technique dhyana. When the Buddhists, carrying this immense knowledge of dhyana, reached China, dhyana became *ch'an* because Chinese do not have the sound 'dh' in their language.

Dhyana can be used to refer to either meditation or the stages of spiritual absorption that the mind enters during deep meditation. Dhyana places meditation and mindfulness at the centre of life. Everything else is used to serve the purpose of strengthening our meditation practice.

Buddha understood the value of dhyana and repackaged it based on his own experiences and understanding. Even though the practice styles differed from culture to culture, the meaning remained the same. When Buddha's student Bodhidharma travelled to other eastern countries, dhyana found a new name in other local languages. As mentioned earlier, in China, it became *ch'an*; in Korea, *son*; in Vietnam, *thien* and in Japan, dhyana became *zen*. During the West's electronic-industrial romance with Japan in the 1980s, *zen* spread in the West as well. Soon, it was in the curriculums of all management schools and became a buzzword in a greedy, materialistic and over-stressed corporate world trying to find balance in the market and in life. Today, all corporates believe in the power of dhyana.

India has always been a collaborative society. Everything in India is collective, except for India's prime ministership. Whenever we experimented with collective prime ministership, we failed miserably. Maybe, to keep the collective, authoritarianism is needed.

The journey of independent India began with such an authoritarian leader—Jawaharlal Nehru. While Gandhi was a stubborn man, Nehru was a romantic, which is a good thing but the only problem was that he was romancing his own ideas. That is why his 'idea of India' is *his* idea of India. He was in love with his own intellectualism. He had an 'idea of India' which superseded Gandhi's 'idea of *Bharat*'. In Nehru's idea of India, there was no space for Subhash Chandra Bose, Veer Savarkar, Rajendra Prasad or Jinnah, or even Gandhi's *swadeshi*. No wonder, his historical independence speech, 'Tryst with Destiny', was in English because he was addressing the West. By ignoring Gandhi's *swadeshi*, India also abandoned the dhyana centre in its politics. *Swadeshi* isn't very different from dhyana. *Swadeshi* is

based on the idea of first actualising whatever is within and then projecting it. It's an inside-out process, so is dhyana. Nehru's idea was 'outside-in'. No wonder, he brought in many foreign concepts that were alien to our dhyana-oriented society. He was obsessed with the bigness of the Soviet and the class of the West. In his mind, his competition was with Kennedy. He introduced big dams, five-year plans, centralised decision-making and self-worshipping. Gandhi abandoned clothes and slept with the downtrodden; Nehru wore a rose in his chest pocket and flew pigeons. He hated criticism. His decisions were based on his self-interest, personal inclinations and what he thought was good for Indians rather than consensus. A society that was based on the principles of 'collective' and 'consensus' found itself moving from the authority of the British to the authority of Nehru, both of which were very similar in their elitism. Whenever dhyana-centred leaders conflicted with the ego of Nehru, they were either sidelined or humiliated—be it Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel or Shyama Prasad Mukherjee.

Thus, independent India, slowly, succumbed to Nehru's ego and his romance with himself. As a result, in 1962, Nehru's ego plunged India into a catastrophic war the country was not prepared for, which resulted in the most humiliating defeat.

India and China had always lived peacefully with each other. There was an informal understanding of our borders in the Himalayan region—the land north of Himalayas was Chinese and south of Himalayas was Indian. There had always been a great exchange of travellers, trade and knowledge. After India got independence, Nehru invested his maximum energy in reviving good ancient relations with the PRC. India was among the first nations to grant diplomatic recognition to the newly created PRC. Since China had remained isolated from the world until the formation of the PRC, Nehru made vigorous efforts in becoming a spokesperson of China on the world stage. Soon after China invaded Tibet in 1954, India signed Panchsheel (Five Principles Of Peaceful Existence) with China in which India endorsed

the Chinese acquisition of Tibet. India presented a frontier map which was accepted by China. After signing the treaty, and flying a dove, Nehru coined a brotherhood slogan '*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*'. Nehru was so gung-ho about relations with China that when, in 1951, the Peace Treaty of Japan, commonly known as the Peace Treaty of San Francisco, was to be signed to end US-led allied occupation of Japan, India did not participate because China was not invited. The other signing nations felt that the PRC did not represent the Chinese people. Such was the extent of India's support to China.

On the other hand, Tibet was becoming a theatre of conflict between the Buddhist Tibetans and the PRC. When the PRC occupied Tibet, India sent a letter of protest proposing negotiations on the Tibet issue. This irked Chinese leadership and an undercurrent tension gripped Sino-Indian diplomacy. The last nail in the coffin was in March of 1959 when India gave asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama after a failed Tibetan uprising. The chairman of the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong, felt betrayed and humiliated by the reception that 'Nehru's India gave to the Dalai Lama' and blamed 'Nehru's India' for causing the Lhasa Rebellion in Tibet. He asked the Xinhua News Agency to 'produce reports on Indian expansionists operating in Tibet'.

In 1959, on 2 October, coincidentally the day when Gandhi and Lal Bahadur Shastri were born, in a meeting between USSR and China, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev defended Nehru which reinforced Mao's suspicion that 'the Soviet Union and India had expansionist designs on China'. As a result, China derecognised the McMahon Line and showed both Aksai Chin and NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) as Chinese territory. Later, China asked India to withdraw from NEFA in return for their withdrawal from Aksai Chin. Nehru opposed it in an undiplomatic manner which China perceived as India's opposition as part of its 'grand plans in Tibet'. Slowly, India's diplomatic relations started to deteriorate.

China saw a threat in India and felt Nehru was double-speaking. This was the main reason behind the Sino-Indian War. Nehru also didn't do anything to eradicate this perception as he indeed was double-speaking. In 1954, between the PRC's invasion of Tibet in 1952 and Lhasa Rebellion in 1959, Nehru demanded that the India-China border be revised on all frontiers, which showed a dispute over 1,20,000 kilometres of the boundary. The Chinese premier maintained that there were 'some errors' in the map.

According to a classified CIA document, Nehru had ignored Burmese counterpart Ba Swe's warning that Chinese were deceiving India by purposefully not disputing the border issue. India presented a frontier map which was accepted by China. Nehru believed China and he even bypassed his communist-leaning defence minister, V.K. Krishna Menon, who had raised suspicions and asked Indian ambassador to China, G. Parthasarathy, to send all the communications directly to him. Nehru thought he would be able to form an 'Asian Axis' with China, but he was wrong.

Nehru's ego was so strong that he thought his council of ministers didn't understand foreign relations and that is why he compromised India's interest by believing that his diplomacy was so good that China would never launch an attack. But it did, on 20 October 1962. It was the belief of Nehru which did not let the Indian Army prepare and the result was the standoff between 10,000–20,000 Indian troops and 80,000 Chinese troops. The war continued for about a month and ended on 21 November, after China declared a ceasefire.

Nehru, perhaps, forgot that we are the land of dhyana, the collective, the consensus. Nehru had broken that rule. He had tried to run the country with the authority of his ego. He took decisions in isolation. His forward policy turned out to be a strategic blunder. Thimayya's warning was correct. Instead of being the *sewak* of the nation, Nehru had behaved like a

zamindar, taking arbitrary decisions resulting from his insecurities, selfishness and ego.

After the humiliating defeat and loss of face on the international arena, Nehru was a defeated man, and independent India became a defeated nation with only questions and no answers.

Our destiny, our peace, our esteem, our confidence—everything a nation needs to build itself—was abused and destroyed by the same person who was elected to strengthen them. Leadership must not be judged in normal times; it should be tested during a crisis. Leaders who pass such tests become immortal. Those who fail to lead, the future generations pay the price of their failure. If Indian democracy did not evolve on the expected lines, shouldn't Nehru be held accountable? If the Indian economy reached such abyss that we had no food for our citizens, shouldn't Nehru be held accountable? If our national security was in a shambles, shouldn't Nehru be held responsible? If the country's morale was at its pits, shouldn't Nehru's leadership be questioned? What else is a leader expected to do if not build national character and morale? A CEO is sacked for bad performance; a captain is sacked after a team's loss. Why didn't Nehru resign immediately after this debacle? If he took the credit for freedom, he should also take the responsibility for putting the country back to square one. Aren't these valid questions any citizen should ask? Why don't our students know about our dark history? By teaching them only about the glorification of our leaders, aren't we partly lying to them? How do we expect to become dhyana guru if we are teaching the wrong history to our future generations? Can't we correct it now?

I realised we had too many questions and no answers. Whereas, a film must answer questions.

‘Why should this film be about answering questions, why can't it be a film about raising questions—questions which were buried to save reputations?’

Docsaab asked me.

It was time to exhume them.

The Kingmaker

Defeat is not an easy thing to accept for a man who is in love with himself ... especially, if you are a Nehru. In defeat, some people shine and some collapse; the difference between the two is that of humility and ego. Nehru had never seen defeat. No wonder, he collapsed. After the humiliating failure, Nehru was quick to understand people's moods. People were outraged. Nehru's popularity was eroding fast. His stock with voters was falling. Congress was in a crisis. There were many stalwarts in Congress whose names cropped up as Nehru's successor—Morarji Desai, J.B. Kriplani, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jagjivan Ram, Biju Patnaik, S.K. Patil, Jayaprakash Narayan, Sanjeeva Reddy. And Kamaraj—the Kingmaker.

Kumaraswami Kamaraj had won three consecutive terms as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu—the most critical South Indian state, politically. South Indian politics is known to worship mass leaders like gods. As the chief minister from 1954 to 1963, he was instrumental in improving the educational infrastructure of the state. He was the first chief minister to launch a scheme similar to the present mid-day meal programme so as to bring young children to schools. Kamaraj was an influential leader in Congress and was the first one to realise that Congress needed a reboot. And a new leader.

Nehru was fully aware of his falling popularity and deteriorating health. He was a broken man and had no emotional or moralistic energy to fight back. People with strong egos also know when their ego stops winning them wars. Besides power, Nehru's biggest weakness was his daughter and the unofficial hostess at the official residence of the Indian prime minister, Teen Murti Bhavan—Indira Priyadarshini Nehru Gandhi. He wanted Indira to be

his successor but with stalwarts like Morarji Desai and others in the running, it was impossible to even think of Indira becoming the PM.

Post war, everyone was nurturing an ambition to become the PM in case of any eventuality. But if you have earned the top post with your political acumen, even at the risk of dividing the nation, you don't want to part with the chair. However, when it becomes a necessity, you want the heir to be your child. This is the problem with power. You start believing that you are the showrunner. Like any egoist powerful father, Nehru wanted Indira to take over his legacy.

For this purpose, Nehru was looking for a man who had high moral credibility and whom he could trust blindly. Kamaraj had a stellar reputation for being honest; he had run the state with just 15 ministers and had still managed to provide efficient administration. Some of his ministers had got a handpump installed in his aged mother's house so that she would not have to go to the street corner to get water. Kamaraj recovered the expenses incurred, which in any case were not much, from the ministers' salaries. Such was his reputation, his credibility.

Besides the defeat in war, Nehru was also charged with protecting corrupt ministers. In 1948, soon after India's independence, there was a Jeep scandal in 1948, involving V.K. Krishna Menon, the then high commissioner to the UK. The scandal involved the purchase of 200 Jeeps for which ₹80 lakh was paid in full but only 155 Jeeps were delivered. The government was cheated of 45 Jeeps, for which around ₹20 lakh had been paid. It was ignored by Nehru who later made Menon his closest advisor and even appointed him as the defence minister in 1959. Then, there was Haridas Mundhra scandal in 1959, which was investigated in public by a commission headed by the reputed retired judge, M.C. Chagla. The scandal was about LIC paying ₹1.24 crore for shares in sick companies without the approval of the investment committee. These findings led to a 22-year jail

sentence for Mundhra, and the resignation of T.T. Krishnamachari, the finance minister, and H.M. Patel, the finance secretary. Ironically, the scam was exposed by Feroze Gandhi, Indira's husband and Nehru's son-in-law.

With this background, it was imminent for Nehru to choose someone with an impeccably honest image like Kamaraj. Kamaraj had wide learning, vision, enormous common sense and pragmatism. In Kamaraj, Nehru found *that* man.

Nehru hatched a plan with Kamaraj to weed out the old guard who could become roadblocks in the way of Indira's elevation as the prime minister of India. According to a famous anecdote in political circles, when Kamaraj told Nehru that Indira was too young and would need some experience before she can run for the PM's chair, Nehru told him that it's in her blood to run India. He wanted to leave India in the 'safe hands' of Indira because he believed, 'She has my vision which others don't.'

'It's clear that Nehru was deeply convinced that only a Nehru/Gandhi should, and could, run India,' I concluded after collating the most relevant excerpts from various writings.

'Elitism is the biggest curse of India,' Docsaab opined.

'Elitism is not a bad word. Tagore and Satyajit Ray were all elites,' I corrected his notion.

'Okay ... correction... Elitism plus power plus ego is a lethal combination.'

'I think not trusting the native intelligence of common people has been the biggest crime of elite leaders.'

'It's not surprising that 50 years later, Congress has the same crisis. Even after facing some of the worst defeats in Congress's history at the hands of a rooted man, Narendra Modi, Congress still wants only Sonia or Rahul to lead.'

‘Do you notice how, once again, there is no accountability. Nobody is answerable for such a shameful rout. I am surprised that nobody is holding Sonia Gandhi responsible, who has been running the show for the last 10 years.’

‘Elitism doesn’t recognise self-failure or their own incompetence. All their efforts are to make sure that no non-elite should acquire power. It happened in 1984 as well. Even after watching and justifying the massacre of thousands of Sikhs by his party leaders, Rajiv Gandhi, a pilot, was considered perfect to become the prime minister because only a Nehru/Gandhi should, and could, run India. That’s it.’

‘Sir, I won’t be surprised if even 50 years later, Priyanka Gandhi’s son is forced to take over the reins from Rahul Gandhi because, as you said it, only a Nehru/Gandhi should, and could, run India.’

On Gandhi Jayanti that year, Kamaraj took everyone by surprise by resigning as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu and urging the other cabinet ministers as well as Congress chief ministers (potential PM contenders) to resign from the CM posts in order to strengthen Congress party at the grassroots level. He proposed that all senior Congress leaders resign from power and instead devote their lives to revitalise the party. Very cleverly he emphasised that India is a young country and, therefore, the move will bring in young faces to power. The political message was that this move will ‘dispel from the minds of congressmen the lure of power, creating in its place a dedicated attachment to the objectives and policies of the organisation’. This resignation gave Kamaraj a high moral ground and left the other senior congressmen with no choice but to resign as well. Masterstroke, indeed.

It’s impossible to fight a man who sacrifices power for the good of society. There is an unwritten rule in politics—never let your opponent take the moral high ground. But Nehru and Kamaraj had a first-mover advantage. Nehru’s trick worked. Other senior congressmen resigned, for if

they had not, voters would have felt they were too greedy for power. Six union ministers and six CMs resigned, including Jagjivan Ram, Morarji Desai, Biju Patnaik and S.K. Patil. Lal Bahadur Shastri also resigned as the chief minister of India's largest state—Uttar Pradesh. This move came to be known as the 'Kamaraj Plan'.

A week is a long time in politics. Just a week later, on 9 October 1963, Kumaraswami Kamaraj was elected the president of Indian National Congress. Kamaraj was a potential prime minister candidate himself. Why then he fell for Nehru's plan? Kamaraj was a rooted man who was aware of the ground reality. He could neither speak English nor Hindi and he understood very well that in India of that era, India's prime minister had to be proficient in at least one of these languages. Though he was realistic, he wasn't unambitious. He chose to be a kingmaker—the real power behind the throne.

Kamaraj came from a very poor background and had to struggle hard to reach where he eventually reached. His life began at the ripe age of 11 when he had to start working to support his family. But this did not deter Kamaraj. He kept learning through leftover newspapers he found in public places. Nobody can stop talent. A strong seed finds its way out of a rock to flourish. At an early age, Kamaraj got attracted to the freedom movement and in 1937, he became a member of the provincial assembly. Later, he became a part of the constituent assembly which drafted India's constitution. In 1954, he became the chief minister of undivided Madras and remained in power winning two consecutive elections in 1959 and 1962. Since he had learnt the ropes of politics on the streets, rubbing shoulders with common man, unlike elitist Nehru who never had to struggle for survival, Kamaraj believed in *Chanakya Neeti*—'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer'. When he became the chief minister, he kept two of his main opponents as ministers in his cabinet to keep a close watch

on their political moves and check their activities. Kamaraj's power was such that all across the party lines, his word was final. Such was his reputation that in January 1966, US vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, said that Kamaraj was 'one of the greatest political leaders in all the countries of the free world'.

When Nehru died, a potential conflict emerged between Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai. The latter was a natural choice to succeed Nehru since he was the senior-most leader of the Congress with an impeccable record as the chief minister, and was a true Gandhian. Congress was divided—many senior leaders were eying the chair themselves and weren't happy with Desai; another lot of irrelevant members were backing Indira thinking they would use her as a puppet. Everyone looked at Kamaraj to a fire. Kamaraj surprised everyone by backing Lal Bahadur Shastri who wasn't even in the race. There were whispers that Kamaraj deliberately picked a weak PM in Shastri so that he could ask him to resign once the fire subsides and install Indira as the PM. Nobody knew what his deal was with either Shastri or Indira, but ultimately, Desai was the biggest loser.

Undoubtedly, in common perception, Shastri was no match to the stature of Nehru. Nehru nurtured an ecosystem of journalists, intellectuals, artists and thought leaders by giving them plum positions or some favours. No wonder, even before Shastri could take the oath, he was labelled as a 'weak prime minister'. What nobody knew then was that this '4-foot man' would surprise everyone. Was Shastri as meek as everyone thought?

Veteran journalist Kuldeep Nayar observes that as a hostess at Teen Murti, Indira Gandhi would ensure that Shastri was humiliated whenever he dropped in for meetings with Nehru. Nayar writes, 'As the days went by, instances (of humiliation) piled up. In fact, Shastri had to wait even to get an appointment with Nehru and at one point thought of resigning from the ministry. Once, he told me that he would return to Allahabad. "There is

nothing for me here now,” he said. He then added woefully, “If I continue to stay in Delhi, I am bound to come into a clash with Pandit Ji. I would rather retire from politics than join issue with him”.

‘Many people told him that Nehru’s behaviour was influenced by Indira Gandhi’s “hostility” towards him. Initially, Shastri would never encourage such doubts, but later, he would go out of the way to find out if that was true. In due course, he became convinced that he was not uppermost in Nehru’s mind as his successor. Indira Gandhi was more open about ignoring him and would herself take important files to Nehru.’

In the corridors of power, proximity is the first assertion of power. Denying a meeting is the second useful tool. Indira had both these advantages.

Nayar further cites an anecdote. ‘I ventured to ask Shastri one day, “Who do you think Nehru has in mind as his successor?” “*Unke dil mein to unki suputri hai* [He has his daughter in his heart],” said Shastri, “but it won’t be easy,” he added. “People think you are such a staunch devotee of Nehru that you yourself will propose Indira Gandhi’s name after his death,” I said. “I am not that much of a *sadhu* as you imagine me to be. Who would not like to be India’s prime minister,” was Shastri’s reply.’

Nobody knew then that under Shastri’s leadership, India was going to go through one of the most critical chapters of history. A lot of people suspected that with Kamaraj’s shrewd political gameplay, Shastri won’t last long as the PM but nobody had an idea that his end would come in less than two years after taking oath as the second prime minister of independent India. Yes, Shastri died in Tashkent, USSR. Mysteriously. On the night of 11 February 1966. A few hours after signing The Tashkent Peace Agreement with Pakistan.

After Shastri’s sudden death, Morarji Desai was, once again, a natural successor being the senior-most and able leader but he was denied his rightful appointment as the PM. Kamaraj, the Kingmaker, brought the old

guard around and in a surprise move, inexperienced Indira became the third prime minister of India. Exactly the way Nehru had wanted. In less than two years after his death.

Indira immediately came to be known as '*goongi gudiya*' (dumb doll). It suited Kamaraj as, like Chanakya, he could control the reins of power. By now, Kamaraj was known as the Kingmaker. But, what no one realised was that this time, the person on the throne wasn't a king but a queen. A queen with the DNA of Nehru—a master in sidelining opponents.

In 1966, after Shastri's death, once again the 'Kamaraj Plan' won. The loser was once again Desai. At least that's how it seemed. But, the real loser was India. Which only the future would tell.

The Weak Prime Minister

If politics is like chess, then Kamaraj played a very smart gambit after Nehru died. Morarji Desai was the natural choice for being the senior-most Congress member with rich administrative experience. Desai had served as the home minister in pre-independence Bombay and later, he became the chief minister in 1952. Bombay State comprised of Gujarati and Marathi people with different aspirations and identity issues which made it a complex state to govern. Both Marathis and Gujaratis wanted separate states based on their respective languages. Despite being a staunch nationalist, Desai was opposed to these demands.

When the protests for separate states for Gujaratis and Marathis erupted and became violent, Desai, despite being a resolute Gandhian, ordered police firing on the protesting crowds that resulted in the killing of 105 protestors including an 11-year-old girl. Though this gave him an image of a tough administrator, the protests aggravated and eventually, Bombay State got divided into Gujarat and Maharashtra. The famous Flora Fountain where the police had fired was rechristened Hutatma Chowk meaning Square of the Martyrs.

Later, Desai was called to Delhi as the home minister in Nehru's cabinet. Nehru and Desai were poles apart. Nehru was socially and culturally liberal whereas Desai was a social conservative. Thus, as soon as Desai became the home minister, he banned kissing scenes in all films and plays. But Desai was pro-business; he believed in free markets and free enterprise whereas Nehru was a socialist and wanted to keep the government's

complete control over the business. On the other hand, the news of corruption in Nehru's leadership was becoming a regular feature whereas Desai was an indisputable anti-corruption minister. What contrasted both of them was also their stand on the issue of nationalism. Desai was a fierce nationalist whereas Nehru was perceived only as a part-time nationalist. All these factors put both of them at odds. Thus, when Desai declared his candidacy within 24 hours of Nehru's death, it was seen as a bad tactic by many congressmen.

However, Kamaraj had a different plan formulating in his mind. He wanted to keep the reins of power with him but he also knew that it would be impossible to manoeuvre a stubborn Desai. So, Kamaraj decided to usurp Desai's claim with a bid to 'support someone who was least likely to divide and most likely to unite the party'. Many claim that while proposing this idea, which went on to become one of his most famous quotes, Kamaraj had Indira Gandhi in his mind. But, it wasn't as easy as it seems; Kamaraj witnessed a real power struggle between veteran congressmen, besides Desai and acting PM Gulzarilal Nanda, who wanted the top job on the basis of their alliances with regional or caste-based support.

Kamaraj appealed to the congressmen to arrive at a consensus as the 'world's eyes were upon India and whether this nascent democracy could transition from Nehru and keep his vision alive', but these consultations for the 'consensus' meant nothing. V.K. Krishna Menon once said, 'When the Congress president calls you, unless you are a fool like me, you more or less express his opinion.' Kamaraj had a sharp political mind and he also knew that popping Indira at that time would have divided Congress so he pitched in for a neutral Nehruvian leader—Lal Bahadur Shastri, the man who had never made a claim for the top post.

Shastri was humble, non-confrontational and was regarded as morally uncompromising. He had a strong sense of personal responsibility which was quite evident when he resigned as the minister of railways and

transport following a disastrous railway accident for which he took the blame personally. *The New York Times* (NYT) described Shastri as a 'colourless, self-effacing, teetotaling, vegetarian peacemaker'. Shastri suited all ideological factions of Congress as his appointment was neither anyone's defeat nor anyone's victory.

The selection of Shastri as the PM was conditional. The understanding was that Shastri will have to take Congress party's approval for all major decisions. This way Shastri was reduced to a mere rubber stamp while Kamaraj controlled the reins as his word was final in Congress working committee. After the syndicate's 'stage-managed' election on 2 June 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri took oath as the second prime minister of independent India.

Indira wasn't very happy with Shastri's appointment. By the time Nehru died, Shastri and Indira's cold war was well known. According to late journalist Kuldip Nayar, who was Shastri's press secretary and was present at the time of his death, once Nehru put the Kamaraj Plan in effect, he started sidelining Shastri to the extent that Shastri felt humiliated.

After Shastri took oath as the second prime minister, a grieving, and perhaps miffed, Indira Gandhi had sent signals that she won't join the cabinet even if persuaded. Shastri was in a dilemma because if Indira didn't join the cabinet, it would look like he deliberately kept her out and if he made her a minister, then he would be keeping a potential rival in the cabinet. Nehru's PA for 10 years, Janak Raj Jai, recounts in his book *Strokes on Law & Democracy in India*, 'Indira "snubbed" Shastri initially when he urged her to join his government on their return after immersing Nehru's ashes in Allahabad.' Janak Raj was also a confidant of Indira who described himself as someone who was PM Nehru's personal staff on paper but 'in principle reporting to both the PM and his daughter'. He further adds that Nehru would often say to officials who came to meet him, '*Indu se bhi mil ke jana* [meet Indira before leaving].' According to him, Shastri and Indira

were walking together at the New Delhi Railway Station when Shastri requested her to join the cabinet. A visibly angry Indira responded that the prime minister was making this appeal when she was in grief. The prime minister then spoke softly, 'If you don't join my ministry, I shall have to ask Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to join my cabinet.' When Indira realised that Pandit might become a minister, she immediately asked Jai to fix an appointment with Shastri. She called on Shastri and told him that she would be 'too glad to join his cabinet'. Thus, Indira Gandhi became the information and broadcasting minister. Shastri knew how to play Indira to his tunes.

Just a few days after Shastri took oath as the prime minister, *NYT* wrote that this '4-foot 11-inch, 111-pound prime minister would thrust India into confusion, uncertainty and possible political instability faster than almost any probable change for the worse in any of the other problems facing the country'.

That was correct to some extent. Indira wasn't the only problem Shastri inherited. During the last years of the Nehru government, the economy was stagnating with a sharp slowdown in industrial growth, the balance of payments was at its worse, and, above all, there was an acute shortage of food with the population increasing at an alarming rate. There were severe droughts in several states and buffer food stocks were depleting to a dangerous extent. It appeared as if God was testing India. In a conference of food experts in Italy, in 1965, it was observed that soon Indians would starve to death like sheep in the slaughterhouse. To make it worse, the chief ministers of food-grain-surplus states refused to cooperate.

Soon, a coordinated campaign against Shastri by both the congressmen and the opposition started taking shape. He was called 'a prisoner of indecision' by Nehru's sister Vijaya Laxmi Pandit. He was seen as failing to give direction to the government's policies or even to lead and control his cabinet colleagues. He felt so unsure and inadequate under the pressure of government and the comments of his critics that in a private chat with a

newsman, in early January 1965, he wondered 'whether he had been right to offer himself for the prime ministership and whether he had the capacity to carry the burden that the office involved'.

Communist leader Hiren Mukerjee called Shastri a 'split personality' because 'while professing to follow the principles' of the late prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, he was, in fact, 'incoherent'. To which, Shastri replied, 'I will not fall prey to such tactics because I am a clever individual. Mr Nehru's policies are continuing, but a "chance of technique" is sometimes necessary.' After a long debate, he said, 'Nehru was an innocent leader and trusted everyone, I admit I am not so innocent as I look. I once even told Nehru I was cleverer than he.'

Shastri was speaking the truth. People had underestimated him. He was a self-made politician and, like Kamaraj, had learnt politics from life. Soon, Shastri began to show greater independence and started to assert himself. This was evident when Kamaraj complained that he was being bypassed, quite often, by Shastri in important decision-making.

In his short tenure, Shastri took some courageous and far-sighted decisions. The Indian government was among the first to criticise the US bombing of North Vietnam. Shastri initiated the 'green revolution' as well as the 'white revolution'. He started India's nuclear programme and was on the verge of demolishing the Soviet model of 'five-year plan' and begin a new era of one-year plan before his death. Shastri also set up the Prime Minister's Secretariat, headed by L.K. Jha, his principal private secretary, as a source of information and advice to the prime minister on policy matters, independent of the ministries. The Secretariat, which came to be known as the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), started acquiring a great deal of influence and power in the making and execution of government policy. Later, under Indira Gandhi, it emerged as a virtual alternative, independent executive.

Sometimes grave situations offer opportunities for great leaders to shine and change the destiny of their nation. It was, however, with the brief Indo-Pak War in August–September 1965 that Shastri's moment came. Historian Manu S. Pillai has described Shastri as 'a man who in 18 months made a mark not as a puppet, but a leader worthy of respect and admiration'.

In his book, *Patriots and Partisans*, noted historian Ramachandra Guha presents the scenario had Shastri not tragically passed away. Guha writes, 'Had Shastri continued as the prime minister until the end of the 1960s, the economic history of India would have turned out very differently... In speeches made in 1965, Shastri clearly indicated that he would like to open up the market to enterprise and free competition... He would have freed the processes of production from State control and also initiated welfare measures to ameliorate poverty. As a man of vision and integrity, he would have also sought to improve the performance of India's public institutions... Had Shastri lived for another five or ten years, it is highly unlikely that Indira Gandhi would ever have become prime minister and it is certain that her son would have never occupied that office... There would have been no Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.'

Noted editor, author and biographer of Indira Gandhi, Inder Malhotra, observes that when Shastri made T.T. Krishnamachari, who was a Nehru man and a close friend of Indira, resign from the finance portfolio just two days before leaving for Tashkent, she angrily told Malhotra, 'I would be the next to be thrown out.' By then, according to Malhotra, it was widely known that Indira Gandhi's relations with the prime minister had soured to the point of breaking down. Towards this end, Shastri had adopted a dual policy of showing Indira all the courtesies and nominating her to the important committees of the cabinet but giving her little say in the making of high policy. She saw through it all and reacted with a mixture of resentment and defiance.

This cold war between Shastri and Indira had started soon after she joined his cabinet in February 1965 when a massive agitation had erupted in Tamil Nadu against the imposition of Hindi. Several agitators had immolated themselves. Before Shastri could find an amicable solution, Indira Gandhi flew to Tamil Nadu and mediated with the agitators, totally bypassing the prime minister. Shastri was found telling his allies that she was ‘jumping over the prime minister’s head’.

Malhotra writes, ‘In August, when reports first came in of Pakistani infiltration into Kashmir, she immediately flew to the troubled Valley and stayed there until just before the all-out war inevitably broke out. Ironically, it was the 1965 war that put an end to Indira Gandhi’s ability to upstage Shastri ... [With his thumping victory,] Shastri’s stock had soared ... by December 1965, Indira was tired of being an inconsequential member of the cabinet. She wanted to resign and go to London... Shastri’s mind was also working in the same direction... He was planning, as he told only a few of his confidants, to offer her the post of High Commissioner to the UK on his return from Tashkent. But who could have known that his mission would turn out to be a classic *Appointment in Samara*?’

‘Sir, what is “Appointment of Samara”?’ Docsaab asked me after we finished collating the above passages.

‘It’s a very famous American novel by John O’Hara.’

‘What is it about?’

‘I haven’t read the novel but it’s inspired by a Persian folktale. A merchant of Baghdad finds his servant scared to death. When asked, he tells the merchant that in the market he had bumped into a woman, whom he recognised as Death. Then, the servant decides to run away as far as possible from Death. He borrows the merchant’s horse and flees far away to another city, Samara. When the merchant goes to the marketplace and finds Death, he asks her why did she make the threatening gesture to his servant. She replies, “That was not a threatening gesture, it was only a surprised one

to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samara.””

‘Sir, there are hundreds of folktales like this all over India. Why don’t they use our anecdotes so that the masses can understand easily... Why always opt for “alien” references?’

‘Because they studied in English medium ... their reference points are very different... While we grew up with the imageries of Premchand’s Hamid, they grew up with Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn.’

‘But they are talking to us ... the Indian masses ... who don’t even know where is Samara...’

‘You are mistaken. They are never talking to the masses.’

‘Who are they talking to then?’

‘Their own ecosystem.’

‘And, who’s is in their ecosystem?’

‘People who know where Samara is.’

‘What makes these people so powerful?’

‘That they know where Samara is.’

Docsaab started rolling a cigarette. I knew something was bothering him. It’s important that all questions are answered then and there else these unanswered questions keep bundling up and someday, they confuse you and, in research, we can’t afford to be confused or lost.

‘What are you thinking?’ I asked him.

‘I am thinking how do people like Shastri survive with such people.’

I had no answer.

Indo-Pak War

On a pleasant evening of 31 August 1965, Shastri got free early from his hectic schedule. It was a great opportunity to do something he enjoyed the most—having dinner with the family. His food was strictly vegetarian and very simple. He had not even finished his first roti when his personal assistant informed him that the three chiefs of the Indian Armed Forces wanted to see him.

Shastri left the dining room to meet them in the living room-cum-office. Within a few minutes, he came back and quietly continued his dinner with the family. When Lalita asked him about what had happened that the chiefs had suddenly come to see him, all he said was—‘be prepared for war’.

Shastri’s immediate challenge was that the Pakistan Army had crossed the international border in the Chamb sector and if not stopped immediately, it would cut off Jammu and Kashmir from the rest of the country. The only way to stop them was to open up new fronts to dilute their concentration in the Chamb sector. Shastri instantly gave the go-ahead to the chiefs and asked them to ensure that Lahore was also included. Shastri also asked the air force to attack Pakistan as well. This was the first time, after independence, that the Indian Air Force went into action and the Indian Army crossed the international border. Air Marshal Arjan Singh also mentioned in some of his interviews that ‘the country could not have had a better prime minister in war’ than Lal Bahadur Shastri. He further stated that the promptness with which Shastri gave the go-ahead to the Armed

Forces could only have come from a brave, decisive and firm military leader.

Pakistan, at that time, was ruled by a Pashtun military dictator, Ayub Khan, who had taken over the presidency through a military coup. Khan had fought in the Second World War in the British Indian Army and knew the game of dividing nations. Ayub Khan nurtured the dream of separating Kashmir from India and to this objective, he had been considering various military plans. Sometime in early 1965, he formed a 'Kashmir Cell' to strategise aggression in Kashmir and its eventual separation from India. General Akhtar Malik headed a specialised team of Pakistan Army and prepared two plans—Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam. Under these operations, Pakistan soldiers would infiltrate Kashmir, disguised as tribals and civilians, to encourage and support guerrilla operations and sabotage the infrastructure. The plan was multidimensional. First, infiltrators would mingle with the local populace and incite them to rebel; simultaneously, guerrilla warfare would commence, destroying the bridges, tunnels and highways, harassing the enemy communications, logistics installations and headquarters as well as attacking airfields. These infiltrators were given names like Salahuddin, Ghazanavi, Tariq, Babur, Qassim, Khalid, Nusrat, Sikandar and Khilji—all named after Muslim rulers.

Once this objective was achieved, a full-fledged attack by the Pakistan Army called Operation Grand Slam would commence. In May 1965, General Ayub Khan gave his approval to this plan albeit with some tweaking. According to his plan, the Pakistan Army would straightaway capture Akhnoor, a city in J&K, which would totally cut-off J&K from the rest of India and no supplies would be able to reach the forces in Kashmir. The assumption was that a staged public rebellion after cutting off supplies would ensure the separation of Kashmir from India.

On 1 September 1965, Pakistan's Operation Grand Slam became effective with a full-fledged armoured-cum-infantry attack on Akhnoor sector. After a full briefing by General J.N. Chaudhari, Shastri had realised that without the involvement of the air force, it would be difficult to stop Pakistani aggression in J&K. They had the first-mover advantage. He also realised that as soon as the air force would get involved, it would turn into a full-fledged war. This was the night of dilemma. Despite his great efforts in controlling the food shortage, initiating the green and white revolutions, giving direction to India's nuclear programme, he was still called a 'prisoner of indecisiveness'. This was Shastri's moment in life.

A crisis is the best test of a human being. Unlike his predecessor, Nehru, Shastri didn't fail the test. In fact, he came out with flying colours. He took a quick and wise decision. He instructed the forces to attack Lahore in order to divert Pakistan's aggression in Kashmir. He also gave a go-ahead to the air force for an attack on Pakistan. Around 22 aircraft from Ambala, Pathankot Adampur were to fly over Kashmir Valley, providing cover against radar detection in Pakistan, and strike all the major air bases in Pakistan. India Air Force did cause a lot of damage. On the ground, Indian Army responded by launching operations against the Pakistan Army and occupied Haji Pir, Tithwal and Kargil Heights. After Shastri's go-ahead to attack Lahore, the Indian Army crossed the international border near Amritsar and started marching towards Lahore. General Ayub Khan instructed his army to protect Lahore from being captured by the Indians. As expected, the Pakistan Army's concentration shifted from Chamb to Lahore. Thus, this 22-day war came to an end on 22 September 1965 with a ceasefire. With the handling of this war, Shastri surprised everyone with his strategic mind, quick decision-making and courage. The marshal of the Indian Air Force, Arjan Singh, who steered India to many victories, called Shastri the best 'Military PM'.

Sometime before his death, Arjan Singh said in an interview, ‘Shastri was not a weak man at all. He was a man of peace and never wanted either country’s population to suffer because of war. During the war, he gave only one direction—not to hit the civilian population ... [D]uring the 1965 war ... his leadership was so decisive [that even] Pakistan was surprised to see this little man stand so firm.’

These were the times of the Cold War and the United Nations was very active. Due to the building pressure from the United Nations, USA and Russia, a ceasefire was called upon by both the countries. Had the war continued, India would have gained a decisive victory. But, the question was why did India agree to stop fighting? Why did the defence minister, Yashwantrao Chavan, and Shastri cave in? It was mainly because of Army Chief Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri.

Chaudhuri had got the top job because of his affluent family connections. In fact, S.D. Pradhan, chairman of India’s Joint Intelligence Committee and deputy national security adviser, writes, ‘He was so good on paper that Chavan often wondered how good he would be in warfare.’ The answer can be found in Defence Minister Chavan’s war diary where he mentions that whenever the Indian Army suffered a setback, Chaudhuri would sink into depression and Chavan would give him a pep talk.

According to Pradhan, ‘On 20 September, when the prime minister asked Chaudhuri whether India could expect to gain if the war continued for a few days more, he informed the PM that the army was coming to an end of its ammunition holdings and could not sustain fighting for much longer. Chaudhuri advised acceptance of the ceasefire proposal. It was later discovered in overall terms that only 14–20 per cent of the Indian Army’s ammunition stock had been used up. At the moment of our greatest advantage, the army chief’s non-comprehension of the intricacies of the long-range logistics deprived India of a decisive victory.’

In contrast, according to *Russia Beyond*, a news site, ‘Pakistan had expended 80 per cent of its ammo. It had also lost 250 of its latest US-supplied tanks. Chaudhuri was also criticised for his lack of daring. When the Pakistani cities of Sialkot and Lahore could have easily been taken after the bravery shown by the Indian troops, Chaudhuri instead told Shastri, “We must move with the caution and wisdom of an elephant. We will take them in God’s good time.”

In fact, when the Pakistan Army attacked in the Khem Kharan sector in Punjab, Chaudhuri ordered the army commander, Harbaksh Singh, to withdraw to a safer position. The commander refused and what followed was the Battle of Asal Uttar—the greatest tank battle since Kursk in 1943. The Indian counter-attack on the night of September 10 was so ferocious that by the morning they had knocked out 70 Pakistani tanks. But what the Battle of Asal Uttar will be memorable for are the 25 enemy tanks found abandoned with their engines running and wireless sets on. It was the perfect metaphor for the plight of the Pakistan Army. Had India kept its head, today we’d have a lot more to celebrate.’

In addition to a military one, India was also fighting a diplomatic war; both the USA and the USSR were determining the progress and conclusion of the said war. The USA was wary of India’s role in the non-alignment movement and wanted to restrict India’s influence in the Asian region. It saw Pakistan as an opportunity to establish their supremacy in the area. Thus, it sold jet fighters F-86 Sabres, 12 F-104 interceptors and hundreds of vintage tanks to Pakistan.

The Indian territory was also crucial for the USSR during this period of the Cold War. Since both India and the USSR supported Tibet, there was a growing divide between the USSR and China’s communism, which, in turn, instigated the USA to tie-up with China.

Thus, while the USA was supporting Pakistan to counter the USSR, China was supporting Pakistan to counter India. Since the USSR didn’t

want Pakistan to become friendly with China, they invited Ayub Khan to Moscow in April 1965 and signed various economic deals and cultural agreements. All these developments made Ayub Khan believe that in case of war, he will have the support of the USA, the USSR as well as China, and decided for a military solution with regards to Kashmir.

The UN Secretary-General U. Thant, who made hectic efforts to bring an end to the conflict, wrote in his report to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 3 September that he had met and conveyed to Pakistan about UN's concern about the situation that had developed by the crossing of the ceasefire line (CFL) by number of armed men and their attacks on the military positions on the Indian side, and appealed for observance of the CFL. To India, he appealed for restraint as regards retaliatory attacks. He subsequently stated that he failed to get any assurance from Pakistan but received assurance from the Indian side. This reflected that U. Thant was convinced that the trouble began because of the Pakistani action.

According to Pradhan, 'Pakistan had expected the USA to support it in the war by restraining India from a counter-attack. But the USA maintained a neutral stance and put an arms embargo on both the nations. This exasperated Pakistan. China tried to settle scores with India by blaming it for violating Sikkim-China border and abducting 59 Chinese yaks, and threatened India with consequences. This threat worked in Pakistan's favour but the USA intervened and pushed China to stay out of the conflict. The Soviet also accepted that Pakistan was responsible for the conflict and it supported India in the UNSC by insisting that Kashmir issue should not be part of the war settlement. The Soviet also assured India that it will support India in case of a Chinese attack.'

According to S.D. Pradhan, Mao Zedong told Ayub Khan later that 'in case of a nuclear war, the target would be Peking and not Rawalpindi'. The Chinese, as well as the world, had got the message.

In May 1964, Indian Defence Minister Yashwantrao Chavan made a visit to the Pentagon, the HQ of the American defence department. Chavan, who was trying to rapidly modernise the Indian military, requested the Americans to sell India the F-104 Starfighter—the most advanced jet fighter of that era. Although the USA had supplied the F-104 and the F-86 Sabres in large numbers—almost free of cost—to Pakistan, India's request was rebuffed in an extremely crude manner.

In his book, *1965 War: The Inside Story*, the former Maharashtra chief secretary R.D. Pradhan states that Robert McNamara, the US defence secretary, had told Chavan that all the aircraft in India Air Force were 'only worthy of finding a place in a museum'. Pradhan further adds, 'With that background, it was an exhilarating moment when some of those junk planes, such as the Mystère, Vampires and Hunters performed brilliantly against Pakistan's sophisticated F-86s. In fact, the indigenously built Gnat, a small beaver-like fighter, brought down several F-86s.'

Reading a random page from my father's diary, before sleeping, had become a ritual with me. It not only gave me warmth, but also provided an insight into what a common citizen felt about the turn of events 50 years ago. However, it's sad to see that not much had changed in these 50 years. We had proved to be a steadfast country. The diary has become my analogue Google. Between the diary's in-depth analysis and Docsaab's innocent but curious observations, I was learning ... even if both of them didn't know where was Samara.

Shastri's leadership and diplomacy changed the equations in the Asian region. All the three powers—the USA, the USSR and China—had realised that Shastri was neither impulsive nor a weak leader who could be provoked or manoeuvred. He wasn't a leader who would heed to the army. They had understood that for the first time since independence, Indian leadership was more focussed on its internal issues and reforms rather than

worrying about its own image to the world, and it was very difficult to discredit a leader who was not insecure about his image. It was almost impossible to beat a leader who didn't fear losing his power. For that was his power. Even the most ferocious of Alsations go on the back foot when faced with a pariah. Because Alsations know that in a street-fight, a pariah will survive.

The message was clear—1965 wasn't 1962.

The Tashkent Agreement

It was a little after dinner time when the prime minister's residence received a trunk call from Tashkent.

'PM *saheb baat karenge*,' the phone operator at the PM residence informed the family.

These words used to make the entire Shastri family round up around the phone instrument. The family wasn't a nuclear family as we have seen with most prime ministers. Shastri's wife Lalita maintained her traditional values in a city of nuclear families. Which is why, the entire Shastri family of some 39 people, despite marriages, lived together in the PM's house, including her two sons-in-law and their children. There was a common kitchen and all the women of the house cooked food for the entire family. Some cooked, some served while Lalita supervised. The world of joint families is very different and impossible to understand if one has not been a part of a joint family. Every trunk call used to be a matter of joint curiosity and participation. Especially, if it was from the *mukhiya* of the family. In this case, the call came from Babu Ji himself.

The phone was kept outside in the corridor between the living room and the dining room. Shastri's wife was the first to reach the phone. In those times, a lot of time was wasted in saying, 'Hello... Can you hear me... *Awaz sahi nahi aa rahi hai ... ab sunai pada...*?' That day was no different than any other day. After a few minutes of screaming over the phone, Lalita gave up. By this time, Shastri's eldest son, Hari; his daughters, Suman and Kusum; Kusum's husband Vijai Nath Singh and eldest grandson, Sanjay

Nath Singh, who was Shastri's favourite, had also gathered around the phone. Since Vijai was the eldest after Lalita, he took the phone. After briefing him about some political developments, Shastri asked for Suman. Suman had been wanting to speak with him impatiently as she was troubled with some political developments.

'Babu Ji, people are very upset here with you giving back Haji Pir to Pakistan,' Suman cautioned Shastri.

'I heard... It's the opposition parties which do not want to see us in peace,' retorted Shastri.

'What are you going to do now?'

'Don't worry at all, I am coming back with great news. On my return, when I will tell people of India this secret ... they will forget everything.'

'What secret Babu Ji?'

'I can't tell you now... That's why it's a secret.'

This is when Lalita asked her to ask about his health.

'Babu Ji, amma pooch rahi hain, aapki tabiyat vagerah to theek hai na?'

'Tell her it's better than ever.'

Later, when his grandson, Sanjay Nath Singh, and two sons, Anil Shastri and Sunil Shastri, narrated this incident to me, I wondered what was the secret Shastri wanted to tell? Was it about Pakistan? Russia? Indira Gandhi? Or Subhash Chandra Bose?

'Sir, this "secret" is the crux of our story ... this is a major clue...' Docsaab said excitedly.

'How?'

'Shastri utters the word "secret" and then, within the next half an hour, he is dead.'

'So?'

'He called and told his family that he had a secret ... right ... in those days, there used to be an operator who could hear everything ... right...

What if the operator was working for “somebody” and informed the “vested party” who didn’t want the secret out and...’

‘We already have too many conspiracy theories... Don’t bring in a new one...’ I pleaded, ‘We should only rely on the material that is available in the public domain...’

‘Sir, read this,’ Docsaab took out a very old copy of the *Soviet Land* magazine.

I instantly recognised the magazine. It was one of those propaganda magazines, such as *Soviet Union*, *Soviet Life*, *Soviet Land* and *Misha*, that were circulated by the Soviet Union before the days of globalisation and internet. These magazines influenced the reading habits and, in turn, the thinking of Indians, especially the students. I used to collect their issues as these magazines used to have glossy pages, which was a unique characteristic, and featured Russian folktales, riddles, puzzles and exquisite coloured photos. We thought the magazine was our window to the world but, in reality, it was Russia literally being delivered to our doorstep. It was not possible to not become a part-time communist after reading such magazines. No wonder, in Kerala, where such magazines sold a lot, people named their children after Lenin, Stalin and Nikita.

In 1991, shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalisation policies, *Soviet Land* had published an account by an ex-KGB officer. According to the former intelligence agent, the KGB was snooping on both the Indian and Pakistani delegations... When Shastri started getting a seizure, the KGB was listening but decided not to alert their aides because that would give away their game and lead to a diplomatic showdown with India.

‘This is revealing. How come nobody ever reported this?’ I asked Docsaab.

‘Even I was thinking of the same thing,’ replied Docsaab.

‘Our journalism has become lazy...’

‘Because nobody chases the truth that doesn’t pay instant rewards.’

‘A lot of secrets of Indian history lie in the international politics of the Cold War. I am sure we can find a lot of insight from there. Let’s do what lazy journalists don’t.’

When the Indian Army was on the threshold of Lahore, why didn’t India move forward?—I wrote in bold letters on the whiteboard, which already has layers of old impressions which refuse to go.

‘India’s leadership frittered away on the negotiating table what the soldiers won on the battlefield,’ writes S.D. Pradhan. ‘In a way, India’s leadership, out of its sense of restraint, fair play and endeavour to seek enduring peace and goodwill with the neighbour, seems to have missed opportunities to solve the problem. At the end of a bruising 22-day war, India held 1,920 square kilometres of Pakistani territory while Pakistan only held 550 square kilometres of Indian land. The Haji Pir Pass was also captured by Indian soldiers after an epic battle. And yet India surrendered everything at the Tashkent Declaration in January 1966.’

The USA, which was embroiled in a bloody war of its own in Vietnam, acted mostly through the United Nations. However, the defining western aim was to see their satellite, that is Pakistan, get through the war without getting battered. Defence Minister Y.B. Chavan wrote in his war diary about the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s ceasefire proposal at a time when India had the upper hand, ‘I insisted on military advantages being maintained. The UK proposal looks like a trap.’ As three divisions of the Indian Army were slicing across Pakistani defences and thundering across Lahore, Wilson sent a message to Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Ayub Khan, ‘Both governments bear the responsibility for the steady escalation which has subsequently occurred, and today’s attack in the Lahore area presents us with a completely new situation.’ Wilson’s message implied that India was as much to blame for the war on the subcontinent as Pakistan. Shastri brushed aside that message, says Pradhan.

K. Vijaykrishnan [writes](#) in ‘The Soviet Union and the India-Pakistan War, 1965’, ‘Support was available for India on some important technical points and objections India had raised. Russia supported the Indian position that the Security Council should only deal with “questions directly connected with the settlement of the armed conflict” and not drag in the Kashmir issue.’

With the USA disinterested in the conflict and the UK showing its true anti-India and pro-Pakistan colours, it was left to Russia to play the honest broker. It was after some initial hesitation that both India and Pakistan accepted the Russian offer. Ayub Khan later said that Pakistan went to Tashkent as it did not want to risk a veto by Moscow. There was another reason for Pakistan’s eagerness for talks. According to Pradhan, ‘The continued presence of Indian troops on the east side of the Ichhogil Canal, facing Lahore city, was hurting Pakistan’s pride. The heat was clearly on Islamabad.’

In his essay, ‘The Indo-Pak war 1965 and the Tashkent agreement: Role of external powers’, S.D. Pradhan writes about the discussions that took place when the prime minister of India and the president of Pakistan met at Tashkent. He states that Shastri wanted all infiltrators sent by Pakistan to be withdrawn along with an assurance that no such operation would be repeated in the future. Ayub Khan, on the other hand, wanted plebiscite in Kashmir. It was Kosygin who used his diplomatic skills and convinced both of them to withdraw their forces.

Pradhan further adds, ‘Other items included that both sides would exert all efforts to create good neighbourly relations in accordance with UN charter and reaffirmation not to have recourse to force and to settle their disputes through peaceful means. They also agreed not to encourage propaganda against each other [...] The question remains why Shastri agreed to return strategic areas which had been occupied by the Indian Army. While the actual answer cannot be obtained as Shastri died within

hours of signing the agreement, only some guess can be made. Shastri may have been persuaded to accept it with the assurance that Pakistan would not use force in future... He may have been motivated to accept this to have enduring peace and goodwill with the neighbour particularly when the Soviet Union had given the assurance that Pakistan would not use force... How India was misled was clear soon. Bhutto stated that the UN charter does not prevent a state to use force in self-defence. Ayub also stated that the Tashkent Agreement did not change Pak attitude towards Kashmir. This reflects that the Indian leadership failed to read the real intentions of Pak leadership and missed an opportunity to keep Pakistan under pressure until the resolution of all the issues.'

'Sir, some reports say we won the war, some say we did not. What is your take on all this?'

'Victory and defeat are assessed in terms of objectives. Pakistan's first objective was to create problems in Kashmir and free it from India. It failed. India won. The second objective was to protect its boundary, but it also lost strategic areas. India was just a few miles away from Lahore. Obviously, Pakistan failed. India won.'

'I never saw it from that angle,' Docsaab started writing it on the whiteboard.

'Its socio-political environment got disrupted, the government started losing control, internal conflicts aggravated, unrest increased, the economy fell ... all this resulted in its eventual break up five years later.'

'Again ... Pakistan lost, India won,' Docsaab wrote with a sense of wonder.

'Indian objectives were reactive. To defeat Pakistan's campaign to seize Kashmir ... to give such a befitting reply to Pakistan that it doesn't dare attack India again. India achieved all this hence India is the winner.'

The war turned beneficial for India in many ways, believes Pradhan. He writes, ‘First, this was the first successful operation that not only thwarted Pak attempt to grab Kashmir but also occupied the strategically significant area that put considerable pressure on Pakistan. Pakistan failed in its gamble to change the situation in J&K. Second, war improved India’s prestige internationally particularly after the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The *Times* in its editorial reported that India was going to be Asia’s major power. Third, it significantly improved relations with the Soviet Union and paid a dividend during the 1971 war. Fourth, India began to focus on a nuclear programme to deal with the Chinese threat. Fifth, India accelerated its defence acquisition programme to build its capabilities. Sixth, India removed its weaknesses in intelligence collection and assessment making capabilities that were noticed during the war. India created a dedicated external intelligence agency and brought Joint Intelligence Committee under Cabinet Secretariat to provide overall assessment taking into account all dimensions. These changes paid rich dividend later.’

After Shastri agreed to return the captured land back to Pakistan, a lot of people in India fiercely criticised it. Why did Shastri do it? Before leaving for Tashkent, Shastri had promised his victorious troops that he would not return the land captured from the enemy after so many sacrifices. But after six days of talks, Shastri gave away everything. Was Shastri feeling the pressure from the international community? Most likely not, but perhaps, Shastri felt—like his predecessor Nehru after Pakistan’s illegal occupation of POK and his successor Indira Gandhi after the 1971 war—that showing leniency towards Pakistan would buy its goodwill.

Or was there another secret that Shastri had to die for?

11 January 1966

After the war, Shastri's political capital was at its highest. A defeated country had found its honour. The army was rejuvenated. The economy was moving in the right direction. Indian diplomacy was at its best having made favourable deals with both the USA and the USSR. It seemed as if the days of conflict were behind us and India will now move on the path of development and peace. It was clear to even a political novice that for a long time Shastri's position won't be challenged. He wasn't a puppet PM anymore. Kingmaker Kamaraj and his only threat, Indira Gandhi, had found no room to manoeuvre their political ambitions.

Though there was a strong political noise building up against the Tashkent Agreement, most of the people stood behind Shastri. The return of the captured territory of Pakistan was the only bone of contention. On one side was the ego of the nation and on the other, there was a collective faith in Shastri—a practitioner of tyaga and peace.

Every nation has an ego. The concept of a nation is based on macho ego. That's why a nation needs a leader with empathy to neutralise that ego. After the bloodied period of First and Second World Wars, the world was entangled in a Cold War which was nothing but the conflict of the egos of the USA and the USSR. Both the USA and the USSR were feeding their egos on the blood of weaker nations, by controlling them either with capitalism or socialism. The economic or ideological enslaving of weaker nations by bullying or armed attacks was the political culture during the Cold War.

After the ceasefire, India could have kept Pakistan's territories. It would have been acceptable to everyone. But Shastri knew that the long-term peace never comes by bullying and military occupations—it comes by tyaga. Nehru ignited his ego in the 1962 war and India lost badly. In 1965, Shastri put his neck out and despite the public opinion he chose tyaga; he won the war and gave back India its lost dignity and confidence. This reinforced my belief in what Bapu used to tell me, 'Bharat is capable of showing the path to this world only when it moves on the path of tyaga.' Everyone thought Shastri was a true Nehruvian but he turned out to be a true Gandhian. During Shastri, India saw a smooth transition of attitude from ego-based leadership to humble leadership. Everyone felt included but not for long. Shastri died early and India went back to ego-based leadership under Indira.

My father's diary has become the candle that lights up a huge library of ancient books. In the library of 2019, nobody goes to the shelves which have books on tyaga. Everyone wants quick-help books written to nourish

the ego. People who choose to read the books of *tyaga* are instantly perceived as irrelevant, romantic and unfit in this fleeting world of consumerism which thrives on individualistic egos. No wonder, nobody teaches my son about Shastri anymore. The education system has abandoned leaders like Shastri. That's why this film is so important to me as I want to bring back the icons rooted in Hindu values to the national consciousness. For me, this film is a life mission.

We had read every noteworthy work on Shastri, his death, the Cold War, etc. I had met his family members, some old colleagues and spoken to over three dozen experts who had analysed the politics of the 1960s and 1970s. It's time to understand the chronology of events on the night of 10/11 January 1966 when Shastri signed the agreement, and later died. Though we have been researching for the last three months, it was finally the time to decide if we should seriously make this film or not. So, I asked Docsaab to make a presentation; I invited my wife, Pallavi, and a close friend, Tripti Sharma, who has always volunteered to doctor my scripts, to find holes in the story from an uninvolved perspective. It's another thing that Pallavi and Tripti are always ready to find holes in my stories.

'Sir, it reads like a screenplay...' Docsaab told me with a lot of excitement, 'of a thriller.'

'Of course, the PM died ... it better be like a thriller,' I added to the conversation like a typical filmmaker.

'No sir, not his death, but researching his death is like a thriller.'

'Why, what happened now?'

'Sir, every book, article, expert, friend and family member has a different flow of events... There is such a maze of jumbled facts that only the hero of a thriller can solve it.'

'In that case, we should read everything, listen to every version but the basis to evaluate their authenticity should only be certified official documents.'

‘But there are no official documents, sir.’

‘How is that possible? The Ministry of External Affairs should have the log of his health, his appointments, movements, etc.’

‘I looked everywhere... There is nothing.’

Docsaab had just come back from Delhi after spending 15 days in the National Archives of India and had found not even a single paper on Shastri’s death.

‘Still, I have made a flow based on the common factors which everyone remembers or are written by credible sources.’

1.20 AM. 11 January 1966. Tashkent, USSR.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

‘Who can be at the door so late at night?’ Ramnath asked Sahay *sahib* while packing his bags for an early morning flight to Kabul. Like everyone else, Ramnath also had had too many shots of pure Russian vodka. And why not?! It was an occasion to get a little merry as after six tension-filled days, the Tashkent Agreement had finally been signed and they were going to leave the freezing cold city.

‘Maybe the plan has changed. Maybe, we have to spend more days in this dead frozen city,’ Ramnath thought. There wasn’t anything wrong in this line of thinking as Ramnath and the other members of India’s second prime minister’s entourage had spent a long week of unprecedented uncertainties in the snow-clad city of Tashkent. Initially, the plan was to stay only for a few days but then every day brought in new issues, new challenges, new disagreements, and new solutions. After six days of roller-coaster drama, they were all set to return to India with a brief stay in Kabul. As an ode to these unforgettable days of tension, conflict, stress and suspense, Ramnath and his colleagues had had a bit too many vodkas. And as they were enjoying these moments of relief from the looming tension, someone intruded again, like every other day.

Ramnath stretched and went to open the door. He could hear someone coughing badly. Despite being drunk, Ramnath's intuition never failed him. He knew it was more than a normal knock. Ramnath opened the door to find independent India's second prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, standing there, coughing breathlessly, his face was turning pale as if he was getting choked from inside.

'Doctor sahib kahan hain?' Shastri asked while coughing.

In that split second, Ramnath realised that his tiny master for the last 30 years had shrunk a bit more.

'Arre utho... Utho... Babu Ji ki tabiyat kharab ho gayi hai... Doc sahib ko bulao jaldi se...' Sahay rushed to Dr Chugh's room upstairs while Ramnath literally lifted Shastri and took him back to his bedroom, crossing the corridor and the living room.

His personal assistant, M.M.N. Sharma put Shastri's head on his lap. Shastri pointed at the thermos which was empty.

'Babu Ji, wo khali hai... Paani lao!' Sahay yelled.

When Shastri kept pointing at the thermos for a little longer than necessary, Sahay got a bit suspicious as if he was trying to say something.

'Babu Ji, kya kehna chaha rahe hain...'

'Babu Ji was so jovial and happy when he spoke to his family back in Delhi just 20 minutes ago. Then, he had his milk from the thermos and Isabgol...' Ramnath's mind was trying to zero in on the cause of Shastri's sickness. *'I am to be blamed... I should have given him the milk ... why did I not protest when that Russian butler and his team of cooks were asked to cook food for Babu Ji.'*

Ramnath was pretty sure that it was a case of food poisoning and everything will be fine after the milk that Babu Ji drank before sleeping is flushed out. Despite being high on vodka, he was thinking logically. In the gala last night, hosted by the Russian Premier Kosygin for the success of the Tashkent Treaty between India and Pakistan, who had just fought an

intense war where India had defeated Pakistan badly, Shastri had eaten only a few nuts and some fruits as he preferred to eat the food cooked only by Ramnath, his personal cook. Only that night Ramnath did not cook for him.

Dr Chugh checked Shastri's pulse. Dead. He checked his heartbeat. Again. Dead. Finally, with trembling hands, he checked his breath. Dead. He administered an intramuscular injection. Shastri was still dead.

'Babu Ji, aapne mujhe ek mauka bhi nahin diya...' Dr Chugh burst into tears.

At 1.32 AM, Shastri's press secretary, Kuldip Nayar, made a trunk call to Delhi Press Bureau and declared 'Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri dies of a heart attack'.

In India, it was just after 2 AM on 11 January 1966.

3 AM. 11 January 1966. Ninth Chief Directorate, KGB. Tashkent, USSR.

On the same night, at 3 AM, the police of the most powerful Ninth Chief Directorate of KGB woke up the chief butler, Ahmed Sattarov, his three assistants and Jan Mohammad, the cook of the Indian ambassador, T.N. Kaul. They arrested them and took them to an undisclosed location.

The official reason for their arrest was the suspicion of them poisoning Shastri.

11 AM. 11 January 1966. Palam Airport, New Delhi.

Shastri's body arrived at Delhi's Palam International Airport in an Air India flight. Despite the biting cold, there was an unprecedented tide of people waiting for Shastri's last *darshan*. It was but natural since Shastri had emerged as people's leader after he defeated Pakistan and had healed a nation that was wounded by India's humiliating defeat in the Sino-Indian War.

Amidst the roars of '*Jai Jawan Jai Kisan*' (a slogan given by Shastri) and '*Bharat ka Lal amar rahe*', Shastri's body was disembarked from the plane. By the time his body was put in an army truck, to be taken to his

official residence, the chanting started to fade and a whisper started spreading amongst his fans and the press, and soon it enveloped the entire Palam airport, 'Why is his body swollen? Why is his body blue? Why is blood seeping out from the cuts?'

Noon. 11 January 1966. 10 Janpath Road, New Delhi.

Shastri's wife, Lalita had always accompanied him on his foreign trips. This was the only time that Shastri didn't allow her to join him. While waiting for the body to arrive, Lalita was cursing herself for not joining him.

It was only a few hours back that Shastri had called his family, at around 1 AM, when his daughter Kusum had told him that people were very upset with his decision that India should return the occupied territory of Pakistan. This is when Shastri had asked her to give the phone to Lalita and told her that he was coming back with the news that will make Indians very happy. He had asked her to keep it a secret.

Shastri's body reached his residence and was taken inside the house. When Lalita, Shastri's mother and other relatives started to perform Hindu rituals of bathing the body and dressing it up with new clothes, they noticed that there were several cuts on his stomach and neck from where blood was still oozing out. They immediately alerted the family and his lifelong friend T.N. Singh.

'If it was a heart attack, why does his body have cuts... Why is blood dripping out... Why is his body swollen... Why has it turned blue-black in colour... Why does his face have dark spots... Was a post-mortem done in Russia... What are they hiding?' Lalita Shastri had a long list of questions to ask Shastri's press secretary, Kuldeep Nayar.

'I am told that when bodies are embalmed, they turn blue,' Kuldeep Nayar had replied.

'Why are there cuts on the body then?' She asked.

'I don't know.'

‘I am sure a secret post-mortem was conducted in Tashkent,’ Lalita said with conviction.

Kuldip Nayar was startled. ‘It is indeed unusual,’ he replied softly.

‘Lalita Ji and others in the family suspect foul play,’ Nayar noted. Shastri’s childhood friend T.N. Singh and his close follower Jagdish Kodesia couldn’t make sense of the situation either; they, along with Shastri’s eldest son Anil and son-in-law Hari, met the caretaker prime minister, Gulzarilal Nanda, and requested him to conduct the post-mortem at the earliest. They also officially requested the cabinet secretary and the home secretary to conduct the post-mortem.

4 PM. 12 January 1966. Vijay Ghat, New Delhi.

On a foggy, winter evening of Delhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri’s body was cremated according to the Hindu rituals. The last *agni* was given by his eldest son, 17-year-old Anil Shastri.

No post-mortem was conducted on him.

‘How is it possible that no post-mortem was conducted on our prime minister?’ Tripti wondered.

‘That too when he died immediately after a war?’ Pallavi added.

‘And in a foreign land?’ Docsaab added another element.

‘Despite the family’s written request to the acting PM?’ Tripti further questioned.

‘I am sure the document should be with the government.’ Pallavi was trying to go deep.

‘Why don’t we file an RTI with the ministry?’ I asked.

‘An RTI?’ Docsaab was confused.

‘Yes, RTI... Right to information.’ I reaffirmed.

‘We will have to find a whistle-blower,’ Docsaab was thinking about the logistics of the idea.

‘I can be your whistle-blower,’ Pallavi said abruptly.

Since the time we started working on this project, Pallavi, a hard-core fan of murder mysteries, had been very excited to know the truth. Though she has been a bouncing board, she always remained an outsider.

‘Which you are anyway ... with full rights to information on my life,’ I humoured her.

‘I mean seriously... I can do it for you.’

‘But you have never done it.’

‘Isn’t that reason enough?’ The way Pallavi looked at me in response made me feel like a hypocrite.

In our home and in the office, we always encourage people to do what they have never dared to do. Pallavi and I run IAmBuddha Foundation which mentors disadvantaged youngsters to explore uncharted territories of life.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked.

‘Yes. I’ll do it not as your wife but as a producer. While you guys are busy with the research, I can file the RTI’s. Besides that, it will also help me learn what it means to be a whistle-blower in India.’

‘I can also help,’ Tripti offered.

I didn’t want to involve Pallavi in this process as I could anticipate the threats and trolling that would come with this film. But I also realised that a self-motivated seeker of truth is an asset that money can never buy. That evening, we found not just a working producer and a whistle-blower but a guide who would eventually become the quality controller and the moral guide of this film. From a team of two, we became three. For an indie film, every addition is welcome. A start-up was born.

At the middle of the night, I opened my laptop and for some time kept thinking what should be the name of this film. Nothing came to my mind. In situations of creative blocks like these, I always make the hypothesis of the theme as the working title. Thus, I named it—Who Killed Shastri?

ACT II

A Nightmare Called RTI

After filing over three dozen RTI applications with various government departments, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, Defence Ministry, Parliament and the Parliament Police Station, where the investigation was carried, a certain frustration had started setting in the team. This was the first time we were dealing with the government directly. As filmmakers, we were full of excitement but as citizens, we were feeling disheartened and angry.

Our assumption was that RTI is an instrument that is available to every ordinary citizen as to find out any kind of truth from the government. However, we learnt that to even start the process of finding the truth, the instrument has to work. Though there is an official website for RTI applications (<https://rtionline.gov.in/>), it rarely works.

'We must have tried to submit the application at least 100 times on their site but it somehow never works,' Pallavi told me.

'How is that possible... Your Wi-Fi must be slow or something...' I said with disbelief.

'Why don't you try it out yourself?'

I spent hours, with my frustration rising with every passing moment, waiting for the RTI form to be submitted on the official site. But, it didn't.

'Is it overloaded? Are millions of people like us filing RTIs at the same time? Is it a national hobby to find out the truth?' Various questions cross my mind.

‘We can’t afford to just sit here and sulk. We have to find a way to submit our applications,’ I looked at Saurabh, ‘Why don’t you go to Delhi...?’

‘We don’t have money to waste on every little problem,’ Pallavi reminded me.

‘There has to be another way... Can’t we send them through the post office?’ I asked, my excitement rising.

‘We tried.’

‘Then, what’s the problem?’

‘The problem is that when Saurabh went to the post office they had no idea about RTI procedures.’

‘How is that possible? Tell them we will report it to the higher authorities...’

‘Sir, I said all that but they didn’t care... In fact, one of them was outrightly rude. It’s a very strange system,’ Docsaab informed me.

‘I don’t believe it! Maybe you couldn’t explain it properly. Postmasters are the most helpful people.’

‘Always be nice to the postman... He is our only connection to the world,’ my father had told me when I had become angry at our postman who I believed had delayed delivering my college admission letter. I have always respected postmen since then.

The post office has been to ordinary people like me what the internet is today to the millennials. The postman was like the Wi-Fi or 4G connection. Best computers and internet systems can’t do anything without a good connection. The post offices were not meant only for inlands and postcards, they were the governance apparatus of the government. Money was transacted through money orders. Money was saved in the form of savings and provident funds. Pension came through the post offices. All kinds of good and bad news came through the post office. From passport to big parcels, everything was delivered through the postal service. A common

citizen's lifeline of communication was the post office which the postman brought to one's doorstep. The postman wasn't just a delivery man, he was also a member of the family. He would spend a few minutes chit-chatting with the family while making the delivery. If we were to go on a holiday, he would safely keep the mail. If you were going out for some time, he would deliver the money order to your neighbour. If requested, he would redirect the mail to your current address. Unlike today's digital communication, there was always a human touch, and hence, scope to improvise.

When I was a child, our postman gave me rides on his bicycle. Sitting on the front rod, my legs hanging on one side, I have travelled door to door with our postman. I have seen the way people welcomed him. He was given hot tea in winter and cold *sherbet* in summer. During festivals, he was given sweets along with gratitude. Many days, I have spent my time observing the postmen segregating the letters. Their skill fascinated me. Let's not forget that the postman has been a central character in our literature and Bollywood films till the early 1990s. The postman wasn't just an integral part of our civil life but he was a habit. I have seen people waiting for the postman at their doors or balconies at the specified time. The postman also gave us a sense of continuity since he was attached to a particular branch for a lifetime. That's why the relationship between a post office and a citizen was always based on trust, help, courtesy and continuity. For me, it was difficult to believe that postmen can be rude. I assumed that Docsaab, being a product of the internet age, must have gone with a certain prejudiced attitude, which would have failed to communicate the urgency.

'I'll come with you. I'll show you how it is done,' I declared, looking to Docsaab.

As we manoeuvred the crowded lanes of Versova village to reach the post office, I felt nostalgic but I also wondered why 'my post office' was so difficult to reach. There was a small tin signboard stained with mud and pigeon shit. It hung at such a 'find-me-if-you-can' angle as if it was

challenging the customers. The assumption must have been that why would anyone come to the post office and if one does, he must be desperate enough to find it. I was reminded of an old saying—if you can't find it, you don't deserve to be there.

A visit to a post office is like opening an old photo album, smelling of the moisture of many monsoons with stained edges, torn pages, crumbling paper and fading pictures in sepia tone, locked in time that ended ages ago but have been kept alive only for the nostalgic purpose. Like sick, old people, the post office carried a peculiar smell of oldness and irrelevance. In India, so many old institutions are just kept alive at a high cost because in this fast-changing world, nobody has the time to decide what to do with them. The democracy doesn't let the government kill the institution and the economic compulsions don't let them transform to meet the challenges of the digital world.

The post office had a lazy vibe and there was an expression of 'we are not relevant any more' on every postman's wrinkled face. The walls were full of cracks but they were carefully hidden behind posters screaming of government schemes which put me off like a chemistry formula. One very old poster that caught my attention was of a scene called 'My Stamp'. I remembered how you could just carry your passport-sized photo and the post office would issue a stamp with your face on it. I also remembered how we used to queue up for the 'first-day stamp covers'. These stamps had either a photo of a great person or, through art, it depicted the lifestyle, culture, an Indian festival or an event like the Asian Games. The designs were diverse and secular in the truest sense.

The stamp art still exists but nobody is collecting them anymore. I wonder why we didn't think of making it cool like collecting superhero stamps. The only difference is that those were real superheroes. A stamp was not just a piece of art, it was also a simple way of collecting taxes.

‘Sir, how can I help you?’ The postmaster asked me after some time.

‘We have to file RTIs... My assistant came here but he was sent back. It seems nobody knows anything about the RTI procedure... When he told me, I said it can’t be true so I have come myself,’ I tried to take him in confidence.

‘It’s true. We don’t know much about it.’

‘What... Really ... but then ... how do I file it as the government website doesn’t work ... and now you are saying...’

‘I am not saying that it can’t be done... We have done a few but that was a long time back... Nobody comes here to file an RTI any more... In fact, nobody comes here since everyone is carrying a post office in their hands,’ he pointed at my mobile phone and winked.

‘It’s no ordinary RTI. It’s to know the truth behind Lal Bahadur Shastri’s mysterious death—’

‘In Tashkent?’ He completed the sentence for me and then added, ‘He was a great man... I still have his “*Jai Jawan Jai Kisan*” stamp. They don’t make people like him anymore... It’s sad that he was killed in Tashkent.’

‘We don’t know if he was killed... as of yet. That’s why I want to file RTIs.’

‘Everyone knows. I am sure even you know. But like everyone else, you also want to keep it a secret.’

‘Honestly, right now, I know nothing. But I want to know everything.’

‘How?’

‘With research and RTI.’

He looked at me for a bit with a blank expression. ‘RTI... Really?’

‘Yes. Could you please suggest how do I go about it?’

‘It’s not that nobody knows about it... One of my men does but he is on leave. You can try next week sometime.’

‘What if there is an emergency?’

‘Emergency ... for an RTI?’ He laughed his heart out and added while coughing, ‘You want to file an RTI to find out something that you didn’t know for the last 50 years ... how will 5 more days make any difference? RTI can never be an emergency for the only emergency in this country is to survive.’

As we came out of the post office, some religious procession was going on, blocking the entire dingy lane. Amidst the deafening sound of drums, trumpets and blaring horns, people were just standing at their doors and balconies watching the procession, with which they had nothing to do. I understood then, why everybody in India is a philosopher, just like our postmaster... When survival is extremely difficult in a crumbling and rotten system, when there isn’t much hope, philosophy, religion and festivals become the best escapes for survival—the only emergency. Everything else can wait.

The postmaster said that RTI wasn’t their priority. It’s strange that in a democracy the instrument of finding the truth is not a priority.

‘It’s not a priority because nobody files RTIs,’ Docsaab told me.

‘This simply shows that the citizens aren’t bothered to keep a check on the government. We spend so much time in accusing or praising the government but never make an effort to hold it accountable,’ I replied, a bit agitated.

‘RTIs help people ... yet people don’t behave in their own self-interest.’

‘Because for generations, our DNA has got conditioned to believe that nothing will happen. We moved from the Mughal rule to the British rule and then to a borrowed constitutional democracy. Systems changed but behaviours didn’t. The authority kept the governance a well-guarded secret and we learnt that we have no right over it. A lot of people tried to become full-time whistle-blowers but eventually, their dead bodies were found near railway lines or hanging from the roof.’

‘Sir, why couldn’t we cultivate the culture of transparency after independence? In fact, after hundreds of years of slavery and suffocation, we should have been fully accountable and transparent but our leadership never deemed it important.’

‘If the British were hiding things from us, it’s understandable. I wonder, why a liberal leader like Nehru couldn’t bring in transparency?’ I asked.

‘Because Nehru wasn’t an original thinker. Almost all of his ideas were borrowed from others, sir,’ Docsaab said.

Docsaab took out an old excerpt from the industrialist, author, a former chief mentor of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Padma Bhushan awardee, Tarun Das, just to substantiate his argument.

‘We have this huge mass of regulation and controls and bureaucracy because when Nehru came to power and had to manage a complex and huge country, and no experience of running a country. Nehru looked around for ideas to run the country. The USA was busy with Europe, Japan and the Marshall Plan. So Nehru looked north, across the Himalayas, and sent his team of economists to Moscow. They came back and said this country (the USSR) was amazing. They allocate resources, they give licenses, there is a planning commission that decides everything, and the country moves. So Nehru took that model and forgot that we had a private sector too. The private sector got put under this wall of regulations ... and mistrust from the Centre... The entire infrastructure was government-owned. This burden of State ownership almost bankrupted the economy ... we were not able to pay our debts ... there was mistrust and no confidence.’

If Nehru had not followed a Soviet model, would India have been a different nation? What if we were not a closed and government-controlled economy? I believe that India should have followed an indigenous model based on India’s *panchayat* system mixed with Gandhi’s *swadeshi*. India’s DNA was always free, liberal and diverse. Nehru suffocated it with closed, exploitative communist ideology. Shastri realised this and that’s why he was

reforming the economy by giving more power to farmers, strengthening our military, revolutionising agriculture, milk and nuclear programmes. Shastri was also on the verge of changing the elephantine five-year planning based on the socialist Soviet model to one-year planning. Shastri wanted to explore Indian enterprise and not kill it as Nehru did. Later, Nehru's legacy was reinforced with new vigour and passion by his daughter Indira Gandhi. The ugliest face of red-tapism, licence raj, controls, permits manifested itself in black-marketing, corruption and exploitation. The government spread its tentacles everywhere. There was nobody who was not exploited, corrupted or oppressed by the government. Various schemes and rights were given but only on paper. The process to avail such facilities was full of bottlenecks exactly like in the Soviet model; the remnants of which are easily visible in old and ignored institutions of India.

RTI is one such institution.

After a few days, Docsaab went to the post office again to file an RTI. This time, the 'person-who-knew' was there but there was a new problem. An RTI application requires a ₹10 postal stamp but the post office had only ₹50 postal stamps. For the next three months, we filed 30 plus RTIs and ended up paying five times more to the government because they didn't have the required postal stamp. The cost of the government's inefficiency was five times more to the consumer. This inefficiency and lack of caring for the customer is Nehru's legacy, further strengthened by his daughter Indira.

After filing a few RTIs we waited. And waited. And waited.

Finally, the reply came. Everyone circled around that envelope exactly as we do on cake-cuttings on birthdays. This was the moment all of us had waited and worked hard for. The first reply was from the protocol division of the Ministry of External affairs where we had inquired about 'the protocol when the prime minister dies in a foreign country? What were the engagements of Shastri while he was in Tashkent? Where is the post-

mortem report? What is the official reason for post-mortem not being conducted? Where are the health logs of the PM? Was anyone arrested in suspicion after Shastri's death?'

We knew that even one answer would lead us to many hitherto uncharted territories.

Pallavi opened the brown envelope with a transparent window for the address. The crisp letter was unfolded. There were hidden smiles of satisfaction which everyone was withholding for the right moment. Exactly like we wait to sing the birthday song at the right moment when the cake is cut.

Pallavi read the letter, and slowly her expressions changed.

'It says they have no information. Whatsoever.' Pallavi informed us with a deep sigh.

There was silence for some time.

'How is it possible that the protocol division of MFA doesn't have any information on the protocol for the PM's death in a foreign country?' I asked.

'This is ridiculous,' Pallavi said, frustrated.

'They must have something ... like when he landed... Who did he meet... The details of his stay... What time his dead body left... When did it arrive at Palam... After all, he was the PM... Did you ask the right questions?' I asked Docsaab in frustration.

'Yes sir, absolutely.'

For a moment it felt like I was going to pass out. I picked up the letter. All the words became irrelevant except for three which were screaming out as if ridiculing our months of struggle— 'No Documents. Whatsoever'.

The Right To Truth

Everyone in my small team was so frustrated that they wanted to give up. It's not that we are a lazy nation. Everyone wants the system to change. Millions of people try to change it on a daily basis. But slowly, seeing so many speed breakers, and disgusted with the bumpy, non-responsive, unfriendly, lazy and corrupt system, most of them just give up. This is why the idea of a revolution is omnipresent in India. It seems that everyone wants a change but nobody has any idea of how to correct the system which has taken such a monstrous shape that more you try to correct it, the messier it becomes. Often, people who challenge the system are the ones who are victimised because they have the conscience and the system is built to destroy that very conscience. Our system forces us to kneel in front of the authority, which is antagonistic to the very idea of democracy. Democracy, which is meant to empower the citizens in leading a hassle-free liberated life has been reduced to exercising only voting rights. In today's India, there are two kinds of people—conscience keepers and conscience busters. In a society of over a billion people, the stories of conscience's victory are very few and the power of conscience busters is immense. We are a mass grave of defeated citizens—defeated by the very system which is supposed to make every citizen win.

In India, you will find speed breakers, for no rhyme or reason, on all roads. As if to ensure that you can never drive in peace. As if the system doesn't want India to drive in a fast lane. The speed breaker is the microcosm of the Indian system—make it so difficult for the citizen that in the end either he/she gives up or is forced to pay bribes. Is this why we fought for freedom and went to jail? Just to become oppressed slaves of a system? We are stuck in a

problem. In 1950, we wrote a constitution. The date of its execution hasn't arrived yet. It's a test of our society. If we pursue truth and accountability with peaceful means, whichever facet of life we are in, whichever profession we are in, our struggle for total freedom from corruption, government controls, unaccountability and administrative exploitation must never stop. As long as you know what your destination is, speed breakers must not bother you. Bit by bit, with our pursuit for truth, we shall have total freedom.

My father used to write a lot on the value of truth in our lives. He was a passionate patriot and was extremely proud of India and her ability to rise after every downfall. Though I got his optimism and positivity, but unlike him, I never fought for truth or *dharma*.

‘God gives everyone an opportunity to fight for truth and *dharma*. We fail because we are not prepared. You must always be prepared when such time comes. As prepared as a soldier is to die for his *dharma*,’ my father had told me once on my birthday. This was his gift. This is how we celebrated birthdays.

Slowly, a few more replies came from the home ministry and the PMO. All of them were straight out of a template. They also said that if we were still ‘aggrieved with the reply, we may file an appeal with the appellate authority’. A few of them asked us to look for our answers in the National Archives of India at New Delhi. I had spent weeks in the National Archives when I used to do research on advertising. It's a disaster for anyone who is not a professional researcher doing a PhD. It's not for the weak-hearted. It's not for people with deadlines and budgets. It's like sitting with an old man on his deathbed who is slurring and coughing while telling his life story which you don't understand a word of. You can be beside him for days without registering anything. It's a sheer waste of time.

Docsaab was dispatched to Delhi for a ‘stay-till-you-get-it’ period of time. He spent the first week understanding how to find a document in the ‘*ambaar* (heap) of files’. Instead of facilitating researchers, the entire system is created to challenge the human instinct of survival. The employees hate it when you ask them many questions. They assume that

you must know how their redundant system works. If you don't, you are not worth their time. They take the word archive from the National Archives very seriously. The process is multi-layered, time-consuming and frustrating. First, you have to check in the ministry section, then you have to find it in the index and then you submit a request for that file which will be given to you after one day or more without any guarantee that it will be the same file that you had requested for in the first place. In Docsaab's case, 90 per cent of the times he was given wrong files and he had to repeat the same process over and over again.

Then, Docsaab approached the lady director of the National Archives and explained his frustration to her. He told her that the RTI replies had asked him to come here to which she told him that if an RTI says there is no document, then you can never find it here. He pleaded with her to help him with only one document—Shastri's death's medical report. She said they had no document like that. It's strange because later we got the medical report from the National Archives through another RTI. Should we believe that the director really didn't know? Or she was lazy? Or there was some other reason? We don't know. But this went on for weeks and weeks and Docsaab couldn't find any information. Whoever he asked had only one reply. No documents were available. Whatsoever.

'Sir, I am coming back, *yahan kuch nahi hone wala*,' Docsaab called me one night, sounding frustrated and hapless.

At the end of this chapter of our struggle, we had no information. No document. Whatsoever.

'Sir, what kind of a system is this? First, they don't tell the truth, then they hide it with all their might. Then, they create an instrument like the RTI for people to ask for any truth. But, when we do, they create so many hurdles that one would easily give up. If somehow you manage to reach there, they will avoid it in the first attempt. They have technical replies but they are of no use,' Docsaab vent out his frustration. 'They take full advantage of the

inbuilt overlapping in the system to buffer the information. It's a rotten system.' He summarised.

'Yes, we have a system which is rotten. Yes, we need to improve it. But unless we fight and go on and on and on like a Duracell battery, we can never change it. Revolution will not come with protests or *bandhs*... It will come by pursuing ... by digging out truths ... even if we can't find the truth, at least, in the end, we will have created an awareness that there is a need to find the truth,' Pallavi calmed everyone down with her optimism and positivity.

India needs to be rebuilt. We give knowledge to our students but not the strength, which is like giving a sword but not teaching how to use it on a battlefield. Without moral and spiritual strength, there will be no reconstruction of our great nation. To rebuild India, we need an ocean of ideas and action emanating from our moral strength. From our shakti. The shakti of one billion Indians. For that shakti, we will have to change our nature of lethargy and pessimism. After a thousand years of slavery, we have acquired a self-defeating habit of succumbing to the authority. Only weak people indulge in self-promotion and the immoral bow down to corrupt authority. This is not true Bharatiya nature for we surrender to only one authority—the truth. Seeking the truth is our only dharma. That is our shakti.

We can't wait eternally for a collective discovery of shakti for it shall never happen. It has to begin with an individual whose shakti will be transmitted to the others. As individuals, we can't keep complaining without ever walking on the path of truth. This is the age of rediscovery. The new man will have to discover the fire of truth in his belly. Every individual who seeks the truth is a volcano of revolution. Only when he will seek truth without fear or favour, India will be reborn.

This passage from my father's diary came back to haunt me as Pallavi spoke. Some divine energy struck me. This was my Buddha moment.

'Why are we making this film?' I asked everyone.

'What do you mean why?' Pallavi was confused.

'What is our destination ... our goal?'

'To find the truth of Shastri's death.'

'Absolutely ... to find the truth... But why do we have to find it? Because we don't have it ... it's not given to us.'

'What are you getting at?' Pallavi wondered.

‘We have democracy so that every citizen has the fundamental right to liberty and justice. But is liberty and justice possible without truth?’ I asked.

There was silence in the room.

‘In a democracy, shouldn’t our first fundamental right be the “Right To Truth”?’ I asked a fundamental question.

‘It should be, but it is not... Sir, India’s second PM died in a foreign land and we did not even constitute an inquiry commission,’ Docsaab was just looking for an opportunity to vent his frustration.

‘No there was one commission called the Raj Narain Committee,’ Pallavi interjected.

‘Ma’am, that’s what some bloggers have written on the internet but there is not a single document available anywhere which confirms it.’

‘Because we have no real right to truth, we don’t know about the hundreds of scams, scandals, political murders, corruption cases, delays in government projects... We never know the truth,’ I explained. ‘Commissions and inquiry committees are set up but truth never comes out. That’s why we have no accountability. Anyone can pass off anything.’

‘Fine, but how is our film connected with all this. This is a totally different tangent,’ Pallavi questioned.

‘No, this is the theme of our film.’

I took a blue marker and wrote, in bold, on the whiteboard—
#RightToTruth.

‘Right To Truth. This is our theme.’ I announced with conviction.

I was not so concerned with what was available, my concern was what was missing. We must find a method to discover that ‘unavailable information’.

‘If the government hasn’t formed a committee to find the truth, we will. What is stopping us?’ I asked.

‘Us? Forming a committee? Really?’ Pallavi laughed.

‘What if we dig out all the possible holes in Shastri’s death and we ... all of us ... roleplay as the members of an inquiry committee. What if we meet every day, pick one hole and debate it out from all possible angles, with all conspiracy theories, and see if those theories stand on their logic or not? What if, for some time, we assume that the Government of India has actually formed an inquiry committee and we are appointed as the jury... What if—’

‘But don’t you think our individual biases and prejudices will come in our way?’

‘So let them. In a real committee also, the same biases will come. But that’s exactly why we have committees so that despite all the biases it can emerge to find rationality.’

‘Sir, I would like to play the prosecutor because I believe he was killed,’ Docsaab was as excited as a child.

‘I don’t care what you believe... In the end, you show me the facts for I don’t care about your beliefs or your emotions... All I care about are the facts.’

Thus, it was decided that we will hold these committee meetings every day. Docsaab, Pallavi, Tripti and I were going to roleplay for the next few months, digging every hole, every aspect of the Indian PM’s death. And there were holes, suspicions and suspects. But no evidence. We had the excitement, commitment and sincerity, but no money. Research costs money and we had very limited funds. Mostly, our savings. If money gives freedom to spread your wings, scarcity also gives the power to travel to unknown territories, especially those where no one ever goes. It was a full-time job that entailed Pallavi and I couldn’t do anything else. How long the passion was going to drive us? The reality struck me.

After everyone left, self-doubt enveloped me.

‘Though I have initiated the process, how are we going to do it... It can go on forever,’ I asked Pallavi.

‘Don’t worry... We haven’t come this far to just go back... We have come so far to go further...’ Pallavi said.

‘But we don’t have that kind of money... How will we sustain?’ I asked with self-doubt.

Pallavi held my hand like a mother does when we feel weak. She took me out to the meeting hall and pointed at the whiteboard.

‘This will sustain us,’ she told me pointing at the whiteboard.

Both of us stood in silence and stared at my own writing on the whiteboard—*#RightToTruth*.

‘Are you prepared?’ My father’s voice echoed in my mind.

The Heart of Shastri

We were surrounded with books on Shastri's death, his life, his politics. There were thousands of notes on information available in the public domain. There were transcripts of our interviews with the family and various people who were even remotely connected with Shastri. We had tried to get everything—paper cuttings, photos, documentaries, the foreign press of that time, interviews, etc. We had more information on Shastri than perhaps the government-funded Shastri Memorial in Delhi. Because the memorial was established to appease his family and fans, it's driven by tokenism whereas we were driven by passion.

Docsaab and I waited for others to join us on the first day of our 'Shastri's Death Inquiry Committee'. I was extremely excited. But Docsaab was not. He was restless.

'Did you sleep well?' I asked him.

'No sir, I haven't slept at all. My mind is spinning,' Docsaab replied while arranging his research papers.

'Is everything alright with you?'

'Yes sir, I am absolutely fine but I was wondering if we really need to go through all this?'

'Of course. How can we make a film on Shastri's death without probing it from all possible angles?'

'Sir, this can take a lot of time.'

'We may not have money but time is all we have.'

‘Still you think about it, sir... Do we need to go through all this? Because in the end, the film has to say that Shastri was murdered...’

‘Murder has not been proved as yet.’

‘But the film will have to prove it. Why else would anyone see this film?’

‘We don’t have to prove anything. We have to just tell the story of that time ... from all angles possible.’

‘Sir, that will be like a documentary. Nobody will fund it.’

‘In that case, we will go for crowd-funding.’

‘Okay. But who would be interested in seeing a documentary?’

‘But it’s not a documentary.’

‘Sir, without a conclusive end, it will not work. We are raising a question—Who killed Shastri? That’s murder mystery genre. Why will people see it if there is no answer?’

‘Who said there is no answer. Yes, there might not be an answer that many people would want to hear. Basically, people want a reconfirmation of their beliefs. But if we are able to give them new information which they never thought about, if we can make them look at a new possibility that would be a revelation. A paradigm shift.’

‘Are you sure sir people want a paradigm shift?’ Docsaab asked curiously.

‘I don’t know,’ I replied after a long pause.

‘Sir, we are not making an experimental film?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What is the genre of our film? Murder mystery, right?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘We are calling it “Who Killed Shastri”, right?’

‘For the time being, yes.’

‘So, we have to answer who killed Shastri.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why would anyone see a film which raises a question but doesn’t answer?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Sir, why are we making this film?’ Docsaab couldn’t control his frustration.

Docsaab’s tone had changed. The enthusiasm to travel to the unknown was shadowed by the need to feel secure ... to find answers—familiar answers. He always carried a frown which was due to the lack of sleep and staring at the digital screen but today, his frown was coming from a place of self-doubt. Self-doubt which envelopes us just before the exam despite impeccable preparations. Too much of research also takes us far away from our fundamental beliefs. The disparity between the actual and the intellectual widens and this gap is filled by self-doubt.

‘Sir, why are we making this film?’ Docsaab asked me again.

‘I don’t know,’ I said honestly.

I seriously had no idea. Why was I making this film? Who would finance it? When would it be made? What lies ahead? I had no answers. I just had a simple belief that there was some truth which was not being told. Otherwise, this suspicion wouldn’t have cemented in the nation’s psyche.

You cannot travel the length and breadth of India without finding one person who doesn’t have a suspicion that there indeed was foul play in Shastri’s death. I couldn’t. The moment you utter Shastri’s name, people’s reaction ranges from ‘Yeah, he was murdered’ to ‘Wasn’t he murdered?’ There are many academicians, historians, politicians and journalists who have confirmed that everything was not right and he died of poisoning but there isn’t any scholar who has proved beyond doubt that he died of a heart attack. Besides that, the government and the Congress party also never came out with the conviction that there was no foul play involved. The silence of Congress as well as that of the governments of India and the USSR, and the absence of scholarly material give scope for anyone to probe

into Shastri's death. It was this belief that something must be done that was driving me.

Belief is not an intellectual process, belief is not something that can be reasoned, belief is something that is there in our hearts, something we want to do, which we must do because belief is from the divine. It is through our beliefs that the divine speaks to us. What we call conviction is actually nothing but this belief. Instinct is just the symptom. Instinct is just the lightening before a thunderstorm. This was the kind of thunderstorm which I had never felt inside my heart. It was this unrelenting belief that had made me undertake such a complex project, such unknown territory, the means for which were so poor, the resistance to which were so strong, so organised ... and what resources did I have with which to carry out this enormous work? If you look at it intellectually, it was hopeless. Like Docsaab, I had only questions and no answers. Would we find the answers? Would I be able to complete it? Would the same divine voice which made me dive into this deep ocean show me a horizon?

Well, I didn't know.

'Isn't it strange how little we know about Shastri?' Pallavi opened the first meeting of the committee.

'Why only Shastri? How little we know about anything,' I replied.

'Let's start then,' Pallavi wrote 'Meeting #1' on the whiteboard.

Pallavi, Docsaab, our script doctor and a researcher par excellence, Tripti Sharma, and I settle down with our chai.

'Let's vote first who thinks Shastri was murdered and whoever thinks it was a heart attack,' I proposed.

'It was possibly a heart attack,' Pallavi spoke before I could even finish.

'How can you say that?' I asked.

'He had had heart attacks earlier,' Pallavi replied.

'That's not confirmed,' Tripti chipped in.

‘He had two heart attacks earlier,’ Pallavi insisted.

‘Then this committee is over... If we know it was a heart attack then where is the case?’ Tripti said, sarcastically.

‘I am just saying since he had two heart attacks earlier there is a possibility that this too was a heart attack. The possibility that it wasn’t a heart attack is exactly what we need to find out,’ Pallavi reasoned calmly.

‘Okay. So one thing is confirmed that he had two heart attacks,’ I took the discussion further.

‘It can be true or it can be a rumour as there are varying reports but there wasn’t much reporting in Indian newspapers about his health. If it was a certain fact then media must have written about it,’ Docsaab informed us.

‘See, it has to be a rumour. It’s like when some person falls sick, people assume it to be fatal; then someone exaggerates and tells another who further exaggerates and tells others and slowly, nobody cares for the evidence and the hearsay becomes the fact,’ Tripti tried to conclude.

‘But few prominent people have also written that he had two heart attacks,’ Docsaab added.

‘Like?’ I asked.

‘Kuldip Nayar, who was the press secretary of Shastri,’ Docsaab replied.

‘He just said it in passing; never confirmed when and where.’

‘So it can’t be said with confirmation that he had two heart attacks earlier,’ Tripti again tried to conclude.

‘Sir, there were a series of articles in *The New York Times* confirming that he had a history of heart attacks,’ Docsaab took out a few papers from his bag of research.

‘*The New York Times*? We have to refer to a foreign paper to confirm our PM’s health records?’ Tripti argued.

‘Yes, you have to when you can’t find anything in our media,’ Docsaab replied.

‘How does it matter where the information is coming from as long as the information is correct,’ I set some ground rules.

‘What if the source is biased?’ Tripti inquired.

‘There can’t be any argument which is not biased. That’s why we research so that out of all biased stories and arguments, we find the rationality which is always lost in half-truths. Let’s put everything on the table and debate it till the time we are unanimously convinced that it can be used. Till that time we should let all arguments flow.’

‘*The New York Times* had two articles on his health within a month,’ Docsaab was waiting for his turn to read out excerpts from an *NYT* article written on 29 June 1964, just five months after Nehru’s death.

‘An official spokesman said tonight that there had been progressive improvement in the condition of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. Mr Shastri received a number of visitors today, including Kumaraswami Kamaraj Nadar, the Congress party’s president, and several Cabinet ministers. The spokesman indicated that Mr Shastri’s temperature had not returned to normal. The Prime Minister was taken ill on Friday. Mr Shastri had a serious heart attack in 1959. Unofficial reports attributed his present illness to a slight heart attack.’

‘But the article also says that “Shastri was expected to return ‘to government business in a couple of days’ and ‘unless a decision to the contrary is taken, present plans stand’ for Mr Shastri to visit London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference”,’ Pallavi had the article opened on her phone.

‘If it was really a heart attack then why would he travel to London immediately?’ Pallavi raised a valid question.

Docsaab took out another article from *NYT*, published a month later.

‘Listen to this, “When, following Mr Nehru’s death, Lal Bahadur Shastri became the prime minister, he served only 17 days before he was ordered to

bed suffering from what was officially described as ‘physical and nervous exhaustion and strain. It is widely believed that this was a heart attack... In the last week, he has left his residence several times to take drives. The fact remains that the health of the frail, ascetic, [59-]year-old Mr Shastri continues as one of the biggest problems facing India at present... Were it not for the uncertainty about the prime minister’s health, the possibility exists that the Shastri Government would be rated as outstanding ... his Administration already rates higher than Mr Nehru’s in many important respects. Mr Shastri is a far more pragmatic and realistic man than Mr Nehru. He knows his limitations and possesses the true politician’s instinct for what is possible. The organisation of his Cabinet has made it plain that he is thinking in terms of a team that can tackle problems and to which he can delegate responsibility”.’

Docsaab read as if he had written the article.

‘There is another interesting fact that may suggest that he was really ill. He appointed Sardar Swaran Singh as the foreign minister. Why?’ Pallavi brought in a new element.

‘What does this prove?’ I asked.

‘That Shastri delegated the most important ministry due to his weak health. What is to be noted is that this was the first time since India’s independence that the prime minister delegated the foreign affairs portfolio. Why would he do something that Nehru never did unless he had a compelling reason? What was that compelling reason? His health?’

‘Oh, come on. He was moving away from Nehru’s Fabian style of governing. He was delegating because he wanted to decentralise power.’

‘If it was so much about decentralisation and not his health why would *NYT* write this?’ Pallavi read out from the same *NYT* article, ‘Powerful figures now backing Mr Shastri would probably look to their own political [futures] and either thrust themselves forward or seek a new leader. If Mr Shastri’s recovery from his recent illness is reasonably complete and he can

continue to make the decisions, there seems every reason to believe he will remain India's political leader and that he will make progress toward solving some of the country's problems.'

"Powerful figures would probably look to their own political futures." Is it possible that some leaders took advantage of this rumour of his ill-health and conspired to make his murder look like a heart attack?' I asked.

'That would be called wild imagination,' Pallavi said sarcastically.

'But it's possible.'

'Hypothetically, yes.'

'So, there is a doubt,' Tripti wondered.

'But the fact that he had two heart attacks...', Pallavi spoke.

'One is confirmed ... another is just hearsay...', I replied.

'But he had a severe heart problem.'

'That does not prove what happened in Tashkent was also necessarily a heart attack.'

'I have a very serious feeling that he had a heart attack...'

'Feelings can't solve mysteries.'

'Okay, so, factually speaking, he had one severe heart attack and one close to a heart attack... It can be said with confidence that he had a heart history... Now, look at the situation in this context.'

'What context?' I asked.

'There was a lot of pressures on him as it wasn't easy to step in Nehru's shoes... He had competitors who wanted him to die... There was a no-confidence motion against him in the Parliament... He was called a weak PM... There was economic crisis... There was the stress of war... There was the stress of returning the captured land to Pakistan... Even his family wasn't happy with his decision to return the land... He was under severe stress and he was old... A heart attack is a logical conclusion,' Pallavi summed up.

'But he wasn't so old. He was just 61,' Tripti countered.

‘People retire at 58,’ Pallavi rebutted.

‘People also climb Mount Everest after they are 80,’ I opined.

‘Reagan became the president at 69,’ Tripti added.

‘Morarji Desai was 81 when he became the prime minister. Charan Singh was 76... Narasimha Rao was 70... Vajpayee 71... Deve Gowda 63... Gujral 77... and Manmohan Singh was 71,’ Docsaab read out in one breath.

‘Are you trying to prove that Shastri was a young PM?’ Pallavi asked, incredulous.

‘He was much younger than the average Indian age, which is around 70 years,’ Tripti replied.

‘It’s 67 for men and 73 for women,’ Docsaab furnished the latest data.

‘Then 61 is no age to die,’ Tripti opined.

‘But in 1966, the average age used to be 35–40 years,’ I threw in a new angle.

‘Sir, in 1966, it was 46.98 for men and 44.7 for women. So, from that point of view. Pallavi ma’am is right that he was old. Also, heart treatment wasn’t so advanced at that time.’

Silence.

‘There is no way we can ever reach any conclusion like this. The average age doesn’t mean one has to die at that age. Morarji was also from the same generation and he lived for 99 years,’ I broke the silence. I was a bit irritated. I took a deep breath and tried to guide the discussion, ‘We can’t ask questions like students. Some things are simply common sense. Can we decide not to ask naive and stupid questions?’

‘I think we must approach this discussion like a child ... like primary school students... Only when we understand it from the basics will we be able to tell this story to kids. Our job is not to educate the learned... Our job is to make the naive learn it. So it’s okay. Let’s not have any rules,’ Pallavi wisely advised.

Pallavi was right. I was impatient. Once I understand something, I want to move forward, ignoring the fact that everybody is at a different level of understanding. Everyone is looking at a different angle. But, in a group, you might want to sit on your ego. That day, it was my ego which considered some queries stupid. But, who knew then that the truth lay in one of these naive and stupid questions.

After Pallavi's suggestion, I realised that I would have to keep my ego aside and approach the problem with a curious mind instead of one bound by rules.

'Tell me something, Shastri was the most important man in India. He was the PM. He had the best medical care. Doctors were always around him. It's not possible that he had a heart attack and he walked up to his assistant instead of calling his doctor. Why didn't he call his doctor?' Tripti asked, breaking the silence that had enveloped the room once again.

'Because there was no phone, no intercom or buzzer in his room,' Docsaab informed nonchalantly.

'What do you mean ... no phone, no buzzer... Every hotel room has a phone.'

'But he didn't stay in a hotel. He stayed in a dacha.'

'What is a dacha?'

'In Russian, a bungalow is called a dacha.'

'Did he stay in a bungalow ... not even a government guest house?' Pallavi was curious.

'He was supposed to stay in a hotel but at the last minute, his residence was changed,' Docsaab replied.

'Who changed it?'

'That's another big story... From here, the plot gets interesting ... really interesting,' Docsaab said while digging out a new file titled 'Dacha/Phone/Buzzer'.

After everyone left, I opened the window. Chilly sea breeze hit my face. It was a breezy day. The coconut trees danced with the salty strokes of the wind. The sky was amber turning into indigo. Birds were going back home. Silently. The only sound I could hear was the *naad* (rhythm) of the sea and the swaying leaves of the coconut trees. Everything was in perfect sync.

Except me.

A storm of questions was building inside me.

‘If everything has a reverse side and the reverse side also has a reverse side ... if the other side of the truth also has the other side ... if there are always two points of view, then how will we arrive anywhere?’

I didn’t know.

Was this self-doubt?

I don’t know.

The Night of Premonitions

Self-doubt is not always a bad thing. It also gives us an opportunity to do a reality check. When I decided to fight for India's freedom, I knew that there will be many hurdles in my way. My decision was based on pure love for India and my passion to free ourselves from slavery. But when three months after my wedding, both me and my wife were arrested and sent to different jails, I found myself in not one but two prisons. Inside a suffocating cell of Wardha Jail, I also found myself imprisoned in the cell of self-doubt. There were temptations from the jailor to file a mercy plea and I almost decided to file one. When I had dedicated myself to the purpose of freedom, the mind was not burdened with logic. There was a dream and an innocence. But, as I moved forward in accomplishing our mission, a lot of second-hand information started collecting in my mind. I was in the real world—a world full of conflicting logic, pessimism, compromise and defeat. This was when self-doubt struck me. This was the real test. This was an internal war between belief and logic, between extraordinary and normal, which every man walking on the path of dharma, to seek the truth, has to go through. Because the journey from here is devoid of innocence. From here, it's a journey of self-discovery which might appear darker than the reality. But people who stick to their belief always find the light at the end. It was our belief which found us our freedom. If that doesn't give strength to our young people, nothing can.

Before I could finish this passage from my father's diary, a myriad of questions started to storm in my mind.

‘Yes, we did get freedom but is this real freedom? If it's the freedom we desired, then why did we pollute it by killing the truth? Why did we pollute it with corruption and lies? Shouldn't those who are responsible for contaminating our freedom be punished? Why there are so many doubts on Shastri's death? The man who never let his belief break while fighting for our freedom, why there are so many holes in his story? Why they have not been addressed? Who is responsible for this? The system or the governments who never answered them? The people who never pressurised

the government to come clean on this conspiracy? Or the intellectuals, journalists, academicians, historians and thought leaders who never seriously probed this mystery? Or the fourth pillar, the watchdog of democracy, the journalists who never chased the story and asked tough questions? Why no filmmaker picked up this story? Are all of us collectively responsible? After 50 years, in the absence of records and evidence, and because of too much of ambiguity, how can one conclusively prove anything? Who is responsible for missing these records? Shouldn't they be punished?'

My head was spinning with a volley of questions. But right then, at that moment, all of a sudden, the doubt was gone. I realised that I couldn't assume the role of a homicide inspector. I was not even a journalist. Nor a historian. I was, and still am, a storyteller. And this was an unprecedented story of unanswered questions. I had to tell the story of a society deprived of truth. I had to show to people the reverse side and the reverse side of the reverse side, the other side of the truth and its other side.

I called everyone to brainstorm. We decided to probe the night of 11 January 1966—the night where all the secrets lie.

‘At a time when India has very nearly forgotten that the most humble prime minister that India has had since independence, a man who was tough, a man who could have changed this country and guided it to its destiny, a man who died soon after signing an accord in Tashkent in the January of 1966, Lal Bahadur Shastri, each year I mourn quietly and remember that fateful night when the telephone rang in my hotel room at the dead of night and the caller at the other end announced—“Your prime minister is dead. Please come down as soon as you can.” I was stunned and could not believe the words that came out of my mouth, “they killed him”. Who were they and why did I say that I have wondered ever since?’ writes veteran journalist and the chairman of ANI, Prem Prakash, who had been present in Tashkent and had travelled with Shastri's body to Delhi.

This is one of the three published credible eyewitness accounts of the fateful night of 11 January when Shastri died few hours after signing the Tashkent Agreement.

Why did Prem Prakash think that someone had ‘killed Shastri’? Why ‘they killed him’ was his first reflex? The reflex action is always instinctive and driven by our top-of-mind concerns. Premonitions, dreams and instinctive reactions don’t come from nowhere. Is it okay to assume that at that time, subconsciously, Prem Prakash feared for a possibility of Shastri’s assassination? What was the germ of this feeling? Was this feeling present in the air?

The press secretary of Lal Bahadur Shastri, Kuldip Nayar, who later became the high commissioner to the UK, has described the fateful night in his book, *India: The Critical Years*, and his autobiography, *Beyond the Lines*, in great detail.

‘That night I had a premonition that Shastri was dying. I dreamt about him dying. I got up abruptly to a knock on my door. A lady in the corridor told me, “Your prime minister is dying.” I hurriedly dressed and drove with an Indian official to Shastri’s dacha which was some distance away,’ mentions Nayar in *Beyond the Lines*.

Why did Nayar also have a premonition? Nayar always used his words very carefully. All his life he has maintained that there was no foul play in Shastri’s death. Yet, he chose to underline that he had a premonition and he dreamt about Shastri dying. Did he know of any threat to Shastri’s life? Were there circumstances building up which had a deep impression on his subconscious? What was the germ of this feeling? Was this feeling present in the air? Was this connected with Prakash’s premonition?

Nobody actually knows why we get premonitions but one common theory is that danger triggers them. It is the thought that the main purpose of premonitions is to warn us about some danger to ourselves and those

around us. There are many stories of people who have either been saved or have saved others because of premonitions.

Dr Larry Dossey, an author, scientist and renowned expert on premonitions, a decorated surgeon in the Vietnam War, one-time chief of staff for a Dallas hospital, an advisor to the National Institutes of Health, former executive editor of a leading peer-reviewed medical-research journal, the best-selling author of the book *The Science of Premonitions* and a cutting-edge thinker on mysterious ways says that premonitions about death must not be ignored. ‘If you dream about death, take it seriously, because you might not get a second chance,’ says Dossey.

Kuldip Nayar and Prem Prakash were both journalists and worked closely. Did they have the same information? Were there whispers which nobody registered but they made a place in their minds?

NYT reported a case where a World Trade Center fire-safety director, Lawrence Boisseau, had a dream that the towers were falling. His wife had told him her dream, which was identical. They were rational people and just said, ‘Isn’t this a weird coincidence?!’ So they ignored it. He lost his life rescuing children from the child-care centre on 9/11.

Just because many premonitions don’t manifest in reality doesn’t mean they don’t exist. The pioneer for precognitive research in the US, Dean Radin, confirmed the validity of these experiences about two decades ago. According to Dossey, ‘...if you don’t want to believe in premonitions, make sure you don’t have one.’ You may have heard of this incident—an elephant-rescue worker in Africa devoted his life to saving elephants. When he died, a herd of elephants, from miles and miles away, arrived at his house, where the funeral was being held, at the precise hour it began.

The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Erwin Schrödinger said that the ‘multiplicity [of mind] is only apparent, in truth there is only one mind’. That’s hardly a mystic talking, it’s one of the greatest minds of the 20th century. Another physicist, David Bohm, also argued that there is only one

mind. These two particular people work with the most precise science ever devised by humans, Quantum Physics. They both wound up at the same place with respect to the nature of human consciousness. Thus, the idea that we are all connected isn't just a spiritual concept or a bunch of hippies talking.

Security specialist Gavin de Becker pointed out in his book, *The Gift of Fear*, that when you feel real danger, there is a powerful knowing that fills you and directs you. He said, 'Signs of resonance will arise in your nervous system, like goosebumps, hairs standing on end, or chills or premonitions and dreams ... you will become hyper-alert ... and you may feel that someone is guiding you through the danger.'

The question isn't whether someone believes in premonitions or not, the real question is whether this possibility should be examined.

The third eyewitness account is of Surinder Mohan Singh Chadha, as published in rediff.com, who had accompanied Shastri to Tashkent in January 1966. 'On December 31, 1965, I was sent on a mission to assist Shastri for the Indo-Pak conference and I reached before him to ensure all the arrangements were in order. Shastri was housed in a bungalow called a dacha... Right next to the dacha, there was a modern hotel that housed Kaul, Kewal Singh (India's then-ambassador to Pakistan), Sardar Swaran Singh (then India's foreign minister) and I.J. Bahadur Singh (then additional secretary at the foreign ministry), among other officials. Our rooms were all in one row. All other journalists and media personnel, nearly 40 of them including Kuldip Nayar, were in a hotel far away... It took great diplomacy and shuttling between the dachas for Soviet statesman Alexei Kosygin to convince Shastri to return the Haji Pir Pass to Pakistan, a territory that India had won after losing over 1,000 of its soldiers. But Shastri agreed to return this territory as a peace gesture... We all partied till nearly 10 PM and I went back to my hotel room to sleep. I was woken up at about 1.30 AM by one of the officers and was told that Shastri had died. We all immediately reached

Shastri's dacha and within half an hour, we all had our duties made clear to us. My officers told me that a special plane had been arranged to take Shastri's body to India and I was to be in charge of this.'

Does this mean 'within half an hour' everyone concluded that he had a heart attack? Did nobody think of doing an autopsy?

Chadha further states how he called the chief of protocol, J.N. Dhamika, and gave him the news so that proper arrangements could be made to receive Shastri's body at the airport. Since he couldn't get through to Dhamija, Chadha called his colleague who rushed to Dhamija's residence and the requisite protocol was put in place.

Why did Dhamija think it was a prank? If the news of Shastri's weak heart was so common, one would tend to believe it. But Dhamija didn't.

When Chadha was asked why post-mortem was not done, he replied that he was a young officer and didn't know why it was not conducted. He later added that maybe the senior officers must have decided against it as there was no suspicion about his death.

I understand that he was a young man then and was inexperienced, but later in his life, why didn't he ask those 'senior officers' that when the butler and the entire team of Russian cooks were arrested on the suspicion of poisoning Shastri, why did they still think there was no foul play involved? Why those 'senior officers' were not suspended for ignoring the most crucial factor? Was it a team of bureaucrats or a team of novices?

Nayar pieces together the events leading up to Shastri's death in his book, *Beyond the Lines*, in the following manner, 'The prime minister reached the dacha around 10 PM after a reception, chatted with his personal staff and asked his cook Ram Nath to bring him food which was prepared in the dacha by the Russians. In the kitchen there was a Soviet cook helped by two ladies—both from the Russian intelligence department—and they tasted everything, including water, before it was served to Mr Shastri.'

Let's not forget this was at the height of the Cold War and India-Pakistan hostilities, and the security paranoia was extreme. Assassinating world leaders was a popular weapon. Nayar was no novice in the world of journalism. It's not possible that he didn't know about the arrest of the cooks by the Ninth Chief Directorate of KGB suspecting them of poisoning Shastri.

My question is that if KGB could suspect a foul play and assumed he was poisoned, why did Indian delegation assume it was a heart attack? If KGB arrested people on suspicion of poisoning Shastri, then why didn't they conduct an autopsy to confirm or refute the suspicion? True or false, but the suspicion was there? Why did the Indian government did not immediately think about an instant post-mortem?

'As days passed, the Shastri family became increasingly convinced that he had been poisoned. In 1970, on October 2 (Shastri's birthday), Lalita Shastri asked for a probe into her husband's death. The family seemed to be upset that Jan Mohammad, T.N. Kaul's cook at the time, had cooked the food, not Ram Nath, his own personal servant,' writes Nayar.

A murder mystery is solved by connecting the missing links. Why didn't Nayar raise this question in public? Nobody can say with authority but this needed to be probed further.

Nayar further writes, 'When I returned from Tashkent, Lalita Shastri asked me why Shastri's body had turned blue. I replied: "I am told that when bodies are embalmed, they turn blue." She then inquired about "certain cuts" on Shastri's body. I did not know about those because I had not seen the body. Even so, her remark that no post-mortem had been conducted either at Tashkent or Delhi startled me. It was indeed unusual. Apparently, she and others in the family suspected a foul play.'

If it startled him, then why didn't he write articles and ask tough questions? Why did he keep silent throughout his career? Later, he was the high commissioner to the UK. If any Indian PM had travelled to London and died there exactly in the same fashion, what would Nayar have done as the high commissioner? Wouldn't he have ordered a post-mortem?

Prem Prakash writes in his article, 'Come Down Your Prime Minister is Dead', in *Outlook* magazine, 'At the evening reception held by the Soviets, this author and N.S. Thapa of the Films Division walked up to Shastri Ji to request him if we could come to the dacha later on to get some shots of him at work. It was around ten at night, or maybe a little later, that we reached Shastri Ji's dacha and the famous silhouette shots of him pacing up and down inside his dacha were filmed apart from few others... Coming back to the hotel and then receiving that call in the dead of night seems so long away... To constant enquiry as to what happened and who was there when he died sadly one heard that even the security officer of Shastri Ji was not around in the dacha, nor was his doctor and that India's second prime minister had died of a massive heart attack in the arms of a Soviet guard outside his room! Why?'

If Shastri was fit to do a photo shoot a few hours before his mysterious death, what caused the sudden failure of his heart.

Of course, it can be substantiated if we get his health logs... I am sure a PM's BP, heart rate, etc. are checked on a daily basis and readings are recorded in an official log.

Where were they?

Nowhere.

How was that possible. But what happened to our media? Why didn't they ask such questions? Is it possible that Nayar and Prakash didn't exchange notes? What happened to their journalistic instincts?

Prakash rightly questions, ‘What were the pressures put on the prime minister of India that claimed his life? Was it the Soviet Union’s ploy to win Pakistan away from the United States in its Cold War that killed Shastri Ji? Who were the mandarins at the Foreign Office who carried out the Soviet Union’s wishes to pressurise the prime minister to sign? The mystery remains because no one has seen till today any archival papers of Indian delegation’s inner talks at Tashkent. Have those documents been destroyed? No one tells. The mystery continues.’

The mystery continues because the wise men didn’t ask questions. Isn’t it strange that there is no credible article in the media about the missing documents of the Tashkent Agreement? Nobody bothered?

Finding swelling and cuts on his body and blood marks made the Shastri family suspect that there was something wrong. His son-in-law and two young sons made a formal request for post-mortem to the caretaker prime minister, Gulzarilal Nanda, and the home secretary but no action was taken.

‘We were told, unofficially, that a post-mortem at this stage will create doubts and unrest amongst the people,’ Shastri’s grandson Sanjay Nath Singh told me.

If it’s remotely true, then who thought that a post-mortem will create unrest? The post-mortem is done to put an end to all kinds of doubts. On what intelligence inputs were this view based? Was it discussed with relevant ministers? Was it discussed with the family? Who was this authority which refused to conduct a post-mortem despite the family’s request and a huge public outcry?

We don’t know the truth behind Shastri’s death but we do know that the truth is that nobody asked questions. Some did, but the people in power never replied.

Why didn’t Indian officials raise an alarm when the Russian cooks were arrested?

Why didn’t they seek post-mortem?

Why didn't Soviet authorities conduct a post-mortem despite suspecting that he was poisoned?

Why was his body blue? His body arrived within a few hours after his death from Tashkent which had sub-zero degree temperatures and Delhi is also freezing cold in January, then how did it turn blue in such a short time.

Why were there cuts on his body?

Why didn't journalists ask these tough questions to Sardar Swaran Singh and Yashwant Rao Chavan—two senior-most ministers?

Who made Shastri's health log disappear?

Why there was so much indifference towards Shastri's death?

'Sir, imagine if instead of Shastri, Nehru had gone to sign the treaty and if he had died like this ... would these people still have been so indifferent?' Docsaab asked me.

I had no answers. But one thought struck me—'It seems everyone went with the government's version, but the question is who was running the government after Shastri died?'

Missing *Dharma*

Our inquiry committee sat again to probe further on other conspiracy theories available in the public domain.

‘Before we discuss any further, let’s look at all the official statements of the government,’ I set the rule.

‘Sir, Shastri’s death was discussed five-six times in the Parliament. First, a month after his death on 16 February 1966 by the then foreign affairs minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, who had also travelled with Shastri to Tashkent and was a witness to all the proceedings before and after his death. On 11 August 1967 and four years later, on 2 and 4 April 1970 as well as in December of 1970, Shastri’s death was discussed in the Parliament at length where the government was forced to present a white paper on his death. The white paper was presented by the home minister, Yashwant Rao Chavan,’ Docsaab informed us.

‘That’s better. Let us study that white paper and treat it as certified government’s version and then let’s see what are the counter-arguments ... point by point...’

‘What if there are other holes in the story which the government has not even addressed yet?’ Tripti asked.

‘In any debate, there is the main story and then there are a gossip stories. The main story is always at the centre and is based on documented facts ... documented on credible platforms like the Parliament, the inquiry commissions, police records or consistent reports in reputed media ... only reports, not the opinion pieces...’ I replied.

‘What is a gossip story then?’ Pallavi asked.

‘Anything which is neither official nor substantiated but still people whisper about it.’

‘How about media reports, blogs and articles on the internet?’

‘This is where we need to use our judgement. Everything that is printed can’t be authentic...’

This is the biggest challenge of the modern world. People believe in the printed word. Taking advantage of that, all kinds of lobbies try to fill the printed space to advance their argument. What we think of as media, actually is a game. Some newspaper puts out a story—right or wrong, it doesn’t matter—which makes people start talking. Other sites start writing about that story. Then, major mainstream media says since everyone is talking about this issue, we have to cover it. Fake or real, doesn’t matter, it’s already setting a narrative. Then, our guilty, voyeuristic and judgemental society becomes the jury. The government doesn’t check any fact but institutes an inquiry just to be on top of the narrative. Media gets the credit. They get the TRPs. They get the money. Money, in turn, buys those who have instituted the inquiry. Media gets the power. The real power. Powerful people aren’t those who are in power. But, those who can use them as puppets. Middlemen and media are the real powerful people.

‘What if media is silent on an issue?’ Pallavi asked.

‘Silence is also a part of gossip. Silence doesn’t mean an absence of truth.’

I had discovered this angle only when I had started to reply. Sometimes, broken, sundry thoughts do get consolidated in a discussion. That’s why in a democratic and liberal set-up, discussions and debates are so important. A good dialogue can consolidate broken thoughts.

‘Do we all agree to focus on only authentic documents. No scrutiny of gossip at this stage?’ Pallavi proposed the norm.

‘Absolutely. So, first things first ... the official records,’ I put a seal on the norm.

Everyone turned towards Docsaab. I could see Docsaab’s body language change. He got up from the corner and positioned himself at the centre. Though, technically, Docsaab was at the bottom of the hierarchy, at this moment, he was at the top. Despite rigid power structures, the person with the information has always been the most powerful person.

Docsaab read the official medical report of Shastri, ‘On 16 February 1966, the minister of external affairs, Sardar Swaran Singh, informed the Parliament that “the late prime minister was accommodated in a villa especially provided for his use by the USSR government. With him in the villa were the following members of his personal staff:

1. Dr R.N. Chugh, Medical Officer
2. Shri R. Kapur, Security Officer
3. Shri J.N. Sahai, Private Secretary
4. Shri M.M.N. Sharma, Personal Assistant
5. Shri Ram Nath, Personal Attendant

This villa was about 250 yards from the Intourist Hotel where the other members of the Indian delegation were lodged. The room adjoining the prime minister’s suite was allotted to the medical officer and the security officer. Other members of the party occupied the remaining accommodation in the villa.”

‘If the medical officer’s room was tied to Shastri’s room, why did he walk up to Ramnath’s room, crossing the living and dining area? Was the medical officer not there? Or the minister was hiding some facts?’ I asked.

‘Sir, please be patient. We have just begun,’ Docsaab looked in my eyes and said with a smile.

‘Is he the same boy who came from Pratapgarh with drooping shoulders, no confidence and no idea where to look? Knowledge can certainly make

any man discover his confidence,' I wondered, silently.

Docsaab read further from the medical report, 'On 10 January 1966, the late prime minister returned to his villa a little after 10 PM after attending a reception given by Mr Kosygin, the chairman of the USSR council of ministers. He retired immediately to his suite and was served dinner there by Shri Ram Nath, his personal attendant at about 10.30 PM. A little later, the prime minister allowed himself to be photographed by two Indian newsreel cameramen from outside his window. Thereafter, he spoke on the telephone with the members of his family. At 30 minutes past midnight, the prime minister asked Shri Ram Nath to go and have his food. Shri Ram Nath then put out the lights and went to the adjoining room where he and other members of the staff were attending to the packing of their luggage. At about 1.20 AM, while the prime minister's personal staff were packing the baggage for the morning flight on 11 January, they saw the late prime minister at the door of their room. The prime minister paused a while and asked for the doctor. Shri Kapur and Shri Sharma hurried forward and escorted the prime minister to his room, while Shri Sahai woke up Dr Chugh who immediately rushed to the prime minister's room.

'Dr Chugh started examining the prime minister and while doing so, he asked Shri Sahai, the private secretary to the prime minister, to call local doctors. This was done immediately by the Soviet security officer on duty. By 1.32 AM, the prime minister had lost consciousness, the pulse had disappeared, the heart tone could no longer be heard and breathing had stopped. Efforts by Dr Chugh to revive the prime minister, through an intramuscular injection, artificial respiration and massage proved fruitless. The team of Soviet doctors who arrived on the scene within minutes at the personal bidding of Mr Kosygin were also unable to revive him in spite of excellent medical facilities.

'All during his stay in Tashkent, the late prime minister appeared to be in good health. My colleague, the defence minister, and I, as well as the other

members of the delegation, were constantly with him for long periods every day. He was cheerful and relaxed. His daily schedule of work was less strenuous than it was in Delhi, and at no time did he either complain of being unwell, nor did he, in fact, show any signs of fatigue or strain.'

For anybody who wished well for the country and Shastri, this should be good information that the PM was 'healthy and cheerful' on the evening of 10 January 1966. But how could a nation be sure about this? Just because a minister was saying it? Especially, when the minister belonged to a team which was suspected of negligence and overlooking?

'Are there any records, Docsaab? Like his daily medical readings ... foreign ministry's logbook...' I asked.

'No records, sir,' Docsaab informed me.

'Whatsoever,' Tripti added sarcastically.

Besides the pertinent question—why was a post-mortem not conducted on Shastri's body—the missing records were the biggest hurdle in our finding the truth. Shastri was the prime minister of India. The PM is always accompanied by a dedicated doctor whose job is to keep a logbook of records of PM's pulse, blood pressure and other health indicators on a daily basis. This logbook is the State's property. It's an official document. Sadly, in Shastri's case, it was missing from the records of the Government of India. Why? How could such an important document be missing? Should an investigation be concluded on the basis of a minister's words or concrete evidence?

These are some of the obvious questions which any aware citizen would ask in a democracy. It's not that they were not raised at that time both inside and outside the Parliament by responsible citizens. The only institution which didn't ask these questions was the media—the 'supposed' watchdog of our democracy.

T.N. Singh, the member of parliament who later became the chief minister of UP and the governor of West Bengal, had raised some very valid questions after the government's statement. As per the parliament records, Singh had asked, 'I think the doctor must have maintained the chart about his blood pressure, about his pulse beating, about his temperature and all those things. Where is that doctor's diary? I claim that it has never been made and therefore it can never be made available. I demand that the chart of that doctor be impounded, if it is available anywhere it should not be allowed to be lost.'

Another esteemed member of parliament from UP, M.P. Bhargava, who knew Shastri very closely, had also raised the same concerns as per the parliament records in our possession. '...then what has to be explained is where is Shastri's personal diary which he was in a habit of writing every day. And where is that buzzer telephone? Which was made to have been there in his room at the time of his death and "which could be used by him if he so liked".' He went on to further accuse the government, '... everything is missing ... doctor's diary, his diary, the thermos which is the most vital evidence... Therefore, a deliberate attempt has been made to mislead the House ... that has to be explained by the government.'

M.M.S. Sidhu, a doctor himself asked specific questions, 'I would like the honourable minister to tell us whether it was a fact that Lal Bahadur Shastri was looking well and he was cheerful, whether he was previously examined clinically as well as by electrocardiogram and whether blood pressure and other things were taken before the 10th. I mean, I want to know whether all the time that he was staying there, there was a daily check-up or not, and if it was done, then the report may be laid before the House.'

The report was never laid out before the House. It's ironical that the motto of Indian democracy is '*Satyamev Jayate*'.

When we had filed the RTIs, the government had replied that there were no documents available. I was willing to give the benefit of doubt to the government that after 53 years, there might be a slight possibility that the documents were lost, washed away or burnt in a fire, as it's a common practice employed by the governments which want to hide the truth from the voting public and media. But what was beyond my comprehension was that just a month after Shastri's death, when the esteemed members of the parliament asked the government to present Shastri's personal diary and other belongings, such as the doctor's medical log, foreign ministry's engagement logs, minutes of the meeting of Tashkent Agreement (which ran for seven days), etc., what stopped the government to produce them? Were they never collected? Were they in the possession but were not presented? Were they missing? Were they left behind? What was the reason that despite such a boiling controversy, the government failed to produce one single document, official record or the belongings of the late prime minister?

This, in my mind, was the biggest hole in the story and the betrayal of the innocent public's faith in the State.

In politics, there is a saying '*Agar controversy ko khatam karna hai to uske saare saboot jad se khatam kar do*' [If you want to stop a controversy from building up, destroy all the evidence from its roots]. This tactic was employed by the Mughal invaders who began their assault on Indian intellectual wealth and records. They destroyed temples and libraries. It is true that the idols in temples were destroyed because Muslims don't believe in idol worship but the real reason was that temples, in India, were the knowledge centres with traditional records. This tradition of destroying records has been continuing since the time when a Turkish chieftain, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, burnt down the 5th-century BC Nalanda University in Bihar, which is said to be the 'first great university in the recorded history'. Nalanda was reported to have been visited by the Buddha

during his lifetime. Its collection was said to comprise hundreds of thousands of volumes, so extensive that it burned for months when set aflame by Khalji. It's ironical that the library of Nalanda, also known as *Dharma Gunj* (Mountain of Truth) or *Dharma Gañja* (Treasury of Truth), was the most renowned repository of knowledge in the world at the time.

My father was a scholar of oriental studies. I am not a scholar but I know that the British employed a unique trick to destroy the truth. They manipulated records, starting with the *Manusmriti*—the first *Dharmashastra* written by Rishi Manu. By distorting *Manusmriti*, the British projected India as a regressive, unequal and fundamentalist society and, therefore, justified their immoral occupation of India. The British distorted Indian history, literature and, thus, created a new truth about India which has been exploited since then by the communists who have waged an intellectual and cultural war against Hindu civilisation. The British introduced the very absurd Aryan Invasion theory, which has now been demolished by the archaeologists and other scientific evidence.

After independence, the governments have carried on with the tradition of hiding, manipulating and burning the records. If one were to make a chronological list of such random fires, there will not be a single year when some major official records were not gutted down. For such natural calamity, nobody can ever be held responsible. After all, the absence of truth has never been a punishable crime.

The seafront opposite my office became very quiet that night. There was a stillness in the sea and the air was heavy. There was a haunting silence. In fact, it had become so silent that one could hear the sound of one's own thoughts. As I stood alone at the window, watching random fireflies, the only sound I could hear was of fire... The fire that burned down Nalanda ... and then, I heard the screams of help from the burning monks—‘Save *Dharma Gunj*... Save *Dharma Gañja*’..

Dacha, Bell and Buzzer

There is a small time frame between waking up and getting up. It is the sweetest time, which you wish never ends. I call it the heavenly zone.

As I lazed in this zone, I heard Pallavi mumbling softly.

‘How will we find any truth if all the records are missing?’ A frustrated Pallavi asked me as soon as I came out of my sleep; it seemed she hadn’t slept well.

Under normal circumstances, I would have got irritated if confronted with a work-related question while in this heavenly zone, but, that day, I didn’t mind. In fact, I felt happy. I felt happy because it was an indication that this research was not just academic anymore, it had become personal. If the last thought before sleeping and the first thought in the heavenly zone is the same then it means it has possessed you. In creative arts, such possession is good.

‘Tell me, how will we...,’ Pallavi didn’t finish her thought.

‘Our job is to find holes ... not to fill them, and as I see, we are going to discover many holes ... and those holes will lead us to a truth which nobody ever looked at.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I don’t know.’

I jumped out of my bed and called Docsaab knowing fully well that he is a late riser. I summoned him immediately. On the other hand, Pallavi called

Tripti. A new exploration of truth began, even before the normal world woke up.

‘When asked about Shastri’s staying arrangements in Tashkent, Sardar Swaran Singh told the Parliament that “the physical arrangements for the late prime minister’s stay in Tashkent were made in consultation with and under the supervision of our ambassador in Moscow. Everything that could possibly have been done for the comfort and convenience of the late prime minister was done by the Government of the USSR”,’ I said.

‘What’s wrong in this?’ Pallavi asked.

‘You will know once you listen to the Parliament debate and other facts brought out by the members of the opposition and as well as the Congress,’ Docsaab said, creating curiosity.

M.P. Bhargava was the first one to raise doubts in the parliament about the prime minister’s stay as it was suspected that his arrangement was shifted last minute from the Intourist Hotel to a dacha. As per the parliamentary records, he had asked, ‘May I know from the honourable minister whether it is a fact that the Russian government wanted the late prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, to stay with all the other Indian delegates in the same building where they had provided all the arrangements for heart specialists to be there round the clock? And, in fact, they had equipped a room where all facilities were to be given to the late prime minister. I would like to know if this is a fact. Also, I would like to know under what circumstances the prime minister was shifted from that building to the villa where he actually stayed.’

‘The villa in which the prime minister stayed had originally been earmarked for him. It is wrong to say that he was allotted any suite in any other place. From the very beginning, all the arrangements including the kitchen, the cook and the servants ... everything ... had already been made and it was a nice gesture because it was a self-contained villa and all of us, the other members of the delegation, were in a separate place. It is

absolutely incorrect to say that he was first allotted one place and then shifted to another,' Sardar Swaran Singh had submitted his official reply as transcribed in the parliament records.

'Now, this is a bit too much. When someone dies and if there is even a slight suspicion, then people try to see a conspiracy in everything ... they exaggerate... I don't buy Bhargava's argument... You can't fiddle around with the PM's stay, at least,' Pallavi was not convinced.

'Ma'am, it didn't stop here... Four years later, this issue again created a storm in the Parliament,' Docsaab replied.

It's true that four years later, when Indira Gandhi's government failed to convince the common public and the media remained a mute spectator, the legislative members represented people's concern on the floor of the Parliament and a long debate was called for on 2 April 1970, which ran for days. This time the responsibility of replying was on Yashwant Rao Chavan, the home minister.

The most scathing attack was made by a socialist leader, Raj Narain, who later challenged Indira Gandhi in Allahabad High Court for her misuse of power. She was convicted and to overrule the high court's ruling, she imposed the Emergency—the darkest chapter in Indian democracy.

'Isn't it true that Shastri was supposed to stay elsewhere but on Shri T.N. Kaul's advice, who is our ambassador in Moscow, his residence was shifted as an afterthought? If it's true, then why was this done? Honourable T.N. Singh has proved that the room was small and that's why Ramnath had to be accommodated in a room far away from Shastri's room. The PM who had security concerns, health concerns, didn't have his assistant next to his room. Why? Shouldn't the nation ask such questions?' Raj Narain had led the debate.

M.P. Bhargava had joined in, 'Is it or is it not a fact that at the insistence of the ambassador in Russia, a telegram was received by the Government of India that the other delegates shouldn't be placed with Shastri, and the arrangement should be made in a "particular" villa near about the hotel? And where is that "blessed" telegram which was sent in reply by the Government of India to proceed with the arrangement for Shastri's stay in that villa separately from the Indian delegation?'

On 4 April 1970, a reply to Bhargava and Narain's query was given by Yashwant Rao Chavan, who had defended and denied all the allegations made by the opposition. He had replied, 'He (Shastri) could have separate arrangement for meeting in the villa, while in the guest house, only a common dining room was available for the whole delegation... Shri Bhargava had asked a question on 11 August 1967, whether the above arrangement was disapproved by our security officers, but we deny that there was any such disapproval. He had also asked whether there was a telegram... I may reiterate that there was no such telegram with us.'

R.T. Parthasarathy, an MP from Tamil Nadu had raised some very important points which were not raised this far by any member. 'There is also another point I'd like to bring to notice that as soon as the plan for PM's stay in Tashkent was worked out, a DIG from central government flew to Tashkent and saw that the tourist home or the hotel and approved it. Particularly, because on the ground floor, there was a provision for an operation theatre with oxygen and other fittings, without a spiral staircase to climb up. But two days after his approval, a "particular gentleman" from Moscow ... a very big person ... intervened. At whose instruction the entire arrangement was cancelled? It was then that the new villa was allocated to him where there was no provision for oxygen and operation theatre. And this was not a fit place compared to the other one, as Shastri had to climb up through a spiral case to the height of 30 feet to get to his room. Why was this done? In

spite of the fact that there was a telegram from the DIG saying that they were not approving the whole thing... Why was it that the officials decided to put him in the villa ... and not in the original place (with an operation theatre and no spiral staircase) to stay? Why did they deviate from the Russian government's earlier arrangements?'

'The ministers never replied to these details. Till date, there is no official clarification on this,' Docsaab informed us.

'I believe if a question, a doubt, even the slightest of concerns are raised on the floor of the Parliament, it must be addressed and taken to its logical conclusion. What else is the Parliament for?' Pallavi opined.

'Of course. They are the people's representatives. The government is serving the people of India and if people of India start doubting the government then some agency has to fill that trust deficit. By not replying to a technical doubt, the minister did not uphold the democratic duty,' I added.

'What if Parthasarathy was pushing a gossip... An imagination to further his narrative ... his agenda?' Tripti expressed her doubt.

'In that case, it becomes even more critical for the government to clarify, else a false narrative will become the truth of tomorrow,' I replied.

'A false narrative of today will eventually become the truth of tomorrow; therefore, it must be countered, exposed and stopped as soon as it takes birth. But the problem is that in an inconclusive debate with missing evidence, how do you know which of the two is a false narrative?' I mused.

'Even if the government's version is true, one factor that is bothering me is that why did the PM walk to Ram Nath's room when the doctor was in the adjoining room?' Pallavi asked, breaking my reverie.

'What if he did go but the doctor wasn't there?' Tripti replied.

‘The question should be why did he walk at all? Why didn’t he just call on an intercom or press the buzzer?’ Pallavi asked again.

‘Would a person who was having a heart attack walk such a distance, bypassing the doctor, to call his assistant or would he just press the buzzer which can alert everyone?’ I wondered.

We decided to scrutinise the government’s white paper, once again. Sardar Swaran Singh had described the exact details of that fateful night. He had said that ‘apart from the two telephones for internal and international calls fitted in the prime minister’s suite, there was also a third telephone with a buzzer which could be activated by simply lifting the receiver. This instrument was available for the prime minister’s use to call any member of his personal staff or the doctor in case of need. As mentioned earlier, on 10 January 1966, the late prime minister returned to his villa a little after 10 PM after attending a reception given by the chairman of the USSR council of ministers. He retired immediately to his suite and was served dinner at about 10.30 PM. A little later, he had a photoshoot; then, he spoke on the telephone with his family. At about 1.20 AM, on 11 January, the late prime minister was at the door of his help’s room, asking for a doctor. He was escorted back to his room and Dr Chugh was summoned to his room.’

‘Why didn’t he call or press the buzzer?’

‘Sir, all these questions which are arising in our minds were also raised in the Parliament,’ Docsaab replied before we can ask any further questions.

M.P. Bhargava was, perhaps, the first one who had raised a doubt. ‘The minister said that Shastri walked to his assistant’s room... “Apart from the two telephones for internal and international calls fitted in the prime minister’s suite, there was also a third telephone with a buzzer which could be activated by simply lifting the receiver. This instrument was available for the prime minister’s use to call any member of his personal staff or the

doctor in case of need”... where is that buzzer telephone? According to my knowledge, there was no buzzer ... no telephone ... in that room ... The buzzer was in the suite (main hall)... Anything in the suite couldn't have been used when he was in his bedroom...’

Another MP from Madhya Pradesh, K.S. Khandekar, had said, ‘From the statement, it appears that the late prime minister was alone in his room. May I know what arrangements were made for his servant or for doctors to be near him because it appears that they were not in the adjoining room? Why was not the servant nearby where his help could have been secured and the doctors could have been called? What was the difficulty?’

‘In a matter like this, I would submit that we are dealing with the wishes of the prime minister of the country, and what arrangement could I or anyone else make? He is the best judge. The doctor is there in the same building. His attendant is there. There is a buzzer in the room, as soon as he lifts it, there is a buzzing sound in the room of his attendant, in the room of the doctor and in the room of his assistants. All of them will come rushing to him. It is for him whether he uses that buzzer or not,’ Swaran Singh had replied.

To which, another MP, Ram Sahai, asked a genuine question that even a child of 5th standard would ask, ‘He got up from his bed and walked up to his assistant's room (which was after the medical officer's room). Why? According to the minister, if there were three telephones including the buzzer then why did he walk?’

This issue again came up in April 1970 when T.N. Singh made a bold statement. ‘It's an absolute lie that there was a phone or an intercom. It saddens me to read the minister's (Swaran Singh') statement. Let me illustrate, the minister said “Apart from the two telephones for internal and international calls fitted in the prime minister's suite, there was also a third telephone with a buzzer which could be activated by simply lifting the receiver. This instrument was available for the prime minister's use to call

any member of his personal staff or the doctor in case of need.” When Ram Manohar Lohia had said that there was no phone, even in the photos of that room there were no phones... In reply, Swaran Singh had said that he meant it was in the suite ... not beside the bed... Why was the second sentence not read out (in the white paper)... Why was the second sentence separated... Was it to mislead people... One thing is to speak the truth but to say it in such a misleading manner so that it appears there was a phone/buzzer next to him whereas it was not in Shastri’s room but in the main hall... This is *mahapaap* (ultimate sin) against *ajatshatru* (one who has no enemies) prime minister like Shastri. I know for a fact that Shastri was supposed to stay elsewhere ... away from the doctors... Later, a phone was set up ... but no bell... If someone needs a glass of water ... what will he do? Walk? Then you say it was a great arrangement... Is this how you do great arrangement?’

Two days later, on 4 April, T.N. Singh again attacked the government by making some very valid charges. ‘The sentence as framed (by the minister) is highly deceptive. I am as clever a man as the home minister to understand its implications. I am really amazed at this. That sentence runs like this, “Apart from the two telephones for internal and international calls fitted in the PM’s suite, there was also a third telephone with a buzzer which could be activated by simply lifting the receiver.” Then, the second sentence runs like this, “This instrument was available for the PM’s use to call any member of his personal staff or the doctor in case of need.” Obviously, the impression in everybody’s mind was that the buzzer was there. I say and I make this charge that when the photograph was produced by Dr Lohia, there was no way out except to admit that there was no telephone. The first statement did create the impression, I make bold to say, that it was available to him by his side; it gives that impression. I am saying all this because I have some personal knowledge about it. I did not know about it then that there was some discrepancy. This I discovered accidentally only a month

ago. I will explain to the home minister in what circumstances I came to know about it.'

When cornered by T.N. Singh, Home Minister Yashwant Rao Chavan confessed on the floor of the Parliament that 'it was explained in the foreign minister's statement on 16 February 1966 that apart from the two telephones for internal and international calls fitted in the prime minister's room, there was also a third telephone with a buzzer which could be activated by simply lifting the receiver. This instrument was available for the prime minister's use to call any member of the personal staff or doctor in case of need. It was subsequently clarified in the other House while replying to late Dr Ram Manohar Lohia that the buzzer telephone *was not by the side of the prime minister's bed*. The buzzer telephone was *in the prime minister's suite which consisted of a sitting room opening into his bedroom, and all the telephones were kept in the sitting room only a few paces away from the prime minister's bed*.'

'Aha! That's very interesting. Now no one knows "a few paces away" is how many paces away,' Pallavi was amused.

'Sir, isn't it funny that if it was just "a few paces away" then why did he take extra paces rather than those "few paces" to walk to his assistant's room?'

'This is the first time I have a solid doubt that the government was actually trying to cover up something,' I said instinctively.

'Sir, this is not all. You have to listen to a very funny statement made by Sardar Swaran Singh in the Parliament,' Docsaab dug out a fact all of us had missed.

When the MPs arrived at the conclusion that 'Shastri's villa was not even fitted with a buzzer hence the dying man had to walk to the next room to summon the aide', Sardar Swaran Singh came up with the most implausible reply possible. He had said, 'How can I answer that? He could have pressed the buzzer or called on intercom ... but he didn't ... he walked ... perhaps,

in his heart, he must have thought why should I trouble anyone... Why don't I go myself and inform them about my heart attack?'

'Did he actually say that? You can't be serious.'

'Yes, ma'am. These were his exact words, "*Shayad unke man mein yeh ho ki main kyon kisi ko takleef doon... Jaa ke hi keh deta hoon*".'

Pallavi and Tripti burst out laughing. After a very long time, our research room was filled with laughter.

'Sir, is this how we run our country?' Docsaab asked me amidst the loud laughter.

Docsaab is a millennial. They are unforgiving people as they have grown up in a world of binaries. They want concrete answers. It's a sad commentary that Indira Gandhi's government not only had no answers but they had tried to avoid the most blatant charge in such a cavalier manner. This is why people have no faith in our system.

Never ever trust politician's statements which can make ugly lies look beautiful truths and political crimes like social service. Always remember what George Orwell said that the political language can 'give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'.

What my father felt decades ago is true even today. In the age of millennials.

The Controversial Medical Report

Our independence is full of insurmountable difficulties. We are poor and weak. Demotivated and under-confident. Doubt, discouragement, corruption and exploitation are the common features of this difficulty. There is cynicism, a refusal to believe in anything at all, an increase in dishonesty, self-growth at the cost of the weak and an obsession with pleasure by sacrificing higher things. Wherever you go, whoever you meet and whatever you hear carry a great expectation for the worst. There is defeatism and pessimism. People who fought for freedom are left with no fuel. They have given in to the authority, sycophancy and compromise. The government is in the business of deceiving the innocent masses. But I know when too much darkness envelopes us, we must prepare for the sun to shine. The sun will shine on India when our children will become adults. That is when the old order and the tyranny of the authority will go and a new India will emerge.

As I sat reading my father's diary, I realised that I was rediscovering my father so late in life and with him, the India that I didn't know.

'Has India changed in all these years? Have the children who became adults at the turn of the century really defeated the tyranny of authority? Has the sun spread its light and warmth on us?'

These were just a few of the questions swirling in my mind.

The man sitting in front of me was heading the research of an event that remains a mystery even 50 years later. Does he see darkness or the light? When he started the research with me, the only question he asked was, 'How can a prime minister's death remain a mystery even after five decades?' Now, after a year of research, all he said was, 'I don't think that even after five more decades, we would be able to solve this mystery.'

‘Sir, I don’t think this system can ever reveal the truth. This system isn’t made to empower people, instead it is made to keep them in the dark so that they spend all their lives inside a tunnel, hoping to find the light someday but that someday will never come,’ Docsaab had once summed up his experience in this manner.

‘What do you think is the real problem?’ I had asked him.

‘That our system is built on the grave of honesty, transparency and accountability,’ he had replied.

On a normal day, I would have challenged such pessimism but what struck me hard was that between my freedom fighter father and the millennial boy Docsaab, nothing has changed. The system defeats the optimism of its own citizens.

As we progressed further, these lingering thoughts got more reinforced. Docsaab read out the medical report of Shastri’s death as it had been read out in the Parliament. ‘During all the days of his stay in Tashkent, as well as on the evening of 10th January 1966, the Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri, felt well. He never complained about his health. On the evening of 10th January 1966, the Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri, was healthy and cheerful while he was attending a reception given by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of USSR, A.N. Kosygin. According to Dr. R.N. Chugh, the doctor-attendant of the Prime Minister who used to be always present at his side and thus had attended the reception, after return from the reception to his residence, Lal Bahadur Shastri was in normal health and was in a good mood and spoke over the telephone with his relatives in Delhi. He went to bed at about 12.30 midnight. On the 11th of January, at about 1.20 in the morning, Messrs. Shay, Kapur and Sharma approached the Premier’s doctor who was in the room next to him and told him that the Prime Minister is feeling unwell. Dr. R.N Chugh at once approached the Prime Minister and found that the Prime Minister was sitting on his bed, coughing and was complaining of lack of

breath. He was holding his chest with his hands and was looking pale. The doctor found the pulse to be very fast and weak. Blood pressure was not registered. The heart beats were hardly audible. With the help of the gentlemen mentioned above, the doctor put the Prime Minister in a reclining position, gave him intramuscular injection of MEPTHENTIUM SULPHATE one m.l (15 milligrams) and 1 m.l. of MICORENA [sic]. Within the next 3 minutes, Prime Minister L.B. Shastri lost consciousness, the pulse disappeared, breathing stopped and heart beats could not be heard. Death occurred at 1.32 on the morning of 11th January 1966. Doctor R.N. Chugh had already begun revival treatment by the methods of indirect massage of the heart and artificial respiration through the mouth by means of the air tube. The Soviet doctor E.G. YEREMENKO who had come there immediately on a call from Dr R.N. Chugh also took part in the treatment by revival procedures. She found Prime Minister L.B. Shastri dead when she arrived: The pulse had stopped, the heart was silent, there was no breath and no corneal reflexes. The revival treatment was continued further with the help of the anti-shock group of doctors which had arrived immediately on call. Indirect massage of the heart was done; in the left cavity under the heart at an interval of 15 minutes was twice introduced a mixture of Calcium Chloride [sic] with Adrenalin and glucose. Artificial respiration by means of the machine with the help of "Intubation tube" was also attempted. However, these measures yielded no results. The following professors also took part in the entire treatment: U.A. Aripov, Y.Y. Gordon, O.N. Pavlova, A.R. Rakhimjanov, M.S. Tursum-khojaeva, Z.E. Ummidova. Taking into account the fact that Prime Minister L.B. Shastri had suffered even in the past from [Infarct Myocardial] and the fact that during the night from 10th to 11th of January 1966 there was an acute attack of the same disease it can be considered that death occurred because of an acute attack of [Infarct Myocardial].'

This medical report created a storm and opened a Pandora's box of contradictions and confusion.

The fiercest attack came from T.N. Singh who challenged the medical report point by point. He asked the government if Shastri was so well and happy, as per the government records, then what made him die suddenly?

Atal Bihari Vajpayee brought in a new fact. 'According to the press reports, the last thing that Shastri took before going to sleep was a glass of milk. I wonder why no mention has been made of this fact in the statement.' He further asked, 'It was reported from Tashkent by Indian correspondents that the last thing he took was the milk. I would like to know who was the person who offered that glass of milk.'

Kuldip Nayar has also written in detail about the sequence of events leading to Shastri's death. 'Shastri, after attending the farewell reception, reached his dacha around 10 PM. Shastri told (his personal servant) Ram Nath to bring him his food which came from Ambassador Kaul's house, prepared by his cook, Jan Mohammad. He ate very little ... Ram Nath gave Shastri milk, which he used to drink before retiring at night. The prime minister once again began pacing up and down and later asked for water, which Ram Nath gave from the thermos flask on the dressing table. (He told me that he had closed the flask.) It was a little before midnight when Shastri told Ram Nath to retire to his room and get some sleep because he had to get up early to leave for Kabul. Ram Nath offered to sleep on the floor in Shastri's room but Shastri told him to go to his own room upstairs. The assistants were packing the luggage at 1.20 AM (Tashkent time), Jagan Nath recalled, when they suddenly saw Shastri at the door. With great difficulty, Shastri asked, "Where is doctor *sahib*?" It was in the sitting room that a racking cough convulsed Shastri, and his personal assistants helped him to bed. Jagan Nath gave him water and remarked: "Babuji, now you will be all right." Shastri only touched his chest and then became unconscious.'

Even Shastri's close friend and colleague, C.P. Srivastava, has confirmed this sequence of events in his book, *Lal Bahadur Shastri: A Life of Truth in Politics*. If it is a fact, then why was it missing from the white paper?

When confronted with facts which were not mentioned in either the white paper or the medical report, Swaran Singh had given a reply which was irresponsible, and not telling of a foreign minister. He had said, 'I cannot say that because the service was always done by Ram Nath, his attendant. I don't know whether he took milk as the last thing and I don't know who administered it. It has nothing to do with my statement.'

I found this reply full of political hara-kiri. It seemed as if the intention was to somehow escape the query. Why didn't he call Ram Nath and ask him as other well-wishers of Shastri had done? Wasn't he also present there as a foreign minister? Or was he a tourist? What would have taken for him to say that he would ensure that a team of officers would call Ram Nath and collect the factual details? Maybe, he underestimated the political acumen of Vajpayee, who was destined to become the future prime minister of India.

Vajpayee did not let Swaran Singh remain ambiguous. He asked, '...it might have something to do. Let the minister find out whether a glass of milk was offered to Shastri before he went to sleep. I want that information. I don't want any deduction from that information. But honourable minister must be in a position to deny or confirm it.'

Swaran Singh replied, 'I can't deny or confirm it. Because I don't have any information as to what was the last thing he took and who gave it to him.'

Dayabhai V. Patel from Gujarat brought in another element of doubt and raised a pointed question. 'May I know whether oxygen was available because in such cases, normally, oxygen gives great relief to the patients of

heart disease. Was oxygen administered? Or it was not available and was not administered?’

‘I have been informed that Dr Chugh had made arrangements for oxygen and the health minister has confirmed that he had all the arrangements for oxygen and everything that was required to be done. Even in the report, it is mentioned that through the tube “something” was administered,’ Swaran Singh replied. He sounded as if he was not prepared or just wanted to avoid giving answers in black and white.

‘How can the minister say that “something” was administered?’ I asked.

‘What was that “something”?’ asked Pallavi.

‘How difficult is it to confirm whether that “something” was oxygen or not?’ asked Docsaab.

‘We are in a dilemma again. The press reports contradict it,’ Atal Bihari Vajpayee said. To which, Swaran Singh replied vaguely. ‘Now, I am not a medical man myself. I have placed all the materials that are there before the House. Let there be no controversy over this. If there is any doubt in any member’s mind, I’ll be glad if he communicates that because it is not an issue over which I can really debate.’

Nobody was actually asking Swaran Singh to debate. The members just wanted facts which the government didn’t have or wanted to hide. In either case, it was wrong. Vajpayee represented the same sentiment when he retorted, ‘It is not the question; we do not want to raise a controversy. But, if facts do not tally with the facts that have been reported in the press, we are bound to ask questions. Now, the honourable minister has stated that oxygen was available and it was administered to Shastri. But according to the press reports, only oral respiration was given, oxygen was not given because it was not available.’

‘I cannot really throw any further light. I am not an expert,’ Swaran Singh replied. Nobody expected him to be a medical expert but yes, he was a minister who should have consulted the experts and should have presented the facts on the floor. Even the speaker found this reply inconclusive and intervened, ‘He (Vajpayee) only wants to know whether oxygen was available there.’ However, Swaran Singh had no reply.

Dr M.M.S. Chugh, a doctor himself, asked the minister, ‘The second point is whether, in the sequence of events as it has been narrated in the medical report, oxygenation or intubation was done. Well, Shastri was clinically dead when the Soviet doctors had come and after that oxygen by intubation was mentioned. Earlier, Dr Chugh administered the medicine, the injection. There is no reference to oxygen having been immediately given to him while he was sitting and was made to lie. Therefore, on these two points, I would like him to provide the information collected. It is possible that things might have been done and they are not there in the report.’

‘The honourable member himself is a medical doctor and I cannot really meet all his arguments or suggestions. I am not a doctor, so I cannot really answer all these medical questions. I do not know the distinction between the two,’ Swaran Singh answered.

‘Is this the kind of an answer we should accept from the foreign minister of India about the mysterious death of his prime minister?’ I wondered aloud.

T.N. Singh did not accept Swaran Singh’s vague answers and further attacked, ‘Dr Chugh, in his report, says that Shastri complained that he was short of breath ... even I am a heart patient and I know what is cardiac asthma ... a man can’t get up, forget walking... Second, he was given an intramuscular injection of mephitine sulphate as per the medical report whereas his heartbeat had almost stopped, blood pressure was nil. My brother also died exactly in the same fashion... What I know is that in such

situation, the doctors give intravenous injection... He finds the vein and injects so that it reaches the blood instantly... But the intramuscular injection that was administered to Shastri would stay in muscles for a long time and won't enter the veins... I ask why this injection was given... The report clearly says "intramuscular injection"... My two brothers have died of heart attacks... In both cases, the doctor tilted his head down and raised the legs so that the blood flows towards the heart... But Shastri was put in a reclining position in which it's not possible for the blood to flow to the heart... No trained doctor would ever do that... So, hereby, I make a charge that he was dead before the injection was administered.'

Though we are not doctors, this made some sense. Was it a conspiracy or sheer negligence? Was it incompetence or a deliberate act?

T.N. Singh further asked, 'One more thing I must expose... The (Russian) doctors who came there, who checked Shastri ... one of them was Dr Yermenko ... she refused to sign the medical report. Why did she refuse to sign the medical report? Now the government must explain if the attending physician doesn't sign the medical report, then how relevant are the signatures of other physicians. This is something that needs to be explored and understood. I am a nobody but Shastri was my friend... Since the age of 12 ... today he is dead ... and I remember (Antony's lines from Julius Caesar) "none so poor to do him reverence".'

What T.N. Singh revealed further was astonishing and confirmed the government's intention to manipulate information. Showing the white paper, T.N. Singh asked, 'This is Swaran Singh's reply ... this is the white paper of the government... In this, Swaran Singh's statement is there but the medical report was not attached... Later Swaran Singh said that the doctor's report was taken out... Why? ... Because if you read the doctor's

certificate and the (minister's) statement between the lines, the contradiction will be self-evident.'

It seemed as if the time gap of 50 years between my father's observation, '*The government is in the business of deceiving the innocent masses*', and Docsaab's frustration, 'Our system is built on the graves of honesty, transparency and accountability', had evaporated. Our democratic journey, in the last 70 years, has moved only from *no truth* to *no truth*.

Two Medical Reports

In my college days, I was involved in student's politics. I started as an Idealist. A revolutionary. But soon, my seniors corrupted my mind and convinced me that in electoral politics, idealism doesn't work. One has to employ many tactics—both unethical and immoral—that are effective enough to win the elections. The most common tactic was to create a pseudo fact against an established one. This would divide people since, in reality, people don't care about facts, they only care about narratives. Depending upon their own beliefs, people would believe in either of the theories and, thus, people will be confused and the electorate would get divided. Often in politics, dummy truths are more powerful than the truth. In these modern times of manufactured consumerism, be it products or truth, sells more than organic.

It's the Parliament, the judiciary and the media's job are to demolish the pseudo truth so that the actual truth wins. But, does the truth win in our democracy? Going only by Shastri's mysterious and unsolved death and observing the Parliament debates and media's role in this mystery, the answer is a big NO.

Despite the demands from almost all quarters, the government never bothered to institute an inquiry commission. Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister, who was famous for appointing various commissions and who even defied high court orders, did not even once consider a professional investigation into Shastri's death. Why? Nobody knows.

In the epic Mahabharata, Sanjay only had the right to narrate the war, as it happened in Kurukshetra, to a blind audience, but in the Kurukshetra of our democracy, which soon followed Shastri's death, Sanjay self-acquired the right to twist, omit, fabricate and manipulate the truth. We learned this vulgar truth of our democracy as we investigated further.

Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, an idealist socialist leader, raised some very tough questions regarding Shastri's death, both inside and outside the Parliament. His protégé, Raj Narain, left no stone unturned to pressurise the government to respond to Lohia's allegations. He asked comprehensively on the floor, 'When Dr Ram Manohar Lohia has maintained in all his public meetings that Shastri did not die, he was killed and this must be investigated, why it is not done? Isn't it true that several veteran leaders and I have persistently demanded the inquiry in this House? I want to ask why Dr E.G. Yeremenko, who was the Russian attending doctor and the first Russian doctor to arrive, didn't sign the report? We have full information which we have got from Moscow that she refused to sign the report. Until the time it's asked from Yeremenko in person about why she refused to sign the report ... and why other doctors were called ... I seek a comprehensive reply to this ... on just one point—"Why didn't Yeremenko sign the report?" Because she knew what was the real reason of Shastri's death and she didn't compromise on her medical oath and morals.'

'This, by any standards, is a very serious allegation,' Pallavi said.

'Even I want to know why Yeremenko did not sign the report.' Tripti also joined in.

'Did the government clarify?' Pallavi asked.

'Not in the Parliament, as it seems,' I replied.

'Sir, not even in the RTIs.' Docsaab threw his one-liner.

M.P. Bhargava asked the government, ‘Where is the original death certificate given by Dr Chugh? Because according to my information, the Russian doctors refused to give the death certificate. My allegation is that the original death certificate is with the Russians. And on the basis of that, “Russian doctors signed the death certificate”. My other point is that there is always an oxygen cylinder available for heart patients and Shastri was our prime minister. To relieve breathing difficulties immediately, oxygen is necessary. But, in the statement made in February 1966, where it was stated that “all kinds of things were tried on Shastri’s body”, there was no mention of oxygen being administered.’

Sundar Singh Bhandari asked, ‘Now it has become clear that there were two medical reports. One was in Russian and another in English. I want to ask if the two reports were the same, which they must be, then why there is a difference in the number of signatories? Why the government did not reveal it for four years and why it has come to our knowledge now? It is clear that the number of signatories differs. Why were the people of the country not informed? So far the government has not been able to eliminate the doubts in people’s minds, and, this is why, there is a strong demand for an inquiry and I want to know if the government is considering to set up an inquiry commission on Shastri’s controversial death.’ Bhandari further asked, ‘Why two doctors didn’t sign the report in English?’

The minister from the government’s side, Ram Niwas Mirdha, did not have any answers.

Loknath Mishra from Odisha raised another logical question. ‘When the Russian doctor Yeremenko was attending to Shastri besides the Indian doctor Chugh, why her sign is not in both the death certificates? This is a mystery in itself.’

Yes, this was a mystery in itself. And it seemed, it shall remain a mystery in the absence of any records. This was not the first time the question of Dr Yeremenko’s missing signatures was raised in the Parliament. First, it was

raised in 1966. However, even four years later, the government was not able to give any satisfactory reply.

Mirdha did try to give an ambiguous answer, but nobody was satisfied. He said, ‘The medical report was prepared in Russian and a photostat copy bears the signature of Dr Chugh and eight Soviet doctors including the deputy health minister of USSR and Dr Yeremenko. The report was translated in English by an Indian interpreter. The English report was also signed by Dr Chugh and six Soviet doctors. The report in English was handed over to Indian officers on the spot and has been in the possession of the Ministry of Home Affairs.’

This fumed Raj Narain who never missed any chance to make a political attack on Indira Gandhi’s government; but this time he raised some valid points. ‘Till date, in the last four years, the government has not even once said that she (Yeremenko) signed the report. Now Mirdha Ji is saying that she signed the report. Recently, PM Mrs Indira Gandhi went to meet Kosygin, and because there was so much commotion and controversy in the country, maybe she conspired with him to get the missing signatures. What if I raise the question of contempt of the House against Mirdha because Y.B. Chavan had replied earlier that when big doctors have signed, how does it matter that Yeremenko did not sign. Which means he had accepted that she did not sign. Now for the first time, Mirdha is saying that Yeremenko had signed. So there is a contradiction between Chavan and Mirdha’s statements. This contradiction is recorded in the Parliament so now it should be made clear by the government who is lying—Mirdha or Chavan?’

As per our research, this contradiction was never addressed.

Pitambar Das asked, ‘I want to ask only one question... Please refer to para 11 ... in the 9th line, it’s written “the report was first drawn up in Russian and Dr Chugh and 8 Soviet doctors signed it. The report was translated into

English. And as it happened, only 6 Soviet doctors signed it.” This gives the impression that in the English report two signatures are missing. The language of this report indicates that Dr Chugh and 8 doctors signed the Russian report and Chugh and only 6 doctors signed the English report.’

Sunder Singh Bhandari introduced another confusing but a very important element to this complex mystery. He asked, ‘In the English report, there is a signature of Prof. Y.Y. Gordon but in Russian report, his signature is not there. Why?’

We were confused. If a signature was in the original Russian report and was missing in the English report, which was made after some time, one could argue that the doctor left by the time the other report was prepared. But if a doctor’s signature was not there in the original one but was present in the English one, then this fact, per se, is the strangest fact. Was he a dummy signatory? What did this mean? The six signatures out of eight should be the same. But there was a new signatory in English. How was that possible? It seemed in this long parliament debate, there were only questions and no answers. Exactly like our RTIs.

India remains a nation full of questions with no Krishna giving any answers.

Another discrepancy that many members pointed out was that while the Russian medical report stated that the mixture injected into Shastri’s body by the anti-shock group of doctors was ‘calcium chloride and adrenalin glucose’, the report in English said ‘potassium chloride and adrenalin glucose’ was administered. Members also showed reports where this discrepancy was verified by the Soviet authorities.

This led to an unprecedented demand for an inquiry commission. Members were of the opinion that with so many ambiguities and doubts for foul play, an inquiry commission must be set up immediately.

L.K. Advani, who was known to be the most logical and erudite parliamentarian, made a comprehensive argument. ‘In the statement made today, I have seen a candid admission that there was a discrepancy between two medical reports in respect of which Mr Pitambar Das just raised a question and the discrepancy is very substantial. It’s about the medicine administered. It has been admitted that two medicines differ. On page 10 of the statement which is laid on the table of the House, it is said: “It has been verified from the Soviet authorities that the mixture used was calcium chloride and adrenalin glucose”.’

Advani further added, ‘See the explanation (given by the Soviet authorities), the difference in two reports obviously is due to a mistake in translation. The Russian word for calcium and potassium are very similar, they are *kali* for potassium and *kaltsi* for calcium. The Indian translator while translating the Russian report appears to have wrongly translated *kaltsi* as potassium (instead of calcium) as the anti-shock treatment had been carried on by the Russian doctors. At the time of signing the report, Dr Chugh was not in a position to locate this mistake. This in itself is something very serious. In case of this kind, where the death of a late PM is involved, the government has come out with this kind of callous report and is trying to justify or whitewash everything. There are many other factors also. If there is suspicion in people’s mind that fair play and justice have not been done, it is fully justified.

‘Sir, the government has been saying that those who proclaim that Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is alive are absolutely wrong. But they know that there are suspicions in the minds of people. Therefore, to allay these suspicions, the government has agreed to set up a commission. I think they have done well there. But I am surprised that in the case of Shastri, in whose case it is not only various political parties, but even eminent jurists like Shri Chagla and eminent statesmen like Dr Kunzru who have expressed

doubts, nothing of that kind has been done. Even more than that, the widow of Shastri, Shrimati Lalita Shastri has herself expressed doubts.

‘Sir, the home minister has said that the government has no skeleton to hide. He may be correct. If he has no skeleton to hide, he should not have the slightest hesitation in appointing a commission of inquiry to go into the entire episode and answer all the question,’ Advani concluded.

After going through the parliament proceedings and various articles in leading papers, few things became apparent:

1. There were two medical reports.
2. The government hid this fact for four years.
3. Both the reports were meant to be identical, but they weren’t.
4. There were some very serious discrepancies in both the reports.
5. No comprehensive explanation was given for the discrepancies.
6. No oxygen was administered.
7. Was there oxygen or not? If not, why? If yes, why wasn’t it administered?
8. Why no post-mortem was conducted on Shastri’s body?
9. Why the government never explained all this?

‘What, according to you, is the biggest hole in Shastri’s story?’ I asked.

‘I think the two medical reports,’ Pallavi replied.

‘I think the non-availability of oxygen,’ Tripti said.

‘What do you think sir?’ Docsaab asked me.

‘Post-mortem. I believe not doing the post-mortem of the prime minister was the biggest mistake,’ I answered.

‘Mistake? Sir, it was a blunder. It was a punishable crime. It was such a big blunder that in any decent democracy, the government would have been sacked... That’s what I believe, sir.’ Docsaab said emphatically.

Millennials are different from us. We have grown up in a compromising society where you forgive such blunders easily. What seemed a mistake to me, appeared to be punishable crime to Docsaab. That is the difference

between us, the compromising generation, and the millennials, the uncompromising generation.

Discolouration of the Body

When the Mughals invaded India, the wise men stood as spectators. When the British made us slaves, the wise men stood as spectators. When India was partitioned, the wise men stood as spectators. When, immediately after the partition, Pakistan attacked Kashmir and the Indian Army repelled Pakistani troops but Nehru called for a unilateral halt to the fighting and took the dispute to the United Nations, the wise men stood as spectators. When China invaded Tibet, India stood as a spectator. When Shastri died under mysterious circumstances and no post-mortem was done, the wise men stood as spectators. When the Emergency was imposed, the wise men stood as spectators. Indian democracy, at each step, was compromised but the wise men stood as spectators.

When Shastri's body reached the Palam airport, on a freezing afternoon, thousands of people lined up for his *antim darshan*. There was a silence of disbelief. These weren't political supporters. These were mostly people who had nothing to do with politics. They were from all sections of India and were waiting as if their own family member's body was going to arrive.

People loved Shastri who, in a short period, had won everyone's heart and respect with his honesty, sincerity and passionate dedication to serving the downtrodden. He not only brought back the lost glory by winning the war but rekindled the pride of 'forgotten people', especially the farmers. People were fully aware that he didn't even have the money to buy a personal car and had to take a loan from a bank to purchase one. While Nehru's era was engulfed with corruption, Shastri showed a humble way of life based on *tyaga*.

'Lal Bahadur Shastri died at a pinnacle of popularity that no one in India believed possible when he succeeded the late Jawaharlal Nehru as the prime

minister barely nineteen months ago,' reported *NYT*.

It was said that 'Nehru died too late, for Shastri death came too early'. However, it is believed that his popularity had soared not only because of his response to the war with Pakistan but also his unprecedented reforms made in the economy. It won't be wrong to say that he was India's first economic reformer. Though he was expected to follow Nehruvian economics of emphasis on physical controls instead of prices, the focus on industry instead of agriculture and the crushing web of controls, he realised that it was proving hostile to national development. In a very quick time, Shastri dismantled it piece by piece. He pumped in fresh thinking into India's development strategy. People understood that Shastri wore no ideological blinkers and, instead, he saw facts as they were in reality and how they can be tackled with practical solutions to help the downtrodden. Unlike Nehru, he went about his job in a quiet manner, without any showmanship.

'In response to the problem of chronic food shortages, he shifted the investment focus from basic industries to agriculture; to contain the growth of black markets, he encouraged the setting up of a system of incentives instead of controls; and to address the numbing inefficiencies of the public sector, he gradually allowed for a larger role for the private sector and foreign investment. He also shifted the locus of economic decision-making away from the Planning Commission and towards the states. His actions significantly reduced the influence of the Planning Commission, which had become extremely rigid in its outlook on economic policies. Such policy decisions were unimaginable in Nehru's India. Apart from these moves towards economic reform, he also began embracing a policy of export promotion instead of import substitution. It is interesting to note that South Korea had almost the same level of average income as India in 1964, but it pulled ahead following a similar strategy that Shastri had favoured.

Therefore, there remain legitimate grounds to speculate how the Indian economy would have developed had Shastri lived longer. India went on to adopt similar reform measures twenty-five years later, which put the economy on a higher growth trajectory. The little man was just way ahead of his times,’ writes Amit Kapoor in his book, *The Awakening of India*.

After Gandhi, he was the most trusted leader. People weren’t in awe of him like they were of Gandhi, but they considered themselves to be close to him like any family member. Obviously, people felt the same grief with his sudden death as they would feel for an elderly member in their family. Hence, such a mammoth crowd gathered at Palam airport.

A Soviet plane, CCCP-75586, brought his body from Tashkent. His body was covered with flowers. There was nothing unexpected thus far. His fans chanted, ‘*Shastri Ji amar rahein... Ajatshatru amar rahein...*’ Slowly, some people moved closer to the body as it came out in full public view. Some people turned and whispered to others. More people came closer and their expressions changed. The whispers started to spread like wildfire and became a noise which amplified in no time. The slogans changed from ‘*Shastri Ji amar rahe*’ to ‘*Shastri Ji ko mar daala*’ ... ‘Shastri Ji was poisoned’.

This wasn’t a fantasy. In broad daylight, people could see his body had turned blue, his face was swollen and there were blood marks around his neck. Their suspicion was valid. When a person is poisoned, the body indeed turns blue. Also, the blood oozing out of a prime minister’s body definitely leads to suspicion.

As soon as his body reached 10, Janpath—the official residence of the prime minister—it was handed over to his family for the traditional Hindu rituals where the body is bathed and dressed in fresh clothes. As his bare body was revealed, his mother screamed, ‘*Babaua ko maar daala* [they killed my son]’. Lalita, his wife, was instantly convinced that there was foul play as there were incision marks on his neck and stomach, and blood was

seeping out from them. His white *khaki* cap was also soaked with blood. Alarmed with the cuts, the blood and the swollen body that had turned dark blue, the family asked for a post-mortem but, according to his sons, the post-mortem was denied.

Kuldip Nayar has also written in his autobiography that Lalita Shastri had told him about the body turning blue. She was convinced that he had been poisoned.

The discolouring of the body and the incisions added fuel to the fire. The people, the family, the supporters, media and even jurists felt that foul play was involved. The government neither conducted a post-mortem nor investigated the mystery. This arrogance of Indira Gandhi's government irked not just the common people but the legislators as well, and this issue became the most intensely debated issue in the Parliament.

Veteran T.N. Singh said, 'Shastri's body was covered with flowers but when I went close for his *darshan*, I saw his face was swollen and had turned blue like ink. I am not a doctor but I know that Pakistan is not our friend and after the war, our relationship with Russia had also diminished. These were not ordinary times. The Cold War was on. This leaves me with doubt that there was foul play.'

Brij Kishore Prasad Singh from Bihar said, 'I saw his body very closely when it came from Tashkent. I stayed close to his body throughout. His entire skin and face had turned dark blue. Generally, when someone dies, the body turns pale yellow which is called *purdani aa gayi*, but in his case, it wasn't pale yellow ... it was blue... (which happens in the case of poisoning). Therefore, I request the honourable minister to clarify what does medical science say in this matter? If there were few blue spots, I would have understood but the entire body turned blue ... the skin ... the face... This gives me a strong reason to feel suspicious.'

M.P. Bhargava said, 'The point to be clarified by the government is—why was his body blue and black? If it is a normal heart attack and death

there should be no transformation of the body. It can be explained in two ways—either some sort of injection was given, which will chemically produce some reaction on the body and which will make the body become black and blue and thus, hide the real truth. The second way in which the death could have occurred was if he died a natural death. Where was it necessary of all these things being hidden from the public. A statement should have been made immediately saying this is this, this is this, this is this, this is the chronological order of things. Then the next point that has to be explained is a very serious one, which was brushed aside. What I am referring is the request by Russia to both Mr Chavan and Mr Sawaran Singh to allow the post-mortem on Shastri's body. Why was the post-mortem request declined by the two ministers?’

Raj Narain also raised this issue and asked some objective questions. ‘I want to know how long it took to fly (Shastri's body) from Tashkent to Delhi? Lal Bahadur Shastri's body had two major incisions ... on his neck and on his stomach ... why? When his family and especially his wife Shrimati Shastri asked, she was told that it's to keep the body safe from decomposing but can any doctor explain when his body was flown immediately (in such cold weather) where was the question of it decomposing? There are many injections available for this ... to stop decomposition. It was not just a death ... it was a historical tragedy... When asked the government about post-mortem, they say don't raise this issue... Why not? I'll tell you why the post-mortem wasn't done ... so that nobody gets to know about the poison (which made his body blue) ... so that nobody gets to know about the thuggery of this government... It's the responsibility of the government to tell who killed Shastri ... who was from a poor background and the prime minister of India... Is this why he had to pay a price to the conspiracy of the sycophants and family members of Indira? Please reply why there were incisions ... when his body was flown (in the coldest month of January) within a couple of hours to Delhi?’

Shri Loknath Mishra expressed his suspicion by stating that when Shastri's body arrived in India it was abnormally discoloured, with a texture totally unlike that of a victim of heart failure. To which Ram Niwas Mirdha gave a very indifferent and arrogant reply. He said, 'If the honorary member wants to impute motive to everyone, in every respect I have no reply to that.' This agitated the members who said, 'The prime minister of India had died mysteriously and you are talking about the inputting of motive?'

Ram Niwas Mirdha defended the government again with an irresponsible and ambiguous reply. 'As regards the other points that Mishra Ji has raised regarding the incision on the stomach or the buzzer, or what type of injection was given or why no injection was given on the heart muscle, all these facts are contained in this [white paper]. Every phase of the treatment is mentioned. The name of the medicine is mentioned. The quantity of medicine injected is given. If the honorary member reads it, most of these questions will be clarified.'

One can ask what was the problem with this reply. Well, the problem was that the entire debate and suspicions were based on this self-contradictory and incomplete white paper. This reply made L.K. Advani raise some logical and mature observations. In a long argument, he stated, 'This itself is something very serious. In a case of this kind, where the death of a late PM is involved, the government has come out with this kind of callous report and is trying to justify or whitewash everything. There are many other factors also. Though this House has raised this issue three or four times, after the death of Shastri in 1965, this is the first time that the government has come out with the statement saying that after the death of Shri Shastri, an incision was made on his body. The explanation given is this: "After the reanimation treatment had been given up, Shri Shastri's body was embalmed by Soviet doctors, in the presence of Dr Chugh, to check the decomposition". Why was this not told to this House or the other House at the earlier stage (in 1966)? It is only when the matter has been

raised in the papers and the press, and the *Dharmyug* of Bombay, that they (the government) have come out with this kind of statement. Suspicion of the people that fair play has not been done and justice has not been done is fully justified and the whole issue is sought to be covered and whitewashed.’

These questions were never explained. Never answered. Why?

Whenever the heads of State travel to a foreign country, it is ensured that there is an emergency level medical help like oxygen, blood, etc. available within his residence of stay. His medical team is stationed next door for any emergency. His room is checked for bugs and is fully protected. He is not just any VIP, he heads the State and his health can jeopardise a nation’s security. These are fundamentals that even an apprentice in the foreign ministry knows. But these protocols were never adhered to.

And nobody explained why.

‘What is the protocol when the prime minister dies in a foreign land?’ I asked Docsaab.

‘That’s exactly what we asked the foreign ministry in many RTIs but they had no information. Whatsoever,’ Docsaab replied sarcastically.

The Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union was then at its peak. Political murders were common. Yet, no post-mortem was done. Even if nobody asked, shouldn’t the Indian government have asked for the post-mortem?

‘Knowing the truth is important for our family. The truth has never been out,’ Shastri’s grandson Siddharth Nath Singh had told me. ‘All we want is that when Shastri Ji’s life story is written, the last page must have the truth of his death.’

‘What stopped the Indian government to declassify a document it had in its possession pertaining to Shastri’s death? How would it have imperilled

our foreign relations? And, with whom?’ I asked the team.

‘Doesn’t Shastri’s family and the nation deserve to know the truth?’ Pallavi brought in a compassionate concern.

‘Shouldn’t the truth be out and the controversy buried, once and for all?’ wondered Tripti.

‘By not revealing the truth, who benefits the most?’ I asked.

‘Isn’t it true that immediately after Shastri died, some people were arrested on the suspicion of poisoning him?’ Tripti asked.

‘Yes,’ Docsaab replied.

‘Which means there was a reasonable doubt that he was poisoned or he may have died of poisoning?’ Pallavi asked.

‘Yes,’ Docsaab replied.

‘Did the ambassador and the ministers know?’ Pallavi raised another doubt.

‘How can they not know?’ I intervened.

‘Did the Russian government know?’ Pallavi asked.

‘Russian government arrested them so obviously they knew,’ Docsaab replied.

‘Then, how come no post-mortem was done despite arresting people on the suspicion of poisoning him? No inquiry was done?’ Pallavi asked.

And, just like that, Pallavi opened a new angle. A new conspiracy.

We needed more information. More leads, more first-hand accounts. Just because the government failed to give records doesn’t mean the information was not there. In 50 years, it must have scattered with people.

‘I must have the information. Some direction. Some conclusion to this 50-year-old mystery,’ I thought resolutely.

I was convinced that Shastri’s death wasn’t handled well. I could smell some skeletons. It was time to act. I couldn’t remain a spectator.

Not anymore.

Poisoners of Indian Prime Minister and the Missing Thermos

Normally, I wake up early. Around 5–5.30 AM. I immediately start writing or do some creative work. This is my mediation. It's a habit.

But, that day, I didn't wake up. Because I didn't sleep. Often we can't sleep because of stress or acidity. I couldn't sleep because of my instinct. My instinct told me that I must act ... do something different. Else, I'll be a mere spectator to unresolved debates and will never understand why they remained unresolved.

Why was I making this film? Am I a mere filmmaker? What's the purpose? Was there something more ... a new angle ... a new dimension? Why was it that questions had been raised but never answered? What kind of democracy is this? Are we a real democracy? What is democracy? By the people, of the people, for the people ... that's what I had learned in school but where are the people in our democracy?

I wanted to scream from my apartment and ask the milkman if he was being heard? If he was being answered? Did he know the truth? Maybe he did. But nobody listened to him.

Why is it assumed that the government is the provider of truth? Why is the government always the giver and we, the people, takers? That milkman on the street or that newspaper-wallah or that sweeper cleaning the streets are as equal in a democracy as the prime minister. We are just playing different roles. Who is that man on the street ... is he just a statistic... What

is his role in our democracy? He may not be educated, he may not be aware of the globe but he is a source of memories, observations, information, metaphors, visions, traumas and secrets. The smallest particle of rock may not mean anything in front of the Himalaya but it's the collective strength of such particles which makes the Himalaya. Without those particles, the Himalaya is nothing. The smallest unit is the most powerful unit.

I had found my Buddha.

If a thought lingers on, resolved or unresolved, for a long period of time, it is because somewhere it's a part of our collective consciousness. It's not an individual or a political party that has kept Shastri's mystery alive for 50 years. It's the collective consciousness of the people of India. Collective consciousness has a magical mechanism to shelter what is precious, to yield what is valuable and to dispose what is harmful. If this mystery has lingered on, then it must be precious to the people of this country.

If there are always two points of view in democracy then it means there is a reverse side to everything and the reverse side also has a reverse side. The other side of the truth also has the other side. The truth of the milkman, the truth of the newspaper-wallah, the truth of my father, the truth of Docsaab ... all these mini-truths make a bigger truth. Those bigger truths make a universal truth and those universal truths lead us to the ultimate truth. This is why institutions like the government and big corporations control knowledge ... the milkman ... and me! Even the great philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault believed that what authorities claim as 'scientific knowledge' is really just means of social control. For instance, in the 18th century, 'madness' was used to categorise and stigmatise not just the mentally ill but the poor, the sick, the homeless and, indeed, anyone whose expressions of individuality were unwelcoming. Foucault was concerned with how different groups of people construct knowledge and, eventually, truth. In his view, what is true for one is not true for all; '[truth] is always dependent on a particular discursive formation; that is, there is no

underlying meaning or truth within or imposed on the things of our world. Truth or knowledge of something rests entirely within the relations of statements inside a discursive formation' to the extent that individuals and groups of people generate particular perspectives of the truth.

My head started to churn. This churning was leading me somewhere. I picked up my phone, opened the camera and recorded a video.

'Dear friends, as you know, I am trying to make a film about our second prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's death. We are stuck. We need information. The government doesn't have it. Which is why I have come to you. Please help me. If you know anything about Shastri or if you have anything—a memoir, fact, document, photo whatsoever—related directly or indirectly to Shastri's life and death, please share with us. If you don't have any information but you know or you have heard that anyone else has, please connect me with him/her... If you know of any book, article or any piece of information, even unrelated, which you think can help us in any way ... please let us know. Like Shastri was a people's leader, this film is also people's film. It's your film. It will be made with your cooperation. Please help us make it. Please help us find the truth. Because it's our right to know the truth. Thanks.'

When your heart knows you have done something right, you don't need approval from anyone. Without checking with anyone on the team, I posted it on all my social media accounts. I had no idea then that soon, this voice of instinct would initiate the process of the world's first crowd-sourced research for a movie.

Docsaab had collated all the eyewitness accounts of the last night of Shastri, which ranged from white paper of the Indian government, the journalists, the government officers, Shastri's colleagues to his family members.

I summarise below the most common sequence of events:

C.P. Srivastava mentions in his book, *Lal Bahadur Shastri: A life of Truth in Politics*, that on 10 January 1966, by 9.45 PM, ‘Shastri started taking leave ... Thereafter, he boarded his waiting car and I came back with him. On the way, he expressed his satisfaction over the successful completion of his mission. I still remember vividly the joyous scene in the street of Tashkent ... [People] shouted “Shastri, Shastri” and the prime minister responded by waving back at them. We reached the villa at about 10.15 PM and we sat down in his study. He recounted his talks at lunch with Ayub when both had agreed on the commencement of a new relationship. We had talked for about 10 minutes when Shastri looked up and said, “...Let us retire early today. Tomorrow morning we are going to Kabul.” I replied, “I will take care but I have another engagement still. A few official members of the Indian delegation are due to meet the press representatives in a hotel located a few miles away”.’

As mentioned earlier, Kuldip Nayar also pieced together the events leading up to Shastri’s death in his book, *Beyond the Lines*. He states how after having his meal, Shastri spoke to his family in Delhi and asked his eldest daughter about her opinion about the peace pact. She replied that none of the family members have liked it. Her reply made Shastri wonder about the reaction of everyone else. ‘He began pacing up and down the room... For one who had had two heart attacks earlier, the telephone conversation and the walking must have been a strain,’ Nayar writes.

Then, his staff gave him milk and some water in the flask. Around 1.30 AM, his personal assistant answered his door and saw Mr Shastri who was asking for a doctor. The staff woke up Dr Chugh, while other staff helped Shastri walk back to his room. ‘If it was a heart attack—myocardial infarction, and obstruction of blood supply to the heart muscles, as the Soviet doctors said later—this walk must have been fatal,’ mentions Nayar.

Nayar further states that Shastri started coughing, touched his chest and became unconscious. When Dr Chugh arrived, he gave an injection into the

heart and even tried CPR, but nothing worked. More doctors came; they declared the time of death to be 1.32 AM. Then, he goes on to explain how he gathered information about the details of Shastri's death and mentions that Ram Nath said that he gave Shastri water from a thermos flask which was kept on the dressing table. Nath stated that he had closed the flask.

But from several other accounts, the thermos was turned around and the cap was open, suggesting that Shastri consumed the water or milk from the thermos.

According to Nayar, T.N. Kaul's cook, Jan Mohammad, had cooked the food, not Ram Nath, Shastri's personal servant. This was strange as the same Jan Mohammad had prepared food for Shastri when he visited Moscow in 1965.

There is a story that Shastri's family recounted; the story was something like an obsession for his daughter who was also the last family member to speak to Shastri. She was on the phone with her father, as her husband, V.N. Singh, an employee of the State Trading Corporation, was travelling to Cairo for work where Shastri too was headed. Shastri, therefore, told his daughter to ensure that her husband carried Indian newspapers to Cairo. His last words to her were, 'I'm going to have a glass of milk and sleep.' The line got disconnected and Suman tried again. However, when she got through 15 minutes later, she was told her father was dead.

Two and a half hours later, at 4 AM, Ahmed Sattarov, the Russian butler attached to Shastri, was rudely woken up by an officer of the Ninth Chief Directorate of the KGB (responsible for the safety of VIPs). The KGB officer told him that he was being arrested on the suspicion of the poisoning of the Indian prime minister. Sattarov was handcuffed and, along with three junior butlers, was rounded off to Bulmen around 30 km away and was put in a dungeon.

In his memoirs, head butler Sattarov has written, ‘Early in the morning, I was woken by an officer of the Ninth Chief Directorate of the KGB (who guarded members of the Politburo and the government), from whom I learned about the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. The officer said that they suspected the Indian prime minister had been poisoned. They handcuffed me and three other head waiters, of which I was the senior, and loaded us into a Chaika automobile. We four had served the most senior officials, and so we immediately came under suspicion. They brought us to a small town called Bulmen, which is about 30 km away from the city, locked us in the basement of a three-storeyed mansion, and stationed a guard. After a while, they brought the Indian chef who had cooked the Indian dishes for the banquet. We thought that it must have been that man who poisoned Shastri. We were so nervous that the hair on the temple of one of my colleagues turned grey before our eyes, and ever since I stutter.’

The Indian press never wrote about it while the foreign press dubbed them as the ‘Poisoners of the Prime Minister of India’.

‘The poisoners of the prime minister of India? Yet our ministers did not order an autopsy? Wow! What’s happening here?’ Tripti was visibly upset.

‘Shastri consumed some food made by a Jan Mohammad, who was Indian ambassador T.N. Kaul’s cook,’ Docsaab informed us.

‘But he had prepared food for Shastri earlier in Kabul in 1965 too,’ Pallavi brought out some new information.

‘That must have been a rehearsal,’ Tripti said.

‘You are assuming that it was a murder?’ I asked.

‘It has not been proved as yet,’ Tripti said.

‘Why was the thermos lying sideways... Which means he tried to drink water but it fell,’ Pallavi asked.

This opened a series of valid questions:

Whether it contained water or milk?

His assistant said later that when they brought him to his room, Shastri was pointing at the thermos. What was he trying to say?

Maybe he wanted water.

Maybe he was trying to say that he got sick after drinking whatever was in there.

Was he trying to say that whatever was in there in the thermos, water or milk, had poison in it?

Why wasn't there any forensic study of the thermos?

But the thermos was missing.

When Atal Bihari Vajpayee, many other members of the parliament, some journalists and the family raised questions on Jan Mohammad, the government just told the Parliament that he was first Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's cook and then he was posted as T.N. Kaul's cook in Moscow. He was sent there because he could cook non-vegetarian food well. The question arises that if he was a non-vegetarian cook, what business did he have to cook for Shastri who was a staunch vegetarian. Second, Swaran Singh, Y.B. Chavan and Vidya Charan Shukla, three cabinet ministers, replied on this issue but none of them told the Parliament that Jan Mohammad was arrested on the suspicion of poisoning Shastri.

'But he was released later... The next morning...' Pallavi said.

'So? What does that mean?' I asked.

'That he was not found guilty,' Pallavi explained patiently.

'But even this information was not given to the nation. Why?' Tripti added.

'Everything is ambiguous. There is no evidence of anything,' I said, exasperated.

'Sir, you are right. When there is no evidence, then all theories are equally false. But one thing that everyone agrees on is that there indeed was a thermos which was missing then and is missing still. The question is

where is that thermos? Every single thing that Shastri used in that room is missing including his personal diary. It's neither with his family nor with the Indian government nor in any museum? Did it disappear? One autopsy and two pieces of evidence—his diary and the thermos—that could have solved this puzzle are all missing. And there was never any investigation either on his death or the missing items. In a court of law, won't these facts create reasonable doubt? And, that's not all. Sattarov was arrested, the Indian ambassador's cook was arrested. Why? On the suspicion of poisoning India's prime minister. Yet, the Indian ministers and officers didn't even consider doing an autopsy? They did not take the thermos in their possession for forensic investigation? There is no report of the ambassador in this matter. Are we a constitutional democracy, a private company or a banana republic? I don't know who am I? A free citizen who has the right to truth or a prisoner of a pseudo-democracy which is worse than a rogue nation? There was no justice then and there is no hope now. We are at a dead end. We are a wasted democracy,' Docsaab had tears in his eyes. These were the tears of frustration and anger.

His anger was absolutely justified. The reason Shastri's death remains a mystery is because nobody at that time got angry. Some anger is good in a democracy. This anger keeps the government on its toes. In Docsaab, I see myself when I was a teenager.

I protested in my college against the tradition of making girls sit separately from boys. I felt it was a wrong tradition. If women have to become equal to men, first men need to include them in their circle. And vice versa. You cannot territorially isolate women and then give lectures on inclusiveness and equality.

First, I discussed this with my teachers. They thought I was a man with high testosterone and wanted to get closer to girls. Then I went to the principal who really got angry with me and said 'How dare you? *Bahut jawani chadhi hai kya* [Are you high on libido?]' Yes, I was a teenager and

high on libido but it didn't mean I couldn't see social logic. So, I protested and raised slogans against the principal and the system which was teaching us to be discriminatory. I believed young men with libido lusted more after girls when isolated from them. This caused perversion and molestation of women. If both the genders interact with each other, they get to know each other more, become sensitive to each other and the desire to possess what is inaccessible reduces. The principal suspended me and summoned my father. I was very scared and unsure about my father's reaction. He was a highly respected man and everyone expected his son to be *Maryada Purushottam Ram*. To top this, the principal had been a student in the same university where my father was a vice-chancellor. The principal told him, 'Your son is an angry boy and he is a danger to the college's culture. I would have terminated him if he wasn't your son as I was sure once I bring this to your knowledge, you will reprimand him.' My father listened to him attentively and in the end, told him, 'I am not going to ask my son to apologise. I am not even going to ask him to control his anger for the reason you told me. Unless some people are going to get angry at us, we will not change such rigid traditions. Such anger got us free from the *sati* tradition ... *devadasi* tradition; such anger got us free from the British and only such anger will get us free from isolating our girls in a male-dominated campus.' And my father held my hand and walked me out of the principal's room. As we came out, he hugged me and said, 'Never surrender to authority.' That day, I walked with my head up feeling as if I had won the world. That anger stayed with me forever. That anger has brought me here.

I came and sat next to Docsaab who was rolling a cigarette with trembling hands.

'Sir, why are we taught the wrong history? Everything I knew ... I felt proud of is falling ... shattering...'

'History never records things that took place behind the veil, it records the show in front of the curtain. But nobody can stop us from lifting the

curtain. That is also the beauty of our democracy,' I told him as I held his hand and hugged him.

Was Jayanti Teja in Moscow?

Oh My God!
This was my first reaction when I opened the inbox. It was not just full, it had crashed. So many people had responded to my appeal for crowd-sourced research. A lot of them were thanking me for making the film. Most of them had sent links from google which I could guarantee Docsaab already had. Some were absolutely unrelated but gave a new perspective. Some connected me to people who knew something about the mystery. We were overwhelmed. A video appeal which was a result of my instinct had delivered results and how. This had reinforced my belief in human instinct. We didn't know where to begin.

We decided to start with unbelievable conspiracy theories. On a normal day, we wouldn't have cared for these but as we proceeded with them, new unknown territories started opening up to us. And we learned more, not about just Shastri, but many other factors that eventually led us to new, shocking revelations.

For example, a simple note from an old man in Bihar led us to discover the corruption and patronising of a businessman, Teja, by the governments of that time. It all started when the old gentleman, who had served the central government during Shastri's time, informed us that Lal Bahadur Shastri, in his personal life, was very simple, against wastage of resources and was fanatic about honesty in public life. As the AICC general secretary, he used to give his wife Lalita a monthly allowance of ₹40. When he came

to know that she had managed to save ₹10 out of it, he felt he was overpaying her and cut ₹10 from her allowance.

This led us to research the economic management of that period. We learnt that Shastri also had a strong sense of economy. In 1965, when the drought made the food situation bleak and added to the miseries of the war, Lal Bahadur Shastri coined the slogan '*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*' (Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer) to boost the morale of both soldiers on the borders and farmers on the fields. Shastri's dilemma was that the food-grain import bill was eating into spending on defence. The agricultural production had declined by 17 per cent, food prices had jumped by 14 per cent, all the government buffer stocks had been exhausted and the only option that remained was to depend on imports.

Amit Kapoor writes in his book, *The Age of Awakening*, '[T]he USA had suspended all aid to both India and Pakistan as it felt that scarce resources had been wasted on an unproductive war. This is when Shastri pushed the market-based orientation of the agriculture sector. He set a programme under the expertise of Subramaniam for revamping Indian agriculture that included the use of high-yielding variety seeds, price incentives to farmers and concentrated use of improved inputs in irrigated areas. But the finance minister, T.T. Krishnamachari, and the Planning Commission opposed it. A major problem was the production of fertilisers, which was largely controlled by the public sector ... [which was] operating with inefficient technology and low rates of utilisation, due to which the government had to subsidise the cost of fertilisers; Shastri's government passed a new policy to provide concessions to foreign private companies willing to invest in the Indian fertiliser industry. This was the first opening of the market which was in contrast to Nehru's Soviet-socialist model. The only part of the World Bank recommendation that was needed to resume aid was the aspect of currency devaluation. Krishnamachari opposed it vehemently. Krishnamachari had also been under fire for misusing his office. Shastri

showed no support for his finance minister and planned to set up an independent judicial authority that would examine the issue. Krishnamachari resigned on the last day of the year, reasoning that if the prime minister had to consult someone else, he had clearly lost confidence in him.'

With this decision, Shastri stamped his seal of honest governance.

Obviously, corrupt officers and businessmen were rattled. One such businessman was Dr Jayanti Dharma Teja. Consequently, they had little difficulty in gaining access to Jawaharlal Nehru who, as a respecter of achievers, was happy to welcome them. This boosted their stock so much that there was a scramble to be on their right side.

According to various press reports and articles by Inder Malhotra who had met him personally, 'Teja had a brilliant academic career in nuclear physics and soon relocated to India. Very soon, he became a regular at the Teen Murti Marg residence of the prime minister ... In 1961, he set up a shipping company by the name of Jayanti Shipping Corporation. He developed a need to obtain a financial loan to realise his dream and applied to the government. Teja had managed to acquire the status of a close confidante of the prime minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru.' Some bureaucrats, particularly in the directorate general of shipping—dubbed by Teja 'abominable no-man'—expressed deep reservations about his claims. Inevitably, the matter was referred to the cabinet. Nehru told his colleagues, '*Thoda kuch de do* [Give him a little something].' The government released crores of rupees.

Teja ordered Japanese ships after paying the first instalments and then used those as collaterals to acquire a large fleet. Then, he also started buying properties all over the world. While there were many who were applauding his achievements and aspirations, there were also a few who had become anxious with his growing popularity.

But, Shastri becoming the prime minister put a full stop to his objectives. Teja did try to become friends with Shastri but to no avail and soon he got in trouble with the tax authorities. With Shastri tightening the rope on him along with the income tax inquiries, Teja's fortunes were threatened. It was alleged that just before Shastri's visit to Tashkent, Teja visited Moscow to meet Ambassador T.N. Kaul. Later, he was also present in Tashkent while Shastri was there. Ram Manohar Lohia demanded in the Parliament as to what was Teja doing in Tashkent during Shastri's talks with President Ayub Khan of Pakistan. The then foreign minister, Swaran Singh, brought the House down by declaring, 'The honourable member's impression is a case of mistaken identity. There was a Teja at Tashkent but he is a foreign service officer, J.S. Teja, posted to our embassy in Moscow.'

Teja's special relationship with Indira Gandhi was not only whispered in the political circles, once Ram Manohar Lohia even said on the floor of the Parliament that Teja had gifted a sable coat to Indira Gandhi when she was 'nothing more than her father's daughter'.

It's a fact that Teja wanted to meet Shastri but was denied an appointment. It was alleged by many MPs that with the help of someone very powerful (an obvious reference to Indira Gandhi), Teja went to Moscow to meet T.N. Kaul (another confidante of Mrs Gandhi) to 'fix Shastri'. Was this 'fixing' related to his death? We don't know but this must have been probed. L.K. Advani raised this issue in the Parliament and asked the government specifically 'whether it is not a fact that on 23 December 1965 Jayanti Teja emplaned from Bombay to Moscow and was in Moscow from 23 to 28 December and that he stayed with ambassador Mr T.N. Kaul there. And 23 to 28 December 1956 was just a few days before Shastri's death took place in Tashkent. So it cannot be said that Jayanti Teja has nothing to do with his presence in Moscow.'

Inder Malhotra recounts, 'Soon after becoming the prime minister, Indira Gandhi went on an official visit to the USA. Dharma Teja was among the

Indian tycoons that had gravitated to Washington and New York for the occasion.’

Sooner or later, the bubble was bound to burst and it was found in investigations that Teja’s financial empire was a mirage. Consequently, the public sector Shipping Corporation of India took over and assimilated Jayanti Shipping, and Teja was tried for massive fraud and sentenced to imprisonment for seven years.

He spent some time in Tihar Jail, but died a rich man. It is still believed by many that Teja’s prosperity was mainly the result of his friendship with Nehru, Indira Gandhi and the Congress.

‘This means that the culture of corruption, patronising of fraud businessmen and helping them flee the country actually started in Nehru’s regime,’ Tripti observed.

‘Lalit Modi, Vijay Mallya, Choksi, Nirav Modi are just the recent players of this great tradition of PMO-sponsored corruption,’ I commented.

‘Sir, Teja wasn’t the only mysterious guest in Tashkent,’ Docsaab brought out a photo of Shastri in Tashkent posing with Pakistan’s president Ayub Khan and several other people.

‘What is wrong with this picture?’

Docsaab pointed at one bespectacled man standing behind Ayub Khan and asked curiously, ‘Doesn’t this man look like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose?’

Though I outrightly rejected this conspiracy theory, I was curious to know more as the mysterious ‘Tashkent Man’ in the picture indeed had a very strong resemblance to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

Was this the secret Shastri wanted to tell the nation on his return to India?

Netaji Bose—The Tashkent Man

All of us looked at the picture with a magnifying glass and there indeed was a very close resemblance between ‘The Tashkent Man’ and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. We dug further.

Subhash Chandra Bose, popularly known as Netaji, then 48, was thought to have died in an air crash in Taiwan on 18 August 1945. However, British intelligence agencies believed that he had not. On 22 August 1945, Tokyo Radio announced the death of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in an air crash in Formosa (now Taiwan) on 18 August, en route to Japan. But the crash theory has been rejected by scores of Netaji’s followers and admirers; and claims of the revolutionary leader resurfacing continue to intrigue and divide Indians. The Jawaharlal Nehru government allegedly spied on Netaji’s kin for nearly two decades. Declassified papers of the West Bengal Intelligence Branch have revealed that they were targeted by massive state surveillance machinery that continued the British-era snooping on Bose’s kin. The obvious question is if there was no conspiracy and no hidden secrets, then why was there snooping of his kin. ‘Nations that forget their history lack the power to create it,’ Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said on 15 October 2015, while announcing that classified files on Netaji would be made public. Of the remaining 39 files still not in public, 4 are ‘Top Secret’, 20 ‘Secret’, 5 ‘Classified’ and 10 ‘Unclassified’.

The family members of Netaji believe that secret files on Bose still exist in Russia, China, the USA, UK, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia, and

they have requested the prime minister to write to these countries for their declassification.

Bose and Shastri's deaths have been the hottest controversies in Indian consciousness. Despite being a specialist of suspense genre in films, I wanted to write a screenplay where both the mysteries would meet at one point ... and that point would be Tashkent.

The picture lay in front of me. Docsaab had marked a red circle around the face of a man who was alleged to be Netaji. This man came to be known as 'The Tashkent Man', who appeared in both still and video imagery from the Tashkent Declaration of 10 January 1966. The Tashkent Man was seen around India's late prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistan's late president Ayub Khan as well as Soviet statesman Alexei Kosygin. Was he Subhash Chandra Bose in disguise?

A London based NRI, Sidhartha Satbhai, led an investigation to solve The Bose Mystery. He commissioned Neil Millar, a veteran of the Royal Signals Regiment of the British Army, to conduct an imagery analysis on the video and photographic evidence that had been supplied to him by an internet group, Anonymous. As per his final report, Millar believed that the Tashkent Man was indeed Netaji. He made many observations which are available on Satbhai's website, *thebosemystery.com*.

The next obvious question is that if the Tashkent Man was indeed Netaji, what was he doing at the peace talks? In a report in the *Open* magazine, Iqbal Malhotra has tried to answer this question. He writes, '[W]hat information lies in the public domain, during the decade of the 1930s, Netaji had been unable to crack access to the top Nazi leadership and had turned to the USSR as the only hope in the international arena from whom help could be expected in India's freedom struggle... The line of argument that I am proposing is that Netaji's real collaborator in his quest to create a credible alternative to the non-violent path to freedom was the USSR, and neither the Germans nor the Japanese. The latter two were mere pegs of

convenience in this alternative paradigm of the freedom struggle... If the Tashkent Man and Netaji are indeed the same people, then the circumstantial account provided in this article is broadly close to the truth. If, however, the Tashkent Man is not Netaji and is merely an inexact doppelgänger, then the argument holds that Netaji might have died in the USSR either as a prisoner or as an expedient inconvenience. In either case, the truth lies within Russia.’

One thing was becoming clearer to us that in both these mysteries, the role of Russia had to be studied in great depth.

As we called it a day, an email popped up in my inbox. This was about Gumnami Baba.

‘Gumnami Baba? Who the hell is he and what has he got to do with Shastri?’ Pallavi asked.

‘It is claimed that Gumnami Baba was actually Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose,’ I replied.

Every truth has a reverse side, every reverse side has a reverse side—how true.

Gumnami Baba—India's Most Famous Unknown Man

There are three most well-known and argued theories about what happened to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose—the first is that he was killed in a plane crash in Taiwan; second, that he survived and lived in Soviet Russia; the third that he lived in various parts of UP in great secrecy, hidden behind a curtain most of the time.

Till the time he lived in Faizabad, in UP, his followers called him Bhagwanji but after his death, the media named him ‘Gumnami Baba’ (The Unknown Sage). After he died, the curtain behind which he had lived all these years was raised and his room was found to contain hundreds of objects; most important of them were his correspondence and notes which were examined by his niece, Lalita Bose, who confirmed that Gumnami Baba was indeed her uncle—Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Lalita and a few citizens then filed a suit in the Allahabad High Court. It took 13 years for the UP government to reply. A few years later, Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav set up an inquiry commission headed by Justice Vishnu Sahai. But the commission made no convincing headway in answering the question—who really was Gumnami Baba?

Of course, more than one theory has been floating around since 1985 about the real identity of the sage. They range from the allegation that he was a CIA agent (but, what would a CIA agent do, sitting in a remote part of UP?) to a fugitive from the law. More prominently, certain members of

Subhash Bose's family (in private talks) and BJP leader Subramanian Swamy (publicly) have claimed that Gumnami Baba was an impostor planted by the Intelligence Bureau with a view to mislead the people of India, taking them away from the real 'truth' about his fate that he was bumped off in Soviet Russia with Jawaharlal Nehru's connivance.

Several researchers, journalists and activists have investigated the claims that Gumnami Baba was Netaji. The rumour first started doing the rounds over a month after the sadhu's death in the servant's quarter of a BJP leader's house in Faizabad city near Ayodhya in 1985. It took a serious turn on 28 October that year when a local Hindi daily, *Naye Log*, published a lead story claiming the sadhu was actually Netaji in disguise.

It was Ashok Tandon who first highlighted the links in the daily, *Naye Log*; a detailed inquiry was undertaken by Sayed Kauser Hussain, Nirmal Nibedon (both deceased) and V.N. Arora for *Northern India Patrika (NIP)*. Anuj Dhar carried out the investigation in 2002 on behalf of the national daily, *Hindustan Times*.

As per a report in *Indiatimes*, '8 Items From Gumnami Baba That Link Him To Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose', by Rishab Banerji, 'Letters, telegrams and postage stamps were among the 197 items probed by the District Treasury of Faizabad linking Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose to Gumnami Baba aka Bhagwanji. Some of the findings provide an uncanny resemblance with the freedom fighter ... Inland letters and telegrams written by and received from Dr Pabitra Mohan Roy (a senior official of Bose's Indian National Army's intelligence wing) were also found among the belongings of Gumnami Baba ... Son of INA veteran Nizamuddin, Akram, helped identify a German-make pair of binoculars used by Netaji and other members of the Azad Hind Fauj ... A letter written on 16th September 1972 by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief (Sarsanghchalak) M.S. Golwalkar was also retrieved ... RSS chief in his letter addressed Bhagwanji as "Pujoyapad Shrimaan Swami Vijayanandji Maharaj".'

In 1999, the central government had set up an inquiry commission under ex-Supreme Court judge, M.K. Mukherjee, to probe the mystery of Netaji. The commission found that Netaji never died in an air crash which was rejected by the 2006 Congress-led government without assigning any reasons in the Action Taken Report tabled in the Parliament. But, in 2010, Justice Mukherjee made a shocking statement that he believed Gumnami Baba was Netaji.

The believers in ‘Gumnami-Baba-was-Netaji’ theory asked why the Sahai Commission, which was probing Gumnami Baba’s credentials, did not approach Justice Mukherjee? And why Mukherjee, a former Supreme Court judge, would link Baba to Netaji when he was told by DNA experts that there was no match between his and Bose family samples? Because there were reasons to believe that forensic tests concerning Gumnami Baba, handwriting as well as DNA, were fudged by *sarkari* experts.

The beauty of public-sourced research is that you get to know all sides of a story and we learned from some other contributions that there was more to Gumnami Baba’s story.

In November 1985, a Hindi newspaper, *Janmorcha*, received an anonymous letter claiming that Gumnami baba was in fact K.D. Upadhyay (aka Kaptan Baba), who had absconded after killing Pandit Brahmadev Shastri. The letter also mentioned, ‘Upadhyaya fled to Nepal following the killing incident. After some time, he started living in Basti.’ According to a few followers of Gumnami Baba, the baba had come to Ayodhya from Basti, a town in Uttar Pradesh. He had lived the rest of his days in the servant’s quarter of Ram Bhawan, the home of a BJP leader, in Faizabad.

Dhirendra K. Jha, in his report, offers various views that suggest that Gumnami Baba and Upadhyay might have been the same person. There is an autobiography of Suryanarayan Mishra, *Meri Jeevani*, which carries important details of a murder that was committed in 1958. According to the book, Upadhyay and Shastri managed the Gayatri Brahmacharyashram

Sanskrit Vidyalaya in Ayodhya and had a feud related to some financial matter. On 10 October 1958, Shastri was murdered just as a board meeting was about to end. ‘The murder took place in full public view in the evening of that day, when the trustees were holding a meeting in the open space in front of the Hanuman temple (at the centre of the school),’ says Pandit Ramabhilash Mishra, the temple priest and the lone surviving witness. He continues, ‘Upadhyay, who was not present at the meeting, suddenly appeared from behind the temple with a rifle in his hand and shot at Brahmadev Shastri, who died instantly. Kaptan Baba [as Upadhyay was called] was never seen after that day.’

The district manager of Faizabad, Indu Kumar Pande, said that there was a rumour that Gumnami Baba had killed somebody but the investigation was closed after the Allahabad High Court took over the matter after Netaji’s niece, Lalita Bose, made a plea to preserve Gumnami Baba’s possessions.

After going through a few more reports and research materials, we figured out that this was an unrelated controversy and we should not divert our focus from Shastri’s death. As far as Gumnami Baba goes, without finding out who he really was, if not Netaji, the controversy about his identity will never end.

Bhabha's Air Crash—A Strange Coincidence

People are not researchers but they are information seekers. They store some random information in their subconscious and when probed, they dig out a small piece of it and try to correlate it with one major event and form their own theories. That's how gossips are created. But a smart cop uses this gossip to arrive at the door of the killer. We were trying to be that cop.

People and fans of Shastri had sent us random stuff—photos, paper cuttings, anecdotes, contacts, articles, conspiracy theories and every possible thing that they believe was connected to Shastri's death. As long as we were dealing with the parliament debates and other directly related issues with his death, our job was easier. Now for a few months, we had just been sorting the information that came as a result of my appeal, and filtering it out. We had been applying filters after filters, and after prolonged deliberations and going through details, we shortlisted the most probable angles.

There was one strange coincidence though that made us think if there was indeed a larger conspiracy by CIA as Shastri had given impetus to India's nuclear programme led by Homi J. Bhabha. Around 13 days after Shastri's sudden death in Tashkent, Bhabha died in a mysterious air crash on the Alps. Both the mysteries remain unsolved to date.

This coincidence was brought to our notice by one of the research contributors who sent us a book of a CIA officer called *Conversations with the Crow*, and a paper that established the direct link of CIA in ‘knocking off Shastri’. This was substantiated by the ‘mystery crash of a plane that killed Homi J. Bhabha’—the father of India’s nuclear programme.

Conversations with the Crow contains the transcripts of journalist Gregory Douglas’ interview with a former CIA operative, Robert Crowley, who claimed that the CIA got rid of Bhabha to ‘paralyse’ India’s nuclear programme. Crowley also claimed that it was a bomb in the cargo section of the aircraft which brought it down in the Alps.

Homi Jehangir Bhabha, regarded as the father of the Indian nuclear programme, was the founding director and professor of Physics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Trombay Atomic Energy Establishment, later named Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). Both institutes reportedly played the main role in India’s development of nuclear weapons, which Bhabha supervised as their director. After the Chinese nuclear bomb test, in late 1964, almost eight years after the humiliating defeat from China, Lal Bahadur Shastri asked Bhabha whether Indian scientists could manage an underground test. Bhabha, who was keen to put India into the position of being able to make plutonium bombs, told him that India could explode a nuclear device within 18 months, and for a cost of \$10 million. Shastri gave him a free hand to ‘make some dramatic “peaceful” achievement to offset the prestige gained by communist China among Africans and Asians.’

But just 3 months before the completion of the desired 18 months, both the architects of Indian nuclear programme died. Mysteriously. Only 13 days apart. Was it just a coincidence? Was it sabotage? Or just an accident?

As per a report, ‘Sino-Indian Nuclear Rivalry: Glacially Declassified’, by Jayita Sarkar in *Indian Defence News*, ‘On 24 January 1966, around 7.02 AM, Air India Flight 101 “Kanchenjunga” ... exploded ... above Mont

Blanc near the Franco-Italian border. All 117 people on board were killed, including Homi Jehangir Bhabha. He was just 56 ... The black box from the 1966 crash was never recovered and rescue operations were halted the day after the crash owing to severe weather conditions around Mont Blanc. The investigation resumed in September 1966, and the French inquiry commission completed its report in March 1967, concluding that severe “white-out” conditions near the summit of the mountain, together with miscommunication over “phraseology” between the air traffic controller in Geneva and the pilot Captain J.T. D’Souza led to the crash. The French line of reasoning was accepted by the Indian government... According to the transcript of communication of the air traffic controller in Geneva ... the controller [had] asked Flight 6029 to report on what it saw around Mont Blanc. The pilot remarked in Italian that he saw “a black cloud”... and he thought that the black cloud was possibly due to an “explosion”... In August 2012, rescue worker Arnaud Christmann found a bag containing diplomatic mail from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, which he turned over to the police in Chamonix. The jute bag, weighing about 9 kilograms (19.8 pounds), contained newspaper reports from January 1966 that were found largely intact and was promptly returned to the Indian Embassy in Paris.’

In 2017, Daniel Roche, an aviation enthusiast and Swiss climber, found a few limbs as well as a jet engine at the site, which could be from either of the two Air India crashes. He believes that Air India Flight 101 was intercepted by another plane and crashed.

‘If Kanchenjunga had crashed in the mountain, there should have been a huge fire and explosion as there was 41,000 tonnes of fuel in the aircraft, but that was not the case. According to me, it collided with an Italian aircraft and as there is very little oxygen at that height, there was no combustion that could cause an explosion,’ he said.

Regarding Bhabha, he said, 'I do not know whether it was a conspiracy or what as Bhabha was going to give India its first nuclear bomb... I feel that it is my duty to tell the truth to the world based on the evidence. If the Indian government wants, I am ready to hand over the documents and the belongings of the passengers to them.'

On 30 December 1971, a few years after Dr Bhabha's death, Vikram Sarabhai, hailed as the father of India's space programme, was found dead in a hotel room at the Halcyon Castle in Kovalam. He had shown no signs of illness the previous evening and had died rather mysteriously. His cremation was performed without even an autopsy.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has lost 684 personnel since then, dead under unnatural circumstances. There are conspiracy theories that foreign powers are trying to cripple the organisation.

However, this, Shastri and Bhabha's mysterious deaths, was during the Cold-War period and CIA was famous for eliminating world leaders. It led people to believe that the US intelligence agency had a hand in the Air India crash and Homi Bhabha's demise.

The theory was that the USA was perturbed by countries like India gaining nuclear capabilities or making atomic bombs and weapons. In 1945, the USA was the sole possessor of the technology; by 1964, both the Soviet Union and China had tested atomic bombs and India, under Shastri and Bhabha, was just 'three months away' from an anticipated nuclear test.

This theory got fuelled when a former CIA operative, Robert Crowley, claimed that the CIA was responsible for eliminating both Bhabha and Lal Bahadur Shastri. No wonder the CIA was the US's primary player in all its subterranean narrative.

The CIA official was quoted as saying, 'We had trouble, you know, with India back in the '60s when they got uppity and started work on an atomic bomb.' Referring to Homi Bhabha and Shastri, Crow said, 'We knocked off

Bhabha when a bomb went off in the cargo hold ... and we nailed Shastri as well. Another cow-loving raghead.'

'What?!' All of us were left speechless.

'We knocked off Bhabha ... and nailed Shastri ... another cow-loving raghead...'

These words of Crow reverberated through our minds for the next many days.

Conversations with the Crow

On 8 October 2000, Robert Trumbull Crowley, a former leader of the CIA's Clandestine Operations Division, died in a Washington hospital of heart failure and Alzheimer's Disease. Just before Crowley's death, Joseph Trento, a writer of books on the CIA, had gone to Crowley's town house and taken over 50 boxes of Crowley's CIA files with him. A small group of CIA officials gathered at Trento's house to search through the papers, to find those documents that must never become public. A few were found but, to their dismay, the files Crowley was known to have had in his possession had simply vanished.

In 2002, some material concerning the CIA's actions against Kennedy became public. Then, it was discovered that the missing documents, which included details of CIA's activities in Southeast Asia as well as information regarding the assassination of President John Kennedy, had been sent by Crowley to another person. This other person was Gregory Douglas.

After his retirement, Crowley, known as the Crow, began to search for someone to write his biography. His search had ended with Gregory Douglas. Both of them began a series of long and informative telephone conversations that Douglas had secretly began to record. In 1998, before going to the hospital, Crowley asked his son, Greg, to ship two large foot lockers of documents to Douglas asking him to open them only after his death. These documents contained information about many covert operations. Two of these alleged operations of the CIA were to eliminate

Shastri and Bhabha which were accomplished successfully, according to the claims made by Crow.

What can't be ignored, however, are the allegations against Crow that he was an erratic man and after retirement, he was missing the attention; thus, in order to 'rediscover his importance', he could have cooked up various conspiracy theories.

However, a detailed, scientific study of Crowley-Douglas conversations could help in tying a few loose ends, especially for the Indian government, in the wake of Shastri and Bhabha's mysterious deaths.

In one of these tapes, Crowley mentioned, 'We had trouble, you know, with India back in the 60s when they got uppity and started work on an atomic bomb. Loud-mouthed cow-lovers bragging about how clever they were and how they, too, were going to be a great power in the world. The thing is, they were getting into bed with the Russians ... we did not want them to have any kind of nuclear weaponry because God knows what they would have done with it... Oh, yes, and their head expert was fully capable of building a bomb and we knew just what he was up to. He was warned several times but what an arrogant prick that one was. Told our people to fuck off and then made it clear that no one would stop him and India from getting nuclear parity with the big boys. Loudmouths bring it all down on themselves. Do you know about any of this? ... Name was Homi Bhabha ... That one was dangerous, believe me. He had an unfortunate accident. He was flying to Vienna to stir up more trouble, when his 707 had a bomb go off in the cargo hold and they all came down on a high mountain way up in the Alps. No real evidence and the world was much safer.'

He further added, 'We nailed Shastri as well. Another cow-loving raghead. Gregory, you say you don't know about these people. Believe me, they were close to getting a bomb and so what if they nuked their deadly Paki enemies? So what? Too many people in both countries. Breed like rabbits and full of snake-worshipping twits. I don't for the life of me see

what the Brits wanted in India. And then threaten us? They were in the sack with the Russians, I told you. Maybe they could nuke the Panama Canal or Los Angeles. We don't know that for sure, but it is not impossible.'

When Douglas asked about Shastri, Crow replied, 'A political type who started the program in the first place. [Bhabha] was a genius and he could get things done, so we ached both of them. And we let certain people there know that there was more where that came from.'

We had no answers to Shastri's death as yet but this probe, which started with one tweet on 2 October a year ago and a simple instinctive video appealing for crowd-sourced research, had most certainly led us into such dark corridors of political mysteries. This journey was also a revelation of our own state of democracy. No wonder, people have lost hope to find the truth.

We felt like we were swimming from a river to a sea to an ocean with no horizon in sight. One of the dark seas, in this mind-boggling exploration, was the unnatural deaths of Indian nuclear scientists, which gave credence to Crow's theory of CIA's covert operations in weakening the nuclear power nations.

According to a report, 'Unnatural Deaths', by Prasenjit Chowdhury in *The Statesman*, 'Eleven nuclear scientists in India have died under unnatural circumstances during 2009–2013, as per the data furnished by the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) in its response to an RTI query... Attention has been drawn to the series of questionable deaths at BARC as well as at the Kaiga nuclear facility, in a span of three years... In 2013, two high-ranking engineers ... were found dead beside a railway track. They were allegedly poisoned before being placed on the tracks... The Indian media did nothing beyond occasional reporting on the circumstances of the unnatural deaths of Indian scientists. Conspiracy theories abound and there is a perception that Indian scientists are being killed in an attempt to thwart the country's progress in nuclear and space research and make it dependent

on enriched uranium from other countries... The fear of conspiracies has been a potent force across the political spectrum, from the colonial era to the present. But these ought not to be regarded as factual evidence against any establishment or its personnel. Conspiracy theories are sustained by anonymity. Hidden assassins and shadowy saboteurs thus roam free.'

Was there a hidden assassin in Shastri's case who is still roaming free?

The Missing Inquiry Reports and Strange Coincidences

What is leadership for a nation? Leaders don't come from a different planet. Like us, they are also human beings with their weaknesses and strengths. What they learn from life is what matters. Life is what is around us. Life is our school.

In India, there are two Indias—a *Superior* India and an *Inferior* India. In *Superior* India, rich, English-speaking, beneficiaries of British patronage with rich lineage, and upper caste, politically-powerful people come; and in *Inferior* India, everyone else.

Beneficiaries of lineage and nepotism, such as Nehru, are *superior*, Self-made people like Shastri, *inferior*. Nehru was *superior* class. Shastri was like everybody else.

When *superior* people die, the entire State machinery gets busy to ensure that there is no foul play. Suspicious people are picked up, they are beaten up, investigation works on steroid, rules are mended. Their families are given all kinds of state facilities, honour and status. Big *samadhis* and monuments are made for them, which their families treat as private properties. On each death anniversary, there is fanfare, full-page ads are released and the dead person's legacy is glorified. *Superior* people's life never dies. It just transforms. From physical life to a surreal magnificent memory.

When *everybody else* dies, they ... just die.

When Shastri died, no autopsy was done. No inquiry was set up. His children weren't declared natural heirs like Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi or even Rahul Gandhi. In fact, Shastri was an irritating pause in the glorious tradition of the Nehru dynasty. Even the venue of his *samadhi* didn't come easily. His wife had to fight for it. Sanjay Nath Singh, the grandson of Shastri, told me in a video interview that when the family and his supporters suggested inscribing '*Jai Jawan Jai Kisan*' on his *samadhi*, the prime minister in waiting, Indira Gandhi, objected to it strongly. Only when Shastri's wife, Lalita threatened to sit on a hunger strike at the *samadhi* and attracted media's attention, did Indira Gandhi surrender fearing negative press.

In India, VIP roads are smooth. *Everybody else* has to manage speed breakers and potholes. If Shastri's life was full of speed breakers, his death fell into a pothole. No wonder, the investigation of his death was handed over to Parliament Police Station. No CBI inquiry. No Special Investigation Team for India's second prime minister. The home ministry referred the matter to the Delhi Police. That too, as an afterthought and in a very casual manner. Without any guidelines or deadlines. Why was the Delhi Police asked to handle the retrieval of documents? It was 'absurd and silly' how the death of a sitting PM was inspected by district-level police instead of higher authorities.

What is more absurd is that there was no report available for that inspection. When we made an extensive inquiry, no cop had any idea about it. That's common for the death of *everybody else*.

Only by going through the parliamentary records, I learned that there were two occasions when some kind of parliamentary inquiry was set up. I learnt about the first one by Raj Narain's argument in the Parliament. Another one through newspaper reports sent by a crowd-researcher.

Raj Narain made a statement in the Parliament in December 1970. 'I want to appeal to honourable members of the house that National Committee for the Inquiry into the Death of Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, which is already constituted under the chairmanship of Shri H.N. Kanjur and Shri H.V. Kamath and Shri Bhargava are the members and Shri Dharmesh Dev is the secretary. Shri Dev wrote a letter to me on 14th and I'll read out major excerpts from that letter: "But I now learn on fairly reliable authority that the prime minister advisors have decided that this white paper be placed before Parliament only on the last day of the present session, the reasons and strategy behind it being quite obvious, the government does not want opposition MPs to be able to make too much noise of it or have an opportunity of raising a serious discussion on it because this white paper will be no more than a poor apologia and a poor whitewash. If my information is correct, then it is a serious matter surely the government cannot be allowed to get away with such type of tactics".'

He further added, 'It is clear from this letter that the committee was formed a few days ago and within four days, this letter came because the advisors of the prime minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, have advised her to table the white paper on the last hour of the last day so that members can't question. The way this matter is handled and the way Indira Gandhi's government is avoiding any kind of debate in this matter is a proof government is guilty ... that Shastri was killed in a major conspiracy which is very well known to the government.'

Then, he addressed the Speaker and said, 'Sir, be the judge and tell me such a long report is tabled at the last minute on the last day, how do you expect members to study it and ask questions? Why is it being done?'

'How come this fact is not mentioned anywhere?' Pallavi asked.

'Lazy media...' I said.

'Please sir, don't call them media... They are the collaborators of a scheming government...' Docsaab concluded.

I remember my father telling me once, '*Governments can scheme only when the media is a co-conspirator.*'

We learned through many references that another committee was set up in 1977 by the Morarji Desai government under Raj Narain. A lot of public-researchers requested us to find the Raj Narain report. We tried to find it but its details were not available anywhere. Though there was a mention of a Raj Narain Committee but there were no records of this inquiry, whatsoever, in the Parliament's library, where they ought to be. National Archives also had no records related to this committee. We checked with many journalists but none had a clue about it. Till date, nobody from *superior* India has raised questions as to why the report is missing, suppressed or destroyed. Such things happen with *everybody else*. Sometimes their records disappear, sometimes they disappear. Often, their memories disappear. Like Raj Narain Committee's report. Like Lal Bahadur Shastri.

In India, witnesses are crucial to any inquiry. In a case involving *superior* people, witnesses are created, manipulated and fabricated. In case of *everybody else*, witnesses go hostile, missing or die in accidents.

Two witnesses were scheduled to depose before this parliamentary body in 1977. One was R.N. Chugh, Shastri's doctor who accompanied him to Tashkent. The second was Ram Nath, his personal servant, who was also present on the day of his death. Chugh was travelling to Delhi by road to testify before the committee and was hit by a truck and died with his family members. Only one child survived.

A few days later, Ram Nath came to Delhi from his village and visited Shastri's widow Lalita, before the deposition. According to the family members, he told her, '*Bahut din ka bojh tha, amma. Aaj sab bata denge* (I have been carrying this burden too long. I will shed it today).'

Ram Nath left their residence, 1, Motilal Nehru, to make his way to the Parliament and right in front of the ex-PM's bungalow, he was hit by a government bus. He went into a coma, his legs were crushed and amputated, and he lost his memory. After a few months, he died.

This may sound like a Bollywood movie plot but then movies are nothing but reflection of its times. In India, it has been a common practice to first try to threaten the witnesses, then try to buy them off to go hostile and if they don't bend, just bump them off. If you open any newspaper, inside somewhere, in the middle pages, there are news items of some witness, lying next to a railway line, run over by train or dead in a road accident. It was very common during Indira Gandhi's government. Many judges had even expressed their annoyance with the government over this menacing practice.

Any sane person would have asked how was it possible for both the crucial witnesses to be killed in road accidents on the day of the deposition. My father asked this. I am asking this. Docsaab is asking this. My son will ask this.

Two committees that were set up to find the cause of the death submitted their reports to the Indira Gandhi government. But both the inquiry committees' reports are missing. The Parliament Police Station report is missing. All the evidence is missing.

In short, the truth is missing. Like *everybody else*, in this grand narrative.

The Impossible Takes a Little Time

A lot of people are end-chasers. They are interested in the end result. These are the people who first read the last page of a novel. These are the people who want to know the end of a suspense movie. These are the people who subscribe to the fantastical theories of the end of the world. In a way, all of us are victims of end-chasing.

If we had to make this film, we also needed an end. A climax. A conclusion. But, all we had were questions, inferences, some gossip, some conspiracy theories and some fantastical theories. But there was no resolution. If there was a conspiracy, then there must be a conspirator. Even though all the material pointed at certain conspirators, there were no hard facts or evidence. Because the conspirator was the storekeeper of that evidence. But there was also no concrete evidence that the conspirator had destroyed the evidence. It seemed like a never-ending, catch-22 situation.

Should we drop the film? This had become our main worry.

It was a Sunday. Nobody was in the office. I sat alone, tired and underslept after months of non-stop research and reading of the material.

I was lost. *Going nowhere*. I was standing amidst a huge crowd. People were rushing and giving me chits which had various secrets but they were written in a cryptic language. I tried to decode them. I started running and the crowd was following me. Wherever I went, there were people shouting from loudspeakers. I was stuck in a valley where papers, like snowflakes,

had surrounded me. The papers had something written on them... But they were only half sentences... I tried ... and I tried ... and I tried ... but the sentence was never complete. Slowly, the papers started falling over me ... hard ... like a cloudburst... I was under the heap of papers... I was drowning in this heap... I couldn't breathe... I couldn't get out... This was like quicksand ... worse ... I was suffocating... I had to protect myself... I needed fresh air... I must breathe ... fresh air... I was choking... I was dying...

I woke up breathing hard. I looked around, there was no heap of documents... There was no crowd... I was in my bed... There was only a laptop beside me containing the valuable but incomplete research on Shastri and a whiteboard with a list of holes in the story, scribbled in multiple handwritings. I saw keywords flying out, in bold, and jumping at me.

His stay arrangement was *changed* at the *last moment* from *Intourist hotel* to a *dacha*.

There was *no bell or buzzer* in the PM's suite in Tashkent.

Why *Jan Mohammad* made dinner for him instead of Ram Nath?

There was no arrangement of in-tubular *oxygen*.

Why the doctor gave him *intramuscular injection* instead of an intravenous one?

He was continuously indicating towards the *thermos* and that thermos never came back to India.

Why *Dr E.G. Yeremenko* refused to sign his medical report?

Why there were *two different medical reports*, an Indian report with the signatures of *six doctors* and a Russian report with the signatures of *eight doctors*. Both mentioned different medication too. One reported he was administered with glucose, adrenaline and *potassium chloride* and the other reported glucose, adrenaline and *calcium chloride*.

Ninth Chief Directorate of KGB arrested Russian butler *Ahmed Sattarov* and *Jan Mohammad* at the night of his death.

Mark of *cuts* on the body.

His body was *blue*.

Presence of *Netaji* in Tashkent.

Why a *post-mortem* was not carried out?

Why *no enquiry* was set up after so many suspicions?

Why did nobody know of *two secret inquiry committees*/Why their reports and records are *missing*?

It is claimed that *Dharma Teja* travelled for Tashkent just before Shastri went.

Both *eyewitnesses* died in road accidents on the way to attend the parliamentary committee.

Why *medical report* was misplaced from parliament proceedings?

In 1994, a KGB agent gave an interview to a newspaper and said KGB was *spying* on Shastri and Ayub Khan.

Conversation with the Crow: ‘We knocked off Bhabha and *nailed Shastri*.’

I was surrounded by tons of papers, books, sticky notes but we were not getting anywhere. Did we need so much information? In modern times, we have been conditioned to believe that every written word is true. Since the power to read and write is limited with the educated, who are a few, the power to create a particular narrative is also with that few. Like a postman, who reads out letters to illiterate villagers for whom ‘*kaala akshar bhains barabar*’ (to an illiterate person, black letters are like a buffalo). The postman has the power to read out whatever he wants. Some postmen have used this power to misinform or hold out some information depending upon what he seeks from the receiver. In my village, British officers would come and read out from a handout which was translated by a local teacher. The teacher would translate the government’s *farmaan* (order) according to the

mood of the villagers. Now I know that most of the times, he translated it wrong as villagers believed in him and he didn't want to upset the villagers. He was a good man but he had the power to manipulate because he could read the written word. The written word was the ultimate authority, ultimate knowledge, ultimate truth. And, since it was delivered through the teacher he was perceived as the man with ultimate knowledge and truth. In reality, he was just a middleman. Middlemen have the power to manipulate the truth depending on their agenda.

That's what governments did. They made the information so technical, legal and complex that the common man ran away from it. That's how the government kept the power. If someone actually applies and examines government records, he will stop trusting the written word.

According to the teachings of the Manu's *Dharmasastra*, the first signs of awakening in men were brought through *iccha*, *jnana* and *kriya*; that is, desire, thought and action. It is the desire which initiates man to know and it is the knowledge that initiates man to action. Values are essential elements of action. Values mean the cherished end-state and the awareness of actions that direct human endeavour to reach it. Values also help decide legitimate goals which give rise to social action. They indicate truth, goodness, beauty and freedom and also the inherent human drive for realising these values. Values are co-extensive with duties.

Whatever schemes we make to gain power become useless when our end comes. Politics is full of scheming and plotting but whoever thinks he or she can manipulate innocent citizens, soon finds how terrible is the grasp of the Supreme and how insignificant the human manoeuvring is before the vortex of his breath. Only the one who doesn't make any schemes to immorally acquire power and works for the transformation of his citizens and surrenders to the will of the Supreme can have any chances to transform the society and the world. For the great rule of the Supreme is to have no schemes but only one unalterable purpose—surrender to the ultimate truth. Those who follow this simple principle will have circumstances bending to clear the path for them, to achieve greatness, to be able to serve the weakest. Whereas, the schemers will be sucked in the whirlwind of the Supreme's wrath.

I find myself not agreeing with my own father. Yes, I do believe in the power of truth. I believe in the Supreme. But I don't understand why good souls become victims of schemers?

In the darkness, I stood alone. There is nobody to answer.

'When there is no answer, surrender to the Supreme. The impossible takes a little time but keep hope. Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away,' my father had once told me.

Hope is all I had to find the truth. But, it seemed, I was going nowhere. I walked over the heap of information. Put off the light. Walked down the stairs. Started the car. And drove in the middle of the night. *Going nowhere.*

But the truth has an embarrassing and often very fatal habit of emerging, albeit decades later, from the most unexpected of places.

A few days later, I received India's constitution from a public-researcher with a yellow 3M stuck on the first page of the preamble. There was a small note on it—*Please research why 'secular and socialism' was added to our constitution in 1975 and you might be able to unlock many doors.*

I looked at the preamble, 'India is a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic.' Two words—secular and socialist—were underlined by a blue fountain pen.

Nobody knew at this stage that this small yellow 3M sticky note would change our lives. Forever.

I saw my father walking ahead of me, holding my hand and leading me towards the light.

I took out my phone and typed a message to Docsaab...

The impossible takes a little time but keep hope.

ACT III

Tanashahi: The Emergency

It was hot. Extremely hot. The scorching sun was right at the top. Fans were running at full speeds. Coolers were throwing hot air despite of the brand new khus-khus paddings. I'd have run out in the burning sun to stand next to my father, the vice-chancellor (VC) of Jabalpur University, at the gate of our huge residence if my mother had not pulled me back with all her strength and locked me in the study room.

On an ordinary day, I wouldn't have bothered about my father speaking to the students, but this wasn't any ordinary day. There were hundreds of angry students, who wanted to break inside our house but they had been stopped by the guards at the main gate. The students were angry and it seemed that they wanted someone's blood. They were screaming, '*Tanashahi nahin chalegi... Nahin chalegi* (Dictatorship will not work... It will not work).'

I asked my caretaker, Tukaram, the meaning of *tanashahi*.

'When someone does wrong things to protect his chair,' he told me.

'Why would anyone want to protect his chair? Who would take his chair?'

'Chair means position ... power.'

'How can a chair have any power? It can't even move on its own.'

'The person who sits on the chair makes everyone move.'

'How can anyone make everyone else move around him?'

‘When someone becomes a *tanashah* or a dictator, he doesn’t care about you, the country, your freedom or your rights... When only one person has all the rights and you have no rights to challenge his orders ... someone who dictates you and if you don’t obey, you are punished... That is *tanashahi* and the person is a *tanashah*.’

‘Like my class teacher?’

‘Yes ... maybe,’ Tukaram said after a lot of contemplation.

That was my first lesson in dictatorship ... at the age of ten.

The slogan-shouting from the students had become intense. The police had arrived but the students weren’t letting them inside the compound. They wanted my father to meet them directly but looking at their aggression, it wasn’t safe for my father to go out. I remember my mother trying to persuade my father’s staff to not let him meet the students. The students were not just screaming at the top of their voices, but some of them had also stolen mangoes from my mother’s favourite mango tree. I wasn’t sure what was worrying my mother more—their screaming or their stealing of the mangoes. But, whatever be the case, she seemed very worried.

My father always listened to her, but that day he took a very strong stand and told my mother not to interfere in such issues. Then, he rushed outside. His PA ran behind him. My mother shouted at the house servants to go out with my father and protect him from the ‘*goondas*’.

It was appropriate for her to call rowdy students *goondas*. In India, everyone becomes a *goonda* at least once in a lifetime. When nothing works, nobody listens and you have nothing more to lose, one becomes a *goonda*.

These students, led by Sharad Yadav, had been boycotting exams. They had also locked the registrar and humiliated many professors. Everyone was scared of them. No decent person wanted to get his face painted black by these *goondas*. But, I saw my father rushing out towards them. There was no fear on his face. He was frowning. I saw him at the gate asking the

guards to open the big iron gate at the main entrance. This surprised the students as they hadn't expected it. The first barrier was down. I saw my father discussing with Sharad Yadav as other students started screaming more loudly. Some students were even abusive. All of a sudden, something went wrong and I saw my father slapping a student.

'Oh my God!' my mother screamed.

She sensed something bad was going to happen. In fear, we only think of the worst. However, it's also mostly in fear that humans reveal the extraordinary side of their being. That's exactly what had happened.

The students were notorious for beating up professors and had once even tied a former VC in his office. Over the years, Jabalpur University had seen quick changes of VCs as nobody wanted to deal with the out-of-bounds students. But, my father showed his metal by not just confronting them without police cover, he also disciplined a rowdy student for his misbehaviour.

For centuries, war strategists have proved that the best strategy in a confrontation is to surprise the opponent, and that was what my father did. The rowdy group of students wasn't prepared for that. They had never imagined it. There was pin-drop silence.

'I am not separate from you. I am not against you. I am your man. But don't forget, you are my students. I am here to solve your problem. But you can't misbehave in my house. So, if you want my ears, you have to come inside and discuss with me. Calmly and unconditionally,' my father told Yadav.

After some time, Sharad Yadav, accompanied by some students, entered my father's office for a discussion. This had happened for the first time in many years. This 'new' turn of events surprised everyone. They spoke for some time and then Sharad Yadav touched my father's feet, called for my mother, touched her feet, and gave me a hug. All I remember of that hug was that he was stinking of sweat and dust.

On his way out, he told my father, ‘Sir, as long as you are here, there won’t be any problem because of students.’

My father smiled and told him, ‘I’d rather be troubled by the students than the politicians.’

This exchange became the talk of the town. Indira Gandhi’s government did not appreciate this. Thus far, the VCs used to avoid or buffer the students’ protests which made students angrier and they intensified their *goondagardi* which isolated the administration and a vicious cycle was created that nobody tried to break. Eventually, the government imposed a state of ‘emergency’ in the university which gave unprecedented power to the VC and the administration. On the contrary, my father chose not to use his powers and instead confronted the so-called *goonda* students, risking his life, and, thus, solved most of their issues.

India is a country of ABC styles of management. The first reaction of authorities is to (A)void a problem, then (B)uffer it, and only when there is no escape, do they (C)onfront it. Most of the people leave their ground at stage A. At stage B, they either bribe the authority or use some *tikadam* (unethical means) or *jugaad* (temptation/power pull) to get their work done. As the last resort, they confront the authorities with violence, destruction of state property and the complete shutdown of the system, to be heard.

When the students pressurised the authority, the government imposed emergency in the university as a buffering tactic. But students, at that time, were extremely motivated by Jayaprakash Narayan’s movement and there was no sign of them withdrawing their protest. Police started arresting students but a time came when there was no place left to house the arrested students.

‘What is an emergency?’ I asked my father at dinner.

‘It gives unusual powers to the VC and his administration.’

‘Why do they need such powers ... don’t they have them already?’

‘No. In normal times, the VC has to take the approval of the counselling bodies and the HODs, and follow the various democratic chain of rules. In an emergency, he can act on his own.’

‘Why can’t he act on his own otherwise?’

‘Because our democratic system ensures that there are lots of checks and balances.’

‘So, now you don’t have any checks and balances?’

‘Yes, we don’t.’

‘You can do anything?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you a *tanashah*?’ I asked.

My father wasn’t a dictator which I learnt later. But then, the only thing I knew was that something dangerous was happening and everyone was talking about it in whispers. The poets and intellectuals who used to come to our house regularly weren’t at their humorous and casual selves; they were all angry. Two names which occurred in all newspapers, all discussions and all gossips were Indira Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan. I had learnt vaguely that students all over India were protesting and, in many places, they had even damaged public property and beaten up the authorities.

‘*Desh mein aag lag rahi hai* (the country is burning),’ Tukaram told me while dropping me to school in our Willys Jeep.

‘Where?’

‘Everywhere. Mills, railways, banks, universities... Everyone is on strike.’

‘Why?’

‘They want Indira Gandhi to resign?’

‘Without Indira Ji how will India run?’

‘India was running when there was nothing... India will run when there will be nothing,’ Tukaram said.

This made sense to me only later in life when I read Vedic philosophy. In fact, I have learnt more about Hindu philosophy from common men than I did in any school. Tukaram wasn’t just a caretaker, he was my Wikipedia. He explained the most complex aspects of Hindu philosophy in the simplest way.

Seven years after Shastri died, India was in turmoil. Quoting Tukaram, ‘*Desh mein aag lagi thi*’. The economic distress in Bihar had led to mass protests by the Left. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and other student groups formed the Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti and joined in the protests. They turned to Narayan for leadership; as his ‘total revolution’ took shape and the Gandhi regime grew more oppressive, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh came on board, acquiring the mainstream legitimacy it had previously struggled for. Almost, all the opposition stood against one woman—Indira Gandhi.

Mills were shut. The distribution system was paralysed with black marketing, hoarding and spurious goods. Universities were on virtual strike. In most major universities, no exams were conducted for years. There wasn’t any employment. Corruption and sycophancy had become the key values to survive. It seemed that the motor of India had stopped. On the other hand, after the victory in the 1971 war, Indira Gandhi enjoyed massive popularity and power. The entire political class, intellectuals, bureaucracy and influential forces had only one job—cement the power of one leader, Indira Gandhi, even if it meant threatening freedom, democracy and sovereignty. The president of Congress went to the extent of declaring, ‘India is India. India is Indira.’

When Indira Gandhi had taken office in 1966, everyone thought her to be a dumb doll. But by 1971, she was compared to Durga—the goddess of power. With her slogan ‘*Garibi Hatao*’, she was considered a ‘worthy

servant of great people'. Even though Indira had reached great heights, she couldn't stay there because her 'greatness' was not authentic. 'She raised hopes which she had no intention of fulfilling. Her government was as schizophrenic as herself; it sought to draw its power from the poor and the downtrodden and serve the interests of the exploiters—of her own class,' wrote Janardan Thakur, Gandhi's close colleague of many years.

However, what mattered was that Indira managed to retain power in 1975 and she seemed to be in a much stronger position than she was years ago. The Syndicate's dominance had been shattered and most of their favourites had been dropped or downgraded in the new government. They were replaced by ministers who were nominees of chief ministers who had remained steadfast in their support of Indira. This became another characteristic of Indira Gandhi. Just as in a feudal court, dissidents would be eased out only to be replaced by people who would unquestioningly do the bidding of the one at the top. Being the junior-most in Congress, Indira was an insecure elite who was always worried about her own position and the fact that her own party members could pose a legitimate threat to her in the future. Thus, slowly, she had prepared herself for it. But, she had never envisaged such a powerful, united and aggressive opposition. She was like Abhimanyu. Her father had trained her in the art of managing her own party's politics but he hadn't told her the ways of coming out of the opposition's *chakravyuh*. When faced with a strong and united opposition, she panicked and saw the judiciary also as her opponent. In her panic, she believed that the murder of the democratic principles alone could save her. For Indira Gandhi believed that, in these testing moments, the real opposition wasn't the political parties, but the democracy. She had to murder it to retain her power.

And she did murder India's young democracy and imposed the state of Emergency.

An emergency is a state where your fundamental rights are suspended. It means that the State can take any action and people have no rights to oppose the orders. On 25 June 1975, Indira Gandhi declared the state of emergency throughout the nation citing the threats of national security and bad economic conditions. During the Emergency, thousands of people, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, George Fernandes, and many journalists, activists and intellectuals, were arrested and put behind bars without trials. The media had no right to report. Mass sterilisation was conducted. And, the State's policies were completely implemented with force.

Besides the complete lockdown of the country's economy and institutions, there were many other reasons for the imposition of the Emergency. From the starting, there was a clash between the judiciary system and the legislative assemblies of India. After independence, the government acquired lands under their socialist policy. But, the right to property was a fundamental right. So, a lot of amendments were made including the removal of the right to property and the introduction of the Sixth Schedule under which one couldn't challenge on the grounds of violation of fundamental rights. And, due to this schedule, the Union of India won the case of Sajjan Singh and Shankari Prasad. But, after 17 years, in the case of *I.C. Golaknath versus the State of Punjab*, the petitioner won. Under this case, Ninth Schedule and many other amendments were challenged.

Meanwhile, the economic situation of India was at the abyss of a collapse. The Soviet-influenced socialist policies of Indira's government were not working as desired. Massive civil unrest took place. Strikes and lockouts were commonplace. Jayaprakash Narayan's nationwide protests had turned into an unfazed fire.

Then, a famous case took place—*Raj Narain versus Indira Gandhi*. This case not only increased her troubles, but it also turned out to be the final

nail in the coffin of Indira Gandhi. Raj Narain, who had contested against Indira Gandhi, filed cases of election malpractices against Indira Gandhi. She was found guilty. Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha, who was hearing the election petition against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, held her guilty of ‘misusing’ official machinery during the poll campaign. He debarred her from occupying an elected office for six years but stayed the order for three weeks, that is, from 12 June to 3 July 1975, to enable her to appeal in the Supreme Court. She appealed but again lost.

India has always been a country of worshippers. We love to create gods. And gods never perish. Indira Gandhi was one such god. The masses didn’t know if there was an alternative to Indira Gandhi. Congress also thought so. In fact, Kuldip Nayar told me that at the prime minister’s house, the reaction to the High Court’s order was such as if she was punished for a small traffic offence. This was also the first time in India’s democracy when the courts had ordered against such a powerful person. Gods can’t be prosecuted—that’s what the masses and the Gandhis believed. But, the Allahabad judgment had changed that.

West Bengal chief minister, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, could make out that the opposition was winning. Thus, he counselled Indira to opt for an ‘internal emergency’. Indira Gandhi agreed and imposed Emergency, citing this move to foil ‘the plot to negate the very functioning of democracy’.

‘During the Emergency, thousands were detained without trial. The press was gagged and a series of totally unwarranted actions followed. Even Mrs Gandhi’s friends in the West were horrified. A daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru snuffing out liberty was too horrible a reality for the liberals to face. It is a tragedy that public servants or politicians were never punished for the excesses they committed. The damage which the Emergency did to the system—and the institutions—can never be repaired because those who perpetrated the worst crimes are not even feeling sorry [...] The imposition of the Emergency exposed the timidity of Indian society once again. Its

moral hypocrisy was reinforced. There was no awareness of what was wrong, nor was there a desire to act according to what was right. The dividing line between right and wrong, moral and immoral, ceased to exist. And the nation is still paying for it', wrote Kuldip Nayar.

It's really horrifying that even after 45 years, the Congress Party and the Gandhi family don't feel sorry for the 'murder of democracy' by their leader. There is nothing which can ever justify the imposition of the Emergency.

Justice J.C. Shah, who looked into the excesses of the Emergency, pointed out in his report, 'But there was no evidence of any breakdown of law and order in any part of the country to justify the imposition of the Emergency [...] there is no reason to think that if the democratic conventions were followed, the whole political upsurge would in the normal course have not subsided.' Nayar felt that if the Emergency had not been imposed, the fallibility of the press, public servants and the judiciary would not have been proved.

Media, in the words of L.K. Advani, began to crawl when they were asked to bend. The anxiety to survive at any cost became the key concern of public servants. People did not have the courage to respond to the call to fight the fear which Indira Gandhi had created. Most of the judiciary was so afraid that it would reject habeas corpus petitions against detention without trial. The high priests at the Supreme Court, with the exception of Justice H.R. Khanna, upheld the Emergency and the suspension of fundamental rights.

The Emergency also saw the sudden rise of her younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, as the virtual prime minister of the country, who went on to create the most corrupt and vicious coterie at the Centre. Vidya Charan Shukla was the Joseph Goebbels of this coterie who banned Kishore Kumar songs on AIR. Then there was 'Jat bully' Bansi Lal; India's Rasputin, Dhirendra Brahmachari and P.N. Haksar, who built a cerebral veneer around Indira

Gandhi. Veteran leaders like N.D. Tiwari, Siddhartha Sankar Ray, Yashpal Kapoor and Lalit Narayan Mishra fawned over and validated the Gandhis' brazen narcissism.

Sanjay Gandhi organised large public rallies not only to convince Indira that the country needed her but also to keep her 'enemies' at bay. So crude was the exhibition of support for Indira Gandhi that some Congress MPs took exception to the 'populist' demonstrations. Indira Gandhi's reply was, 'They are spontaneous'.

The clampdown on civil liberties and the widespread abuse of human rights by police angered the public. Indira Gandhi announced a 20-point economic programme whereas Sanjay announced a 5-point programme. Thus began a futile and inhuman exercise of cleaning India.

'Sterilisation, razing of Jama Masjid, the humiliation of committed people, sycophancy, fake data, fake governance, and the culture of less work and more advertising started. I don't think India ever recovered from such an assault on its moral character,' I said.

'But, why are we researching the politics of 10 years after Shastri's death?' Pallavi asked me.

'To understand who killed him?' I replied.

'But why 10 years after his death?'

'Because the real clues of a political murder lie in what happened after the murder.'

'So, have you found anything?'

'Not as yet.'

'Why don't you sleep? It's been a long time since you slept for more than 5-6 hours.'

'I can't sleep until I understand the meaning of those underlines.'

'Come on, people write all kinds of things; we can't get carried away by any random idea. Sleep. That's what you need the most,' Pallavi turned off the light and slept.

I turned off the light. But I could still see two words, glowing in the pitch dark of the night.

Secular. Socialist.

The 42nd Amendment: The Murder of Democracy

The most controversial and undemocratic amendment—the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution of India—was enacted during the Emergency by the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi. This was the first and the only instance when the amendment was done only to materialise the personal ambition of Nehru’s daughter. No wonder it came to be known as the ‘Constitution of Indira’.

The 42nd Amendment reduced the power of the judiciary, including the Supreme Court, to pronounce upon the constitutional validity of laws. The amendment’s 59 clauses stripped the Supreme Court of many of its powers and moved the political system toward parliamentary sovereignty. The amendment gave the Parliament unrestrained power to amend any parts of the Constitution without judicial review. It transferred more power from the state governments to the central government, eroding India’s federal structure. The amendment also removed election disputes from the purview of the courts. The amendment’s opponents described it as a ‘convenient camouflage’. It curtailed democratic rights in the country and gave sweeping powers to the prime minister.

Indira Gandhi didn’t stop there. She also changed the preamble of India. The preamble is the definition of a nation. After years of laborious work, India was defined by the greatest minds who had dedicated their entire lives

for nation-building, as a ‘sovereign democratic republic’. Indira Gandhi changed it to ‘sovereign, *socialist, secular*, democratic republic’.

I took out the constitution sent to me by the crowd researcher. I opened the first page and only see the blue ink of a fountain pen underlining these two words—*Socialist* and *Secular*. Everything else had blurred.

One can understand that being an authoritarian leader, Indira Gandhi wanted to withhold the power by murdering democracy and, therefore, the amendments were made. But, why did she change the preamble? India is, by virtue of being the centre of Hindu philosophy and culture, a secular country. In fact, secular is an alien word for the world’s most ancient society like India. If there is any society in the world which is truly secular, it is India. India has not only given birth to the world’s four most peaceful religions, but she has also given shelter to many faiths when they were under attack and had no place to go. While the USA and many other western countries have token diversity, which is neither interactive nor collaborative, it is only in India that an immense and complex diversity is not just collaborative but constantly interactive. Not just that, India has invented the most peaceful artistic movements of *Bhakti* and *Sufi*. India is the only country which has invented an entire language for the Muslims—Urdu. One can write an entire book on India’s nature of total acceptance.

Then, where was the need to artificially infuse the blood of secularism in a young and growing democracy where none was required? Why was it included when nobody asked for it? There has been neither any demand nor an agitation. There was nothing new that we could change in our society by its inclusion. In fact, it worked in the opposite direction. All the inefficient, unproductive and corrupt sycophants of Indira and the enemies of India, all kinds of negative and destructive forces, and the rich, powerful and elite of the society exploited, oppressed and destroyed the society, wearing the mask of secularism. If the Emergency gave license to Sanjay Gandhi and

his coterie to sterilise millions of unwilling, innocent citizens, including children and elders, secularism gave license to the elite to demoralise and decontrol the Hindu society which was at a higher level of evolution. Secularism became the political weapon to appease Muslims and to disempower Hindus. It wasn't possible that it would last long. Secularism was against the grain of Indian society. Indira Gandhi was the daughter of the man who wrote *The Discovery of India*. She should have known it.

So, why did Indira Gandhi want to shove it down everyone's throat? Why was she so keen on 'secularism' which could eventually destroy India's political canvass? Nothing has damaged India more than forced secularism. Did she do it on her own accord? Or there was a third force which made her redefine the world's most ancient society?

Then, there was another word, more dangerous than the previous one, which was also added to the preamble—socialist. While 'secular' defines the social structure, 'socialist' defined the economic structure. Why would anyone want to define a nation with social and economic definitions when even a 5th standard child knows that both the society and the economy are dynamic processes and they can't be bound in permanent definitions. What if the digital generation wants to have a fully capitalistic economy or entirely new economic principles that are more suitable to the digital world? Why did Indira Gandhi deny future generations their freedom to run this country in the best-suited way? Was it her or someone else's doing?

Babasaheb Rao Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Constitution, was opposed to declaring India's social and economic structure in the Constitution. During the Constituent Assembly debates on framing the Constitution in 1946, K.T. Shah proposed an amendment seeking to declare India as a 'secular, federal, socialist' nation. In his opposition to the amendment, Ambedkar stated, 'My objections, stated briefly, are two. In the first place the Constitution ... is merely a mechanism for the purpose of

regulating the work of the various organs of the State. It is not a mechanism whereby particular members or particular parties are installed in office. What should be the policy of the state, how the society should be organised in its social and economic side, are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances. It cannot be laid down in the Constitution itself, because that is destroying democracy altogether. If you state in the Constitution that the social organisation of the State shall take a particular form, you are, in my judgment, taking away the liberty of the people to decide what should be the social organisation in which they wish to live. It is perfectly possible today for the majority of the people to hold that the socialist organisation of society is better than the capitalist organisation of society. But it would be perfectly possible for thinking people to devise some other form of social organisation which might be better than the socialist organisation of today or of tomorrow. I do not see therefore why the Constitution should tie down the people to live in a particular form and not leave it to the people to decide it for themselves. This is one reason why the amendment should be opposed.'

Ambedkar's second objection was that the amendment was 'purely superfluous' and 'unnecessary', as 'socialist principles are already embodied in our Constitution' through Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. Referring to the Directive Principles, he asked Shah, 'If these directive principles to which I have drawn attention are not socialistic in their direction and in their content, I fail to understand what more socialism can be. Inclusion of Secular and Socialist, therefore, will be the murder of the very concept of democracy.' Shah's amendment failed to pass and the preamble remained unchanged until the 42nd Amendment. Ambedkar was asked on many occasions why he refused to accept the definition recommended by K.T. Shah, he merely responded, 'It would have been the murder of democracy.'

After the 1980 General Elections, the Supreme Court declared Sections 4 and 55 of the 42nd Amendment as unconstitutional. In the judgment on the sections, Chief Justice of India, Y.V. Chandrachud wrote, ‘Three Articles of our Constitution, and only three, stand between the heaven of freedom into which Tagore wanted his country to awake and the abyss of unrestrained power. Since the Constitution had conferred a limited amending power on the Parliament, the Parliament cannot under the exercise of that limited power enlarge that very power into absolute power.’

On 8 January 2008, a petition, filed by Sanjiv Agarwal of the NGO Good Governance India Foundation, challenged the validity of Section 2 of the 42nd Amendment, which had inserted the word ‘socialist’ in the preamble to the Constitution. In its first hearing of the case, Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan observed, ‘Why do you take socialism in a narrow sense defined by the Communists? In a broader sense, it means welfare measures for the citizens. It is a facet of democracy. It hasn’t got any definite meaning. It gets different meanings at different times.’

I was aghast to read this, ‘... it hasn’t got any definite meaning ... it gets different meanings at different times.’ If it hasn’t got any definite meaning, then what was the purpose of declaring the emergency and redefining India with the inclusion of ‘socialist’, that too at a time when every single socialist leader, activist or socialist thinker was in jail. But then, by 2008, India was so badly infested with the deadly communist and socialist ideology that even some of the upholders of India’s sovereignty, Constitution, justice and liberty were suspected of being disciples of such a dangerous ideology.

In the book, *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency*, historian Bipan Chandra wrote, ‘Sanjay Gandhi and his cronies like Bansi Lal were keen on postponing elections and prolonging the emergency by several years... In October–November 1976, an effort was made to change the basic civil libertarian structure of the Indian

Constitution through the 42nd Amendment to it. [...] The most important changes were designed to strengthen the executive at the cost of the judiciary, and thus disturb the carefully crafted system of Constitutional check and balance between the three organs of the government.’

If Tukaram was alive, he would have cited this as an example of *tanashahi*. He would have definitely asked, ‘Who was it who wanted to confine India’s growth in the hard, dark, opaque box of a socialist government?’

‘Obviously, the capitalist USA gets ruled out. In the era of the Cold War, if the USA is out, who is left? The USSR? The KGB? Who wanted to convert a democratic India into a *tanashahi*, a dictatorship?’

These questions were running in my mind constantly. In the era of the Cold War, the USA was trying to dominate by establishing democracies, whereas the USSR was establishing socialist dictators.

‘So, was it USSR? The KGB?’

I had only questions and no answers.

At that moment, it felt like opening Google map using a weak 4G network; the map did open but the directions weren’t loading.

Novosti, a Defector and the Subversion of India

The Greeks were all-powerful and mighty, knowledgeable and enlightened, yet Christians converted them without any force. A gnostic society which was experimenting with agnosticism at that time went back into darkness. Darkness, indeed, absorbs the light.

The highest levels of knowledge and philosophy do not interest masses since they are gullible and consume fantastical stories about the mystery of God and the world. Aggressive religions like Christianity and Islam, with their fantastical stories, captured the imagination of the masses. They spread like wildfire and eventually became competitors to each other. These aggressive religions overshadowed thousands of years of research of Hinduism. First, they demoralised Hindus by questioning the empirical data for its findings, without accepting that there can be multiple systems to arrive at the truth. Thousands of years of spiritual research of the Hindu society was destroyed in a moment by labelling it as superstitious and unscientific. Once, the doubt was established, destabilisation of the society began by invasion and conversion. They misused the caste system, which in reality was an economic system, to create a divide. Concepts of Vasudhev Kutumbkam and Karma were ingrained in our DNA so we kept absorbing them till the time we remained mere clerks of Bada Sahib.

This was realised by the USA and USSR during the Cold War. They used the same tactics to colonise weaker nations to assert their power. Colonisation had ended but the tendencies had not. Russia identified former colonies of the West (non-communist, and yet non-capitalist, but definitely an 'anti-imperialist', mainly anti-US way of development). India was a perfect fit. After 1,000 years of ideological and economic slavery, India had found constitutional freedom, but not psychological freedom. Self-doubt had become a habit. There was an ideological vacuum after Gandhi's assassination. It's not coincidental that Nehru chose Russian style socialism. With easy access to the ideological mind map of India, Russia used the same tactics as the Muslims and Christians. Subversion. Conversion.

Russia is projected as our best friend but in reality, it's our coloniser; with our government, our intelligentsia, our bureaucracy and even our media sold to it. I realised this only on my tour to Russia as part of an official delegation. We were supposed to exchange our views on respective education systems. What I saw, stunned me. Almost all the members of our delegation had been to Russia a few times and, therefore, they knew our hosts pretty well. There was a kind of understanding between them. Like school friends, sharing a secret. Our delegates knew almost every waitress by name, every Russian propagandist intimately, and

every Soviet ballet, by acts. In our official meetings, instead of any exchange, there were only instructions from the Soviet authorities. Vodka parties filled the evenings. Since I am a teetotaler, I was isolated. This also gave me the opportunity to observe from outside. The behaviour of some of the delegates, after a few drinks, was exactly the same as of dealers in an Annual Corporate Party. It is easy to guess that the Soviets were like the corporate bosses wooing the dealers with unlimited wine and belly dancers in hope that they will deliver desired results—the ideological and economic colonisation of India. No wonder, most of the intellectuals I meet these days, speak the Soviet language of class struggle and revolution.

Being a passive society, this is India's biggest danger and the reason why India was invaded, India was colonised. Now, it seems, India has been sold. The citizens have started doubting our own culture, ideology, traditions and values. They are questioning the very identity of India—a 5,000-year-old civilisation. For the first time, I am forced to question—if India is really sold?

I read out this passage from my father's diary to Docsaab.

‘Sir, even Yuri Bezmenov says the same,’ Docsaab said.

‘Yuri... what?’ I asked.

‘Yuri Alexandrovich Bezmenov. He was a KGB agent and propagandist. During the Cold War, many intellectuals of Russia, who morally protested against the brutal regime of the USSR, risked their lives and defected to foreign countries,’ Docsaab informed me.

‘So ... one of them is Yuri Alexandrovich Bezmenov,’ I guessed.

‘Yes, sir. He told how the USSR and the KGB played dirty politics to break other nations. Specifically, India. He has written and spoken at length about how the KGB subverted religion, government system and economic system in India while he was posted in Novosti's New Delhi branch.’

‘Novosti?’ I asked.

‘Sir, Novosti, in Russian, means news. Novosti Press Agency was a front of the KGB used for disinformation. It was founded in 1961 to replace Cominform (Communist Information Bureau). Working directly under Agitprop and the KGB, Novosti Press Agency became the biggest propaganda and ideological subversion organisation of the USSR. Yuri was posted in Delhi as an agent for “ideological subversion” of India, but basically he was assigned to spy,’ Docsaab read out from a file.

‘What did he say?’

Docsaab picked up a book titled *World Thought Police* by Tomas Schuman, and started reading, ‘Fooling the masses is a trick as old as mankind itself. From Pharaohs to Ayatollahs, from Andropovs to Trudeaus to “councils on foreign relations” to the UNO—across the continents and through the ages—rulers, politicians and “leaders” (as we call them today) often indulge in the art of, to put it mildly, MISLEADING the people ... but always to their own advantage though! For more POWER, more CONTROL of society’s WEALTH. And often, ultimately, for CONQUEST of other nations. Today, the Soviet KGB has mastered this ancient art to stunning perfection! They call it “Active Measures”, meaning IDEOLOGICAL SUBVERSION.’

Docsaab stopped reading.

‘Go on ... don’t stop,’ the passage had caught my attention.

Docsaab smiled and passed me a few other books.

‘Sir, here are his other books and this is Novosti’s report. Please read them yourself. I will send you the links to his interviews. I am sure you will enjoy it.’

Before leaving, he asked me, ‘Sir, which year was your father talking about ... in the diary?’

‘I assume the early 70s.’

‘Okay. Then, it fits.’

He left, leaving me behind in suspense.

I was curious. I started digging.

After being assigned to a station in India, Bezmenov eventually grew to love the people and the culture of India, but, at the same time, he began to resent the KGB-sanctioned oppression of intellectuals who dissented from Moscow’s policies. He decided to defect to the West. After defecting to Canada, in the early 70s, disguised as a hippie, Yuri Alexandrovich Bezmenov, used the alias of Tomas David Schuman. All his books are under this alias.

I looked at some of his books—*Love Letter to America*, *World Thought Police* and *The Art of Subversion*.

I compared the notes on Novosti's and Schuman's interviews and books and found that both of them were saying the same thing. If both had to be believed, then India was indeed colonised by the USSR and the KGB. India was sold.

Yuri Bezmenov aka Tomas Schuman narrates many incidents of how Indian intellectuals were turned into agents of KGB, '[A] large group of editors and publishers of India's leftist and Communist papers ... had just finished a three-week tour of the Soviet Union. I showed them all the "typical" collective farms and kindergartens Novosti could arrange, and the comrades were full of impressions and "provocative questions." They were what we call "unscared idiots" and "truth-seekers," who wanted to show they took our propaganda seriously and expected us to do what we preach. They looked as if they believed they were invited to Moscow to exchange opinions. Why, they asked, does Novosti use such incomprehensible language in propaganda literature? Isn't it possible to explain the advantages of socialism to the Indian masses in plain language? ... The Indian comrades were told that it is not Agitprop which must learn the "plain language" of the developing masses, but the masses who must learn the future language of all mankind: the language of scientific Communism.'

Under the chapter, 'Indo-Soviet Friendship: My Cup of Tea', Yuri writes in detail, 'Whether it was a puppet exhibition, or an "evening of Indo-Soviet economic cooperation anniversary" ... [it] always proceeded in the same order. First Dr. Balabushevich would read from a typewritten page something no one in the audience could understand or bothered to listen to ... The ambassador of India would then take the floor and say something nice about the Russian winter, carefully avoiding mention of the Bhilai Steel Plant or any other industrial monster, for which India is supposed to be eternally thankful to the USSR ... The Indian guest pretended not to

notice that “media representatives” asked him only questions which already contained answers, and most of the answers were in favor of Soviet foreign policy. The next morning, *Pravda* and other Soviet central papers carried the rhapsody to Soviet peace-making efforts ... at that very moment, the Soviet Defense Ministry was pushing more and more Soviet-made military hardware on both India and Pakistan, trying to make both dependent on our supplies.’

He further explains the recruiting method in which a foreign journalist was given crudely written propaganda clichés and the foreigner, for a substantial payment, could either rewrite it or simply pass it on as his own report. He goes on to describe how Novosti made Indian papers dependent on them as the latter could not afford to keep their own correspondents in Moscow, but were not averse to publishing the “latest gossip from diplomatic circles”, which, in turn, was planted by the KGB.

Schuman describes the ideal candidates, as considered by KGB, to further their agenda, ‘...conceited snobbish “intellectuals,” who suffered from self-importance and firmly believed that the public in their own country was too backward to understand their genius. Novosti provides a very receptive audience for such megalomaniacs, especially when they write books about their “experiences” in the USSR in surrealistic (or rather Social-realistic) terms ... Novosti Press Agency and her KGB bosses will be successful in the manipulation of public opinion in the free world as long as there are AMORAL persons ready to cooperate with APN-KGB for their own immoral gains and purposes.’

India had many people who fit the bill.

According to Yuri, ‘It was a political conspiracy to break the Indian Nation. During the Cold War, it seemed, India was for sale.’

My father was right. India was indeed for sale.

So, if Yuri is right ... if Novosti's document is right... then who sold India?

They first shattered all Indian philosophy, her idealism, her social structure into pieces and made everyone quarrel over what should substitute it. That's when they introduced us to Marx-Lenin and revolution. Yuri says that anyone who came in their way was eliminated. Shastri was doing away, not just with the five-year plan, but most of the Soviet ideas. He was 'in their way'. Was he eliminated? By whom? Those who wanted to 'subvert' India or by those who were ready to sell India, just for a few rubles.

I stared at the diary. It was not just a diary. It detailed the continuity of India's tragic struggle. The handwriting smelled of a freedom fighter's sweat.

There must be millions of diaries, just like this one, written by freedom fighters. Some in ink. Some in memories. With only one dream, one desire—freedom. For the fragrance of their collective sweat is, indeed, freedom.

So, did someone really sell it?

Dynamics of Subversion and Collaborators

I made a summary of Novosti's documents and Schuman's books.

The main emphasis of the KGB was not in the area of intelligence at all. Only about 15 per cent of time, money and manpower was spent on spying as such. The other 85 per cent was a slow process, which is known as ideological subversion.

Ideological subversion was the legitimate tool of the CIA and the KGB. It was used to destroy the culture, religion, government system and economic system of any country. Then, the ideology and government system of the other country was imposed on it. Socialism, in case of the USSR and capitalism, in case of the CIA.

What ideological subversion basically means is to change the perception of reality by the process of brainwashing the people covertly through the years. It's a great brainwashing process, which goes very slowly. It is a simple method to make somebody a permanent fool or crazy through brainwashing. It takes about 15 to 20 years to destroy a country's culture and civilisation in such slow steps that the people would hardly realise that they are being slow-poisoned to degenerate. And, they get finished without even knowing.

The moment they lost their religion (cultural and moral education, and social structure), the old civilisations like Mohenjodaro, Babylonia and Egypt, etc. disintegrated, collapsed and died out. You cannot subvert an

enemy which does not want to be subverted. For example, Japan never accepted anything from any foreign country, some 50–60 years ago, to preserve their culture, ideology, traditions and values.

According to both Yuri and Novosti, there are four steps to transform the thinking and behaviour of an entire population, over generations:

1. Demoralisation
2. Destabilisation
3. Crisis
4. Normalisation

In this chapter, we concentrate on the first two points—Demoralisation and Destabilisation—since India never reached the next two steps. As mentioned earlier, it takes around 15–20 years to demoralise a nation. Why that many years? Because this is the minimum number of years required to educate one generation of students in the country of your enemy exposed to the ideology of their enemy. It destroys the morals of the people. Through this process; the public is discouraged.

After demoralisation, the next step is destabilisation by which the government system is destroyed. One generation of students in the country of your enemy are taught that their country's government system is rotten and your government system is far better. This way you can subdue the ideology of the enemy's youth. The educated class like professors become the tool to destabilise the nation.

Marxist-Leninist ideology was being pumped up into the soft heads of at least three generations of students without being challenged or counter-balanced by the basic values of their nation.

‘They fail to understand all this tricky process; and thus they become our victims leaving the ideology of their country and patriotism. Most of the activity of the department was to compile huge amount or volume of information on individuals who are instrumental in creating public opinion.

For this purpose the publishers, editors, journalists, actors, educationalists, professors of political science, members of parliament, representatives of business circles are used by us,' writes Schuman.

They were called 'useful idiots' by the KGB.

'We divide them into two parts; one part of them will promote and propagate the communist ideology. We place them on high positions; so that they can mislead the people through media and public communication,' says the Novosti's documents.

'The others, who are against us, we destroy them; by character assassination, by spreading rumours or by getting them killed or showing them dead in an accident,' Yuri elaborates the second part.

'We demoralise the youth by teaching and misguiding them. The educated class, like professors, become the tool to destabilize the nation. Their activities include the destruction of religion, government system and economic system. The people would hardly realize that they are being slow-poisoned to degenerate. The country does not perceive the agents of subversion as their enemy. Therefore, they make the country weaker and weaker day by day. It is like building a house on sand, which will collapse sooner or later. The demoralisation process in India is basically completed already. Even if you start right now to start educating the new generation of India, it will still take you 15 to 20 years to turn the tide of the ideological perception of reality. When they will become self-esteemed, patriotic and enthusiastic they will be able to understand the truth; and will be able to defend themselves, their families, their community and their country', concludes Yuri 'Schuman'.

The official document of Novosti describes a unique 'reward system' in great detail. Yuri/Schuman corroborates it in many books, lectures and video interviews. So do hundreds of other defectors.

The material rewards include regular payments in Soviet or foreign currency, free trips to the USSR and valuable gifts. Then, there were rewards of prestigious nature, such as invitations to an international forums or celebrations. There were also rewards of amoral nature, such as sex (often perverted), alcohol and drugs.

I shut the books. I didn't want to read further because I was angry. India's enemies aren't outside. They are within. Naxalism, jihad, terrorism, riots, militancy, everything is funded. And, this is made possible because some people of my country had sold us to the KGB. They sold it by becoming the collaborators of India's 'subversion'.

In 500 BC, Chinese philosopher and strategist Sun Tzu formulated the main principle of war—the highest art of war is not to fight on a battlefield, but to subvert the enemy by destroying all the moral values in your enemy's country.

These 'collaborators' worked with the enemy to destroy India. They were the enemies of India.

Shastri was surrounded by the enemies of India.

These Indian 'collaborators' of the KGB/Novosti sold their conscience in exchange for these miserable rewards. Then, they traded to the Soviet tyrants something priceless—the collective consciousness of their own nation, the freedom of thought and sanity of judgement, and, in the long run, *freedom*.

Miracles Happen

*Keep hope, miracles happen.
Have faith. Go on. And on. And on.*

‘Vivek, I can’t do anything until you give me the climax of the script,’ Pallavi said with authority, like a producer.

Sometimes, I needed to be reminded that she indeed was the producer.

‘Listen to these wonderful lines by papa, “*Keep hope, miracles happen. Have faith. Go on. And on. And on*”,’ I tried to divert her attention and escape the issue.

‘Nice lines. So, climax?’

‘But, I don’t know if such lines ever happen in reality or they are just fantasy of a poet? Considering me, the opposite happens.’

‘Vivek, don’t change the subject. When are you writing the climax?’

‘How can I just write the climax? We have to find it,’ I was getting irritated with this daily question.

‘Then, find it. Like Abhimanyu, we can’t keep going inside this *chakravyuh* without knowing the climax.’

‘If we don’t have a climax, we don’t have it. We can’t invent one. This is not some la la land film. This is not an opinion piece. This will be referred to for centuries. Just because we have to finish the production doesn’t mean we write fiction after 2 hours of an authentic film.’

‘So, what do we do? Mortgage the house?’

‘I think we are getting somewhere... I am reading some material and I am sure it is going to lead us somewhere... Soon.’

‘Vivek, I have never seen an optimist like you ... but the optimism which finishes your saving, mortgages the house and kills you with debts is called stupidity. Nobody is going to give you a medal for this. His family didn’t bother to do anything, his party didn’t do anything, his friends, his supporters ... they didn’t do anything; intellectuals, artists, filmmakers didn’t do anything! Everyone can talk but did anyone spend even one penny from their pocket? No! But, you did. They didn’t get life threats, you did... You have done enough ... it’s time to wrap it up and move on.’

There comes a time in the arc of filmmaking when everyone wants to get out of it. Especially, the producer. Pallavi was speaking to me as a producer with the subtext of a wife. For a couple who work together, it is the most complex situation—to be able to distinguish between the voices of a working partner and a life partner.

‘I understand. Give me a little more time. I think I am arriving somewhere,’ I tried to comfort Pallavi.

‘How much time do you need?’

‘Let me come back from Delhi ... say, next Monday.’

As I looked out at the orange and amber sky from my aircraft window, I saw many shapes of clouds around me.

Inside an aircraft, I have never felt like a part of a magical landscape. In fact, I have always felt like an outsider ... like film viewing. You are always outside of the story.

Suddenly, my mind was filled with questions...

‘But, what if the window opens and I can fly?

Then, I will be the landscape.

What if I can be a part of the story of the film?

What if I am one of the characters?

Who is this film for? The youth of India.

Will the youth see it from outside or can they be inside the story?

Will they hear my voice in surround sound or can it be their voice?

In that instant, I understood that the climax of the film should be the voice of Indian youth. I realised that it was not necessary to answer the question—Who killed Shastri? This film could just be about raising that question. It could be about the pathetic state of our system where the common man can never get answers to his questions. Nobody had ever made a film which only raised questions.

‘It could bomb at the box office...’ another question popped up. And in the next instant, so did the answer, ‘Do I make a film for the box office? Is this a film or a mission? If it is a mission, then the climax must be based on authentic material which answers who killed Shastri. Or rather, who killed Shastri and then sold India?’

As I came out of the T3 airport, the hot April wind hit me. This was the fourth summer since I had started working on this film. As I waited for the pick-up car, my phone rang. When I saw the name of the caller, I froze in the heat.

For last one year, I had been trying to get in touch with veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar, the only surviving witness of Shastri’s death. Interviewing him was key to our film. In my heart, I knew that despite over two dozen RTIs, analysis of uncountable archives, years of primary and secondary research, crowd-sourced research, personal interviews with family and other connected sources, and having access to many confidential reports, a film of Shastri’s mysterious death could never be authentic without Nayar’s interview. I had called him many times but each time he took my number

and denied the interview on some pretext or the other, mostly citing health reasons. I had given up on calling him, but the hope lingered.

‘Mr Agnihotri?’ asked Mr Nayar in his deep, husky voice.

‘Yes, Sir. How are you?’ I replied, not knowing what else to say.

‘I am fine. Well, you wanted my interview on Shastri... Can you see me this evening at 4 PM, at my house?’

I was shooting from 4–6 PM at Shastri Memorial. I had a few interviews lined up with people who were coming from different cities only to meet me.

‘Sir, can I see you or after 7 PM?’

‘No. I don’t meet anyone in the evening.’

‘Can I come at 1 or 2...?’

‘No. I sleep in the afternoon. This is the only time I have.’

‘Okay. I’ll see you then.’

‘Wait, what is this interview for?’

‘For a feature film.’

‘Like a documentary?’

‘No Sir, a full-length feature film.’

‘With actors?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Okay. Take down my address.’

I spent most of that morning rescheduling my Shastri Memorial interviews. I reached early with my small crew at Mr Nayar’s Vasant Vihar residence. We weren’t allowed in because Mr Nayar was sleeping. After waiting outside, under an old peepal tree, for over 20 minutes in the heat of Delhi, we were called in at sharp 4 PM.

Behind a table, an old man with myriad layers of wrinkles and sagging skin sat in an old chair, leaning on his side. Mr Nayar was 95 years old. I had seen my father at 95 years.

Old men, experienced men and evolved men have an aura around them. The odour of their sweat is different. That odour is history. That aura is history. History is not an isolated phenomenon. It's a collective consciousness of a group of people. A lot of people just go through history. Some absorb history and some become history. People who absorb history know how people became history. These people are a school, an *ashram*, a *gurukul*, a *Vidyapeeth* in themselves.

Mr Nayar had seen history, experienced history, analysed history, wrote about history, spoke about history. And historically, he has always maintained that there was no doubt that Shastri had a heart attack. It's another thing that the master of wiring that he is, he left a few ambiguities, for us to guess.

It had been half an hour. Mr Nayar had spoken about various things but had not answered my questions. I had asked him, in three different ways, but he had given me the same answers as available in all his writings. It was very difficult to break him. But, why did he call me? I was getting a bit restless.

'Sir, this interview is specifically for our film on Shastri's mysterious death. I don't think anyone else will ever make a film on this subject. This is your last chance to speak on his mysterious death. If nothing happened, then why has this mystery lasted for 50 years?' I tried to break in.

'What did you say you are making?' he inquired.

'A feature film.'

'For TV?'

'No. It will release in cinema halls.'

'Like a normal movie?'

'Yes.'

'With actors?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know about economic hitmen?' he asked after an extended pause.

‘No. But I can guess.’

‘Economic hitmen are state-sponsored professionals who cheat underdeveloped or developing countries like India, and extort trillions of dollars. They funnel money from the World Bank and other foreign “aid” organisations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy families who control the planet’s natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex and murder. This game has been played for ages but in the Cold War, it took on a terrifying dimension. You must read John Perkins book, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*,’ Nayar took a pause and cleaned his saliva with a thick white cotton napkin.

‘Both the USA and the USSR understood the idea of economic hitman extremely well. They didn’t have to worry about the threat of a war with each other. Organisations like the CIA and the KGB were used to recruit potential economic hitmen, send them to work for private consulting companies, engineering firms, construction companies so that if they are caught, there would be no connection with the government,’ Nayar continued, slowly, in a broken voice.

‘Do you understand why our economy always used to be in doldrums and indebted to the World Bank? Now go and find out who were these economic hitmen in India? And who was benefitting.’

There was silence. I didn’t know where he was leading me but one thing was clear—Yuri was talking about ideological subversion, Nayar was talking about economic subversion. This was not coming from an ordinary man. He had absorbed history; he was rich with words and expression. He said more between the lines.

‘A documentary or a film was also made on this ... I forgot the name. You can check out on the internet,’ Nayar said after thinking hard for some time.

‘Sir, what did you exactly see when you entered Shastri Ji’s room?’

‘First thing I noticed was that the thermos was overturned. That’s when Jagan Nath came and told me that Shastri Ji knocked at his room, asked for Dr Chugh and then with his help walked to his room. He was feeling very uneasy. Then, Dr Chug spoke to me... As soon as he reached he said, “*Babuji aapne mauka nahi diya* (Babuji, you didn’t give me a chance).” This means that Shastri had already died by the time Dr Chugh reached.’

‘Was Shastri under any stress?’

‘Not that I know of. I didn’t feel it even when I left him just a few hours before his death. But I heard that when Shastri refused to sign the agreement to return Haji Peer and Chitwal posts, Kosygin said he would use veto power if Shastri didn’t sign. This must have created some stress. Other reason could be that his family wasn’t very happy with the statements of Atal Ji and Krishna Menon against Shastri on the same matter of Haji Peer and Chitwal. Maybe ... all I can say is ... maybe ... that caused some stress.’

‘Were there any cut marks on his body.’

‘I didn’t see that myself but Lalita Ji told me about it as soon as I reached their residence from Palam airport.’

‘Did Indira Gandhi have any role in this?’

‘I can’t say. Many people said this but I don’t know. Indira was pro-Moscow. There were murmurs that they wanted to bring her as the PM. That’s why I told you about the economic hitmen. Who knows there are political hitmen also. There must be, if you believe Mitrokhin. But like I said, I don’t know.’

‘Mitrokhin?’ I couldn’t hide my surprise.

‘He was a KGB director—’

‘What did he say,’ I interrupted him.

‘You asked me about Indira Gandhi. I remember that Indira Gandhi wanted Shastri to be cremated in Allahabad. Lalita Shastri intervened and said he should be cremated next to Gandhi and Nehru’s *samadhi* and “*Jai*

Jawan, Jai Kisan” should be inscribed on his *samadhi*. Indira wasn’t ready to change her mind. That’s when Lalita sat on an *anshan* (protest). Indira then said we can give the place but no inscriptions. But soon public opinion started building and Indira conceded. I also remember that as PM, Indira had to shift to the official PM residence where Shastri lived. She asked me to accompany her. After seeing the house the only comment she made was “how middle class”.’

‘Why was the post-mortem not done in Tashkent?’

‘I can’t say. But I remember, in Tashkent, the ambassador, T.N. Kaul, did not let us touch his body, even to pay our respects. That was a bit unusual. Then, he asked me to give a statement saying that there was no foul play and Shastri had died of a heart attack. I thought maybe he wanted to eliminate any doubts. But that was also a bit unusual. Post-mortem *us samay mujhe bhi click nahi hua, par hona chahiye tha. Kuch galat toh tha*. (At that time, I also didn’t think of a post-mortem, but I should have. Something was definitely wrong).’ Nayar said nostalgically, looking out of the window.

‘Sir, do you think a post-mortem was not done because somebody was trying to hide something. Because, in this modern era of science, there is nothing that can kill a person which a post-mortem cannot find,’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. I can’t say anything. But, at that time, the talk of poisoning was there. Later, I read somewhere about a poison called aconite. You must read up on that. There is a documentary called *Forensic Files* where they describe how potassium chloride can induce a heart attack. And, since potassium chloride forms naturally in a dead person, the only way to be caught is if a post-mortem is done immediately...’

There was a brief pause.

‘Do you want any tea,’ Nayar asked suddenly, totally disconnected from what he was saying earlier.

All of us declined.

‘Was T.N. Kaul trying to hide anything?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. But one thing is for sure that later, when he was posted in Delhi, he met me a few times and asked me to give a statement clearing his name in the conspiracy of Shastri’s death. Later, he called me a few times to issue a statement. I think he was the foreign secretary at that time and I was the editor of *Statesman*. He called me three times and said, “*Statement tum kyu nahi dete taki baatien sab khatam ho jaayen... Maine kaha ab main akhbaar mein hun kyu statement dun... Lekin us din se mujhe shaq shuru hua ... kyuki usne ek dafaa nahi kitni dafaa mujhe phone kiya... Toh maine kaha ye bhi ek aspect ho sakta hai.* (Why don’t you give the statement so that all this conspiracy talk comes to an end... I said why should I give a statement since now I work in a newspaper... But, from that day onwards, I had a doubt ... because he had not called me only once, he had called me so many times... Then, I thought this could be another aspect of Shastri’s death).’

There is another pause.

‘Also, what I forgot to tell you is that T.N. Kaul was also very keen that Shastri signed the agreement,’ Nayar said after wiping saliva with his large white napkin.

We had got it. He had said it. And we knew that he would never say it again in so many words.

If Nayar said he has a doubt, for the first time in his glorious career, it means that there indeed is a doubt. There is suspicion. There is a mystery. A conspiracy ... which must be answered by the government. It’s our right to truth.

Had I got the climax of the film?

‘Will you show all this in your documentary?’ Nayar asked me, again.

‘Yes, Sir. But, it is a feature film, not a documentary.’

‘Oh, yes. You told me.’

A maid asked him to finish the meeting.

‘You didn’t tell me about Mitrokhin,’ I said.

‘Yeah. Mitrokhin. Write it down... *The Mitrokhin Archives*. M I T R O K H I N. Read it. Especially, the chapter on India. It may give you a better picture of how hitmen worked in India. Let me know when your documentary comes out.’

‘Sir, feature film.’

‘How will I see it?’ Nayar asked innocently, like a child.

‘I will ensure that I keep a screening for you,’ I told him. That’s what I had told my father when he had stopped going anywhere.

‘I don’t go out anywhere,’ he said, fully bent over the arm of his chair; saliva dripping out, slowly.

‘Then, I’ll come here and show you,’ I said and passed him the white cotton napkin.

‘Good. Call me. I know you have followed-up with me for a long time. Maybe I wasn’t ready. Whatever happens, happens with the will of God. Only God decides. *Only God knows*. I wish you all the best.’

Our meeting ended with a few selfies. In all those selfies, I am looking elsewhere. I am in the picture but not in the scene. Like the window of the aircraft. Or the movies. Because I was contemplating why did Nayar recommend *The Mitrokhin Archives* to me?

Does he want to lead me somewhere? Should I end the film on his statement and meet the deadlines as promised to Pallavi or should I give *The Mitrokhin Archives* a chance? What is the secret hidden in the ‘India’ chapter of *The Mitrokhin Archives*?

I opened Amazon on my iPhone and ordered a copy of *The Mitrokhin Archives*.

Docsaab jumped into my car and demanded my quality time.

‘Sir, did you notice Mr Nayar spoke about a poison called aconite. I found out that a few poisons are termed relatively undetectable because one needs unusual methods to find them in blood through procedures like gas chromatography. The “Queen” of poisons—aconite is one such poison. Aconite has a few more cool names like Wolfsbane, Monk’s Hood and Devil’s Helmet. The poison can interact with voltage-dependent sodium channels which are proteins present in the membranes of cardiac and neural cells. This interaction keeps the channels “open”, allowing sodium to flow freely inside the cell. The cardiac cells, as a result, cannot repolarise, eventually leading to a heart attack.’

This is when, Sanjay Nath Singh, the grandson of Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was also with me, put his hand on my shoulders.

‘Vivek Bhai, I want to share a secret with you. I possess the *khadi* cap of Shastri Ji which he was wearing when his body came home. I have kept it locked for so many years. My family doesn’t like me talking about it. But, I want to show it to you. I trust you,’ Sanjay said softly.

‘But, I’ll record it on camera,’ I said.

‘Yes. Now, I have the courage and the truth must come out,’ said Sanjay with conviction in his eyes.

Sanjay Nath Singh handed an old *khadi* cap to me. It was stained with red on all sides. The colour had faded and spread, wherever it could go, in various shades of red... like slow waves on a sea beach.

‘I am asking you again, can I use this footage in the film?’

Sanjay Nath Singh looked at his wife. For an extended pause, both of them just stared at each other and then his wife nodded. Sanjay took a deep breath and said, ‘Yes. If not now, then never.’

For the next one and a half hours, our car kept manoeuvring in Delhi’s peak-time, chaotic and noisy traffic. But for me, the chaos had just ended. The noise had vanished. A song started playing in the language of silence.

Keep hope, miracles happen.

Have faith. Go on. And on. And on.

(Mr Kuldip Nayar died 3 months after giving me the interview and 10 days after his 95th birthday. This was his last ever interview on Shastri's death. Was my interview his call of conscience? We will never know the answer. As Mr Nayar had said, '*Only God knows*'.)

The Mitrokhin Archives: India for Sale

I had no idea that the answer to all my questions was hidden in the shoe of a six-feet-two-inch tall spy. If Mitrokhin, the ex-KGB Director of archives, had not stolen secret KGB documents every day for 12 years, there would have been no Mitrokhin archives... And the climax of my film. It was kind of a guide to all the questions that had been raised so far.

Vasili Nikitich Mitrokhin began his career with the First Chief Directorate of the KGB (Foreign Espionage) in undercover operations. When Mitrokhin became critical of Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech, he was transferred from operations to the archives.

By the late 1960s, the KGB headquarters at the Lubyanka Building became increasingly overcrowded and the chairman of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, ordered the construction of a new building outside of Moscow in Yasenevo, which became the new headquarters of the First Chief Directorate and all Foreign Operations. Mitrokhin, who was by that time the head of the archives department, was tasked with cataloguing the documents and overseeing their orderly transfer to the new headquarters. The transfer of the massive archive eventually took over 12 years, from 1972 to 1984.

While cataloguing the documents, Mitrokhin secretly took his own copies and immensely detailed notes of the documents. After the dissolution of the USSR, he travelled to Latvia and walked into the US embassy in

Riga. The CIA officers there did not consider him to be credible. Then, he went to the British embassy. One month later, with the representatives of MI6, operations began to retrieve the 25,000 pages of files hidden in his house that covered operations dating as far back as the 1930s.

Mitrokhin then defected to the UK in 1992 and he took the archives with him. His defection was hailed as one of the great intelligence coups of the 20th century and his archival material was confirmed as genuine by the CIA and MI5. When *The Mitrokhin Archives* was published in 1999, the book created a tsunami in Western intelligence circles because of the authoritativeness and detailed information copied from thousands of KGB files. In the UK and Italy, Mitrokhin Inquiry commissions were set up.

According to Mitrokhin's notes, 'Soviet security organisations played key roles in establishing puppet communist governments in many countries. Their strategy included mass political repressions and establishing subordinate secret police services at the occupied territories. The notes also elaborate how the KGB assassinated world leaders. The book's thesis is that the Soviet Union decided that the Third World was the arena in which it could win the Cold War by proxy.'

The chapters titled 'The Special Relationship with India' details the scale of the KGB operations in India and the extent of the penetration. There have been tons of material including the 'Cold War International History Project' in Washington, which details the KGB penetration in India.

We sat around the book. Pallavi, Tripti, Docsaab and I. We sat like teenagers sit around voodoo ... scared to go in to the world of unknown. What if the unknown reveals evil secrets?

'You read,' Tripti told Pallavi.

'No, you read,' Pallavi told Tripti.

'Let Docsaab read it,' Tripti said.

'Sir, you read. You also look like Mitrokhin,' Docsaab said instantly.

'Let all of us read it, turn by turn,' I solved the puzzle.

We read pages after pages from *The Mitrokhin Archives II: The KGB and the World*. It isn't a spy novel, but it sure reads like one. Finally, we came to Chapters 17 and 18, 'The Special Relationship with India, Part 1: The Supremacy of the Indian National Congress'.

I made tons of notes. Some still haunt me.

1. India was a spymaster's Disneyland.
2. India was the 'model of KGB infiltration of a Third World government' with 'scores of sources throughout the Indian government, in intelligence, counter-intelligence, defence and foreign ministries, the police...'
3. The maximum operational effort by the KGB in a third world country during the Cold War was in India.
4. Largest number of KGB agents outside the Soviet Union were in India.
5. In 1978, the KGB was running over 30 agents in India, 10 of whom were Indian intelligence officers.
6. Suitcases of cash were sent to the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, for her party's war chest and vast sums of money was funnelled in to the CPI.
7. In 1977, KGB files identified 21 non-communist politicians (four union ministers) whose election campaigns were subsidised by the KGB.
8. In 1959, CPI general-secretary Ajoy Ghosh agreed on a plan to found an import-export business for trade with the Soviet bloc. In little more than a decade, its annual profits grew to over ₹3 million.
9. V. Krishna Menon, as defence minister, was persuaded to buy Soviet MiGs and not British Lightnings. His election campaigns in 1962 and 1967 were funded by the KGB.
0. By 1973, the KGB had 10 Indian newspapers on its payroll plus a press agency. During 1972 the KGB claimed to have planted 3,789 articles in Indian newspapers—probably more than in any other country in the non-communist world. According to its files, the number fell to 2,760 in 1973 but rose to 4,486 in 1974 and 5,510 in 1975. In some major NATO countries, despite active-measures campaigns, the KGB was able to plant

little more than 1 per cent of the articles which it placed in the Indian press.

1. Promode Dasgupta, the communist stalwart, was identified by the KGB as an Intelligence Bureau (IB) informant in the Indian communist movement.
2. Nine of the Congress (R) candidates at the elections were KGB agents. Files noted by Mitrokhin also identify by name 21 of the non-communist politicians (four of them ministers) whose election campaigns were subsidised by the KGB. The Soviet media called for 'unity of action of all the democratic forces and particularly the ruling Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India. Repeated pressure was put on the CPI leadership by both New Delhi main residency and Moscow to ensure its support for Mrs Gandhi.
3. Four Union ministers (in Indira Gandhi's cabinet) and over two dozen MPs were on the KGB payroll.
4. Indira Gandhi's principal fundraiser, L.N. Mishra, also accepted Soviet money. In fact, claims about Mrs Gandhi accepting money were also made by former US ambassador to India Daniel Moynihan. L.N. Mishra was later assassinated in a bomb blast in Samstipur. The mystery of his death is still unsolved.
5. An Indian diplomat, codenamed PROKHOR, in the embassy in Moscow was recruited via the classic honey trap, compromised by a female KGB agent with the delicious code name of NEVEROVA. PROKHOR provided the agency with the embassy codebook and other material and was paid ₹4,000 a month. Two other diplomats were also compromised. I remembered T.N. Kaul.
6. Defence Minister Krishna Menon, openly anti-US, was backed by the KGB on the assumption that he would succeed Nehru, a prospect that ended with the Chinese invasion in 1962.
7. KGB funded an 'extremely influential' minister codenamed ABAD. The KGB was also helped by India's decision, started in Menon's time, of getting almost all its arms requirements from Moscow, which began

arriving by the early '70s, as then Delhi's KGB resident head Shebarshin noted in the files, 'in an endless stream'.

8. KGB had recruited one of India's most influential journalists, codenamed NOK. His anti-US articles were considered a major coup in the Lubyanka. However, they had other ways of stoking anti-US sentiments. In 1969, according to *The Mitrokhin Archives*, Andropov informed the Politburo in Moscow that they could 'organise a demonstration of up to 20,000 Muslims in front of the US embassy in Delhi and that it would cost ₹5,000. I request consideration.' Leonid Brezhnev wrote, 'Agreed on Andropov's request.'
9. KGB was able to influence Mrs Gandhi's anti-US policy.
10. KGB was keen to alter Sanjay Gandhi's open distrust of socialism. They recruited a close friend of his code named PURI.

INDIA WAS FOR SALE. INDIA WAS FOR SALE.

INDIA WAS FOR SALE.

I scribbled fanatically.

Former KGB major-general, Oleg Kalugin, had also said, '*It seemed like the entire country was for sale.*'

Yuri's words echoed in my mind, '*It appeared as if India was for sale.*'

'Was Indira Gandhi really a puppet? Did she sell India? Is there an 'ecosystem' of elites, politicians, yesteryear zamindars, beneficiaries of Congress's corrupt government, media, intellectuals, artists, narrator-builders, influencers who have conspired against India? Who has sold India's sovereignty? Her freedom. The sweat of freedom fighters. Their diaries,' my mind buzzed with questions.

After we finished reading *The Mitrokhin Archives*, every one of us went to the different corners of our small studio. We didn't know what to say. We didn't know how to look at each other. We were flabbergasted. We were ashamed. We were broken. We were numb.

There was a vacuum inside me.

There was nothing. And in that nothingness, the soul spoke.

I picked up a few loose sheets of paper and started writing... in one flow. Without a pause. Without a thought. As if some divine force was dictating and I was just the medium. I didn't know how long I wrote but it felt like a moment.

Miracles happen in a moment. Divine happens in a moment.

I was not outside the landscape anymore. I was the landscape. I was inside the scene. It was my story. I had found my voice. Myself. My purpose.

I gave the sheets to Pallavi.

'Here is the climax of the film.'

The Climax

What I had written that day was a monologue. Was it my voice? Or protagonist Raagini Phule's voice? Or antagonist Shyam Sunder Tripathi's? Perhaps, they are my alter egos. The conflict thus far was between them. In that moment of vacuum, the nothingness, both became one.

This monologue became the climax of the film. In two different scenes. One part was spoken by Shyam Sunder Tripathi, the antagonist. The second part was spoken by the protagonist, Raagini Phule.

When I had written this monologue, I had cried.

When we had read it internally, all of us had cried.

When the actors had read it, they had cried.

When Shweta Basu Prasad performed it, she cried, the actors cried and the whole unit cried.

When the first cut was played, every technician cried.

When it released in theatres, the viewers cried.

The 25-minute-long climax, unusual in a film, made everyone cry.

These tears were not isolated. They were connected. They were a manifestation of a hidden universe of sorrow, loss, pain, frustration, anger, self-discovery and rebellion. These tears were connected at the level of frustration and anger with the system.

Here, I present the unedited version.

This is my voice, your voice, India's voice.

What the terrorists couldn't achieve in so many years, we did it easily. We divided India. India Somebodies and India Nobodies. India Somebodies mean people like us who hold the power and India Nobodies mean honest, hardworking citizens of India who trust us. How did we achieve it? By robbing them of their biggest power in a democracy—truth. We stole it from them—their right to truth. We are worse than terrorists.

Indira Joseph Roy (celeb social worker in the film) is opposing the committee because she wants to negotiate with the government so that her NGOs don't come in government's radar of inquiry. She has no empathy for society. All she cares about her is foreign funding and upscale social status, which she maintains by exploiting the poor. She is a social terrorist.

The judge is supporting the committee because he wants to remain in the good books of the government so that he can be appointed in some committee or the other and sustain his high-maintenance retirement plan. He has nothing to do with truth or justice. He is a judicial terrorist.

GVK (ex-RAW officer) is anti because the government didn't renew his term so he is taking his revenge. He has nothing to do with the security of the country. He can sell intelligence and the nation's security for a few benefits. He is worse than a terrorist.

Aisha Ali Shah (award-winning historian) doesn't want the inquiry to continue because if new facts emerge, contrary to what she has written in her book, what will happen to her bestseller. She is not concerned with the truth. She only cares about her royalty, her awards and her fame. She misleads future generations with her selective history. She is an intellectual terrorist.

Gangaram Jha (scientist and intellectual) wants the inquiry so that he can prove that Shastri was poisoned because the cook's name was Jan Mohammad. He is communal. He is a communal terrorist.

Omkar Kashyap (archives director, bureaucrat) has no voice. His job is to protect the truth but he can sell it to Ram or to Ravaan as long as his bank balance keeps growing. He is a state terrorist.

They can't think beyond their prejudices and agendas. People think democracy runs with voting. Wrong. Democracy runs with reasoning ... rationale ... conscience ... *vivek* ... which the honest Indian has. But unfortunately, he has no control. The real control is with these multifaceted terrorists.

The innocent masses trusted these terrorists, they gave them love and power with the hope that they will bring change, but the very same people sold India. Sold their freedom. Independent India is a story of betrayal. Around 1.2 billion people of India sweat hard, day and night, struggle with challenges, burn their blood so that India becomes stronger. India shines. So that the pulse of India keeps beating. But these people sold this beat to the KGB.

Regarding Shastri's death, there are many theories. I don't know out of all these theories, which one is the most popular but I do know which is the least popular—*the truth*.

There is one question which is at the centre of all the theories—the post-mortem.

We were told that the post-mortem is only done when there is strong reasonable doubt. Since there was no reasonable doubt, no post-mortem was conducted. This was a lie. It was a State-sponsored lie.

Immediately after Shastri's death, the Ninth Directorate of KGB arrested Ahmed Sattarov, his assistants and an Indian cook named Jan Mohammad. On what charge? On the suspicion of poisoning Shastri. Wasn't this suspicion enough for reasonable doubt? Is it possible that an Indian cook, not an ordinary cook but Indian ambassador's cook, was arrested on the suspicion of poisoning the Indian prime minister and nobody in the government knew about it? Is it even possible?

Kuldip Nayar had confirmed that Ambassador T.N. Kaul persisted with him to issue a statement clarifying Kaul's name. Isn't that reasonable doubt?

The government stated that the British doctors had said that the body turning blue is a natural phenomenon in the case of a heart attack. What the government didn't tell us is that they had also said that 'without a post-mortem and taxological studies, it is impossible to absolutely say that no poison was administered.'

Then, there is Shastri's cap, stained with blood, confirming that blood was seeping from his neck. Isn't that reasonable doubt?

I ask you to close your eyes for a moment and put your hand on your chest and visualise if some old member of your family has gone abroad and he dies under mysterious circumstances. When the body comes back, it has turned blue and blood is seeping from cut marks on the body. But, you are not allowed to even do a post-mortem. Fifty years go by ... how would you feel?

In 1998, after Mitrokhin's documents came in possession of Britain's intelligence agency MI6, it shared this information with RAW. Why didn't RAW reveal it to the nation?

Isn't it true that the KGB was notoriously famous for assassinations, especially with poison? Isn't it true that their trademark technique was that they used to take out the organs from the body, leaving no traces behind? Can that be the reason why there were cuts on Shastri's body?

If all this knowledge was with the government agencies, why it was not revealed to the Parliament? Why was it hidden from the citizens? Who was behind it?

Given the evidence, interviews and confessions, would it be wrong to say that after Shastri's death, India was colonised again? This time with systematic subversion. This was done by using our own constitution. By

using our politicians. Our intelligence agencies. By using our media, bureaucracy and intellectuals. By using our system. Who was behind this?

Indian constitution is a sacred document. It's not any party's manifesto. The original preamble of India's constitution defined India as a 'sovereign democratic republic'. When it was proposed in the Constituent Assembly that the preamble also include 'socialist and secular', Ambedkar rejected it saying 'It would be the murder of democracy'. He reasoned that 'socialism and secularism can be the policy of a party, not of a country. What if future generations want a new system?' Then, what was the reason that Ambedkar's definition was changed within 10 years after Shastri's mysterious death? Why these words were added, and that too during the Emergency when all socialist and secularist leaders, thinkers, activists were behind bars? Wasn't that 'murder of democracy'?

Who was going to benefit the most from this compromise? Who wanted to entangle India in the ideology of socialism? The clues of murder are not in what happens before the murder. They are hidden in what happens after. Within a few years of Shastri's death, India was engulfed with red-tapism, rationing, nationalisation, corruption? Would it have been possible if Shastri was alive?

Mitrokhin's revelations were suppressed in India. The book was not allowed to sell freely. The debate in the Parliament was adjourned. Media never probed it. Intellectuals never discussed it. Thus, the ordinary citizen could never know that India was for sale.

If Shastri was alive, would anyone have dared to put India for sale?

Is this why no post-mortem was done?

Who are these people who wrote on India's forehead that India is for sale?

When the youth protests, they are told they know nothing. Yes, they don't know that after Shastri's death, India had become a Disneyland for

spies. KGB had maximum spies in India. Our own intelligence officers were working on KGB's payroll.

Is selling India's security nationalism?

Hundreds of political leaders, ministers, political parties including Congress were funded by KGB.

Our journalists, media, professors, scientists, historians, authors ... almost every powerful person with influence ... all were directly or indirectly working for KGB. But, our history books never talk about them. Is writing the wrong history ... selective history ... not treason with democracy?

I am not an intellectual. I am not an activist. I am not a researcher or an analyst. I am not even an author. I am a simple storyteller. I am surprised that how come all our intellectuals, journalists, historians, politicians, bureaucrats got away with hiding such an apparent truth. Perhaps, they did notice. But due to their prejudices, agendas, their selfishness, they found it better not to probe it.

The day after Shastri's death, his secretary found a note in Shastri's handwriting. It was an Urdu couplet of Saqib Lakhnavi: *Zamana bade shauq se sun raha tha, hum hi so gaye dastaan kehte kehte* (The world was listening with great interest, we only fell asleep while narrating our story).

Maybe, Shastri wrote this seeing us. Everything is apparent but we are sleeping.

When the future generations will ask who killed Shastri, all fingers will point to us. Shastri was killed twice. First, in Tashkent. Then, he was killed by us when we deleted him from our minds. We killed Shastri by being lazy, by being ignorant, by being indifferent. By not finding out the truth. By not asserting our right to truth.

We killed Shastri.

(I have said whatever I had heard, read, learnt, felt and understood. I may be absolutely wrong. It's just an interpretation. But, if you think that in

a democracy, a citizen's first fundamental right is the right to truth then, now, you find out what is the truth. That will be real justice, real patriotism, real nationalism and real *shradhanjali* to India's second prime minister, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri.)

(This monologue became the much-acclaimed last two scenes of the film.)

Epilogue: *Satyamev Jayate*

It was 4 AM. We had just finished the completion of 100 days of *The Tashkent Files* in theatres. It's another thing that we were celebrating it on the 117th day. We were busy with our next project. *The Kashmir Files*. I was in Goa, reading the research of *The Kashmir Files*, when a lot of people started tweeting about the 100th landmark of *The Tashkent Files*. That day, we had finally found the time to be together. The four of us. Pallavi, Tripti, Docsaab and I.

It all seemed like a dream. That's the beauty of dreams. When accomplished, they look like dreams. Like after a strenuous trek you reach the peak and the view seems like a dream. When you look back, the journey also seems like a dream. You are in a state of 'creative consciousness' as you take every step to climb. It's very interesting to observe human behaviour when you reach the peak, in a group. Some people keep cursing the trek. Some immediately start taking selfies. They see nature through selfies. Then, there are those who just relax. It doesn't matter whether they were climbing the tough terrain or relaxing in front of the breath-taking view of the mountains. To them, these are not two different things. It's one process. One journey. One mission. One experience. I am in that state of mind.

We had had a big party when the film had completed 50 days in theatres, despite the onslaught of big films. Nobody had ever imagined that our small film would run for so long, so it seemed like a massive success. Impossible made possible. We had invited a few friends in a restaurant at Andheri. The

restaurant had a capacity of 150, so we had invited 100 people. At the end, 500 had come. Just because in the WhatsApp message I had written—*It's your film. It's your celebration. The Tashkent Files* had become a people's film. Whoever had seen it had become its brand ambassador. Everyone owned the film and, therefore, the party; so, I had invited other friends and fans of the film.

I remember taking pictures with the guests, drenched in sweat. It was one of the most successful parties of my life. But I don't know if I should have enjoyed.

'Why not? You have never tasted such success before. Enjoy the glory,' Pallavi had whispered while taking a selfie with Mithunda and Anupam Kher.

But, there was no glory. It was a journey of self-discovery.

When this film idea has begun, I had never imagined where would it go. Slowly, it became my obsession. And as it matured, it became my mission. We worked hard. We worked intelligently. We worked efficiently. We worked creatively. We gave it all we had. Days and nights. Mind and soul. Emotions and logic. Family, friends and social life. Savings and sleep. And four years of our lives.

It was a tough journey. Financially, socially, professionally, personally, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. It was this completeness of the struggle that makes it look like a dream.

We had research, story, outline but no script. When we had a script, we had no climax. Then, it all came together in one divine moment. Shweta performed it in one take. Like magic.

The casting also had many hiccups. A lot of actors, after agreeing, backed out. Some had genuine reasons but some certainly had ideological issues. There even came a time when I thought that I will never be able to cast for the film. I was hurt for some time but then it made my resolve stronger. In the end, we got the most talented cast. Six National Award

winners. Rest all acclaimed and highly respected actors with great body of work. I never made an effort. It felt as if it was a dream. Maybe, Saraswati had blessed us. A divine force was behind us, for sure.

The research was tough. We didn't know how to go about it but we learnt it. Also, it kept coming to us as if someone was secretly helping us. Then, I appealed to the public to help us with research and that opened a web of information.

We hardly had any money. We had to make the film on a shoestring budget. The scale was big, but the money was little. During the course of making this film, I learnt that few enthusiastic, curious, self-motivated, young people are far better than many egoistic, tired, genius professionals. We employed innovative and disruptive techniques of production, utilised every second of the shoot, negotiated hard, worked hard, worked intelligently.

We pushed our actors to memorise and rehearse 25-page long scenes at one go so that we could shoot it in two or three takes to save time. Actors obliged by doing it in one take. We ended up saving two days in the overall schedule. For a film of our size, two days meant a lot.

These were veterans. I was scared there might be ego hassles, which is very common in multi cast set-ups. Actors are like children; they want unlimited and exclusive attention from the director. A small hint of neglect can cause problems. Another factor is the competitive spirit on the sets. If one actor gets all the attention or claps on a day, few get upset and want to steal the show the next day. I had not handled a situation like this before. So, I left it to Saraswati. Everything went off so smoothly that it seems like a dream. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

Was it for the others?

The day Mithunda wrapped up, it was an emotional atmosphere on the sets. He had won everyone's hearts with his talent, hard work, sincerity and good humour. After we cut the cake and bade the protocol farewells, I

dropped him to his van. He hugged me and said he had never enjoyed shooting so much. I went back to the set.

After one hour, his assistant came and told me, 'Dada is calling you.' 'What? He didn't leave yet?' I asked surprisingly.

'No,' he said.

Inside the van, Dada was sitting in a corner. The light was dim.

He held my hand and said, 'I am sorry I called you from the shooting but I just couldn't leave. It's haunting me and this has happened to me for the first time in a career of 40 years, after doing countless films. This feeling is different. I don't know. But I don't want to leave.'

And his eyes became moist. But, he didn't control. He didn't pretend.

'You have given me a new challenge. A new test. I hope I passed your test.'

There was honesty in that moment. I have not experienced such honest moments since I left Bhopal. My numbness shattered in that one moment.

'What are you saying Mithunda, I have learnt so much from you.'

'I called you because I just wanted to thank you for giving me this opportunity and I am saying this from my heart.'

That night I felt gratitude like never before.

When Naseeruddin Shah's work got over, we again got a cake. Here the atmosphere was different. While on Mithunda's wrap-up, everyone was emotional like a wise and loving elder was leaving, at Naseer's wrap-up, it felt like the way one feels when a quiet professor leaves. We were a bit intimidated by him but we also owed him a lot for the learnings he gave us. If Mithunda was a life teacher, Naseer was a crafts teacher.

Naseer got emotional and said, 'In my entire career, I have always thought when would this shoot wrap up? I always wanted to run back home. This is the first time that I never want a shoot to get over. Why are you guys sending me back so soon? I want to shoot more.'

After the shooting was over, the investor got cold feet as it always happens in a small film's life. Everyone started telling him that who would watch a film on Shastri. Initially, he had thought that as soon as he would finish shooting, studios would run after him with sacks of money. This was impossible and he felt discouraged by this impossibility and stopped sending us money. The film got stuck. We had no money to put in. For almost nine months there was no work, which gave me ample time to research for my next film.

In the meantime, my book *Urban Naxals* got launched and turned out to be one of the fastest-selling bestsellers. I toured with the book in the USA, UK and all over India. At the World Hindu Congress at Chicago, when I announced that my next film is on Shastri's mysterious death, the audience stood up and kept clapping for a long time. I had to plead them to sit down. That was when I realised that this film would work as there is a lot of curiosity in people's minds.

Still, nobody was willing to take the film. The investor wasn't ready to pay release funds till the time there was a studio or an outright buyer. It was a catch-22 situation.

Almost everyone in the film industry told me, 'Nobody is interested in Shastri, the youth doesn't care about him. Who will see a film on someone who they don't know?'

'That's exactly why this film will work. Because they don't know, they would want to know' was my usual answer. I believed in it.

But nobody understood me. They never even tried to understand what the film was all about. They were not ready to see the film. I didn't know if they were disinterested in Shastri or in me?

This is when Pallavi and I met Subhash Chandra at his office in Worli. I showed him a 10-minute clip. He asked me what did I want. I said I wanted Zee Studios to either buy or release the film. He instantly called the CEO of Zee Studios and told him that they have to do something with the film. Zee

studios saw the film, liked it but never believed in it. The CEO was confused about how people will accept this new format of facts and fiction, mixed seamlessly. Also, why would anyone see such a verbose film? He was unsure but he had to do something because the chairman had asked him. Nobody was understanding that this is not just a film, it's an experience, it's a voice and if even a few people identify with this voice, more will connect. All this film needed was a chance.

The film was released in only 250 screens. An average film releases in 1,000–1,200 screens. Big films release in 4,000–5,000 screens. Even the smallest art house film releases in 400–500 screens. We released in only 250 screens. Like a formality. There was no advertising or awareness. I was in no commanding position. Everything was a formality. Except for the film, which had an energy of its own. Life of its own.

Two days before the release, a famous critic tweeted that he won't review *The Tashkent Files* and instead attached his malicious review of my previous film, *Buddha in a Traffic Jam*, where he had refused to give it any stars. Some other high-profile critics boycotted the film. Most gave it very bad reviews; some gave it a zero star and very few gave it five stars. Most of the critics reviewed me, my ideology, my tweets, my personal life but not the film. But, the reviews in the vernacular press were good.

A film's worth is tested on the first Monday after the Friday release. If the film's collections drop more than 50 per cent, it is considered to have bombed. In our case, the revenues stayed little more than the Friday collections. This was very encouraging. But the fear was that on Wednesday, a huge Karan Johar movie was releasing in 5,000 screens. This meant that theatres would take out our film to accommodate the mighty. And they did. When *Kalank* released, our screens came below 110. There was no way we could have survived the weekend. But we did. On Monday, our screens started increasing and by Tuesday they came up to 750. Even Zee couldn't believe it. But another roadblock was that *Avengers: Endgame*

was releasing the next Friday and it was going to run round the clock in over 5,000 screens. On Friday, our screens came down to 400, which itself was proof that the film was working.

Slowly, the positive word of mouth began. People started writing reviews in almost all the languages. People on their own started giving it five stars. These long reviews started circulating in WhatsApp groups. The IMDB rating became 8.7, the highest ever for a Bollywood film, ahead of even *3 Idiots*. Google ratings came to 4.5 out of 5. BookMyShow had a 95 per cent approval. It had never had so many audience reviews for a non-starrer, non-mainstream film.

We survived the *Endgame*. Our shows increased again. But the next Friday, another Karan Johar movie, *Student of the Year 2*, released. And again, we survived. The same pattern of reduction in screens and increase on Monday continued. Many multiplexes took out the film from smaller centres like Dehradun, Bhopal, etc. Many people started complaining that despite such great reviews, the film wasn't available in their city. I issued a video requesting people to go personally and ask the manager of local theatres. People actually started doing it. The theatre managers started complaining to Zee Studios. They had never seen such a phenomenon in their air-conditioned job. They have muscle. But they forgot that in people's business, people have the muscle. All they need to do is assert it. In the case of *The Tashkent Files*, they did. The theatres had to bring back the movie after a gap of one week and then it ran for another five–six housefuls weeks.

We completed 50 days. It was a moment of disbelief. We threw a party. It was successful and everyone went home assuming the film will do another four days and die down. But it had legs. It ran.

As mentioned earlier, I was in Goa when I learnt about its completion of 100 days. The biggest achievement for a film. It was an extraordinary feat for a film like ours which had no awareness, no stars, no marketing, no

good reviews. It not only ran for 100 days, but it made money for everyone and started a movement for the right to truth.

People said that the youth won't be interested in Shastri. Most of our audience consisted of youth and women.

The film was screened at some of the world's most prestigious venues, including universities and forums. There was a special screening at Indian International Film Festival, Goa (IFFI) which ended with an extended standing ovation.

Whoever saw the film, unanimously, said almost the same thing. 'This film opened our eyes... We learnt so much... Wish our schools taught us this... This must be made compulsory in every school, college...' and so on.

The film became a rage, embarrassing all those critics who had maliciously trashed it, those who had called it propaganda, who had tried to sabotage it, who had sent me legal notices to stop me, who had sent me death threats, those who had trolled me. One film exposed their sold conscience. It was a victory of conviction and honesty.

The film created tremendous awareness about Shastri amongst the youth. For the first time, social media was flooded with posts on Shastri. On the 150th anniversary of Gandhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted to pay his respects. There were thousands of retweets. Sometime later, he posted another tweet paying his tribute to Shastri. The Shastri tweet was retweeted at least 20 times more than the Gandhi tweet. The previous year it was the opposite. Same was the case on Facebook and Instagram. This proves nothing but gives hope.

It was around 5.30 AM, everyone had slept. I was still awake. Birds had started chirping. Dawn was going to break any moment. There was a little chill in the breeze. I took out my father's diary and opened a random page as the first rays of sun fell on earth.

The real victory is not the one which dies with you. The real victory is in changing the world in a manner which becomes a reference for further change. If you want a smooth road, walk in the known territory. If you want to discover, explore, open up new avenues, walk on the rough path. Cross all the hurdles. In the end, it may seem that you have found nothing but you have found that unique experience of travelling. That is your story. If you discover something, then don't get attached with that discovery. If your intention is only to discover truth, then never stop. Go for a new one. Truth is not static. It's a dynamic phenomenon, like life. History is not something that takes place 'elsewhere', it takes place here. We all contribute to the making of it. No one can govern in a vacuum. The exercise of power is determined by thousands of interactions between the world of the powerful and that of the powerless.

Never leave hope. Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. Hope which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

Only those who are blessed by Saraswati get to discover that truth. Surrender yourself in the feet of Saraswati and just go on. Walk alone. Walk naked. Believe in 'tyaag'. Do everything like a 'tapasya'. The only thing you must carry with yourself is gratitude. For Saraswati meets you in many ways, through situations, through people. Have gratitude for your supporters. Have gratitude for your critics. Have gratitude for all of them. For in the end, only truth will win.

I closed the diary. My father was right.

Saraswati meets us in many ways.

The sun had risen fully. It was a beautiful day with an unlimited clear sky.

I called up Docsaab. He didn't pick up. I called again. And again. He picked up and said hello, half-conscious.

'Docsaab?'

'Yes sir.'

'Saurabh, I am sorry I woke you up. I just wanted to say thank you.'

He didn't say anything.

'Go back to sleep,' I told him.

Next, I sent a message to Tripti—*Thank you. For everything.*

Then, I go to bed. Pallavi was fast asleep. I kissed her on her cheek and whispered in her ears, 'Thank you.' She pulled me close to her and hugged me. I held her and tried to sleep.

In that moment, I felt as if the entire universe was looking at me and saying '*Satyamev Jayate*'.

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ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

1. Parliament Debate Records, courtesy Anuj Dhar
2. Lalita Shastri's interview in Dharmayug
3. Henderson Brooks Report on the Sino-Indian War
4. CIA's declassified documents on the 1962 War
5. Various news features, video clippings, documentaries
6. Video recorded interviews in India and Tashkent conducted by our research team
7. Crowd-sourced research. (Even though we didn't depend on it for its lack of authenticity, it directed us in directions where we wouldn't have gone otherwise)