

DIMENSIONS OF LIFE UNDER FASCISM

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The twins were the first to be flattened.

I was sitting on the porch, typing up reports on the classes I'd taught over the last week, sipping nimbu pani, keeping half an eye on them. It was a sunny summer afternoon, just a bit brighter and warmer than I preferred, but the twins, young and filled with coltish energy, loved it all, every minute of that last joyous three-dimensional summer weekend. They'd been playing with their skipping ropes – Anna and I tried to make sure our children had a mix of old-school and digital pastimes – and were cooling off, giggling to each other, watching videos on their tablets. The bright jingles of kiddie music made way for the sporadic drone of one of those mandatory mantra breaks the government inserts into all media. The giggling stopped. I'd like to say there was some sense of foreboding in that moment, some cloud crossing the sun, some chill in my heart. Instead, I just felt a vague relief that the twins had quietened down and a surge of hope that I could finish my reports before dark.

A quarter of an hour later, with just a couple of reports left to finish, I looked up, shading my eyes with a hand. Everything seemed normal. The twins – Sara and Radha – were standing side by side, facing me, but gazing past me into the middle distance. As many twins do, they occasionally seemed to communicate on some non-verbal level and stand just so, communing in silence. The mantra from the tablet continued. I turned my attention back to my laptop. I had half-finished another report when the stasis began to bother me. I looked up again. The twins stood where they had been, absolutely still. I put my laptop aside, called out to them. Nothing. I got up, walked over. No response. I moved around to face them, trying to fathom what strange prank or fancy they'd happened on, when my world changed forever.

Because, as I walked around them, I saw that the twins had become completely flat – cardboard cut-outs of themselves, printed or painted in all

their living colour on one side, absolutely blank, a dull, dark gunmetal grey on the other side. I walked around them once, twice, taking in the impossible reality. My twins – Sara, the quieter one, preferred scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast; Radha, seconds younger than her sister, given to tantrums, liked lots of idlis and even more vadas for the first meal of the day – were gone. They were no longer there. Or anywhere.

The mantra droned on. I reached out with trembling hands to feel my daughters – no, the cut-outs that they were now. I felt my legs give way and found myself on the lawn in front of them. Nothing made sense. Panic took hold – a tightening of the chest as I cried and called out the girls' names, called out to Anna, even though she wasn't there, even prayed to the gods I hadn't thought seriously about in years. I tried calling Anna, but my hands were trembling too much. I dropped my phone and lay down on the ground, moaning.

Anna found me – us – like that when she got back from her shift at the hospital. It took her a while to understand what had happened. For a moment or two, she thought it was some elaborate set-up, that I'd somehow had these props made and hidden away our beautiful twins just to play a stupid prank on her. That was when I started to hyperventilate. When she finally believed me, for a while, we panicked together, Anna sobbing and shaking uncontrollably in my arms. Then she too quietened down – the shock setting in, perhaps. We sat side by side, staring at our girls in disbelief. At some point, the mantra on the tablet had wound down, and a series of cheerful jingles tinkled out and echoed around us, and the shadows grew long and merged with the evening.

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In the first days after the twins became flat, Anna and I were inconsolable. We took leave from our respective jobs and tried everything we could to reverse whatever condition had afflicted them. We brought them, or whatever had replaced them, into our home, propped them up in their bedroom in their favourite corners, prepared their favourite treats and piled them up in front of them, played the songs they loved, then songs they hated – corny old nu metal and EDM from our teen years. Nothing changed the fact that our lovely, whimsical, so-similar-yet-so-different girls were gone. When time ran out and we were needed in our offices, we each took a twin with us and propped them up at our workplaces. What if we missed the moment when

everything would just switch back to normal, when our girls would call out for us in their shrill, gleeful voices?

That's when we found out we weren't alone in our predicament.

It was happening to everyone, everywhere. In this twenty-sixth year of the MoSha Rajya, people were turning flat all over Bharat. Anyone could be flattened – it happened to the young and old, rich and poor, adults and children alike. The common factor in all these instances was that some kind of state-mandated spiritual content seemed to be present when it happened. But avoiding the chants was not an option – it caused people's social credit score to drop dangerously. 'Soldiers are dying on the border!' a pop-up wraith admonished me once, 'And you can't even listen to 10 minutes of tapas a day?'

People continued consuming their daily dose of prayers and hymns and chants, and the flattening fell upon whomever it chose, driven by a logic, an algorithm we were not privy to.



Eventually, there was no workplace or home or public space without at least one flat person in it. The principal at the school that I taught in was now literally the mere figurehead he'd been for a while. A bus driver was flattened at rush hour and the pile-up that followed was unprecedented, even by the standards of mid-twenty-first-century Bharatiya megalopolises. Policemen found themselves pursuing flattened criminals. Debtors halted in their fearful flight, their thuggish pursuers rendered inert and two-dimensional. Workforces and consumer groups fell to the attrition of the flattening.

Yet, life carried on. For Anna and me there was a strange sense of relief – our perfect girls, our beloved twins, were suspended, forever free – nothing could happen to them any more. It was only we, in the three-dimensional world, who were still vulnerable, still susceptible. Life nibbled at us, tore chunks out of us. A mixed-religion couple, we lived in constant dread that the government would finally repeal the Special Marriages Act and nullify our bond. Regulations multiplied. I had to make an appearance at a stipulated number of bhajan meetings and prayers. Anna had to demonstrate that she was steadily learning more about Hindu religion and culture.

At school, syllabi were rewritten at regular intervals. Sometimes, a new textbook was declared 'secular' – and thus forbidden – instants after my students had downloaded it onto their tablets. Mo and Sha paraded around, not just on our screens, but also as holograms on our main streets and sometimes on

special days of prayer and unity in our homes. Their girth grew as the territory of Bharat shrunk, its northern reaches lost to the big Chinese whale, and other portions of it to secession and bloody rebellion. At least the flattened ones retained an unshakable serenity, a changeless, timeless impunity that was almost enviable.

Caught between a dead-end life in three dimensions and the freedom of a life without depth, we, the people, started to look for ways out.



The bulldozer had become a common sight in our cities. It was a kind of remedy, a way to join loved ones and nemeses lost to the flattening. All you needed to do was call an 1800 number, make a money transfer on our state-provided apps, lay down on the road and wait. Some chose the cover of a blanket or a tarpaulin; some braved the ordeal uncovered. Some had their families flattened with them, some no longer did or chose not to bring them along for their own flattening. One thing was certain: no one who had undergone the process ever complained afterwards.

That was good enough for us.

On a sunny afternoon, not unlike the one when I'd been sitting on the porch finishing up my reports, we lay under a tarp, Anna and I, holding hands. And each of us holding the hand of one of the girls by our side. The bulldozer was on its way. We could feel its rumbling in the road, in our bones. This was the crowning moment of our story, our life together. I kissed Anna. Her tears were sugar on my lips.