

Sahitya Akademi Samavatsar Lectures: Sixteen

CRIMINALS AND KILLERS
A PERSONAL VIEW



Vijay Tendulkar

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Criminals and Killers
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The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

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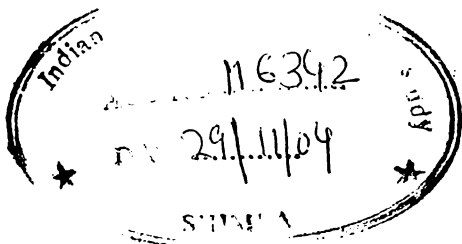
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I still remember the years when children like me had no notion of crime and a criminal. They just did not exist in our middle-class upbringing of the thirties. But there were a number of 'do's and 'don't's for children. A poem in our Marathi primer laid down norms of decent behaviour. Do not steal, do not lie, do not fight with anyone, never be in the company of rowdies and those who indulge in vices and so on. We were told to practise these virtues and stick to them at all costs. And it was so easy then. Crime did exist but did not show its ugly face in the open every day as it does now. It was not a part of our daily existence.

This situation changed in the early forties. *Quit India* movement was on. Breaking the law, indulging in sabotage of public property and going to jail were considered patriotic acts. The division of the country brought bloody riots with it and bloodier accounts of them. Thousands of ruthless killings, arson, abductions, rapes, gang rapes. Papers were full of them. The Mahatma was murdered. The event rocked the nation. Details of that evil conspiracy filled the columns of newspapers for months. The killers became household names. The Second World War brought to the fore a new elite class, the neo-rich, and cases of earning a fast buck by illegal or criminal methods, later known as 'white-collared crime', flashed on the front page of newspapers. Once in a while, a murder for gain was reported. 'Decent' middle class characters trying to get rich overnight by illegal or criminal methods, even killing. In the accompanying photograph the accused was not shown with a covered face and police holding him handcuffed as he is displayed today. He was seen in a family photograph looking respectable and often displaying a genial smile. Crime and defiance of the law had acquired respectability. It was no more the domain of the lowly and the down-and-outs.

But even before these years, in the mid-thirties, that is in my early teens, I distinctly remember an event I experienced which has remained with me till today. We were in Kolhapur which in those pre-Independence years was a tiny state in Maharashtra ruled by a monarchy. The now sprawling city of Kolhapur was a small town then with a cluster of villages around. News spread one morning that a man had woken up in the early morning and killed seven of his family members one after the other with an axe. The Police were called in by the shocked neighbours. Even the police, the rumour said, could not go near the man and arrest him till he voluntarily surrendered. Such was the fury of the killer. Excited crowds rushed to the spot to have a glimpse of the man but he was taken to the police station before the crowds collected. The bodies were removed to the morgue by a back-door. There was nothing to watch except a particular tenement in an old, single-storied chawl. People hung on, eyes glued to the 'killer' tenement. Even children joined the crowd. Everyone excitedly talked about the happening and added some fantasy of his own to what he had heard. They hung around till evening. Fresh crowds joined them. A posse of special police was kept to maintain order. Special afternoon editions of a local daily were taken out and sold like hot cakes while this long and pointless wait went on. The next morning papers were full of eulogized versions of the 'event,' with pictures of the chawl and the assembled crowds. (Investigative journalism not being there, no one thought of publishing gory pictures of the killed. Picture of the killer could not be printed because he had never been photographed in his life and a new picture could not be taken.) By noon, hastily printed booklets on the man – kind of biographies, true or false – were being sold on the streets. By evening a statue of the killer – made of mud – was put in the town square. A fictional one because the man was not known to anyone. The maker of the statue had never seen him.

People from even the surrounding villages arrived in bullock carts to take a look at the fictional killer. This went on for days. The vague human figure standing with axe in hand. Soon the place became a *yatra-sthal* with commercial stalls and roadside shows added. The killer had become a hero of the town. He had killed seven members of his household at one go with only an axe. Police took some time to overpower him. A ballad on the event was composed, printed and sold. In due course the killer was tried in a court and hanged. The hanging took place inside the local jail. Our childish imagination was set afire by hearing about it and our conversations and thoughts and nightmares were replete with imaginative details of the last drop for days. Years have passed but this experience has not been erased from my memory. A killer elevated to the status of a hero. And this was way back, before the Second World War, in the late thirties.

Such happenings, which involved extreme violence, were always a hot topic in my childhood and were discussed by elders with great relish. More and more spice and sensation were added to them as they were passed from one to another in conversation. Children were often around when adults talked about them with excited faces and they were enacted in great detail by us children when we played. And we, as did perhaps those adults of that time, had been groomed in the tradition of the poem in the text book: Do not steal, do not lie, do not fight, avoid bad company, stick to the good old way of life. Side by side with the uneventful, simple life in those years, crime, though it lacked the kind of over-projection it gets now, had already acquired a place and familiarity in the social psyche. Even a concealed fascination for it.

I had my first brush with a criminal when I was eighteen. I had left home and a so far protected life and migrated to Mumbai in search of work. I was a drop-out from the school. No qualifications. Not even a Secondary School Leaving Certificate. I came to Mulund, a suburb

of Mumbai on the Central Railway, searched for a particular chawl where my contact lived; and was accommodated in a vacant room in the single storeyed barrack-like brick chawl composed of two more tenements where two other families lived. My contact lived in one of them with his wife. He worked in a newspaper. Mulund, now a sprawling suburb, was then a developing cluster of houses and a few bungalows. It was slowly growing on both sides of the railway track and the house where I lived was on the east side. This side was a complicated doodle of wired vacant compounds, houses standing in a haphazard manner at varying angles with each other, and a population of a few hundreds at the most. There was no municipality, therefore no municipal services, no roads, no secondary school, no post office and no market. No police station but a police *chaukee* on the extreme other side of the suburb; one had to cross over to the west of the railway track even for a pack of cigarettes. There were wired poles fitted with electric bulbs amidst the jigsaw of barbed-wire compounds and those bulbs were seen lighted on some nights but lighted just enough to show where the poles stood. There being no roads, the poles had been an integral part of the doodle of compounds and houses and wells and trees and at night one had to get under and over so many wired obstructions to reach one's destination. On the way, on a rainy night, one met more snakes and scorpions than human beings and occasional dacoities were a regular feature of life in this part of the forlorn suburb.

It was one of those nights of the dacoits. A no-moon night. All my neighbors had gone to the city and they were not to return till the next day. I was back from my newspaper job of a junior sub-editor in the evening on a Saturday and found that I was to be the only one in the barrack-like chawl till the next morning. I had no place where I could move for the night so had to stay on. The day turned into night, light into darkness

and soon a fear gripped me. What if something happened? Other houses were away from mine. I knew no one. If I called for help no one would care to come. As the darkness fell the atmosphere around became more eerie. I decided to skip dinner, locked the door from the inside, closed all windows, put off the kerosene lamp and got into the bed with the hope that sleep will take me safely through that night and soon there will be morning. But I could not sleep. The darkness and the humid air in the air-tight room became suffocating. Mosquitoes added to my problems. I remained wide awake anticipating something to happen as each moment crawled toward the far away morning. And a stone hit the roof of the chawl, rolled over the tiled roof and dropped to the ground. Then after a couple of minutes it was a shower of stones. All fell on the roof over my head and hurtled down towards the ground. This was the usual warning for those staying in the vicinity to stay put in their homes till a dacoity took place in the vicinity. So the stones had come. The scare in my system doubled. Will the dacoits come to this chawl? Is it their target to-night? What is to happen next? And I was the only one present in the chawl. I had never seen dacoity except in films with faces covered and weapons ready to kill. I perspired. Prayed that they go to the next house. The stones stopped falling on our roof. Stifling silence for a while. I had two uncontrollable desires at the same time. To go to the loo (which was out in the compound) and to know what is happening outside. To go into the open would be madness. I got out of bed and moved to the tightly closed window. Peeped through a slit into the darkness outside with heavily beating heart. For a while nothing happened. Then steps were heard on the dirt track outside. Not two but many feet. Naked. Without chappals. Not one but many. My fear increased. God! They seemed to come to our chawl. And I was alone. What would I do? I held my breath. Waited. The steps approached our chawl. Any

moment they would enter our compound. Break all the doors open and find me. My heart raced. I perspired heavily in the already humid room. And a light appeared outside. Light of a hand-held *kandeel* swerving as it moved toward the walking feet. Several feet were seen. They halted just in front of our gate. Sprawling human shadows on the wild growth outside. Then voices. All male. Matter of fact, gruff. Casual. I could not hear the words. My heart had virtually stopped. Will they? Or will they not? Who was the one who came from our compound, lantern in hand? To my knowledge there was no one in the chawl. I tried to find out but could not see the person. He seemed to confer with the visitors in undertones. It went on for many gruelling moments. Minutes passed before the halted gang moved again – farther – toward some other house. They left. I heaved a big sigh. The figure with the lantern moved back to our compound. The gate clicked close. The light of the lantern faded. I felt excited. I knew who he was. He was the *malee* (attendant) who was staying in a hut at the far corner of the compound. He was definitely not there when I looked for him in the evening. I had seen him leaving when I reached the chawl. He must have been back when I was inside my tenement. I knew him and did not know him. Had seen him day in and day out on and off the property but had never spoken to him. A tall, lanky, man of bony build. Tanned dark skin. Shaved head. A hard, tight-lipped face. Well-etched features. He lived alone in the hut built for the resident *malee* or caretaker in the compound. There was a shade of mystery around his personality. It did not reveal much. I too had not made a serious effort to know about him. He was the one who had gone out and accosted the dacoits in front of our gate and had made them leave for some other bungalow or house. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the man, for the first time. Also found him to be a brave man who confronted the dacoits alone

and so casually. It had been a brief conversation between them but obviously an effective one. As soon as the dacoits left and I recovered from my panic, I came out to pee. I called for him.

"Malee..."

He harked back. "Who is it?"

"It's me. The new tenant."

"Oh! Are you there? Thought all have gone away for the night."

"Can you come for a while?"

"Coming."

He said and appeared before me in the pitch dark in front of my tenement, still holding the lantern with diminished light.

"What is it, master?" He asked.

I was not his master. The landlord paid him. But I liked the way he called me and said, "Will you be with me for a while? I cannot sleep any more. The sleep is gone. Rest of the night is still there. And the fear in my mind refuses to recede."

I had spoken about my fear still not knowing him but I felt reassured.

"Yes," He said and squatted in the open space in front of the tenement, putting the lantern by his side.

And we spoke through the night till it was early morning. He on the other side of the threshold of the open door, I inside. He left only after I told him that he can leave and I shall sleep. What did we talk about? He asked about me. Very casual queries, easy to answer. I asked about him. Without flinching even once he answered all my questions. The tone casual. Face immobile like the face of a statue in stone. No expressions. Even his physique hardly moved. The hands were static. Minimum gestures.

Eye-balls rolled and the whites of his eyes were vivid in the surrounding dark. And the teeth shone when he grinned. What did he talk about? His past. About his rich experience in boot-legging. (The prohibition was there.) Dacoities he had committed single-handed, without accomplices. And a few murders he had committed. No relenting. No pride. No claims. No drama. It was an impersonal, dry narrative of events in which he had played a role. Rather an important one for him, considering that he was a loner and never did anything in a gang or a group. And the wonder of wonders was, I was feeling very secure while he talked about all this. Not a shred of fear and my mind was peaceful. After leaving he left a feeling of warmth behind. Also a feeling of revulsion. Cold-blooded murders were narrated in the minutest detail, as if they were successful surgeries performed by a seasoned surgeon on his patients. What he did with the bodies had suggested the ingeniousness of a scientist. Details of dacoities sounded like details of an intricate, self-evolved technique. Tone casual. He left and I returned to my bed to snatch some sleep and I realized the horror of what I had heard. I shuddered. Could not imagine such beastly behaviour from a human being. Even tried to imagine that it was all fiction, that he lied, bragged in a pervert way to frighten me more. But I was not convinced. I could not think of him as a braggart. It was just not in his personality. He had been a man of very few words. This man was the first major criminal in my life.

We did not meet more because I left the place and moved to another suburb, another house. But the experience of feeling very secure and peaceful in the company of a seasoned killer has not left me till now.

I had just landed with a job in journalism at this time. I remained in this profession for many years. In my early years one of my routine jobs in a daily newspaper

was to edit the city crime news. In this column I came across several categories of crime like robberies, rapes of sorts, killings by various means and crimes involving intelligence than violence like frauds and blackmailing. A suicide or a failed attempt of suicide in between for a change. I wrote about them without wanting to know the mind behind the crime. Never asked myself why while describing them in a routine cursory fashion for the newspaper. Almost all crime news was collected by ringing up various police stations. The journalist was not supposed to go there and meet the arrested man or woman and inquire. That an innocent person can be arrested by the police was not known. All arrested persons were considered to have done the mentioned crime.

It happened in the fifties. I was in my late twenties and was married. We were staying in a distant suburb of Mumbai. It was a sunny morning. I walked to the market to buy some provisions required at home. On the way a man I knew only formally, passed by on a bicycle. He used to stay just behind our building. At times both of us saw each other in our compounds though we had never exchanged a word. We had never wished or even smiled at each other. This morning he gave me a very bright, genial smile. I returned the smile. With the smile on his face he said without my asking, "Had been to Pune. Just returned, I am engaged." He went his way riding the cycle, I mine. I returned from the market and after doing some work sat for lunch in the kitchen. My wife was sitting in front serving hot *chapatees* while we talked. I smelled something. It was an appetizing smell. It was coming from outside. It increased. "Someone is frying *purees*!" I said. My wife agreed. It was a holiday and in the distant suburbs of Mumbai holiday is a special day when all the members of a family can be together and relaxed. No rush, no chasing the local trains, no working in the city for eight hours and then travelling back home on an overcongested local train, only to reach

home in a half-dead state, gobble what is served as dinner and get into bed. That day, being a holiday, was a special day. The smell increased. Gradually I felt that it was a smell of something getting charred. "Someone has put something on the burner and has forgotten about it", I said. My wife agreed. Within minutes there was a commotion outside behind our house and both of us rushed to find out what it was about. A crowd had collected in front of the house opposite ours and smoke was coming out of the closed window. A few broke through the door and rushed in. There were shouts from those standing outside, Fire! Fetch some water! Quick! Buckets of water were rushed to the door in minutes. Obviously a fire, I said to my wife. Then found that a man had burned himself alive. I stood stunned. Then something struck my benumbed mind. That the man was the one who had passed by me riding a cycle when I was on my way to the market, hardly an hour ago. He was the tenant of that tenement. I remembered. He had said he was just back from Pune. Had his engagement. And the extra ordinarily bright smile on his lips! The beaming face! It had made my morning beautiful.

It took days for me to come out of the shock.

Someone I knew. Someone in the prime of life. Meets me on the way and talks to me for the first time, tells me that he is engaged. And the face is full of excitement, exuberance. The sun-shine is all over him as he speaks. It makes me feel bright and good. He comes home and sets fire to himself. The time in-between is less than one hour. He is dead. Has burnt himself to death. No one seems to have heard his shrieks. I go and watch the sight. The charred body is in a sitting posture, back to the wall. I am stunned. Something impossible to perceive.

How does it happen? What happens to the mind of the one who commits suicide in such a gruesome manner? And in such a short time! A mere one hour between

that sunny smile and the charred body in a squatting position.

A mind-boggling mental trip.

He would have been a criminal if he survived the attempt. Suicide is a crime in our law.

And it so happened that more or less a replica of the event I had experienced in my teens in Kolhapur happened when I worked as the assistant editor in a newspaper in Mumbai in the seventies. It happened to one of the peons in my newspaper office. He woke up in the morning and killed all the members of his family by hitting each member with a heavy household object used in the kitchen. A stone *paata* or grinder. His family included his young wife, his two small children – the younger one was three years old – and his parents. After hitting them he tried to kill himself but was stopped in his efforts by neighbours who had heard the shrieks of the attacked and rushed to the scene. The police were called in and he was taken into police custody where he was languishing when I was told about this happening. I was shocked by what I heard. I had thought that I knew him. Could not believe my ears. Felt perplexed by what I had heard. The man was not only known to me but was around me every day in the newspaper office till the day before the morning on which he committed the horrible act. I could not have suspected by the longest stretch of imagination that he was capable of what he had done. And he had done it. It was a fact and he was languishing in the police lock-up for what he had done. Revulsion followed shock. Then a curiosity. How? What could be the reason? Had he really done it or was it planted on him by someone? True, he was a man of few words. In recollection I also found that lately his words had become fewer and fewer; he had virtually become a silent character. He was like that the day before. A tense face. Disturbed eyes. Did not follow orders

properly. At moments he was oblivious to what I was saying though the eyes were on me, not quite focused. I suddenly felt the urge to go and meet him. I did.

He was brought to the room where they made me wait for him at the police station. A large bandage on his head and a swollen face. Eyes red after a traumatic day and sleepless night. Lips parched and bloody. The blood had dried. He stood before me. Recognized me. Tried to wish me with a shade of a tragic smile. How are you? I asked trying to start a conversation. He nodded meaninglessly. Lips moved but nothing came out of them. Two constables were standing behind him as if to stop him if he tried to hurt himself. Both looked sympathetic but dutybound. He looked stunned. Sunk into the dark depths inside. "What happened?" I asked him. There was a fresh effort to speak but no words came out of the trembling mouth. I asked the question again putting my hand on his back in a reassuring manner. He seemed to respond to this gesture. His frame trembled. It took some minutes and a Herculean effort for him to talk. He did describe what had happened, may be for the umpteenth time, but to someone he knew and had confidence in. For the last few months he had developed a suspicion about the character of his young wife. (He hastened to add that he had this doubt even before they had their second child—that he was not the child's father.) He had formed an impression that she was sleeping with a macho kind of man living on the same floor. He also found that she was cold in bed when with him. Not interested in having sex with him obviously because she was getting sexually satisfied by the other man. The husband asked her about it more than once and she shrugged it off with a kind of laugh. But he was certain. He waited for some concrete proof and then confronted the wife with the proof only to hear a spirited denial from her. How dare you say it? She asked feigning anger. He began thinking obsessively about it when on duty and

even at night when she lay asleep by his side. Sleep left him. Not a wink through the night. Head heavy with thoughts about her, about the children, about the future. What would happen to his child (the younger one was not from him according to his confirmed impression) and his old parents if he went mad by this situation. He began hearing voices of that man and the wife as they made love. He used to see them doing the act while he worked in the office. His head would nearly blow up when he saw his wife pretending innocence in his presence. Sleep was gone, peace of mind was gone. He lost appetite. Lost interest in life. Would hear the whispers of the other residents of the chawl pitying him and discussing his wife. He had to remain sane and it looked increasingly difficult as the wife continued to sleep with that man when the husband was on duty. That morning he could not work in the office; felt very sick; left the office early and reached home and while on the staircase, heard the whispers of the neighbours pitying him for his wife's clandestine affair. He heard voices referring to him as an impotent husband. He even saw his wife coming out of the room of that man, looking ruffled and satisfied and rushing back home. That was the decisive moment. He reached his house. Did not eat saying he was not well. Did not talk to his parents, did not play with the children. (He said he loved even the younger one who was not his. After all it had done no wrong.) Got into bed early. Could not sleep. Was wide awake trying hard to get some sleep but sleep would not come. The head was bloated with thoughts. His wife was a little away, asleep, the children by her side. He woke her up and asked for the last time. Did you or did you not? Be truthful. Tell me if you are involved with him. She brushed him off in half-sleep. The parents were in the inner part of the room sleeping. The decision came to him. He did not take it, it came to him. Let it be over once and for all. He was going to kill the wife. There was no other way of getting out of the unmanageable

mental turmoil. Only his wife. He reached this decision in the early hours. The moment had come. And he did it with the stone grinder which he found handy. He killed the wife. Momentarily he felt sad for her but the next moment thought that it had to be that way. Then he saw the children sleeping. The younger one was a baby. What would happen to them after their mother's death? Who would care for them? Who would nurse them and help them grow up? He felt sorry for them. They had become orphans. They would suffer. So he decided to kill them too. He killed them one after the other. He was not sure but his wife must have shrieked with the heavy blow of the stone grinder and woken up the parents. They rushed to the scene. He saw them. In a split moment he saw their fate written large on the wall. They would be left without any support in their old age after he was arrested and hanged, and would beg on the roads. So they had to die before he was arrested and he killed them too with the stone grinder. After doing this, it dawned on him what he had done. His heart was full of remorse. I have killed my young wife, my children, my parents. Why should I live? And he wanted to kill himself with the grinder but was stopped by neighbours who had rushed in on the gory scene.

And there he was, standing before me at the police station, arrested, shattered, still numb after the happening, full of pain for what he had done. What had happened could never be altered. He had killed his family for good. That a well-meaning, non-violent person can do this was a mind-boggling experience for me. I could not come out of it for days. Brooded over it.

In 1972/73 I worked on a project on violence for my Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship. I met criminals in and out of jails for two years. Also watched the ways of the law and order system we have for controlling crimes and nabbing the criminals. In the two years of the Fellowship I met several unfortunate souls who were put into lock-

ups and produced in the court and were convicted but did not have a criminal mind. Some had indulged in crime, even a serious crime like killing, out of some inner or outer compulsion. Once I met a young man in a small town jail. Generally if asked and forced to reply a criminal does not mention his crime but mentions its number in the Indian Penal Code. This young man replied, I stole. When I tried to grill him for more information he said, I was working on a *pedhee* of a money-lender. My master trusted me fully because of my honest record. Once it so happened that he was away and I had a sick mother at home. She was very sick. A surgery had been advised. Money was needed if I had to get it done. I did not have that money. Being my master's confidante I asked the master and he turned down my request. I had the keys to the *tijoree*. I was brooding over my problem as I pretended to work. A moment came when there was no one around. I was beyond myself and lifted some money from the *tijoree* and pretended the next day that a robbery had taken place at night. They found out the truth and here I am. No, my mother did not survive. I could not get the surgery done.

"Which means that you were forced to do it by your circumstances." I offered a defence. The young boy in his early twenties angrily corrected me, "No, I did it. Not my circumstances. I should not have done it."

Innocents in a police lock-up or a jail were a frequent sight during my Fellowship days. Of course even a seasoned criminal pleads innocence if he finds a sympathizer in or out of a jail. But a seasoned eye can, most often, though not always, differentiate between a real and a branded criminal. Their eyes speak. The gestures reveal everything. The hollowness of the claim comes through for one who looks for it. In a women's jail I found that most convicts either had been compelled to do what they did by some man or they did not do it but their man played bitchy and arranged to implicate

the woman to keep himself out of jail. At times he is a frequent visitor promising the woman that he is trying to get her out. It never happens. The man goes scot-free after indulging in the crime and the woman spends years, at times her prime, in the jail for something which she did not do but owned to please her man. When finally she comes out the man is not there or is beyond her reach.

In my Fellowship years a woman who claimed that she had supernatural powers was arrested for killing her sister-in-law. The husband of the dead woman was arrested as an accomplice in the killing. Both the sister and the brother were tried and the woman was sentenced to death by hanging while the brother was given life imprisonment. Later the death sentence of the woman was changed to life imprisonment. I met the old parents of the convicted duo in their lower middle class chawl in Pune. The husband of the murdered woman and his spinster sister were in the *Yeravda* jail. The husband in the men's jail and his sister in the women's jail. They talked to me separately. Putting the versions together and putting aside the irrelevant details of both the versions, I could gather that the man was under the influence of the elder sister from his early years. The sister who had several disabilities from early childhood could not get married and had been living with her parents and the brother. After the father retired from his job she became one of the bread-earners in the family (her brother was the other one) and when the brother married she chose the bride for him. After the marriage the girl came to stay in the family and with her methodical mind and good nature influenced her husband and his parents and became the mistress of the house. The spinster sister now saw her sister-in-law as a potential counter-magnet and as an adversary and began looking for opportunities to contaminate the mind of the brother against his wife. The weak-minded brother who had been under the influence of his sister earlier,

soon became suspicious of his wife and both the sister and the brother began beating and torturing the woman. The spinster sister would get possessed by a goddess on certain nights of the month. In the role of the holy goddess she ordered the brother to do as told. The parents were the helpers. Together they would work on the young woman at night till she fainted after the beatings and torture. They probably thought that as a result the woman would leave the house; but she would not. Neighbours did not intervene or the interventions did not work. This went on for months and one night they indulged in excesses which led to the death of the already ailing and sick young woman. Neighbours called the police and a case for murder was lodged. The court convicted the spinster sister to death and the brother to life imprisonment. When I met the brother in his cell in the men's jail he was not communicative. His rather unusual allegiance to his sister was obvious. To him, she could do no wrong. This fanatic allegiance was unshaken even after the conviction, when I met him. He refused to relent or give away any details of the act. The sister, when I met her separately, still believed in her supernatural powers. She regularly performed the *tantrik* rituals in her cell and seemed to wield some influence over the jail staff. She appeared to be under forty from the jail records but looked fifty-ish. She wore a denture and her hair had gray patches. The forehead was coloured with red *sindoor* and the reddish eyes displayed a hysterical trait and a touch of being in a trance which is the peculiarity of those who claim to have supernatural powers. She hardly looked at me than through me, or looked elsewhere and talked to me. She too seemed fanatically attached to her brother and parents. When grilled she showed no remorse for the dead sister-in-law and was not a bit repentant. She maintained that the sister-in-law was an evil soul and had to die on that night as fate had ordained it. She did not admit to the act of killing. She did not show

any disturbance of the mind over the death-sentence given her which was not commuted to life when I met her in the jail. She looked outwardly calm and composed though one could feel the ruthless violence in her frail frame and unusually large eyes. After meeting her and the rest of the family my impression was that the killing must have been the deed of a sick and otherwise powerless person who wielded power over a small, insignificant household. The power was unintentionally challenged by an outsider who later became a part of the household. The fear of a powerless existence turned the weak person into a vicious and violent one. The challenger would be made to leave. Therefore the *tantrik* rituals and the behaviour of a possessed person (possessed by a goddess) and the relentless beatings and torture. The ultimate moment of killing may not have been calculated or otherwise. The result was killing. And the death by hanging which was converted into a lifer later.

Why did someone kill is the question often asked. What was the gain, the motivation? What did the killer want? Likewise one wants to know the reason, the logic behind a suicide. I too used to look for it when I met a new killer during the initial days of my Fellowship or when someone around me committed suicide. Then as the days passed I did not insist on an answer to this question. More often than not, a killing or a suicide has its own mechanism which leads to the grim end. By our logic it achieves nothing, is indulged in with no realistic motivation of our kind. Without a convincing reason or logic, we say. Or attribute a reason or logic of our own. With only a goading, driving force behind the act which refuses to leave the mind of the killer or self-killer till he or she kills someone or oneself. With the subconscious mind than the conscious mind ticking like a time-bomb. One is 'seized' by the urge to kill some other person or oneself. It may be there for days or may not exist in the conscious mind even minutes before the act. It happens.

The realization, quite often, comes after the act. The gravity of the act. The irreversibility of it. If one is still living.

I have already given above an example of my peon in the newspaper office. What did he gain by the killings? What did the person who was happily engaged on the previous day and announced it to a not-so-known person without being asked, gain by his suicide soon after?

This reminds me of the *thugs* in the days of the East India Company. I had written a research-based film-script on this subject. The film was not made. Most of these men had the experience of killing in a war. The private armies of the various *rajas* and *maharajas* were disbanded with the expansion of the Company rule in the country and these professional warriors had to revert to their domestic modes of work like farming or traditional skills but they were itching for the kind of life they had led while in the army. The profession of killing. And thuggery, a *Kali* cult, practising killing as an act of religious faith, was born. Like wildfire it spread over a large chunk of the northern part of the country embracing both the Hindu and the Muslim faiths. A great opportunity for the disbanded warriors everywhere. It professed killing without the intention of any gain. Killing as a purely religious act, an act of faith, an order of Goddess *Kali*. They developed a technique of killing with a handkerchief. And a list of good and bad omens which suggested *Kali's* wish. Thousands of innocent people were killed as a religious act till the British took a serious note of it and put a stop to this cult of killing by hanging thugs by their necks in hundreds. This reminds me of those Americans who fought in Vietnam and Indo-China and later could not adjust to a normal civilian life developing perversities like indulgence in torture and even senseless killings. And the suicide cults committing collective suicides in America.

Killing in a fit of anger is another type of killing where the person has no intention of killing, even a few minutes before it happens. I have met a good example of this in an open jail in Andhra Pradesh during my Fellowship years. He was a landless labourer in a remote village in Andhra Pradesh. His father had taken a loan from a local moneylender for the son's marriage which he could not repay and the father had died. The moneylender would occasionally harass the son for repayment. By this time his mother, now a widow, decided to marry off her daughter who had come of age. The bridegroom demanded a sum for which she pressurized her son to borrow more money from the moneylender. The son tried to argue with her but she would not listen. More loan was taken at the usual exorbitant rate of interest and the pressures from the moneylender doubled. He would now come to the house of the dead, landless labourer and swear at the son in the filthiest language and even humiliate him physically in front of the son's wife and little children. He would not spare him even if they accidentally met elsewhere in the village. The son, a young man, could not take this after a time and since he was not in a position to retaliate or repay he left the village for good seeking work somewhere. He did get work in a tea-shop in another village which was far from his village and worked there for some time saving money from his meager earning to repay the moneylender. For once he experienced some peace of mind. And the moneylender came to know. He reached the place and found the young man doing his chores in the tea-shop. Seeing him the moneylender let out a barrage of filthy swearwords at him. For a while the young man tried not to pay attention to what was happening. A crowd of locals collected to watch the *tamasha*. Seeing that the young man is not reacting to verbal humiliations the moneylender became more menacing. The young man was cutting vegetables with a knife when this happened.

Initially he had tried to argue with the man, tried to tell him that he was saving from his meager earning to repay the loan, to please leave him alone for the time being but the moneylender got wild and he lunged at the young man. That was the decisive moment. Fearing that the man would really kill him the panicked young man in a desperate attempt to defend himself used the knife in his hand with which he was cutting vegetable. Before he knew what he was doing he stabbed the moneylender frontally once and then over and over again with all the strength he had till the hulk of the man collapsed and was dead in a pool of blood. Realizing what had happened and seeing the crowd around, the young man panicked. He threatened the crowd with dire consequences if any one tried to catch him and walked straight to the nearest police *chowkee*, knife in hand and blood splattered all over him, confessing that he had just killed a man. He was sentenced to a life term and was in the open jail undergoing his life term when I met him. After hearing the account of his crime I felt that he could not be branded a killer or even a criminal. What he did was done at the spur of the moment in self-defence though it had resulted in a killing. A murder as per the Indian Penal Code. The jail officials agreed with me.

I was to meet many like him afterwards in different jails I visited. They killed in a fit of panic or anger and were genuinely repentant for what they had done. They were the most well-behaved convicts in the jail and had no killer instinct. Or even a criminal instinct. And yet they had killed.

In my Fellowship years I met and interviewed several killers and other criminals. Even a serial killer. But one man whom I met in the drawing room of an astrologer friend of mine was the most dangerous. A thoroughly non-violent white-collared upper caste middle-aged person. Even the memory of that meeting which took place many years ago makes me nervous. I was called by my

astrologer friend to meet this person one evening. He would send for me when he had a client whom I would find interesting. I was staying within walking distance from his flat. I was not told who I was going to meet. The person I saw sitting in my friend's drawing room looked indistinct at first glance. He was that type who will not be noticed on the road. A modest build and a face that you feel you have just seen at the corner. He smiled at me and I returned the smile. In the next few minutes I knew that he had a habit of smiling. Before my friend introduced him the man introduced himself.

"I am Joshi. Your respected self?" He sounded very courteous.

I introduced myself.

"Profession?" Joshi asked.

"Writing of sorts. Journalism, plays..."

"Mine is fraud."

I thought I had not heard right.

"What did you say..." I asked.

"F-R-A-U-D." Joshi made it more obvious for me. He was casual and smiling. For a moment I felt completely lost. Did not know what to say about it. My face must have displayed my confused state. Joshi said, "I am sure your friend called you to meet me specifically for this reason. My profession is somewhat odd. Not practised by many."

I was still speechless.

"Because the skills involved are not taught in a school or a college and also because it is a profession with a high rate of risk. Risk of being caught and jailed. I am just out of jail on a parole and before I go back I have to get a deal done. I have come to consult this astrologer friend of yours in connection with this deal I want to finalize. No, not whether I should get into it but an

auspicious day on which I can clinch it."

The smile was constant on the face. By this time I had noticed that though the smile was on the face the eyes never smiled. They seemed to dig deep into the other person's eyes all the time. So much that they made me restless.

"What does a person who writes, earn per – let us say a book or a play?" Joshi put a question to me as if he was interviewing me. I did not like his superior stance. I said, "Depends. Depends on the stature of the writer and the demand for the book or the play. On how much the book sells or the play runs."

"Quote a figure." He pressed me. I quoted a figure.

"And how much time is required to write a book? A play? You can tell me approximately."

"A year. Two years at times. Depends on the kind of book one writes."

"Too little." Joshi quipped and sighed in pity. "In my profession I earn this amount in a day. At times in one hour."

And he had already told me what his profession was. Fraud. Duping innocent people. That he had practised only this profession for the last twenty years and had been to jail only three times. That too because the time was astrologically bad for him. But business was business and one cannot wait for good times all the time, he said. I felt increasingly annoyed by this man in spite of his courteous tone. He is a criminal and gives me the feel of a superior person! That his profession of fraud is superior to my creative writing. Restraining myself I said, "A respectable profession has other advantages like a respectable life and peace of mind. You don't harm anyone. You don't have to worry over matters like being caught and being sent to the jail." "You are right," Joshi supported my claim. "When you don't have the guts better

stay satisfied where you are and be satisfied with whatever comes your way as your earning. My kind of work requires guts. A conviction of mind if I may put it that way. You know I am a believer in certain things."

"Like?" My tone was uncontrollably sarcastic but he did not seem to mind. "What are your beliefs if I can ask?"

"I claim to be a disciple of Lord Krishna who has authored *Bhagwad Geeta*. I follow him," said Joshi.

It was becoming difficult for me to maintain my composure.

"What are his teachings according to you?"

"He according to me is the originator of my art. He told *Geeta* to Arjuna on the battleground of Kurukshetra. Right? What is *Geeta*? A brainwash. A psychological gimmick. A fine one of its kind. Arjuna did not wish to fight but it was the need of the time that he fought it out with the Kauravas. Krishna knew that what Arjuna felt was right. War is destructive. All wars are. But we fight them. Krishna had to make Arjuna get up and fight. Make him and his men kill and plunder and destroy though in Mahabharata it is described as dharma-yuddha, a war fought with certain rules. No war is dharma-yuddha. Being extraordinarily intelligent and knowing human psychology as well as the inevitability of human destruction Krishna cheated Arjuna out of his dilemma with great success. What Bhagwan Krishna did was an intellectual trick, a fine fraud, because that war and what happened in it and after it was destiny. Everything was to happen."

I would have murdered anyone for such an atrocious interpretation of *Geeta* but Joshi sounded so sure of himself when he said it that I momentarily saw *Bhagawad Geeta* as a glorious fraud and Krishna, a superior Joshi.

"No, I do not agree with you at all", I gathered my

senses and contradicted him. "On the other hand I now see how you twist facts to suit your purpose. Please don't compare yourself to Lord Krishna. A cheat is a cheat."

Joshi was not at all ruffled by my strong reaction.

"Of course." He conceded. "I am not Lord Krishna. I am a small being in front of him. I was only answering your question. You wanted to know about my beliefs. I believe in *Geeta* and the principle behind it. Every fraud needs to be planned with the utmost care. It must not look like one. Should be worded properly. The one for whom it is meant must feel that the one who dupes him is his benefactor. You must pay attention to psychology. Only then it works. Lord Krishna succeeded because he was God; Joshi fails some times and has to suffer for the failure because he is a human being and capable of making mistakes however hard he tries to be perfect. The best I can do is to keep correcting old mistakes which I do. Never the same mistake for the second time." I was feeling amused and increasingly annoyed at the same time. What kind of a man was Joshi? I decided not to encourage this man any more. I turned to my astrologer-friend who had called me to meet Joshi and who was watching us both, looking amused. I started a conversation with him side-tracking Joshi. Joshi did not intrude. He waited till I got up and followed me till we were in the open.

"I want to apologize if I have hurt your feelings." He sounded genuinely apologetic.

"Oh no, nothing of the kind." I pretended. "It was all in the game, Joshi."

"And I want to make a small request to you if you will not mind." Joshi said, looking very humble. His hands were folded to emphasize his humble posture.

"You know, my kind of life does not allow one to develop a social circle and keep expanding it and what

I need is fresh contacts. I cannot use the same contact again, you know why. Lately I have run out of contacts because of this year in the jail."

"So?" I was half- expecting something terrible to happen. It did. Joshi said next, "You are a writer. Your circle must be large and respectable. Why don't you introduce me to some of them? Only the moneyed ones." I was speechless.

"I mean only those who are well off. Not others. Not writers in any case. Real respectable moneyed stuff."

"Have you gone off your rocker, Mr.Joshi?" I was trembling with rage.

"No, please don't misunderstand my request." Joshi. "You being a writer I expect you to understand what I am saying. If not me, someone else is going to do my job these days. Money, after all, has to change hands. Then why not me? I won't involve you after the first introduction. No legal hassles for you, I give you my solemn word."

"Joshi..." I could not say anything further because of my growing sense of outrage. "It will be absolutely safe, I guarantee. And if you like, there will be money for you. We can make it a nice proposal."

I left Joshi where he was. Could not sleep that night. For days the memory of Joshi would not let me live my life. This happened in the early seventies.

By now I have met many more Joshis and they no more shock me by their fearless criminal way of life or irreverence toward everything decent and moral. But they disturb me.

In those two years of Fellowship in the early seventies, I witnessed two hangings. One of the two was in the Secunderabad Jail in Andhra Pradesh. I could be present only because I was a Nehru Fellow doing a research project on violence. Hanging is an extreme punishment

and given only in rare cases of inexcusable killing combined with violence of the worst kind. I do not think there can be anyone among us who does not feel curious about the ritual of hanging. The first hanging I witnessed in Secunderabad jail was a twin hanging. Two land-labourers – tribals and brothers – were hanged at one time, side by side. They had chased and killed the landlord of an adjacent land who had an old feud with their master. After killing the man they had severed his head and had refused to run away from the place of their crime. They were found sitting by the side of the dead and smoking *beedi* when the police arrived on the scene. All this added to the seriousness of their crime according to the judge who heard the case. Therefore the extreme conviction of death by hanging. Their appeals were rejected and petitions for reprieve summarily turned down. The hangings took place very early in the morning, in the dark and in a secluded place known in a jail as *phasee*-gate of hanging-within the jail. No one from the jail except the officers and guards was allowed. (I was a special guest of the Jail Superintendent.) A district magistrate was present to verify the identity of the convicts to be hanged and the authorized medical officer of the jail to pronounce that they were dead beyond a shred of doubt after the hanging. When the frail, famished looking duo was brought out of the death cells, handcuffed, they looked so ghastly and pathetic that the thought that they were to be hanged soon looked unreal. Then a series of rituals like checking their identity by tallying the body marks recorded in the jail register, making them aware why they were being hanged, by reading out only parts of the judgement (which was in English) and letting them have their last wish. Both wished that they be served a cup of hot tea. This last wish was dutifully fulfilled. Being hand-cuffed, they could not drink the hot tea by themselves; so the jail officials held the cup for them and fed them like a mother feeds her child. In the process tea was spilling from their parched lips like it spills when

a child is fed. The rituals having done, black hoods were put over their heads and both were walked to the gallows which stood side by side, all ready for the final act. A noose was put around their necks while their hands were tied behind. As this was being done, they were alternately chanting *Rama*. Then just a few seconds before the final drop one of the two fell silent while the other went on with the chant, his voice now getting hoarse and weak. And the order and the gesture of a shake of a handkerchief as in a hurdle race from the jail superintendent. A loud thud was heard and both disappeared from the spot where they were seen a second before, two effigies standing side by side. No one from the jail staff cared to go down and take a look at the sight below. Only the jail doctor went down and certified that both were dead beyond a shred of doubt, as ordered in the court judgement.

The two experiences of watching a person being sent to his death by hanging still give me a sick feeling. One defenceless person who cuts a lone, pathetic figure when he is taken out of the death cell, being handled by two guards for checking the body marks as if he is a cadaver and not a living person, being defaced by putting a black cape on him and hauled for killing, and being killed by a group of persons, in darkness, in isolation and with a guilt on their conscience which shows on their faces even after the act. While this happens, there is no one around who will change his mind or be deterred from killing. The ghastly visuals of the hanging will not be given to the newspapers or to the visual media to create a terror in the mind of possible killers. The act is performed in complete secrecy, in the darkness of night and announced by the tolling of a bell in the jail. Minus the use as deterrent, - which is doubtful, looking at these conditions in which the act is performed - it is no more and no less than a murder, collectively done.

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Criminals and Killers, presented as Samvatsar lecture at the Sahitya Akademi's Festival of Letters in 2002, is a profound and well-researched human document about crime, especially murder. An exciting narrative full of interesting anecdotes, the talk is informed by deep creative insight into the sociological and psychological aspect of crime. The speaker distinguishes between the real criminals and the innocent ones driven to crime and considers hanging almost a collective murder.

Vijay Tendulkar (b.1928) is one of the pioneers of modern Indian drama. Author of more than 50 publications, mostly plays, Sri Tendulkar has received Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award, Maharashtra State Award (9 times), Fellowship of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Saraswati Samman and Padmabhushan. His plays like *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Gidhade* and *Kanyadan* have been recognized masterpieces of modern Indian drama. He has treated the problem of violence, cruelty, exploitation and hypocrisy with rare sensitivity. He has also been a major screenplay writer having won several awards for the screenplays of films like *Nishant*, *Manthan*, *Samna*, *Akrosh* and *Ardhasatya*. His social awareness is reflected also in his 5 volumes of short stories, several one-act plays and his journalistic writings. He has also been a great translator of drama and fiction.

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