

The Case of the Missing Dhobi

a short story

by

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THE CASE OF THE MISSING DHOBI

Hyderabad is four cities in one. The original city - housed within the giant Golconda fort of the Qutb Shahi dynasty - was eventually abandoned due to a lack of access to water. This was resolved by moving what is now named Hyderabad to the southern shore of lake Hussain Sagar. This became home to the Mughal Nizams who ruled after Aurangzeb conquered the city in 1687. The British, of course, never satisfied with anything, just had to build their own city on the north shore but at least had the decency to name it after the then current Nizam, Secundra - hence Secundrabad. The forth and latest addition is High Tech City, which, starting out as a technology park 40 kilometres to the north west of Secundrabad has grown up to such a degree that it is now welded seamlessly onto the rest. Indeed, in the last 15 years this latest addition now covers a greater area than the other 3 put together and has been renamed Cyberbad.

Cyberbad is just one enormous building site and with political parties vying to control the local government and needing funds to do so, corruption - mainly from property developers - is on the same scale as the city itself.

What is it about the mix of property developers, politicians and sex that makes for tawdry news the world over? I was having quite a chuckle at the Images in the local edition of the Times of India when my coffee arrived hand delivered by the cashier of the Kamat restaurant. He and I had become well acquainted as I often took my meals here - the Pure Veg cuisine was excellent. I showed him the pictures of politicians, property developers and naked exotic dancers being bundled into police vans from a nightclub wonderfully named 'The Spice of Life'. He then filled me in on the 'grim' details, of how, on wanting to celebrate another successful deal the property developers had invited the politicians to a special performance of naked dancing, with girls from several nations, including, Poles, Rumanians, Russians, Lithuanians, Philippines and Italians. Unfortunately, the opposition parties had got wind of this exhibition of international nudity and had tipped off the police whose ire was up as it was, as they had not been invited. To make sure they would not be forgotten in future they had acted as any good citizen would and had tipped off the press and for good measure the local TV station. This resulted in days of ribald fun as Hydrabadies, indeed, Indians in general, like nothing better than to see their political masters humiliated. 'Ahh' I thought.

The cashier, turning serious, pointed out an article - sidelined by the quirks of human nature - to a single box at the bottom of the page. This was about a terrorist alert. Now it may be that Westerners have only recently become aware of the terrorist problems in India, and that, since the Mumbai massacre, but, India, has had more than its fair share of atrocities even before the recent events.

Because of Hyderabad's wealth derived from its technological genius and also because there is a large, and largely content Muslim community, this city has long felt that it would be on the terrorists' hit list as the main aim of such acts of barbarism are to destroy communal harmony so well represented in Hyderabad. The cashier was pointing this article out to me because he felt concerned for me - as a Westerner staying in what was a predominantly Muslim area - that I both stood out and could easily become a target. His concern was genuine, mine was not. I have long suspected that India will be the death of me and having given myself up to this eventuality, I have little fear in this regard. This did not stop me though from thanking him for his concern.

Having paid my bill I stepped outside into the warm night air. Nampally Station Road is usually a non-descript street the same as you will find in any large Indian city. Built or at least rebuilt during the 60s the buildings looked a little worse for wear but still hung onto the status of a middle class neighbourhood. But now the street was in turmoil. A new sewerage system had meant that the entire length of the street had acquired a trench - 2 metres wide and 3 metres deep. This represented a golden opportunity for the local population, as they would all appear to have been waiting for such an occurrence so that they could dispose of years of accumulated waste. Fridges, air-conditioners, broken furniture and refuse of every description were loaded in every night and reclaimed very morning by the best recycling team in the world - the Indian poor.

As my hotel, the Annapurna, was on the other side of the street I was forced to cross over the ditch. This was achieved by means of a make shift bridge made of doors. I then had to mount a small hill of earth - the spoil from the trench - before dodging the erratic 2-way traffic now reduced to using 1 lane. Mayhem would perhaps be the best word for an initial response but organized chaos would be better employed for a more recollected assessment of the then present situation - it could, with only a small stretch of the imagination, be a term that could also be applied to India in general.

Having avoided an early death - more by luck than skill - I arrived on the other side having braved an obstacle course worthy of a training ground for the legendry Black Cat commandoes.

'Ahh' I thought.

With the dust from the spoil still swirling around I entered the recessed forecourt of my hotel. The Annapurna had been one of the better hotels in Hyderabad in the 70s but had since been supplanted by its hi-tech successors in Cyberbad. As it was, this was now a hotel for lower ranking businessmen and the occasional Western budget tourist. The rooms were clean and came with air-conditioning, or not, and, on suite, or not. The interior circular design meant that all the rooms faced onto a central shaft around which a circular staircase wound. It thus had a rather unique and pleasant ambience and people often used to lean against the rail looking down, and up, to others enjoying the communal space the architecture afforded. Many an enjoyable conversation with agreeable company had I participated in, and often between levels - but not tonight. For I was tired from a long day trying to make contact with computer generated animators for a project - a screenplay - that I would like to have made into a movie.

Having showered I lay on the bed under a large fan, still damp, allowing the evaporation to cool the skin - an aid to sleep. It was not long in coming.

The knock was fast almost furious and it had me off the bed and to the door within seconds. There before me stood the Manager his face taut with worry, and begging my pardon, he then turned to introduce to 2 giants. They, however, ignored all forms of common courtesy, brushing aside the Manager, and myself, they entered with purpose and started dismantling the artefacts present. I turned to the manager who - half whispering - informed me by means of a pathetic attempt at an introduction that these were the agents of the Central Intelligence Bureau. The CIB was known to me by reputation and as such I now gazed at these 2 giants in awe. No one, and that includes politicians, the police and even the army, lives without fear of these modern day demi-gods. They have been chosen for their incorruptibility, their intelligence and their physical prowess. Most have Master's degrees, speak several languages and have completed their physical training with the afore mentioned Black Cat commandoes. No wonder the Manager was in a state of panic for these giants had been given the power of life and death over mere mortals. I on the

other hand possessed a mischievous streak that knew not the strictures of self-preservation.

"So!" I said this with as much gravitas as I could muster. "You have finally come about my missing dhobi."

A number of things then happened in reaction to this statement. First, the Manager almost choked as he stumbled over words trapped in his constricted throat. Second, the giants turned as one reaching behind them to the guns tucked in to their immaculately pressed trousers. While I, placed my hands firmly on my hips becoming aware as I did so that I was naked except for a pair of boxer shorts and pair of which one side had risen up into the nick of my backside. Trying to ignore this impediment to my dignity I blundered on. "Well if you ask me, it must be the dhobi wallah as he was the last person seen with it some 3 days ago. And neither he nor my dhobi has been seen since."

The two giants turned and looked at the Manager who finally found voice, albeit a high squeaky one. "No, no Mr. Coxon, they are not here about your dhobi. They are looking for terrorists."

"What! Under my bed?"

The two giants resumed their work with the efficiency of a cyclone, reducing the room to junk status in but a few hectic moments. Having finished with the inanimate objects they now turned their attention to me, one standing directly in front while the other walked around behind me - I could feel his eyes on my exposed buttock.

The one in front smiled over my head to the other whom now reappeared in the periphery of my vision - he was scrutinizing my passport. His comment in perfect English, though not addressed to me, stung never the less.

"So, this is all that is left of the Empire? Comedians and ... writers". He flicked his arm out and I plucked my passport from his fingers which were dangerously close to my throat.

Being blessed with a quick wit and a barbed tongue I was about to launch into a verbal assault when my eyes fell upon the pleading, horror filled face of the Manager. The blessing of speed in my mental make up works both ways and realizing that it was my initial facetious comments that prompted the situation in the first place, I now made good, by making amends.

Changing position so that I now faced the giants who had returned outside, and keeping the bright smile that had

adorned my face from the very beginning, I brought my hands together in a traditional Indian salutation bowing 60 degrees to the horizontal.

I was rewarded all around. The giants, with fixed smiles turned to open grins, returned my offering with exaggerated civility. And, as for the manager, he backed out of the room bowing and mouthing 'thank you, thank you' until all that was left was his bowed head before it too disappeared behind the closed door.

'Another successful outcome for a shared mindscape.' I thought, preceding it with the usual 'Ahh'.

I turned to the devastation. Kicking a space for the mattress I retrieved a pillow from what looked for all the world like a work by Tracy Emin, perhaps imaginatively named 'beds I have not shagged in', and laying down with it I was soon fast asleep once more.

A knock so small that it eventually awoke me by irritation. I revisited the door only to find my missing dhobi wobbling on the wobbling hands of the missing dhobi wallah. This jelly like mass was thrust into my chest and I was forced to grasp onto it. I followed the fast retreating dhobi wallah - a young boy of perhaps 16 - out onto the landing, then I crossed to the rail. Shouting after him as he descended the stairs "I haven't paid you yet."

"No pay. Free, free. No pay."

"But what about your tip?"

He was now making his decent 2 steps at a time, "No pay, no tip. No tip, no tip, no pay."

I should really say here, as it makes sense of what has already been related and also bears on what is yet to come, that the poor dhobi wallah, having been informed that I had mentioned his name to the dreaded CIB, had absconded, and was only returned to his duties after his family had dragged him from the sanctuary of the local Mosque.

Dressed in clean clothes I descended the staircase stopping at a position that I knew those behind the reception desk would be able to see my legs - thus building the required tension for my mischievous conclusion to this affair.

I walked with purpose up to where the nervous manager with two wide-eyed clerks behind awaited my arrival. I slammed both hands down on the counter making the occupants of the far side jump.

"What am I expected to do? Chase after the dhobi wallah so that I can pay him?" I said this with as much annoyance as I could muster, but this was difficult while fighting with mirth and now a raising pity for the poor manager. I could not hold out, and rounding the desk I placed an affectionate arm around the manager's shoulder while slipping a 100-rupee note into his top pocket.

"Give this to the dhobi wallah and tell him to keep the change." And then repeating the exercise. "And this is for your troubles. But that is not all."

I left his side then making my way from behind the desk I started across the lobby.

"I'm just off to the headquarters of the CIB to recommend that they give you a citation for your great forbearance in last night's proceedings."

"Noooooo!" came the wail from behind the desk and before it was ended he was by my side grasping onto my arm. I could not keep the ruse up and circling his shoulders once more, I said, "Only joking."

The relief found form in a sag. "Joking?"

"Joking." I reaffirmed with an affectionate smile.

He repeated the word but in a form far removed from its original, meaning, "Joking, joking."

"Go home to your wife, my friend, you need to rest."

I left him, mumbling, then walked outside where I was greeted by the guard of the hotel - an ex-army man - who no doubt had been told of the previous night's escapades for he shouldered his rifle and saluted me. After making a few adjustments to his shirt and looking him up and down I stood back and saluted him, then walked out into the madness of India.

'Ahh' I thought. But said out loud by an enforced involuntary emotion, "Only in India!"