



From the Author of the bestselling title *Kabeer in Korporates*.

Echoes of Gasping Souls



GURUCHARAN SINGH GANDHI

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Gurdip Singh Gandhi

I owe my voice and my words to you.

Gagan

Thank you for serving Dad when it mattered the most.

Rohit Jain

For taking care of my family when I could not be there.



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~ ABOUT THE AUTHOR ~

Gurucharan Singh Gandhi, in his own words, is a ‘full time corporate *wallah* and a part time writer’.

His debut book ‘Kabeer in Korporates’ published in 2016, in English and thereafter translated to Hindi and Marathi, was a national bestseller and won the *Best Debut Manuscript* in Non-Fiction’ at ‘Lit-O-Fest’.

Born and raised in Jhinkpani, a dusty hamlet in Jharkhand, his writings have the sensibility of small-town India coupled with its inescapable complexes.

PROLOGUE

‘Sunil Paswan is dead’ – he wrote on the WhatsApp group. ‘He died yesterday.’

‘What!’, ‘Oh shit’, ‘Are you sure?’ – were the responses from the other three members in the group within a few minutes. He was still staring at the screen in a daze, not knowing what to write back. He was grappling with grief at the news. There was silence on the screen, but a tempest raged in his mind. He also knew that each member in the group was going through the same.

Dying is an extremely personal thing – only the person concerned dies. Those who are emotionally wedded to the deceased feel that their world will no longer remain the same, but the truth of life is also that it goes on. This death, however, was different. Even in death Sunil Paswan had proved that he was superior to them. We might survive the biggest scares but will succumb to the meanest streak of a fellow human being’s soul. This news was the beginning of what was perhaps was the worst nightmare for all of them – the nightmare of the soul – as if all those days that they had survived together were not nightmarish enough!

Since yesterday he was seeing his home in an altogether different way. He had noticed things that he had not noticed in a long time. He had noticed that the photograph of his wedding reception was now almost two decades old and that he looked very awkward and conscious standing with his

newly wedded wife. He noticed that there was a pen stand that was on the side stand, the one that he had bought for his son when he was in class 8. He noticed that his wife had a few more wrinkles on her face than the last time he remembered. He also noticed that he did not remember when the curtains and upholstery were changed. Since the time he had returned from Mumbai he had started to notice these things and many more. Meeting death makes you alive to the tiniest details – it makes you realise how precious they are.

The news of Sunil Paswan's death shattered him. He felt the room closing in on him. There was a loud noise between his ears – he was not able to think or hear a thing. He felt a tight lump in his heart building up. Even breathing was an effort. The reason for his death only made him angry.

‘What did Sunil's death mean for him?’ – he did not even want to think about it. However, he knew he had to think about it. The others had to think about it too – Kulwant Kaur, with her lovely salt and pepper hair and caring personality had to think about it, Razia Sheikh with her large ‘Mallu’ eyes and mature outlook had to think about it, Manoj Joshi with his big intellect and loud mouth had to think of it, and he, Sitam Pradhan in his flat in Lutyens Delhi with a new newfound sensibility had to think about it.

Sunil Paswan could not think because he was dead. He would have wished that he had died of the COVID-19 like a million others but he was not lucky enough. He had escaped from the worst and the most diabolic human instinct 30 years ago in his village in Bihar, little knowing that it would

catch up with him in Mumbai.

Everyone had to think about it for a very simple reason – they had stayed together in the same hotel in suburban Mumbai during the lockdown for the first 21 days and then beyond, first out of compulsion and thereafter out of choice.

‘Damn the world!’ Sitam muttered in anger.

PART 1

1. Day Zero

It was a normal day, as normal as it could be given the storms that were brewing across the world. The trouble with bad times is that first they happen slowly around us, leading us to believe that it is happening only to others, and that somehow it will leave us untouched – then all of a sudden it explodes on us!

Hotel Landmark and its manager Sunil Paswan were both veterans in the business of dealing with guests. The hotel had seen better times but now it was running on the twin engines of familiarity and comfort. Old timers were too used to the hotel and it was conveniently near the airport. These two factors often took away the attention of the patrons from a rather average upkeep and a complete lack of fancy facilities that hotels these days are known for.

Hotel Landmark had middle-class written all over it. Sunil Paswan was just the perfect manager for such a hotel – a middle-class manager for a middle-class hotel.

He had joined the hotel as the doorman around the time it had opened its doors to guests thirty years ago and had grown to become its manager. His journey was made sweetest the day he was called a ‘manager’ because that was something beyond his wildest imagination, a far cry from the tumultuous circumstances under which he had to

flee his village in the district Ara in Bihar, right after his schooling, when he was only 16-years-old.

Only in a hotel like Landmark could someone like a Sunil Paswan become a manager. He was forty-seven now but looked older. Life has a funny way of showing up on your face.

It was not a busy day. The number of guests over the last few days had dwindled significantly with all the furore about the Coronavirus flowing thick and fast. In fact, only four rooms were occupied as of now. Mr Paswan was worried.

Mumbai was cautious but still going about its business as best as it could, given its propensity to be in a perpetual state of business-as-usual. It had not stopped for riots, floods, bombs and rains and it was unlikely that it would come to a standstill for something as tiny as a virus.

Sunil had been reading about the Coronavirus spread with amusement. He understood serious problems like bombs and riots, but he just could not fathom how people could be afraid of a disease which according to him was nothing more than mere cough and cold.

‘These are fears of the rich. It’s a disease of the rich,’ he said aloud from behind his newspaper. Cholera is serious, malaria is serious, TB is serious. This is just some cough and fever,’ he muttered under his breath, as if he were still in his village in the backyard of Bihar.

There was a part of him that had still not been able to adjust to the joys and fears of this city. The truth is that a village sees sickness and its seriousness differently; the violence of nature is dealt with poise and equanimity – there is no reason to panic if it’s the fury of nature. Its karma,

some kind of tax paid to the Gods. Its fury is secular – everyone, irrespective of your name or caste or status was equally susceptible. There was spiritual relief in that.

Panic happens when it is man-made. Caste violence and the killings of the Maoists that he had grown with, were things to be really worried about. One worried about them because one would be a victim of its fury because your name was Sunil Paswan. Names in villages are more than mere names. They have castes written all over them. He realised he had allowed his mind to wander.

As he saw a wave of humanity moving about outside, his mind moved to the Prime Minister's address that was due to begin in some time. He smiled at all the memes that he had read since morning – the memories of the PM addressing the nation at night had become the source of hundreds of jokes and memes. 'Mitron' – he uttered the word in his mind and started to smile. He increased the volume of the TV above as he sat on the counter of Hotel Landmark in the city of Mumbai.

"Mere pyare deshwasio...." The PM began... '....corona mahamari se bachne ka ekmatr vikalp hai...social distancing...desh aaj ek mahatvapurn nirnay karne ja raha hai...aaj raat 12 baje se sampurn desh me sampurn lockdown hone jaa raha hai....hindustan ko bachane ke liye gharo se bahar nikalne se poori pabandi lagai ja rahi hai...lockdown kia ja raha hai...for 21 days...till.. "

"My countrymen, there is only one solution to dealing with the Coronavirus spread, that is social distancing...the country is taking the decision of going going under complete lockdown from today midnight...this is the only way to save the country...this will last for 21 days."

It took some time for Sunil Paswan to register what he was hearing. He was too numb to understand what this implied.



Kulwant Kaur was enjoying the sights of the Gateway through her touristy eyes. It was her first trip to Mumbai – actually, it was her first trip anywhere alone. Dressed in classical Patiala salwar, with liberal salt and pepper in her long hair, more salt than pepper, she was the quintessential Punjabi woman at sixty-two-years – graceful and difficult to ignore.

She was enjoying the wide sight of the sea in front of her, and the helpless bobbling of the boats on the waves reminded her of herself – for all her life she she had been a boat at the mercy of the waves. The boats were out in the sea and free to be what they wanted to be, yet they looked so helpless as they floated there, bobbling up and down, giving the impression of being free but not really being so. Only she knew how it felt to have merely a notion of freedom.

This whole trip for her was about the boat being finally free.

She looked around and enjoyed being free amidst so much of activity. They told her that the madness was actually far less today. She cursed the Corona scare in her mind. She could see the majestic Taj hotel on the other side, something she had only seen on TV. She spent the next few hours on the sea face. It was beyond 8 in the evening and the lights had come out.

Her phone rang. It was her husband. ‘There has been a lockdown announced by the PM today – you cannot move

out for the next 21 days.’ She could hear the concern and anger in his voice. Her trip had become a cause for bitterness between them. The whole idea of going on a solo trip at this age was something he did not quite understand. It was not a question of whether he approved of it or not – because approval was neither sought nor discussed; it was about whether it was a sensible thing to do. One fine day, Kulwant had announced her plans to go for a solo trip, covering the gurudwaras in Bidar, Karnataka and Nanded in Maharashtra and the birthplace of Namdeo in Pandharpur – the religiosity was a smart wrapper for her first solo trip. In India one can argue with law, logic and even emotion – but no one messes with the Gods.

She had been pressured to return a few days earlier, but she had not relented saying she would return by train to Delhi and then to Amritsar, her hometown in a few days. ‘Now this lockdown!’ she cursed. She hurried to her hotel – Hotel Landmark.



Sitam Pradhan in his mid-forties was like any other bureaucrat who is stuck in the Indian bureaucracy – extremely bright but bored, well-read but frustrated, intelligent but useless.

He was right now sitting in one of those government offices which are notorious for being cramped, dirty and grossly incompetent. Every inch of that stereotype was true as he saw in front of him the monument of neglect and mediocrity. He was terribly tired and frustrated. There could not have been a deadlier combination than that for an angry Indian bureaucrat.

He worked in one of those departments in the government whose job is to churn out reports after reports, that everyone in the business of churning out reports knew, were useless. He worked in the department of Food and Public Distribution, a department whose job is to formulate policies on export and import of food and edible oils in India.

If one would have seen college photographs of Sitam it would have been difficult to imagine that someone with his looks, personality and erudition would work in a department such as this.

He used to, and in a lot of ways still looked stunning in his 5 feet 5 inches short Nepalese frame. Small eyes, bushy crop of hair, flat stomach and great skin – all gift of the genes that he in his own words ‘had not lifted a grain to influence’, for whom a bottle of Old Monk was a balm for the heart then and a source of meditation now. Although in his mind he should have become a swashbuckling police officer who broke bones and flew from high rises, and protected everyone from evil criminals, through a strange quirk of fate, he was now protecting large stocks of food grains from rodents and insects.

Sitam was in Mumbai on an errand for his senior officer and had absolutely no interest in being there. He was to stay in Hotel Landmark which only exacerbated his anger – of course he deserved better but then the miracles of Indian *babudom* are inexplicable not only to the common man but also to their own. His trip was for a full month and he had just arrived a week ago. Despite the deteriorating situation and increasing alarm, an earnest plea to his boss fell on deaf ears. He was asked to rise to the occasion and stay put

in Mumbai – something he knew that his boss was forcing upon him for the utter lack of devotion that Sitam had so far demonstrated towards him. In general, such behaviour is bad but in the context of Indian bureaucracy, it's suicidal. It was only when he was buying his daily quota of Old Monk in the evening that he got to know about the 21-day lockdown. He would thank his survival skills much later but at that time it appeared only as a whim, he ordered a full crate of Old Monk from the Wine shop. He trudged into Hotel Landmark like a General victorious after war, struggling to carry the 12 bottles of Old Monk – a decision not only he, but also others will secretly thank him for over the next 21 days and more.



Manoj Joshi and his Mumbai team were on a frantic VC from a makeshift office in a shared building when they heard the news of the nationwide lockdown. It would still be an hour after the country came to know that he would come to know, because he was in an animated discussion with some financiers on the other end of the video conferencing. His team knew it because their mobiles had started to buzz from concerned family members, however no one had the courage to take calls or visibly check their messages. All of this was done surreptitiously, for they knew if caught prying on their handsets by Manoj, would mean a consequence more draconian than the lockdown itself – or at least that was the reputation he carried.

In any case he was fighting a battle for survival of their company. They were acutely aware that if this funding did not come through, then there was going to be a long winter. Last few quarters had not been good for sales and some

decisions by Manoj had not turned out to be the winners they had been for many years. Many bankers had refused to extend the olive branch, and this was the last chance. Manoj was at his persuasive best and his elite educational background showed. He was lean, wore a crisp shirt and suit, and the rimless glasses only amplified his elegant look. He was a winner all the way. However, the circumstances they were in were not to his liking.

The questions from the other side were as disconcerting as were expected, although Manoj was impressive – deftly answering where it was required, carefully dodging where it was necessary, sharing facts and figures where it would buttress his argument and speaking in generalities where he had nothing worthwhile to show as evidence. MBAs have this ability in their toolkit. It's a survival guide for them – to be intelligent when needed and bullshit inanities when required; the latter more often than they cared to admit.

What his team did not know however, was that it was not only do or die for the company but also a do or die for Manoj. As a rising star quite used to winning, he knew that only through this deal could he wipe off the last few crappers and re-establish his claim for the business head position – something that was due to open soon. A failure today meant that he could kiss goodbye his dream of becoming a business head before he turned thirty-five. This was personal to him.

It was during such a precariously perched point someone from the other side announced the lockdown and called for this meeting to be rescheduled. Manoj, fuming inside but maintaining a smile agreed pleasantly.

So when he walked into Hotel Landmark that evening he was infuriated on many counts – one on his company,

who because of cost cutting had put him in this hotel, which was clearly not up to his tastes or standards; second, on the state of suspension of the outcome of this meeting and finally the realization that he was stuck in this godforsaken hotel for the next 21 days.



Razia Sheikh

While Sunil Paswan was watching the PM declaring the 21-day lockdown, and Kulwant Kaur was in a taxi on her way back to the hotel, Sitam Pradhan was buying a crate of Old Monk and Manoj Joshi was blissfully unaware of what was going on as he was in the flow of his presentation – Razia Sheikh was attending her husband's cousin's wedding. She had checked into this hotel much to the opposition of both her husband and the uncle's family but it was easier this way than to explain to all the nosey relatives why their nephew had not come but had sent his wife instead.

She needed some respite from those prying questions. This had been the state of affairs ever since their marriage. Her doctor husband was too busy treating patients and found attending such family gatherings a meaningless waste of time. He had happily outsourced the burden of fulfilling such family responsibilities to Razia, who would be part representative and part emissary in such gatherings. This was always a tricky situation, especially when your name is Razia Sheikh and your husband's name is Srijith Nair and you are representing him at a wedding from his side of the family. Hence, Hotel Landmark was a haven for Razia.

It had frustrated her to no extent that this wedding was even happening given the Corona scare, but it was not her

remit. Her job was to attend. She saw the extended family, the gross display of gold and silk, the meaningless banter that accompanies such weddings and promised herself one more time that she would not attend them ever again. All wedding ceremonies bored her. Her own had bored her too.

If marriages were a redundant institution, then wedding ceremonies were the act formalising the act of perpetuating that redundancy – as if a ceremony would cause make a dead institution to somehow wake up.

She had somehow braved her own marriage. This did not mean that she did not love Srijith; both were head over heels in love with each other – they just did not feel the necessity for the elaborate functions that go with it. Her distaste for such crass display and irresponsible wastage of wealth was very thinly hidden. She walked into Hotel Landmark almost in relief from that ostentatiousness only to realise that she was stuck there for 21 days.

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Guru is Passionate about human beings... He has a penchant for picking up what is strewn around us - and building a beautiful mosaic. With imperfect characters reminding us of our own imperfections, the book makes the reading, an insightful journey into our own lives - **Ashish Vidyarthi, Actor**



Four strangers are stuck in a hotel in Mumbai.

Sitam, a Nepali speaking man from Sikkim, works in the dusty offices of Indian bureaucracy. He has seen racism at its worst during his University days. He is a frustrated Indian bureaucrat.

Kulwant Kaur from Amritsar is on her first solo trip at the age of 62, under the pretence of a pilgrimage. This trip is her revolt against the inescapable North-Indian patriarchy.

Razia is a Malayali Muslim married to a Hindu. The only identity that matters to her is that of a woman. She hates it when others want her to be a Muslim or a Malayali.

Manoj is a typical Engineer-MBA, highly driven, ambitious and suave. His superiority complex is nauseating.

Sunil Paswan, a Dalit from Bihar is the hotel manager. He survived caste riots in his native village 30 years ago, after which he moved to Mumbai and has never gone back home.

They hate each other, hate being forced to live together and hate that the torment will last almost a month. How do things play out and what happens at the end? The story changes when hearts and minds slowly begin to open up...

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