

A Silent Witness

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Vijay looked at his watch and suddenly realised that it was 5:05 in the evening- five minutes past the polling time. Heaving a sigh of relief, he patted himself. It was a hectic election but a peaceful one- a no mean achievement in this faction ridden Palnadu area of Guntur in Andhra Pradesh. Being his first assembly election as a young Deputy Superintendent of Police, Vijay put his heart and soul into it and the orderly conduct of the election showed this. It was worth all the effort.

While Vijay Kumar was lost in his thoughts, he was awakened by the shrill of the telephone ring. He grabbed the phone, expecting the worst. At the other end was sub inspector Ashok. It was bad news- a faction murder, but at 5.15 pm. The young DSP again heaved a sigh of relief. At least the incident occurred after the election- technically not an election incident!

Getting into his rickety old Jeep, the DSP reached Tekulapally village. Dusty road, shambled stone houses and no electricity greeted the DSP. Time seems to have stood still here. No development worth the name had taken place. Nature also seems to have cursed this place by denying water. People were living in abject poverty. And to add to this misery was the curse of faction fight between 2 groups in the village. No wonder progress was at a premium here.

It was a nearly deserted village that greeted Vijay. Almost all the male members had run away from the village due to fear except for some supporters of the victim. They gave a graphic account of the attack on their faction leader Ramakrishna by their opposite faction. 20 members had apparently attacked Ramakrishna and as he ran, the attackers chased him with swords, knives and country-made bombs. Ramakrishna got onto the roof of his house and bolted the door from inside. The attackers did not give-up. They went to an open area near the house of Ramakrishna and threw country-made bombs on him from the ground. The bombs exploded and killed Ramakrishna.

Though he had heard stories of the goriness in faction murders during his training, coming face to face with reality had a telling effect on the DSP. What type of humans would resort to this barbaric act? Do they not value human life? What sort of mind can even think of this act, let alone execute it? While he was lost in his thoughts, he suddenly realized the purpose of his visit. Overcoming his emotions, the professional in Vijay took over. He started pouring over the details of the case. Vijay went onto the roof of the building where the bombs were hurled and saw an array of broken stones and debris. The story given to him appeared to be a typical faction murder. Though being young, he still kept an open mind, rather than jump to any conclusion. Deep in thought, trying to unravel the mystery, Vijay picked-up one of the broken stone pieces. He turned the stone in his hand and was struck by something unusual. The bomb marks were on the fresher side of the stone- the side unexposed to the Sun and other vagaries of weather. How was this possible? It was not possible for such marks to appear if the bombs were hurled from the ground. Was the witness speaking the truth? Was the truth something else? Vijay picked-up some more stone pieces. They all showed the same signs- bomb marks on the fresh side. As he delved deeper into the case, the jig-jaw puzzle seems to fall in place. The DSP looked at the injuries to the deceased. Most of the injuries were on the hands, face and the upper part of the body. These injuries were not consistent with the version told to him. But how did these injuries occur? It appeared that the injuries could have occurred only if one was

on his knees and bending down to remove bombs from a narrow opening. Vijay looked under the narrow sunshade, which was about a foot above the roof slab. He removed some of the debris and examined it. There was a strong smell of sulphur- one of the chemicals used to make country made bombs. This indicated that bombs hidden under the sunshade had exploded when the deceased was removing them, killing him. Unfortunately, the victim was a victim of his own carelessness.

Confronted with this evidence, the complainant confessed that the deceased had procured the country-made bombs to attack his rivals. On the Election Day, as their group did not do well in the polling in the village, Ramakrishna wanted to capture the ballot boxes by attacking the polling station. He went onto the roof and was collecting the bombs but the bombs exploded accidentally, killing him. Taking advantage of his death, Ramakrishna's supporters blamed the rival group for the murder. But confronted with the silent but telling evidence of the broken stones, the truth came out.