

The Night I Lost My Fajila

Yin and yang. Black and white. Fire and water. Hindus and Muslims!

As a ten-year old Hindu lad living in a small village in Bengal, I was always intermingling with Hindus and Muslims. Although the majority of my classmates were Muslims, I had never felt a tension between the religions. We all had the same skin color, spoke the same language, studied the same books, played the same games and grew the same rice in our paddy fields. The Muslims celebrated *Eid* twice a year and I went to my best friend, Fajila's house for *payesh* and *pitha*. During the big *Puja* celebrations, Fajila did the same. Although our celebrations differed somewhat from Fajila's family who did not pray to Goddess *Durga*, but rather congregated at the mosques for prayers at different times of the year, these festivals created the same kind joy and celebration throughout the entire village. Family and friend (regardless of religion) visited each other, ate good food and were merry. It was not until I found myself caught in the middle of the vicious, bloody riots that tore apart our little village during the 1947 partition that I truly understood the conflict between the Yin and the Yang.

As I think back now, the riots seem hazy and unreal, as does our journey westward to the present region of West Bengal. The years have dulled many of the senses and after trying incessantly I finally managed to forget most of the tragedy, hatred and anger that I had witnessed. Yet I am unable to forget the one night that started it all. I especially remember Fajila and once again I am unable to stop myself from remembering the events leading to the night, which tore apart a village, a community and two bosom friends.....

..... I woke up unusually early that morning to the shrill cawing of the crows. I hated the high pitch sound and tried to fall back asleep. But it did not work. All of a sudden the cawing stopped and everything was eerily quite. Kiran was asleep in her cradle, quiet and peaceful. This was also unusual. She usually never slept so peacefully in the morning. I usually awoke to her shrill cries and *Amma* gently rocking her back and both in her arms while balancing the kneading of the dough for the *rotis* in her other hand. I felt uneasy so I hid under the covers waiting for daybreak. I finally got up to go to the prayer room where *Amma* usually said her morning *puja*. I was surprised to see both my parents praying there. It was uncustomary for *Abba* to say morning prayers and they both stayed for a very long time. I felt puzzled and scared since I suspected that I was not the only one feeling the vibes of some impending doom.

Soon it was light and *Abba* went to work and *Amma* started on her household chores. Despite *Amma's* pretense on going about the daily rituals, she seemed preoccupied and snappy, as if she were waiting for something to happen. It was a weekend and school was closed, so I was having a hard time escaping her scolding. So when she asked me to get some groceries from the weekend bazaar, I grabbed the opportunity to get out of the house. The plan was to actually make a stop at Fajila's house and play hopscotch with her. Fajila was a year younger than I was and I always beat her at hopscotch. She never managed to keep her balance as she she tried to skip over the steps and fell flat on her face. I loved playing with her! However, she usually beat me when we played *blind man's bluff* as she was definitely swifter on the foot. We also turns taking dips in the cool waters of the small pond in between our houses and playing games. After lunch we helped our dads with their work in the fields. Although Fajila was strong enough to carry the big bales of wheat,

I liked to help her out with the load. I felt secretly happy when she gave me her sweet little smile after I divided up her load and carried them over to her house. I thought this Saturday would be the same as any other. But when I ran over to Fajila's house, it seemed as if things were even tenser than ours. Men in long *kurtas*, *topis* and *gamchas* were going in and out surreptitiously and everything was eerily quiet. I decided to keep my visit a secret. So I cooed out a birdcall from behind the bushes. Fajila and I used to have that as a signal to when we sneaked out of our houses for rendezvous. Soon she came out and we went to hide among the paddy fields so we could talk. She also had no idea of what was happening, but it seemed that we shared our feeling of unease. Her father had been locked up with different men in his room all morning and her mother seemed scared and jittery. So we decided to just ignore the world and have our weekend fun. Now that we were comforted by each other's company and had shared our feelings, nothing seemed to hold us back. We were soon caught up in the fun until we realized it was nearing dusk and I had completely forgotten the groceries. So Fajila and I ran over to the bazaar. But everything was closed. The blinds were tightly shut and there was not a single soul on the streets. The bazaar usually ended right about this time, but it the streets were usually teeming with the hawkers around this time as they screamed out their profits while they packed up to leave. Suddenly, the uncanny feeling of dread once again dawned on us and dampened our spirits. We decided to head home.

As I neared home, I could see the glow of the light from a mile away. I was confused. As I got closer I could feel the heat of the fire scorching my skin and the glaring blaze hurt my eyes. There was confusion and chaos all around. I tried to squint and find my family but I could not see anything. I started to cry. An uncle told me that *Abba* was inside

our burning house with another uncle trying to save *Amma* and my baby sister, Kiran. Other houses around us were also burning. The babies' shrill cries could be heard above the screaming men and women. I felt as if I was in the middle of a nightmare desperately wishing I would fall off the bed and wake up. I did not know how the fires had started. Maybe it was the end of the world and maybe *Bhagavan* was punishing me because I had not listened to *Amma* that morning. The flames were beginning to envelope our house and just when I thought I had lost my family, the men emerged with *Amma* coughing profusely and holding on tightly to Kiran who was crying as usual. Maybe the dream was about to end after all. We were all safe again and we could always build another house. I stopped crying and thought it was all over.

The chaos did not end but rather, the fury built up. The men seemed enraged and slowly started to congregate together at Uncle Shubhro's house. I was confused and disturbed, because I could not understand their reactions. I thought fires were natural calamities but their conversations indicated otherwise. Everyone seemed to be blaming the Muslims for the fires. I refused to believe them. I knew that Fajila was my friend and she would not want anyone to die. As soon as the men had ensured that everyone who could possibly be saved was rescued, they left the women and children to recover and retreated to Uncle Subhro's room. Once I was sure that *Amma* and Kiran were okay, I slowly inched myself towards the men's room. I wanted to find out what was going on by listening to the snatches of their conversation through the keyhole. They were discussing some plans and sounded like they were going somewhere to light some fireworks. It sounded as if they were going to throw some party for the Muslims. Not only was I shocked by the derogatory terms they used to refer to the Muslims, I was completely baffled by their plans. First they

blamed Muslims for the fire and now they wanted to entertain them with fireworks! This was not a time to have fun and be merry. Many people were injured and a few were in critical conditions. They also discussed plans to travel somewhere. I could not understand why the men would want to travel when they had to stay and help their families recuperate and rebuild what was destroyed in the fire. Soon they appeared to come to some consensus. Some of them remained to help the women and children pack while the others headed out to carry out their plan.

After I realized I had done all I could to help *Amma*, I confided in a close friend, Uttam and the two of us slowly sneaked out through the window and towards the village. We made our way towards the Muslim settlement areas, since I was sure that was where the fireworks were going to be. I knew of a small hill that overlooked the villages and we hid behind the undergrowth in the hopes that soon we would see some action. We waited but everything was pitch black. We could see some dark shadows moving about but we thought it was just our eyes playing tricks. I had a clear view of Fajila's house from the hill. I wondered if she was up because she loved secret rendezvous. As I was pondering these thoughts suddenly there was a deafening noise and a flash of bright light and the Fajila's house or what remained of it was on fire. Soon other houses followed and soon all we saw were "fireworks" just as the men had promised.

The meaning of fireworks suddenly dawned on me and I nearly retched from the sickness of the actions. I wanted to run out and save Fajila but I knew that she was gone forever. I had to escape from the madness that was tearing apart our villages. First the fires and now the bombings! Uttam and I made our way back to Uncle Subhro's house where there was now a flurry of activity as the men had returned. It seemed as if everyone was

ready to leave. I did not know where we were going but now the journey made sense.

There was nothing to stay here for. Our house had burned down. Fajila was gone! I did not know another other ties that could bind me to this village. The peace and the happiness I associated with my life here was gone forever. The families left one by one amidst the tense urgency that filled the air. It was almost daybreak when the trek lead us to cross the borders of our village. We were not safe yet but our scope for survival was improving and we continued our journey, each family in a different direction.....

I remember the events vividly, as if I am still in the middle of it. The pain of losing my best friend still feels raw and sears my heart with its intensity. The horrifying events of that fateful night forced me to acknowledge the dark side- not the dark side of religion, but rather the dark side of human nature. Even today, I feel like the ten year old who did not understand human nature and religion. I wish to go back to being the naïve young lad without a worry in the world playing hopscotch, swinging from the vines of the old banyan tree and going skinny dipping in the pool to ward off the sweltering heat with my friends, both Hindus and Muslims and never worrying about who was what. Ironically, it seemed to me that religions had created the very divide between men that it had hoped to conquer by teaching people the value of morality! In one night our village went from being a place where the black and white had coexisted as gray to one that was overshadowed by one stark monotone.

