

THE SORROW OF THE VALLEY

Thomas Mathew approached the Innova he saw first in the taxi stand outside Srinagar Airport. Ignoring the calls 'taxi, sir' all around him, he moved towards the driver and asked:

'What is the distance to Srinagar?'

'Fourteen kilometres, Sir'

'Sopore?'

'Another seventy three kilometres.'

'OK', he said. He was about to open the back door and put the suit case on the seat without wasting time, when the driver came running obsequiously; took charge of the suitcase and helped him unleash the backpack; put both together on the back seat.

His entire body tingled in the snow- cold Himalayan wind that welcomed him. His eyes caught the stunning beauty of a Kashmiri dawn as he got into the car. It was around nine. Thomas Mathew plunged into the beautiful panorama sketched out by nature. The snow covered mountains were basking in the glitter of scattered sunrays.

The chilling snow and the snow-capped mountain ranges were not novel to him. Yet he felt a peace descending upon him from somewhere. It was as if he had never experienced something like this before. His life in America and Italy was absolute darkness beside this glorious experience. The grandeur and the purity of the Himalayan ranges....the peace that emanates from them... the peace that is home only to Kashmir.

Suddenly he remembered something and he asked the driver: 'Your name?'

'Nissamudin'

'How much time does it take to Sopore?'

'You can't be sure during snow. There could be obstacles on the way. If none, In Sha Allah (God willing), two to two and a half hours.'

'How is the road?'

'We can take Jhelum valley road. Highway. Safe during this weather.'

Invoking 'Allah', Nissamudin started the car. Thomas Mathew's eyes were brimming with myriad sights of unending vastness. The mountain peaks brushed against the clouds, with Kailas hidden somewhere in their midst. Thomas Mathew whispered to himself curiously: whiteness, whiteness that stretches beyond the eyes, the infinite whiteness that knows no boundaries... the silences of the peaks... the mind that loses itself up in meditation... a peace that melts into God. But why is Kashmir so disturbed? Bloody flowers in the saffron fields.... the echo of gun shots in the mountain ranges swallowed up by silence. A good number of the beautiful, peaceful and hospitable people of Kashmir embrace terrorism. Or are they forced to?

He remembered having read about the artist from abroad who lived his entire life in the Himalayan valleys, contemplating the mountain ranges and copying their great silences into his canvases. Is it true that the purity of the Himalayas is not enough to impart peace to the people of this land?

'Sir, we have reached Srinagar', the words of Nissamudin, applied a brake to his thoughts.

The heart of the Kashmir valley.... Most of the vehicles in this celebrated town bursting with news are military trucks.... The distinctive sign of a place of discord...

Nissamudin eagerly tried to draw his attention elsewhere.

'Sir, Dal Lake.... The jewel of Kashmir'...

Dal lake, full of frozen snow.... A very precious jewel.... A few tourists are skating on the snow. Tourists all over the world must have included Kashmir in the list of unsafe places. He saw multi-coloured shikaras hibernating on the banks of the lake, waiting for

summer.

The car stopped at a point from where the astounding beauty of Dal Lake could be perceived well.

Nissamudin, you will make an excellent tourist guide'. Nissamudin was stimulated by the words of praise. 'Sir that is Charminar'. The small island in the Dal Lake... In season, it will be full of tourists. In summer and more particularly in autumn, each Chinar tree will be a riot of colours. The four Chinar trees you see there have given the name to this small island. Nissamudin explained to Thomas Mathew who was looking at the bare Chinar trees, with their leaves shed.

'Do you know sir, it is believed that the beauty of Kashmir is the benevolence of the Chinar trees'.

'But now they look like upright skeletons' Thomas Mathew said in jest. The skeletons of the glorious past of Kashmir!

'Over there, beyond the lake', Nissamudin pointed his fingers, 'is the Sankaracharya hill. Can you see the dark spot on top? It is the granite temple of Sankaracharia.'

'The temple of Adi Sankara? We belong to the same place.' 'Are you from Kerala?'

'A Malayali coming from New York' 'Are you a tourist? Or you have any other work?'

'Official... as reporter of New York Times.' Nissamudin's face reflected his eagerness. 'Sir, if you are a journalist, you should write fearlessly about Kashmir. Let the world know what is happening in Kashmir. In India everyone is afraid of terrorists, of the government, of proprietors of news papers'.

Thomas Mathew smiled. In front of him was the sumptuous panorama of Dal Lake, Sankaracharya temple and the hillock. He could not take his eyes off them. He was overwhelmed with thoughts, paying mental obeisance to the illustrious Sankaracharya, the ancient sanyasi who founded Monism. This is the land where Sankaracharya received the right to sit on the Sarvajna Peetha (the throne of wisdom); the land where the earth meets the sky. There is no duality, but only unity in this land. Yet this land has witnessed endless struggles for drawing the boundary between two nations, endless struggles for power through massacres and conquests. A

call from Nissamudin brought Thomas Mathew back to the world of contemporary reality. 'Sir, being a journalist, could you clarify my doubt?' Thomas Mathew laughed. Then said: 'I have come with a number of questions. To find answers...'

Nissamudin said: 'Perhaps you would have asked the same question. Have you got any news from Delhi jail or the President's palace? Will the president concede the request of Al Manaf for clemency? Whether accepted or rejected, wouldn't the result be conveyed to the relatives?'

'Nobody knows whether it would be accepted or rejected. The usual government procedure is to inform the facts in time to relatives and to make arrangements for the last meeting. Anyway, why did you ask me?'

'Sir, there is only this question in the minds of every Kashmiri now. I thought you might have some information, being a man from the New York paper. Where do you want to go in Sopore?'

'To Al Manaf's house'. Nissamudin laughed. 'Nobody has come from Indian newspapers. Good that at least the New York paper has come'

'Alright,. We will continue our trip. I have to catch the flight back to Delhi flight at five'.

Nissamudin drove the car at good speed. Thomas Mathew meandered anxiously within the magnetic self of Al Manaf. A hard core terrorist who has been arrested for taking part in the conspiracy to blow up the parliament building....

A prisoner awaiting the outcome of the clemency petition after being sentenced to death.... What I need to know are the reasons for a medical student turning into a hard core terrorist. Would it be possible for me to unravel the face of terrorism that causes world-wide distress? Am I competent enough to undertake such a serious task?

Then he asked: 'Do you know Al Manaf personally? Would it be difficult to find out his house?'

'Finding the house is not at all a difficult task. Though I do not know Al Manaf personally, I know his father Habibulla. He was a wholesale apple merchant. Good man... Hard working.... Then I had a mini truck. My vehicle was engaged one or two times for

carrying the load. Poor man, shattered by the issues concerning his son. He died after Manaf came back from the jail for the first time'

The smell of apple orchards... the purity and strength of mountain ranges covered in snow... the coolness of Jhelum river... The surroundings overflowing with beauty and peace... It was unbelievable that the bright boy, born and brought up in Sopore had not imbibed them. The chief editor had entrusted me with the task of identifying the reasons for the tragic turn of events and the different stages leading up to it.. A report that would be a scoop item for New York Times.

'Sir, that is Tetwall road. Passes through Sopore. Would be closed during snow.'

'Our road?'

'Normally there would be no problem. But one can't be sure. If there is snowfall traffic would slow down. If there is mountain slide, it would take days to restore normal traffic. Nothing can be predicted.'

Nissamudin continued to drive paying close attention as the vehicle dexterously negotiated the contours one after the other. It is a highway. But still, isn't he afraid of the unseen dangers lurking ahead of each mountain curve and bottomless depths seen at intervals below the road? It is clear; he is worried about the heavy price to be paid for batting an eyelid or scaling down caution on the mountain roads. Is it just him? Thomas Mathew thought with an inwardly smile. The fear that creeps into the spine, even while one is engrossed in the beautiful sights around... A trip along the mountain road is like proximity to a beautiful siren, a terrible beauty...

Uncertainty is the defining feature of life, he thought, delving deep into a philosophic mode. In this beautiful Kashmir, everything is uncertain. There is always a torrent of questions, questions that remain unanswered puzzles: Srinagar or Jammu? India or Pakistan? Snow fall or mountain slide? Terrorist attack or military rule? Will it be possible for the people to embrace enduring peace any time, setting aside the uncertainty of the ever changing scenario?

Nissamudin is driving with extreme caution. Nature has kindly cleared the way for him, keeping the white feathery snow at bay. The vehicle continued its zestful ride, as if with a wild fervour to conquer the mountain curves. The silence of Nissamudin as he was

engrossed in the speed of his vehicle disturbed Thomas Mathew. It was as if a priceless mine of local knowledge had been shut. Searching for the magic word to reopen that treasure mine, Thomas Mathew asked:

‘What do people say? Will Manaf skip the halter?’

‘Sir, such subjects are not generally discussed here. Even the trees and the stones have ears. May be that would be enough to be accused as a terrorist and put into jail. But at heart everyone wants him to be set free.’

‘Why so? Is he innocent?’

‘There was some aberration at some time. Who knows whether it is there even now?’

‘May be authorities have made enquiries and found out something... something..’

‘Those are all defence secrets, Sir. Anyway, there has been no intimation to relatives from investigating agencies. How many times have Manaf’s relatives asked for reports about the progress of the enquiry? No reply. Have sought permission to contact the agency. No reply. Can’t we suspect that the truths were concealed through continuous silence? A charge sheet correctly pinpointing his role in the crime must have been shown to him, at least once during the past seven years.’

Doesn’t this secretiveness reduce the chances of Manaf having any role in the crime?

‘Yes Sir, isn’t that logical?’

‘True, but in matters relating to the country’s defence..’

‘The issue is defence. What is the truth? We are worried as we do not know who the criminal is. If we speak about it or make some enquiries, then we become suspects. It would then be only a matter of time before we are sent to jail. Sir, even as the country makes loud claims about democracy, what we really have is a military rule.

‘Suppose you say you only want to know the facts, with no further queries?’

‘Tell whom Sir? Whichever office you go to with such a request, the same questions will be asked:

‘Who are you to Manaf? If you are not related to him, why do

you make such enquiries?’

‘What ever be the reply, we end up in the suspect list. When you are suspected without any reason, you start thinking of doing some- thing suspicious, as a better option. What else could hot-blooded young people do?’

‘If information is sought under Right to Information Act?’

‘It was tried. Got the polite reply that the information cannot be divulged as it involves matters concerning national defence classified under ‘most confidential list’.

‘What is your view? Is it possible that Al Manaf Akthar was involved in the parliament explosion case?’

‘Who cares for the views of this old man?’

‘Don’t be afraid, Nissamudin. This is not a question for a news paper or an intelligence agency. Only the concern of a fellow country man.’

‘No fear sir. There is no evidence to show that he is innocent. All I can vouch for is just that he led a low-key life after his father’s death. May be he went to Delhi out of zest for life. But who knows what goes inside one’s mind?’

‘The circumstances are suggestive of his innocence, isn’t that so?’

‘Yes sir. But the insecure children of Kashmir! How can it be otherwise? Sir, a Kashmiri is insecure, not only in Kashmir, but in the whole of India. The CBI, the RAW, all are after us. Even if we leave Kashmir for ever, with no thought of return, we could still be hooked up by the unseen strings of national defence. That may be, perhaps that is, what happened to Manaf.’

‘May be. But suppose he were here?’

‘Even then he would not have survived. Working and staying in Delhi, he might have tried to go outside the circle of terrorist organizations. His non-co-operation with terrorists might have turned him into a mote in their eyes. Over there, a suspect in the eyes of military and intelligence agencies. You know what could happen under such circumstances.’

‘A disease with no remedy? If you ask me whether there is no remedy at all, perhaps there is a cure, for which a heavy price has

to be paid. An escape to America or Europe, for example. The ones with zest for life take that way. That is what my son Amir also did’.

‘What did Amir do?’

‘Salavuddin, the son of my younger brother went to New York to work in a restaurant. He is with him.’

‘New York?’

‘Yes sir, he said some Fifth Avenue or something similar.’

‘Fifth Avenue?’. Thomas Mathew’s eyes lit up.

‘Yes sir, something like that. Could give you the correct address from the mobile.’

‘I need it. My apartment is in the residential area of Fifth Avenue.’

‘Oh, good. He has only a small job there. But still he can live without fear. Here in Kashmir we can only become victims of the fury of the terrorists or the military. My wife and I would also like to go there, may be after some time.’

‘You hate Kashmir so much?’

‘Oh no, sir, never. Kashmir is our life-breath from the day we are born. More than our life-breath. But there is no other go. Shouldn’t we also live without threats and fears, at least for some time? Not only for the first prime minister, but for everyone here, Kashmir is the dearest thing. But our patriotism dries up at the sight of rivers of blood and suspicious eyes.’

He is telling the truth; Thomas Mathew rued... the instinct for survival known to each expatriate.

For a moment, Thomas Mathew’s mind travelled back in time. Twenty years ago... twenty years?, he wondered. How fast time flits by? He remembered everything, as if they occurred only yesterday. It was the preparatory meditation for priesthood, on the eve of his ordination as a deacon. He experienced an acute inner conflict on that day. The pangs of doubt as to whether an ill-equipped weakling like him could take up the challenge swept across his mind like a cankerous fever. His body too had to suffer an equally harsh fever. His throat was dry and his tongue lay listless against the dried up throat. His whole body trembled. It was as if his legs had lost the strength to support his body. What could be done? He could not

come to terms with it.

It was his ardent desire to become a priest, right from childhood. After Holy Communion, the desire became more and more intense. His mother told him: 'Great desire. Pray well. But not everyone can become a priest It is a calling from God.'

Endless prayers! Fasting and penance to strengthen the mental choice. The prayers and self-sacrifices of his father and mother gave him great strength.

The tussle between the desires nurtured from childhood and the horror of the moment. Father Fissore, his rector told him:

'Recognize the voice of your inner soul. You may wait for another year praying, learning and thinking, if you are not fully convinced. You can take a decision after that.'

Those who could give him courage, love and support were miles away. The whole night he prayed genuflecting before the Crucified Christ... 'Did you not call me? Or was it only my fancy? Give me the answer, a definite answer'. Then he sensed an inner voice telling him: 'Talk to your mother... She would be sharing your mental agony without your knowledge, even while being so far away from you'.

After getting permission from Father Rector, he rang up home. It was not easy getting connected in those days. 'Pitroda magic' had not yet been in full swing. Taking the receiver, his father asked:

'Is not your ordination as deacon day after tomorrow?'

'Yes Appacha', Without saying anything more he asked: 'Is Ammachi there?'

'Yes, speak to her'.

As his mother took the receiver, she asked: "What is worrying you Tommy, my son? I won't compel you, if you cannot take it up. It is not up to us to choose. It is God's calling. Try to continue your studies over there'. His father wanted to say something. Mother did not give him the receiver. She put it back on the holder.

Finally he decided that he did not have the calling for priesthood. What is to be done next? It was his uncle in Canada who offered him a helping hand. 'You can come over', he said. His father did not talk to him for many years, even while he would call home for discussing the prospects of further studies. Mother said

it was due to the sarcastic references of neighbours about his 'fatherhood'. She would console him: 'Never mind. This is God's calling. Don't worry. Those who are sarcastic are ignorant. Aren't there those who come back after being ordained? Isn't it better to retrace than to betray the church? Don't worry my son. Have good faith. That's enough.'

On the strength of the theological degree from Rome, he got admission for journalism in Columbia University at New York. How much did he yearn to see his native place! He was doing part-time work along with his studies. So there wasn't enough time. Not enough money too for travelling. 'Longing to see you', his mother would tell him now and then. Father remained incommunicado. The income from the rubber-estate set apart as his 'patrameni' (share of the family property due to a son who opts for priesthood) was kept safe in a bank locker! It was only after joining the New York Times that he got an opportunity to go home. Seeing him, the sternness of his father melted away. Mother said: 'Don't you know that Appachen is worried.? Even you look worried. Never mind. It is all over now'

How happy he was walking across the rubber plantation along with his father!

'Appacha, please slow down', he called out as he ran to keep pace with his father who said:

'Hey foreigner, for us natives, this is just fun.' Hearing the loud talk and laughter their neighbor Prenchu chettan called out:

'Who is the guest, Mathachan chetta'? Father said enthusiastically, 'My son Tommy, from New York.' Pat came the sarcastic rejoinder 'Oh, the one who became the priest?'

'Yes', father laughed. But it was a listless laughter.

He went home once again. But the experience was no different. He decided to become an expatriate, despite the loving persistence of his parents to stay back.

He was aware that his native place was not the right place for him. Suddenly he heard Nissamudin's voice and he woke up from his memories.

'Sir Wular lake. Only 36 kilometres to Sopore'. Some people who appeared to be tourists were skating on the frozen lake. On