

ASGHAR WAJAHAT

The Spirits of Shah Alam Camp

I

THE DAYS PASS SOMEHOW in Shah Alam Camp, but the nights are an endless nightmare. God alone can save a person from that hellish torment. And what a terrible, terrible cacophony! You can barely hear your own voice. Such shouting and screaming, raving and ranting, moaning and groaning, sighing and sobbing ...

The spirits come to meet with their children late at night. They caress their orphans, stroking their heads and gazing into their lifeless eyes with their own vacant, wasted eyes as if trying to convey something. Then they clasp their children to their breasts and the air is rent with the same gut-wrenching screams that escaped from them when they were being burnt alive like so much kindling wood.

The children remain wide-awake when the rest of the camp goes to sleep. They're waiting to see their mothers ... to have dinner with their fathers.

"How are you, Siraj," the mother's spirit asks, fondling his hair and caressing him.

"How are you, Amma?"

The mother looks visibly happy. She says, "I am a spirit now, Siraj ... no one can burn me alive anymore."

"Amma, can I become like you?"

2

One night a woman's nervous, agitated spirit reaches Shah Alam Camp well past midnight. She is looking for her son who's nowhere to be found—neither in the other world, nor here. The mother's heart is close to breaking with grief and terror. Other women help her look for her son.

They look all over the camp and then they go to the mother's old neighborhood. The whole street is in flames; houses are burning like stacks of firewood. Since they are spirits now and able to come and go as they please, they enter these raging infernos with complete ease. They search every nook and smoke-filled cranny but they cannot find the mother's little boy.

In despair the spirits go to the homes of the rioters. The lumpens are sitting there making petrol bombs, cleaning their guns and polishing their arms. When the mother asks them about her missing son, they laugh and say, "You mad woman, when scores upon scores of people are being burnt alive, who can keep track of one little boy. He must be lying buried under some mound of ash and rubble."

The mother says, "No, no, I have looked all over ... I can't find him anywhere!"

Then one of the rioters remembers, "Hey, is she the mother of that boy we left dangling from the *trishuk*."

3

The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. They bring food, water, clothes and medicines from heaven. That's why you will not find any sick, naked, hungry or thirsty children in Shah Alam Camp. And that's also why Shah Alam Camp has become so famous. Its fame has spread far and wide among the dead. A certain dignitary from New Delhi who had come to inspect the camp was so pleased with what he saw that he announced: "This is a very fine place ... all the Muslim children from all over India should be brought here."

4

The spirits come to visit Shah Alam Camp after midnight. All night long they stay with their children, gazing at them with love and longing, worrying about them, fretting over their future, talking to them ...

"Siraj, you should go home now," a mother's spirit says to her son.

"Home?" Siraj whispers with dread and his eyes glaze over with terror.

"Yes, home. After all, how long can you stay here? I promise, I'll come to see you every night."

"I won't go home, never, never, never." Smoke. Fire. Screams. Noise.

“Amma, I’ll live with you and Abba.”
“Darling Sikku, how can you live with us ...”
“But Bhaijaan and Aapa live with you.”
“That’s because they were also burnt alive along with us.”
“Then I’ll return home, Amma.”

5

A child’s spirit comes to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. The child looks like a firefly flickering brightly in the dark night. He flits and flies and skips and scampers all over the camp playing little mischievous tricks on everyone. But he doesn’t lisp; he speaks clearly. He runs and hides in his mother’s clothes. He traipses along holding his father’s finger.

Unlike all the other children in Shah Alam Camp, this child looks amazingly happy.

Someone asks, “Why are you so happy?”
“Don’t you know ... I thought everyone knew.”
“Know what?”
“That I am The Proof.”
“Proof? Proof of what?”
“I am The Proof of Bravery.”
“Whose bravery are you proof of?”
“Of those who ripped open my mother’s womb, tore me out and hacked me in two.”

6

The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. A mother’s spirit comes to meet her son. The son is amazed at the sight of his mother.

“Mommy, why do you look so happy today?”
“Siraj, I met your grandfather in heaven today. He introduced me to his father, who took me to meet his father, even his grandfather and great-grandfather. Imagine, Siraj, I met your great-great-great-grandfather!” The mother speaks in a voice lilting with happiness.

“Siraj, your great-great-great grandfather was a Hindu ... a Hindu, do you understand? Siraj, be sure to tell everyone about this.”

7

The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. A sister's spirit comes one night. She's looking for her brother. She looks everywhere till she finally spots him sitting on a staircase. The sister is delighted and runs to meet him. "Bhaiyya," she cries out. The brother hears but pretends that he doesn't. He just sits there, mute and unmoving like a stone statue.

The sister speaks again, "Bhaiyya, listen to me."

Again, the brother gives no sign of hearing her, nor does he look towards her.

"Why won't you listen to me, Bhaiyya?" the sister speaks loudly. This time the brother's face flares up like a fire. His eyes shoot sparks. He rises in a fury and begins beating his sister mercilessly. A crowd gathers and someone asks the girl what she has said to so enrage her brother.

The sister says, "I only called out to him, 'Bhaiyya.'"

An old man speaks up, "No, Salima, that was very wrong of you. Why did you say that? That was absolutely the wrong thing to say." And the old man starts crying like a baby.

The brother starts beating his head against a wall.

8

The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. One night an old man's spirit comes along with all the other spirits. The old man's body is naked save for a skimpy loincloth. He wears chappals on his feet and holds a wooden staff in his hand. An old-fashioned fob watch peeps out from the folds of his loincloth.

Someone asks the old man, "Are you too looking for a relative here in this camp?"

The old man replies, "Yes, and no."

The others leave him alone, taking him for a senile old man. The old man walks round and round the camp.

Someone again asks the old man, "Baba, whom are you looking for?"

The old man says, "I am looking for someone who can kill me."

"Why?"

"I was killed fifty years ago by a bullet. Now I want the rioters to burn me alive."

"But, why do you want that, Baba?"

“Simply to tell the world, that I was not killed by their bullet, nor will I die if they burn me alive.”

9

A political leader asks a spirit who has come to visit Shah Alam Camp,

“Do you have a father and mother?”

“No, they were both killed.”

“What about brothers and sisters?”

“No.”

“Any other living relatives?”

“No, all are dead.”

“Are you comfortable here?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Do you get enough to eat?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you have clothes on your back?”

“I do.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“No, nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

The leader is pleased. He says to himself, “The lad is bright. Not like other Muslims.”

10

The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. One night the Devil’s spirit comes along with all the others. He looks around and is filled with extreme embarrassment, even shame, at what he sees. He can barely hold his head up to look the others in the eye. Sheepishly, he averts his gaze, ducks his head, and furtively looks for an escape route where it would be unlikely that he would meet another soul. Intrigued by this strange creature, people take hold of him by the scruff of his neck and shake him.

Wilting with shame, he bleats, “I have no hand in all this ... all this that has happened, truly I don’t ... I swear by Allah, I have nothing to do with any of this.”

People say, “Yes, yes, we know. You couldn’t have done this. You have your own standards to think of.”

The Devil sighs with relief and says, “You can’t imagine what a weight has been lifted from my heart! So, you good people know the truth.”

They say, “Allah Miyan came a few days ago and He was saying the same thing.” □

—*Translated by Rakshanda Jalil*