

# The Night We Saw Shehenshah

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This is what I remember about that night:

I was twelve and lived in a house that had one bedroom and one living room; a narrow passage connecting the two which I would string with the staccato rhythm of my growing legs while furiously reading for some upcoming exam; a kitchen that was impossibly small but allowed for mock-sparring with a sibling (one point for every jab that lands, no knock-outs allowed); and a bathroom and a toilet facing off with each other, not backing down, separated by a conciliatory wash-basin that in my memory is powder blue ceramic but might have been porcelain white. Or grey.

The city — my city — Bombay, was inexplicably the centre of multiple riots — or perhaps, it was only inexplicable to me while the reasons behind it were perfectly understandable from the vantage point of adulthood. All riots are the same and therefore beg no description.

Across the street from where I lived stood low income households belonging to the others. I hadn't consciously known that till the days of the riots. My housing colony was one among fifteen or twenty that had a tacit understanding not to admit anyone who belonged to the others. This I knew because we won an award for this, this I heard. I wonder who went to collect the award and whether there was a function to commemorate this. Who danced at the ceremony and who sang?

Rumours whizzed by like bats on a night-raid. Rumours are sexy. Even the dangerous ones glint with an attractive menace that make you believe. In this way, they are like god's sermons. There was that rumour about Aadam's bicycle-renting shop that was just outside the border of our neighbourhood. I didn't know how to ride a bicycle then but I knew who Aadam was. I had absorbed the topography of my neighbourhood unconsciously, without romance and melancholy — that only comes when you are older and prone to sentimentality. His shop had burned down — was it someone among us (because Aadam was an other) or was it a faulty electrical connection? Either way, we were braced for retaliation.

My family huddled down, the lights all turned off — but the television was on. We watched a Hindi movie starring the most popular actor ever. He played a bumbling cop who at night put on a costume and doled out vigilante justice. And this is what's important — his costume was composed of a grey wig that spilled over his forehead, a beard and moustache, black leather pants and a heavy jacket and most importantly, a metal fore-arm guard that looked suspiciously like a plaster-of-paris cast painted over with silver glitter. When he walked, chains jangled. He called himself 'Shehenshah' — the Emperor, and when he breathed, you could hear the menace in it amplified, as if he had a megaphone hidden in his nostrils. As he wreaked retribution, he warned his enemies with this immortal line - 'Rishtey mein to hum tumhare baap lagte hain — naam hain Shehenshah' — 'In terms of relationship, I am your Father — my name is the Emperor'. I remember tripping on the tough strength of that piece of dialogue.

Someone knocked on the door at ten in the night. Shehenshah was just warming up. My father answered the door to our third floor apartment. He called my mother out, they conferred and after handing something over from the kitchen, they came back. All this I registered with the corner of my mind, the rest of it was occupied by the movie. Apparently, the young men from the neighbourhood who

otherwise plied their average cricketing skills in the ground below had come asking for glass bottles. They had set up a vigil in the terraces of the buildings and wanted weaponry.

I imagine they must have camped out like only boys can. Cigarettes must have been smoked, ribald stories exchanged. All the while, the slimy fingers of fear would have gripped their insides but on the outside, it was shiny, happy bravado. Let them come. We will pelt them with eggs and bottles. In the dark, the tension in their bodies would have been hidden. Adrenalin would have overflowed in boisterous conversation. Who can throw the longest distance, whose aim was truer than that of others? Among them, there would have been at least two or three who genuinely craved an attack. The others only waited for the others.

Maybe there was a similar group across the street. They would have crowded the low roofs, collected eggs and bottles too. They had their own stories, not very different. In the houses below, while parents listened to the foot-steps of the guarding force, the kids would have been watching Shehenshah beat the minor villain Mukthar Singh to a pulp.

I must have gone to sleep during the second half of the movie, the ringing endorsement of the avenging angel's virility in my head. 'I am your father' travels across oceans and is transformed into the symbol of hope, though the costume and the breathing is plagiarised — but whether this was a complex metaphor or some dialogue-writer's drunken fantasy, I don't know.

Dawn crept up the hot sky but no one attacked. The next rumour was of white flags raised across the street. Like the rumour, the flags were invisible but I was only four and half feet tall and maybe I couldn't see. The next day, the fever of the riot broke and everything went back to how it was.

What I remember about the night is this:

Shehenshah kept the peace.

