

Muslim Portraits

Everyday Lives in India

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Javeedbhai

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When I began my work in this dense, predominantly Muslim neighborhood in 1996, the renaming of the city was new. We were definitely still in 'Bambai', not in Mumbai. The memories of those awful months in 1992-93 were still fresh: the anger, humiliation and disbelief when the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground on 6 December 1992; the brutality of the Bombay police in suppressing the protests in the days after; the horrible 10 days in the beginning of January 1993 when the Shiv Sena and their supporters, burned, raped, looted and killed in Muslim neighborhoods all over the city, often protected by the police force. All this was capped by the multiple bomb blasts in March 1993 and the waves of arrests, beating and imprisonment of anyone suspected of even the most remote connection with the Muslim gangsters who allegedly planned and carried out the attacks.

What was I doing there, in that neighborhood? I had some local friends, and I had been around in the neighborhood for some weeks two years earlier when I helped a TV crew shoot a documentary about the rise of the Shiv Sena, the riots and their aftermath. Emotions were even more raw at that time in 1994. The attendance at Friday *namaz* in the local *masjid* had been massive, thousands of men standing silently in straight rows, shoulder-to-shoulder, traffic at a standstill for hours. A heroic, angry display of defiance and community, in the face of what seemed like relentless attacks by the state and powerful political forces.

There was apprehension regarding my intentions. Was I really a friend of Muslims? Could one really trust this *frangi* who stayed in the neighborhood,

walked around and talked to so many people about religion, the riots, their work in the Gulf and so on. Was I actually some kind of journalist, like some of my local friends? Or did I have links with the government which at the time had been taken over by the Shiv Sena? Why was I so interested in Muslims, after all? After some time various people began to ask me if I had met Javeedbhai. They told me that he was an important man but someone who was not easy to meet, not just like that.

I became intrigued by this man and his reputation. Some of my friends advised me not to mix with him. He was a murderer, I was told, someone with a criminal record. I was not convinced that this really had any bearing on reality. To file an affidavit and claim that someone had committed a crime was after all one of the most well-tested ways to tarnish the reputation of an adversary, a political opponent or a business rival. An affidavit, some rumors and a bit of persuasion, pecuniary or not, is after all often enough just to make the police open a chargesheet against a person, who then enters the category of 'chargesheetee', an alleged criminal. However, with Javeedbhai it was different. He was a former convict and had been to prison for years. Others told me that he was just a proud man who always defended his neighborhood and that was the reason why the police resented him. They did not like strong and proud Muslim men, so he was framed and sent to prison.

This was the version of Javeedbhai's story I heard one day when I was sitting in a small workshop in an area full of little factories, power-loom sheds and small eateries in the neighborhood. One of the men I was chatting with was called Junaid. He claimed he was a friend of Javeedbhai. Junaid was a heavily built balding man in his fifties. His face had deep furrows, his eyebrows were bushy and almost met above his nose. This gave him a somewhat sinister look which he seemed quite pleased with. He claimed that he had acted in several Hindi movies, always as a gangster or evil man, he said, using the English word 'villain' again and again, as a matter of pride. He came from the same town in Uttar Pradesh (UP) as Javeedbhai and they had arrived at the same time in Bombay, as boys. They went back a long time and that was why Javeedbhai had always helped him. I asked him in what way he had helped. Junaid became a bit evasive but mentioned that he had had financial difficulties, and that he had been in trouble with the law when he was younger. Javeedbhai had always supported him and Junaid would always be loyal to him, no matter what people said about him.

Junaid promised to introduce me to Javeedbhai but whenever we met in the following weeks, there was always a problem, something had come up.

It turned out that a small incident that had taken place a few weeks after my arrival made a difference. I had stayed at a small guest-house for some time. The bigger rooms were all occupied by a group of Arab men from Kuwait and the Emirates. Officially they were in Bombay to recruit labor for their homes and businesses, but liquor and the nearby red light district seemed to preoccupy them more than anything else. Judging from their rude behavior, the men did not hold the local Muslims in high esteem. One evening, one of the men got into an argument with an elderly and frail looking taxi driver and started to assault him with his walking stick. A rage that had accumulated as I had watched the men's racist behavior over several weeks made me angrier and more stubborn than I had imagined. I intervened, got between him and the terrified taxi driver, and asked the owner of the guest-house to call the police. The Arab man was probably as surprised as I was, but quickly disappeared, shouting and swearing at me. I did not think much of it at the time but the incident obviously created a certain amount of goodwill and much of the apprehension about me began to vanish.

One evening, weeks after the incident, I was at a public meeting called by the local branch of the radical Islamic SIMI (Student's Islamic Movement of India) in the vicinity. Most of the young men present were college students, very serious and very keen on engaging me in debate. A group of smartly dressed young men were hanging around the door and as I was leaving one of them came up to me and asked me in English if I was the guy who had 'beaten up the Arab guy?' I told them that it was all a bit exaggerated but yes, there had been a minor scuffle. They smiled approvingly and told me that they thought *gussa* (anger) was a good quality in a man, a sign of proper manliness (*mardangi*).

One of the boys, Hanif, turned out to be Javeedbhai's son. Hanif went to the local Muslim college and had made friends with some of the SIMI activists. He admired them for their determination and strong convictions and he supported them. 'We have to stand up to the Shiv Sena and the BJP. They want to force all of us out of India, they don't allow us to be Muslims, but SIMI is showing young people that if we live according to the Quran, they can never beat us.' He admitted that he was not a good Muslim all the time but that he wanted to be a businessman like his father. He did not have the patience and discipline to study the *hadiths*, learn Arabic and so on, like the SIMI activists. 'I am more like my father, someone who helps people and who has courage (*sahtas*), who stands up for himself.' Knowing fully well that I knew the rumors about his father, he

continued: 'People will tell you that my father is a gangster, a *dada*, and that he does not deserve respect...but when they are in trouble they come to him for help....'

Hanif promised to set up a meeting with his father, and the day after, he left a message that I should meet Javeedbhai in his office not far from where I stayed. Hanif was waiting outside and invited me inside. Javeedbhai's modest office below his apartment in an old building in the crowded and busy lanes. Javeed was a handsome, athletic and energetic man in his fifties with a pleasant smile and a firm handshake. The room had a desk with two telephones, a small settee, an aerial photograph of the Kaba with masses of pilgrims, and a big painting of a tiger above the settee. Hanif's elder brother and three associates of Javeedbhai were present. After our tea and the usual pleasantries I asked, half-jokingly if his tiger was stronger than the Sena tiger? The men all burst into laughter and Javeedbhai said 'Yes, of course, it is a Khan, like all of us...each of us are as good as five *sainiks*.' He spoke quickly, in clipped and succinct sentences and rarely elaborated or spoke at length. Hanif added that 'if only the police would leave us alone, let the Sena come here, man to man, and we shall see who are the real men.'

This seemed to be the pattern between father and this, his eldest son. Javeed would say something, a command, a small joke, and Hanif who always was extremely attentive to his father's whims and moods, would pick it up and elaborate, effortlessly switching between Hindi and English as do so many young people in Mumbai. While Javeed was tight-lipped—even as he smiled—controlled and austere in his appearance (always dressed in *kurta-pyjama*), his son had an open and friendly face and dressed smartly in expensive shirts and trousers. Javeed's face sometimes showed a thin smile when his son spoke eloquently and he was clearly proud of his son's manners and polish. The tiger theme returned in the coming months and became a bit of a joke. Javeedbhai told me that he considered using it if he decided to run for the post as municipal corporator in the local ward in the elections in the following year.

It turned out that Javeedbhai was very well informed about my whereabouts in the neighborhood. Who I stayed with, where I normally had my meals, which mosques I had been to, and which of his friends (and foes) I had met. We quickly developed a good rapport, laughed a lot and exchanged jokes. He wanted to know about my country, my previous work, about how Bal Thackeray was, the Sena leaders I had met, and so on. He was also interested in what local people had said about him and I recounted

some of the more flattering stories about him. I jokingly called him 'Special Branch' when I realized how precisely he knew my whereabouts and I told him that he should apply for the job of Chief of the Special Branch in the Bombay Police. This nickname was also picked up by some of his associates who, at least in my company, and probably to flatter me, referred to this joke again and again.

As I got to know Javedbhai better, I understood the full extent of his authority and how much respect he commanded in the locality. It was respect, first and foremost. Although I saw many signs of affection, Javed commanded and expected unconditional loyalty from his men. His sons, especially Hanif, were often with him in his car or when overseeing his business. It was clear that Javed was proud of both of them and that not least the younger one, 17-year-old Shahid, was allowed to joke and interrupt conversations in ways that none of Javed's men would ever dare to do.

Javed's own biography was typical of many in the locality, and yet distinctly different. He came to Bombay from a village in Uttar Pradesh as a young boy. His father had been working in a mill for years and had returned once a year to visit his family. As the children were growing, his father decided to bring his three sons to Bombay while his wife and two daughters stayed back for another few years until he found a suitable house for the entire family. Javed lived with his father, brothers and uncles for some years. His brothers soon got jobs in the mills but his father decided that Javed should continue his studies. He did not object but was envious of his brothers who earned money and could buy new clothes and go to the talkies. Instead Javed took up wrestling at the local YMCA gymkhana. He turned out to have a real talent for wrestling and he soon became the favorite of the old Ustad who trained the boys and young men. Javed was not a big man, but his strength, agility and especially his will to win made him a feared and respected *pehwan*. At the age of 18 he had won several local championships and the Ustad hoped that he would climb further and achieve a national status as he himself had done in his day.

Javed has been admitted to the local Muslim college and was doing well when misfortune struck the family. His father met with an accident at the mill and became crippled and confined to his bed for many years. The younger uncle was sent back to manage the family property in the village and to settle some disputes over inheritance. It fell upon Javed's elder brother to take charge of the family's affairs. He invested the compensation paid to the father from the mill in a small metal workshop in the

neighborhood. A barely literate man of limited capacity, he soon began to rely on Javed's advice in virtually every matter. Javed had left college and had taken various jobs to support his father and the family. Javed recalled these years as bewildering and difficult and he was greatly pained by his father's protracted illness and early death. At the age of 25 Javed was effectively managing the expanding metal workshop. His education and strong will made him the natural head of the family, something that created apprehensions and tension between him and his uncles and brothers. Although his wrestling career was at a standstill, he was still feared and respected in the street and greatly admired by many young men in the neighborhood.

'My uncles found a nice girl from our village in UP. They hoped that this would calm me down' he told me with a smile. But the inevitable happened. When you make money and become visible, someone will become jealous of you. For Javed these two things—*dikhana* (visibility) and *jahna* (envy)—were linked like light and darkness. A local *dada* (strongman, sometimes the term *bhai* is also used, as a synonym for gangster/bad guy) had threatened Javed's brother and wanted money from his thriving business. Javed interpreted this demand as a challenge to him and his family. It became a tug of war, a battle of wills. Javed refused to pay while his brothers thought it was unwise to stir trouble. It was well known that the local *dada* was a friend of the police, and that the police received handsome *hafka* (illicit payment in return for favor/protection) from him to let him carry on with his extortion racket. This made him a dangerous man. But for Javed it was now about honor (*izzat*), both his family's and his own honor and self-respect as a man.

One afternoon, the *dada* and two men came to the shop to demand money. Javed exploded in rage, chased them out and confronted the *dada* with a knife in the street. A few seconds later the *dada* was lying on the pavement, bleeding profusely and dead shortly after. Javed was arrested, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Prison life was harsh (*sakit*) but Javed survived and became a different man, less proud but without fear (*dar nahin hai*). I heard several versions of this story. Some portrayed Javed as local hero and protector of the neighborhood while others painted him as a thug aspiring to be the new *dada*. All versions agreed on one thing, however. Javed had courage, lots of it, to the point of foolhardiness. He had confronted the *dada* and his men alone, face to face, and could have been killed himself had it not been for his superior fighting skills and his aggressiveness. The two accomplices had fled the scene, terrified by Javed's ferocity. Some of the interlocutors of this story told me that such a fight

could never happen today because all the *bhai* carry guns and don't have this kind of courage anymore, and by implication, deserve no respect either. Javeed's story was another instance of the deplorable condition of the Muslim community, its constant sliding into decay and weakness—the larger story that seems so pervasive in many parts of the subcontinent.¹

He appeared completely reconciled with the killing and the punishment, however. 'What happened had to happen ... either you stand up as a man worthy of respect (*adarniya admi*) or you live like a servant. I did what I did and I have also paid for it.'

Javeed got out of prison after less than eight years but it was a bit unclear why it happened. All he told me was that he had shown good behavior and that someone had taken pity on him and his family. It seemed quite clear that he was indebted to someone, an influential man, who had been able to pull strings and get him released well ahead of time. The network of respect and dependency he was entangled in beyond the locality was one of the many dimensions of his life I never got to know about. I was only shown, and told about, his local reputation, the 'social work' he carried out (he always used the English term), and of course his family obligations and his obligations to his *biradari* in Bombay and in UP. Yet, these wider networks, some established while in prison, others after, were hugely important to his business and to his more recent attempts at a career in politics.

When Javeed returned from prison he was a changed man, more judicious and cautious but also more determined to recreate his life, his reputation and the honor of his family. In that he was helped by the way his reputation had developed and grown in his absence. He left the streets as a proud and arrogant young man but returned as a fully evolved *dada*, a strongman with extensive networks, as a man who had endured the ordeal of imprisonment. His brother's business had deteriorated in Javeed's absence and his brother survived mainly on the money which his son sent from Kuwait. Javeed set up a new business and gradually built a life for himself and his family. The business grew and soon Javeed evolved as a local man of eminence. People began to ask him for help with troublesome landlords and employers and he enjoyed his new status as a 'social worker', someone whose word, or presence, could solve problems. The more respectable and educated families in his neighborhood despised him intensely, however. They would never

dream of approaching him or asking for his help. Rumor had it that he was not a proper Khan, although his surname was Khan. 'He is just a *jidaiia*' I was told several times by people referring to the traditional, and derogatory, name for the north Indian Ansari weaving community that made up a majority of the population in the locality and who had worked in the textile mills. 'His father changed his name when he came to Bombay', I was told by high-status Khans who only grudgingly accepted the gradual elevation of the *Jidaiia*/Ansaris to the status of proper Muslims. Some Khans felt that the name taken by this community—Ansari (Arabic for the helpers of the Prophet)—in itself was a provocation.

Javeed was acutely aware of the precariousness of his own reputation and he consistently downplayed the fact that his efficacy as a 'social worker' was built on a reputation for violence. It was widely assumed that because he had been to prison, and had been released early, he had multiple connections with the underworld. As elsewhere in the world, the assumption in central Bombay was that 'you go to prison as a local boy and return as a *bhai* (gangster)', as a friend put it to me.

Javeed tried to build up a more respectable image of himself. He claimed that the experience in prison had taught him humility and to respect Allah. He went to the local mosque now and then, and was adamant that his sons should grow up knowing about the faith (*din*). Both his sons and his daughters had attended a local English-medium convent school, and both the boys had been sent to the *madrasah* from an early age. None of them had become particularly observant Muslims but Hanif was very sympathetic to a broadly Islamist ideology, mostly because of its message of strength and assertion of identity.

Javeed donated money to several local *madrasas* as well as to his old gymkhana although he was unhappy with the new caretaker. 'He allows all these rich boys from Bandra to use our facilities.... They come in their Marutis to do bodybuilding and all that...our young boys just hang around doing nothing.' Javeed deplored the fact that the recently upgraded gymkhana was now run as a modern gym while the gravel pit where he trained for years was hardly used anymore. For him this was another sign of the weakness and loss of strength that was the cause of the predicament of Muslims in India. Although liberal with his sons' behavior, Javeed had rather conservative ideas about family life and about how a respectable Muslim should behave. He spent most of his time out and about while his wife and daughters spent most of their time in the family home. Yet, Javeed

¹ Sudhir Kakar describes the melancholic feeling of decay and loss of *hukumat* (the will/ability to rule) among Muslims in Hyderabad (Kakar 1996).

was not a flamboyant man who loved attention and visibility. He was always impatient, straight to the point and preferred to meet people in his workplace or inside houses rather than in the street or the *chai* shop. None of his men dressed in the 'fimi' *dada*-style (sunglasses, leather jacket, etc.) which Javeed regarded as ridiculous and 'like Shah Rukh Khan', that is, men who dress up for the girls. Javeed was never impressed by the playboy style of Dawood Ibrahim, the famous expatriate gangster king of Bombay. He did admire Dawood for one thing though—his self-respect: 'We should all be like Dawood' he once told me 'we should respect ourselves'. He obviously preferred Haji Mastaan, the legendary smuggler king of the 1960s and 1970s since the latter had claimed that he had been reformed, and had styled himself as a melancholic and pious 'philosopher king' in the later part of his life.

Javeed's physical movements were quick and his bearing exuded a nervous energy and will power that made his men submit to every wish he had. When he moved around in the streets, or in his car, people would smile and show deference and respect. Many would also cast nervous glances in his direction as if they expected something bad or violent to happen by virtue of his mere presence. There was this indefinable aura around the man, a kind of 'dark energy', which undoubtedly had to do with a reputation that was heroic, menacing, and violent at the same time. His men were indeed known as brutal enforcers and debt collectors, I was told, but no-one had ever witnessed Javeed himself hurt anyone since he returned from prison. His reputation was established and had acquired a life of its own, based on rumors, whispers and stories.

His conduct during the riots in 1993 had improved and confirmed his standing as a fighter and defender of the neighborhood. Javeed and his men, including Junaid, had been awake night and day during those weeks. They had patrolled the streets and warded off several attacks by groups of men organized by the Shiv Sena. The most intense confrontations had taken place around a particular street with traditional *chawls*—some Hindu, others Muslim. 'We call this area Jammu and Kashmir' Javeed's brother told me. 'We were there, defending the Muslim side and we kept them out of our *mohalla*', he claimed. While many locals acknowledged these deeds, others pointed out that Javeed was weak because he was an enemy of the police. This was why he could do nothing to help ease the curfew imposed on the area for many days during the riots. Javeed had no clout with the police and it was only after a group of mothers had marched to the police station to demand milk and food after five days of curfew that the police had given in.

Javeed never spoke of that incident but never denied it either. For his reputation, the distance to the police was of utmost importance. The men who worked with the police as informers and 'helpers' were like women, he claimed, men without honor and self-respect. 'They are all *jilatias*' he used to say, 'a Khan would never help the Shiv Sena police', as he always referred to the police force. Whether Javeed was forced to pay *hafia* to the police, like most other businessmen, was impossible to say but he carefully maintained the public image as a self-reliant man, an antithesis to the police, and therefore a law unto himself.

A few years before I met him he had joined the Samajwadi Party and was now chairing its local branch. He identified strongly with Mulayam Singh whose rhetoric and strong stance against Hindutva he admired. 'I am not anti-Hindu but I am against people who speak with sweetness and then stab you in the back....Congress, the BJP and also Janata Dal.....Thackeray is my enemy because he is against Muslims but you know what he stands for, he is direct (*sida*) and I respect that.'

Javeed was instrumental in getting Mulayam Singh to his area several times and the Samajwadis have done well among the Muslims in his locality. He was proud of his work and considered running for the post as Municipal Councillor in his ward. But something held him back and he was not so keen on campaigning, persuading people to give him their vote. Somehow I could not imagine this proud man humbly asking for votes from voters, pledging to serve the locality as most candidates do all the time. Javeed was used to getting his way, not asking for favors. I asked him whether he would stand in the future and he smiled and gave me an enigmatic answer that summed up his life and his experience: 'I know what visibility (*dikhna*) can bring.' In some ways this also summed up a broader sentiment of apprehension and angry patience among the Muslims in his locality.