

Zorawar Singh Shokeen, mid-level political broker and property dealer, was our landlord. A strapping six-foot-two-inches tall half-Jat half-Gujjar from Chandrawal, full bearded, with a dandy's studied taste in clothes, he usually wore deep pink or lemon yellow bespoke silk shirts with gold cufflinks that brought out his peaches and cream complexion. The colour of his eyes was light brown to go with his beard. He was forty years old and for the last ten years had been the terror of Chandrawal, Shakti Nagar, Roop Nagar, Kamala Nagar, Vijay Nagar, Maurice Nagar, Mukherjee Nagar, Indira Vihar and other areas adjoining Delhi University. He was rumoured to be close to H.K.L. Bhagat, still then the undisputed New Delhi Congress boss, whom he called 'kaana' with the proud contempt that only close familiarity breeds. An obvious reference to the vain Bhagat's damaged eye.

Sometimes Zorawar would be picked up from Shokeen Niwas in a white Ambassador car with a red flashing light on the top, tinted windows and a Black Cat commando in the front seat. Zorawar would quickly get into the back beside a small gnome-like silhouette and then the Ambassador would reverse in full speed and turn towards Bungalow Road. All sirens blaring.

Jishnu da was the de facto caretaker of Shokeen Niwas. In his first year itself Jishnu da had endeared himself to Zorawar Singh, showing great presence of mind one evening when the enraged Sikh husband of a 'Madam' Zorawar was screwing quite frequently at the time arrived at the doorstep of the hostel with a Matador van full of sword-wielding sardars. Zorawar was at the time doing his thing to 'Madam' who was on her knees at the edge of the bed with a mouthful of pillow. In Jishnu da's room, of course. Hearing the commotion Jishnu da peeked out from the balcony and gauging the situation correctly, locked his room from the outside. He then gathered a couple of boys from the other rooms who were there at that time of the afternoon and went downstairs to meet the sardars who were trying to break open the front gates.

After instructing the boys, young kids from Chapra who had arrived only a week earlier, to just stand behind him coolly and not say a word, Jishnu da draped his cotton checked towel over his shoulders. Like a warrior's mail. Then, showing enormous pluck he opened the front gate, yawned, rubbed his eyes and demanded quietly, 'Madharchod, what the fuck do you want?' or something to that effect, of the sardar who was banging on the door with the steel hilt of his sword. Taken aback by the sight of this emaciated five-feet-five-inches tall rangbaz in a Sandow ganji of indeterminate colour and Tweety Pie Bermudas, not to mention the self-same checked towel, the sardar replied, 'Where is Zorawar Singh Shokeen? He has kidnapped my wife.'

‘Is that the problem? Then rest assured he is not here. Haven’t seen him here for weeks. Actually no, come to think of it, he did come here with a sardarni a couple of weeks back but she was very friendly with him. Couldn’t have kidnapped her. Probably some other sardarni, not your wife,’ Jishnu da informed the sardar in an indifferent manner and kept rubbing his eyes and yawning. At this, unable to contain his rage any longer, the sardar slapped Jishnu da and he in turn latched on to the sardar’s luxuriant beard with all his strength. Farid Ashraf and Ramanuj Ghosh who were behind Jishnu da joined the fray along with the other sardars. There was a lot of wild shouting, murderous threats, but very little actual violence.

‘I am telling you,’ Jishnu da shouted still hanging on to the sardar, ‘that uncle is not here, screwing your wife. If you don’t go away, all the twenty-five boys I have upstairs will come down and break your asses.’ He then shouted to the only boy upstairs, looking down from the first floor balcony. ‘Tell Panday and Mumtaz to take out the kattas.’

The sardars, confused by the bluster, deciding that Jishnu must be telling the truth after all, slowly retreated. After the Matador had backed out of the lane, Farid and Ramanuj almost collapsed with relief in the doorway. Jishnu da wiped the sweat from his armpits with his towel and then dramatically tied it around his head like a peasant and lit a Navy Cut.

‘Boss, what were you trying to do, get us killed?’ Farid Ashraf inquired after a while.

‘Never under any circumstance back down in a fight or have a dialogue or compromise. No fight lasts more than five minutes. Remember that always. Never try to have a rational conversation with anyone who is trying to fuck you. He will then fuck you. But if you call him a motherfucker and offer to cut his throat, he will respect you. But when you say those words you must mean them, from the bottom of your heart. Just like in the song.’

Farid and Ramanuj looked at Jishnu da with profound incomprehension but thought it better to nod their heads in agreement.

‘Both of you did good.’ Jishnu da passed the Navy Cut to Ramanuj. He then went upstairs and opened his locked room. Just as he triumphantly pushed open the door, a deafening roar erupted from inside the room. Zorawar Singh had opened fire from the Mauser that he always carried in his trouser pocket. Though the bullet just grazed his hair, Jishnu da collapsed to the floor and fainted.

A close bond was forged that day between Zorawar Singh and Jishnu da, and it had continued unabated to the present times. From that day onwards Jishnu da had lived rent free at

Shokeen Niwas and was given carte blanche as to the running of the place, the vetting of tenants, the collection of rents. He was the hostel president for life, so to say.