

By TARUN J TEJPAL

# Death Of A Salesman and Other Elite Ironies

ROHINTON MALOO was shot doing two things he enjoyed immensely. Eating good food and tossing new ideas. He was among the 13 diners at the Kandahar, Trident-Oberoi, who were marched out onto the service staircase, ostensibly as hostages. But the killers had nothing to bargain for. The answers to the big questions — Babri Masjid, Gujarat, Muslim persecution — were beyond the power of anyone to deliver neatly to the hotel lobby. The small ones — of money and materialism — their crazed indoctrination had already taken them well beyond. With the final banality of all fanaticism, flaunting the paradox of modern technology and medieval fervour — AK-47 in one hand; mobile *phone in the other* — *the killers asked their minders, "Udan dein?"* The minder, probably a maintainer of cold statistics, said, "*Uda do.*"



Rohinton caught seven bullets, and by the time his body was recovered, it could only be identified by the ring on his finger. Rohinton was just 48, with two teenage children, and a hundred plans. A few of these had to do with TEHELKA, where he was a strategic advisor for the last two years. As Indians, we seldom have a good word to say about the living, but in the dead we discover virtues that strain the imagination. Perhaps it

has to do with a strange mix of driving envy and blinding piety. Let me just say Rohinton was charismatic, ambitious, and a man of his time, and place. The time was always now, and in his outstanding career in media marketing, he was ever at the cutting edge of the new — in the creation of Star Networks, and a score of ventures on the web. The place was always Mumbai, the city he grew up in and lived in, and he exemplified its attitudes: the hedonism, the get-go, the easy pluralism.

For me there is a deep irony in his death. He was killed by what he set very little store by. In his every meeting with us, he was bemused and baffled by TEHELKA's obsessive engagement with politics. He was quite sure no one of his class — our class — was interested in the subject. Politics happened elsewhere, a regrettable business carried out

by unsavoury characters. Mostly, it had nothing to do with our lives. Eventually, sitting through our political ranting, he came to grudgingly accept we may have some kind of a case. But he remained unconvinced of its commercial viability. Our kind of readers were interested in other things, which were germane to their lives — food, films, cricket, fashion, gizmos, television, health and the strategies of seduction. Politics, at best, was something they endured.

In the end, politics killed Rohinton, and a few hundred other innocents. In the final count, politics, every single day, is killing, impoverishing, starving, denigrating, millions of Indians all across the country. If the backdrop were not so heartbreaking, the spectacle of the nation's elite — the keepers of most of our wealth and privilege — frothing on television screens and screaming through mobile phones would be amusing. They have been outraged because the enduring tragedy of India has suddenly arrived in their marbled precincts. The Taj, the Oberoi. We dine here. We sleep here. Is nothing sacrosanct in this country any more?



What the Indian elite is discovering today on the debris of fancy eateries is an acidic truth large numbers of ordinary Indians are forced to swallow every day. Children who die of malnutrition, farmers who commit suicide, dalits who are raped and massacred, tribals who are turfed out of century old habitats, peasants whose lands are taken over for car factories, minorities who are bludgeoned into paranoia — these, and many others, know that something is grossly wrong. The system does not work, the system is cruel, the system is unjust, the system exists to only serve those who run it. Crucially, what we, the elite, need to understand is that most of us are complicit in the system. In fact, chances are the more we have — of privilege and money — the more invested we are in the shoring up of an unfair state.

IT IS time each one of us understood that at the heart of every society is its politics. If the politics is third-rate, the condition of the society will be no better. For too many decades now, the elite of India has washed its hands off the country's politics. Entire generations have grown up viewing it as a distasteful activity. In an astonishing perversion, the finest imaginative act of the last thousand years on the subcontinent, the creation and flowering of the idea of modern India through mass politics, has for the last 40 years been rendered infra dig, déclassé, uncool. Let us blame our parents, and let our children blame us, for not bequeathing onwards the sheer beauty of a collective vision, collective will, and collective action. In a word, politics: which, at its best, created the wonder of a liberal and democratic idea, and at its worst threatens to tear it down.

We stand faulted then in two ways. For turning our back on the collective endeavour; and for our passive embrace of the status quo. This is in equal parts due to selfish instinct and to shallow thinking. Since shining India is basically only about us getting an even greater share of the pie, we have been happy to buy its half-truths, and look away from the rest of the sordid story. Like all elites, historically, that have presided over the decline of their societies, we focus too much of our energy on acquiring and consuming, and too little on thinking and decoding. Egged on by a helium media, we exhaust ourselves through paroxysms over vacant celebrities and trivia, quite happy not to see what might cause us discomfort.

For years, it has been evident that we are a society being systematically hollowed out by inequality, corruption, bigotry and lack of justice. The planks of public discourse have increasingly been divisive, widening the faultlines of caste, language, religion, class, community and region. As the elite of the most complex society in the world, we have failed to see that we are ratcheted into an intricate framework, full of causal links, where one wrong word begets another, one horrific event leads to another. Where one man's misery will eventually trigger another's.

Let's track one causal chain. The Congress creates Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to neutralise the Akalis; Bhindranwale creates terrorism; Indira Gandhi moves against terrorism; terrorism assassinates Indira Gandhi; blameless Sikhs are slaughtered in Delhi; in the course of a decade, numberless innocents, militants, and security men die. Let's track another. The BJP takes out an inflammatory rath yatra; inflamed kar sewaks pull down the Babri Masjid; riots ensue; vengeful Muslims trigger Mumbai blasts; 10 years later a bogey of kar sewaks is burnt in Gujarat; in the next week 2,000 Muslims are slaughtered; six years later retaliatory violence continues. Let's track one more. In the early 1940s, in the midst of the freedom movement, patrician Muslims demand a separate homeland; Mahatma Gandhi opposes it; the British support it; Partition ensues; a million people are slaughtered; four wars follow; two countries drain each other through rhetoric and poison; nuclear arsenals are built; hotels in Mumbai are attacked.

IN EACH of these rough causal chains, there is one thing in common. Their origin in the decisions of the elite. Interlaced with numberless lines of potential divisiveness, the India framework is highly delicate and complicated. It is critical for the elite to understand the framework, and its role in it. The elite has its hands on the levers of capital, influence and privilege. It can fix the framework. It has much to give, and it must give generously. The mass, with nothing in its hands, nothing to give, can out of frustration and anger, only pull it all down. And when the volcano blows, rich and poor burn alike.

And so what should we be doing? Well, screaming at politicians is certainly not political engagement. And airy socialites demanding the carpet-bombing of Pakistan and the boycott of taxes are plain absurd, just another neon sign advertising shallow thought. It's the kind of dumb public theatre the media ought to deftly side-step rather than showcase. The world is already over-shrill with animus: we need to tone it down, not add to it. Pakistan is itself badly damaged by the flawed politics at its heart. It needs help, not bombing. Just remember, when hardboiled bureaucrats clench their teeth, little children die.

Most of the shouting of the last few days is little more than personal catharsis through public venting. The fact is the politician has been doing what we have been doing, and as an über Indian he has been doing it much better. Watching out for himself, cornering maximum resource, and turning away from the challenge of the greater good.

The first thing we need to do is to square up to the truth. Acknowledge the fact that we have made a fair shambles of the project of nation-building. Fifty million Indians doing well does not for a great India make, given that 500 million are grovelling to survive. Sixty years after independence, it can safely be said that India's political leadership — and the nation's elite — have badly let down the country's dispossessed and wretched. If you care to look, India today is heartbreak hotel, where infants die like flies, and equal opportunity is a cruel mirage.

Let's be clear we are not in a crisis because the Taj hotel was gutted. We are in a crisis because six years after 2,000 Muslims were slaughtered in Gujarat there is still no sign of justice. This is the second thing the elite need to understand — after the obscenity of gross inequality. The plinth of every society — since the beginning of Man — has been set on the notion of justice. You cannot light candles for just those of your class and creed. You have to strike a blow for every wronged citizen.

And let no one tell us we need more laws. We need men to implement those that we have. Today all our institutions and processes are failing us. We have compromised each of them on their values, their robustness, their vision and their sense of fairplay. Now, at every crucial juncture we depend on random acts of individual excellence and courage to save the day. Great systems, triumphant societies, are veined with ladders of inspiration. Electrified by those above them, men strive to do their very best. Look around. How many constables, head constables, sub-inspectors would risk their lives for the dishonest, weak men they serve, who in turn serve even more compromised masters?

I wish Rohinton had survived the lottery of death in Mumbai last week. In an instant, he would have understood what we always went on about. India's crying need is not economic tinkering or social engineering. It is a political overhaul, a political cleansing. As it once did to create a free nation, India's elite should start getting its hands dirty so they can get a clean country.