

The Uprising by Nilanjan Bhowmick

Morning. Winter.

An officer of the government of India strode to his office with a slim VIP briefcase in one hand, dread in his heart and the firm belief in his mind that the country had gone to dogs.

Three things that he always carried with him.

There was complete silence in the corridor. Silent benches, silent doors, silent walls.

He pushed the heavy wooden door, which had his name embossed on a shiny metal strip, and entered his chamber.

The chamber was spacious with an oversized glass topped L-shaped table plunked at a difficult angle. There were three push button telephones arranged neatly in a row on the table. Files lay stacked in a dead heap to one side. There was a bookcase in the room, choked with codes and manuals completely unrelated to his work.

A faint, musty smell pervaded the chamber. He kept his VIP briefcase on the glass topped table, walked over to the window and threw back the curtains keeping his breathing in control, mindful of the ages of dust that could billow out and cause an allergic fit.

The morning sun straggled in, revealing the carpeted floor, the grimy fan, and three creaking chairs.

He glanced at his Titan watch, a marriage present, a delectable icing on the sumptuous cake of dowry.

The golden hands showed ten o'clock sharp. The officer was pleased. He couldn't help give a self-satisfied smile. Ten o'clock. The exact time for a government officer and his staff to show up in office. Well, a government officer could be allowed to be ten or fifteen minutes late but the staff, they have to show up at ten o'clock. He even felt, in his inmost self, that a class-one officer like him could walk in and walk out anytime. After all, they – especially *he* – had so many responsibilities. They could discharge their duties better by being mobile, on the move, coming surprisingly late and leaving without notice. But he kept such revolutionary thoughts to himself.

Ten o'clock, then. For everyone.

He groped under the L-shaped table for the bell. He always had to grope for it, even after having spent six months in this chamber after having been posted to the town of M.

Finding it finally, he gave a shrill ring.

Short. Exclamatory. Announcing his presence.

He settled down in his Godrej executive chair and waited for someone to show up.

But there was silence. Pin-Drop.

Flustered and annoyed, he rang the bell again. A long, hard, deep ring, painful to the ears.

No one answered.

A poisonous well of hatred and anger bubbled inside him. Where were all the lousy nincompoops?, he thought.

Someone had to be pulled up for this. Responsibility had to be fixed.

He decided to call his Section Officer, Establishment Matters, Estt. for short. Sometimes just E.

He dialed on the intercom.

The phone rang ten times and then died, replaced by a dull dial tone.

He tried Section Officer, Public Information.

The phone rang a predictable ten times and disconnected.

Frustrated, he rang the bell again.

He hated the sound the bell made and he often rang it to feel the hatred rising in himself, like mercury in a thermometer.

An unfamiliar face peeped in.

“Koi nahin hai, saheb.”

“No one’s there!” the officer spluttered. “What do you mean by no one’s there? It is already ten twenty.”

“No one’s there!” the officer spluttered. “What do you mean by no one’s there? It is already ten twenty.” He showed his glittering watch to the man.

The unfamiliar face looked puzzled.

“Don’t look at me like a fool. Find out where everyone is,” he shouted.

The man disappeared.

Silence descended, like a curtain in a theatre. The officer swallowed hard.

His day had begun the way it always did. Dread gripped him. Nothing was in his control. No one listened to him. People came and went whenever they liked. Sweat broke out. He searched his mind frantically for a solution to this situation. Could he ever bring anyone in line? He jumped up from his Godrej executive chair and rushed out having no idea what he was going to do.

His office was big; many halls each lined with long rows of desks and stools, which looked like broken, abandoned furniture. Typewriters lay festooned on the desks. Carbon paper lay strewn over the floor.

Not one man, not a soul could be found.

The walls, the floor, the desks, the files, all lay lifeless.

Fury blazed through the officer.

He checked another hall. One clerk graced an invisible corner. The clerk shrank back at his sight.

The officer wanted to do something violent but he lost heart and retraced his steps to his chamber like a tired batsman after a long innings at the crease. Once inside, the swelling magma of anger blew his top.

“The effrontery of it, the gall, the chutzpah,” he muttered to himself, grinding his teeth. “What do these people think of themselves? Do they think they will get away with this?”

He planned to throw a harsh volley of insults at his staff. The moment he thought of this, his mood changed, became light, the fury climbing down.

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Just let them come, he thought with glee. I will make them think again of coming late. First, I will call for the attendance register. Just casually, as if it is nothing. A small thing to check. Then, when I have it in front of me I will cross out with a red pen each and every unsigned square in that wretched register.

A joyous sensation leapt up within him. He began to walk to-and-fro in his chamber, throwing his arms about, as if pushing at an invisible crowd.

I will have them all groveling at my feet for mercy. Oh, just for once, only this time, forgive us, sir. Please sir. Tomorrow we will be on time, sir.

Tomorrow, he imagined himself shouting. You wretches, there is no tomorrow in my dictionary.

No sir, please sir, no sir. We won't repeat this mistake. Please let us off this once, sir.

A smile, almost beatific, played on his lips.

I am not going to spare any one of them. I will file a charge sheet against the whole lot today. I will chop their increments, mince their free passes, incinerate their leave applications, cut their very throats for their perennial insolence.

I am not going to spare any one of them. I will file a charge sheet against the whole lot today. I will chop their increments, mince their free passes, incinerate their leave applications, cut their very throats for their perennial insolence. And I will follow all this with pointed confidence, to be pasted with Fevicol in their service records. A confidential to my clerk R S Sharma, my assistant J P Mahato, my Section Officer, D T P Singh. And to Mrs Sengupta, my secretary? What will I do to her? What can *anyone* do to her? What possible heights can punishment rise to equal her unbounded discipline? She hardly comes to work. When she does, she brings her tale of woes along. Her drunken husband. Her unemployed children. Her mortgaged house. Her loan payments. Ha! There will be no mercy this time. I will – he clapped ecstatically – S-U-S-P-E-N-D her. That will bring her to her senses. Teach her to be more responsible.

He whirled around in his chamber and went charging to the other side.

And there is more I will do. I will carry out a sudden, penetrating and damaging inspection. When they least expect it. When they are sleeping in their chairs. When they have had lunch and are conversing with each other, like women, like tribals. That is when I will strike deep into their territory. The fusillade will be terrible. The damage shall be irreversible.

Their terrible standards of working shall be exposed. Their incomprehensible writing, their appalling composition, their fraudulent designs, their laziness, their corruption – all will tumble out bare and naked in the glaring sun of my brilliant inspection. I will burn them like a magnifying glass burns paper. I will send the inspection note typed in Microsoft Word, Times New Roman, (or if they like Comic Sans Serif, then Comic Sans Serif it will be) font size 12 to my Superiors, class 1 officers all. They – my Superiors – will be surprised at my hard work. My dedication. My inventiveness. And then, as my staff will see my ardor cool (I will do that deliberately) and will let their guard down and get back to their old ways, I will ambush them. I will liberally hand out ill-deserved suspensions, a few removals, one or two compulsory retirements.. There will be chaos, fear, trembling.

He turned around. It was ten forty five.

Speaking of chaos, do these ungrateful people, these work shirkers, know the bewilderment and pain in my life. Here I am, a city-bred man, born in a city, schooled in English, a University scholar, a respectful rank in the civil services, married to a high-ranking police officer's daughter, what am I, me, myself, possibly doing here? Here, this abominable town of two streets, matchstick markets, interminable rains, where Lux is a luxury and owning a car—a sure sign of black money. This town of small achievements, frazzled ambitions, local, incomprehensible cultures. This town with no bookshops, no restaurants. At home, everyday, I have to hear my wife's tirades and have to be reminded of the huge dowry she brought me: the ornate furniture, the heavy immovable bed, the arty, tribal, dysfunctional crockery, the loads of jewellery, the unused, ironed suits. My children are veritable devils. They are dull and disgustingly stupid and I have to request the teachers to give them passing marks so as to tell my colleagues that they are doing well in education.

What do these people know of chaos? Everyday, I face bewilderment. Even though I have no work, I feel wretched and completely worn out. I have grown silent and miserable. Everyday, I have to see nothing happening and nothing working.

And yet, and yet – his arms opened in a flourish as a conductor's would in an orchestra – and yet, *I* come on time. The least I can expect from these miserable nitwits is at least to show me some respect, admit my presence. I am not an invisible man.

A shadow of misery fell upon the officer's face. He had skill, patience, attitude, and education. He had a position in society. Who were this vermin to show him his place, drag his eminence down, make him feel depressed, impotent.

Impotent!!! He jumped at this word. His eyes bulged out and his nerves stood on end. Impotent! Oh, no, sir, no, never. Masters will be masters and slaves will be slaves. Otherwise, the nation, already gone to the dogs, will fall to the jackals and vultures.

He whirled around.

There will be unrest, and if required, rebellion, an uprising to restore the rights of the Masters, the Officers of the nation.. Slaves can't have it all their own way. We struggle, we slog, we sweat. They can't go home without doing a thing. We have to organize ourselves, be responsible, hold out against the silent erosion of our rights. We can't allow indiscipline to spread. Never, Never.

"Never", a shout escaped from his tight lips and he rushed to his L-shaped table and groped for the bell and gave a sharp, hellish ring.

“What’s wrong, sir?”, a voice piped out of somewhere alarmingly close.

It was his officious administration clerk with the attendance register.

The officer realized with panic that the man was standing right next to his desk. How long had he been inside his chamber? Did he see me rushing about in my room, throwing my arms about?

Shame consumed him. However, he collected his nerves and coolly looked at his watch.

Eleven o’ clock. A stern look settled on his face.

“May I sign, sir”, the clerk said, with a disarming smile. “My wife is expecting, sir. Had to take her to the doctor, sir.”

The officer waved his hand in despair.

As his men trooped in one by one and signed on the little blank squares drawn on shabby paper, the officer threw the idea of the uprising away, stowed his rebellion inside his heart, stifled the unrest in his breast and began clearing files.

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Another day had finally got on its way.

Nilanjan Bhowmick works as an Assistant Professor in the department of philosophy at Faculty of Arts with University of Delhi. Her interests lie in philosophy of language, philosophy of literature and she writes short stories.

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