

William Darlymple: The City of Djinns

Semester 6

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Chapter 2 of *The City of Djinns* begins with the assassination of Indira Gandhi on the 31st of October, 1984. It was her Sikh, security guard, Sub-inspector Beant Singh who pulled out his revolver and shot Mrs Gandhi in the stomach. This was followed by a volley of bullets from the sten gun of Beant Singh's friend and associate Constable Satwant Singh. Mrs Gandhi's residence was later turned into a shrine in honour of her memory. The house which has now become a museum of sorts frequented by school children seems to have been frozen in time carrying all the memorabilia of a life cut short – a game of Scrabble, a signed photograph from Ho-Chi-Minh "loving greetings to Indira", a pair of knitting needles and an odd assortment of books which included, Marx, Malraux and *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*. The memorial erected where she fell under a deluge of twenty bullet wounds was decorated with a bouquet of red glass roses from Czechoslovakia. It was Sonia Gandhi, Indira's daughter in law who had driven her to the All India Medical Institute bundled up in an old, ramshackle Hindustan Ambassador. But Mrs Gandhi was declared dead on arrival. When the news was finally made public around 1'o clock the effect was almost immediate sending the crowd off on a wild, violent murderous spree as they gathered up an ammunition of sticks and stones and went looking for the Sikhs. Mr and Mrs Puri who in those times lived adjacent to the Medical Institute were the first victim of mob violence. Mrs Puri had just wrapped up her lunch comprising of dal, two vegetable and an aloo paratha and had settled down to her daily ritual of knitting when she spotted a mob of some three hundred hooligans and angry thugs gathering around their garden gate chanting: 'Khoon ka badla khoon' Judging by appearance she presumed they were jungli uncivilized and from backward castes. She instructed her servant Ladoo to bolt the door to shut out the mob. The mob which had murder on its mind launched a shower of stones which shattered all the glass windows. The family turned off the lights and pretended there was no one home. The mob wreaked havoc outside, they burnt the Puri's car and set their son's motor bike on fire, smashed every window before charging at the front door. It took three gun shots from Mr Puri's revolver to scatter the gathering. Mr Puri who was

staunchly guarding the door then advised Ladoo to throw it open and he fired the remaining bullets at the crowd forcing them to take to their heels and run helter-skelter. Within an interval of three hours Balvinder Singh cruising in his Taxi in the Green Park area close to the Medical Institute was confronted by another mob who circled the Taxi and pelted it with stones. Although Balvinder was unhurt his windscreen was completely smashed. The next day Balvinder and his brothers who were at the Taxi stand alarmed by the empty streets decided to stow away their vehicles from the public eye fearing there was a riot brewing in the city driven by strong anti-Sikh sentiments. At five past eleven they received an intimation of violence at the nearby Sujjan Singh Park Gurdwara which had been set on fire. A large lynch mob was gradually inching towards them. Leaving everything the brothers rushed to their house across Jumna and 12 cousins in a convoy of three taxis took flight from the city. As they reached one of the bridges across the river they were flagged down by a police patrol who advised them to stay put as riots had flared up on the far side. Balvinder's father Punjab Singh aware that there were riots all around and in case they failed to escape the precincts of the city the mob would not spare them insisted on proceeding inspite of the warnings. Besides their wives and children needed protection back in their hometown. Balvinder's family drove uninterrupted for the next five minutes before they ran into a road block at Laxmi Nagar. A burning truck lay across the road and behind it a crowd of men with clubs and iron bars waited in ambush. The first two cars containing Punjab, Balvinder and two of his brothers managed to swerve past the truck and drive past the crowd. The third taxi with three of Punjab's nephews was brought to a halt; the men were pulled out, beaten with rods, doused with kerosene and set ablaze. To protect them from the violence Balvinder and his brothers cut their hair and shaved their beards although it caused Punjab much unease and he refused food for a whole week in atonement. As a measure of protection the family upon reaching their hometown retreated to a Sikh enclave, a colony of Sikhs armed with kirpans and created makeshift vigilante teams to guard their narrow alleys. For four consecutive days they lived in confinement under siege before the army was deployed to scatter the rioters and neutralize the violence. Bulwan, Balvinder's elder brother's house was burnt, much property was damaged. The taxi shack was demolished, its primus telephone and three charpoys stolen as an aftermath of the riots. The backseat of Balvinder's taxi, its meter and battery removed and there was

much financial setback in terms of losses but the family was luckier than other families who had faced severe brutalities.

Questions:

What caused the anti-Sikh riots? Describe the brutality of the riots as narrated by the Puris and Balvinder?(10)

Why do you think Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated? (5)

Explain what do you understand by riots and identify some of their underlying causes. (10)