

I don't know if i can
call



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I don't know if I can call it an accident or not, but it was the most tragic thing that I have witnessed in my life.

But I say it is an accident because none of us-not even one of the two thousand odd people that had either witnessed or suffered had even the remotest chance of expectation. They never could have even dreamt of such a thing, though we know certain things like that would happen, that sometimes aeroplanes are hijacked and sometimes they crash. Only hours after the occurrence, we came to know the truth. After a jolly holiday at Hyderabad, I packed my baggage and boarded the Charminar Express.

But before I did that, I looked at the rather the twin cities where the south and the north so conspicuously meet and mix and said good bye. The love I bore for the city and the attraction it held for me, made me to decide to come back sometime again and spend a longer and more satisfying holiday. But now for my good old Madras! I looked for my seat, pushed my baggage under it and sat with thoughts of home haunting. But then, I suddenly remembered that my canteen was empty and it needed filling I drink quite a lot of water when I am out on my journey by train.

As I filled the canteen, the train roared a thundering take off and I hurried back to my seat. I looked for my ticket. Soon the T.

C. would come and ask for it. I took it out, looked at it, read the Department's wishes for my happy journey ' Subh yatra' and pushed it back into my pocket with a smile that lingered for a pretty long moment. Soon we passed Kazipet. Many of those that had carried their food baskets with them,

opened them up and ate their meal, enjoying every bite they had, talking and joking.

I too took out my small pack of biscuits, munched a few and rounded it off with a cup of hot coffee. As the other passengers began to turn in for the night's repose, I too spread my bed, but I could not force myself to sleep. As I lay awake my mind was filled with thoughts of the trouble brewing in Andhra Pradesh. It was not due to anti-national upsurge or communal ill feelings. It was because of some misunderstanding that surfaced between some political parties. This small misunderstanding fanned and fuelled spread like wild fire. These sorts of feuds were not limited to South India alone. But what I had seen with my own eyes was uppermost in my mind now and I felt that in spite of our claim, we are no better than our neighbouring countries.

If we are like this even after 4 decades of independence who are to blame? The leaders or the people or both? Any way violence had become the order of the day. The whole compartment was asleep as I was thus engrossed in my thoughts. It was past midnight and the train stopped for a few minutes at some station and again resumed its midnight trekking.

But then all in a sudden, I heard loud heartrending cries, shrill voices groaning in pain and shouting for help. I thought something terrible had happened. The next minute the train came to a grinding halt. And as I looked through the window, I could see the whole dark sky lit with something burning.

It was another compartment of the train at the rear. By now all were awake and we all rushed out at once. We saw the general compartment burning. Great God! What a terrible thing to happen! The yawning flames rose like burning clouds up into the dark sky. It seemed to spread to other compartments. The guard and the driver came; people gathered around. Nobody knew what to do. Someone from the crowd suggested that the burning compartment should be detached.

At once the driver and his crew sprang into action. They engaged themselves in this terrifying task for more than half an hour and luckily their labour bore fruit-such an endeavour. The compartment was at last delinked on both sides while the people rose like one man and pushed the few bogies that were behind, the driver ran to his cab and drove the other part of the train in the opposite, direction thus leaving the burning compartment completely isolated. While this task of detaching the bogie was in progress other people were hard at work breaking the doors and windows of the burning compartment. They were not afraid of the sextupling heat, nor cared for their lives. Pouring water over their heads they got into the compartment and brought the few that were still alive, into the open, while a few others, perhaps qualified doctors and nurses, began to render them first aid.

Those that escaped unhurt narrated the ghastly event. When the train stopped at some unknown station a few armed youth entered the compartment. Just seconds after the train started, they quickly locked all the doors except one, poured petrol, which they carried in cans, on the floor and walls of the compartment and set fire to it; as the train picked up speed, they jumped down and vanished. The few that could recover from the

bewilderment, tried to escape, they did not have either the time or the presence of mind to pull the chain and bring the train to stop. But the guard, who saw the sudden and unexpected blow in the compartment as he stood at the entrance of his cabin, stopped the train.

And so, it was not really by accident that the compartment caught fire but by design, by a few misguided youth bent upon creating violence. It appears that when someone tried to pull the chain as they were sprinkling petrol, he was fatally wounded. Relief squads came before it was morning: All the people who suffered from burns were removed; and the bogies which were detached were again connected to the main body of the train. Vendors suddenly appeared with their wares and offered steaming coffee and tea in paper cups; people ate greedily, drank their favourite coffee or tea and boarded the train. As the sun rose in all his glory the train puffed off and the people absorbed themselves in talking about and narrating their own versions of the ghastly scene.

Within minutes, when all the people-the vendors, the onlookers and the people on official duty left, there would not be anything but the burnt bogie to testify to the blood curdling atrocity committed on the innocent children, women and old people who had nothing to do with the political currents and cross currents. When the bogie too was removed, the steep hills and the deep forest would alone remain silently standing as a witness to the human violence. It is a pity that it has become the cult of the day in the land where Lord Buddha and Gandhi lived and preached love and nonviolence.