

# Insistence on empathy holds the key to a society bonded by trust

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A winter bloom of mauve wildflowers is not there in my childhood memories. On one of those very paths, she strode ahead, leading me. The dog pranced around, with the full river on the right and the dazzling brush on the left bordering the dense tree-line. She saw him from a distance, swimming in that nippy morning, and began screaming as her pace increased, “Kyaa kar raha hai, Amma ke paas jaa. Jaa, jaa, nahin toh peetoongi” (what are you doing, go to mother, else I will give you a hiding). He dived and disappeared to surface near the point we had reached on the path, laughing. We strode on, her anger bubbling. “School jaana hai, dus baje, aur Amma ka itna kaam hai” (we must go to school at ten, and there is so much work we have to do for mother).

Who is he, I asked. My elder brother, she said. How much older? Two years. How old are you? Fourteen. And you will give him a thrashing? Yes, I will. I always do. He lets me, she said. He is the best brother in the world. We went up a rise, leaving the river. From the top, we could see the habitation, about 50 scattered huts. That is Amma’s hut, she pointed out. But don’t you live in the village from where we are coming, I asked. Yes, I do, she said. I have two Ammas.

Why do they kill people, she asked. Who is killing whom, I asked, mystified. Well, they just kill, don’t they? They killed Bhai, that is why Amma is alone.

We reached the habitation. Those who were waiting for me quickly commandeered me. She darted away somewhere. I had no interest in the conversation. My eyes searched for her. At the end, I asked about her. She is a very good girl, they said. Her brother is good too. They do all the work for her, pointing to an elderly lady at the back.

What is this killing that the girl was talking about, I asked. Well, the woman's son had gone to do construction work in the big city, he was killed along with others about three years ago. A police case is going on, but you know how that works, they said. Ever since, she and her brother have been doing almost everything for her. Why, I asked, and she would barely have been 11 then. We don't know, they said. Perhaps her son was kind to them. We don't think she also knows why they do all this.

We had to head back on the same path. I didn't want to walk with the others. But there was no sign of her, and I remembered that she must have gone to school. At the edge of the habitation, she appeared from within the tree-line. You didn't go to school, I asked. I want to talk to you, she said; I can be late one day—there is no problem, they like me.

We increased our pace, leaving the group behind. Why are they killing the children, she asked. What are you talking about? I know, she said, I have read, and I have seen photos. They are killing thousands of children. Who will take care of their Ammas?

You can't stop the killing? You said you work with children; Can't you do something? Anything?

You are crying, she said. No, I am not. Yes, you are. I have seen the photos, she repeated. Little girls and boys. Blood in their eyes. Buried in the rubble.

Childhood memories are tricky. Mauve wildflowers must have bloomed even then, but I don't remember. While I do remember brushing rubble dust out of the child's eye before burying her. Which I most certainly did not. It is just the photograph seared in our hearts—those who survived the fateful winter night in 1984. Most else is a blur. Stretchers, bodies, and terror. We too were children, wading into the aftermath of the worst ever industrial disaster to help. Why did we do it? I don't know. Perhaps just because we were there together.

Terrified of Diwali crackers, an innocent old dog living at the corner of a street runs and runs and runs—far away from his home. Haunted, lost somewhere in a city of 20 million people. Torn from the only people who tend to him, whom he is attached to. What do you do? You search him out 20km away and bring him back home. Isn't that impossible in that megapolis, with thousands of dogs who look identical? Not if you are ziddi enough.

Ziddi is my emblematic metaphor for everything that you need to fight the good fight, win or lose. But not just for the good fight. For something perhaps even more difficult. To be kind and caring every day to those around you. Despite our own daily demands, trivial failings and petty concerns. Despite differences and efforts to divide. Despite no inspiration from the flag,

high principles, or idealism. Just because we are there, together. Empathy, expressed in kindness and care, solidarity and fraternity in action, creates a community with trust. Living together with the dignity of each person intact.

It is also essential, though not sufficient, for the good fight to succeed. But even if the good fight fails, the old dog is back home. Perhaps a gas leak will be less tragic, no Amma will be left alone, and we may not kill our children if we are ziddi enough to be kind every day.

I am sorry I made you cry, she said. God will never forgive them. But you can't do anything, that's alright. Anyhow, you are doing other things, you are good. Still, she said, try. Because it's very bad—killing children. She waved and vanished. Ziddis like her will fulfil our tryst with destiny one day.