

A few days back, a 22-year-old young engineer at MindTree had to be pulled out of his training, put on a plane and rushed back to his home in faraway Assam. The night before, a group of gun-wielding-bigots had broken into his home and killed his mother and sister. What was the reason? His family had a non-Assamese name. Though for generations they had lived in Guwahati, they were supposedly "Biharis". What a way to start life for a 22-year-old who, until that day, had everything going for him!

There is another instance of another MindTree Mind — a young Sikh from Delhi. This very intelligent and capable young man would not trust anyone, least of all any male manager. The reason? As a four-year-old, he had witnessed men lynching his father during the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi after Indira Gandhi's assassi-

nation. His father was burnt alive by those men in front of his eyes, and he was subsequently raised by a widowed mother and an older sister.

As a small boy, I heard my mother tell me the spine-chilling stories of people crossing the borders, of rape, carnage, looting, killing and worst of all, graphic stories of how frenzied mobs boarded trains, sought out women of a particular religion and cut off their breasts.

Yesterday, sitting in my hotel room in Chennai, I was watching similar people in Mumbai kick and punch and beat up unarmed taxi drivers, smash their cabs, surround small-time shopkeepers and pavement dwellers, and push and shove them, and terrorise them in their own country only because they have come to Mumbai to work for their livelihood.

I am a Bengali from Bihar, born and brought up in Orissa, I went in

Bagchi: 'Right to remain unafraid'

search of work to Delhi and traversed many places and now I call Karnataka my home. I live in Bangalore. I, like many others, have done so because Bangalore is a cosmopolitan society where people of all hues, from all parts of the country, and now the world, work and live in peace. It is because of its quilted existence that Bangalore has become a global brand today.

But in reality, if a riot were to break out for whatever reason in the city, I could be disenfranchised in no time by a mob, with the law remaining silent. My roots, which no longer belong to a specific state, can so easily be questioned. Do I go

back to Orissa? Do I go to Bihar? Do I go to Bengal? These places are only in my memory today.

How long would it take for a fanatic here to decide that I should leave Bangalore? What would I do if a bunch of stick-wielding people I did not know stopped me on my way to work, and asked me to get out of here?

I do not know what I would do. All I know is that I would have no greater right to grieve than the 22-year-old MindTree Mind who went to cremate his mother and sister in Guwahati at an age when he should be dreaming of soft, wooly clouds and painting butterflies in his heart. I would have no greater



right to grieve than the young Sikh who would not trust anyone, and I am not entitled to any more protection than the small people being dragged and beaten on the streets of Mumbai for their sin of economic displacement.

I know that in times of acute distress, anywhere in the world, and especially in countries like ours, the state cannot come to my rescue. When everything falls, it is not the sovereign but only the civic conscience that can save, and that civic conscience today is under siege by pervasive urban anger on the one hand and the incapacity of law-enforcement because of the eroding self-confidence of an elected government, on the other.

The real choice before me is simple. Do I, or do I not, live in fear? The key word here is "live" and not just exist. To me, to live means to be able

to speak my mind, to question, to voice my soul, to maintain my own identity wherever I am, and not be ashamed of my past of being a Bengali from Bihar, raised in Orissa and living in Karnataka, Mumbai or wherever — of being Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim or whatever the denominational description of my God might be. I think that right was not granted to me by human beings and not even by the republic. It was granted to me by my Creator when I was born into this world. My right to live is alienated whenever I am in fear of anything and anyone.

To me, that innate right to live is more sacred than those given by a man-made Constitution, and I refuse to give up that right. I will not live in fear.

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