

Meant to be, Baisakhi 1919

Bindhya fancied herself in love. She did not know how or why, yet she was sure that in the spring of 1919, she had found true love. Of course she couldn't tell anyone; her parents would be horrified, her friends would tease her, and besides, the world around her had better things going on. At this time, all everyone gushed about was the harvest season and British rule, both subjects that captivated Bindhya. She was all for ousting the British and discussing crops, but not today; today she was in love. She wasn't the silly sort of girl to fall in love at first sight. How juvenile. No, she had converted her amicable feelings into love over eleven years. Her sweetheart was Satya, her neighbour.

Satya and Bindhya were close friends, the closest. When they were four, they had broken into Satya's pantry and eaten all the sugar. When they were seven, they had built a kite the size of them and had flown it all over Amritsar (until their mothers had dragged them inside by the ear). When they were twelve, they had approached a British officer and asked him if he was related to Queen Victoria. To their parents relief, he had let them go with a spiteful comment.

However, the bitter winter and budding spring of 1919 had changed everything. Satya and Bindhya had spent the long days pacing their parents' fields whilst pondering philosophical questions. What was their position in this colonial war? How real was free India? And how many eggs could they eat before puking? (The answer was twenty-five).

With each passing day, fear plundered them. They were no longer innocent children who dared to converse with a British officer, but young adults who ought to pick a side. In every corner was a new war ready to be fought, but all they sought was their childhood. The last drops of blissful ignorance serving as escapism. Alas, the closest thing they had was each other.

In the pink dusks, Satya would plait an indignant Bindhya's hair, convincing her that the hiking taxes imposed on farmers were a momentary issue. Bindhya would in turn whisper to Satya of her dreams of Azadi, her dreams of freedom. Between all these meetings and exchanges, Bindhya was unsurprised when Satya finally whispered the infamous, "I love you." He showed her dreams: a house, children, and a future. "Tell me your response tomorrow, at the Bhag," he had said, sauntering off into the dark.

And indeed, tomorrow came, 13th of April and Baisakhi, the religious new year. Bindhya primed in front of the mirror; the shiniest would be brought out for today. The day Satya would know her heart's true colours She waited for the pink dusk, their time, to peak out and gauge the view. The fairs for Baisakhi had been wrapped earlier than usual, with the crowd drifting towards the park, the Jallianwala Bhag.

Bindhya closed her eyes, letting the romantic win. No birds chirped, but the feeble voices of protesters filled the air. All was calm, until it wasn't. There was a gunshot.

In hindsight, it was quite shocking how a single gunshot shook no one. It was the next thousand or so shots that wreaked havoc. Screams of, "What's happening?" "Why the screams, why the gunshots?" at different pitches ripped the city apart. Bindhya shook under her dresser, waiting for it all to subside. But it didn't; it got worse. The gunshots ravaged her, and the screams pierced her ears. What had started as an occasional thud against the ground was multiplying. Bindhya's imagination could only run wild; were they bodies, or even just parts of them? Rattling metal noises from the gates were next; "Let us out please!" she heard, over and over again in different formulations. Sentences ceased to finish as they were cut off by a howl, groan, or scream. A cacophony of noises emerged from the Bhag—whatever was happening?

"Satya," she whimpered. The sheer monstrosity of the situation shaking her, her Satya was at the Bhag. "Ma, Pa, ask them to stop; what's happening?" What could they say—they who dared not leave their house in fear of death.

Bindhya laid her back against the ground, praying and hoping he would escape and that this would stop. She couldn't tell how long it had been, only that the sky was no longer pink but a dewy purple.

When smoke was all that was left, Bindhya ran out of her house. "No, the curfew! They'll kill anyone who goes out!" voices behind her said. But she ran to the Bhag with those that dared.

Pools of blood and mounds of bodies lay scattered, each telling a story. A cold hand had gripped Bindhya's neck; she forgot to breath. The stench of blood and bodies filled the air. A jolt hit her as she recognized each face in the bodies that were skewered. "Why?" She whispered.

She recognized some bodies that shifted in deep discomfort. "Water," they croaked. She noticed some men, quietly helping the living slip away, whimpering at the mounds of bodies stuffed in the well. Bindhya's hands pulled the different bodies piled on top of each other apart. Some belonged to the grocers, teachers, and doctors of her neighbourhood.

Her heart stopped at the very sight of him, Satya. But this wasn't Satya; this couldn't be him. He was missing limbs, half his body had been blown up; the sanguine look on his face had been replaced with terror. He had spent his last moments petrified and in pain.

Bindhya ran home that night, gutted. She cried for the half-dead that would pass in the bitter night, for everyone who had lost a friend or a family to the brutal bullets, and she cried for her Satya, whom she would never see alive again. But more than that, she cried for every child like her and Satya, whose childhood had been massacred at the Jallianwala Bhag that day.