

15 April 2014

It was a cloudy evening. The sun and the clouds had played hide and seek throughout the day. I waited for my friends in Old City as we after a long gap had decided to group and explore a relatively quiet place. Since we left school, we make it a point to meet once in a while and travel places in Srinagar mostly. But most of the times, I along with other reporter friend who is also the part of the gang, find ourselves in awkward positions. The others never find much interest in politics.

So the visit to this relatively calm place in the historic city began on somewhat intense note. Much to the annoyance of others, the journalist friend kept on talking about the militant attack on the National Conference youth leader and I took keen interest. Panic and dismay loomed large on the faces of our friends and therefore I changed the topic. Nostalgia is best served in these school reunions and I picked up a subject dear to us all. We were simply charged with each one pulling out a different version of the same incident. Technology often plays a spoilsport in such fond gathering and this one was no exception.

The buzz on the cellular phone announced that a gunfight had broken between militants and government forces in Ahmad Nagar on the city outskirts. We were camping under a cloudy sky which seemed to move in the direction of the site of gunfight some ten kilometers away. Then there was a rapid exchange of messages between reporters and our party was disturbed. Our friends taunted us but as our phones rang repeatedly, they sank into a deep introspection; perhaps each remembering an incident when they were caught between the bullets. Each of us returned silently; with a story in our heart.

Late night a coordinated plan announced that we would leave early morning to Ahmad Nagar where the gunfight was raging. We were told that the operation was suspended for night as three common people were trapped inside the house where militants had taken refuge. I thought about the trapped people. It made me restless. Early at 6:15 AM rang me on my phone. He is my human alarm. I had waited for his call, for I just wanted the sleepless night to end. I took a quick shower, dressed up, and put all my essential gears in my bag and rushed to

the bridge outside my house where a van with my colleagues in it were scheduled to pick me up. On the bridge, I again started to think about the trapped people and was disturbed by the sound of screeching halt of the vehicle. I boarded the van and took a corner.

The scene of cordon started outside the police station in Soura, on the way that leads to 90-foot road. Policemen deployed there don't allow us to pass through and directed us to take other route. Driving through lanes and working on instructions by locals we reached the spot where another deployment was placed. We came to know that we were still about 2 kilometers away from the scene of firefight. Two journalists have already reached the place, we are told on phone. We don't hear any gunfire for two hours in the early morning. A police personal informs us that until the man who is trapped inside isn't taken out, no operation will be launched.

More journalists arrive at the scene. Some journalists talk about taking other route, which was open for vehicular traffic. Surprisingly we reach in a lane, which from other end is sealed with barbed wire and is being guarded by Central Reserved Police Force men who look extremely vigilant. After 15 minutes, the lull breaks and guns blaze from both sides. We try to cover ourselves under the porch of closed shops. The house in which two militants are hiding is about 300 meters away from where we are. Exchange of fire continues for next 10 minutes and then random shots.

A bullets comes flying and falls few meters away from where I am standing. This makes us understand the danger we were in. We retreat a little. The day goes on with discussions, random sound of bullets and explosions. I am hungry as shops are closed in the area. Afternoon passes as Sun changes its position. It is 04:30 AM now and some explosions followed by gunshots take place. Moments after a fire engulfs the house in which the militant duo was hiding. Black smoke billows and fans to a neighboring house.

Everyone is alert; locals stick their eyes towards the house, as we decide to move on to an open field so as to get a clear view. Everyone moves deeper and deeper, more close to the house. A security personal shouts at us and directs us to go back. We decide to wait for a while, till the spot gets clear. After sometime we are allowed to move. Youths have started to pelt stones at police and I can hear anti-India slogans. Tear-smoke shells are being lobbed at them and they are being chased away.

From the other side Inspector General of Police Kashmir range briefs the press about the encounter and claims that duo was active since few months and belonged to Pakistan-based

militant outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). It had been 10 hours now that I was at the encounter spot. My body and brain had given up. Fire and emergency vehicles are still near the house. The fire has been brought under control. The relatives of the two house owners which are damaged in firefight are crying. So are the owners.

“If militants had to fight forces why did they destroy my house and belongings?” one of the house owners ask amid wails. No one dares to answer. A septuagenarian neighbor, with a white beard, calls slain militants ‘little angels’. He says to my colleague that he is not afraid of saying this that they (militants) fought bravely. The single storey house, in which the gunfire begun has nothing inside its room, except broken furniture with big bullet marks. A broken refrigerator stands near the front entrance of house. It's riddled with bullets. Some bullet shells are stacked in its racks like we store eggs.

<http://www.kashmirdispatch.com/blog/150422131-kashmir-capital-gunfight-a-reporter-s-dairy.htm>