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Bishan Singh Bedi: ‘With years, this too shall pass’

The former Indian cricket captain, 74, on the resilience that got him through the 1984 anti-Sikh riots

Elder by a year to independent India’s midnight’s children, I have aged with our beloved nation. I have seen this country face several crises but I could never imagine that a disaster of this scale would strike us. I feel deeply saddened with the lives lost due to the present pandemic but experience has taught me to grin and bear it, to not succumb.

There had been another time in my life when I had been confined at home, worrying about my safety and that of my family. That was in October 1984, when the country was witnessing the anti-Sikh violence. A few months earlier, in June, I was one of the two beneficiaries of the Cricketers’ Benefit Fund Series (CBFS) in Sharjah, along with [Imran Khan](#). With the money I got, I bought some farmland outside Delhi, hoping to settle in the peaceful countryside. But when even the capital wasn’t safe for us, it was unthinkable for a Sikh family to live in a secluded area on its outskirts. For close to nine months, my family and I had no roof over our heads. Sometimes, we would stay with friends who were gracious enough to host us, and, at other times, we were at my employers’ Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) guesthouse.

Fearful of the future, I went to a senior bureaucrat, also a cricket administrator, posted at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. I told him I was thinking of selling my land and moving to my hometown Amritsar, where I would feel safe but would have nothing to do. The other option was to leave the country. I thought he would be sympathetic and, perhaps, help me get government accommodation in Delhi. Without much thought, he told me, “Bishan, if I were you, I would leave the country.” Imagine, the country’s top bureaucrat, sitting in Rashtrapati Bhavan, asking a former India captain to leave the country!

I didn’t say a word but I was fuming inside. I left without any dua-salaam, reached home and told my wife that we are removing the “For Sale” sign from the land and we would build a house there. “If I get killed, so be it. I will not leave this country. I have every right to be here,” I told her. I stuck around, the land wasn’t sold and the house was built. When pushed into a corner, you worry for your life. However, if you take it as a challenge and fire yourself up, you get the strength to tide over bad times. This time, it’s the virus, but, for me, the antidote remains the same.

The wars India fought brought more grim times. My memories of 1965 (India-Pakistan war) are of an amusing day in Amritsar when my father, a civil-defence warden, gathered the simple folks of our mohalla for a war-training session. He first initiated everyone into the blackout protocol, and, later, asked them to lie on the ground for a firing session. I, too, joined and tried imitating my father who was pulling the trigger with gusto. The shoulder-smashing recoil of the heavy rifle made me surrender my weapon — “Mujhe ball phekni hai, yeh lijiye

aapki bundook.”

In 1971-72, we were touring Australia at the time of the Bangladesh Liberation War. When I called home, my father assured me everything was fine, even though I could hear guns booming in the background. Next on line was my mother. In a muffled voice, she whispered, “Only the Almighty knows if we will meet again.” Their contrasting statements left me puzzled. Now, years later, I can laugh about that traumatic day. The human mind’s partiality in preserving pleasant moments and air-brushing the dire parts helps us move on in life. With years, this, too, shall pass — the pandemic’s trauma will fade away.

Right now, however, there are a few heartbreaking images stuck in my head — like the one of a daughter who pedalled over 1,000 km with her sick father. It highlights the utter lack of compassion in our politicians, who enforced the sudden and complete lockdown. Honesty and transparency, too, are missing when it comes to [coronavirus](#) numbers. I am not naming or blaming any political party. But I ask, “What is the need to camouflage figures? You haven’t created this pandemic.” If they stuck to the truth, the situation would have been handled better.

There aren’t many speaking out, though. Do we have the freedom of thought, expression and conviction in our country? Not yet — such liberal ideas get ingrained with time. We are still young, we will learn. But first we need to fight illiteracy and impoverishment. Of late, I feel worried. We have become increasingly regressive and narrow-minded. The other day, I tweeted Eid Mubarak. It was a simple and secular message, but on my timeline there were posts that said: “Bedi saab, kabhi Hindus ko bhi kar diya karo.” Come on, this is Eid, it’s a Muslim festival!

But above everything else, the one thing that has really pulled this nation down is sycophancy. I have experienced this in the past and now I see it all the time. While I was at SAIL, in the days following the army’s entry into the Golden Temple, a reporter came to me for my reaction. I told her, “Every Sikh is not a terrorist but every Sikh is hurt that the army has gone into the Golden Temple. And I am one of them.” That’s it, nothing more, nothing less.

This reached the minister-in-charge at SAIL. Without talking to me even once, he suspended me. In that atmosphere of mistrust, the Sikh community felt, “Bishan Singh Bedi tu shaheed ho gaya (You’ve become a martyr).” That the government is not even sparing sportsmen now. Soon my photographs started appearing on the walls of gurdwaras in America and Canada. The repercussions of my suspension got people at SAIL worried. So I was called by the top guy, who asked me: “What’s happening, Bish?” I said that’s exactly what I want to know. The big man had a climbdown, and, in a conciliatory tone told me, “See, before anybody could question me from 1, Safdarjung Road, I had done my job.”

When you always think of pleasing those at the top, you make wrong calls, you become servile, you lose self-respect. That’s happening even today. There’s this one from my fraternity squirming for a seat in the commentary box, bending over his back to please the powers that be — all this for saying something that was anything but offensive. He had a readymade platform to take on the establishment. But no, the courage of conviction was missing. It makes me cringe to see him begging for the BCCI job.

We are constantly reminded that we are a nation with a high percentage of young and progressive minds. For me, it’s a mirage. Even the young and the educated are joining the political conundrum and are reluctant to raise their voice. The reason: sycophancy.

I, fortunately, had the gumption and the strength of character. When I was young, and so was India, I was able to stand up and be counted. Now, it is too late in life. But I am not a pessimist, I have faith in my spirituality and I have hope. We survived wars and invasions and we will survive the political pandemic, too.

The writer, 74, is a former India cricket captain