

PROLOGUE

[Whodunit or Howdunit?]

There's been a murder in one of the new nightclubs/bars in South Delhi. A young girl bartender, age about 26, has been shot dead, point blank through the head while she was serving drinks to a group of young politicians and their high-fliers surrounding the bar counter, around 2 a.m. one Friday in April. It is reminiscent of the notorious Jessica Lall murder case of 1999 – and indeed, several other bar shootings and killings in the NCR since then – except there are significant differences. For one, the man who ostensibly fired the shot is neither an extremely well-to-do, well-connected member of one of the highest families ruling the land, unlike the alleged murderer in the old Lall case, and nor is he absconding, the way the latter had done with his cohorts immediately after firing at Jessica. This alleged shooter is a poor college student who, by all accounts, simply stood there with a gun dangling from his hand, looking quite out of place amongst that well-dressed, clearly plump-in-the-pocket, fashionable lot frequenting this bar.

Now, there are at least five witnesses who were present at the scene who all swear that they saw this young man enter the bar, take aim and fire, apparently killing the young female bartender on the spot. As many claim that they were looking directly at the girl when suddenly there was this loud bang, some sort of an explosion, and before their eyes this blotch of red appeared on the girl's forehead, seemed to rip her head apart as she tottered unsteadily, decanter poised, for a second or so and then, before their horrified, disbelieving gaze, slumped slowly to a heap on the ground behind the bar counter. Meanwhile, say other eyewitnesses, the young man

with the gun just stood there near the entrance, while the din died down around him and faded suddenly to stupefied silence, nobody moving, not even the other bartender who was returning from serving at a table and got paralyzed mid-stride between the tables and the counter, he too simply staring in horror like everyone else at the shattered glassware, shattered mirrors, and the shattered head of the figure on the floor.

But, when the police come – and for some reason, unlike the real-life case, they come quite promptly, within minutes it seems to some (and who called them? nobody remembers) – when they come and apprehend, as it were, the young man, it turns out that the gun in his hand is a dummy. A toy thing, a fake; and the “bullets” in it merely blanks. And the young college student, who readily identifies himself and his lack of “connections” and seems to have a minor speech impediment to boot, claims to have been “told” to come there by another friend for a wager; to come to that particular bar at that particular time and pretend to fire that shot at the girl, with that fake “gun” with its blank ‘bullets,’ just to play a trick, a sort of harmless if elaborate and malicious payback for her refusing to go out with said friend.

That’s the young man’s story, at any rate, and he won’t budge from it. And the gun in his hand is clearly incapable, in the category of lethal weapons, of killing anyone. Upon a search of the premises after the place has been cleared out and the body removed and so on, the police in fact find the missing blank that must’ve been fired from the young man’s dummy gun – it’s lying under a table not far from the counter. They think the dummy bullet must have hit the front of the bar counter and then rolled along the floor to get stuck under the table. It certainly could not have caused the mirrored wall behind the counter, where all the glasses and bottles were displayed, to

shatter the way it did. That was caused by a real bullet, the one that passed through the girl's head first and then hit all that glass beyond.

So who fired that real bullet? And where did it come from?

Where was the real gun; or revolver; or pistol, or whatever the lethal firearm that did the actual damage? Did it fire from the same direction as the entrance from where the young man shot his blank, or from somewhere else? If somewhere else, then there are at least 30 other likely suspects! For, not counting the 20 or so more people sitting at tables or booths too far away or those working in the kitchen areas that are totally separate from the large hall-like room comprising the bar proper, around the counter alone there were at least 12 or 15 people gathered, and then a few more groups and clusters standing about or sitting close enough to aim at the girl, not to mention a couple who'd entered soon after the college student and were hovering somewhere behind him near the main door, and a few others walking about, here and there.... Yes, at least 30, maybe even 40, possible suspects, and it was so hard to tell anything clearly in that dim light, with all that din, and the haze from the smoking area. And also given that it was so late at night, or early in the morning, depending on how you looked at it. Nothing is clear in the memory of anyone, except the image of that young man standing there looking out of place, gun in hand, and the red dripping down the front of the girl as she shattered with the glass after the loud bang and slipped to the ground....

This is the scenario that's presented in an F.I.R. (First Information Report) delivered to the Superintendent of Hauz Khas police station the next morning at about 11 a.m.; and, as

that worthy functionary is irritable after a long night up drinking with fellow officers and distracted on account of his wife's niece's wedding coming up that weekend, he merely shrugs and decides to pass the buck, at the earliest opportunity. Which presents itself at noon in the shape of his second-in-charge, Detective Chief Inspector Mohan Yadav, just returned to Delhi from a workshop at the Police Academy in Hyderabad, yet arriving for an afternoon shift at the station punctually as usual.
