

## *A Tale of a dark land*

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Hearken to this tale, dear reader, of a place on the far edges of the Earth. They have there a system of justice most unusual in God's creation: once the kotwal suspects you of a crime, the justice you get depends less upon the judge's wisdom than the kotwal's mercy. We who live in the centres of God's civilisation have notions of prisoners being bailed out while the kotwal is still looking for proof of his suspicion, but in this far country the judge will say to you: nay, this Court hath heard the kotwal's suspicion and as it hath no reason to believe in your virtue, thou shall not be bailed out.

The kotwal then proceeds to seek satisfaction of his suspicion at an unhurried pace. He wastes not time with fingerprints and blood marks, nor in hunting for credible witnesses. The law of that land allows simpler methods. 'The best evidence is that which comes from the horse's own mouth', say the jurists of that land. The kotwal may put a hot iron piece on your tongue or may smear a stick with chilly powder and push it up your rectum. They say he does it out of no malice but only curiosity, to enlighten himself as to the truth of his suspicion, and the highest jurists of that land have said that so long as it is done without malice, such methods of proof are permissible. If the kotwal is satisfied by your entreaties and importunities that his suspicion was indeed true, he will enter each word you have spoken – or screamed, it matters not – on an official parchment and present it along with you to the wise judge. The judge may send you to the dungeon on such proof. In truth, as the judge himself in that strange land sits in the dungeon rather than a Court, he need not send you to the dungeon, 'tis enough if he goes out.

It happens sometimes, they say, that the judge in his wisdom is not fully satisfied with your confession recorded on the parchment. He then calls upon the kotwal to produce evidence. The kotwal then brings a shoe of yours – or may be a scarf – and tells the wise judge: milord, I have found this at the place of the offence, and methinks there can be no reason for it 'less the prisoner was indeed the offender. The strange law of that strange land says that then it is you who must explain his discovery. 'Tis of no avail, they say, to controvert the discovery, for the kotwal is permitted to bring along two friends of his to speak of his discovery, and your word is that of one against three. Nor is it of any avail to say you have a full pair of shoes on your feet or a fine scarf around your neck, for the wise judge knows that a man may have more than a pair.

Some times, it is said, the merciful judge is not satisfied with this too, and he says sternly to the kotwal: bring forth your witnesses; tell the Court, who hath seen this man wield the offending sword? The kotwal then makes a bow, and brings a masked figure and a screen into the Court. You are shocked, dear reader? But a high jurist of that far country, a sage known for his humanity, hath said such methods are approved by the gods. As suggested by that sage, the

kotwal places a screen before the masked figure, and commands it from this side of the screen: speak, speak fearlessly for the prisoner shall not know who you are, whether man or woman, whether blind or out of mind. And if he does not know who you are, how can he controvert you? So speak on, says the kotwal. The masked witness behind the screen speaks on, and the wise judge is permitted by the law of that strange land to condemn you on each word thus spoken.

May be you are young? May be this is the first time you are arraigned before the law? May be you are of poor health? You probably think the wise and merciful judge will let you off with a light punishment? In lands such as ours enlightened by the wisdom of civilised thought, such would be the expectation, but in that dark land, the law crafted by those most benign sages says that be you as sick as God can make you, be you as young as your mother alone knows, be you as guileless as an angel, and be the Judge as merciful as the gentle dew, he shall nevertheless have you locked up for at least five years, and not a day less. In his discretion he may be more cruel and lock you up for life, but he is barred from exercising mercy. Strange is the wisdom of that land that allows discretion only for the greater cruelty and not the greater mercy.

You hope that at the end of it and in due course you will come out of the dungeon and lead a normal life? That Time, the great healer, is after all on your side? You are mistaken. The law of that benighted land says that when he sends you to prison the judge shall – not may, but shall – cripple you economically for life by making over to the King the property you possess, even the whole of it if need be, but certainly no less than double the annual income of what we call a middle class family. If you do not have that much property, it will be a charge around your neck, to be satisfied through your earnings after you come out of prison.

Do you, dear reader, recognize in this the Andhra Pradesh Control of Organised Crime, Act? You better, as the Americans say, you better.

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