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When a city dies

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Remembering what a city used to be like is nostalgia. With nostalgia, at least you have a vision of what can be. But now even that future is gone

These are the ways by which a city dies.

People on vehicles, one behind the other, for long stretches on end. Standing up on the bike or leaning out of the car trying to find a way out of the mess. Somebody cuts in front of you, gobbles up the little space that you had for a second. A car aggressively from the side road almost scraping the paint off your breath. Another car decides to do a U-turn in a place where even a crow will have to hop and skip. Cars and buses parked on the one-lane road, indifferent. And we are all waiting, miles behind, waiting, waiting.

Cities die. When a red signal light means Go. For those who are impatient or who don't care. Who will also not care what happens to those vehicles and people who have to avoid crashing into them. It is no longer the lawbreakers, the history-sheeters. It is you and it is me, in fancy cars or fancier bikes or women with children in front, in their dainty Scooty.

Cities die. When anger begins in traffic jams knowing that all it needs is just a simple solution. It stares at all of us in our faces but we are tired. We know what to do and will mutter inside the car but all that we will do is to nudge an inch here and steal a foot there.

When anger builds up

Cities die. When anger builds up in the market, in shops, in schools. When every moment of doing something is filled with aggression, with sudden uncontrollable rage. When different faces and languages seem like the enemy at the gate. When different customs begin to take on the images of an invading force. When every man is the criminal, the cop and the judge all rolled into one, into one politician. We know these truths well, truths so jaded that they no longer can cause action.

Cities die. When we all realise that nothing is what it is, nothing will ever be what it was. When we know that nobody will do anything about any of this. All we can do is leave earlier and come back later, but it is the same later, now slowly eating into the whole day and soon into the whole night.

Cities die. Because we just don't care. And when we care, we don't know what to do. And when we know what to do, we are too tired to move. Or we are stuck with breathing problems or mosquito love bites of all kinds. Or we are busy on iPhones and extraterrestrial messages beamed through dangling wires from our ears.

We die when our cities die. Children have no grounds, have lungs filled with such residual poison that they may as well enjoy a smoke. When they are so scared of water that doesn't taste of plastic bottles. When going to school makes it seem as dangerous as a hike to the misty mountains.

Adults die in ambulances that make noise but do not move. And when they do get to hospitals, the doctor is stuck somewhere else. The BP machines have gone out of sync and the whole city is going into cardiac arrest. And yet we watch, there is nothing we can do.

A burning city

Cities die when young men on motorbikes with flags they have rarely seen come and ask you, what are you? They asked that then, when they saw people who did not look like them. They asked them, are you from China, and then said, oh, you are from the Northeast. And they beat them up so that trains that left the city were filled with young men and women trying to find a space in which they could squeeze their fear.

It was the turn of the Northeast then and now it is (once again) the turn of their favourite neighbours. The boys are back on the bikes again, the flags are out with a little bit of oil stain, but the question remains the same. One group is standing around a traffic junction, trying to burn a tyre. When a city is already burning, what is a tyre or two? They say they want justice. A courageous old man asks them, what justice are you seeking for? And they reply, this is all we will say for 200 rupees.

When aliens take over

Cities die when the poor selling drying vegetables on the streets look around constantly in fear. They too would like to be like us, enjoy a holiday and get aroused watching television news, incessantly fuelling their collective anger. They can speak all languages but they know they will be beaten and their produce thrown on the street. We can see that too, we who watch from our barred windows from across the street. We know too that there is nothing we will do, that all of us are anyway nothing more than numbers that have stopped meaning anything to anybody anywhere.

Cities die when all the rage about small little things becomes a rage about all things around us. Every little thing creates anger, depression, asthma, dengue, and gastroenteritis. Like a zombie film, the city seems to have been taken over by aliens, who call *dose dosha*, who eat rice with a spoon, and think that the city is 'cute'. Friends who used to meet from across the city have gone back to burrow into their houses and flats. Or they go in search of malls near their houses so they don't have to travel. We will meet some other time, in other cities that are not yet dead.

Cities die. This city dies and we are all watching, waiting. For those of us who remember this city when it was young, innocent, welcoming, and had real gardens instead of fake ones in IT La-La land, this is all nostalgia. With nostalgia, at least you have a vision of what can be. But now even that future is gone, dying in little bits of anger that builds up at every street corner, at every puddle on the street. When the future dies, the city is already dead.

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