

The desert cooler outside my bedroom made a squeaky noise that night. I had postponed lubricating it for too long. Behind the door, a cricket chirped incessantly. God had omitted lubricating it altogether. The two noises combined to produce an eerie effect. I was gradually slipping into sleep when the phone rang. There is nothing more exasperating than being interrupted in the first stages of sleep. I have this habit of looking at the clock by my bedside every time I am woken up by a phone call. It was 11 p.m. on May 21.

Shreyans Shah was calling from Ahmedabad. Shah, the owner of the Gujarat Samachar, the largest Gujarati daily in the world, asked a matter-of-fact question. "Is it true that Rajiv Gandhi has been assassinated?" Without realizing the shattering import of his question I said I didn't know. Shah sounded pretty certain about the news, but since I live in New Delhi he probably thought I would be better informed about such matters. I promised to get back to him as soon as I found out the truth.

I called Sam Pitroda to ask him if he had heard anything about Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. There was silence on the other end, a silence jagged by anguish. I realized my mistake. Pitroda had recovered from a quadruple bypass surgery a few months before, and despite his protestations to the contrary, he was still not fit enough to take such news with equanimity. If hurt could be seen on telephone, I saw it that night.

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Tikar Ran was on the outskirts of civilization. It was the sort of village which never asserted its existence. The threshold of contentment of its inhabitants was very low. If they ate well, they slept well. A good night's sleep was a blessing that the people of the village sought. Most people were blessed thus. Except one man, Kalyanji Pitroda. He did not spend sleepless nights but he was in a perpetual hurry to wake up.

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