

Brothers in Arms

Brothers in Arms

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Talks about two different people from India, of contrasting lives, and has an interesting family twist towards the end.

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Sitting near the window on an inclined chair, Dayanand was looking out into the streets from his third floor apartment. A long line of people were leading into the building from about 500 meters away. Some of them dressed in rags, and others in clothes.

Being sick for a couple of days now, Dayanand had to consider resting though his heart willed occasionally to support other volunteers at the apartment-turned-community service house.

Volunteers were busy handling the usual noon business of serving free lunch for the under privileged. Dayanand used the time to think about means to relocate the service to a more spacious hall from the small camp now at the entrance of the apartment building. It was also becoming more difficult to see people from the line move around often to make way for large vehicles that had to turn into one of the narrow streets nearby. The road leading to the building was too narrow good enough only to allow two wheelers besides the queue of people.

Most of them on the line were sick and old people, coming from nearby slum dwellings. In Port Nagar, Dayanand's temporary lunch serving shack was the only place these people could look to for food. Once a port brizzling with trade on the sea front, Port Nagar slowly became a poor man's village after the port was shifted to a neighbouring developed town of Thoraipakkam on the shores of the state of Tamilnadu. Since people who lived then moved to the new port area, Port Nagar got replaced with less privileged people, uncared for resources, unkept garbage dumps, almost everything... except its name.

Dayanand was one of the few who didn't move to thoraipakkam though it meant he lost his job as Assistant supervisor of Cargo handling at the port. Dayanand stayed for just one major reason... because he wanted to support the people who worked with him. They all lost their jobs when the port moved, because the new port would use machinery to lift cargo from ships and boats rather than using people like it was. They all had worked together to make the port grow bigger in trade transactions to allow it decide to move to a developed area which was more suitable by its geography for having a port and had more space for the port to expand.

Dayanand helped his people create new livelihoods, making some of them able to do construction work in neighbouring towns.. while some others became fruit/vegetable/flower sellers. When the area was getting vacated, migrants from different slums nearby started moving in to help themselves live in huts of their own rather than in crowded shacks in the slums. Most of them worked in different towns travelling by bus or cycles, and few opportunists found better work in cities nearby and commuted by their own vehicles.

Many vacant lands/ areas in port nagar became obvious comfort zones for dumping garbage of nearby towns. Garbage laden lorries and automated dumpers plied round the clock seemingly committed to creating a reputation for port nagar as a dumpyard in quickest time.

Loud cries and short lived protests by Dayanand and a few others could only stop the dumpers short of the lands already occupied by people. Dayanand and his short team of people were only in their twenties and didn't have leadership skills or confidence to effectively understand or plan better ways to save port nagar when it all started happening around them.

After 22 years now, their efforts have forced the corporation to provide occasional relief by way of resources and some cleanup work.

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Dayanand's interest in helping people help themselves on a temporary work plan had to change to a permanent and long term effort with more and more under privileged people turning up in front of him for taking some support. Almost everybody who came to Dayanand's shack a few handful times got his/her immediate necessities of food, shelter and clothes served.. somehow, with Dayanand and his bright team sparing a few bucks of the money they earned everyday in collective organization.. and a new livelihood for self-support happened for all people who came for help.

Some of them, very courageous, who saw light at the dark end of life when they came to him, chose to stay with him volunteering to help Dayanand's actions become movements to support more under privileged.

Dayanand had been interviewed by people from "The Trader's Journal", only a couple of weeks before this day... for highlighting his social work and commitments in their magazine for their annual feature "People near us who make a difference".

Dayanand felt ironic about the interview after it was done, and shared his thoughts with his long time volunteers-turned-friends, telling them "they converted this into a social neglect and are rewarding us who stayed to work on the neglect.. we become cleaners of their shit".

Leaning forward from his chair, he occasionally took and glanced through the magazine on his desk, which had the feature published with his interview included... reading rather something else other than pages that carried content about his work.

Right then a pal asked "Pradeep Gupte ka bhi interview hai usme.. kabhi tho pado".. (There is also an interview of Pradeep Gupte in it.. do read it sometime).

To which Dayanand smiled and replied "haan tho isse hi uske baare mein maloom padtha hai.. ab thak tho mujhe milne aaya nahin".. (yes, from this only I have to know about him.. hasn't yet come to meet me).

After a few minutes of saying which, dayanand took the magazine again and started going through Pradeep's interview.

Pradeep Gupte had been at a difficult war last year at Kargil near India's border with Pakistan.

Many years back, Pradeep had left Port Nagar along with others when the port moved. After a few years at Thoraipakkam port, he joined the army.

In his 12 year stint at the army pradeep rose to lead a battalion for a year and a handful of months. In the handful of months he was at the difficult war after which he had to retire from army due to his handicap. He lives with his wife and 3 kids at Mehruzabad near Hyderabad, about 750 kilometers from his old home at port nagar.. which is now Dayanand's apartment-cum-community service house.

The war at Kargil was at its peak, with India and pakistan both grilling each other's forces.... trying hard for a victory at some point in the war zone. A visible victory was needed... visible enough to the world media at any part of the war zone to allow the victor to promote on it and weaken the enemy's diplomatic defences with the world.

At war, it is strangely considered that the victor who lost equal men but still took over control was the side which was righteous .. atleast the righteous-most of the two.

Pradeep's Madras battallion with 43 soldiers where countering enemy lines at Point 1280 on the Line of control in the kargil war zone. The geography of this particular area around point 1280 exposed pradeep's

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battalion more open to the enemy lines, because the enemy lines were in higher altitudes on mountainous terrain as against Pradeep's flat lands sloping towards the mountains.

Pradeep planned every move carefully, as he was obviously aware he had 43 men ONLY, and he cannot afford to lose much of them if he planned to surprise the enemy sometime.

He instructed his team to dig not just trenches in the nights but short caves with green cover at the manholes.

He selectively and through shifts sent a couple of his best men every night to plant mines on strategic points near the mountains in secrecy and silence.. and then return back to the closest caves/trenches before dawn... so as to avoid a risk of sudden offensive of heavy enemy forces moving in on their positions.

These men who went on the secret, time consuming, highly sensitive night missions, sometimes were able to compromise and kill a few men from the enemy trenches at the lower side of the mountains in the silence of the night, and could also carefully carry their bodies to camouflage them a little far from enemy lines so that they don't notice the bodies quick enough.

The enemy lines were sometimes made to believe that the Madras battalion was kilometers away and could never advance but only fire at many positions on the mountains. So they didn't advance much to the lower part of the mountains which would have helped attack the Madras battalion deeper. They also wanted to keep their stronger position at higher areas to clearly have control of attack, rather than moving lower and defending.

After securing some of the lower areas of the mountains and reducing risk of sudden enemy advance with strategically planted mines, Pradeep led his men attack by surprise at enemy positions... all the way gradually conquering many areas of vast mountainous terrain.

During day break, Pradeep would call for support fire from the Air force, also planning strategic hits at enemy lines at the top of the mountains.

After about 23 days like this, Pradeep's battalion and support fire had advanced to top of some mountainous terrain, all the while, more men, medical and food support, and air support kept coming in with proper planning.

The enemy lines didn't expect to lose much terrain in a month, and so when it eventually happened, their planning was compromised, and they were surprised often with sudden attacks losing positions gradually over the days... which clearly shattered all their estimates of force and support requirements.

Also, the enemy lines almost never understood the secret landmining strategy Pradeep's battalion was executing which made them afraid of advancing quicker to counter sudden attacks against their positions. They were mostly fighting in the dark even in the day due to fear of mines and fear of sudden attacks. They were trying to make theories of who planted the mines and how far before the war they could have been planted... which they missed to realize at all that it was done in the dead of the nights.

Pradeep's advancement at the end of one month and a couple of days at the peaks around point 1280 encouraged central command to send more support forces, medicines and air fire.

About the time when Pradeep's men took control of almost all peaks around point 1280 he had lost 32 men to enemy fire, most of them of the initial 43 member team which were fighting, and gained 84 men in regular support forces. The force's strength kept on increasing, because most of the men stayed with Pradeep all through instead of returning even after replacement forces for them arrived.

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Pradeep conquered most peaks, after which, a few more Colonels came in to lead more men.

And after a couple of months Pradeep returned with injury due to a landmine blast. The injury left pradeep with both his legs amputated, and he returned to his small home at Mehruzabad. His family was happy he was back while many of his men of the 43 had died in the war.

"The Trader's journal" noticed Pradeep after he was awarded the Param Veer chakra a year later, and some newspapers had reported that he was from Port Nagar in Tamilnadu. They then interviewed him for making his people proud back in Port Nagar. They had questions like how he felt when an enemy soldier was down, and what was the secret for his victory. For such questions pradeep hadn't replied anything more than "I did what I had to do". Also for one question he replied that he didn't kill for the chakra or even the country's pride, but only to keep him and his men alive, all through executing orders he received to capture areas in and around point 1280.

As Dayanand continued to read Pradeep's interview, his eyes gleamed wide open on the last few interview questions printed in the magazine.

"We are proud you are from port nagar, people there would love to know what you like about port nagar or something you want to say to them"... to which Pradeep had replied

"I have my twin brother there.. I left him alone to his social attitude without understanding things when I decided to move out of Port Nagar.. I haven't tried to see him for years now... but after all this war and what I have achieved with killing people... which has left most of my men dead while I still live, and the remaining of my men equally handicapped or wounded permanently. I tend to think that helping sufferers is better than eliminating aggressors... the former more important than the latter.. I realize I should have to be meeting my brother and helping him with his work.. but only if I wasn't an amputee".

A tear runs down a cheek of Dayanand as he places the book back on the desk, leans back and stares through the window again.

There was a last question printed on the mag.. "What is the name of your brother?".. to which Pradeep had replied, "Dayanand Gupte".

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