



Excerpt: Baba ji on Boulton Road by Kavita Bhanot

Even now when it was empty, Mata ji's house vibrated with the sounds and memories of Baba ji and his followers who, for nearly seven years, had filled 23 Boulton Road. Now, although there was nobody there, you could still see everyone; the women in suits and chunnis of all colours, the men with turbans or handkerchiefs of all colours, the children playing in the corners, running wherever they found space, Suita, sitting in the corner of the sitting room telling stories, and then later reading stories, then later still, listening to stories: stories that she would one day share with the world. And, in the middle of it all, sitting on the floor or on his gaddi, at the heart of everything, whether laughing loudly, telling a joke, singing, or sitting in deep thought, you could see Babaji. Wearing a kurta pajama, a careless shawl wrapped around him, his emotions; joy or later a deep sadness, magnified on his face.

And you could still hear, as if the sounds had settled like permanent dust in the house, the chanting, the chatter, the jokes, the laughter, all blended together into a pureed hum that bubbled and fizzed with the excitement of the followers. The mission would grow larger and larger in the years to come but, the first followers would always claim, there would never again be the same ronak of those early days when they had Baba ji to themselves. There was the exhilaration of a new love for Baba ji, the knowledge that out of everyone in the world, Baba ji had chosen them. The feeling that they were all on a journey together that was taking them away from the details of their difficult lives; the long hours in factories and foundries, shops and post-offices, the lack of money, the white boss who gave them extra work and humiliated them for their lack of English, the upper castes who resented them and taunted them everyday for daring to work in the same space, in the same job as them in the new country, the family in India who pressurised them to send money for a sister's wedding, the

ill mother in Punjab who they couldn't visit, the husband who beat them, the mother-in-law who tortured them, the wife who taunted them, the children who were being corrupted with drink and drugs and white friends, girlfriends and boyfriends, the sister who somebody was doing black magic on, the brother who was paralysed. Baba ji took them away from all these problems, to a more beautiful place.

And, on those days when the house was empty, you could also hear, very clearly, Baba ji's raw ginger voice, tip-toeing head and shoulders above the hum of his followers. It was a voice that took on, like Baba ji himself, many incarnations. When, with fire in his eyes, he gave a speech, criticising those who wanted to put a label on God, those who claimed that their religion was the truth, who played politics instead of speaking about love and humanity, his voice unrolled like the huge carpets that his followers would start laying down when they began to hire school halls and leisure centres for Baba ji's satsangs. While giving satsangs, his voice, gentle, thoughtful, netted with pauses, was a tamed tiger. When he sat with the followers, during those long evenings and nights of jokes and stories, his voice quivered and cracked as if, at any moment, the laughter was about to break through. And when he sang, it was as if he gathered all these incarnations together and twisted twisted them into the most beautiful plait. His voice wasn't technically perfect. But there was such depth, such sweetness, such feeling in that voice, that it couldn't leave anyone who heard it untouched. It made grown men cry. It made shy inhibited women dance with abandon, unaware of how their bodies looked as they shook and swayed, forgetting that they had husbands and children and disapproving mother-in-laws. But even the mothers-in-law couldn't sit still when Baba ji started to sing, they found themselves clapping, lifting their heels, moving their bodies in a kind of gidda.

Years later, when Baba ji had gone far away from them, the followers would come to the Boulton Road house to listen to those memoried sounds, captured within those four walls, like the sound of the sea in a shell.