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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Vimla Tyagi's story is that of a good daughter, obedient wife and conscientious mother – the even tenure of whose life is suddenly turned upside down by the country's disruptive economics and politics.

The 1990s was one of the century's most turbulent decades for India. The heady economic reforms had begun under a Rajiv Gandhi-led government, but the country was sitting on a political seesaw. The Indian rupee plunged from 25:1 to 45:1 compared to the USD and inflation swung between 11 to 14 per cent. Market prices of crops like sugar, rice and wheat began to come under the scanner of Commission for Agricultural Costs and Pricing even as big scams like the securities scam, several farm and fodder scams played havoc with the markets and corruption was rampant. The Agriculture Ministry under Balram Jakhar was nowhere near providing competent

administration, the ruling party's internal politics just as vicious as its opponents'. Separatist threats from groups like the LTTE, Khalistanis, the Hizbul in J&K, and the armed insurgents of the north-east all besieged the PV Narasimha Rao government. In this setting, when a popular bureaucrat is gunned down in broad daylight and nobody knows why, one is likely to think, this can happen to anyone like you and me. This is why Vitasta brings you the story of *Vimla: The Everyday Indian Woman & Murder Most Foul*.

PROLOGUE

1992

The Shadow under the Lamp

For the past two weeks, D/49, Bharti Nagar was seeing a constant flurry of activities. Guests moving in and out, relatives and neighbours coming in to congratulate and contribute to the celebratory arrangements and decorations, and a wide smile etched permanently on every member of the Tyagi family who lived there.

And why not? For when it's your daughter, your only daughter getting married, the preparations for the wedding are not really half-measured. Especially not so when the bride's father is the Chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Pricing. As an Indian bureaucrat, Devendra Singh Tyagi had risen to the top and was one of the highest-ranking officials in the bureaucracy. His name commanded as much respect in the government and academic circles as he was loved and revered by his friends and family; for ask anyone about Tyagiji and you would be hard-pressed to find someone who would criticise him for either his work or his person. But try praising the man himself, and he would shake it off with a laugh and an air of humility that would only make you think of him in an even higher light.

Devendra Tyagi lived in Bharti Nagar with his wife Vimla, and their three children: Prerna, Prashant and Praveen.

Prerna, the eldest of the three, had applied for a doctorate course in the United States for which she had been selected. Her visa and tickets were ready, and so she was to fly off to another country and start a new life with her soon-to-be-husband after getting married. Everything was in place and the preparations for her final *bidai* were already done; her bags had been packed, clothes, utensils and everything else an Indian family takes with it when shifting to another country already arranged to be shipped ahead of her. The wait was only for the day of her marriage, which, for the bride it seemed couldn't come any slower while for the parents it felt racing by.

On the night before the wedding, the bride's beaming and proud parents had hosted a party at their house for friends and family to celebrate the big sendoff the next day. The entire day had been a joyous occasion for it was the day of Prerna's

mehendi, the Hindu ritual of applying Henna to the bride's hand, making beautiful and intricate designs. For the night's party, their house in Bharti Nagar was decorated to look every bit as beautiful as the bride herself. The who's who of the Indian government were all present, as were the Tyagi family's close friends and relatives.

Devendra, with a soft drink in one hand, was standing in the lawn chatting with his friends and colleagues. He had an air of exuberance around him, the kind which only a bride's father can display, and he talked animatedly with everyone who came to greet him.

The bride's mother, Vimla, was inside the house, sitting with her daughter in her room and trying to have an intimate conversation with her, but with so much commotion and guests who kept pouring in, it was almost impossible to have more than two minutes alone with her.

'You know, when I got married to your father, he used to write me letters from Lucknow while I was in Kanpur. We hadn't even seen each other for almost three months after getting married. But those letters, they were the only saving grace for me during those three months for I just couldn't wait to meet him. You are quite lucky in that sense, I must say. Going off to a new country together with your husband, right after getting married. Let alone three months, I am quite sure you two will not stay separated for even three hours', Vimla said