

SILENCING THE LAMBS

SAJEET SOUDAGAR



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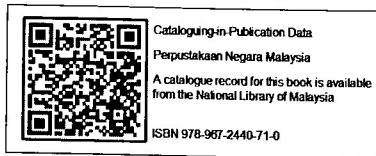
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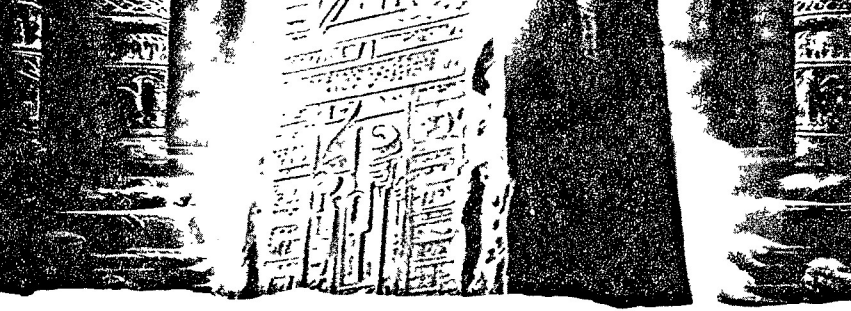


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DEDICATION

To my late father,
Who taught me the power of wisdom
over knowledge and material wealth.

Your wisdom, love, and guidance
has shaped my journey,
And this book is a testament
To the profound impact you've had on my life.
With gratitude and appreciation.



PROLOGUE

THE ASHOKA REVELATION

Year: 272 BCE

IN the heart of ancient Pataliputra, the grand capital of the mighty Maurya Empire lies a dimly lit chamber of great historical significance. This chamber is unique in that it was not constructed in the traditional sense; rather, it was meticulously carved directly from the solid rock foundations of the city itself. The chamber's walls, ceiling, and floor are all hewn from the very bedrock on which Pataliputra stands.

This chamber, with its rough-hewn stone surfaces, has witnessed a multitude of pivotal moments in the history of the Maurya Empire. It has borne witness to countless imperial decisions, serving as the backdrop for the deliberations and actions of Emperor Ashoka the Great, one of the most renowned rulers of the Mauryan dynasty.

Despite its austere appearance, it exudes an air of solemnity and gravitas. The subdued lighting casts long shadows, enhancing the sense of antiquity and historical weight within its confines. Its enduring presence is a testament to the legacy of the Maurya Empire and the

pivotal role it played in shaping the course of ancient Indian history. The chamber stands as a symbol of the empire's strength and the imprint of its rulers on the annals of history.

Tonight, however, is different. Tonight, the weight of an empire lies heavy on Ashoka's shoulders, and his restless footsteps echo through the hallowed halls of this chamber.

Emperor Ashoka, a titan of conquest whose name struck fear into the hearts of rival kingdoms, had been forever transformed on the battlefield of Kalinga—a transformation that would resonate through the annals of history. Amidst the smouldering ruins and the anguished cries of the fallen, he had beheld the horrors of his ambition. Driven to the precipice of despair, he made a solemn vow—an oath to devote his life to the pursuit of peace and enlightenment.

Yet, what occurred in the months that followed was known only to a select few—a secret so profound that its whispers would traverse the millennia, concealed from the watchful eyes of kings and the prying scrutiny of scholars.

In the sacred chamber's soft, flickering light, Emperor Ashoka stood before nine trusted advisors, their silhouettes merging with the mosaics adorning the walls. In his presence were masterminds of their respective domains—experts in the realms of science, philosophy, spirituality, and ancient languages. Together, they formed a brotherhood, a council as diverse as the empire itself, and they were bound by an oath to protect an unimaginable truth.

Ashoka, the polyglot emperor who commanded fluency in Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic, with Prakrit being the primary administrative language, spoke of a revelation—a lippa (cypher in Prakrit), a key to unlocking the hidden threads that wove through the world's secrets, uniting them in ways that transcended mortal comprehension. It was a revelation that could either illuminate the path to enlightenment or plunge the world into chaos.

In this chamber, veiled from the world, Ashoka's voice resonated with the wisdom of the ages as he recounted his vision—an empire of peace, a world unified by the common thread of spirituality, a destiny for humanity far greater than conquest or subjugation.

And so, the council's mission was clear: to protect this cypher at all costs, to manipulate the course of human history towards unity and enlightenment. With the collective knowledge and wisdom of its members, bound by an unbreakable oath, they forged their sacred brotherhood, known to posterity as "The Nine Guardians."

Across the centuries, their influence would mould empires, ignite spiritual movements, and etch their mark upon the very fabric of time. Yet, their existence remained concealed, known only to a chosen few.

As the council's oath echoed through the chamber's cavernous halls, it seemed as though the very walls absorbed their promises, inscribing them into the stone—a solemn covenant that sealed the birth of The Nine Guardians.

In the millennia that stretched ahead, their name would be whispered only in hushed tones—a clandestine society whose existence, like their mission, remained hidden, awaiting discovery by those who dare unravel the threads of history and uncover the profound truths concealed within.



CHAPTER 1

ALIA Merican's restless sleep was an unwelcome intruder in her cosy Bangsar Puteri apartment. Her ongoing struggle with anxiety and depression had thrown her once-structured life into disarray since she had made the bold decision to part ways with her full-time job. The transition from a meticulously planned daily routine to what felt like an unfathomable abyss of free time had been nothing short of a tempestuous journey.

Deep into the night, Alia found herself ensnared into a ceaseless battle against insomnia. She lay in her bed, mind racing like a runaway train on a rickety track. Desperate to escape the clutches of her relentless thoughts, she had resorted to the mindless scrolling of social media, a futile attempt to drown out the cacophony within her.

Hours slipped by, but the sweet embrace of slumber continued to elude her, just out of reach like an elusive wisp of smoke. The digital glow of her smartphone cast eerie shadows across the room, creating a stark contrast to the peaceful darkness that enveloped the world outside her window.

As time went on, Alia's tiredness finally overcame her, leading her into restless sleep. Her dreams were as chaotic as her day, filled with incomplete tasks, half-finished talks, and a constant feeling of being lost in her own life. Each dream like a vague, hard-to-remember memory, leaving her uneasy as she moved through the blurry scenes of her subconscious.

Suddenly, the sharp ring of her phone pierced her dreams, disrupting the fine line between sleep and wakefulness. Alia, still groggy and confused, first thought the persistent ringing was part of her dream, a shadow of her restlessness that wouldn't let go. She tried to ignore it, hoping it would vanish, but the persistent ringing, insistently cut through the quiet of her sleep.

With great reluctance, as if dragging herself from the depths of a deep-sea trench, Alia summoned the strength to pry open her heavy eyelids. The room was cast in a soft, ethereal glow, courtesy of the phone's luminescent display. As her bleary eyes struggled to focus, the digits on the screen came into view, unmistakably announcing the ungodly hour: "8:00 AM." Alia, having embraced a life detached from the rigours of a conventional nine-to-five job since her departure from British Petroleum, found herself disoriented by the untimely disturbance. Such early morning calls had become foreign to her, a relic of a bygone routine.

Blinking away the remnants of sleep and trying to shake off the lingering fog of drowsiness, she squinted at the unfamiliar number that had so rudely disrupted her already restless slumber. It blinked insistently or

week Friday, did you have any contact with him after that?”

Alia’s mind raced, connecting the dots between her last encounter with Dr. Bhanu and the unexpected summons to the police station. She remembered his words, the ominous hints at powerful forces opposing his work. “That was the only time I met him,” she answered, her voice measured. “Apart from a call to schedule the appointment, I’ve had no contact with him.”

ASP Daniel reached for a Samsung Tablet resting on a stack of files, unlocked it, and pushed it towards Alia. Her curiosity piqued, she glanced at the tablet, unsure of what to expect. “What seems to be the matter?” she inquired, her eyes darting between the ASP and the device.

He continued to regard her with a probing gaze, his expression incomprehensible. “Take a look for yourself.”

Alia picked up the tablet, her fingers brushing against the cold glass screen. What she saw left her momentarily stunned. On the display was a series of images, each capturing a lifeless Dr. Bhanu from different angles. His once vibrant disposition had been replaced by an eerie stillness.

As she swiped through the images, a sense of unease settled in her gut. The photos were meticulous, capturing even the smallest detail of the scene. One particular detail caught her eye—a small tattoo on Dr. Bhanu’s left earlobe. She was certain he hadn’t had that tattoo during their last meeting.

“How—” Alia began, her voice trembling with uncertainty. “When? Who did this?”

ASP Daniel looked up at her, his gaze unwavering. “The forensics estimate the time of death to be between midnight to 12:15 last night, most likely poisoning. As for the ‘who,’ that’s what we’re trying to find out. We thought you might be able to help us.”

Alia’s mind raced, her thoughts caught in a whirlwind of questions and suspicions. “You would have arrested me instead of calling me here if you had a suspicion or some evidence against me, so I’m assuming that you genuinely want me to help you out with this.”

ASP Daniel’s lips curved into a faint smile. “I don’t know if I detest or am impressed by your smart Alec answer. Fine, you can help us. Start by telling me about your meeting with him.”

Alia hesitated for a moment; her eyes locked with ASP Daniel’s. She knew she needed to tread carefully, to share just enough information without revealing her own uncertainties. “Oh, there’s nothing much to that,” she began, her voice measured. “I called him and made an appointment. He gave me a slot. I went there and did the interview. I have the video of the interview and can share it with you.”

ASP Daniel nodded, absorbing her response. “That’s a good start. Did you notice anything unusual about him during the interview?”

Alia leaned back in her chair, her mind racing through the details of her meeting with Dr. Bhanu. “People like him have a lot of things that are unusual

about them,” she remarked, her tone contemplative. “But nothing particularly alarming stood out. He was passionate about his work, perhaps even a bit eccentric, but that’s not uncommon in his field.”

ASP Daniel leaned forward; his gaze unwavering. “We’ll need to go through that interview video carefully, but for now, let’s address the matter at hand.” He reached for the tablet once more, swiping through the gruesome images of Dr. Bhanu’s lifeless body.

“This,” he said, tapping on one of the pictures, “is the key to understanding what happened to Dr. Bhanu.” He pushed the tablet toward Alia. “Take your time, go through these pictures, and let me know if anything strikes you. We’ll meet tomorrow at 10 in this office to discuss it further. And don’t forget to share the video of the interview.”

Alia nodded, her thoughts racing as she stared at the images on the screen. “I won’t forget”

ASP Daniel rose from his chair, his gaze still locked onto Alia. “Until tomorrow, Miss Merican.”

Alia left the police station with a sense of unease, the weight of the investigation pressing upon her. As she stepped into the bright Kuala Lumpur sunlight, she couldn’t help but wonder what secrets those haunting images held and what her involvement in this mysterious case would uncover.



CHAPTER 3

LEAVING the police station, Alia was filled with a persistent uneasiness that stuck to her like her shadow. The thought that she was now part of something mysterious and perilous wouldn't leave her mind. Her head swirled with questions and worries as she got into her car and turned it on. The dashboard clock showed it was 10:05 AM, while outside, the usual lively bustle of Kuala Lumpur blithely persisted.

Around the same time, a train pulled into Hat Yai station in Thailand, carrying with it a man on the upper berth of 23-C. His anxiety palpable, a nervous energy coursing through his veins. He had been listening intently for the announcement of Hat Yai station, a signal for him to act. However, he was under strict instructions not to arouse any suspicion. Patience was his ally.

He waited until the train came to a complete halt. Other passengers began to scramble about, gathering their belongings and making their way towards the exit. The man, shrouded in the anonymity of blue denim and a black T-shirt, the very embodiment of inconspicuousness, slowly drew the teal-coloured cotton polyester curtains aside. His backpack awaited,

ready for action. He had also donned a black baseball cap, yet another detail meticulously selected to blend seamlessly into the crowd.

As the passengers continued their frenzied exit, he merged seamlessly into their midst. The majority were tourists who had endured an 11-and-a-half-hour journey from KL Sentral, fatigue etched on their faces. He, on the other hand, had boarded in Ipoh, a mere eight hours ago, and had not rested for a single moment. At the Padang Besar station, the train had come to a halt. He needed to go through immigration checks and change trains.

Nervously, he queued up with the other passengers, clutching his Thai passport—a document that contradicted his recent entry into Malaysia, on a Malaysian passport. His heart pounded with anticipation, convinced that his deception would be exposed at any moment. To his astonishment, the immigration officers at both the Malaysian and Thai counters had merely glanced at his passport, made a few notations, and waved him through. The process had been surprisingly smooth, leaving him both relieved and perplexed.

Now, standing on the platform at Hat Yai station, he wasted no time. He swiftly navigated through the stream of passengers, exiting the station with purpose. With a clear destination in mind, he headed towards the taxi stand, flagging down the first available tuk-tuk. The driver eyed him warily, clearly displeased to be transporting a local passenger when he could have charged a tourist higher fares.

Once safely inside his home, the man wasted no time. He knew the importance of following instructions to the letter, and he wasn't about to take any unnecessary risks. He closed the door behind him, his eyes scanning the room for any signs of surveillance or intrusion, despite having lived alone and taken extensive precautions to maintain his security.

In the dimly lit corner of his room, he approached an aged wooden table. With practised familiarity, he opened a drawer. He retrieved an old Nokia phone, its faded exterior belying its enduring functionality. A quick check of the battery revealed it was still charged, the indicator hovering at a steady half-full.

He dialled the only number stored in its memory. He listened intently as the phone rang; each chime an echo of his unwavering commitment. Eight rings passed as a testament to his patience and dedication. Finally, on the Ninth ring, the phone was answered.

“Charan” he announced, his voice unwavering, filled with a profound sense of duty and loyalty.

On the other end of the line, silence prevailed, the weight of unspoken understanding hanging heavy in the air. Then, without uttering a single word, the connection was severed—a silent acknowledgement of their shared mission and the gravity of their responsibilities.

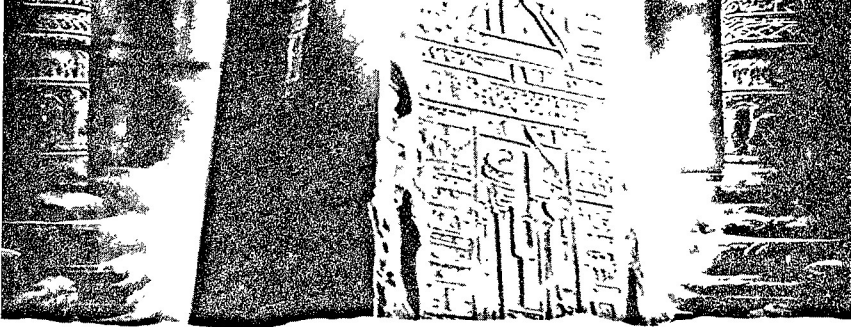
With a calm demeanour that masked the underlying tension, he awaited further instructions. His mind raced with thoughts of the recent events, the unexpected turn of events that had brought him to this point. He understood that he has become a crucial piece

in a complex puzzle, and his actions would have far-reaching consequences.

In the silence of his home, he contemplated his role in the unfolding drama, knowing that his every move would shape the course of events to come.

As he sat in the quiet solitude of his home, the man's thoughts continued to revolve around the immense responsibility he now carried. He had willingly embraced his role in what he believed to be a grand endeavour, a mission to correct the course of the world. The weight of this responsibility filled him with a mix of pride and anxiety.

Charan understood the importance of flawless execution of their mission, that any error could lead to severe outcomes. He was committed to strictly following the commander's orders. He felt deeply honoured to have been personally selected by the master for such a crucial role, a responsibility he took very seriously. Determined to contribute his best to the mission's success, he was prepared to do whatever was necessary, recognizing that the fate of their world depended on it.



CHAPTER 4

IT was only last week that Alia had spoken to Dr. Bhanu. It was not easy to get him to meet up, Dr. Bhanu being his sceptical and elusive self.

Alia: Dr. Bhanu, thank you for meeting me today. Your research on Bujang Valley has ignited my curiosity. Can you indulge me in the history of this enigmatic place?

Dr. Bhanu: I appreciate your interest, Alia. Bujang Valley, a name shrouded in mystery, carries with it a legacy of secrets. “Bujang” itself is derived from the Sanskrit “bhujanga,” signifying a serpent. And this valley, nestled in Kedah, a state in the North Western Malay Peninsula, holds a history that spans ages. It’s inextricably tied to India, thanks to its profound Indianized culture.

Alia: The notion of hidden secrets is intriguing. What is the historical significance of Bujang Valley and its connection to the ancient Malay kingdoms?

Dr. Bhanu: Bujang Valley is more than just a place—it’s a testament to a clandestine past. This region was pivotal in shaping the history of Southeast Asia

acting as a crucible of cultures and clandestine trade. Known as “Kadaram” in Indian annals, it beckoned early Indian explorers in pursuit of spices and gold. To the Greeks, it was the “Auria Chersonesus,” a fabled Golden Peninsula. The Indians fondly dubbed it “Suvarna Bhumi,” the Land of Gold. The term “Melayu” may very well have sprung from “Malayur,” meaning the Land of Mountains in Tamil.

Alia: Dr., how did Indian culture influence the region and can you please elaborate on the intricate trade routes that facilitated this cultural exchange?

Dr. Bhanu: The Indian culture didn’t just touch Bujang Valley; it infiltrated every aspect of its existence. The process of Indianization began as early as the 1st century CE when it took root and flourished. A mosaic of Indianized kingdoms, from Funan to Champa, Chola, Sri Vijaya, and Majapahit, all contributed to this region’s blending of culture and tradition. Bujang Valley emerged as a nexus for commerce and the crossroads of civilizations—Indian, Chinese, Arab, and beyond.

Alia: The convergence of cultures and the exchange of enigmatic treasures become all the more intriguing. Dr. Bhanu, you mentioned cryptic allusions in historical records from Indian, Chinese, Arab, and Malay sources. Could you unravel these references and the secrecy surrounding them?

Dr. Bhanu: Alia, these references are like fragments of a hidden puzzle, waiting to be assembled. Indian records, which designate Bujang Valley as “Kalagam,” “Kedaram,” and “Kadaram,” speak of it as a treasure trove of spices. The Cholas’ invasions in t

10th century CE are tell-tale signs of their keen interest. Chinese accounts, penned by travellers like I Ching, offer vivid accounts of their encounters within the enigmatic valley. Arab voyagers, too, left their mark, christening the region “Kala” or “Calabar” while lauding its famed swords. Malay lore weaves it into “Meru,” signifying a warrior lineage.

Alia: There is so much secrecy and veiled history of Bujang Valley that needs to be uncovered. What, in your knowledge are the hidden archaeological treasures of Bujang Valley?

Dr. Bhanu: The archaeological collage of Bujang Valley is a treasure trove cloaked in the mists of time. Lieutenant Colonel James Lowe’s discoveries in the 1940s were but the tip of the iceberg. Subsequent excavations, led by intrepid archaeologists like Quaritch Wales and Dorothy, unveiled a clandestine world of “chandis” or temples. These chandis, though weathered by time, whisper tales of both Hindu and Buddhist influences, hinting at a mysterious syncretism.

Alia: What were the concealed features that set these chandis apart from the ordinary?

Dr. Bhanu: Ah, Alia, the chandis of Bujang Valley possess an enigmatic charm. They’re distinguishable by their stone pillar bases, remnants of what once held aloft wooden superstructures, now vanished into obscurity. The chandis themselves, diverse in shape—square, triangular, even round—often pay homage to Hindu deities or embrace Buddhist elements. It’s as if these temples hold the key to unlocking the valley’s covert past.

Alia: The secrets of Bujang Valley are etched into every stone. The cryptic artefacts. What can you divulge about these hidden relics?

Dr. Bhanu: The Bujang Valley Archaeology Museum in Marbella shelters relics that have borne witness to the silent passage of time. Stone carvings, utensils, statues—these are the remnants of a bygone era. The stone carvings, in particular, are akin to encrypted messages, portraying deities and practices of that enigmatic time. Utensils, like granite vessels used for grinding sugarcane and rice, are echoes of daily life, shrouded in the mists of time. Every artefact seems to harbour a story untold.

Alia: You've also mentioned a concealed trans-Peninsula trade route in your investigation.

Dr. Bhanu: The trans-Peninsula trade route, was a clandestine artery connecting Bujang Valley to Lanka Sukha (Patani) on the East Coast. It was a covert lifeline, slashing through the dense jungles and cutting four and a half months off the arduous journey around the peninsula. This route, veiled in history, was the lifeblood of the region, fostering prosperity and cultural intermingling with neighbouring realms.

Alia: Dr. Bhanu, your revelations and investigations into the Bujang Valley feel like a journey into the heart of an unsolved enigma.

Dr. Bhanu: Indeed, Alia, this valley conceals more than meets the eye. It's a realm fraught with past whispers, and only the curious adventurers/historians dare to unravel its mysteries.

Dr. Bhanu's revelation had stirred Alia's curiosity to its core. As she leaned forward, her eyes filled with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, she probed deeper into the shrouded history of Bujang Valley.

"Dr. Bhanu," she inquired, her voice laced with intrigue, "you've hinted at veiled secrets hidden within the heart of Bujang Valley. Secrets so profound that they remain concealed for the safety of those who possess this knowledge?"

Dr. Bhanu's gaze became intense, his eyes locking onto Alia's as he responded, "There are mysteries buried within the depths of Bujang Valley that I dare not reveal. The passage of time has woven a fabric of intrigue, and some truths are better left undiscovered. Your life, as well as those who delve too deep, maybe in danger if certain knowledge comes to light."

Alia's heart quickened as she contemplated the gravity of Dr. Bhanu's words. The enigma surrounding Bujang Valley had taken on an even more sinister hue. She understood that they stood on the precipice of an abyss of secrets, and the consequences of unearthing them could be dire.

Dr. Bhanu leaned in closer, his voice barely above a whisper, "There are forces, Alia, ancient and powerful, that guard these hidden truths. They will stop at nothing to protect what lies beneath. Be cautious in your pursuit, for you tread on treacherous ground."

Alia nodded solemnly. The mysteries of Bujang Valley had become a gauntlet, and she was entangled in its web.

SILENCING THE LAMBS

In the bustling streets of modern Kuala Lumpur, Alia Merican's life takes an unexpected turn when she stumbles upon a chilling mystery rooted in ancient history. "Silencing The Lambs" unravels a thrilling narrative that bridges the gap between the grandeur of the Mauryan Empire and the contemporary world.

Young Alia, grappling with her own personal demons, finds herself entangled in a sinister plot that dates back to Emperor Ashoka's reign. As she delves deeper, she uncovers a cryptic message intertwined with the enigmatic history of the world archaeology. Each clue she unravels pulls her deeper into a labyrinth of intrigue, where historical secrets cast long shadows over the present.

From the dimly lit chambers of ancient Pataliputra to the vibrant heart of Kuala Lumpur, to Rome and Shiraz, Alia confronts not just the echoes of a forgotten past but also the harrowing realities of treachery and murder in the modern world. Her journey is fraught with danger, as she faces adversaries with insidious motives, all seeking to unlock the ancient secrets that she holds the key to.

"Silencing The Lambs" is a gripping tale of historical mysteries, unexpected twists, and a woman's quest to uncover the truth. It's a story where the past is not just a memory, but a living, breathing presence that challenges the fabric of the present. Join Alia as she navigates through layers of history and conspiracy, where each revelation is more startling than the last.

A great and absorbing read! The character and protagonist Alia leads us on a thrilling journey throughout time to uncover many discoveries. The plot moves around some very exotic places, makes you feel like you are there. - **Michael Collins**

This should be must read novel. Sajeet Soudagar knows how to intertwine history, thrill and treasure hunt so perfectly that one cannot let his/her eyes let off the book. The story is a treasure hunt set in a time span of 2 weeks. The protagonist, Alia uses her wit and knowledge to unveil some of the deepest secrets. - **Kellie Birman**

Silencing the Lambs is a Sajeet Soudagar thriller novel containing over 300+ pages. When firstly I started reading it, I saw a book of several pages only but the moment when you go through its first suspense you will move continuously without leaving it. And you will get this high stake of suspense every moment after a while. So, for me, it's the kind of book that whenever I get some leisure time, I want just go through it once more. There is so much to learn. - **Purusottam Banerjee**

