



AUM SHINRIKYO

JAPAN'S UNHOLY SECT

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CHAPTER-1

I feel the voices of three innocent victims of social madness calling for justice from beyond the wide chasm that separates the living from the dead and so their story will be told.

They were Tsutsumi Sakamoto, a 33-year-old lawyer from Yokohama, his wife, Satoko, 29 years old and their son, Tatsuhiko, barely 14 months old, all brutally murdered in November 1989.

For all intents and purposes, they were the typical young Japanese family; close knit, hard working and with all the right goals and motivations. Who would want to harm them and snuff out their young promising lives? This was the question many would ask when they disappeared from their apartment without any trace in the early hours of November 4, 1989.

But someone did wish them harm because Sakamoto had taken up a case, which would eventually wipe him and his entire family out. Their disappearance would be the subject of one of the coldest and most cruel crimes to rock the safe and orderly foundations of post war Japanese social structure.

He had dared to venture into the shady territory on the wrong side of society and rack up a nest of vipers best left alone. Sakamoto was taking on the Doomsday Cult, the Aum Shinrikyo, headed by its myopic leader and founder, Shoko Asahara. This was a cult many had considered as tottering on the brink of social insanity at best. Sakamoto took it upon himself to challenge Aum's very legitimacy and reason for existence ...did he really think he could get away with it?

In 1989, when Sakamoto proceeded with the case against them, the Aum Shinrikyo had matured into a religious sect with a huge following and well-organised branches in Russia, the United States and Germany. By 1994, Aum Japan boasted of at least ten thousand followers in 36 branches scattered all over the country with an impressive stronghold in Kamikuishiki. It was here that Aum followers lived commune style in complexes called satyams...

Kamikuishiki is a beautiful and peaceful village of rolling plains and hills at the foot of the majestic Mount Fuji. Its placid and tranquil environment was the perfect cover for the unpeaceful and destructive activities that were being nurtured and festered in the cult nest, growing

like a life-sapping tumour. Evil would soon be exposed in the Asian belief of the “Day of Retribution” that every evil-doer must eventually face.

But before that day came, many lives would be destroyed in unspeakable fear and anguish. The cult’s illicit activities were cleverly shrouded in the powerful and irresistible pull of religion while victims of cultist violence like the Sakamotos were brutalised without mercy. He and his family were left to suffer their fates one cold November morning, in 1989 while the whole of Japan slept and their cries for help went unheard.

Later, someone will always ask, “When did it all start? How did it all happen? Why couldn’t a city of eleven million people have done anything to prevent this trail of terror and violence?”

By all accounts, the unfortunate Sakamoto’s path crossed fatally with that of Shoko Asahara, the Aum leader in June 1989. The parents of several young men and women who had been lured into the cult, had approached Sakamoto with pleas to negotiate with Aum for the release and rehabilitation of their children. Tsutsumi Sakamoto had at the time some vague ideas about the reclusive cult but not enough to realise how dangerous they were, until he was immersed too deep in their murky waters to turn back.

“Please take our case and help us recover our children,” Ayako, the leader of the group, pleaded. Her face was newly lined with the anguish of being unable to come to terms with the loss of her son to Aum. “Their recruitment agency is everywhere,” she continued in anguish. “They prey on the young who have a temporary loss of direction in their lives and on those who have suffered recent losses or personal tragedies and are in need of a shoulder to lean on and pour out their hearts.”

“My son was a bright and diligent bank officer, with a good future ahead of him” another parent broke in, “but I never knew that all this was not enough for him and that he was searching for something more. One day, he told his wife and child that he was leaving them to join the Aum sect because he was convinced that he had found his calling at last and that his life belonged to the Aum leader, Shoko Asahara. Even when he was told that as a prerequisite to joining the cult, he had to liquidate all his assets and donate it to Aum, he could not see the folly of offering his life and soul to a religious group that coveted his material possessions. I tried so hard to make him see how he was throwing away his life but he would not listen. He was like a person possessed and before we knew it, he disposed of all his worldly possessions, even the family house

was sold right under the feet of his wife and child. Everything he had, amounting to 70 million yen, was donated to Aum. That was a year ago and we have not heard from him since. We worry every day.”

Tsutsumi Sakamoto was a young and idealistic lawyer who believed in doing his job and doing it well. Like so many of the young and idealistic, he made the fatal mistake of believing that he was invincible, not seeing evil for what it was and that evil targeted for elimination any threat to its perpetuity. One might say, “Nothing personal at all about why you have to be eliminated beyond the fact that you have become a nuisance to our continued existence.”

Perhaps Tsutsumi was still young enough to have too simplistic a view of life, a view which believed that if there was an evil force trying to cast its net over the young and gullible, it was one’s moral duty to check its invasion into decent society. In the end, good would always win over bad and the world would be a better place to live. A few of Tsutsumi’s more cautious friends had some reservations about the wisdom of becoming involved, however indirectly, with the reclusive and mysterious cult.

“There are stories about the cult that will make your spine chill,” his friend had warned him on their way to a nearby izakaya for a late dinner. “They say that Shoko Asahara is a dangerous man. I don’t feel comfortable that you are undertaking a case which threatens to break the rice bowl of a sinister cult, so to speak. You know the saying that a man will go to any lengths to defend his rice bowl. For some it may be harder to go berserk but for a dangerous man like Shoko Asahara, it will surely come easy.”

But Tsutsumi shook his head, “I’m a lawyer and I have my professional pride. How can I tell a client who comes to me with a problem that I can’t handle his case because I’m afraid of some self-perceived risk to myself? Didn’t they teach us in law school always to uphold our professional integrity, honour and pride? And what kind of dignity can a lawyer have if he refuses to soil his fingers with the occasional murk?”

“Yes, but remember also that they never told us in law school that we must go risk our lives for a client! We’re not speaking of an ordinary client here,” his friend persisted. “They are asking you to fight a whole cult, one which, if the rumours and speculations are any thing to go by, preaches an imminent destruction of mankind and the world and probably works toward a fulfilment of that self prophecy! God, have you read their leader’s book, ‘Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun?’ and see

madness for what it really is? For a man who preaches destruction of a whole nation as his ultimate objective, the destruction of one man who stands in his way would be nothing more significant than the swatting of a fly. At least think about it, please.”

But Tsutsumi Sakamoto was destined to be the proverbial sacrificial lamb that was needed to lure the Aum Shinrikyo into a euphoria of false confidence of their immortality. This would be manifested eventually in a series of irrational acts and bring the cult’s empire tumbling down like a pack of cards. So on this balmy summer evening, so beautiful and calm that it was easy to be misled into believing life could not be touched by so much evil, the young lawyer was adamant about taking up the case and his friend was left with a deep sense of foreboding. Thus, Tsutsumi Sakamoto sealed the fates of himself and his family and once he took that step, there was no turning back.

Later, after the Sakamotos’ mysterious and tragic disappearance, when the authorities dawdled over his case, a friend and fellow attorney was to comment; “I felt it coming even before he took up the case. Somehow I knew it would end this way. Shoko Asahara would wave his magic wand and the whole Sakamoto family would conveniently disappear. Although the police are not convinced, there’s little doubt that Sakamoto’s disappearance is Aum related. Why, an Aum badge was even found at his apartment! Everything points in the direction of that deplorable cult. How can the police still be working on the basis that there’s insufficient evidence to officially link this incident with Aum?”

Disillusioned with the passive response of the police, he decided to start a dedicated and tireless campaign involving Sakamoto’s fellow lawyers and his family to demand the truth and justice no matter how long it took. And it took almost six years for that truth to be uncovered. The tragic souls of the Sakamotos could finally be set free. They were released of the burden of telling their story from a realm where they were no longer able to communicate with the living. The living who could not see the truth and evil that was all around them. Almost six years later, they were free at last....

* * *

Once Tsutsumi Sakamoto decided to take up the case against Aum, he began an exhaustive study of the cult which naturally did not please Asahara at all. But he could still afford to wait and see how far this would go. This deceptively quiet tolerance gave one the uneasy feeling of a tiger

waiting in the shadows for the right time to spring forth.

Undaunted, the young lawyer paid several visits to the cult facilities at Kamikuishiki, trying to establish contact with any of the cult members. What he saw appalled him. On an average day, he would watch the cultists wandering around the satyams as if in a trance, locked away in a twisted world of ferocious brainwashing that no one could reach. In fact, the whole set up felt eerie and unreal. Tsutsumi Sakamoto could feel himself breaking out in goose bumps at the sight of the ghostly figures in their flowing white robes, flitting listlessly in and out of the clusters of factory-like buildings in the compound. Perhaps, they were no longer human. Shoko Asahara owned and controlled their minds, bodies and souls through a process of relentless brainwashing and they had become mere puppets on the strings of their Supreme Leader.

"They look drugged, as if riding on the high of some potent chemical," Sakamoto thought at the time. Little did he know how right he was but he would not be around when the horrible truth came out. It was learned that Aum leaders periodically injected hallucinating drugs into their members to control their minds and compel total submission from them. Needless to say, given the kind of things that were going on behind the closed doors of the cult compounds, it would have been inconvenient and disastrous for Shoko Asahara to have any straying members. It would also have been dangerous to have outside forces trying to pry open his controversial can of worms. Tsutsumi Sakamoto was too zealous to maintain the honour of his profession and do justice to his clients and society to see or hear this first warning bell. When he lost not only his life but that of his wife and child as well, to a cause he believed in, the social order he sought to maintain turned its back on them and left them turning and tossing in their lonely graves for almost six years. Mercifully, the young lawyer never knew what fates awaited him and his family.

On his third visit to the cult facilities, he noticed for the first time the head gears that the Aum members were compelled to wear. A twisted mass of electric wires attached to a cap and fitted tightly over the skull of each member. Apparently, this contraption was designed to give electric shocks to the wearer and was thought to control the brain waves to respond more fervently to Shoko Asahara's teachings. The members were convinced into believing that such devices connected their minds at all times to that of their revered Supreme Leader, Asahara. They were either happy or brutally compelled to suffer the pain and discomfort that

these electrical shocks gave them. No one thought to wonder whether the ugly mass of twisted wires were not unlike the sinister and twisted minds of the cult leaders who created them. All in all, it was an indescribably revolting sight and an insult to human dignity.

“What madness or religious logic is this which compels its followers to live like this,” he told his wife, Satoko, that evening. He was glad to be back in the warm security of his sane, normal home. “Religion is sought to bring peace and healing of the soul to mankind but what I see in Aum is not peace but a kind of blind, frenzied adoration that one man has created around himself. Shoko Asahara calls himself the leader of the Supreme Truth but,” he added in a sudden burst of humour, “some say leader of Supreme Madness is more like it!”

But this time his wife did not laugh. Tsutsumi often talked to his wife about his work and although she would listen and give him encouragement where it was needed, she seldom interfered with his decisions in that area. On this occasion, however, she felt a sudden chill descending on her which had nothing to do with the light summer rain that had begun to fall outside. All she ever wanted was her family to be safe and healthy and Tsutsumi’s allusions to the madness of Aum, albeit half in jest, made her feel cold and afraid. Her arms tightened involuntarily around her happy sleeping son, who would be turning one soon. The baby gurgled contentedly in his sleep and her throat contracted with the pain of those awful doubts. What if Tsutsumi’s interference into the affairs of Aum Shinrikyo unleashed the fury of Shoko Asahara, could he harm them? She wanted more than anything else in the world to entreat her husband to give up the case so that they could all live out their lives in safety. But she was a good Japanese wife and could not bring herself to rave and rant at him until he saw the wisdom of her fears. She considered it her duty not to interfere in his work, so she resolutely pushed all her fears and misgivings into the deepest recesses of her heart and kept her peace.

* * *

But on that cold November morning when she faced the chilling reality of certain death not only for herself but her whole family, just for a split second, perhaps she regretted being too good a Japanese wife to have badgered Tsutsumi into giving up the case. Perhaps even as she slipped into the merciful oblivion of death, she cried out wordlessly, “I should not have kept my peace ...had I not kept my peace ...had I put my foot down...” but by then, it was too late. They would never live to see the

possibilities and the joys life had promised them.

* * *

In order to equip himself with sufficient ammunition for effective negotiation with Aum on behalf of his clients, Tsutsumi Sakamoto had to dig up as much dirt on the cult as he could and his hard work and persistence paid off eventually. He received his first break when he managed to make contact with a few secretly disillusioned Aum members who were too petrified of the often fatal consequences of desertion, to leave the cult. They could only speak to him furtively with tearful entreaties to be rescued and the young lawyer realised that the cries for help came not only from outside but from within Aum, as well.

A member disclosed the following testimony to Tsutsumi. "The initiation period is the worst. I was forced into a tub of boiling water, it hurt so badly that I screamed to be spared but they pushed me deeper until they were done with me. I felt my heart, my ear drums and my head bursting and wished for death if that was the only way I could be rid of the excruciating pain the scalding water inflicted on my body. None of us was allowed any sleep. We were forced to pray and meditate day and night to the chanting of Shoko Asahara played over and over again on tape. All light was blotted out by the eye masks they made us wear and even when our bodies withered with exhaustion from such relentless physical abuses, we had to will our minds to take over our bodies and go on. This, we were told, was the Aum training that we needed to undergo, to attain the Supreme Truth. After some time, I began to wonder whether the whole exercise was about breaking and cracking us up into hapless, mindless robotic beings for Shoko Asahara to enslave and feed his egomania. I began to feel that Aum was nothing more than a myth created to satisfy the greed and egomania of one man who had an obsession to control people. They kept us on very poor food which they called the Aum diet. I think that too, was intended to weaken our physical conditions so that we would be too lethargic to put up any resistance to whatever was being done to us. The potent mixing of a weakened physical condition and a manipulated mind is what Asahara needed to keep us in line."

He continued to tell his shocking story to Tsutsumi. "Sometimes the Aum doctors administered us with strange drugs and we had to submit to injections. If we didn't do so voluntarily, they used force on us. I don't know what chemicals were used on us but they often made me feel alternatively ill and sort of light-headed. Sometimes, they produced

hallucinating sensations and feelings of supreme well being and, these were the times, I could do anything be it to kill or to steal for Aum but for the greater part, I just felt so weak that it was all too easy to submit to anything Shoko Asahara and the rest of the Aum leaders dictated to us. If we didn't tow the line, however unintentionally, they did terrible things to us. I saw a member being immersed in icy water recently only because he was thought to be making too much noise during the training sessions. He died of the shock and they hushed up the incident as they did everything else."

"I am no longer convinced of the religious values of Aum and its teachings. How can I help but feel evil in a religion which teaches the way of destruction of mankind and the world and not the way of salvation? But we are too afraid to leave Aum. No one who tried to leave has come to any good, they will go after us and we can never get away."

"What happens to those who try to leave the cult?" Tsutsumi prompted.

"Well, I know of at least three occasions when the cult leaders discovered that a few Aum members were plotting to leave. They were those who could no longer take the harsh conditions that we are brainwashed into believing was the ideal way of life for those chosen people who sought the Supreme Truth. Even among the cult members, there were informers who reported everything to the leaders. Two were caught as they were trying to sneak out of the cult compound; the other three were pursued outside, kidnapped and forcibly brought back. Asahara unleashed the full force of his fury on them and ordered them to be confined to tiny cubicles with hardly enough room for movement and there they were left for months to reflect on the wisdom of crossing their leader. Sometimes, there are accidents during the initiation and training or punishment processes and the experimental drugs that are injected into us. When that happens, it means nothing to the leaders. Bodies are disposed of in the neatest and most quiet way and they become mere numbers in the list of disappeared Aum members."

Tsutsumi looked at the pale, emaciated young man before him and two powerful emotions swept over him. Compassion for this trapped victim of a nightmarish cult, and anger at a man who toyed with the lives of and capitalised on the tragedies of people who had been driven to seek peace and healing in religion only to find themselves buried alive in a hell they could not get out of safely. How did one take the concept of religion and twist it so grotesquely out of proportion?