

The Old Man

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Now, only dust and dirty sunlight. Scattered through the dust, old sandals, overturned, and scraps of black flags. One end of a slogan written on cardboard was lifted up by the wind and then lay back down in the dust, like a wounded man who had regained consciousness.

The police had had to do much running. Since the maidan was quite large and the boys were swift runners, sweat and a sticky layer of dust had smeared their faces. Their large boots, covered by dust, looked like camels' hooves.

The police officers looked toward the Chief Minister with smug satisfaction. A moment later, however, their satisfaction disappeared. The Chief Minister's face was burning red, as if someone had branded his temples. During the crowd's tumult, stone throwing and lathi charges, so much dust arose that the Chief Minister began sneezing. He wanted to cover his nose with his handkerchief, but he was stubborn. People wanted to whisk him away to a safe spot, but he refused. It all seemed so insulting. Twenty-five years ago it was understandable. The Governors and Commissioners were English. We had to show our disapproval. But now

he was the Chief Minister, and he was not English. So why this demonstration against him!?

He refused to move from his place. He was no coward. Nor was he weak. If the boys had not made so much noise, he could have even ignored the black flags. And their coming up so close had no purpose. Then the rock throwing!

His initial distress gave way to a rejuvenated anger. It was not only the boys, that Old Man was among them, too! Drinking goats milk and eating neem chutney, the sala stays young, his. . .

Shocked, he himself reined in his tongue. In addition to his bodyguards, near him were his ministers, important officers in the police force and the wealthy merchant Sarju Das. He had sworn aloud unintentionally.

He was very upset. The entire program had been interrupted, he was unable to focus his mind. He had no idea how to complete the yagya or how to lay the foundation stone. On the way back his secretary softly suggested, “Sir, we could have the Old Man arrested.”

“Arrested?” scolded the Chief Minister. “Have you lost your senses? You want to make him a hero?” Up until two years ago he would have reacted differently. In those days the Chief Minister had certainly made his mistakes. He should have acted then with more circumspection.

In fact, he should have acted more carefully even before then. The Old Man was a thorn in his foot from the very beginning. What lies he told during the Freedom Struggle! Freedom brought no cause for happiness or enthusiasm. He said he was saddened by the plight of the oppressed. The Chief Minister

enlightened his secretary about history. “He was made neither a Cabinet Minister nor a Governor. He said he did not want any of that. What he hoped inside, however, was that the people would force the issue and give him everything. They did not, so the Old Man fretted. Then he became obsessed – why don’t the Ministers live in shacks? Why don’t they walk to the office? And now in this salee of a conference – International Conference of Ecology – put up all the sala delegates in shacks, feed them on banana leaves and send them out into the jungle to do their shitting!”

The Secretary could not stop a chuckle, then he remembered the seriousness of the present situation and controlled himself.

The Chief Minister knew the situation had deteriorated. As long as there was only a gherao of the Vice Chancellor, a demonstration against the secretaries, a fast unto death at Ministers’ homes – as long as he himself was not targeted, then all this often helped him. They provided him an excuse to sack a Vice Chancellor or transfer a Deputy Commissioner. But now this march and a demonstration against him? The mistake behind this he had committed two years ago.

He had banned the Old Man’s books. Which wasn’t even necessary. They were hardly that important. Then one day someone informed the Chief Minister that the Old Man had set himself down with an old, wheezy harmonium at a major intersection and was singing and selling his books. Two lines of one of his songs were:

They called him the butter thief.

They called me the salt thief.

The Chief Minister had had a big laugh. He rubbed his paunch, laughed some more and wiped his eyes with his khadi handkerchief. “What a feisty, stubborn sala! You must admire him!”

The Old Man was indeed unusual. The Chief Minister once had had a big statue made of him. It was said to have cost half a crore rupees. Who knows when the Old Man went to see it. First, he tried to pull it down, but the bronze was too heavy. So he threw stones at it, dinging its nose and eyes, and then he angrily urinated on it. In the morning people noticed a note attached to it which read:

Hé Ram, these people do not recognize a man until they make him a god. If one does not want to become a god, they make him one by force. When will this foolish tradition stop? Why isn't a statue of one of my harijan brothers here? And why spend so much money on this nonsense in the first place? Give this money to my poor country.
– Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Some people did not like that very much. The owner of Parasram Limited had donated ten lakh rupees for that statue. In his own newspaper he expressed his resentment this way: The Government Is Unable to Prevent the Desecration of Precious Memorials.

Then the situation became even worse. The capital was hosting a major conference on the problem of ridding the world of poverty. To house the honorable representatives of the world's most important countries gleaming buildings were constructed in the capital's most beautiful area. To see to those important guests'

every comfort, preparations were made twenty-four hours a day. And here is where the Old Man caused a scene again.

To clean out the lavatories of these shiny new buildings an army of sweepers had been mustered, among whom was the Old Man. One of the conference delegates was a journalist who had spent months with Gandhi during the Freedom Struggle. One morning he recognized that very Old Man cleaning out the lavatory of his flat. He was a French journalist who knew little English. Almost screaming in French he ran out of his flat, and in no time a crowd of Indian and foreign delegates had assembled outside the door. The Old Man did not speak. He appeared quite different from the photos of him that had been printed all over the world. His beard was a number of days old. Even in this cold season he wore only a loin cloth around his hips. On his upper body he wore a very dirty, tight, ripped kurta. Here and there his skin had split. The faces of the people gathered at the door were filled with a terrified curiosity. The Old Man patiently finished his work and then gathered up his mop, broom and bottle of phenol. When he came to the door, the crowd made a path for him. He came out and then stopped. He had stuffed some pieces of paper in his waistband. Perhaps for this reason. He carefully pulled them out and indifferently threw some of them on the floor before proceeding to the stairs, leaving wet footprints behind him. It was only by chance that the notes the people gathered were in good enough shape to be read. There was nothing in particular written on them, only this:

Do not mock our poverty. Discussing poverty in palaces reduces no man's suffering, it increases it. Go away from here. Leave us to our

state. – Gandhi

The Chief Minister had been beside himself. The Old Man refused to stop cleaning along with the sweepers. Despite every effort, he refused to speak with anyone. It even appeared once that the conference would have to be halted, but after a savory article in the newspapers, the work of the conference went on as planned.

But gradually it became clear that with each defeat the Old Man became that much more active. Or irritable. Before the election campaign started, when the Chief Minister asked for his blessing, he spit on him. A dirty, mucousy wad who knows how long the Old Man had nursed in his mouth. For an unusually long time the Chief Minister lacked the courage to wipe it off his arm. With merely that, though, the Old Man was not satisfied. He wrote a pamphlet against the Chief Minister and had it printed and distributed.

After that, people felt that the time had come to restrain the Old Man. His tongue was getting looser and looser. He called the election a farce. Inflation being what it was, it was not unusual to spend ten to twenty lakhs for a seat! But who could convince the Old Man! He said the country had been split into two parts – the poor and the wealthy. The wealthy will rule, and they will have to strike down the poor, otherwise. . . otherwise. . .

Concerning the incident that happened after that, the Chief Minister patted his paunch and laughed. Wiping his eyes with his khadi handkerchief, he said, “What a mischief is that Old Man!”

The Government officially proclaimed that foreign powers had so successfully spread their nets that our nation's independence was at risk. Literature, in large numbers and at inexpensive prices, had been sold throughout the land, the purpose of which was to undermine our nation's values and spread dissatisfaction and rebellion. Immediately after that proclamation the Old Man's little books disappeared from the marketplace.

Rage flailed on the Old Man's face like a gecko's severed tail. That was the first time, then, that he took out an old, wheezy harmonium and sat in the street. Next to him was a bundle of his books, and two dirty harijan boys sat with him, wiping their noses with their sleeves.

In no time a crowd of who knows how many dirty, bedraggled folk gathered there. Lord knows where they all came from. All evening the Old Man sang songs and bhajans. Then a noise suddenly arose. Not far from the Old Man an old woman selling peanuts started packing up her stand; perhaps she was late for something.

A voice from the crowd said to the Old Man, "Baba! Run! It's the Committee!" The Old Man was undecided for a moment, then he regained his composure. His fingers, however, remained stuck to the harmonium's worn-down keys. He stopped his song and looked at the old peanut seller. She had not yet gathered up everything to run away. Jumping out of a Municipal Committee truck, some uniformed men grabbed her small bundle. Her blackened clay pot full of smouldering sawdust to keep the peanuts warm flipped over, and smoke columned up. Like a hook she held onto her bundle and was dragged toward the Committee

truck.

A whirlwind devastated the entire marketplace. Little pushcart hawkers, necktie sellers, the man with a box of buttons and combs, the flower-bracelet seller, everyone without recourse fled for safety. Due to the overturning of sellers' baskets, chickpeas and fruits were scattered over the sidewalk. The Committee's officers hunted the people down and stuffed them in the truck along with their things.

Having come near the truck, the old woman let go her bundle, and instead of crying she let loose a stream of obscenities.

The Old Man thought he would be grabbed and stuffed in the truck too, but he was unable to decide how he should stand up to this situation. During the political decline of the past twenty-five years it seemed he had forgotten that language by which he had once been able to sway the whole world. Not only had he forgotten that language, but even the expressions he did have were slowly losing their force. His status, likewise, had declined. He had no influence on government. No one wanted to set up a gleaming dais for his speeches. He had become totally irrelevant, alone and empty-handed.

"Run, Baba!" someone yelled, but at that very moment, like a pair of hawks, two men pounced from behind and dragged away his bundle of books and harmonium. A corner of the harmonium struck the Old Man in the shoulder. Whether from the pain or the blow, the Old Man toppled over. The people sitting near him suddenly went silent, and then an ominous tingling electrified the entire marketplace.

Just as in the past few years the government had grown indifferent towards him, so the people, too, had lost their attachment. They were saddened when they first saw him wearing dirty clothes, but then it became an everyday occurrence. Although his ideas still seemed true, the people's path was headed toward a world against which he had harangued morning, noon and night, until he grew tired and disappeared down a small lane. Despite this indifference, the people still held the Old Man in a small part of their hearts, deep down somewhere.

A nearby bank had closed, and its two rifle-bearing security guards came down from their post, as if an illusion had drawn them. The commotion on the sidewalk ceased.

“They hit Baba, and you haramees just stand there and watch!” screamed the old peanut seller suddenly. Her voice sprang up over the people like a fluttering flag and suddenly dominated the entire sidewalk's discontent. Then the old woman lost interest. She wheeled around, pounced on a guava that had fallen on the sidewalk from a seller's basket and began wiping it off on her saree. While she was doing that, the two boys who had been sitting with the Old Man sprang up and pulled the harmonium away from the Committee's men, who couldn't even imagine the people would be violent like that. Seeing the crowd's aggressiveness, they became afraid. They clambered into the truck and got away. About an hour later a small police car arrived. By then everything had returned to normal.

Normal, yes, but the incident had given the people an idea. During the next

few days whenever the Committee truck arrived, the people chanted the Old Man's name as if it were a warcry.

That had been the mistake, thought the Chief Minister. I should have corrected it right then. His three decade's old language had become as ineffective as damp matches, but that day, by taking away his harmonium, he suddenly had a new language.

Can an unarmed man surrounded by wild animals save himself by singing bhajans to Ram? Of course not. What will he do? He has fingernails! He has teeth! He has the stones on the ground! That is how an unarmed man will fight. The Old Man had a strange way of thinking, but it had its logic. He started making use of the unemployed laborer, the office babu, the women who lived in shacks, anyone who realized that his weapons were nails, teeth and stones.

The Chief Minister had made a mistake, but what he did after that did not lack for cleverness.

The Grocery Merchants Association came to the Chief Minister for help. The Old Man's violence had made their lives difficult. The Chief Minister smiled, then his face hardened. These were the same merchants who in the last election had run their own candidate against him.

The Chief Minister said, "Violence will happen," and then started flipping through the newspaper. The merchants were stunned by his response.

After a lengthy pause the Chief Minister said, "If you people don't change your behavior, then this is what will happen. Times have changed. If you keep blocking social progress, all this will keep happening. Either you become an ally

and let us bring about peaceful change, or the people themselves will bring about change, flooding the streets with blood.”

It couldn't have been clearer: side with the Chief Minister, or. . .

So after that, the Chief Minister was able to hang that tool, too, on his belt. It amazed everyone to learn that the organization that had never let an opportunity pass to throw stones at the Chief Minister was now firmly in his pocket.

But this time the Old Man did not become agitated. On his face, outlined by white, dishevelled hair, was a smile. He knew the Chief Minister's limits, and he knew just when to plan his attack.

A new building for the Legislative Assembly had been the Chief Minister's greatest desire. It had been designed with an auditorium that held thousands and in which major international conferences could be staged. The most modern infrastructure had been designed for the simultaneous translation of many languages. For the celebration of the laying of the foundation stone the Chief Minister had crafted his speech with particular care.

For this the Old Man himself had come. How terrifying he'd become in the meantime! For quite a while the Chief Minister had not even recognized him. He'd become shorter. His skin had become black and crusty. While he had no beard, his face was a field of tiny, raggedy, undisciplined hairs. Down to his knees he wore a pair of ripped, dirty, baggy trousers and on top a yellow undershirt stained with sweat. His feet were covered with what looked like prehistoric dirt.

For a moment the Chief Minister could not believe this was the same man

for whom people had been eager to clean a space with their tongues and who had run his kingdom wearing clean, white khadi garments. For a moment the Chief Minister felt like approaching this dirty Old Man, embracing him, bringing him home and getting him cleaned and washed up so that he would once again be all bright and shiny. That small glimmer of respect had just flashed in the Chief Minister's brain when the Old Man raised his hand and spoke to the crowd swelling behind him.

The Chief Minister's attention was diverted again. Behind the Old Man was a huge crowd. During his life the Chief Minister had seen many crowds. During the Freedom Struggle he himself had led how many marches. Those crowds, however, were different. The people usually wore clean clothes. They even had flower garlands. Their slogans were written in beautiful letters on shiny white cloth. On his official tours he had seen crowds. Even in areas affected by famine, flood or drought, the people brought near him when he went out had usually just been given new clothes. This crowd was different. They looked like so many cockroaches that had come out. Their eyes were red and shiny, and everything else about them was dirty and smeared with dust, like cattle who lived in mud. In their eyes was a frightening glint. In their hands were posters, the ungainly letters of which had been scrawled on cheap paper that had been glued to cardboard, and they held flags made of rage dyed black. The people's legs and arms were unusually thin and dry, but they held their flags and posters as if they would break them. The amount of noise and dust was inconceivable.

The Chief Minister somehow gained control of himself and asked, "What are

these people saying?”

His secretary immediately told him. The Chief Minister turned his eyes away from the crowd. To his left, beneath a decorated dais a marble stone had been suspended over a smallish platform, and on a table covered with an expensive velvet cloth had been placed a tiny golden trowel and a silver basin containing a small amount of washed sand and cement. The Chief Minister had become a little frightened of the crowd, the reason for having turned his attention away from it. He asked a man standing near him, “First will be the worship of the ground?”

A stone came before the answer and struck the middle of the silver basin. The mixed sand and cement splashed up on the Chief Minister’s nehru jacket. Then stones came one after the other. The Chief Minister’s people got him down under the protection of the dais.

The police furiously fired canisters of tear gas. When they struck the ground, they hissed and a bitter, white gas streamed out like a djinn. The boys began stuffing the canisters with dirt, but the police then charged, swinging their lathis. Fleeing, the boys felt excited. Then they tore the black flags off their sticks and had their own lathis.

The Old Man refused to go, and was stubborn about it, but the boys were not going to leave him behind. They lifted him up from both sides and ran. He was not very heavy. If he had had teeth, he would have certainly bitten them. He did use his fingernails, but the boys took no notice.

They did not stop even after crossing the bridge and entering a dense neighborhood. They turned into the very first lane so fewer people would see them.

The lanes were not unfamiliar. After making a number of turns they slipped into a house. Actually, it seemed less a house and more a godown, and the lane in front of it was packed with tongewala horses and old cows.

The Old Man was so angry, speech was impossible. Foam had gathered at both corners of his lips.

“Instead of being carried away like a dog it would have been better to die there! Aré, you think I’m that much of a coward!?” screamed the Old Man. The boys paid no attention. They closed the outer door. Just then two men came in by the back, wearing only lungees.

Addressing the tall one who entered, the boys said, “Baba, the battle has begun. They fired bullets. Many have died. The police will not sit quietly now. Had they got their hands on Baba, they would have eaten him alive. . .”

“Eaten him alive?” repeated the tall man, stunned. He looked in the direction of the Old Man and was startled. Who knows when the Old Man had entered an inner room and come back out. He had a shiny, heavy revolver in his hand, placed it against his wrinkled belly and with fingers trembling was trying to load it with bullets.