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Deadly Silence

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I never imagined myself in such a small congested space ever in my life. The cold and rough floor makes the ordeal of squatting on the floor a herculean task, not even room enough to stretch my legs without brushing and aggravating the others. The others seem to be thugs, ruffians and goons, in their sweaty, stinking cloths, spitting in all directions at their convenience, indifferent to the others around. Look around and the peelings of dried spittle make it clear that it is not the first time people are spitting here but a routine and in the four corners it looks like it is never allowed to dry. It is then I felt the nauseating smell of chewed tobacco spittle and started retching wondering how can people savour such a loathsome substance.

It is as if in a dream everything happened in just a whiff of a time. Was this how I was brought up ... ? Absolutely ... noooo! There is no streak of violence or violent background in our family. Is it a rare occurrence that the ancestral Neanderthal barbarianism dormant in the homo sapiens surfaced in me?

Stepping on an inanimate, blank, torn piece of paper, I am trained to seek pardon from Goddess Saraswathi, mother of knowledge and intelligence; dropping a coin or a rupee note, I am tutored to touch it to both my eyes and kiss it, to show my obeisance to Goddess Lakshmi, mother



of wealth and prosperity, who may otherwise get angry and abandon me or depart from my household.

I can clearly recall my childhood days when we would wait for power failures, so our parents would let us free from behind the book bunkers and let us breathe some fresh air. It was the time for all age groups to gather with their own likes. Children playing, forgetting all their home works, projects and assignments; and teenagers eagerly sharing their new found secrets and unraveled taboos. The youth lurking in the darker corners trying to grab a glimpse of their beloveds who are also in similar endeavours, but at times looking towards someone else. It was the adults who were more occupied than anyone out there, having an eye on all the age groups and cursing the 'power people' for the power cuts, ready to call back and gather their fold at any time the supply resumes.

Bad weather during such times would keep us tied down to the confines of our house, leaving us to entertain each other with our skills in hand shadow puppets dancing on the walls. One of us would get bored and would sit near the candle, chasing flies and beetles hovering over the flame. Occasionally an insect would fall into the flame and we catch and drop the second insect watching it wriggle, stuck in the melted wax, being pulled up by the burning wick. Once noticed, this act of brutality would invite the wrath, if not a slap from our elders bidding us not to harm any creature, however small it is.

Jostling in a crowded bus, when we stepped on someone's legs or brush our legs against theirs, we were taught, or better say observed and learned to express a gesture of respect. On inquiry our elders would say, 'the other has a part of the 'Atma', 'All of us have a particle of the



Paramatma'. So every human deserves respect for having something divine in oneself. May be in a hurry, may be my fault or the other person's; clearly unintentional, the act of brushing the other with one's limbs especially legs would provoke a prompt response. Both our hands would touch the other and rest on our hearts invoking our household deity's name.

I wonder at what happened to all this training and all the respect for the 'other', for the 'Atman-in-the-other' ingrained into every thought, instilled into every nerve, infused into every cell? I curse myself for paying a deaf ear to my parents' instructions, never to promise anything when happy, decide anything when sad or upset, do or say something when you are angry; to keep away from brawls and quarrels; not to join a crowd when they are angry or be curious to know about every silly and stupid thing happening around.

I deeply regret joining the crowd to see what was happening. With people moving in and out of the mob, many more pushing themselves in to see what was happening I soon found myself in the center. The elderly person lying down on the road was trying in vain to plead with folded hands and say something. But none gave him a chance to speak. A young ruffian, whom I don't see now with me here, was beating him with a muddy old slipper ... on the face. Curious to know the antecedents and why what was happening was happening, I was struggling to hold my position in the center. One other ruffian was shouting, 'you did it intentionally, only to hurt our sentiments' and showered punches with his youthful fist anywhere he could. One other shouted, 'he was laughing at us and was talking back when we questioned?' and kicked him in his stomach.

Seeing the old man being mauled by the beasts in these humans, curiosity took the upper hand and I was still trying to hang on and listen to what the old man was trying to say. He was



trying to utter something, but except for a feeble hoarse crackle nothing was heard, sticky bubbles of saliva mixed with blood was dripping out of his mouth, half shut with fully bruised and swollen lips. The young ruffian with the muddy slipper in hand, started shouting at the top of his voice, “this should be a lesson to all, here after no one should dare eat what you ate. Either you stop eating or pack and go to your land”. Shouting obscenities against his parents, siblings, kith and kin and cursing his children with all possible swear words he pushed the slipper into the old man’s bruised mouth, making him groan in pain. I remained a mute witness to what was happening, not adding a stone nor removing one.

A person whose face is rather familiar to me, moving out of the center was saying, ‘let them be’... ‘they have been doing this for centuries now, and why find fault with it now’. One other added, “How can good turn to bad overnight?” Though they voiced out their views as they were going, I’m sure no one paid attention, neither did I. But only to regret for life later for having witnessed what I witnessed.

I was still not so sure of what was it that he ate to hurt people’s sentiments. Did he steal food offered to God meant only to be consumed by the few who feel full and belch all the time? If so where are they asking him to pack and go? No, it is not about the delicacies offered to deities. Yes... enlightenment descended upon me ... I think I understood what he did... or what the mob thought he did. As the realization dawned and before I could weigh the pros and cons of the act, decide for myself whether it was really a crime, it was too late. For in a frenzy people started kicking their target and pushing him around with their legs. In just a few minutes the old man remained motionless with his clothes torn and bleeding all over. As if summoned elsewhere, the



crowd dispersed as fast as they gathered, except for a handful laughing at the old rag, with a few feet still resting on the motionless body.

As in many bollywood movies, the police arrived too late to save the old man from the moral police. They are growing in numbers these days, taking law into their hands and deciding on instant punishments in the name of safe guarding culture, tradition and values. They appear from nowhere, judge and execute their sentence and disappear in a twinkle of an eye, just like all the rescue operations of superheroes in movies that abound these days. But the handful of us left there were surrounded and loaded into the van.

Whom can I blame for dragging myself into this mess? Is this how God wishes to punish me for my oppressive silence? For in the face of injustice, the silence of the spectator weakens and betrays the oppressed and that same silence also strengthens the oppressors. Today it is the old man, tomorrow it is someone else and then one day the mob would be around me, to silence the silent spectator... punish me for something they think is wrong. And for sure there would be all these silent spectators standing there around me as I was standing, a mute witness. Fear gripped me... and my throat went dry...

As fear gripped my throat, sweat drenched me and my clothes stuck to my already sticky body. A few hours in custody felt too, too long and I could not think of anything. From the place I was sitting, a glimpse across the classic from 'behind the bars' scene sparked a ray of hope. I thought I saw a familiar figure moving around in the station. Did I really see or am I hallucinating in a state of delirium? I do not have a clear idea but the lighted flame of hope kept me busy hoping, against all odds, for something good to happen.



All the prayers I uttered, all the vows I made to God pleased Him and my hope against hope bore fruit and the familiar figure I saw turned out to be a distant relative with a lot of political influence. Though he is not straight away in active politics, he is known to be the backbone for many a figure, both in the ruling as well as the opposition parties. This I could never understand, for how can a person be there for both the ruling as well as the opposition. He stood far away and waved his hands and I responded very energetically, waving my hands vigorously so as not to miss and not willing to take chances that he comes for someone and goes without noticing me, for it is the last place anyone may expect to meet me. Gesturing, as if to say wait, he turned to business. After a short while, when a constable walked towards the cell calling out my name, I jumped and stood, pushed myself forward only to be pushed further back by the one whom I pushed aside, shouting a few expletives. But the constable looks at me and turns back without a word. After an hour or so the constable comes and takes me along and within no time I am out on the road scot free with my uncle, and join a few relatives waiting outside who escort me home.

I returned home, shaken and in the state of shock could neither feel happy for the release nor could do anything. Though on our way back my uncle assured that nobody would disturb me again, every time when someone comes knocking to inquire of what happened, a chill would run down my spine ... Are they here for me? ... Are they feeling threatened that I would identify them before the police? ... Or is it the police?

Only days later did we get the facts that it was based on a mere supposition that the old man ate beef and was having some more in his possession that he was publicly condemned. And a mobs verdict was executed on the spot, with no second thought. Though this assumption turned out to be



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false, there is no one who can take back all the blows showered on the old man or bring him back to life.

In the light of the happenings, pondering over their demand to pack and go, I realized their intentions... their dubious ways of driving a wedge between people living in harmony for centuries. I heard of all sorts of discriminations, based on race, religion, class, caste, age and gender. It is the birth pangs of a new discrimination that I witnessed... that of diet.

Much more shocking was the news that out of the thirty odd arrested only two still remain in the custody and two more were arrested a few days later, to pacify the few who go around demanding that the culprits be booked and justice be meted out to the victim. Given my own case I realized, how people are penalized or left scot free, how rubbing shoulders with the so called 'big shots' works.

It is years and the case is still awaiting closure, the old man's family for justice and the spirit of the deceased happy that it changed at least one person, for I decided never to let silence prevail in the face of injustice and am ready to die for a just cause.