

The Buddha, I and the Leopard

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Poet's Note: Ideals, in their entirety, can seldom be put to practice; otherwise, they cease to be ideals. My attitude towards the futile efforts to put ideals, word by word, into practice – apologies - is a little ignoble. This poem is an involuntary release of my suppressed mirth as I witnessed our leaders trapped between their wish to adhere to the Gandhian principles on one side and the demands of the day-to-day governance, on the other.

Not a morsel to eat, nor a wick to burn, abject misery •
 Yet is it fair, for men to be eaten by a leopard?
 Half a mile walk, through the forest path
 And, there on the other side is my tiny hut.
 My children, few of them, oh! misery!
 Might be screaming; far too famished.
 Distressed, exasperated, hitting on the head
 My wife would be awaiting my arrival,
 A knotted cloth of meagre ration rice on my shoulder
 Raging thoughts burning in my bosom;
 If I am to take the regular path, alas!
 The walk would be miles longer to reach my aim.

My feet moved towards the woods; it's dusk,
 A crescent moon, like the fang of the sky!
 Stamping down the path skirting the hillside,
 I started walking, crushing down the thorns.
 If any leopard comes - let him; time-tested
 Are my feet; and I am not a woman. *
 The Leopard at most must have faced a hunting dog
 I am better exposed having faced warrant sepoy*!

Half the distance crossed and I reached
 The august presence of Buddha, The *Sugata**.
 The ancient granite statue stood there,
 Still radiating absolute purity around.
 Highly virtuous Buddhist monks must have
 Once reigned in the cool shades of these trees,
 Delivering sermons again and again
 On the imperativeness of non-violence
 And the glory of compassion! May have made
 The looming angry murderous foes to weep.
 Gratified seeing the world, its faultless virtues brought out
 By the fruitful implementation of his own teachings;
 The sage has been meditating here for twenty centuries;
 In such deep trance, not to even realise, the ferocious
 Prowling creatures, sharpening their claws on him!

Growing dark around; it's becoming difficult
 To tell apart tender leaf from flower or dry leaf;
 The glowing pink and red, something I realised,
 Were the pitiless crimson eyes of a leopard!
 One moment, just one moment; that infernal beast
 Would leap onto my neck, yet I didn't retrace my steps
 To take the long serpentine path to my hut!
 There in my mind, I see my wearied family;
 My wife, down-and-out, ribs showing through the skin,
 eyes bulging; throwing a thousand heavy curses
 At the pretty face; torture personified
 Trying to suck even the life blood out of
 Mother's breast, where sweet milk is dried up.
 In front of her, they stand, the bawling elder children
 Starved, their minds lost and a bit confused.
 Whoever says 'Turn around and follow the virtuous path
 Even if it is a little longer'; certainly, doesn't have
 Even a remnant shred of a heart.

The leopard is inching towards me, what shall I do?
 Should I fall prey to you, to be taken to the den,
 To quench the burning stomachs of your young ones?
 Legend says that in one of his former births, this *Sugata*,
 Had willingly become prey of a wild animal.
 That was self-sacrifice in the name of compassion!
 Let me, again in the name of compassion, put in a word
 Uncle leopard; don't you see on my shoulder
 The knotted cloth with meagre ration rice in it?
 And the sigh of exasperation from me?
 The leopard was nearing me and was about to leap;
 In a flash, I pushed the granite statue onto its back!
 Not a morsel to eat, nor a wick to burn, abject misery
 Yet is it fair, for men to be eaten by a leopard?

Tummies half full, they laugh and play
 My children, my own life, now asleep.
 My wife, sweet kisses given to them,
 Rested her back, lying next to them.

Surely it is my fault to allow bloodshed
 Of a fellow creature, in achieving the supreme aim.
 But if I had taken the longer path; and if my children
 Had been put to fiery hunger or even starved to death,
 wouldn't that be a fault too?
 Let those who have time to contemplate, debate on the slip,
 Between the ends and the means; let me take a nap.

This Poem was read in Ernakulam Parishad meeting and published in Aikyamunnani in 1951. India got independence on the 15th of August 1947 and started self-governance. The leaders were mostly freedom fighters and the impact of Gandhism was strong in the air.

* I am not a woman – This note is for the younger generations. During those days women were considered by men as debilitated. Edasseri was an exception. He had high regards for women and had written many poems glorifying motherhood and depicting women as strong, courageous and independent.

**Sugata* - The Buddha. Word meaning is “man who goes along the right path. A righteous man”.

*Warrant Sepoys - Officials who bring warrants or summons from the courts, tax department, etc. — They were and are still feared very much by the citizens.