

Self Respect

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I observed this old man, lean and thin, wearing unclean clothes, unkempt hair, bare feet, expressionless, working mechanically in our neighbourhood park, quietly and totally unconcerned with his surroundings. He was not interested in people walking by, dogs running around or birds chirping on a nicer spring evening. His only companions were his broom and spade. I observed his monotonous routine of shifting twigs, cutting grass, and collecting dry leaves and garbage left by the visitors into one big heap in the corner of the park day after day.

Suddenly, I was curious to know who he was, where did he live, his family and background. I already knew that he lived alone in the complex of the park itself. He could not have a jhuggi because regulations

do not allow anyone to make a temporary shelter in the park.

With plenty of caution, I approached him, prepared mentally of being ignored or rebuked (as he looked quite unfriendly). Contrary to my apprehension, he greeted me with a broad smile, quite willing to share his tale. He hailed from district Tikamgarh near Jhansi, Madhya Pradesh. He did not know his age though by his appearance he looked around 75 years old to me. Totally illiterate, he did not know to even write his name. A father of four sons and a daughter, all married, his wife had passed away some 15 years ago. Till about three years ago, he lived with his family in Tikamgarh leading a quiet, laid back and retired life. He never had a good status at home as his sons and their wives ruled the household. He had come to terms with the fact that he was no longer useful to his family. Still life had to be lived. Fully accepting the emptiness, he maintained a low profile and mostly kept to himself. However, one major incident changed his life and he took a bold and brave decision to leave everything behind.

One day, one of his sons, driver by occupation, came home drunk and totally unsteady and unstable. Baba (I called him Baba) asked him not to drink as it is dangerous for him and others when he is on wheel in such an inebriated state. In response, his son gave him two tight slaps and kept hurling ' choicest' abuses at him till he was completely out. No one in the family intervened. Apparently no one found it to be objectionable or abnormal!

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Poor people may not have money, and uneducated people may not have education, they can still have dignity. More than physical assault, it was an assault on his dignity. He had enough. With no hope of a respectful life, badly hurt, he started to contemplate committing suicide on the railway tracks. That would be an easy exit! But good sense prevailed and he decided to move out of his surroundings and start new life.

You cannot choose your family, but you can choose your friends. The support that he got was from a female gardener, Rajjo, from the same district working in a municipality park in Delhi. She recommended his name to the contractor and arranged a job for him in the same park.

Starting a new life in a new place, with no money, no education, no skills, no home, and no support cannot be easy. I will leave the readers to imagine what he may have gone through. How were his basic needs met? Rajjo cooked for him initially, but she had to stop that after about four months being overworked herself. Now he cooks both the meals for himself in the morning before leaving for work. His meals consist of only thick rotis and pickle. No vegetables, fruits or milk for him.

He is no longer in touch with his family. He has not gone back to his native place even once during these three years. His sons did try to call him back every now and then but there has been a strict 'no' from his side every time. He does not want to put his dignity on stake second time. Getting this "dream job" may not be possible and he may not get a 'second chance". On asking if he could go to live with his daughter, he said they don't do that in their community.

I asked him how he envisions his old age without support and without anyone from his family around. His reply was that he will work as long as possible and then depart when God calls him. As for the family, to him, those people don't exist.

He feels grateful to Rajjo who came up as a saviour when he had despair all over him. When asked about his savings, he informs that he saves Rs. 2000 from his meagre salary of Rs. 6000 a month.

After talking to me, he resumed his work silently, again without any expressions. I watched him from a distance, sadly, thinking how eagerly one waits for offspring, especially male child, to arrive, their education, their work, marriage, all remaining the priority, till they really 'grow up'. And boy, his sons did "grow up."

My high school math teacher once said that one father can take care of 4 sons but 4 sons cannot take care of one father. I never fully understood what he meant. Now I get it. This statement by my teacher was made more than 5 decades ago. So, I sadly realize that this problem is not new. There are many more people like Baba in our society, who suffer in silence, see their dignity taken away but do not have courage or means to do anything about it. I still suspect that although this issue may not be new, but it is more prevalent now than in past.

What crime he must have committed to bring his children to this world, caring for them, settling them down. How happy he must have been to have just one 'liability' and four 'cheques' to take care of his old age. He must never have thought that instead of a comfortable life, he would be ill treated and be forced to live such a pathetic life. But the very next moment, I smiled. In sharp contrast to those who keep tolerating inhuman behaviour in twilight zone of their life, to protect the prestige of their children in the society or may be fearing their older age, this man elected to discard his ungrateful family. I saluted his confidence, courage, sense of self-respect, and positivity that he decided not to take nonsense from his children.

I wondered if his wife could have taken this step had she been subjected to this kind of behaviour
