AUTO DA FE

chandrashekhar sastry

"Auto Da Fé, what's an Auto Da Fé?
It's what you oughtn't to do but you do anyway!"
Torquemada tells his monks when describing the Inquisition which involved a public humiliation before burning at the stake.

My mobile was ringing. I picked it up and predictably it was the same voice,

"Sir," it said with mock reverence, "do you remember what happened last month in Gadag?" He was referring to the recent assassination of a prominent writer. The voice was coarse, as of an unlettered man.

"Your writings too have drawn our attention and if you do not desist you too will meet the same fate."

This was the third time he had called with much the same message. I was now used to the threats and I calmly told him not to make such calls as they would not deter me from writing what I wanted and what I felt was right.

"You godless *Nastiks!"* He rang off, as he always did, abruptly. I had blocked his number at every call but he chose a different one each time.

The press note from the publisher had appeared and the book announced. A book launch for my forthcoming book was scheduled in Delhi next week and my publisher had organised my air tickets and hotel. It was not my first book and there had been much criticism, from various quarters, of my earlier books too. But there was also the gratifying recognition from quarters which I respected and which made my whole effort worthwhile. Perhaps some passages had offended people who were not able to read and understand their meaning and I hold nothing against them for their ignorance. The essence of my work was the promotion of reason and a battle against what Tagore had called '*the burden of ages'* in the form of myriads of false but comforting superstitious beliefs and practices. These ranged far and wide with many mutations prevailing over most parts of this vast country. My new volume contained an exhaustive listing with some anthropologists making interesting speculations on the origin of some of these practices, dissecting faith from fact. It promised to be a path breaking compilation and I was excited at going to

Delhi for the book launch. The publisher had lined up an impressive list of speakers, even a celebrity stage and film actor to read out passages from the book. The press note a week ago had led to a few vicious telephone calls to the publisher and to me. On informing the police I met with little help other than an assurance that an ap byplication for an arms licence would be considered favourably.

"A 0.22 inch revolver would be good protection and not too costly. These are now available from the Indian Ordnance Factories," the Inspector said.



I had laughed off the suggestion, "Inspector, the police have to protect citizens and you cannot abdicate that responsibility."

"But you always have the right of self-defence," was his nonchalant answer.

"We could arrange to train you at the Rifle Club," he added gratuitously, leaving me wondering if I could ever steel myself to using a hand gun.

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I was not surprised when I was approached for an interview by a journalist on the day I was to leave for Delhi. The man was late by an hour and I was fidgeting when my servant ushered him into my study.

"I can only give you half an hour," I said, "my flight leaves in two hours and it is a long drive to the Airport."

He was a tall man and he seated himself in the chair across my desk. He kept his dark glasses on and sported a coloured turban on an enormous head. He made no apologies for his deceit and went straight to the point in a calm and refined voice, markedly different from the coarse tone that had threatened me on the telephone.

"Since you do not take heed of our calls I have been sent in person with a message to you." He saw that I was startled and went on to press his advantage, cajoling me in a restrained voice,

"Please do not go to Delhi today," and on seeing me shake my head in dissent changed tack to threaten me. Warning me not to go for the book launch, he said there may be disturbances which may result in my not being ever able to write again or go to any more book launches. It was all recited in a cold, firm voice. That unknown fear that had visited me ever after the recent violent killing of some writers came back. They had been shot dead after repeated warnings. Now this man had come to me in person with a sinister message.

“Cancel your journey to Delhi and call off the function; they could hardly have a book launch without the author.” After a slight pause he had raised an intimidating voice, “If you disregard this warning there will be a major incident which you may not live to remember. Make no mistake about us – we do not tolerate ungodly men like you.”

He rose from the chair and turned his back to me. I observed him carefully as he walked to the door. I knew that time was running out but suppressed the urge to check my watch. I took a deep breath and started counting in reverse under my breath. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five ...” He slammed the door and I stopped counting putting down the oversized glass paperweight I had instinctively grasped in defence. I could hurl it a good distance accurately like a cricket ball and had restrained myself. I was more angry than scared but not ready to fight.

My first reaction was to call the police. Does the bluster of a bully deserve any response? Going by the precedents it may not be an idle threat. Approaching the authorities would inevitably lead to long questioning and procedures making it impossible to catch my flight which was due to take off in another hour and a half. I must leave immediately if I was to get to the airport on time and be present at the book launch. They had timed their warning with precision, leaving me barely a few minutes to make up my mind. The next thing that occurred to me was to call the publisher. I told him that I had received a warning personally delivered by a suave man who would not give his name and appeared to have disguised himself. All I can remember is that he wore dark glasses, a coloured turban and walked with a slight limp of the left foot. The publisher acknowledged that the threat was intended for today evening at the book launch if it

was not cancelled. He too had been intimidated on the phone early this morning and a complaint was registered with the Delhi police. They would take necessary precautions to avoid any disaster and protect his staff and me while in Delhi.

“You have always been proud and fearless. Show up this evening, and don’t worry,” he had assured me.

Ml

1. was an uneventful flight and with the winter mist that had not cleared at noon Delhi seemed unwelcoming. The publisher received me in person and whisked me away in a car handing over my baggage tag to a minion. Although Delhi has wide and well kept roads the traffic is deplorable. To add to that we had to traverse three road barriers where policemen stopped us and checked the vehicle, under the bonnet, inside the boot, interrogating the occupants.

"We've changed your hotel as advised by the police," he said as we turned into a side road and came to a small building. The LOGIN Serviced Apartments in Karol Bag was a pleasant change from the star hotels and had a homely ambience. Over the good lunch provided for the two of us, he spoke of the arrangements made by the helpful police.

"I agreed when they asked me to mention the threats to the five speakers, two of who then asked to be relieved from speaking. They are both successful authors published by me with no controversy around their writings. The celebrity actor was hesitant at first but I persuaded him to attend."

It was a small auditorium with only about a hundred and fifty seats. A hundred books were stacked to be displayed on a table at the entrance. All visitors were being screened through the frame of a metal detector as they entered by the single portal. Occasionally some youngsters were frisked by hand held scanners. Though the policemen were in plain clothes I recognised them by their straight backs and brisk step. I couldn't help noticing some had bold moustaches on sharp features, their keen eyes glancing everywhere intermittently. In spite of these reassurances, the publisher and I were feeling tense. We were sitting on the dais my fingers nervously playing with the oversized bronze paperweight, a good reproduction of Rodin's *The Thinker*. The hall was slow in filling and we delayed the start to avoid distractions by latecomers trooping in noisily. The delay only extended the nervousness. Finally, after a short invocation to the muses sung by a young girl, the publisher rose to welcome the gathering. All eyes turned to him as he strode to the lectern. He looked at the gathering of about sixty persons and smiled broadly.

"Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are gathutered here..."

I heard a loud voice cry "Fire!" It came from the far right corner of the hall. It was repeated from the other side and then a lady screamed, "Hai re hai! Aag... Aag laga hai!"

I could see smoke rising from the rear of the hall. All hundred of my books had been piled up on the table moved now to block the entrance to the hall and they were up in flames. People ran out of the jostling towards the blocked entrance only to be beaten back by the smoke. The heat was building up. The publisher was ineffectively pleading for all to remain calm but his voice was drowned in the clamour of the guests. He threw up his hands and returned to his seat by my side.

I saw a tall man standing beyond the flames a little away from the door, eyeing the conflagration, the flaring books lighting up his bloodshot eyes. As he moved back and started walking to the door I saw him limping. He turned back at the exit and I was aghast to see him raising his hands struggling to bring down the metallic shutters. Unhesitatingly I grasped the Rodin Thinker and flung it at him as in my best fielding days on the cricket field. The pullover with long stripes was the wicket and I hit him squarely in

the chest. As he fell with the impact two burly moustachioed men who had crawled under the table with its burning books pounced on him and hauled him up.



The publisher sitting by me was still holding his head in his hands and had not seen anything that happened. I shook him by the shoulder and told him the arsonist had been apprehended. The fire engines were clanging their way to the hall and soon the firemen appeared with fire extinguishers and hoses. They quickly doused the fire but the books were irretrievably lost. 'No insurance,' moaned the publisher computing his loss. I ignored his wailing and closed my eyes. The audience had all but gone away, only a few were waiting to offer us sympathy. The publisher stepped down to them promising that the event would be repeated soon. I chose to sit down, eyes closed and deep in thought, wondering what position I should take. It was quite clear to me that they would strike again and I may not be as lucky as I had been today. The world has lost all the writings that would have come from the pen of those who had been untimely silenced. I would not want that to happen to me. Not because of the fear of death, but because I had so much more to say, many more fields to cover. I started thinking of the old poem talking about promises to keep, of the miles to go before the sleep. I could not get the exact words though I knew it was Robert Frost. I thought of my fans who looked forward to my writings.

When I opened my eyes I had made my resolve. I will fight back. I will apply for the arms licence the Inspector had promised. I joined the others and walked towards the exit. On the way out I picked up a half burnt and still smouldering copy of my book as a souvenir.

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