

The Master Director

EXCERPT NO. 10

A Question of Politics

(from Chapter 23)

I was in Gangtok some time later when I heard Gurudev was staying at a devotee's house below the city. I dropped what I was doing and went down there and as always I was immediately part of the entourage—even though I didn't really want to be. I didn't feel comfortable riding in Ghising's new gift to Gurudev, and his new attendants were almost militant in the execution of their duties. I knew none of them from before, and even Pema wasn't there. I did not feel at home. What I wanted was to have some time alone with Gurudev in order to ask him what exactly he was doing associating with Ghising and his political cronies. And actually it was better to do this in Sikkim than in Darjeeling, since the influence, effect, and corruption of Ghising and his associates stopped at the border.

I spent a few days hoping for a break in the schedule, a moment free, such as there used to be, when I could be alone with Gurudev. I even managed to line up various people to translate for me so that I could record Gurudev's answers with precision should the opportunity arise. But it never did. Then one morning I heard that the next day Gurudev and his entourage would be returning to Darjeeling. I became desperate. I had to finish the book, and to do that I had to at least give Gurudev the opportunity to provide answers to the questions that were proving beyond my comprehension. At the time I even became convinced that Gurudev somehow knew exactly what I wanted from him and was deliberately providing me no opportunity.

It was the afternoon before his departure. Gurudev was holding court in the master bedroom of his wealthy sponsor's house below Gangtok. Though the house was crowded because of his presence, a moment came when there were only a handful of us sitting on the floor around the bed: the sponsor, a few members of his family, and some of the attendants. I was sitting next to the attendant with the best command of English. My desperation that Gurudev would leave the next day without my putting my questions to him was acute. This might be my last opportunity.

So with a pounding heart, I asked the attendant if he would interpret something for me. He agreed, and I said to him, 'Please ask Gurudev this: What is your relation with Subash Ghising?'

The attendant, a boy from a tea garden in Darjeeling, laughed nervously at my request. But I insisted. ‘It’s my question, not yours. Please ask him *for me*.’

He did.

‘The foreigner is asking what your relationship is with Subash Ghising.’

The buzz in the room suddenly stopped. You could have heard a petal from one of the flowers piled on Gurudev’s table glide through the air and hit the floor.

‘He is a devotee,’ Gurudev replied, ‘like many. That is all.’

‘But isn’t it true that he is your main sponsor?’

‘Sometimes Subash Ghising is my sponsor,’ he replied. ‘Not always.’

I screwed up my courage to say what I thought. I could feel my blood pounding through my ears. ‘Everybody knows that Subash Ghising is a dangerous man,’ I said. ‘Some even say he uses violence to stay in power. Most people I speak with say they are afraid of Subash Ghising and wish he were gone. Yet when I ask them why they don’t say something, the most common answer is that they don’t want to become six inches shorter. You are from Darjeeling. You must know what that means. They are talking of a gang of goons coming with *kukris* and beheading them. This is no imagination on their part. This is no idle threat. This is very real, and everyone in the Darjeeling Hills knows it.’

My interpreter proved quite good, and interpreted what I said, sentence by sentence.

I continued: ‘You know, Gurudev, that I have the highest respect for you and your teachings. The one thing I cannot understand is your relationship with Subash Ghising and his deputies. It confuses many of your devotees as well. So please tell us, how can you deal with such men?’

Everyone in the room started speaking at once, but Gurudev put up his hand to silence them. ‘Each person is different,’ he said. ‘Some are deaf; some are mute. You might think one is good, the other bad. The mother has equal love for each of her children, the same love for the one that is good and the one that is bad, a thief or a good man. So it is that everyone is equal to God. That kind of love is God’s love. Equal love for all.’

‘I must give love to all people and guide them in the right direction. If I call Ghising a bad man and have no relations with him, how can I influence him? And with a man like Ghising, it does not always work. Ghising was attacked some time back. I went to see him in his hospital bed in Siliguri. Ghising said he wanted to call a *bandh*. I know how much suffering *bandhs* cause ordinary people. So I told him not to call this *bandh*. But he did not listen. What to do?’

I looked around, and the room was suddenly full of people. They had heard what was going on, and they came to see. It was a far cry from the private discussion I had envisaged, but it was too late to put the cork back in the bottle. Pema came in. He stood protectively at the foot of Gurudev’s bed.

‘I cannot make anyone do anything,’ Gurudev continued. ‘After I told Ghising not to call the bandh, he said if he didn’t achieve Gorkhaland he would start a Third World War. I told him if he did that I could not protect him. Ghising is like bin Laden, like George Bush. Dangerous—same-same.’

‘Each of us has two qualities within—the good qualities and the bad qualities. If the inside is good—good. If outside is good, and inside not good—not good. George Bush—white outside, black inside.’ He laughed.

‘We are used to saying there are good and bad people. But if we make an operation on ourselves, we’ll find our stomachs very dirty: there is dirtiness within us all.’

He made his finger like a flying insect. ‘It is like the bee. If we do good to the bee it will give us honey. If we do bad to the bee, it will sting us. It is like the poisonous snake. Isn’t the poison also used as the medicine?’

‘But Gurudev,’ I said, ‘how about your new vehicle? Isn’t it a gift from Subash Ghising?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘How can you accept a gift from such a man and then enjoy it? Everybody knows Ghising is the head of the Hill Council. He gets a salary from the government. He is a public servant. He cannot possibly earn enough clean money to buy his guru such a nice vehicle. How much does such a vehicle cost?’

The driver had come into the room. Gurudev asked him, and Pema put in his idea and it was agreed among the men in the room—who, now that I looked at them, were looking quite distressed at the direction the conversation was taking—that such a vehicle costs about nine lakh rupees (900,000 rupees, or about \$US 20,000).

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Let’s say someone steals a TV and gives it to you as a gift. If you know the TV was stolen and still you accept the gift, in most countries you can also be found guilty of theft—you can be thrown in jail. Now, you know Ghising cannot possibly afford through legal means to buy you such a vehicle. Therefore it must be black money that bought that vehicle. You accepted it, and now you ride in that vehicle, enjoying the comfort. Please, Gurudev, tell me, how can you justify this?’

I felt emboldened to continue on my reckless course by knowing I was asking about Gurudev’s relationship with Ghising not only for myself, but for all those devotees who were made uncomfortable by it, but could never ask. And Gurudev’s relationship with Subash Ghising confused many. Once I had been riding with a carload of devotees, following Gurudev’s vehicle to the next event. Somehow, the subject of Subash Ghising came up. I think there had been the threat of a bandh. It was clear none of them were in favour of Ghising or his underlings. So I asked them what they made of Gurudev’s relations with these people. ‘None of us can understand it,’ came the reply. ‘We all wonder, but how can we ever ask?’

I am sure no one had ever questioned him about it, not so directly. The room was buzzing again.

Gurudev put up a hand again to silence the crowd, which was growing by the minute as word spread about what was happening.

‘As you know,’ Gurudev said, ‘this is not the first vehicle I have accepted from Ghising. The first was a Marshal and I used it for quite some time. But I returned that vehicle. I returned it when Ghising acted with particular violence, as I told him I would. This is how I engage Ghising. Ghising felt guilty that I had returned his vehicle in that way. So he presented me with this new one, even better. I accepted it, but only under one condition: I told him that if he does anything violent I will return the vehicle, publicly. I gave back that first car. He knows I will do it again. He will have to think of that before he commits violence again. Maybe it will stop him. Maybe not. This is my way to try to stop him from creating violence in the Hills. It is a balance. For peace.’

I pressed on. ‘But the fact remains that in the meantime you are enjoying his gift. You accepted a gift of stolen money. Where did the money come from for the vehicle?’

Pema spoke up in defence of Gurudev, his voice tense. ‘It is from the Tourist Department. It is not Gurudev’s vehicle. He cannot sell the car. It is only to ride in. It is a government vehicle. You can see the papers. We don’t *own* the vehicle. It is on loan. The minute they say they want the vehicle back, we must give it back. You see, it is part of his monastery, the one Ghising built for Gurudev. The monastery is also under the Tourism Department.’

‘Is this true?’ I asked Gurudev. ‘This vehicle was bought from Tourist Department funds?’

‘Yes, it was.’

‘How is *that* right?’ I exclaimed.

My heart was really pounding now. Probably I should have taken a breath.

‘The Tourism Department,’ I said, ‘is set up to use taxpayer money to help local businesses attract tourists and to help their business. Look, I’m the only tourist here! This is taking money for one thing and using it for something else. How could this possibly be a legal use of Tourism Department funds?’

‘If I don’t engage these people,’ Gurudev said, ‘how can I influence them? I accept his gift in order to engage him. Look, George Bush is searching for bin Laden. If he would search for bin Laden with love and with peace he would get him. But he has made a war, so he has not caught him. It is just like that. We have to catch that man with love and peace. If I push Ghising away, if I reject his gift with negative judgement, it would be an act of violence, and then he would repeat that violence. Instead, I love him. And through that I try to transform him, for the good of all.’

‘If you want to control someone, even a member of your family, maybe a son or a daughter, if you scold them, if you beat them, if you treat them like an animal, then *definitely* one day that person will attack you.’

‘There is a very bad situation for Nepali people in Bhutan. The Bhutanese king has been making problems for them. He has kicked many out, and others have had to flee. There are now about 100,000 refugees in Nepal, living in United Nations camps. I go to these refugees in their camps, and they are angry. I tell them not to try to attack the king of Bhutan or say anything against him. I tell them to love him. If you do so, I tell them, one day you will *definitely* be able to go back to your homes. The king will change; through love and affection and through peace the situation will transform.

‘Many times I go to tea gardens. Often I am invited to the manager’s house, or to the tea garden owner’s. They lay out a large table and offer me all manner of sweets and food. But I take only one piece, a single bite, and I tell them why. “You are offering me this wonderful food,” I tell them. “I will take it as prasad, as an offering. The big offering to me will be when you look well after your workers, when you give them fair wages, when you provide them with good roads, water, and doctors. Then your actions will be in accord with the dharma—when you do good for others.”’

Gurudev’s fist came down on his open palm. ‘Sometimes to do good you must smash a diamond. And to prevent something bad, you cannot give even one penny.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘You see, sometimes you have to accept the gift, other times you cannot—for the same effect. A knife in the hands of a thief can kill a hundred people. The same knife in a surgeon’s hands will save a hundred lives. Only the way of thinking is different. The knife is the same. Money also can be used for good or to harm others. And money is just like blood. It must flow freely. Never hold on to too much of it and block it. Free it. Let it circulate. It has to circulate, it has to move.’

Gurudev pointed to various parts of his body. ‘This part America. This part India, this part Pakistan. The body is like the world, and money is like the blood. If the blood stops in one part of the world, it will affect the entire world, won’t it?’

Gurudev was silent for some moments. ‘I can only do my work according to my ability. Within that limit, I always try to help those in need. Suppose there is a car going to Siliguri, and you want to go there. And suppose that car is full. If you get in that car it will be beyond its capacity. It could tip over into the river. The car can take only up to its capacity. In the same way I can do only to my capacity. Often Ghising doesn’t do as I advise. I never get angry. Still I give him my love.’

There was a hush in the room.

‘Subash Ghising is like a broken-down engine,’ he continued. ‘Doesn’t the mechanic have to go to the engine?’

Recently I had stumbled upon a story from the Bible that seemed pertinent, and I told it to him. I had read it in *The Times of India*. It was from the Book of Matthew. Jesus was seen having dinner with some tax collectors. Tax collectors were a particularly corrupt lot in Jesus’s day, members of the community who extracted money from people to give to the occupying Roman Empire after keeping a hefty slice for

themselves. They were considered the worst kind of traitors, inflicting pain on their neighbours for personal gain. Afterwards, people complained to Jesus's disciples, wondering what kind of master he could be, accepting a meal from such bad characters. When Jesus heard of this, he gave them a spiritual lesson: he said it is not the healthy who have need of a physician, but those who are sick. Jesus came, he said, to help those in need.

'If you know this so well,' Gurudev said when I was finished telling him the story, 'how can you ask me about my going to Subash Ghising? You should know why. We should never condemn, but always extend our hand.'

For so long it had hurt my heart to question Gurudev's motives. Now, it seemed, I'd tested him and once again he'd come out shining. There was a palpable release of tension in the room. Gurudev held out his hand. I jumped up and we shook hands.

'If we discuss like this,' he said, 'we will all gain knowledge. No knowledge without college! These are very important questions—very important for your book.'

And with that the meeting broke up and we cleared the room so that Gurudev could rest.



Painting of Gurudev floating in a cloud at the entrance to the monastery built for him by Subash Ghising