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The Lens-less Spectacles

John Methuselah

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In the cold breeze, walking up and down the market streets,
He s and She s with their bulbous babies,
Warming-up walking down the lanes of their dreams,
In warm sweaters and sleaze
Shopping in blazing stores for the right colours to deck the dawn,
Watching neither the year breathing its last night,
Nor the toddling Gandhi dressed in silver paint;
Lens-less bespectacled playing with a balloon
Bound to his finger with an elastic string, chuckling his toothless bliss,
Counting no nickel that clanked in the tin,
Out of the din that walked past him.

Out of the blue a tension was brewed in the name of truth,
That some never belonged to where they longed to be,
In the name of faith or caste or land or clan or colour or might be for all,
They clashed and clanged, abused and banged,
Went on a rampage; broke every mirror and glass,
The stampede that followed no sense could impede.
Sharper than the chill broke out a shrill,
The trembling hands that rocked the cradle
Felt the intrepid blood that shared her burden
Now tainted in silver; the broken balloon tied to its finger,
As the day broke in meaningless silence
Beheld through lens-less spectacles.

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Author's note on The Lens-less Spectacles:

In India Gandhi-ji is respected as the father of our nation. Poor people get themselves painted in silver colour and dress like Gandhi-ji with a *dhoti* (cloth wound around the waist), round-rimmed spectacles and stand in the middle of the road for alms.

On the evening of December 31st, 2009, I went shopping and saw a toddler painted in silver (you must imagine the pain in getting painted like that on a winter evening) and dressed like Gandhi. As he was not able to stand, his mother sat him in the middle of the road with a balloon tied to his finger and put a tin by his side for alms. He was innocently playing with the balloon, chuckling and now and then looking for his mother who must have been somewhere around. A striking thing was that he never moved out of the place he was in. The market thronged with people, the shops were lit bright with alluring ads. I saw young couples (the He's and She's I mentioned because they seemed to be very assertive about their gender in the way they dressed in contrast to the way they behaved with each other) carrying their toddlers and babies wrapped in bright warm clothing. The toddler Gandhi in contrast was innocently sharing his family's burden. This sight reminded me of Gandhiji and how he took up the cause of India's freedom with a vision, and how innocent he was about the things that would happen to him after.

I was scared when I thought of what would happen to that toddler Gandhi if something like a stampede or arson broke in the name of caste or religion or region, and was fanned by fanatics. I sometimes lament how visions of Gandhi-ji have been blurred by selfishness, and how he became a victim from the time of the separation of Pakistan from India to this day. The Gujarat Carnage and riots in the name of separate states, regions, and religions is an example of how something that started from his vision has been distorted. Casteism is another problem that plagues modern India. It is like racial discrimination. Caste is a work-based community and it segregates people based on their work. The spectacles with no lens shows the truth or facts without adjustment or distortion.

About the author: John Methuselah is a faculty member in the Department of Softskills at AMET University, Chennai, India. He has a master's in English Language and Literature from Andhra University. His poems have been published and recited at national poetry festivals. His hobbies are listening to music and writing poetry.