

Arun Dada and Mira Ba by Nipun Mehta

Two weeks ago, a few of us visited an elderly Gandhian couple in Baroda -- Arun Dada and Mira Ba. Now in their 80s, their entire life has been rooted in generosity. As students of Vinoba, they have never put a price tag on their labor. Their presence speaks to a life-long practice of equanimity, trust and compassion. And so do their stories.

"Nine years ago, we were gifted this house," Arun Dada told us. The week they moved in, they discovered that their neighbor was a drunkard, prone to fits of violence. Just a couple days after their move, they noticed that their front-yard was filled with food items and alcohol.

It turned out that the neighbor also ran a catering business, and thought he could use Arun Dada's front yard for storage space. Arun Dada naturally protested. "Sir, this is our home now, we don't drink or take non-vegetarian food, and this is inappropriate." Somehow he managed to convince the catering staff of their error.

But that night, at 12:30AM, the gates of his bungalow shook violently. "Who is Arun Bhatt?" a loud voice screamed. Mira Ba is wheelchair bound and immobile, but she woke up and looked out the window. Arun Dada put on his glasses and walked out to the gate.

"Hi, I'm Arun," he said while greeting the ominous drunk man. Immediately, the man grabbed 73-year-old Arun Dada by his collar and said, "You sent my staff back this morning? Do you know who I am?" It was the next-door neighbor bent on inflicting fear and punishment. While cursing vehemently, he struck Arun Dada's face, knocking his glasses to the ground -- which he then tossed into a nearby creek. Undeterred by the violent actions, Arun Dada compassionately held his ground. "My friend, you can take out my eyes if you'd like, but we have now moved into this house, and it would be great if you could respect our boundaries," he said.

"Oh yes, you're that Gandhian type, aren't you? I've heard of people like you," sneered the intruder. After some more verbal assaults, the drunken neighbor gave up for the night and left.

The next morning, the neighbor's wife apologetically approached Arun Dada and Mira Ba. "I'm so sorry. My husband gets very unruly at night. I heard that he threw away your glasses last night, so I've brought this for you," she said offering some money for a new pair of glasses. Arun Dada responded with his usual equanimity, "My dear sister, I appreciate your thought. But my glasses, they were rather old and my prescription has gone up significantly. I was long overdue for new glasses anyhow. So

don't worry about it." The woman tried to insist, but Arun Dada wouldn't accept the money.

A few days later, during the day, the neighbor and Arun Dada crossed paths on their local street. The neighbor, embarrassed, hung his head and looked down at the ground, unable to make eye contact. A common response might be one of self-righteousness ("Yeah, you'd better look down!"), but Arun Dada didn't feel good about the encounter. He went home and reflected on how he might be able to befriend his difficult neighbor, but no ideas surfaced.

Weeks passed. It was still challenging being neighbors. For one, the man next door was always on the phone, negotiating some deal or another, and every other word out of his mouth was a curse word. They didn't have much sound insulation between their walls, but Mira Ba and Arun Dada were constantly subject to foul language, even though it wasn't addressed at them. Again, with equanimity, they quietly endured it all and continued to look for an avenue to this man's heart.

Then, it happened. One day, after one of his routine conversations peppered with foul language, the neighbor concluded his call with three magical words: "Jai Shree Krishna". An homage to Krishna, an embodiment of compassion. At the very next opportunity, Arun Dada approached him and said, "Hey, I heard you say 'Jai Shree Krishna' the other day. It would be nice if we could say the same to each other, every time we crossed paths." It was impossible not to be touched by such a gentle invitation, and sure enough, the man accepted.

Now, every time they passed each other, they exchanged that sacred greeting. 'Jai Shree Krishna'. 'Jai Shree Krishna'. Pretty soon, it became a beautiful custom. Even from a distance, it was 'Jai Shree Krishna'. 'Jai Shree Krishna'. Then, as he left home in the morning, 'Jai Shree Krishna' he would call out. And Arun Dada would call back, "Jai Shree Krishna". And one day the customary call didn't come, prompting Arun Dada to inquire, "What's wrong?" "Oh, I saw that you were reading so I didn't want to disturb you," came the response. "Not a disturbance at all! Like the birds chirping, the water flowing, the wind blowing, your words are part of nature's symphony." So they started again.

And the practice continues to this day, nine years later.

While concluding this story, he reminded us of Vinoba's maxim of searching for the good. "Vinoba taught us there are four kinds of people. Those who only see the bad, those who see the good and the bad, those who focus only on the good, and those who amplify the good. We should always aim for the fourth." It hit a deep chord with all of us listening to the story, particularly since it came from a man who practiced what he preached.

Amidst the sea of negativity, physical threats, and curse words, Arun Dada found those three magical words of positivity -- and amplified it.

Jai Shree Krishna. I bow to the divine in you, the divine in me, and that place where there is only one of us.?