The Modern Prince and
The Modern Sage
The Modern Prince and
The Modern Sage
Transforming Power and Freedom

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Ananta Kumar Giri
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The SAGE Team: Sugata Ghosh, Vikas Jain, Anju Saxena and Trinankur Banerjee
For
Gaura Devi, Lech Walesa, Aung San Suu Kyi,
Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Thich Nhat Hahn,
and millions of children, women and men struggling for
freedom, dignity, peace and soulful togetherness in our times of
war and terror.
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A nanta Kumar Giri has edited a fascinating book about power and politics around two key figures, the Modern Prince and the Modern Sage. How modern and how timeless can be discussed, but they are easily conjured up for our inner eyes, dressed in the garbs of their age. A third one is missing, the Modern Merchant, for instance in Venice. Sad for him that he did not make it to the book. But he can draw some comfort from the present era, no doubt that of the merchant in Sarkar’s sense, of the vaisya, not the brahmin sage, nor the kshatriya prince. Like the others he is now dressed in a grey flannel suit with white shirt and blue tie, if not in jeans and checkered shirt. Their public persona have converged, but their keys to power and politics have remained the same, the power of bullets for the Prince, of ideas for the Sage and of money for the Merchant.

Like most intellectuals, or so I presume, I prefer the Sage because that is where my own ambitions are located. In this short introduction I would like to sketch why I hold the Sage approach to the political to be at a higher level than the other two. They have their roles to play. But that is also all they have; theirs not to change reality unless we are dealing with a rare combination, the Prince, or Merchant, who is also a Sage.

Let me illustrate building on the fable known to all Italian school children, Il lupo di Gubbio, The Wolf from Gubbio (a little village in the Apennines, close to Assisi)—but sadly distant from what passes for princes and sages in Italian politics. The winter was atrocious. So was the wolf, starving, and then descending on a village, eating one of the villagers.

Enters the Sage, Saint Francis, Francesco d’Assisi. Brother Wolf he says, ‘what’s the matter. ‘I am starving’, the wolf says. ‘But why did you eat that nice person in the village?’ ‘The only thing there was’, the wolf says, ‘what else is there?’ ‘Let me see’, Francesco says, leaving the wolf, entering the village.

‘Sisters and brothers’, he addresses them, ‘what’s the matter?’ ‘That terrible wolf’, they answer in unison, ‘he just ate one of us’. ‘Very bad’, Francesco says, ‘but let me ask you a question: he is hungry and you
always have some leftovers from your meals, could you imagine putting them in a bowl and place the bowl at night at the outskirts of the village? ‘OK’, they say, ‘but only once, to see whether it works. We really want to kill him!’

Francesco goes back to the wolf, tells what happened and asks the wolf whether he could imagine helping himself from that bowl? ‘OK’, he answers, but only once, to see whether it works.

So bowl and wolf meet, the content passes from the village bowl to the wolf’s bowels, a happy, contented wolf. The experiment is repeated, and repeated, and the villagers find in the wolf an impeccable garbage dump, and the wolf in the village a bottomless source of leftovers. The wolf gradually conquers space and time by venturing further into the village, even at dusk and dawn, testing the waters. In the end the wolf is seated at the table, helping himself to his new favourites, occasionally donating an animal or two from his meager winter catch. And at the very end they are all dancing, brothers and sisters, with Francesco.

However, when using this story to inspire a workshop of general staff Italian officers to solve the Iraq problem they said: ‘we are not Francesco’. And there were even two wolves, Bush and Saddam. Dear Reader, solve that one; be a Sage, not a Prince!

Francesco, the Sage set the tone by humanizing both parties, the killer as well as those out to kill, as brothers and sisters. Using shuttle diplomacy he emphatically explores their goals, food and survival, both legitimate, and uses his Sage creativity to bridge that apparent incompatibility. He transcended, into a new reality of conviviality, and even helped solving an environmental problem.

What would the Prince have done? Depending on whom he considers the most valuable future ally, the villagers or the wolves (assuming there are more wolves where he comes from), he would have given the green light, even the order, Kill the wolf!, or Go ahead, serve yourself from the villagers! But that is not politics defined as the art of the impossible, a Francesco making the incompatible compatible. This is merely politicking, creeping on the belly, licking some crumbs from the table of the Sage.

What would the Merchant have done? Bargaining, and then a deal, some kind of compromise. How much is the wolf willing to pay for not being killed and what is the commission fee for a merchant who brokers that deal? Or, how much are the villagers willing to pay for not being killed? Killing is sweet, but money is also sweet and more lasting, and the merchant might become quite rich if he brokers both deals at the same time.