

Witness



Witness

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with

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 juggernaut

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*For my dada and dadi.
I wish they could see me achieve all that I did.*



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1

End of the Line

Wrestling is the art of moving a body against its will. When it came to being pushed around or pushing, I thought I knew all the moves. But on the morning of 28 June 2023, I learnt a powerful new technique that no coach had ever taught me.

It was the thirty-seventh day of the protest against the Wrestling Federation of India and its president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. I, the other wrestlers and our supporters had decided to march from our protest site at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi to central Delhi, where the new Parliament building was being inaugurated.

But we must have barely covered a hundred metres when a swarm of police personnel descended on us. I tried my best to keep marching while the police tried to pull me into a bus. There were several hands grabbing at me. I'm sure they had plenty of experience with this sort of thing, but I was an Olympic medallist, after all. It's hard to drag me out of position. Every time the policewomen pushed me, I'd readjust my stance or grab the bus doors or handrail. I could sense I was starting to frustrate them.

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Finally someone behind me yelled, ‘Tickle her!’ I was probably stronger than all those policewomen, but once you are tickled, you become helpless. My strength evaporated, and before I knew it I was bundled into the bus.

In the chaos, I lost sight of my companions. My fellow wrestlers Bajrang Punia and Vinesh Phogat were bundled off in a separate bus. My husband Satyawart was also put in another bus. The police were sending each of us to a different police station, and they kept driving in circles so we couldn’t get our bearings. In my bus there was no one I knew. Apart from me, there were two men who were part of the protest, whom I didn’t recognize, and a couple of constables. Nor did I have my phone with me. Satyawart had kept it in his pocket at the start of the march so that it wouldn’t get misplaced.

The two other protesters were sitting in the front of the bus and I was sat a couple of rows behind them. A woman constable was behind me. She had her hand on the seat in front of me, to keep me from moving.

I really didn’t want to be by myself. I kept pleading with the police to put me in the same bus as my husband, or at least with someone I knew. The longer we circled around, the more I started to panic.

In tears, I begged and pleaded with the police. Feeling sorry for me, one of the men from the protest gave me his phone and I managed to call Satyawart. When my husband heard me bawling he couldn’t take it.

He broke the back door of his bus and jumped out of the vehicle. On the phone he shouted to me to send him my location. He was coming to get me. I too decided to jump out of the bus. It was a crazy thing to do. I know now that detention doesn’t mean arrest. You are eventually released a day later. But I knew little about protests and

protesting. Until a few months ago, I was someone who would avoid confrontation at any cost.

Perhaps if I was sitting with my husband, or with Sangeeta or Vinesh, I might have been calmer. I might have thought through my actions. On that day though, everything was happening too fast. When Satyawart kicked open the door of his bus, I decided I would do the same.

I started moving to the front door. The policewoman tried her best to hold me back, but of course this wasn't a ten versus one, as it had been on the grounds. There was just one of her, and her grip wasn't anything I hadn't dealt with before. I just shook her off, pushed the door open, jumped down and started to run.

As I took off, with two police constables chasing after me, I felt a familiar twinge in my left knee. It didn't hurt, although it made me run a little funny. Just a little reminder of a ligament torn and patched multiple times and a career in wrestling that was on the verge of ending.

I didn't get very far. I dashed into a lane and then turned into another, which, unfortunately, turned out to be a dead end. In front of me was a building that was under construction. If I hadn't turned into the dead end I would probably have escaped because damaged ligament or not, I was still pretty quick. I might have called an autorickshaw, found out where Satyawart was and gone to him.

Instead, as I stood in front of that building, trying to figure my next step, I realized that one of the construction workers was staring at me. I tried my best to hide. There was a staircase just outside his line of sight and I squeezed myself next to it. Of course he had already seen me. He'd also seen the two police constables who were running towards us. He asked me why I was hiding and why the police were after me.

Before I could answer him the police caught up with me. I didn't have the heart to run again. The fight had gone out of me, as quickly as it had come. Now, as I walked back to the bus, I couldn't stop my tears. In fact I was hysterical. People in the lane peered out of their windows in curiosity at my wails, watching this crying woman being led off by the police. I hoped no one recognized me as the Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik.

Eventually, I ended up at the police detention centre. My mother-in-law also joined me there. We were detained at the police station until the evening, when they decided to release me. They took me to a hospital for a check-up. There were scratches all over my back and neck where the constables had grabbed me. I was in pain, but to avoid being held up any longer I told the doctor that I was fine. Besides, I was a lot more hurt emotionally.

Once Bajrang and Vinesh were released too, I started coordinating with them. Our protest had been stopped, but we weren't done. We decided to meet at 11 p.m. to decide what we would do. That night, at our lawyer's office, all of us talked around the table.

We all had very mixed emotions. The adrenaline we felt earlier in the day was wearing off. I was proud that we had fought and raised our voice, but now we were feeling very low, like we used to feel after a defeat on the mat. Bajrang had been one of the last to be released, and his wife Sangeeta was still in tears. We tried to cheer each other up by making light of what had happened. My escape and recapture by the police got a few laughs, but there wasn't much else to smile about.

We had been on the streets protesting for nearly forty days, and now we had nothing to show for it. Our protest had been ended violently. Our protest site had been torn down. There didn't seem to

be many options. But we had to move fast. Our protest had become a movement and had captured the imagination of thousands. But if we delayed our next action, many would lose interest in the movement.

We thought of going back to the protest site, but that had already been cleared out by the police. Another idea was to go on a march to Rajghat, but that was also dismissed. A third was to somehow restart our protest. We needed to make some gesture to show we were continuing our fight.

That night we decided we were going to immerse the medals we had won over the course of our careers into the Ganga at Haridwar. The way our protest site was demolished, the way we had been dragged by the police into a detention centre made it very clear to us that our reputation as international athletes had counted for nothing. In such a scenario, what was the point of all the medals we had won?

We had originally planned to immerse all the medals that we'd won, but we decided to just immerse the medals that meant the most to us. Bajrang brought the Olympic bronze medal he had won at the Tokyo Olympics. Vinesh brought her two medals from the world championships and a gold medal from the Commonwealth Games. That night I fetched from Rohtak the bronze medal that I had won at the Rio Olympics.

That medal meant the world to me. Ever since I'd first won it, it hadn't left my side. Sometimes I'd take it out of its box and just admire it. Sometimes I'd put it on and look at myself in the mirror.

It was beautiful. I've won medals at the Commonwealth Games and Asian Championships, but the Olympic medal was different. It looked like nothing else I had. The other medals had a thin silk ribbon. My Olympic medal had a double-layered, sea-green ribbon, which felt soft and almost cushion-like against my neck.

After I got married and moved to Satyawart's home, I decided to get it framed. I got it done in such a way that one side of the square frame had a photo of me winning the bronze and the other side the medal itself. I had it hung on the wall of my bedroom, right next to my Padma Shri medal and my Arjuna award.

Now I was going to lose it.

I took the frame with my medal off the wall and stuffed it into a bag.

Bajrang and Vinesh would carry their medals loose in their hands, but I didn't take my medal out of its frame. I wanted it to stay inside, all shiny and clean.

I slept fitfully that night in New Delhi and got up early the next day. My mother-in-law was staying with us, and she made some dal and roti for breakfast. I couldn't eat anything beyond a few bites. I didn't bathe either. I just wanted to get through that day. My mother-in-law then made some *churma* with ghee, sugar and shredded chapattis. It's the sort of thing mothers in Haryana make as a comfort food. She knew what we were planning and that I was going to be in very low spirits that day.

At night our decision felt like the right thing. In fact, it felt as if there was no other alternative. But I began to waver as the day came and we began planning our journey. The idea of losing the medal forever felt very painful. It was the same for Bajrang and Vinesh.

We had initially planned to immerse our medals without any fanfare, inform the media after the act was done and then restart our protest. But then, just before we left for Haridwar, Bajrang suggested we post messages on social media to say what we were going to do. It was a six-hour drive from New Delhi, and we hoped that it would be enough time for perhaps the sports ministry and the government

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to feel that things had gone too far and, out of necessity, agree with our demands. We were hoping against hope that we'd get a message on our phone that read, 'Kids, this has gone far enough. Don't get rid of your medals. We will listen to your demands.'

So we each posted a message on our social media accounts about half an hour after we left Delhi. All of us posted the same message. We said that we were immersing our medals in the Ganga because only the river had the ability to wash away all sins. Once we had done this, I felt maybe this wasn't the best idea. But I didn't realize just how bad it was going to get.

I was travelling with Satyawart, my mother and my mother-in-law. We met with Vinesh and Bajrang near Sonapat after they had picked up their medals from their homes. We wanted to travel in the same convoy and keep moving so that we couldn't be stopped by the police before we got to Haridwar.

I had tried not to look at my medal. I just put it in a bag, which I kept in the boot of the car. I knew that if I saw it I would start to cry. But try as I might, I couldn't not think about it. I talked about it constantly. Satyawart tried to change the subject, but we'd circle back to that Olympic medal. For the five hours that we were on the road, the only thing I remember thinking was that I was going to lose my medal.

Because we had already publicly declared what we were going to do, I started getting a lot of calls. People were telling me not to get rid of my Olympic medal. This was the fruit of my labour of so many years. They told me the government didn't really care, so I shouldn't give up something that was so important to me.

The mood inside the car swung between determination and despair. I'd tell myself – what's the big deal about a medal? It's more

important to win this other fight. I had to get rid of an evil man. But almost immediately I'd start thinking that if I lost the medal, then what would I have to show for all my years of struggle?

I was hoping against hope that a miracle might happen and the government would come around and tell us they'd agreed to all our demands. I just wanted my medal to be saved, somehow. I started thinking all kinds of absurd thoughts. Perhaps the International Olympic Committee had a policy of replacing medals that were lost, so I would get a duplicate of mine?

My family in the car was as emotional as I was. About halfway to Haridwar, my mother-in-law suggested we could still back out – she could see I was a wreck. But then I'd remember the goal. I kept thinking back to how I'd been pushed into a bus, had run away, got captured again and then detained in a police station for six hours. There was no other option. After the humiliation that I had felt two days before, it had become really important to get a win.

We reached Haridwar by around 6 p.m. Once we reached the bus stand near Har ki Pauri ghat, I got out of the car. It was a five-minute walk to the ghat. I held the frame with my medal close to my chest as I walked. There were already a lot of people, including the media, waiting for us.

All the wrestlers who had brought their medals went and sat along the ghat even as a crowd surrounded us. While we were sitting there, someone came and took Bajrang away, saying Amit Shah wanted to talk to him. The rest of us were instructed to wait until 7 p.m. because there was a 'big' meeting going on between Bajrang and Amit Shah. We sat there on that ghat for half an hour, hoping against hope that Amit Shah would actually call Brij Bhushan and dismiss him. Simultaneously, we also got word from Naresh Tikait,

a senior activist who was known to all of us as one of the leaders of the farm rights agitation from a year ago and whom we respected as an elder of the Jat community we belonged to, to wait until he could speak to us.

I'd always imagined that one day, when I became a mother, my daughter would point to the wall, to my framed Olympic medal, and ask me what it was. And I would open that frame and show it to her. I might be older and out of shape by then and my kids might think I was just a boring mom, but I'd tell them what that medal was. I'd tell them the story of how their mom won it. I'd tell them the story of how she met their dad. How she was something once, a long time ago.

But instead, I was on that ghat, about to throw that medal away, all because I'd tried to fight for a cause I knew was right, hoping against hope for a favour from a politician that might stop that from happening.

As the crowd got bigger and bigger and tighter around us as we waited, my heart started to sink. I knew that we were being backed into a corner. And then, suddenly, from the midst of that crowd, Naresh Tikait emerged. He unwrapped the safa on his head, walked up to each of us, took our medals and placed them in that cloth. He told us the medals were the pride of the country and he'd make things all right.

Then he walked away from the ghat, leaving us there by ourselves.

Within a couple of minutes we realized what a tremendous mistake we had made. What was supposed to be a great act of defiance had turned into a complete farce. Not only had we not been able to get Brij Bhushan Singh out of the federation or give up our medals, but we had also broken our word to the people who had supported us.

All of us sat in a car in a state of complete bewilderment. We were crying. Vinesh had started hitting herself. I was just blank. When animals face a predator, they either run or fight. And they say the same applies to us humans. For me it is neither. I just freeze. When I am faced with something traumatic, I just switch off. My mind stops working. I start thinking everything will get better. It's wishful thinking, I know. Of course things don't just get better by themselves.

When we had recovered somewhat, we thought we would go and take back our medals from Tikait and throw them in the Ganga as we had first planned to do. It was too late for that, of course.

Even as we were sitting in our car, some of his supporters had gathered around us. We were told we were to go with them to Tikait's house and sit with him while he addressed a press conference. And just to make us more inclined to agree with them, they mentioned that the police were coming to arrest us.

We went to Tikait's house and sat silently next to him while he addressed the media and took credit for being the man who had stopped India's medals from being lost. It was his moment to shine. As for us, we had been completely dishonoured.

Later, people would tell us that Tikait, for all his image of confronting the government, had a history of selling out movements he had been part of, and he'd done the same to us. I don't know the truth about that, but the fact is that the mistake of actually handing over the medals was made by us. The kindest explanation I can give for myself is I was so swayed by the emotion of the moment that I wasn't thinking clearly at all.

Until then, I had always felt I could turn things around in the protest. That had been how I had wrestled too. I was known as someone who would pull off comebacks from the direst of situations.

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But there was no comeback here. We couldn't have been beaten more thoroughly. There was nothing I could do to turn this around. It was a shock of a kind that I've felt just a few times in my life.

The last time I'd felt that helpless was when I was a little girl, when my grandmother died. That was the first time I learnt that sometimes there's no salvaging a bad situation. Sometimes things are final.