

The exclusive Trivedi Club was located on the spacious premises of US Strips & Mines, which the company had bought many years ago for the use of its own officers, but with a quick change of mind, for which they were famous, the Americans had given it on nominal rent to the elite official members of the club, named after the first chief secretary who had struck such a shrewd deal for the benefit of succeeding generations of IAS officers. Non-officials, that is, the rest of humanity, never saw anything more of the Club than its high and closed wrought-iron gates, and members of the humbler services entered the premises, only for five minutes at a time, to procure the signatures of their chiefs on urgent documents.

Hence, Sharmaji was extremely gratified to receive a personal invitation from the departing chief secretary, Mr. Thummaiah, to attend a party he was giving at the Club to celebrate the birth of his first grandson. The CS, whose father had been a Dalit bonded labourer, had risen through sheer merit, forced open several educational gates, normally closed to students who are not educated from their infancy in the English language, gained entry into the elite 'heaven-born service,' and then quietly made his way up, despite disparaging comments made by his superiors, for 'acting without abundant caution' when securing the interests of the poor and needy. He had taken a liking for Sharmaji, for so eloquently voicing the plight the poor found themselves in, had helped him build up his NGO in the early days with grants for which it was entitled, and introduced him to foreign delegations that visited his department. At the end of his official career, Mr. Thummaiah felt it would only be right that Sharmaji, who had worked with him on several development projects over the years, should be at his last party in the Club.

The officiating member-secretary of the Club covered his surprise at Sharmaji's inclusion in the guest list with practiced ease. "Uncle Tom is bringing one of his spooks to the party!" he announced with a laugh at the bar, and the other young bloods having a drink there chipped in with their own pet stories of 'Uncle Tom,' an affectionate, and only slightly derisive sobriquet, they had given their reserved and well-liked superior.

On the night of the party, Sharmaji, dressed in dark closed coat and trousers, and wearing shiny black shoes, half a size too tight for him, sat in a dark corner on the lawns. Some of the high officials had perfunctorily shaken his hand, others had airily waved across the table to him, and many had just ignored him. He did not mind. He was all too aware of the unique honour done to him; he would embroider and recount the happenings of the night at several other dinners to come, and drop names at key meetings. For now, he just sat quietly savouring his drink, and the august atmosphere.

Mr. Raghuram, the principal secretary finance, otherwise known as 'The Rajguru,' was a very small man, with an egg-like bald head, but his eyes and permanently distended nostrils exuded self-conscious power. Younger acolytes were gathered round him in an admiring circle, listening to one of his great exploits. "Bearer! Bring me another double scotch and soda," he said, snapping his fingers over his head. "Glenfiddich. Right. The bugger comes up to me with the greatest look of innocence, and a plan that would have netted him millions. I saw through his game straight away. The Minister of course wanted the industry because it would bring thousands of jobs to his own constituency, and tried to force my hand, but I put a stop to it. That factory will not be opened in ten years, I give you my word! What happens after I retire, God only knows!"

"These business wallahs are always corrupt," said Mr. Sarangapani, deputy secretary industries. "Well, not corruption in this case," corrected The Rajguru, "but think of his cheek. Trying to go

behind my back to the Minister.” They all nodded agreement that the unpardonable had been done.

“How is your son doing in America, Sir?” enquired a junior officer trying to ingratiate himself with the Great One. Others leaned forward obsequiously.

The Rajguru lit a cheroot, leaned back and blew a ring into the dark sky. “He is very clever – ahead of his examiners here – they never understood him, and I had given up hope that he would ever become a doctor; and as you know with my salary I can’t afford to send him to a private medical college, when the fellow – all by himself, quietly – found out that Texas Oil, to whom we have given the off-shore concession, had set up this new scholarship for third world students. He went for the interview without telling me – imagine! without telling me! – got selected, and comes home, saying, Papa, I am off to the United States! I was flabbergasted, I tell you.”

Everyone broke into appreciative murmurs, and ‘A chip of the old block’ was heard said distinctly. The Rajguru continued gleefully: “It’s a whopping big scholarship, the fellow is earning more than me already, has bought a car, and fancies himself as a host, giving parties to his professors!” The conversation turned to how brilliantly everyone’s children were performing. Someone mentioned the name of the late Mr. Trivedi’s grandson.

“Oh, he is the spitting image of the old man,” said Mr. Banerjee, Special Advisor, Tourism Development. “When he walked into my room, I was taken aback – he had that same confident gait. Mr. Trivedi was my Collector, you see, when I was under training, and he taught me how to exert power, and how to do deals. He had the vision to buy up these hills when they were just jungle. The old man made millions I tell you, and this boy will turn it into billions!”

“Did he get the contract to plan out fore-shore tourism development?” asked The Rajguru.

“How could I refuse him?” asked Mr. Banerjee in comic tones. “It was like watching the old man standing in front of me. It was all I could do not to jump up.” Everyone laughed in shared amusement, and Sharmaji thought it was the right moment to slip out from his chair and collect some food from the buffet.

“Ah! Sharma! Our Man from Civil Society!” said Mr. Govind Nair gaily, helping himself to mutton biriyani. “We hear so many stories about the goings on among NGOs that I don’t know what to believe. Is it true that Father Ambrose was caught in a sex ring and had to give away one of his NGOs as part of the dowry of Mukund’s daughter?”

Sharmaji eyed the secretary for food relief with caution, for he would continue to be indebted to him. “I know nothing about it, Sir, one hears so many untrustworthy rumours,” he started slowly, “and the IG Anti-Corruption naturally is not liked, so when he celebrated his daughter’s wedding so lavishly, people talked...”

“My dear Sharma, none of us were born yesterday,” said Mr. Govind Nair leaning confidentially on his shoulder, “we all know where the money came from for that wedding....aree yaar, Gopal! A word with you! I hear you are taking a trade delegation to China! Why don’t you buy the tickets through my wife? She’s just set up a travel agency, and will give you a big reduction. She

tells me she can give you two nights in Bangkok – five-star hotel, trips up the river, evening entertainment, all free!”

The two officers started discussing the details, and Sharmaji exited to his chair in the dark corner. The big group had moved off to collect their dinner, and a few others had deposited themselves in the vacated chairs, their plates piled high with food.

Mr. Ram Narain, principal secretary rural development was seated next to Mr. Chaturvedi, IG special operations, the only one in uniform in the crowd. “ Tell me, yaar, I believe your boys just decimated three groups in two days, how was it done?”

The police officer silently ate a kebab. “ Nothing to tell, really. My men were on normal patrol duty, when they were fired upon. They shot back in self defence. The bodies will be returned to their families after post-mortem.”

Mr. Ram Narian was in reminiscent mood. “ I remember Gowamma, beautiful, well built girl, though dark like a Negro. She was only sixteen then, but she spoke up bravely, saying there was no food to eat in those villages. Remember that terrible drought? She wanted me – she was telling me – to open a food-for-work programme, but I had no allocation...And all those other women?”

“ They were all well-trained armed terrorists,” said the inspector-general flatly. “ You know I am in an impossible situation?” Mr. Thummaiah came up to see if Sharmaji was getting on all right, and the group stood up to give him their best wishes. Sharmaji hurried off to collect his dessert. He was debating whether he should add a scoop of chocolate mousse or chocolate gateau to the gulab jamun he had already collected, when he was hailed respectfully by Mr. Krishna Prasad, director human resources training institute.

“ Hello, sir! I am so glad to see a leading person like you in this Club,” said Mr. Krishna Prasad, leading him to two chairs, near jasmine bushes. “ We are too insular here, just meeting each other. We need people like you to tell us what is really happening at the grassroots. I want you to give a series of lectures at our next executive training programme.”

Sharmaji was suitably flattered. He suggested some titles for the lectures, but Mr. Krishna Prasad paid scant attention, saying all such details could be left to the deputy secretary in charge. He reiterated that he now had sanction to pay the best national rates for each lecture, but he was even willing to consider international rates, seeing that Sharmaji was really an expert known throughout the world. As he rose to take his leave, Mr. Krishna Prasad detained him with a hand on his arm.

“ Sharmaji, my nephew is looking for a job. He is a bright fellow, you will see for yourself, but he cannot pass examinations. And you know how stupid the educational system is. Can he work with you? Keep him busy, you don’t need to pay him even. Just let him work and learn.” Sharmaji assured him gravely that it was against his Gandhian principles to extract work without payment – a workman was worthy of his hire – and that the nephew should come round to see him next morning.

He slipped out into the night, and dismissing his driver, walked home on air, despite his pinching shoes. For a few hours he had been in the company of the rulers of an obedient billion people, and he wanted to savour the memory in the quiet of the dark night.