

The President of the United States of America broke through the swarms of people around him. “ Hey! – Sam – may I call you Sam? I liked what you said. You are a good man,” pointing a forefinger like a gun at Sharmaji’s nose. “ When you are in Washington D.C. give me a call, and we will have a drink together;” and then he was gone, with the swirling crowd of businessmen, Indian politicians, security guards, and media men following him to his car. But he had spoken loudly for all to hear, and already a respectful circle of the subaltern business elite was beginning to form around Sharmaji.

A brief visit to the one-day ‘Consultation: Business Aids the Poor’ was scheduled for the President at the last minute, and even though the President’s security had been for hours at the seven-star hotel venue of the conference, none of the Indian business organizers had actually expected the President to show up. Just the announcement that he might drop in for a few minutes had made their day. Hastily, secretary, general administration department, was asked for names of officials who should be invited. In the list sent up had been slipped in un-noticed Sharmaji’s name, the government’s stock rep of civil society for all meetings. When he had arrived at the super posh hotel, he had been largely ignored and given a seat at a table at the back, where he had sat comfortably, stuffing himself with canapés, admiring the chandeliers, and already making up stories for the future on how he had single-handedly defied – that was the only word – defied corporate might in defence of the people.

In the midst of the session, the President of the United States, the American Ambassador, and the Secretary of State were present. Sharmaji had been uncomfortable, but not been cowed. He had asked to identify himself, but had loudly and firmly informed the audience that he was surprised that a conference on assistance to the poor included only himself and not several of his more famous colleagues.

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“ We from Civil Society do not ask for hand-outs – the Poor do not need them. We only ask that you treat them with Respect. They do not ask for your Aid. They ask only for Business Opportunities!” When the President of the United States himself stood up and applauded, the whole large congregation of the elite business world leapt to its feet and cheered loudly and long. Sharmaji had sat down, preening himself for choosing the right message for the occasion.

When the session resumed, after the President’s departure, Sharmaji was cordially invited to the dais, a large name card, hastily printed out, almost hiding half his face. Before the presentations started, Miss Kirti Desai of Media Buzz described all the trials and tribulations her team had undergone in the production of the coffee-table book: Challenge! The Face of Poverty, with five hundred beautiful pictures of the poor and hungry, photographed from all over India. Complimentary copies were handed to every delegate in the room by her staff.

During the presentations that followed, Sharmaji’s opinions were deferred to with cordial regularity. Businessmen, famous in India, and several of them well-known in the United