

Ramanujan Varadachary, the reclusive, spiritual-revolutionary centenarian, was all that Sharmaji imagined he would be – spare and fit, bright-eyed and clear-headed, dressed in a simple white cotton *dhoti* with a blue border, and a cotton singlet, and living in a small ill-lit lower middle-class house, tucked away behind a neem tree and on the edge of a school building. What was unusual was the lively sparkle in his host's eyes as he carefully read the label of the red-wine bottle, he had been instructed to present as a gift before the interview.

“Made in India, from French grapes grown in a vineyard near Bangalore, very good,” commented his ancient host. “We will let it breathe for a while, and then taste it, we'll see what wine we can make – it's a lost Indian tradition, destroyed by the uncultured British, and now restored to us by the French! Wonderful! Let me get two wine glasses, which I have not used for the last 32 years.” With that, the old man scuttled off inside, to emerge polishing carefully two wine glasses, and clutching Sharmaji's letter.

“Yes, certainly I can tell you a great deal about Sri Arobindo, and his Ashram, and even more about his younger revolutionary days. He took over where Vivekananda left off; he fired the patriotic zeal of all young men of this country – I left the Madras Presidency College after listening to his speech, and followed him to Pondicherry – the French gave us all shelter, from where we could attack the might of the British Empire!”

Varadachary carefully opened the bottle with a corkscrew, poured out the wine, swished it around with his perfect teeth, and took a sip. “This is not the complete story. To read further, please either register as a new reader or login now if already registered. A very good beginning! It is to be used for tables. What do you think *soma* was? Not some kind of medicine as these theologians make out, but wine, sir, wine, from the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush mountains, grown and drunk by our great vedic forebears! It was the source of their good health, and if I have lived to be a hundred, it's because of the French wine we drank in Pondicherry!”

“We are bringing out a collection of essays dedicated to harmony among all religions,” broke in Sharmaji mildly. “We in civil society want to be proactive in this climate of communal violence. Several great people are sending us ‘messages’ for inclusion, but our publication will not be complete without a short message from you, Sir. You are the last of our great freedom fighters, and more – Sri Arobindo called you a Spiritual Soldier of India, and my request is...”

Varadachary waved him into silence. “Of course, I shall write out a message, today, right now, as we drink this bottle of wine which you very thoughtfully brought along. The import of all real wine was stopped a long time ago... and I didn't even know we had started to make our own, I must tell my grandson to send me another bottle along with his money-order. Don't drink it like whisky – savour the bouquet, roll it round your tongue!”

Sharmaji dutifully tried to comply with these instructions, while Varadachary took up an old ruled notebook and blunt pencil and started to write. He put both down after writing a couple of sentences, and started to speak dreamily, pausing to sip his wine between sentences.

“This is the first Sunday of February, do you know where I was exactly 80 years ago to this day? In Paris! Sunday, the first February, 1925! It was my first winter there and it was dreadfully cold. I was not yet a French citizen then and the British were asking for my extradition to stand trial for