

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 three-minute welcoming speeches for the President, the American Ambassador had stood up and asked to hear voices from civil society. A brief uncomfortable silence had followed, which saw Sharmaji rise slowly to his feet. He had not been cowed by the irritated tone of the chairman of the federation of industries when 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.

“ 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

States as well, came up in disciplined procession to the podium to make ten-minute power-point presentations, projected on to a giant screen at the back, their trained voices carried around the vast room through a specially-installed BOSE system. The chandeliers dimmed expertly at every presentation, always followed by just thirty seconds of applause from fellow businessmen.

A seafood exporter showed how a fleet of ultra-modern trawlers could increase fish catches by an order of ten; a seed specialist pictured vast fields of GM grain, burnished in the golden sun of several other countries; a ready-made pre-fab house was seen to be assembled ready for occupation within one hour; several pharmaceutical giants presented drug technologies in the pipeline that would eradicate disease; varieties of beverages to please every taste flashed from slide to slide; an auto manufacturer projected yet another people's car; a combined display of IT greats showed that education for all was only a mouse-click away; and there even a presentation on women's empowerment by the institute for fashion technology. Two corporate houses, which had adopted a village each, showed pictures of smiling village people, one to the accompaniment of a Carnatic kirtana, for the village was in Tamil Nadu, and the other to the sound of a Hindustani alaap, for that village was on the banks of the Ganga. When the presentations ended, the screen dissolved into a picture of Aishvarya Rai smiling over her left shoulder.

Industry rose for a sumptuous lunch, fusing the culinary traditions of several Asian countries, with renewed confidence that they could do the job of eradicating poverty and making the new millennium an Indian century. Sharmaji's received another standing ovation, when he summed up with Winston's Churchill's immortal words: ' Give us the tools and we will finish the job.'

He of course sat at the high table, his side pockets bulging with the business cards thrust upon him. He daintily determined to taste every one of the forty-odd exotic dishes laid out for the gathering, secure in the knowledge that his new friends would surely give jobs to several of his nephews, nieces, and other hangers-on.

As he was dithering over which set of desserts to go for, a thin young man in a loud check shirt came up to him. " I am Sitaram," he said simply, for most people knew the legendary billion dollars he had made in Silicon Valley over a year and a half, and then given up IT to head a group of Venture Capitalists who funded socially-relevant cutting-edge technologies. Despite his obvious charm and suavity he was also known for ruthlessly cutting off a hopeful presentation in the first two minutes, if he thought it was a non-starter.

" I want to convert my home village in Krishna district to look exactly like the President's home town," said Sitaram shyly. " Give the same street names, and rebuild an exact replica of his town square in the center of my village. What do you think?"

" I think it is a great idea," said Sharmaji, helping himself to all the three different kinds of gateau, being unable to decide between them. The conference chairman then hustled him away to a secluded corner for a serious talk.

“ Indian Business will be making a major presentation in Detroit this fall,” said the chairman, his accents switching between a major of broad coastal Andhra to a minor of mid-western American. “ We will all be there. We would like you to make a keynote presentation on private sector- civil society partnership. We will of course cover all expenses, and an honorarium of ten thousand rupees a day. We mean to make it a dynamic occasion. I am sure you will enjoy it.”

Sharmaji thought for a bit. “ Ten thousand rupees – that’s about two-fifty dollars a day, right?” he asked in mild enquiry.

The chairman busily rustled his papers, and said with an amused laugh at himself: “ Sorry! What am I thinking! Of course it’s an international conference, and the honorarium would be at international standards – around a thousand dollars – no, two thousand dollars day.”

There was a pause. “ These days, what with my health not being robust, I always travel with my wife,” said Sharmaji pleasantly.

The chairman tapped Sharmaji’s knee confidently. “ Leave it to us. We will fly you both out first class, of course, and the President’s suite at the Sheraton – unless of course he turns up to hear you!”

They both laughed together at the joke.

“ I will have to ask my wife, of course,” said Sharmaji, and then to leave no matter to further suspense, added: “ But I am sure I can convince her. It’s for India, and we are all Indians!”

While the chairman was busily noting down cell phone numbers, times to call, and the office address, Sharmaji, who had briefly adopted the well-known pose of Rodin’s Le Penseur, lifted his head and said with a worried frown: “We should make better use of this opportunity, you know? I mean, take the initiative forward to have lasting effect.”

Securing the chairman’s undivided attention, he sketched out a training programme to be conducted some time in the future, by his own organization, aptly named SERVICE, and why should it not be of service to business?

“ Fantastic idea, Mr. Sharma!” said the chairman decisively. “ I can see you are a man of vision. I think we can settle this right away!” Rising, he snapped his fingers familiarly at the dean of management studies who was ambling around vaguely with a cup of coffee, and took him into a huddle with a few other colleagues from Silicon Valley. He came back to Sharmaji a few minutes later with a satisfied smile, with the dean in tow.

“ It is too early to say, but there is a feeling going round that we should institute a chair in the management school. We would like you to be the first person to hold that chair – of

course, we know you are very busy, so don't say, No! A lecture a term is all that is asked for, and a keynote on Convocation Day! Come on, Mr. Sharma! Help us out!"

After some persuasion, Sharmaji was made to agree.

" This is a landmark Day for Private Sector Civil Society Partnership!" said the chairman enthusiastically. " I see only Progress, and Profits for People ahead of us!" They all shook hands on that.