

Lesley Tuck had reached the end of his undistinguished professional career as the Regional Director of the British Council in the city. A good-natured but ineffective fellow, he had got by in many a third world town with his self-deprecating clowning, his attempts to push the envelope on behalf of several local indigent groups, and the low profile he had studiously adopted within his departmental hierarchy. He had been put out to grass at this his last posting. But hidden within that colourless exterior burned a desire to achieve, to create an event that would be long remembered as the Tuck Initiative.

He got a startlingly imaginative idea, during the tea he organized to facilitate the free distribution of old books on British Sport, for which really there was no more room on the crowded library shelves. With a flash of brilliance, he thought of a cricket tournament among local NGOs, the winning team being awarded two tickets for a weekend visit to London during Jubilee Year, and tickets at Lord's to see the final of the ODI series. He was surprised when his superiors took up the idea with alacrity, instead of the usual dismissive wave of a hand. Within weeks he was authorized to organize the local tournament; a small but adequate budget had been allotted, and he even received a short letter of praise for his initiative from the minister for international development. Lesley Tuck positively glowed with importance. His career would end with a bang, a golden hued bang, which would bring back memories of his one brief year as slow left-arm bowler for the Minor Counties.

With unwonted energy he got around to organizing the tournament, which after some consultation he agreed had to be a short knockout series, rather than the more elaborate league idea he had started out with. Most of the NGOs in receipt of donations from Britain signed on, many secretly recruiting fresh staff with some knowledge of cricket. While taking part in the matches might be tiresome, it was worth their while to get the recognition of the British government, which had suddenly opened its tight purse-strings, and was shaking out guineas in all directions. An ancient jewel had been prised out of its crown by the tragedy that followed its triumph in the Second World War; old colonial connections were allowed to wither away as Her Majesty's government dithered between Europe and nostalgia; but the ceremonies attendant on the Jubilee Year brought back a rush of enthusiasm to win back the minds and hearts of a people, who had once without much complaint built up their lost Empire.

Very quickly, the one-day games that were played on a variety of badly maintained club grounds winkled out most of the competing teams, who were happy to retire from the scene with a hand-shake from Lesley Tuck, and a Certificate of Participation in the Jubilee Year Cricket Tournament of Civil Society Organisations. The winner could possibly be SERVICE, with its long tradition of Saturday afternoon cricket, Sharmaji carrying on an earlier belief he had inherited from his physics teacher in school that exhausting cricket was better than allowing his staff to scheme during their idle hours. Or, the winner would be the Foundation for Advanced Urban Geriatric Health [FAUGH], a rich NGO, which had recruited jobless sportsmen as male nurses.

SERVICE and FAUGH faced each other at the finals one afternoon over the Gymkhana pitch, a well-rolled affair, surrounded by a tidy oval-shaped ground. Not only Lesley

Tuck, but the British Council directors from Delhi had turned up for the match, and were seated in the pavilion along with the town's sporting elite. Both SERVICE and FAUGH had quickly and in unanimity rejected the idea of permitting 'unknown' neutral umpires to preside over the fate of the day. Lesley Tuck reluctantly agreed that Sharmaji, on behalf of his team, and Vemmalapudi Sastri *garu*, the thin, stooped, authoritarian head of FAUGH, should be the two umpires. When Sastri *garu* shook hands with Sharmaji, there was already a condescending assumption in his voice, when looking down on his opponent's bald head, he wished the best team all success. Sharmaji grimly determined not to let that 'corrupt fellow' have the last laugh, come what may. To his discomfiture, the FAUGH captain won the toss and naturally decided to bat first and fresh in the morning.

The runs rolled out easily for the enemy team, and if the batsmen got out at regular intervals, it was more because the male nurses settled scores by running each other out. An astonishing six wickets were lost with batsmen stranded in the middle of the crease while Sharmaji's gleeful finger remained pointing rigidly towards heaven. The grin on the face of the remaining batsman would soon be wiped out as he was paid in full by the colleague who followed. FAUGH were all out for 127 runs, Sastri *garu* refusing to speak with Sharmaji or anyone else at the leisurely lunch that followed, and breaking his silence only to remark about the glorious uncertainties of the game to Lesley Tuck, who was totally oblivious of the suppressed tensions around the table. Sharmaji on the other hand was loud and jolly, and related well-known anecdotes about Dr. W.G. Grace, winning the condescension of the British Council directors. The head of FAUGH tried to make amends over desserts by stressing that he had tried all his life to inculcate cricketing values among his colleagues, but unfortunately to little avail. His team returned his glowering look with blank smiles.

The male nurses being good trenchermen did full justice to the lunch, and hence were sluggish when they took the field; however they were confident that their opponents could never make up enough runs to win. Sastri *garu*'s pace attack became understandably breathless in a few overs, and the runs came easily, though to Sharmaji's mounting concern wickets also fell at regular intervals, Abraham at thirty-five closing his eyes to sweep to leg, missing completely, and getting bowled. With his in-form batsman gone, Sharmaji called a drinks interval, loudly seconded by the fielders, despite Sastri *garu*'s disapproval, and under cover of the happy chatter of the players counseled caution to his batsmen; focusing on the ball right up to the bat, taking their time, and even desperately promising vague rewards to follow victory.

The only one to take his advice seemed to be Dasgupta, who despite his dragging left leg miraculously seemed stuck to his crease, snicking boundaries over the out-stretched fingertips of the fielders. Gamely he stood at one end, his nimble runner stealing singles, whenever the ball bounced out of reach. Thankfully, Sharmaji was at the bowler's end to consider an appeal when a straight ball rapped Dasgupta on the pads. After a very short struggle with his conscience, Sharmaji ruled in favour of his batsman. After all, he reasoned, you cannot give a man out for being unable to move his polio-stricken leg well out of the way of a ball intentionally hurled at a physically challenged batsman. But

Sastri *garu* fumed at this totally moral decision. He said loudly to the sniggering of his fielders that he was sorry that poor sportsmanship was marring the good name of cricket these days. His chance came twelve runs later when from square-leg he loudly called 'run out,' though no appeal was made, and Dasgupta's runner seemed to have dashed past the stumps.

As his star batsman dragged his way back to the pavilion, Sharmaji grimly declared war without the niceties of the Geneva Convention. A skied ball to mid-off was declared 'no ball' by him before it landed in the fielder's hands. Fifteen more runs were needed for victory, which he felt honour bound to secure for his team. Were they to be cheated by this paltry quack, who everyone knew terrorized his aged patients? He and his wife would go to London with the winning tickets, and she could shop at Marks and Spencers to her heart's content, and they would lunch at Wimpy's.

As they crossed over, Sastri *garu* came up to him officiously and sneered: "Sharma, can I lend you a copy of the Rule Book?"

"Read it yourself, Sastri," shot back Sharmaji hotly. "I hear many of your patients are launching public interest litigation against FAUGH for cheating and cruelty. Better hurry away and bribe some officials, and leave cricket to players." Sastri *garu* was beside himself with fury at this disrespectful address to him, who was far senior to this fellow Sharma, but he realized the English were watching, and he would not demean himself on the field with further words. He determined to act.

When only nine runs were needed for victory with three wickets still in hand for the SERVICE team, Sastri *garu* coolly held two batsmen leg-before wicket of two successive balls. He smiled with avuncular triumph at Sharmaji at the end of the over. Grimly defiant, Sharmaji decided to do away with all convention. He declared every ball a 'no ball,' even as it left the bowler's hand, and Venkat at the crease picking up the cue smashed two boundaries. But in his eager carelessness to score the winning run, he slipped and fell heavily, straining his bad back. To Sharmaji's chagrin there he lay in the middle, like a beached whale, while Sastri *garu* quite loudly and unnecessarily shouted 'run out.'

The match had ended in a worthless tie. Without a word said between them, Sharmaji and Sastri *garu* walked back to the pavilion to gathering applause, while the players helped poor Venkat to his feet, and half carried him back. Lesley Tuck gushed: "I must say what a magnificent end to a super tournament! We have two winners! SERVICE and FAUGH! But we have only two tickets," he continued in less enthusiastic tones, "so I am afraid, you'll both have to share them. One each I mean."

Sharmaji and Sastri *garu* looked at each other with dawning comprehension. They would not be able to take their wives. They would not have to hang around shops, spending money they did not have. They would not have to have their London holiday spoiled with wifely strictures. They could spend time in a pub. They could go to places they could not visit with their wives.

Sharmaji turned and smiled graciously at the happy crowd in the middle of their sumptuous tea in the pavilion. “ We could not have had a better result for the Jubilee Year Tournament,” he said with a broad smile. “ At Lord’s I would have missed the companionship of my good friend, Sastri *garu*. We have always been together, at work and at play, in serving people and in playing cricket. God produced the tie, though, of course without that freak accident, we would have won.” He went up and pumped Sastri *garu*’s hand, who though not fully placated, and not having forgotten or forgiven any remark, was wily enough to express pleasure at the outcome. He peered down at Sharmaji’s round smiling countenance. “ Let us plan our London trip together, so that we may bring back new ideas to serve the people,” he said audibly enough for the happily smiling Lesley Tuck.

As he expected, so it happened. Their memorable London visit ended one evening in the warmth of an English pub. London had been home to so many Indian myths and legends over the last hundred-and-fifty years, and they relived several in repeated well-known anecdotes. Then mellow and happy, they ordered familiar, cold Kingfisher beer from India for their last drink. Sastri *garu* looked fondly at Sharmaji, who smiled back, already in the daze of nostalgia to be recollected back at home within a few hours. “ Well, we laid it on with a trowel, about their sportsmanship,” said Sastri *garu*, “ till they were bursting with self-congratulation, though as you know, Sharmaji, they are the worst cry-babies in sport.”