

Sharmaji never had any doubts about his own worth to ‘society,’ so he treated as a matter of course the invitation he received to chair the key session of the annual conference organized by the Nuclear Scientists of India. He was told the focus of the conference would be on ‘the energy needs of the poor,’ and who better than himself to chair such an important session? As further, and unnecessary, inducement, he was told the Prime Minister himself would be on the dais. Sharmaji made detailed notes of all the issues he would raise during tea-time with the leader of the country.

The local chapter of the Indian Association of IT Industries offered to host the two-day meeting in their own Grand Hall, which was linked by a covered walkway with the banquet hall of the latest seven-star hotel. All the distinguished scientists of the country, most of whom had been retired from directorships, according to strict government service rules, would also attend, all hoping like Sharmaji to get the undivided attention for a few minutes of the most powerful person in the land. The first inaugural day was when it would all happen, the second being reserved to ‘technical sessions,’ only for younger scientists to share news of the latest research, which everyone knew would be dull, boring, and quite pointless.

The Prime Minister arrived punctiliously on time – well, no more than twenty minutes late, which everyone considered uniquely praiseworthy, since previous incumbents had kept scientists hanging about for hours on end, involved in the more vital tasks of settling power-sharing disputes among local politicians. After all the garlanding, the lighting of inaugural lamps, and the singing out of tune of invocative hymns taken from the Rig Veda were over, the learned audience settled down for the morning session. Seizing the occasion, Sharmaji said he would open the meeting with the ‘Chair’s Remarks,’ since he was in no position to express an opinion on the learned talks that would follow, but he would do his duty by pointing out to the august assembly the actual living conditions of the poor, with which, he was confident, only he was familiar. He gave them many anecdotes about the struggles of rural women to fetch water from miles away, the stygian darkness that prevented girl children from reading, how living forests had to be felled for cooking some thin gruel over charcoal fires, the lack of connectivity that left innumerable unwarned villages at the mercy of tsunamis. His remarks met with thunderous applause, Dr. Bhattacharjee, the President of the Association of Nuclear Scientists, seizing a moment to say he could not listen to Mr. Sharma dry-eyed, hoping that they, the gathered scientific elite of the country, would rise to the call of the hour, to lay the ghost of poverty, and putting their combined shoulders to the scientific wheel move the bullock-cart of the state into the jet age of the future!

They then settled down to hear the key-note address on ‘energy needs of the poor,’ given by Dr. Srinagesh, the former director-general of nuclear fuels. He was a distinguished scientist with thirty-five years spent arguing vehemently the case for a total energy focus on the nuclear option, since there was no other imaginable source of power that could supply all of the country’s immediate, and growing, developmental needs. Previously, he had painted an alarming picture of a pandemic of cancer if one more coal-fired thermal station were added to the grid. Pleas for examining renewable energy sources, he had laughed away to scorn, becoming quite witty in the process. The great man had

reluctantly given up the chair of office, informing the government dispassionately ‘as a scientist, that the country would face a grave crisis were he to step down at this critical political-energy juncture,’ but with its usual somnolent conduct of the affairs of state, the government had not heeded his dire warnings, and retiring him had appointed a younger man in his place. But in his ‘devoted commitment to the people – not to any transient government,’ Dr.Srinagesh said he would willingly ‘get back to solving some of the key problems scientists faced in basic research,’ which he had had to discontinue, though on the point of epoch-making discoveries, to shoulder over the last thirty years the weighty administrative duties trust upon him by a thankless State.

Most of the audience who has heard his impassioned presentations on behalf of nuclear energy thought they would see some of his familiar powerpoint presentations, but they were in for a surprise. “ Mr. Prime Minister, Dr. Sharma, Distinguished Colleagues!” boomed Dr. Srinagesh, “ I should first of all like to thank my colleagues and friends, who without informing me, got together with Jeannie Larmont, to set up the Srinagesh Foundation, on the eve of my joyous return to science from the ranks of the bureaucracy –“ he paused to beam at his successor – “ my return to the work-bench of science, if you will, and devote myself to the Goddess of Knowledge, as I was not able to do while being Director-General, though, of course, I represented our country at all of the great scientific gatherings in the world. Jeannie, please stand up so that we can all give you a big hand!” A thin faded American millionairess stood up shyly to applause, many of the assembled scientists openly envious of Dr. Srinagesh for landing such rich girl friend. “ Jeannie has been able to persuade me to take a re-look at the scientific facts that stare us in the face. There can be no doubt at all, Mr. Prime Minister, that with over thirteen hundred joules of sunlight streaming down on every square metre of our great country over three hundred and thirty days of the year on an average, we have no option available but the solar energy option! We must exploit this God-given perennial source to provide energy for our billion people. My Foundation is ready to do its part. I have already calculated that for a small initial investment by government of no more than a hundred crores – which is less than twentyfive million dollars – I would be able to energize a hundred villages to eternal light! I shall now proceed to give a brief oversight of the potentialities, and the installation processes I shall adopt.”

The enthusiastic discussion that followed his presentation highlighted other renewable energy options. Retired nuclear scientists seemed to have experienced spectacular change of heart, and spoke of the exciting path-breaking work they were doing with their own foundations with wind energy, biogas, energy woodlots, and many hybrid systems that could solve the country’s energy problem, provided a few crores of public investment could be made right away in foundations under informed scientific leadership. Dr. Ghotge, a well-known elder figure of the nuclear establishment, then rose, dressed in *khadi kurta* and *dhoti*, and sporting a flowing, saintly white beard. After several lengthy mumbled quotations in the original Sanskrit, he said it was vain to think of harnessing Nature, while Man himself chose not to toil. He had developed several simple mechanical devices which would enormously – that was the only word – increase the effect of human muscle energy, and when you think of a billion people working together as a community – as Gandhiji had wished – one could readily imagine the energy transformation of

society. His society, aptly named Man for Energy – or ME, to emphasize personal commitment – would show the way. He asked for no government support, but as a Gandhian he would not prevent them from partnering him.

Dr. Subbaraman, former director of the Cement Institute of India, agreed with all the views expressed, but said everyone was missing the point by ‘externalising the poor people’s need and use of energy.’ It had to be integrated in their housing. He would say without fear of opposition that the indiscriminate use of cement was the bane of the countryside – a view which he would have shouted down two years earlier when in power – what the poor wanted was the use of mud for buildings, friendly mud, with which they grew up, and in which their last remains were interred. He showed slides of different styles of traditional mud housing still in practice around the country, and said simply he was even now willing to serve the country at half the compensation he would receive as a United Nations Consultant.

The question of ‘food energy for the people’ was also brought up by a group of life scientists who had bought out five-hundred acres from poor farmers as a cooperative group, in the Nagarjunasagar left-bank ayacut region. Despite better profits that would accrue from the market, they were willing that government should procure all their produce at a price to be mutually determined to ensure food security among the poor.

In consequence of so many excellent presentations, lunch had to be put off by half an hour. The Prime Minister, and *Sharmaji*, along with a few top-flight in-service scientists were taken to a small special room by Dr. Bhattacharjee, the President of the Association of Nuclear Scientists, for a cosy chat over lunch. When they were all seated in deep sofas, with plates piled high with food balanced on their knees, Dr. Bhattacharjee turned to the PM with a smile. “ Sir, my retired colleagues, despite their advancing age and other infirmities, have shown you, shown us all, the vigour in science exploration. I am sure they will produce some good results, even if it is only to educate our school-children to look at all sides of a question. But as you rightly said in parliament, Sir, we are staring down the barrel of an energy meltdown. Our hydrodams are silting up fast, and do not produce power as expected. And this despite causing immense suffering to displaced farmers – electoral losses in three state assemblies I put down to this single fact! Our cities – I don’t need to tell you, Sir, living as you do in the capital - are made unlivable by thermal power stations. There is no option but to go in massively for fast-breeder reactors! I am as peaceful a man as Dr. Ghogte, but I am also a patriot.” He dropped his voice to a chummy conspiratorial whisper. “ Let’s face it, we are surrounded by neighbours who do not necessarily wish us well. We must be prepared. We all know the dual uses fast-breeders can be put to, and it gives us a necessary margin of safety.”

The Prime Minister, perhaps, unwilling to discuss security concerns among relative strangers, then rose and said he had to go. The scientists jostled each other at the door in their eagerness to press their separate cases, while seeing him to his car. *Sharmaji* was alone in the small dining room. He went up to the side table and helped himself to a few desserts. After he had eaten all he could, he wandered back to the conference hall to find most people had disappeared somewhere. Those who were there were riffling through

their papers, and gave him a blank look. He looked around to say thank you and goodbye to any functionary, but could find none. So, he made his own way out, and went home for his habitual siesta.