

The Norwegian was a young, slim, pleasant faced diplomat, in a simple white shirt and khaki trousers. He could easily have been mistaken for a student. He smiled apologetically at Sharmaji, looked out of the large French windows on to the trim embassy lawns, and then pushed the excellent cup of coffee closer to his guest.

“ I suppose I should have come down to Hyderabad to make my request,” said Ashbjorn Trigvisson gently, “ instead of sending you the air ticket, but I have to be on call all the time here now that the ambassador is on leave, and I hope you forgive me. We want your advice, we want to enlist your help.”

Sharmaji nodded his agreement.

“ You know how people learn, grown-up people, I mean,” continued Trigvisson. “ They don’t know something, they go to a library, take out books, and find there isn’t enough information in them, and take out more books. Finally, they take a course, because a person can teach better than a whole lot of books. This is where we want to help in a unique way, using our small aid funds to best advantage. We want to fund the setting up of a Living Library, really a team of experts, who will advise NGOs, or local government, or any development agency, on request, who can be taken out like a book to help people who want advice. And we want to start with a really Big Book, like the Bible of Development. We want you to be that Bible!”

Sharmaji was dazed to say the least at the intended honour, and at the same time scared of how he would be used by several NGO leaders he knew. The image of tearing pages, and scribbled margins came vividly to mind. He recoiled in horror, and said quickly that cognizant though he was of the honour done, the pressure of work at home, et cetera, etcetera. Trigvisson looked quite crestfallen.

“ I know it’s too much to ask,” he said. “ But you are such a fund of vital knowledge, like a Bible, as I said, and India’s needs you to share it. I cannot think of two other persons to replace you, but I respect, and regretfully accept, your declining the offer. In fact, there is no money in it, and it is such a bother, I know.”

Sharmaji congratulated himself on not falling into a trap. Somehow he had sensed there was no money in the offer, just a painful social obligation. Every scoundrel who wanted to make a fast buck by starting an NGO would have been after him to share not knowledge, but leads to his best donors. No way, old boy, thought Sharmaji. Trigvisson continued anxiously to ask his advice who else he could call. There was no money, which was a big handicap in getting the right person. The fund could afford no more than a thousand dollars per day of advice offered, and of course all expenses paid, business air travel, three star hotel accommodation, that sort of thing.

This news completely changed the picture for Sharmaji. There were several of his friends out there who could keep him busy for at least a hundred days a year, and that would mean a hundred thousand dollars a year, plus all expenses for star hotels.

“ Ashbjorn, I am willing to help, only temporarily mind, till you have the whole thing properly set up. By then, I would have helped you select the next ‘Bible’ as you say, and I will be back to my villages. No more after that, OK?” Ashbjorn accepted gratefully.

The next day, his new-found friend, Ashbjorn, took him round to Sastri Bhavan, the government’s control center of all educational institutions, to meet the Secretary for Human Resources Development, who did the controlling. After the statutory half-hour wait in the crowded waiting room, with walls reddened with eons of betel-nut spit, they were ushered into the presence. The Secretary, a squat balding man, listened to the idea, enthusiastically welcomed *Sharmaji*’s induction as the first Living Bible, and said that he would personally watch the progress of the proposal through the various departments and ministries of government before the funds could be accepted and the Living Library set up.

*Sharmaji* flew home on the wings of his jet, and his soaring hopes. He was sure his calculation, give or take ten thousand, was accurate, he would get all the money he wanted in one swift package. Ashbjorn was a good trustworthy guy, these Scandanavians were all trustworthy, especially the Norwegians. Apart from the money he would make, he was happy to be helpful to the nation. It was an honour, and a duty, which only he could perform. As soon as he got home, he would celebrate by buying a new red Maruti. He had always wanted a fast red car, and he at last felt justified in spending lavishly on himself.

*Sharmaji* enjoyed his new car; he loved to drive it, and to be seen driving it. He called on friends, and offered lifts. He started going out to expensive restaurants in five-star hotels; after all he should get accustomed to entertaining his clients in such places. His monthly expenditures went into the red, but his conscience was untroubled. Ashbjorn continued to be enthusiastic and supportive. Everything was going well, *Sharmaji* knew better than most how slow the government machinery worked, and his case was safe in the Norwegian’s hands. Of course, section officers asked too many questions, and fresh notes had to be prepared. Of course, the department of economic affairs raised some queries, and the file had to be re-written all over again. Of course, for the umpteenth time, *Sharmaji* had to send a fresh version of his curriculum vitae. But the patience and youthful exuberance exhibited by Ashbjorn was exemplary.

Joji George walked in one day into *Sharmaji*’s office, He was a tall, powerfully-built man with a black square-cut beard that framed one of the widest, friendliest smiles on the face of a NGO leader. The Kozikode Women’s Crafts Foundation had received a very large order for coir mattresses and coir doormats from New Zealand buyers, and Joji had come in search of extra coir raw material supplies, though the Andhra variety of coir was decidedly inferior, but then it had to be cheaper also, right? *Sharmaji* placed a car at Joji’s disposal, and all the attention of his staff for the next two weeks was diverted to helping Joji in securing his supply chain.

“ Thank you, brother, you have been the Nizam of Hyderabad for me,” said Joji laughing deeply, and embracing *Sharmaji* before leaving. “ You are a great guy. Why don’t you come to Kerala, to God’s Own Country, some time?”

“ I might, Joji, I might, but good friends like you must invite me,” said *Sharmaji*, placing his hands on the tall man’s shoulders. “ You should ask me to come and advise, or something, I have the funds for it you know, I could spend a week or so with you.”

Joji George laughed happily again. “ If you have the funds, brother, come for a month at Onam time. Or come and see the snake boat races, visit the Periyar national park. I will fit you out with a boatman I know, he will take you out through all the backwaters, through the Kerala few visitors see, special only for special guests,” he added with an elaborate wink. After he had left, *Sharmaji* searched for the address of another old friend who worked on organic tea in Kerseong. A fortnight spent in the high Himalayan hill stations, while he earned a thousand dollars a day, would be very bracing.

When six months had passed and no word had come down to him, he made another long-distance call to the Norwegian, and learnt the Indian government wanted to consider the proposal in the coming financial year. During the next summer Ashbjorn came down unexpectedly to Hyderabad to give the good news in person to *Sharmaji* that the project had finally been approved by the Indian government, and not only that but the Indians were enthusiastic to contribute funds, real *funds* to establish the Living Library! They both had dinner at an expensive continental place, and Ashbjorn and he polished off several bottles of the best wine available. Peeking over the Norwegian’s shoulder, *Sharmaji* was stunned at the bill, but steeled himself with the thought that he had now moved into a higher bracket in life.

A few more months passed, and over the phone Ashbjorn sounded hassled, but still positive. Then he was away on long home leave, and no one else in the embassy seemed to know about the fate of the project. After several inconclusive telephone conversations, and receiving irritated answers from haughty Indian women receptionists, *Sharmaji* desisted from making further calls, and decided to wait it out till Ashbjorn returned to Delhi. After the rains had ceased, he was surprised to get a letter from one Mr. Janhunen, who said he had taken over from Trigvisson, and was renewing acquaintance with all his predecessor’s contacts. Mr. Sharma would be hearing shortly about the progress of his project. Three months later, *Sharmaji* got a short note from Mr. Janhunen that he was glad the project of the Living Library was at last in operation, and that Mr. Sharma had been appointed as one of the Living Books. He would soon be hearing in detail from the Indian Human Resources Development Ministry, under which the Living Library had been established.

Three weeks later, *Sharmaji* received a long coarse envelope, with his name and address printed in cheap smudged ink. The several cyclostyled sheets listed the rules and regulations governing the establishment of the Living Library, and the required duties of all the ‘Living Books.’ A key section detailed how the Living Books would be selected by the chairperson of the empowered committee, who incidentally happened to be the

Secretary he had met two years ago. All the other Living Books were retired Secretaries to Government. Sharmaji's name was appended at the end as 'conjoint category' to be used in conjunction with the above named.

Unemotionally, Sharmaji looked out of the window down at his red car. Even if he sold it now, he would lose at least two lakhs of rupees. He looked at the sheaf of papers he held in his hand and knew he would never be called, even as a 'conjoint,' and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. The point was to survive, and he was a survivor.