

The SAS, that is to say the Secular Association of Socialists, had first been formed during the dark days of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, by a group of brave academics, as a way of showing up the falsehood in Mrs. Gandhi's political protestations, and establishing for the Indian public the true meaning of both secularism and socialism. Feverish closed-door midnight meetings were held in several campuses, notes passed from hand to hand in complete secrecy, a code elaborately constructed, which turned out to be too complex for any intellectual, and much drinking of coffee and whisky in several cafes and bars. And though many professors had willingly agreed to join, and sacrifice careers, and even life, for the sake of truth, somehow none of them could find time to address public meetings. Sharmaji had been a student in those heady days, and with the commitment and the rash courage for which he was to be known in later years he agreed to be the founding president of the SAS. He eloquently addressed several open meetings, though only on campus, and mostly in the student hostels, and consequently he was picked up for questioning by the police.

The next ten days were the worst he ever was to experience, and he remembered for the rest of his life that while upholding democratic principles was the duty of every citizen, such acts, or for that matter any act that might draw the attention of the police, was best carried out symbolically, like a religious ritual, for instance. He then understood the practical wisdom displayed by his elders in the 'movement.' Though in fact, the police had merely amused themselves by making him go through all the early phases of interrogation, while demonstrating to their new recruits how a prisoner goes from defiance, to sullenness, to pleading, and then abject surrender. None would ever know, except for a few senior officers, what effect a mere visit to the 'electrical room' had on him, and while they perfunctorily took down what information he had, all and more already known to them, he left their premises, the college, and the city, thoroughly shaken, and retired to his uncle's house in his ancestral village.

A few months later Mrs. Gandhi lost the elections, and overnight he became a national hero, as the martyred founder-president of the SAS, and started his rapid advancement as a spokesperson, and a budding leader, of civil society. The SAS was de facto discontinued since there seemed, at that time, no further need for such an organization. One can imagine Sharmaji's surprise then, when several decades later, a delegation of lawyers, retired judges, and active academics came to his flat one morning to suggest a revival of the SAS, now that globalization threatened the very values for which he had sacrificed his liberty. In the past he had spoken with his usual eloquence about that earlier threat to Indian democracy, and how he had taken all that a neo-colonial system could fling at an Indian with Gandhian courage, and he spoke of it again. He assured the delegation that despite his failing health, and the pressure of enormous duties on his time, he would undertake the re-formation of the SAS.

A few phone-calls assured him that Christians Everywhere would be proud to fund such an organization, and that he should not be his usual parsimonious self when working out the budget for the founding conference. With Dasgupta's help a generous proposal was dispatched, and he was able to acquire in short order a couple of air-conditioners, a washing machine, a micro-wave, and a large flat TV, which made his wife very happy, as

well as communication equipment for the office. He was also able to take on long lease, and very favourable terms, the Conference Center of the Federation of Textile Industries, which could no longer afford such excellent facilities.

Global Event Managers, run by his cousin, were hired to promote the International Conference of the SAS. The BBC, Associated Press, CNN, German radio, France One, and all the local and national TV stations and Press were to cover the event. Lady Scilly decided to come with a small staff, but only as an observer, since she said she came only to learn and hear. Every evening would be graced with an ethnic cultural performance, and a dinner hosted by a leading business house of the city. The municipality arranged for fireworks on the opening night.

Sharmaji beamed at the great circle of distinguished academics, jurists, doctors, and activists, around the conference table, with supporting students, and staff seated behind their leaders. After media had taken all the pictures they wanted, they retired behind the glassed off cubicles arranged for them, and the conference got under way with a stirring inaugural speech by Sharmaji. As they broke for coffee, he was able to see in the TV sets placed in the corridor grabs of his speech being relayed by several networks.

“ You have arrived,” said Pauline Lefevre smiling down at him, and he smiled back and moved away uncomfortably, for memories of that unsuccessful evening he had spent in her flat in Paris still haunted him. Robert’s praise was unequivocal, without any tinge of sarcasm. “You laid into them, old man, great show!” said the lanky Brit, dipping his biscuit into his tea, village fashion. “They will have to take notice of SERVICE and Christians Everywhere now. Grand job. I wish I was an orator like you!” and he moved off, thumping Sharmaji on the back. All his other guests wanted to meet him then, and a few anxious students asked complicated questions, which he could neither hear nor understand.

The main plenary discussion turned on what was meant by secularism, particularly in the post 9/11 age. Anti-spiritualism was rejected out of hand by all, but none could agree on what ‘spiritualism’ signified. Even accepting that the term meant something, which they all understood, or better still felt, in a non-inter-subjectival way, they asked what signification should be given within the political context of secularism? Swami Vithalananda referred to several texts that a saffron-clad acolyte sitting behind kept handing to him. After fifteen minutes the gist emerged that nothing existed but the Spirit, and that ‘spiritualism’ was the recognition by the Mind – which itself was an ephemeral creation of the Spirit – of this sole Truth, and secularism could be an approach by which all could share this Truth. The academics respectfully would have none of this simplification. The discussion returned to the Problematic.

After tea-break, David Kriegmann of the New York Dialogue Committee showed a ten-minute clip of the fall of the World Trade Center. He said that this film should be shown in all madrassas along with another, which he had with him, showing Moslems, Jewish people, and Christians all praying near each other in Jerusalem, but his ramble was cut short agitatedly by Angela Hanley of the New Age for Peace, who broke into tears, and

stammered: “It is not so much the death of three-thousand people that shatters me, horrifying – horrifying – though the very thought is, I mean I could mourn, Mourn, for a friend, but my God, three-thousand? but then Death is the billowing debris in David’s film, don’t you see? – darling, this is not a criticism of your film – but the thought that humanity is Billowing towards Destruction, global warming melting huge glaciers, tigers gone within the decade, all those magnificent creatures – has anybody seen house sparrows lately? – and every morning I get up with a single image etched in my mind, the face of that lovely African child, with his large eyes, dying, dying in his mother’s arms ...” and then she ran out of the room, followed by Kriegmann, and a dozen girl students.

Retired professor Godbole, his shiny bald head sticking out over wispy white hair, tried to bring the group round to what worried him. “ I have a great difficulty in accepting, without challenge, the Nehruvian concept of Secularism,” he said in a whisper. “ All societies are basically religious – I will qualify my statement – they follow certain cultural practices, which have grown organically out of their own religious beliefs. To negate this is to negate a vital element of their cherished identities... If we are to bring peace between communities – and that is the purpose of the secularism project – we must remember what Gandhiji said: ‘ There is no path to peace. Peace is the path,’ and so...”

Vyjayanti Iyengar, Professor of English, broke in sharply, as she always did when Gandhi was mentioned: “ I thought Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that?” she challenged.

Dr. Susie George, Director of the Institute of Immunology, lifted her patrician head with its beautifully coiffured halo of white hair and said softly but decisively: “ Sir Syed Ahmed first mentioned it at the inaugural of the Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College at Aligarh, in 1886, was it...?” and she looked round for corroboration.

At this point, Sharmaji decided to up the ante, and take charge: “ That quotation has been used by several great people, but you first find it in Kabir’s 14<sup>th</sup> century poems,” and since there was no one in the group of intellectuals who had read Kabir, he launched into an oration about the need of the hour for everyone to come together under one banner, irrespective of caste, creed, or colour. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw Lady Scilly silently applauding. “ I work with the simple people in the villages,” he continued. “ In our villages they are all one, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Gond. We should not confuse the religion – the religiosity of the urban middle-classes” – he gave a short laugh “ – with the true religion of the simple people. For them it is a way of life, it is not an opium of the masses.”

A delicate cough reminded everyone that Dr. Feroz had sat silent throughout, incessantly smoking one cigarette after another, each lit from the stub of the one preceding, a deep frown between his hooded eyes, with their faraway look. Everyone knew he had staunchly maintained his communist principles despite a trying twenty-five years with the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. The delicate cough also brought to mind the whispered rumour that Dr. Feroz had not long to live, though he had always stoically refused to speak about his health, much to the admiration of his friends.

“Marx said religion was an opiate,” he said with aristocratic precision, and continued in same nuanced style. “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”

A pin-drop silence followed, as everyone took in not only the words but the manner of their delivery.

The delicate cough was repeated. “This is, perhaps, the one unsolved – the one unsolvable – question that has revolved in my mind,” said Dr. Feroz, fixing his eyes steadily on the flowerpot in front of him. “How do we ease that sigh? How can we bring ‘the soul’ back? Back to soulless conditions?” And then he looked at them all as if waking from a dream, and laughed softly till a cough blew out a cloud of smoke. “It is a torment of mine,” and then as if no one existed, he got up and went out into the verandah to smoke a fresh cigarette. A large girl with a large bosom rushed out to be of assistance.

The discussion was picked up again. A thin-faced spectacled activist, with a thin straggly beard asked Sharmaji loudly: “Are you saying then that you, you, you support all kinds of religious ideas, actions? Do you support fundamentalism?”

“Certainly not!” said Sharmaji stoutly. “The very meaning of my remarks makes it clear that I oppose fundamentalism, of all kinds, religious, economic – the Americans are economic fundamentalists, cultural...”

Farook Ali Khan Sahib, the curator of the Hyderabad Medieval Records Library, could not let this pass: “Sharma Sahib, there is a distinction we must make here between correct religious belief, and erroneous religious belief. A person with correct religious belief could also be termed a fundamentalist scholar, and he could lead a completely peaceful life.”

Sharmaji squirmed a little. “Well words have different meanings in different contexts,” he said. “I am referring to fanatical behaviour, which I condemn.”

“What do you call fanatical behaviour?” challenged the activist with the thin straggly beard.

Loud voices cut in from all directions at this stage, with a consensus being reached after ten minutes that they would accept violent behaviour as fanatical behaviour.

A girl in some kind of religious robe, who had been looking fixedly at a long-stemmed rose she held in her hand, now got up, allowing her unbound hair to fan around her to her knees, and asked Sharmaji: “Do you now regret that you ever were a revolutionary, and do you reject and condemn all revolutionary acts?” Many young men glared at her and him in turns.

Sharmaji tried to use all his skill and tact in trying to work around the question, when Dr. Shankar Rao, the chair of The Voice of the Dalit Nation, and head of the Department of Political Science, jumped up, and shouted: “God damn it! I am sick of this Brahmin-Baiya farce. I came here only because I thought some few of you may have the guts to Demand Social Change. I will have nothing further to do with such trickery!” He kicked back his chair and made for the door, but professor Godbole held him back by main force. A number of young men shouted: “Inquilab Zindabad! Long Live Marxist Leninist Mao Ze Dong Thought!” The girl with the rose shrilled: “China Out of Tibet!”

Sharmaji looked round helplessly for Dr. Feroz, but he along with the large bosomed girl had disappeared.

Lakshmi Srivatsav, the doyeness of the feminist movement, was standing and tinkling her pen against her glass. Silence fell over the room. She was a large woman, ‘nobly planned,’ as Wordsworth would have said, and she commanded the gathering with little effort.

“Whenever we discuss political matters, or matters of faith, as we did today,” she said with impeccably regurgitated received pronunciation, as if she was chewing on something tasty, “we tend to forget that there are others in the world apart from the men” – she paused to let that sink in – “who take all the decisions. I have been sitting here all day listening to you debate this point and that, and not one of you have voiced, or realized, what hardships women have to bear because of your decisions. You talk of peace as if it concerns only you – almost as if everything is a game – I am sorry, but it is not. It is women who are killed, and tortured, and not you comfortable gentlemen.” Lady Scilly went up spontaneous and kissed Lakshmi Srivatsav, and their eyes were glistening when they unclined.

It was time for SAS to come out with a concrete action plan, suggested professor Godbole. Mr. Krishna Prasad, Head of United Publishing, adjusted his elegant tie, and said they should bring out a book, or even a series, well researched, and using modern terminology, which would highlight the similarities of thought in all religions. He could help with publication, if some financial help were guaranteed, he said. All the students seemed to think it was a great idea, while the religious leaders sank glumly into silence. Sharmaji quickly saw the dangerous shoals to which such an enterprise could lead, and cut short the debate by saying roundly that they did not have the expertise to make summaries of religious books without giving offence, or even the skill to modernize the texts, which itself would require years of work by qualified religious leaders. Farook Sahib nodded assent, and the matter was dropped.

It was close to dinner time, so they adjourned, asking Sharmaji to draft out a release for the Press. After a sumptuous dinner, he drafted out a carefully worded innocuous statement out of the mish-mash of notes presented to him by the rapporteurs.

He got up late the next morning, and sat in his favourite chair, overlooking the busy street, waiting for coffee to be served to him by his wife. He picked up the first

newspaper out of the neatly laid out pile on the side-table. There was a flattering colour picture of him speaking. “Sharma of Service condemns fundamentalism” read the caption. The short account of the conference, written hastily by the reporter, focused largely on him, he saw smugly – no doubt as a return for the lavish bar he had kept open all day – but as he read on he was appalled to find himself made out into some sort of heroic crusader against fundamentalist religious fanatics, of all religions. The reporter made him out to be a fearless opponent of all bigots, and who wanted to cleanse society of all religious superstitions. Not a word of his Press Release had been used. With a nerveless hand he picked up other papers, but all the rags carried a similar theme, written by worthless, drunken idiots. They put in words he had never used, or remembered using. It was all taken out of context.

The telephone jangled his thoughts. “Sir, there is some crowd gathering here outside the office,” said Dasgupta’s voice. “I don’t know what the problem is, but I am closing the office and I have called the police.”

He was sunk deep in thought, as his wife brought him his coffee. He took her hand. “I am very tired. I need a holiday, and I want to give you a holiday. Let’s both go to Darjeeling for two weeks – no, three weeks. Let’s leave today – this morning!”

She looked at him in amazement. What had come over him? They didn’t have the money, and in any case they would need time, to make all arrangements... but he brushed aside all her objections like a eager young lover. They would go to Darjeeling that very day, that very morning. He would ring Indian Airlines and they could collect the tickets at the airport.

“But it is November!” she said half in doubt, half happily.

“The best month to go to Darjeeling,” said Sharmaji. “All the tourists would have gone. And you have never seen snow, have you? We will roll in it!”

And happily, hand in hand, they went off to pack their bags.