

“Yes! Daddy, I am going in for a divorce. And nothing you can say, or any of this hypocritical meaningless nonsense, can make me change my mind!” Shanta said firmly, slapping down on the dining table her black leather work-bag, thrust full of exams papers to correct. His wife was rattling pots and pans in the kitchen of their flat, whether in support of her daughter’s statement, or in agitated response, he could not tell.

It was a hot summer evening, with mosquitoes buzzing round his head, adding to his discomfort. “ But Shantu, what has happened? I know you have had disagreements with Ravi; which married pair does not? I can help sort things out. Ravi – I know Ravi – leave it to me, and he will come round, don’t I know how to do it?” Sharmaji was trying to regain control. This was not the time for a scandal. He was held in very high esteem. He was trying to glue together a coalition of civil society organizations, with himself at the head, which would use EU money – he forgot which DG it came under – but essentially for cultural purposes to revitalize traditional values. But people would laugh if his own daughter at this time went in for a divorce.

His daughter’s plump figure was heading towards the kitchen, her hair, cut short in a ‘bob,’ swaying defiantly round her shoulders. “ Shantu, Shantu! Don’t be disrespectful! This is your father speaking, not one of your modern academic friends, who don’t care about values. I will not let you ruin your life! What else do I have in life, except my children? Everything else I have sacrificed to the nation!” Sharmaji got up ponderously from the dining table, leaving behind his plate, periodically filled with hot *pakodas* by his wife. “ Let us discuss this, listen to your mother!” he cried in desperation, following her into the kitchen.

His wife was calmly giving some hot *pakodas* to Shanta, who was eating them as if nothing had happened. “ Give me a list of what Ravi has done; let us be rational. He is a good fellow, you modern people should appreciate him. He never took a rupee in dowry; even I with my high principles was surprised at that noble gesture. And you have hardly been married two years, and you jump up and say you want a divorce? You, why don’t you speak sense to your daughter?” His wife, her ample back turned towards them, continued to make *pakodas*, but the way she handled the ladle, he knew she was angry about something. Maybe the silly woman would help him, just this once.

“ Father, this is not your business,” said Shanta calmly, munching *pakodas*. “ If you like Ravi so much, marry him yourself. That will give mother a break.”

Such effrontery was not to be tolerated, but Sharmaji was at a loss how to regain control. Shouting at his daughter would make her more obstinate, he knew. If he put up with insolence it was only to bide his time; but he must bring this cocky stupid girl round, manipulate her somehow so that she did not spoil everything.

He laughed a dry laugh. “ You are angry; my little girl! Whom I have treasured more than life, seen through every little trouble, protected her, taught her, spent lavishly on her wedding” – he regretted the allusion he moment he said it, this was no time to talk

of marriage – “ she is angry with her poor father. Be angry, but I will continue to love you!”

His daughter seemed unimpressed. She continued to munch *pakodas*, as if they were discussing something totally inconsequential.

“ Father, you have made a pretty good life for yourself. You twist everybody round, everything round to satisfy yourself. You are the greatest manipulator there is! But you cannot manipulate me! I know you too well. I know all about this precious SERVICE society, and its scams. And remember, I know that poor grand uncle Satyanarayana passed away without your lifting a finger to save him. So, no talk of values to me, OK? I will live my life. I just thought I would let you know, rather have a neighbour tell you.”

Sharmaji was getting livid. His rough tongue had made many others back down; maybe a tongue-lashing would make this girl bend to his will. “ Thank You! Thank You! Thank You!” he said viciously. “ We now have no family! These modern women don’t care if they kill off their parents! You have squeezed everything you want from me, and you don’t need either of us any more, I see that! What a fine example you set your students! No wonder with teachers like you the country is going to the dogs! Dogs, I tell you, male and female!” He had avoided the word ‘bitch,’ his skills in wordy duelling were finely honed.

His wife spoke suddenly, unexpectedly. “ Shanta wants a divorce, she must have her divorce. You will never understand.”

Sharmaji was stunned. He had never expected that his traditional wife, more over, one over whom he ruled, gently, but firmly, would support any such non-Brahminical attitude to marriage. “ What is this, what is this I hear?” he demanded moving threateningly towards his wife, who turned her back on him calmly. “ So, you people have been discussing this for some time, have you? Without telling me? Behind my back, while I was slaving in the pariah *chairy*, rubbing shoulders with Muslims, why, to feed you? Ah, ha! What loyalty, what family feeling! I see now, when you said get a large-screen colour TV I knew that the rot had set in. It is these films with their degrading dances that have corrupted you. This is why our Manu Dharma Shastra has said that women must be controlled by men, or else society is lost, dharma is lost! What a fool I was not to have seen all this before! What a fool to be soft towards women. One thing I will tell you, listen to me, Woman! I will not permit any divorce in my house! That is final!”

With that he went to the bedroom and lay down without switching on the light. His wife did not come to him immediately. He would take it out on her later. After some time, the dark, the quiet, and all the *pakodas* he had eaten, had their effect, and he was dropping off into a sullen nap, when his wife came in.

“ Come, dinner is ready,” she said simply.

“ I will not eat,” he said. “ You have given me a pain in my chest. You have killed me.” His wife went away. He grimly closed his eyes.

“ Come, Dad, don’t sulk,” said his daughter, indecently cheerful. “ Mother has made brinjals with that special *masala* you like, and the curds are really thick. So come before we eat it all up!”

What arrogance! But why should he suffer for their sins? They should be taught a lesson, not himself. He got up, and went into the next room, blinking in the light, and trying to look both ill and aggrieved. The food was already on the table, and he sat in his customary place and made quite a good meal of it, taking whatever was offered with ill grace.

After the meal, he sat in his easy-chair fanning himself, and satisfied himself with the *paan* his wife had made for him. “ Eh, you!” he called out to her. “ What has happened to you! Is this the way to make *paan*? My God!” His daughter was talking in the kitchen with his wife, helping to clear away the dishes, wash, and dry them. As she left, she wished him a cheery good-bye, but he deigned no reply.

He had hoped that the whole thing would blow over, that his daughter had thought it all up just to harass him, but such was not the case. The divorce petition was to be heard in court. He tried meeting Ravi a few times; but each time his son-in-law was pleasant but evasive. He was surprised that Ravi himself was not going to oppose the divorce. How could a man be so lost to shame?

The meeting of the NGO coalition to protect traditional values took place in the Dange Hall, named after the famous communist leader of olden days, communists being more interested in the matter of traditional values than anyone else. The walls of the hall were covered with printed iconic portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh. Over the entrance hung the large oil portrait of Dange himself. Delegates crowded in, many from rural areas, straight from bus stations. On the high dais, was a long table, covered with the standard red tablecloth one expects in left-wing functions. Several chairs were ranged behind the table, and each one had a small flower vase with plastic flowers, and a sealed drinking water bottle, in front of it on the table.

The high dignitaries took their places. To the right of the central chair was seated Mr. A.K. Nilakentan, former chief secretary to government, who after retirement, became the leading spokesperson in any left-wing forum. To the left was Dr. R.P.Chatopadhyaya, famed and retired atomic scientist, who never failed to espouse the cause of world peace and disarmament. At the very edge of the table, next to the podium, sat Mr. S.D. Damodhar, retired director general of police, the latest leader in human rights activities. The central chair was of course reserved for *Sharmaji*. When all were seated, and the hall had filled up to three-quarters, forty-five minutes after the function was to start, young Gopalan, who managed such affairs, welcomed the audience, and said something rambling for ten minutes about the value of values.

Slokas in Sanskrit followed ,recited by the last surviving follower of Mahatma Gandhi, who explained the slokas by repeating them again, but more slowly, in Sanskrit. Then came the time for the Presidential address.

Slowly, with head bowed but with determined step, *Sharmaji* made his way to the podium. Then followed the traditional business of tapping the mike, making a gesture to the technician fiddling with the amplifier, who turned a knob that let out a deafening screech. Finally, after taking a sip of water, and clearing his throat, *Sharmaji* began his address.

“ Mr. Nilakentan, Dr. Chatopadhyaya, Mr. Damodhar, dignitaries on the dais, and in the audience, friends, all citizens who have come here to uphold our traditional values, our Indian way of life, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, Sikh, and Dalit brethren and sisters, Greetings! I have been asked to undertake the heavy burden of the Presidentship of this new coalition, which holds so much promise for our people. I declined several times for I knew there were many others far more worthy to hold this office than myself. Please don't interrupt, believe me, I know I am unworthy, I thank you for reposing confidence in this old man, I thank you for your affection, and regard, but I want to share with you today, in open assembly, an innermost struggle I am waging, between duty, and truth! Can there be such a struggle? Yes, my friends, there can be. You all know – why should I hide anything from you, my real family – that my daughter has disobeyed me and filed for a divorce. I said not a word to her! It is the inner conscience that must be stirred. I hope it will, I can only pray it will. But when such an act is being contemplated by my own daughter, I can only see it as my own sin. I cannot remain your President. I therefore, request, Shri Chakravarthy – the last remaining follower of Gandhiji himself” – pause – to take the chair!”

This was a master-stroke. The centenarian, after the exertion of waiting two long hours in the hall and reciting the slokas, had already been whisked away home. *Sharmaji* could have nominated the civil servant, the atomic scientist, or the policeman, but he shrewdly sensed that any of them would have gracefully accepted the post. There was near pandemonium in the hall. A few men rose, from organizations supported by SERVICE, and with quavering voices insisted that he and only he should be their President. With great reluctance, *Sharmaji* accepted to shoulder the burden, unworthy though he was.