

## P-E-P

Shankar Rao, the sexagenarian, was universally known as a good man. No one had ever questioned his goodness. After all, his father and grandfather had been freedom fighters who had sacrificed much for the country. His uncle had died in jail – perhaps because of a heart ailment as the police records stated, but more likely because of British brutality as the people believed. Shankar Rao himself entered government service after Independence as a clerk and rose to the high position of office superintendent in the public works department before retiring. Unlike many of his colleagues, he made no personal use of such a lucrative post, not even taking home ‘official’ pencils and erasers for his children. But what else could you expect from a man whose forebears had worked with the great Mahatma to liberate the country?

Shankar Rao’s exceptional honesty was put to the severest test by God when his first son, a brilliant boy who stood first in school, developed typhoid. Shankar Rao took the child to all the holy men for their blessings, and faithfully administered the cheap herbal remedies recommended by the local *vaid*, but the boy got worse. Too late, he took him to the government general hospital. The rich contractor who had the run of the office offered to move the child right away to an expensive private hospital at his own expense, but Shankar Rao refused the offer, rightly figuring out that a quid pro quo would be required of him later, during the dispensation of future contracts. His wife who had put up with all the privations that his honesty had enforced on her never quite forgave him when their first born passed away. Shankar Rao himself rarely smiled again, but stoically bore his loss, and continued to work with his usual diligence, without murmur or cynical comment.

The second boy was never as brilliant as the first one, more playful, lazy, and uninterested in studies. He was often seen in the ‘bad company’ of other wastrel working-class boys. Once Shankar Rao was visited in his office by a respectful sub-inspector, who informed him that the boy had been taken into custody with other vagabonds. Shocked, Shankar Rao had requested emergency leave from his sympathetic superior, bailed out his son for the princely sum of a hundred rupees, and read him a lesson with tears in his eyes. His son had also broken into tears and promised to reform. Though henceforth the boy kept out of such mischief that might invite the attention of the police, he did no better in school. Finally, despite the wistful hopes of his father, he also ended up as a government clerk, brazening it out by saying he was too dutiful to accept a job higher than the one his father started with. Then, without informing his parents, the fellow had gone and married a Christian colleague. His mother had wept incessantly, even more than when her first-born had died. The boy soon moved two bus-rides away to a Christian colony, and they lost touch for some time till the grandchild arrived. By that time, Shankar Rao’s wife had begun to realize that it was the Christian daughter-in-law who more or less supported the family and kept her son out of trouble, so without too much sniffing she did go to the Wesley Church for her grandchild’s baptism, though she refused to eat anything at the lunch that followed.

Shankar Rao's daughter was their pride and joy. Brilliant, charming and confident, she had sailed through her childhood and adolescence, securing top marks in every subject in school, and without falling ill even for a day. The scholarships which she won on an annual basis added significantly to his meager salary. By the time she was fourteen, neighbours were already prophesying a brilliant alliance. She won her way with ease to medical college, and Shankar Rao acknowledged to his wife with secret happy tears that he had not spent one penny on her education. She on the other hand had bought them small luxuries ever since she was in primary school.

So, despite all the misfortunes he had endured, Shankar Rao was more or less a contented man when he retired. He received a gift from heaven when he least expected it. Many years ago, soon after he had joined service, he had been ordered by his superiors to join a newly-formed society of government employees. Despite his acutely straitened circumstances, he had continued to pay his dues and other fees to the society, more out of fear of his superiors than because of any interest in that society. At the end of forty years of service, when he was wondering how he would pay the rent out of his pension, he was informed that the society had bought land in Ibrahimpatnam on the outskirts of the city, and that careful management of its funds had enabled it to build houses on this estate for all its members at the cheapest possible rates. He was unaware, or chose to be unaware, of the fact that such growth of invested funds could hardly have occurred without the engineered intervention of contractors who had long battered on the department. While many of his colleagues in the society's gated community held house-warming parties in three-storied mansions, he himself was content to spend his provident fund and post-office savings of forty years on a small two-bedroomed bungalow with a small yard at the back. His wife at long last beamed with happiness, at 'owning something,' and at not having to quarrel daily over the water supply with their apartment neighbours in town. There was room for his daughter as well, for weekend visits, though she had to stay in the city most of the time to prosecute her medical studies.

He never forgot his lost first son – whom he met regularly in his dreams, and to whom over the long nights he tearfully explained why he had been unable to save his life. This nightly companionship had enabled him to last all those hard years, and he had arrived at acceptance of God's Will. His only other hidden regret, which he never gave voice to, was the realization that he had failed to follow in his revered father's footsteps to do some marked service for the nation. Yes, he had served in a small capacity in the independent government of India, but he knew that his work had hardly benefited the people; it had on the other hand filled the pockets of contractors, corrupt officials, and greedy politicians. His own hands were clean; he prayed monthly to his father's and his ancestor's memory in that secure knowledge. God had not wanted him to be a hero, and that inscrutable Will was master of all.

The sunshade over his front door threw a shadow in the morning sun right up to his wicket gate six feet away. It became his custom to sit in that protected area to sip his morning cup of coffee while he looked with fondness at the two rose bushes that grew on either side of the gate. He was having his coffee there as usual one winter morning, two

years into his retirement, when quite unexpectedly Jairam Sir drew up in his car, and slamming the car door in a hurry, came briskly towards him.

Shankar Rao was beside himself with excitement. He shouted to his wife to fetch another cup of coffee for the ‘Sir,’ ran in to pull out another rickety cane chair, and went bowing to his guest babbling incoherent greetings. Jairam was no ordinary visitor. He was famous as a brilliant officer of the heaven-born service, the Indian administrative service, who had risen to the ranks of a special chief secretary through hard work, dedication, and that rarest of all qualities - honesty. He was respected equally by the powerful and the landless Dalit. He was always kind to his subordinates – Shankar Rao in the rare moments when he discussed office work with his wife over their meager dinner had regaled her with Jairam’s virtues, his decisiveness, and his unfailing courtesy towards his own humble self. That such an exalted officer should come to his abode was unthinkable, but there he was.

His head was in a whirl, even as Jairam stood up when his wife brought out the cup of coffee – imagine his standing up to honour his wife – and asking kindly after her health, their daughter’s progress in her studies, whether the house was comfortable, and so forth.

Finally, his wife withdrew into the recesses of their house to steam some *idlis* for them both – which Jairam Sir accepted! Then he turned briskly to give instructions to Shankar Rao, who prepared himself to listen with his usual devotion.

‘Shankar Rao, the Government of India is about to launch a great scheme for people’s welfare,’ said the great Jairam, ‘The Prime Minister has named it: P-E-P, Participatory Empowerment of People. It is to be piloted in our state, and I have chosen this region for its launch. You know why? Because you live here. I want you to be part of it. I can trust no one else.’

Shankar Rao’s heart swelled with pride and pleasure. His ancestors had heard his secret prayers. At long last he was to be given a chance to serve the nation and its people.

‘Sir, any service I can render, I am most willing, Sir. You have been my Friend, Philosopher, and Guide, if I may make so bold...’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ interrupted his officer, ‘I know. Look, this is a magnificent scheme which addresses all round development. So, we shall start with provision of pure drinking water to everyone in this locality. Just think, Shankar Rao, no one, no child will fall ill of any water-borne disease. A new dawn for our people!’

Shankar Rao shed silent tears, thinking of his long lost son. He was to be an instrument of God, the government and Jairam Sir, in preventing the unnatural death of children, and in – in – resurrecting his son’s cut-short life through the life of others! Dimly through his private thoughts, he heard Jairam tell him that a local people’s committee would be formed and he would be appointed as its chairman. An honorary job but an arduous one, in which he would be required to ensure full people’s participation from all the villages in

the project area; working with them for long hours so that they fully understood the provisions of the scheme; and making sure there was no quick conversion of its benefits to enrich any of the bureaucrats or contractors who would surely smell money the moment the government announced the scheme. In brief, it was his responsibility to ensure the success of the scheme and the absolutely honesty of the process. At the end of his life he could ask for nothing more. He was old, but so had Churchill been when that man's people called him to save them from fascism. Cometh the hour, cometh the man – he was ready.

The next year was passed in hard work, harder than any he had encountered in diligent service of the government. His respected figure was to be seen in all the villages, in all the meetings, the first to arrive, the last to leave, raising pertinent points, tirelessly elaborating on people's rights, humbly countering any arrogant assertion from a political leader or young bureaucrat. If he took a cup of tea in the midst of all this activity, he was seen to pay for it immediately. He paid for all the trips out of his own pocket, even for second-class railway fares to attend important conferences in Delhi, whether hastily called or badly organized to suit the convenience of some great man. He reminded the local officials that his was an honorary post, and that he was not entitled to ask for any travel allowance. He was content to spend his money in the people's service. After one or two exasperated attempts officials stopped arguing with him, and focused instead on their own compensations.

It was a dream year, the days flashing by in work, hope, and glory. He grew darker and tougher, and comforted his worried wife by saying that he felt better than ever. Having served with government, who knew better than him that any project, however simply constructed, should and must pass through several gates, through every department that had any connection with it, and surmount every doubtful notation with sufficient reasons. The provision of drinking water required clearances from the departments not only of public health and sanitation, but also from those of public works, irrigation, both major and minor, watershed development, rainwater harvesting, urban horticulture, science and technology, social welfare, child care, women's rights, financial assistance for the weaker sections, agriculture and cooperation, land records and assessment, economic affairs, finance, education – since drinking water should of course also be supplied in schools – and every other department that had any connection with the usage of water. Few harassed clerks in any of these multifarious departments had the time or the skill to put up useful notations on the subject to their own departmental heads, so it became his regular occupation to sit in a corner of their hot offices, go through their files, and draw up clear and concise notes on the subject.

A high point of this busy year was attending a conference organized by Jairam in a five-star hotel. He had never stepped inside such palatial surroundings, and wondered at everything he saw with childlike curiosity while at the same time modestly deprecating his interest in such expensive frivolities. He refused almost all the dishes that came his way for he did not know what they were or how they were made, contenting himself with a glass of milk and a dry biscuit. The keynote speaker was a Professor Charles Walker of Cambridge, who explained in the chaste English Shankar Rao loved to hear that pure

drinking water could and should be supplied free to all inhabitants, produced almost as a second thought by a new technological process that converted waste into several highly commercial end products, which would produce wealth for the country and health for the people. He did not understand the power-point presentation that explained the technology but he clapped vigorously along with the businessmen in the room.

During the second year of work, most of his new-found friends in the several dingy departments he had visited called him to say his notes had been returned with several fresh queries. He was expecting such a response out of long experience, but the irrelevancy of most questions raised by high officials did surprise him. However, he redoubled his efforts, and once again produced more notations which he felt sure would enable the sanction of the wonderful government scheme of giving pure drinking water to everyone. The days turned into months, and few departments mentioned any fresh developments; and none reported final authorization.

Anxious, and beginning to be a little frustrated, he decided to seek an audience with the great Jairam Sir himself, who in the meantime had retired. He found him on the tennis courts of his club. He was toweling himself after a brisk match with his partner. Shankar Rao stood humbly by the chairs in the locker room.

‘Rafa is unbeatable on hard courts,’ said Jairam obscurely, ‘but grass is another matter, remember, and Roger is by no means yesterday’s man in Wimbledon.’

‘I admire Roger as much as anyone,’ said the other great man, ‘always have, but you know, time has a way of dealing with the best. Anno Domini!’

The conversation proceeded on such incomprehensible terms till five minutes later Jairam turning spied Shankar Rao standing patiently, his spare frame bent a little out of deference.

‘Shankar Rao!’ Jairam cried out happily. ‘What brings you here?’

‘A game of tennis, perhaps,’ said his friend in lordly good humour.

Refusing to sit in their presence, Shankar Rao said something about the project not moving forward despite all notes being put up.

‘Refresh my memory about the project,’ said Jairam frowning, as he pulled on his tee-shirt. ‘That’s the one about poultry feed, right?’ Shankar Rao hurriedly said it was not, and described the P-E-P scheme as they walked towards Jairam’s car... the scheme which Sir had so kindly... he meant the honour.. that is, that he should humbly serve....Shankar Rao’s low voice petered out indistinctly as he waited for Jairam to throw his kit into the car.

‘Yes, yes... that drinking water one. Should have gone through. Can’t understand what is causing the delay. Tell you what, I will have a word with my successor, Subramanyam.

Go and see him tomorrow, he will straighten it out.’ With a friendly wave, Jairam got into his car and drove off.

However, Mr. Subramanyam was unable to see him for ten days. When finally the summons came for four o’clock that afternoon, it was too late to catch the bus and Shankar Rao for the first time in his life took a taxi and spent forty-five anxious minutes doing little else than look at the spinning metre. By seven that evening he was ushered into the sanctum sanctorum of a special chief secretary, a large room, almost a hall, air-conditioned to freezing though it was quite pleasant outside, with capacious sofas at one end and a huge curved walnut table at the other, behind which sat the great man. Subramanyam was engrossed in something he was reading and did not look up for a full ten minutes while Shankar Rao stood in front with arms folded in respect. Then with a sigh of disgust, Subramanyam flung the papers to the ground and pressed his buzzer with annoyed impatience. His personal secretary and two attenders came running in. He stretched out his hand and a file was placed in it. He glanced at it briefly, shook his head with annoyance and looked full into Shankar Rao’s face.

‘I am very tired of contractors like you trying to get around government regulations. I am very angry that you had the effrontery to go to Mr. Jairam. If it was up to me, fellows like you would be put in jail and thrashed! I will not entertain any such representation again. I am giving you a serious warning. Go!’

Shankar Rao reeled out of the presence, his thighs shaking. As he blindly tried to find his way out to the corridor, the personal secretary told him kindly, ‘It is better to go through the normal channels... you know after fulfilling formalities.’

That evening as he sat on the floor for his dinner, tears rolled down his withered cheeks in humiliation. He could not keep himself from telling all to his wife.

‘How dare that fellow talk to a *maha purush* like you!’ said his wife angrily as she poured watery buttermilk over the rice. ‘Who is that fellow? The world knows that his wife is the biggest contractor supplying all guest houses and offices with curtains, table cloths, cutlery, cups and saucers. Such ugly expensive things! I know this looter, don’t think I don’t just because I stay in the kitchen. Everyone in the world knows except you!’

She made him stand in their living-room, brought an *arati* plate from the kitchen, ceremoniously removed all evil *drishti* cast on him, touched his feet and bustled away. He was very touched at her devotion but his heart kept beating fast for a long, long time.

Then, all of a sudden he was informed through a government circular that several cabinet ministers were descending on his locality to inspect it for its suitability to host the P-E-P scheme, which the Prime Minister had ordered should be launched within the month. He was required as chairman of the locality committee to mobilize a public meeting on the occasion. His heart rose in excitement, he rushed around the villages, went door to door to spread the good news, returned to the government secretariat and waited on Subramanyam’s personal secretary to take his latest instructions. He hardly ate in the next

few weeks, he was so busy. Since he was so willing to take on his own frail shoulders the burden of organizing the public meeting, officials in charge made use of his willingness and ordered him about as if he was a paid subordinate. He did not mind – why should he – it was all for the public good.

A large open *maidan* was chosen for the grand occasion, and he spent two sleepless days reminding everyone in the villages to attend. The dignitaries were five hours late due to the fact that a late heavy breakfast had made them miss their flight. Compounding Shankar Rao's problem was the depression that had formed over the Bay of Bengal, leading to unseasonal heavy showers drenching the thousands of patient villagers who were gathered in the open. Finally the crowd was informed that due to the weather, the meeting would be held in the old Thesil office a kilometre away. Shankar Rao shouted to the people to reform in front of the office. When most of them were gathered there, the ministers, the principal secretary, and the collector addressed them through megaphones from the safety of the office verandah. The people were informed that the government was doing everything for the public good. Then, the dignitaries left in a cavalcade of white cars, splashing mud over the people who stood near the road.

Suddenly, a boy squelched through the mud, touched Shankar Rao's feet, and stood eyeing him wildly, his hair plastered round his head in the pouring rain. It was Nikhil, the son of an old friend.

'Uncle, look around you – can't you see the difference between us – human beings and them? They are vampires – alien robots – terminators – left by the British to rule over humans!'

Shankar Rao could make nothing of this, and tried to speak to the boy, but he vanished as quickly as he had come.

A week later, Shankar Rao saw his photo in the papers, spread-eagled on the ground along with five other boys and a girl. There was an inset picture of the superintendent of police and a short statement that these desperate Naxalites had been killed after they had opened fire on a peaceful police party.

At the cremation ground, Shankar Rao tried to console the father, holding him close to his heart. 'Nikhil was like a son to me, Prasad – he was a son – he should have listened. Gandhiji never approved of violence...'

His friend was sobbing loudly. 'It is because of your Gandhi that my son has died today!' he wailed. 'If Netaji had been in charge we would have got real freedom!'

Shankar Rao turned away. What could one say to an anguished father? He himself knew that pain.

Despite that meeting, the days continued to pass by fruitlessly. He became afraid that this project would get lost in the dim corridors of power, as so many had in the years he had

worked for the government. He was making another of his endless rounds of dirty offices in low, yellow moulding buildings, when Mohan Babu came back into his life.

‘Sir! Sir! Sir!’ said the familiar voice. ‘What are you doing here, Sir? How can I be of service?’

There stood Mohan Babu, a little stouter than usual, gold rings on all the fingers of his hands joined respectfully, his full moustache a little greyer, but otherwise still very much the same man he had taken under his wing in the office long ago. They had liked each other almost from the first moment of meeting, but Mohan Babu was of a very different stamp. He had quickly discovered the ways of the world, and though Shankar Rao strongly disapproved of others who used them, he could not get over his fondness for the young man. They had remained very good friends, even when Mohan Babu started amassing sudden wealth. After a few years of what could hardly be called service, the young man had resigned to work for a familiar contractor and then in no time at all become the lead contractor for government. Because of a certain rash deal, beyond even Mohan Babu’s skills at manipulation, his erstwhile pupil had to depart suddenly for Dubai, and Shankar Rao had lost touch. But he continued to hear about him off and on.

Seeing his old patron looking lost, Mohan Babu refused to hear a word till he had taken him to a nearby hotel for coffee and tiffin. Shankar Rao poured out his heart to him. Mohan Babu kept smiling all the time, happy to see his old friend across the table.

‘Sir, I think I can fix all this... in no time at all,’ he said at long last. ‘Day after tomorrow I shall take you to Murthy who is the man who can do this job for us. He will do anything I ask him.’

Mohan Babu insisted on dropping his old friend at home though it was fifteen kilometers out of his way. After all, he wasn’t doing anything, he said gently, it was the car that was doing the work.

Shankar Rao admired the car. ‘Is this a Maruti?’ he asked innocently.

‘No, Sir, it is called a BMW,’ said Mohan Babu deprecatingly. ‘They are all the same, no difference.’

Two days later they were sitting in Murthy’s office.

‘Murthy – this is my old boss, my guru. You must obey him exactly as I do,’ said Mohan Babu expansively.

Shankar Rao was uncomfortable at such familiarity for he realized he was in the presence of a superintending engineer, a high official whose office he would not have dared to enter without being commanded in. But Mr. Murthy bowed graciously to him, joined his hands in a respectful namaste, and asked how he could be of service. Shankar Rao was



too embarrassed to say anything, but Mohan Babu explained everything in a few short sentences.

‘Sir, there is no problem,’ said Murthy easily. ‘I have heard of the project, and I also know why it is stuck. It will be sorted out. Nothing to worry.’

After that assurance Mohan Babu and Murthy spoke of a few other projects, named a few dignitaries by their nicknames, joked together, mentioned a few coded terms and then rose in good humour to shake hands. Murthy turned to assure Shankar Rao earnestly and repeatedly that he could come to see him at any time of the day or night, instructions would be left in the office. There was no problem, he had his personal assurance.

After that initial meeting, Shankar Rao made it a point of visiting Murthy once every fortnight, to politely request information about the stalled project. Murthy always smiled at his anxiety, said every government project took time to reach decision, gave him a cup of coffee and politely saw him to the door. Several months passed with no further progress being reached. Since there was little else to be done, Shankar Rao started to attend the spiritual lectures of Viragaswami who had come to the city. The Swamiji spotted his regular attendance, and once invited him to come up close to receive *prasad* from his gracious hands.

As their hands touched, the Swamiji said gently, ‘You are a *karmayogi*, you will surely succeed. But remember the path of dharma is not a straight line. Sometimes you have to accept the world in its illusion for what it is. Even Dharmaraja in the *dharmayuda* of the Mahabharata told a lie for victory to be achieved.’

Shankar Rao came away in a daze. He had been blessed. He could feel it. The yogi had told him something important, but what was it? He tried to interpret it in many different ways but still the subtle meaning eluded him. He was still dazed by his personal meeting with the Swamiji, when Murthy surprisingly sent for him. He went to his office in haste, almost in elation that somehow the Swamiji had brought about a successful conclusion to his project. After three years of work and longing, he had come to see the project as his, his own, the justification of his life and his ideals.

Murthy was cordiality itself as usual, cups of coffee were accompanied by a plate of samosas, crisp and tasty, noted Shankar Rao with rare pleasure. Finally, the great man came to the point.

‘Your project will happen, there is no doubt about that,’ said Murthy evenly. ‘There is only one stone blocking the door. We must roll it away.’ He continued in similar vein and then paused to look at Shankar Rao meaningfully.

Shankar Rao was no fool, and knew what he was driving at. He shook his head. ‘Sir, I am a simple man, not a contractor. I am doing public service at the behest, at the orders, of Mr. Jairam himself. You know that.’

Murthy leaned forward. 'But ultimately it is the contractors who will carry out the physical job. Their dharma is to make money – profits. Let them give – let us say an advance – to make more. Do you have any contractor in mind?'

Shankar Rao shook his head wordlessly.

'Then leave it to me. I know a very good man. But he will not take all of the risk himself. Actually, there is no risk – the money just goes in a circle.'

Shankar Rao was amazed at himself for participating in a discussion he would have walked out of a few years ago. Now, he understood the Swamiji's words, and so he continued to talk with Murthy. It turned out that a competent contractor was willing to give the bribe to secure governmental clearances, but it was against his practice to take all of the risk – however insignificant it was – all by himself. Murthy asked Shankar Rao whether he would share in the risk.

'Money should exist only to do good,' said Shankar Rao at the end of half an hour's discussion. 'I cannot find the sort of sum we are talking about. I will ask nobody, not even Mohan Babu. It is against my principles.'

'Then, Sir, if you want this project to be cleared, give the advance yourself. What does it matter? You will have it returned in a matter of weeks, days, I should say. You will not lose even a month's interest, I can assure you that.'

Shankar Rao laughed dryly. 'Sir, I might have great friends like Mohan Babu, but I am a poor man. I have nothing to live on except my small monthly pension.'

Murthy had not expected this. He looked doubtful, then surprised, and then he fell into thought. He made a few rapid phone calls. Then, he turned to Shankar Rao and smiled.

'I have found a way out. You have a house in Emerald Valley. A very good address. Bring the papers of the house to this office on Friday, that is an auspicious day. A friend will give you a hand loan of fifty lakh rupees, without knowing anything about the house. It is just a nominal transaction. You hand the money to the contractor who will also be here. I will supervise everything in your interest. The project sanction will be given in a week. The advance will come to the contractor, he will return the fifty lakhs to you in this office and you give the money to my friend, and he returns the house papers. Everything done in less than ten days – just a paper transaction. Okay, Sir? Don't worry, your project will be done!'

Shankar Rao was ushered out before he could voice any doubts. He was troubled about the morality of the deal more than about any risk he might be facing. He knew how things happened with government contracts, though till now he had kept strictly out of such deals. But the Swamiji had spoken to him with prescience, he knew what was coming. Like Dharmaraja, he too must forsake the principles of a lifetime for the public good. On Friday as he furtively took the house papers out of his battered trunk, he had a fleeting

discomfort that he should have discussed the proposal with his wife. He shook his head, she would never have approved, and she would have worried herself to death till the papers were returned. Better to leave her in happy ignorance.

The transaction was very brief and jolly. Everyone laughed a great deal. He gave the papers to a large man in white khadi on his left, who without looking at them gave him a briefcase, and a paper to sign. He signed and returned the paper, and handed the briefcase without opening it to another large man in a white bush shirt to his right, who opened it briefly to show them a flash of neat bundles of money. The case was snapped shut, and everyone laughed again. There was nothing to worry about, they all assured him once again as he left.

The announcement about the project was to appear in the newspapers later that month, but when this did not happen, Shankar Rao tried to call Murthy over the phone to learn about the launch date, but Murthy was away in a meeting. He tried several times to reach Murthy in the next few weeks to be always told that he was unreachable in meetings. A vague disquiet formed in the pit of his stomach. He had not risked any money himself, but he had been party to someone else taking that risk. He calmed his fears with the thought that they were all friends and surely friends do not cheat each other. But still he was concerned at the lack of progress, and determined to go and see Mohan Babu. He had to wait a week for his friend was away in Europe, but he buttonholed him the very next day after his arrival.

Mohan Babu heard him out with narrowed eyes. ‘Sir, I wish you had had a word with me, before you did this,’ he said. ‘But never mind, I will try and repair what I can. First let us see what exactly has happened.’

It turned out that the English professor’s technology had not been able to pass several environmental tests, and while not discarded, it was shelved for the moment and sent back to the drawing board for changes. In the meantime a Harvard professor had met with the planning commission in Delhi and stressed that giving anything free to people, even pure drinking water, was a bad thing for the economy. People must learn to pay. If the presently available bottled water firms failed to provide absolutely pure water, American competitors who had passed all the USFDA tests could be invited to invest in India. This was in the process of implementation, with the government agreeing with the American approach that expensive but pure drinking water would be provided to those who were willing to pay for it; and those who required a lesser degree of purity could buy what was currently available, while the rest of the population would in gradual stages demand purer water as their living standards rose through capitalist competition.

Shankar Rao’s dejection was greater than he could articulate till he received an urgent message from Murthy to attend him in his office. It was a grave meeting at which it was explained to him that the moneylender was forced to take possession of his house, though it was in no way commensurate to the money that was advanced. When he weakly suggested that since the project was not going forward the advanced money – the bribe – could be returned, he was met with incredulous blank looks. The house must be given up

by the end of the month. As he left the office in a daze, Murthy came out and told him confidentially that since he was a friend of Mohan Babu they would work out a solution.

In the days that followed his wife continued to berate him in words that she had never used in the long suffered years of marriage. His daughter was surprising very calm when she heard what had happened. She kissed his tears away as if he were a child, and said soon she would be a doctor and they would all live together in her house, as soon as she got one. But his wife continued to challenge him, asking where they were to live in the meantime. Was it not better they should both jump into the Ganga and die, that is, if he could still afford the train fare to Benares? He had said weakly that perhaps they could shelter in a temple. Which temple, she asked would have two old people like themselves? He was a useless dreamer – he did not know the world he lived in. Her parents had ruined her by marrying her off to a fool... This was almost the least of the insults she showered on him.

And then, Mohan Babu came to their house, touched his wife's feet, and said all this would never have happened if he had been around, and that alternative arrangements had been made. It turned out that the contractor who would be entrusted with the construction of the American PURFLO factory had a large guest house for business guests, and Shankar Rao would be given charge of looking after the guest house and its guests. Shankar Rao burst into tears, and Mohan Babu held him close in a fond embrace.

The guest house was a large beautiful double-storied house set deep in a large garden. Mohan Babu had quickly painted two rooms in the servants quarters at the back, and these were to be Shanker Rao's residence. A pay of one thousand rupees a month had also been agreed upon.

Shankar Rao and his wife settled into a new routine. Their bed, chairs and table, frig and TV were fitted in somehow. He sold the almirah which was too large for the small rooms and bought two small cupboards for their few clothes. Their daughter moved her things permanently out to her rooms by the hospital. His wife could cook in the sheltered small verandah at the back. The cook in the guest house soon became a friend of his wife, and without his knowledge augmented her provisions with heaps of vegetables whenever possible. So, somehow they were able to start putting their lives together.

Shankar Rao's duties were simple, but he carried them out with his usual thoroughness. He straightened out the accounts. There were business parties in the guest house almost every day. Senior politicians, high-level officers, and captains of industry all came to them. Shankar Rao surmised that they came accompanied by their wives in the guise of attending a party to discuss affairs of state in private. He was satisfied that in a small capacity he still continued to serve the nation.

Though till that date he had not known the price of the various meats in the market, or what various bottles of liquor cost, he soon determined that it was his duty to know and differentiate. He soon learned what was Indian whisky and what was Scotch, and why single malts were favoured. He continued to hate the sight or smell of meat, but insisted

with the cook that he would pay not a rupee more than the prevailing price of the day. Under directions from the contractor's lady manager, he supervised any repairs that had to be made, bought new sets of curtains or bed sheets when ordered, after carefully ensuring that he secured the best deals for his boss. He gained back some of his self-assurance while carefully supervising the work of others, as he had always done during forty years of service with government. By five-thirty in the evening his work was done, and he would retire to his quarters leaving the lady manager to supervise the parties.

Then, one day his boss did not appear for work. He learned from the servants that she had been diagnosed with having a serious illness, and would be absent for several weeks. The total burden of management fell on him. He went to the hospital where she was undergoing treatment, but he could not present the bouquet he carried since she was in the ICU. After an unhappy half an hour he returned to the guest house. On the evening of the first party under his charge he stayed on doggedly, sitting unobtrusively in the kitchen, though the cook and the waiters told him to go home since they were experienced in managing everything. There were quite a few important men and their wives at the party, and there was a lot of noise, till very late in the night they retired upstairs to bed. He himself got to bed by two in the morning. He was woken up next morning by the sound of cars driving away and went hurriedly to the guest house to supervise the clean up. To his surprise he found that a few of the wives were still there, laughing and having a drink in their night clothes. In the light of the morning, he saw a little better who they were and why they had been at the party. He saw them off, stonily unresponsive to their innuendos. Later when he went upstairs to the bedrooms he was revolted at what he saw. Then through the mists of aversion the thought came to him that what he was witnessing was no other than a manifestation of the primal force of creation, to whose energy even Ishwara owed his existence.

So, he controlled himself for the moment and went down the stairs very quickly. He was a slow thinker, but he had to take a decision. The present state of affairs was intolerable. He should not keep his discoveries to himself, he should tell his poor wife. He ended his simple recitation to her with a clear order. 'Kamu, pack what you can. Let us leave this hell hole this instant.'

She stood her ground, however, facing him, her arms akimbo.

'Yes, and which palace are you going to take me to? Which temple is waiting there with open arms? Brahmana, open your eyes! Which world are you living in? I have known from the beginning, only a fool would not! If we go, who will support us? Your daughter? She is still studying, do you realize that? She will become one of those women in that guest house, to feed you and me, remember that!'

He ran out at that, and wandered about aimlessly for a long time.

The next day, in place of his discreet lady boss, there appeared a jolly Miss Meena, a large blowsy woman who made no secret of what all the business parties were about. She gave him clear instructions what provisions were needed for the evening. His job was to

go to the market and buy them and leave the rest to the experienced cook and her helpers. Confused feelings raged through him that day as he went reluctantly to the market. In the evening, Miss Meena inspected his purchases and was highly pleased.

‘Hey, Pops! Want a free shot this evening?’ she asked slapping him on the back in a friendly way. ‘Come on, Pops, if you don’t use it, you lose it! I will tell Supriya to come down to you this evening when she has the time. You will like her, I know your type.’ That evening, finishing his work as quickly as possible, he handed over charge to the cook, and fled to his quarters, before Miss Supriya found time to visit him.