

“ The Indian tragedy. What is it? First, all the people in power, who take decisions, their wives, their children, and nephews, have very great needs, needs that mount every day, with every ad they see, with every visit they make to the West, till the world may not have the resources to satisfy any one of their number. It is only when one of this number reaches temporary satiety that he will deign to let resources flow to the poor. The little muddy streams trickling downwards have all disappeared into the desert sands like the fabled Saraswati river. Second, and even more of a tragedy, the poor are strictly corralled and prevented from developing any resources of their own. Ours is an ancient land, bound on three sides by the deep sea, and in the North by the lofty Himalayas. For five thousand years we have regarded resources as fixed in size, we have not experienced a moving western frontier as the Americans have, who are taught to expect an increasing pie tomorrow. So, the Indian people must be prevented from inventing their own livelihoods in case they encroach on the expanding preserves of the rich. Third, and finally, the huddled masses will not revolt against this burden, they will not sink the State into chaos, as the Westerners expect, they patiently experience a lesser life generation by generation. Of course they have leaders of their own. But before a person can be recognized as a leader of the poor, in fact, the only condition under which he or she will be so recognized is the leader must genuinely believe in helplessness, and total dependence on the rich. So, why do the people persevere in suffering, with such gentle patience? Perhaps, from some spiritual clarity they have always had of old. They see that this worldly experience is tawdry, whether lived in wealth or in poverty, and they turn, since they have nowhere else to turn, *inwards*, to the eternal light, the *jyoti* within, which is the *jyoti* without. This is the beacon they shine towards the West wallowing in mindless consumerism.”

The Guriji, Sri Sri Sri Satchitananda Swayamachari, was dressed in a bush shirt and loose cotton trousers. He would not wear saffron robes, for was that not also a false emblem of the world? His long black hair fell in curls round his serene face as he sat crossed legged on the cotton *durree*. Sitting so, he said, could also be taken for an *active emblem*, but we should discriminate between the false gesture and the natural posture of the body for cultivating thought. His tapering fingers played with roses, jasmine, and marigolds, offered to him by his devotees in a bowl. They were the *inedible fruits* of the world which nurtured the soul. Gathering the flowers in his hands, he got up easily and slipped his feet into thin cotton sandals; the lesson was over.

Sharmaji was wedged uncomfortably against the far wall, behind a large crowd of regulars, and others, who had wandered in for the evening to hear the *guruji*. They all rose grunting and heaving, and stood around in silence, straightening their shirts over their bellies, absorbed in that day's lesson. The *guruji* was coming towards the door, chatting easily with people he knew. When people tried to touch his feet, he gently restrained them with a smile. One burly man in a yellow silk shirt, a few paces ahead of Sharmaji, insisted on reaching down with force to touch the *guruji's* feet.

“ Ah! Shivanand, our devoted Inspector General of Police!” said the *guruji* with affection. “ I have the greatest affection for the police. They are the only living arm of government, since they have to control and herd our masses, till they pass away quietly

into the night.” He then moved forward, and emptied the flowers into Sharmaji’s hands. “I brought them for you. I wish they were the lilies of the field,” he said, with a distant smile. Then, the crowd swallowed up the *guruji*, and led him to his waiting car.

Sharmaji was not much of a devotee of any guru, where did he have the time serving the people as he did, and were not the people his guru, he would ask? But this *guruji* was a strange one, few understood him, even fewer knew when he was serious and when he joked gently, but all felt a sort of magnetism around him. People talked of seeing auras around this guru, and by the colour of the day’s aura could tell on what aspect of the human predicament the *guruji* would focus his lecture. Sharmaji found the lectures soothing, and at the same time, they stirred some discontent in him, which led him to buy the occasional book, or reflect on his own life. He took to going to the Ashram every Saturday for the evening lecture. It was a beautiful low building in the middle of a lush garden, and he always marveled at the variety of flowers that hung in bunches over the pathways, and the blooming water lilies in the ponds round which the paths led. How did the *guruji* find such good gardeners, when public parks were such dried up wilted places, with horticulturists on tenured full government pay complaining about climate change? Well, superstitious people always worked well for religious leaders, Sharmaji rationalized. He also enjoyed the tall glasses of sherbet that the ashram devotees served to all the guests before the lecture. The sherbet would have a different fruity flavour every time, but there was much more than ordinary fruit in the drink, he was sure. The devotees, usually attractive young women always gave him a silent sweet smile with a shake of the head, when he asked for the recipe.

He got into the back seat of his car with some difficulty, for both his hands were cupped round the flowers the *guruji* had given him. He couldn’t just toss them into a pond, or leave them by the roadside. He would take them home and lay them before the little wooden Krishna figurine in his wife’s *puja* room. That’s what he would do. The driver had to open the door when they reached home, and he wiggled out with some difficulty and took the lift up to his apartment. The maid was taking in the evening milk, so the front door was open, and he went in straight to the *puja* room, and gratefully deposited the flowers in front of the idol. He was tired with the exertion, and his head swam a little.

He turned to leave the room, when a clear voice spoke to him from behind. “Vedavyas! Vedavyas! What veda do you know?” He turned back in astonishment, there was no one else in that small cramped *puja* room with its stone platform for the several idols his wife crowded round the *diya* as multiple heavenly insurance. There were only the stacked side-cupboards with boxes of incense sticks, oil for the lamps, a few stained prayer books in Sanskrit.

“I am talking to you, old boy. I do like a trickster, but don’t you think you owe something to this *guru*, to work out what he’s telling you?” It was indeed eerie. The voice seemed to come from the cracked wooden Krishna. He hesitantly lifted up the idol. Its primitively carved face had widened into a broad grin. He put it down again, and standing back looked at it. It kept its grin. What had that *guru* done to him? Was this a mystical experience? Surely, such things didn’t really happen, except to hysterical young girls,

who had not yet...but he didn't dare to continue thinking on those lines, just in case... He retreated from the room to a tinkle of laughter.

On the dining table he had left the *guruji*'s latest book, 'Let Life Preserve You,' with a smiling photograph of the author on the yellow cover. He looked at it, and saw the *guruji*'s left eye give him a distinct wink. His heart started to race, and he went into the bedroom and lay down, with a second pillow wrapped round his head.

His wife came into the apartment an hour later, peeked into the bedroom, saw he was lying down, and chatted away loudly as she got dinner ready in the kitchen. Sorry she was a little late from the ladies meeting in the colony, but everyone now knew who had been the Peeping Tom who had given poor Sarala such a fright. Guess who it was, he would never believe it, they had all thought it must be that unmarried boy of Kelkar's, but it was really Shyamala's husband, she was dying of shame, why couldn't he go to a prostitute, that's what they were for, if he wasn't happy with Shyamala, everyone in their village knew her paternal great uncle did that, who really cares as long as you don't hurt anybody?

His heart was still fibrillating when he got up gingerly for dinner, after she had called him three times. He ate very little, nodded at everything she said, and said no, he wasn't upset, just too tired to eat a heavy meal, and he would go straight back to bed. Slowly, he sank into sleep, and had a disturbed night. Next morning, when his wife called him into the kitchen to fetch his coffee, since she couldn't leave the stove, even for a minute, he passed the *puja* room, and gave the Krishna figurine a quick look. It just looked like a cracked old wooden idol, it wasn't grinning any more. He drank three cups of coffee very thoughtfully that morning. They must be putting *bhanga* into the sherbet, that was it, God! All these religious fakirs, fakery really, he would drop out of the Saturday lectures.

Occasionally he would pass the Ashram in his car, and would feel a pang of regret, for he did have a good time when he had gone there, but they shouldn't be playing with drugs, OK, he was a strong man, a man of the world, but what if it had been a susceptible young kid, a girl, maybe that's what it was all about, maybe it was some kind of a sex racket for the *guruji*, that guy could justify anything.

At the end of a donor's meeting, six months later, Leonie, packing up, asked Sharmaji to take her to the Ashram. She had been in correspondence with the *guruji* for several months, and did not want to miss this chance of a *darshan*, and listening to the *guruji* in person rather than to his tapes. On the way over, he half opened his mouth to voice his suspicions, but then thought he better not upset a donor, and in any case these foreign women had different morals from ours. He sat at the far end as usual, Leonie hunkering down with her slim legs folded underneath. She kept her eyes closed throughout the lecture, with palms delicately folded in front of her face. When everyone got up, she went forward eagerly to meet the *guruji*. Sharmaji hung around near the door waiting for her to come back.

Leonie came towards the door, chatting animatedly with the *guruji*. As he finally turned away, he caught Sharmaji's eye, and stretching out his hand said: " Ah, the Krishna devotee! Yes, the path of Krishna consciousness is right for you. But first you must understand what he tells you about yourself." With that he was gone, and Leonie and Sharmaji made their way to his car. Finding him lost in thought, she desisted after asking a couple of questions, and the rest of the journey to her hotel was made in silence.

That evening, almost stealthily, when his wife was not looking, Sharmaji took out the *guruji's* book from its dusty corner in the bookshelf, and settled down in his armchair. But he could not read, and closed his eyes to see the cracked wooden face of Krishna split into a broad grin.