

Over the last few years, Sharmaji had started a rather painful early morning routine, having been sufficiently scared by his doctor. His paunch had been developing, and he could no longer thrust himself into his trousers without feeling constricted, and slightly out of breath. He had tried to go for gentle walks in the evening, accompanied by Revathi, who had replaced Rukmini, the earlier coordinator of SERVICE WIDS, discussing new ideas for women's empowerment, but such walks had only given him a healthy appetite, and he would finish the evening with a sumptuous meal. Not only his girth grew, but nights became disturbed and uncomfortable with flatulence. The suppressed joke of the campus was that his explosions sometimes reached Point 6 on the Richter scale. He had consulted his doctor back in the city, who had wanted a complete, very expensive check-up to be carried out. The news had not been good. His bad cholesterol was too high, and his doctor said, we don't want an event, do we? A brief early morning work-out under supervision in a gym was recommended.

He had begun a routine of walking his way to a nearby gym before six every morning, feeling rather proud of the figure he cut in shorts, tee shirt and white Adidas, which his wife cleaned every afternoon, when she was through with housework. He would cycle for ten minutes, chat with the coach for fifteen, while drinking cups of sugary coffee from the gym's dispenser, and then under prodding from the coach, try standing exercises for another five minutes. By six-forty-five he would be back home, feeling virtuous, and would loudly demand a fresh cup of home-filtered fresh coffee from his wife. If he was feeling peckish, he might even ask her for a plate of *upma* right then and there, served with potatoes. He did not seem to lose much weight to his surprise, but he was able to struggle into some of his clothes, though the way he bulged in tiers round the middle added a note of cheer to schoolboys waiting for the bus near his flat.

On the January morning in question, he was late going to the gym, feeling grumpy because of over-indulgence the previous night. His wife was a gifted cook, even he acknowledged that, and the previous night, her brother and his wife had dropped in for a meal. Sharmaji, despite the warning looks given by his wife, had not been able to restrain himself. So, his grumpiness was understandable to himself, and refusing all conversation, he concentrated on his cycle in the gym. Gas seemed to rise in bubbles up his throat, and every now and then he would stop cycling, and belch and fart loudly. He also tried drinking some coffee, and cycling again, but he was not comfortable. He slowly began to realise that everyone in the gym was looking at him in a rather peculiar manner. He surreptitiously checked to see if his fly was open, but it was not. Perhaps, there was a tear in the seat of his pants, and he tried to feel if it was so, but his arm could not stretch that far round his backside. Peeved, he left the gym with a curt nod at the coach. These fellows, who were they? Nobody. Waiting for jobs they would never get, envious of big men like himself. They had no culture in any case, so it was not surprising they gave him such stares. But still he felt uncomfortable.

As he walked past the line of small shops that lined the street leading to his locality, he noticed, now that he was aware something was wrong, that shopkeepers paused in the process of getting their shops ready for business, and craned round to look at him. What the devil was the matter? It could not be anything to do with his clothes. It must be some rumour everyone had heard. Anxiety gripped his heart. Everyone was always trying to ruin his reputation; no one, not even his wife, despite all the good he had done everybody, was grateful to him. He knew it was human nature. He would follow only the dictates of his conscience, his duty to God, the nation, and society. Let dogs bark, it was their nature to do so. None could touch those under God's special protection.

But still, it was worrying. What had these rascals heard? It could not be the matter about that accounts slip-up at SERVICE. He had had an anxious two weeks at the Income Tax Department. To be called up for what happened a few years ago was atrocious, but these fellows tried to trap you, and extract money. He had been threatened with legal procedure, leaving him ill and perspiring. He had explained how his staff, inefficient and lazy, had let him down. How could he afford properly trained accountants, when every penny had to be saved in the interests of the poor? No, there should have been no muddle about the travel expenses. The donors who had invited him – the only delegate from India at the International Conference on Sanitation for Poor Countries, in Paris, it should be noted – the donors themselves seeing his poor health had made all arrangements for a two-week rest cure in the south of France. How could he show any letters from them? It was an ad hoc, last minute intervention on their part. In fact, they had insisted, kidnapped him in fact on his way to the airport, when he was desperately trying to get back to his project in rural India. No, there was no doctor's report either, for the French are very strict about medical confidentiality. Anyway, the matter was settled one way or the other, Gupta, that rascal who had got him into this trouble, greasing some palms no doubt. God knows, he and the poor were being swindled at every turn.

On second thoughts, it could not be the Income Tax matter, for nothing had come out, Gupta had seen to that; he would have fired Gupta on the spot if he had not patched up the whole matter, he didn't care how it was done. It was something else, but what was it? He was very sensitive now, and was aware of locality people, people he never even talked to, coming to their windows to look at him as he walked back. Oh, my God! They all knew something. The city must be agog with some filthy rumour! He had returned to his flat only late last night, and gone straight to bed without waking his snoring wife. That woman! How he had been cheated by that uncle of his into marrying a penniless woman without family. And now she was faithless. Why had she not stayed awake to tell him what everyone was gossiping? Is this how a loyal wife should behave? Perhaps, she had heard about that incident with Revathi. A cold hand gripped his heart. Yes, that was it! All these immoral scoundrels, who sleep with each other's wives all the time – how he had to put up living in the midst of this steaming filth; but how could he afford to live in a locality befitting his stature, when every penny was to be

dedicated to the poor? – yes, these fellows must have heard about what happened with Revathi. It was all innocent, mind you, as she herself had explained to the rest of the staff. She had come to ‘his unit’ on campus in the evening, as was her duty, to discuss project matters. Despite his headache he had reluctantly agreed to go through the files. His headache being intolerable, she had gone into the kitchen to make him a soothing infusion. He had followed, and blinded with pain, had tripped at the door, and falling had clutched on to her, bringing them both down on the durrie. Badly winded, he was struggling to get up, when both Venkat and Gupta came in carrying more files. It was only when he saw their astonished look that he noticed for the first time that his hand – which he had held out for support – was on Revathi’s breast.

So, that was it. How filthy minds were ready to believe that even the God-fearing were as filthy as themselves! He would never cease to be amazed at people’s depravity. So, they were all trying to bring him down. No doubt that Venkat, and that Gupta wanted to seize control of his NGO. He would see them in hell first. A new suspicion dawned. Maybe that whore Revathi was an accomplice! How he had been mistaken in promoting her. He had been beguiled by her smiles, and her pliant manner. He remembered now how she would deliberately sway towards him, not wearing any bra, but lifting her large breasts shamelessly to his face. He was so naïve, so innocent! He should have known she was a practised whore, egged on by those snakes in human form, Venkat and Gupta, to ruin him. But he would not be ruined. He had nothing to fear. The donors, government officials, all good men, knew him for what he was, a patriot, a tireless worker for people’s welfare. Brushing aside the grinning lift-attendant, who came forward to insinuate something, he slammed the gate shut and went up to the third floor all by himself. For one awful minute, he feared a retinue of neighbours on that floor would be waiting for him, but mercifully the corridor was empty, and he shot into his flat and bolted the door with relief.

He sat in his easy-chair grimly, perspiring, without calling out to his wife. He would be stern and dangerous, and cow her into silence. In time this miserable episode would be forgotten. Maybe he would buy her those new gold bangles she was always pestering him about. She was an old woman, how could she complain if he, a virile man, had manly needs?

“Good morning, Padmashree, Sir,” he heard at his elbow, and there was his wife, smiling fondly, bearing a steaming cup of coffee, some freshly-made *vadas*, and the local morning newspaper on a tray. He was confused and agitated; he didn’t know what was going on, till his eye fell on the folded newspaper. There was his photo on the front page, not taken from the best angle, but undoubtedly it was him. ‘Vedavyas Sharma Awarded Padmashree for Social Service,’ proclaimed the headlines. He had been included in the Republic Day Honours List!

The next several minutes were too confused for him to remember later. He had patted his good wife, and promised to buy her gold bangles as part of the

celebration. Not four, they could not afford so many, but two he could buy. He must buy new clothes for the investiture. He could not go to the Rashtrapati Bhavan looking like a beggar. He would get himself a good quality black suit, not a European jacket, but a closed coat, as befitted a nationalist. And yes, Florsheim shoes, nothing less. There would of course be a Press Conference at the SERVICE campus. He had read somewhere that the Sixth Nizam at the Delhi Durbar had been similarly attired in severe black, and had called his ministers his jewels. He would do the same. After all, those splendid fellows, Venkat and Gupta, deserved praise. They had their way to make in the world. What did he care for such gewgaws? He cared only to serve humanity. And he would not forget poor Revathi either. He himself would call her to the stage and help her up, being careful not to brush against those breasts of hers. *Sharmaji*, Padmashree! He savoured the title. In a way the President was honouring himself by honouring a simple servant of the people as himself.