

“ Happy Birthday, Sharmaji, Happy Birthday!” A chorus of good wishes voiced in varying tones and accents showered in, as his staff burst into the sanctum sanctorum, unannounced for the first time in the history of the Society for Educational Resources Vitalising Indian Community Entrepreneurs [SERVICE]. Shri Vedavyas Sharma, M.A.[London], sat in his customary cane easy-chair, behind the long teak table, piled with important looking files, and received the congratulations and adulation of his staff with the modesty he always displayed, and never failed to mention, on such occasions. This was only his fifty-third birthday, though often before he had openly talked of his extreme old age, both to make sure he got the respect he deserved, and also to allay any comment on the fatherly interest he took in his female staff. Rukmini, separated from her husband soon after her marriage, had found herself without money, marriage, or shelter, and come to the village SERVICE centre looking for any kind of work. He had taken pity on this young unskilled girl, trained her personally, and made her coordinator of SERVICE WIDS, Women in Development. Now she came forward sinuously, under the arms of her male colleagues garlanding Sharmaji, touched his feet, drawing long fingermarks with scented sandalwood paste, and then stretched forward gently to place a jasmine garland round his neck. He had to lean forward a little, and could smell a fresh perfume on her breasts, inches from his face.

After what seemed a long time, they all drew back respectfully, and Sharmaji looked at them, his handiwork so to speak, with satisfaction. They were his life, and he told them so. Gupta, his clever accountant, who for some reason had failed to find work with government or corporates, came dragging his polio-stricken left foot, and carrying a plate of Bengali sweets he had specially ordered from home for the day. They all had one each, chattering that this was a family celebration, when they felt close to their leader, their guru, their father.

“ Thank you, thank you, thank you,” said Sharmaji. “ My love and my blessings are always with you. But you must understand, I am nobody. Gandhiji” – and he paused as he always did when he took this name – “Gandhiji wanted us to fight Self, if we are to serve Society. I am an old man, and of course I love you as my children, but my thoughts should be now about God. What is it we have done here?”

At such moments there would be silence, and his staff would look at each other like children in a classroom. This day was no different. Venkat, tall and darkly handsome, who took more interest in Rukmini than Sharmaji liked, ventured a hesitant answer.

“ We, we serve Society,” said his coordinator for SERVICE TEAS, Thrift Entrepreneurship and Savings, glancing at his colleagues for reassurance.

“ No!” said Sharmaji with much satisfaction. “ We serve God; for in people we see God. All this we see around us, people striving, people fighting, people agreeing, pain and pleasure, all, as Adi Shankara has taught us is *maya*, illusion. If it is all *maya* why should we do anything, help people?” He hurried on knowing

that they needed his message. “ We serve Society, because through this we serve God. This is how we come to know God”

They looked stunned at this revelation.

“ It is our very, very good luck, “ said Seshadri, his Admin Manager, “ that we work under you, that God sent us to you.”

Here was another opportunity for Sharmaji to teach his staff something.

“ You serve with me, with me, never under. I am the least of your colleagues.” With this he signalled that they should leave, so that he could return to weighty matters of serving the people, and Mother India. Alone, he heaved a happy sigh. He knew they would celebrate his birthday, though he had given them no inkling of expecting anything. He was a humble servant, the man who washes the courtyard of the temple so that others may pray. And he had moulded them into a good working unit. There were some problems of course, as in any human organisation. This Venkat, he was too self-willed, unable to appreciate that in his own best interests he should listen attentively to his master.

And then, Rukmini, what was to become of her? She was fresh as a flower; the image of a ripe fruit came to his mind, but he discarded it as too worldly a symbol. He was no traditionalist; he would have liked her to re-marry. If only she had been fair, he might have found a suitable boy, but she was dark, in fact black, even with black lips, enclosing a melon mouth that never failed to startle him when she sang a SERVICE song. He would call her over this evening, and speak of her prospects. Perhaps, through Christians Everywhere, he could send her on a Training programme to America for a month, no, that was too long, say, two weeks, for how could the Women in Development get along without her for a whole month?

When at work, at the village SERVICE centre office, he always wore a spotless white kurtha and dhoti, a hallmark of service coming down from the days of Gandhiji, but when he retired to what he called ‘his unit,’ actually a nice little cottage with a drawing room, a bedroom, bath and kitchen attached, he liked to lounge in a full-sleeved shirt over a pyjama. He would sit in an armchair in the deep verandah fronting ‘his unit,’ an occasional table with a telephone and pad by his side, and he would summon Rukmini. He took a fatherly pleasure in seeing her tall trim form walk across the SERVICE campus, and then, only because it gave her pleasure, he would ask her to make him a cup of tea and pakodas.

Sometimes, if it was later in the evening, she would come of her own accord, carrying a basket of flowers. She would sit on the steps of the verandah at his feet, and thread the jasmine into flower-strings for all the SERVICE women to wear. She would tell him all the local gossip, the diamond in her right nostril twinkling as she talked, and then she would raise the jasmine to her tuck into her hair, her breasts rising under her sari. Somehow, one day he must tell her not to wear such

low-cut blouses, for you could almost see everything. But these were ladies matters, and he was too shy.

“ Hello, *Sharmaji*, the years come around, eh?” cut across his reverie, and he saw Robert’s long thin face poked round the mesh door. “ I’ve brought something very special for you.” Robert, dressed as usual in a careless loose shirt with sleeves rolled up, over khaki shorts, and sandals, thrust his thin British body unceremoniously into the office, and flung himself into a chair, putting a long jute bag on to the table.

“ My motorbike failed somewhere near Shadnagar, and it took me a couple of hours to find a mechanic who had even heard of a Harley-Davidson. So, I left it in his tender care, and took a bus, *Sharmaji* to bring you this.”

He pulled out a full bottle of Teacher’s Scotch. *Sharmaji* gripping his hand in gratitude, quickly slipped the bottle into a special lower compartment in his desk. Robert had been for ever in India, first as something low down in the British Council establishment, then for several years in an Ashram in Rishikesh, till he and the development agencies mutually discovered each other. He was an instant hit with village people, simple, charming, painfully helpful, and surprisingly efficient. He had recently taken over as Regional Director for Christians Everywhere. But he was also totally mad.

“ Robert, thank you, I can’t say how much,” said *Sharmaji* sincerely. “ You know, it is years since I have had a glass of genuine Scotch. Indian whisky is good, I won’t say anything against it, but Scotch is Scotch. You will stay for dinner and a drink this evening?”

Robert expressed his inability to stay for more than half-an-hour. He had to catch the next bus to Tummalikunta, for all the drinking water wells there were dry, and he must fix the pumps.

“ Robert, you know, it was Professor Headley,” said *Sharmaji* in a reminiscing mood, “ who first taught me to sip Scotch gently. Those days, London was beautiful. We Indian students were much liked. I remember Lord Cornwallis – a descendent of one of our Governor-Generals – invited all the Indian students over for tea. He questioned me very closely about living conditions in India. I remember...”

Robert had come round the table, his lanky blond moustache falling like a curtain over his laughing mouth. “ Another day, *Sharmaji*, *Sharmaji*, for these stories of ye olde England. I must get on with these pumps. I am sure you will find someone far better than an Englishman to split the bottle with.” And with a vulgar wink and a slap on the back, Robert swung out of the room.

Robert was undoubtedly mad, why else would he be in this God-forsaken hole? He could have lived in England. *Sharmaji* still treasured every memory of those never-to-be-forgotten nine months he had spent in London; those parks, that sharp

chill in the morning air; the politeness and discipline of English people, his own appearance, fully dressed in jacket, tie, overcoat, hat, and carrying an umbrella. His uncle had sold nine acres of his father's lands to enable him to do a foreign degree in London, and those acres had given him more than an education, they had set him apart as 'foreign returned,' as a man, who, though all the world was open to him, returned to serve his country. This point he never failed to drive home, to his staff, his family, his donors, and to supercilious government servants, some of whom even dared to make fun of his M.A. [London]. Of course, every evening was not spent at tea with Lord Cornwallis. He saved money by eating *dosas* at the India Club, at the edge of Waterloo Bridge. And there was also the secret, confused memory of the ample bosom and energetic embraces of the Austrian cook who made the *dosas*. How did his wife know? She always threw out these dark references, whenever he spoke of London, and his studies there.

Mallanna, his attender, as a peon was politely called these days, stood before him. "I am going to the village to post letters. Can I get you anything, Sir?" he asked.

Sharmaji placed a podgy hand on his stomach and groaned slightly. "Bring two bottles of soda round to my unit," he said in a feeble voice. "I have some pain, and soda will help, I think."

Mallanna gave him a knowing look unnecessarily, and left. He was a smart young dalit, whom Sharmaji liked to showcase when visitors came to the Village SERVICE centre. "He is like my son," he would say, "we eat from the same plate," though this was very far from the truth, Sharmaji only allowing him to wash the utensils after he had finished dinner. But the key point was that the thought was there. All in all, it was a very Happy Birthday, with a bottle of Teacher's arriving just at the right moment.