

People vs Pesticide

Rukmini and Venkat sat on the stone platform built around the base of the large *peepal* tree in the heart of the SERVICE campus. Dappled morning sunlight fell on them through the dancing leaves, as they sipped their morning cups of tea, and shared a plate of hot *pakodas*. Rukmini was still in her blue house-dress, while Venkat was already quite ready for work, bathed, shaved, and dressed in jeans.

“The old goat wants to impress the foreigners with that silly play he has written,” said Rukmini, “it is so silly, I am afraid everyone will laugh and we will look ridiculous.”

Venkat was giving her a strange look, a half-smile on his face. “Oh, I thought you were his pet lamb,” he said. “Have you fallen out with him, or something?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, arching her eyebrow. “I had never fallen into him. This is a very good job, Venkat, or even you wouldn’t be here for half a second. If I can get a permanent job in a good company, I would be off.”

“Don’t put me off,” said Venkat, still smiling. “Has he made it with you? Come now, you can tell me the truth. We all know what’s going on.”

“Nothing is going on,” she said shortly. “I won’t sit here and have you insult me.”

“I don’t want to insult you ever, Ruku,” said Venkat softly. “Just want to know if he has had the courage to make a pass at you. Is he any good?”

Rukmini drained her cup, got up, and flicked a long finger against his cheek. “No one is as good as you,” she said, walking back to her room.

The campus was beginning to fill up with gaily decorated bullock carts, and choruses of traditional songs could be heard from groups of women, who were sitting down in circles to light a fire and make their breakfast. Sharmaji had declared a *mela*, and all the poor women and their children were invited, from all the neighbouring villages, which he dominated. Of course, many of the men were also there, driving the carts, putting up *shamianas*, supervising the work.

Nagaraju came striding across from between the groups of squatting women. He was tall and handsome, with a full, black moustache, oiled and curved. Even his village-made *chappals* looked masculine, the way he stood with his left foot trust out. “Rukmini amma! I am looking for you all over,” he said smiling into her face, as she came out of her room, freshly dressed in a printed nylon sari. “Nothing will be done right, unless you come and stand there. They have not even started to cook the big meal, and the stage is falling to pieces!”

Three of the London Directors of Christians Everywhere were to arrive any minute at the village campus of SERVICE. It was rumoured that Lady Scilly, Chief Patroness, herself might come, and bring along some European donor friends as well, to witness the empowerment of poor rural women. Everyone had worked for weeks, preparing a spectacular *tamasha* for the occasion. Venkat was printing out the latest micro-credit figures, in the low godown converted into the SERVICE TEAS office, which managed Thrift, Entrepreneurship and Savings. He saw Rukmini hurry away to the cook-house, almost rubbing shoulders with Nagaraju. That man needed to be taught that he was only a villager, and that too a Dalit villager, promised Venkat to himself.

Finally, Lady Scilly's cavalcade was announced with a blare by turbaned trumpeters, arranged in a glittering line on a nearby hill-top. When she drew up, in a cloud of dust, tutored village women surrounded the vehicles, garlanding the guests, daubing large dots of *kumkum* on their foreheads, sprinkling them with *attar*, and slapping sandalwood paste on their arms. Lady Scilly, an old NGO hand, dressed in beige *salwar-kameez*, got out of the car with folded hands, smiling, and saying "Namaskaram! Namaskaram!" to everyone, but Jeneke van Boren, from Holland was new to such greetings, and concerned that the paint would spot her clothes, remained unconvinced by reassurances from Lady Scilly. Gert Wolfowitz, a tall, well-built, bespectacled German, in a blue safari suit and an abstract air, seemed neither happy nor embarrassed at the reception, in fact, he seemed far away in thought.

The village women then formed a cordon round the guests, singing and clapping their hands, and led them with din and confusion through the sights of the SERVICE campus; past the windmill, which remained obstinately still without moving; past the solar panels, and the biogas plant; through the medicinal herbarium, and the dryland micro-watershed demonstration, to the biodiversity fields. The procession stopped at a little forest of messy plants to discover Sharmaji, totally oblivious of the noise, on his knees in the mud, patting a seedling into place, with three women whom he seemed to be instructing.

"Welcome! To SERVICE village, Sally," he said familiarly to Lady Scilly, getting up with some reluctance from the wet earth, his *dhoti* muddied up to the knees. "I would have come to welcome you at the gate, but this planting must be done at this hour, according to local tradition." He held up folded hands when introduced to Jeneke and Gert. "Please forgive me for not shaking hands, but this is village India. We touch mud all the time, it is the skin of our mother, Mother Earth." Jeneke was smiling at everything now, resigned to paint, and mud, and noise, and pollen. Gert said nothing at all, but just nodded, mostly to himself.

Sharmaji then escorted them all the way back to the low buildings which formed the office, loudly declaiming over the general hubbub how multinationals had stolen the indigenous knowledge of peasant women, the scientific work of several

hundred generations of women farmers. Lady Scilly was seen nodding in gracious acknowledgment, while Jeneke seemed wildly enthusiastic at every expected revelation of multinational deceit, and heroic grassroots resistance. Gert kept talking in German into his cell-phone.

Sharmaji stopped at a low door with a brass-plate that read “ Ramulamma, President.” He knocked timidly, and then, as if hearing permission to enter, led them into a small carpeted room, where a thin dalit woman sat perched on a metal chair behind a large desk, which had an in-tray, with a few papers in it, and two telephones, one painted red. A large photograph of Lady Scilly, wearing a garland of marigolds, hung behind Ramulamma. There were only three chairs in the room, so the guests sat in them, while Sharmaji stood humbly by the desk of his President, and translated, Ramulamma’s short answers at great length. Thanks to the Internet, the women knew everything, with Sharmaji highlighting, and translating all the ploys of multinationals to patent people’s knowledge under the new WTO regime, to thrust their rotten GM technology on to India’s sacred land, by bribing corrupt politicians, and to poison people with their pesticides. Jeneke’s eyes showered on Sharmaji the devotion owed to a *guru*, while Gert continued his inaudible German conversations over his cell-phone. When a particularly important call drove Gert out of the small office, Sharmaji thankfully took the vacant seat. Lady Scilly sat serenely facing her photograph, in fact, dominating the proceedings though saying not a word. At a break in Sharmaji’s efforts, she turned to Jeneke and said for all to hear that SERVICE’s biodiversity programme had to be supported, and she, that is, Christians Everywhere, would support 55% of total cost, and would Jeneke pick up 25%? Jeneke was too overwhelmed at this gracious offer of participation in a planet-saving exercise to say anything but beam with watery eyes, while Gert ducked in, made inaudible German calculations between marks, pounds, and rupees, and said, yes, he could manage the other 20%, and went outside to continue his calls.

The business of the day accomplished, Sharmaji led the foreign delegation to the feast that had been laid out under flapping *shamianas*, while Ramulamma locked the deserted President’s Office, and went to help in the kitchen. Changed into clean white clothes for lunch, Sharmaji stood in the centre of the tent, holding a plate in one hand, while he stuffed his face with the other, explaining to his guests the nutritional value of every dish, the origin of the recipes, the obscure names of the local landraces of grains, from which the culinary creations had emerged, and the battles he had fought to retain these grains in village storehouses, under constant threat from multinationals’ secret agents. His loud voice competed with the women’s singing, leaving Jeneke straining to catch his words, while Gert, with one small, untouched helping of a single dish, stood scribbling in his notebook while he spoke on his cell-phone. Lady Scilly seated herself in a comfortable cane-chair, surrounded by the village women, who sat in a circle on the ground around her chair, and ate a hearty lunch, nodding and smiling as though she understood what the women said.

It was then time for the play, which had been a spontaneous creation of all the women, said Sharmaji. The covered stage was set like a court of law, with the village women arranged on the wings like a great body of jury, while in the centre was a gold-painted chair, to which some women led Lady Scilly with great ceremony. She was clearly to be the judge, and everyone laughed when a big black shawl was draped round her shoulders. Lady Scilly seemed to enjoy herself immensely. In the dock stood three boys, dressed in suits too big for them, and wearing cardboard black top hats, with the American flag painted on them. To make sure everyone understood, the boys had placards slung round their necks, reading 'MNC.' The prosecution witnesses were all girls, each symbolically carrying the stalks of a plant.

The star seemed to be a short girl, with two long sheaves of rice tucked behind her ears. She rolled on the stage, weeping loudly how she had been ravaged by the bad MNCs in the dock, torn out of her soil, thrown away as if dead. Jeneke was much affected and said it was very good that the women had thought of the gender question as well, for gender and biodiversity were inseparable. Sharmaji beamed his agreement. 'Cotton' was a tall girl, who lunged to tear out the eyes of the MNCs, and had to be dragged away, screaming her hatred. 'Sunflower' had huge flowers in front of her face, and went silently bowing from jury member to jury member, depositing drops of oil on to their palms. A row of finger millets dramatically collapsed on the stage, and were literally swept away, dry and dead, with brooms. Every act of accusation was greeted with loud applause, till finally the jury were ready for the verdict. A black cap was put on Lady Scilly's head, and everyone laughed as the boy MNCs ran away in great terror.

Sharmaji gave a short speech in English as the shadows of trees lengthened across the grounds in front of the stage. He reminded the villagers that their foreign friends had come from across the globe to show solidarity in their just fight. The people would win, for *dharma* was on their side, Gandhiji had always been sure of that, and he as a humble follower had no doubts. He was especially grateful to Lady 'Iskilly' – he could not bring himself to pronounce her name any other way – for she was the *Dev Mata* of SERVICE. Everyone clapped.

Gert needed to take the plane that very evening to Delhi and Frankfurt, so after cups of tea, which Lady Scilly slurped happily in village India fashion, the cavalcade set off, with all the women standing on either side clapping their hands, and waving. One girl came up to the window, and said in English: "Come again, please quickly, Ladyamma!" Then, they were really off in a cloud of dust, leaving the tired women to clean up, while a few fights broke out, about accounts, and stolen food. Some of the women had eased themselves behind the office building, and everyone was very angry, but what could they do pointed out Rukmini, someone had left the toilets securely locked up. The *bhangi* women members had to clean up the mess, and everyone could hear them grumbling, and shouting later at the other women. Sharmaji had been successful in his mission of landing the

money; he was exhausted, and went to his 'unit' to relax. He also had made sacrifices that day, not getting one minute to listen to the Test Match commentary.