

The brother-in-law is a traditional figure of fun in folk literature, and popular films. There was nothing funny at all in Sharmaji's brother-in-law. He always brought problems that led to other problems. He would drop in at around seven-thirty in the evening, when Sharmaji was about to settle down in front of the TV to watch his favourite serial, and begin to talk endlessly about his office, the hostility he faced, the strange thing that had happened in the street that morning, and so many other annoying things, before he broached the problem. Then he would wait, drinking the third cup of coffee that Mrs Sharma served up, in full expectation that Sharmaji would solve it, and indeed would be happy to do so. Sharmaji's evening would be ruined, the TV serial left unwatched, leaving Sharmaji anxious moments that night wondering whether the heroine was able to escape the clutches of the villain, or the calumny cast on her by her sister-in-law, or teach her competitive female friend a thing or two in match-making, or whatever.

This evening was no exception. His brother-in-law sat lightly poised on a straight backed chair, balancing a cup of coffee in one hand and a lurid journal in the other, brought as a peace offering. Sharmaji was back in the bosom of his family midweek, in his large, untidy, third floor city flat, and he was already feeling hot and sticky. His village SERVICE centre was so orderly, totally under his command, where he was treated with great respect, almost verging on fear, though he was the most democratic and fatherly of leaders. But here in his own flat he was just an ageing husband, father, or brother-in-law, suspected of eking out a livelihood by means that could almost be termed shady. None in his family cared to understand that he, with vision, daring, and sacrifice, had built up an NGO, considered a jewel in the comity of world civil society organizations.

“ I understand, your need, Prasad,” he said wiping his bald head with a handkerchief already greying in the city dust, “ and believe me, your daughter, dear Meena, is like a daughter to me. But how can I raise thirty thousand rupees by Monday to pay for her admission to this IT College? Can you not raise money through a chit fund, or the bank? I believe banks are giving educational loans liberally.”

“ *Bawa garu*, I have tried everything. The banks want collateral, gold, or my house, which is already mortgaged to pay for the housing loans. If I don't find the money by Monday, the College will offer the seat to someone else. The Principal, who is the cousin-brother of my friend, is actually doing us a favour,” said Prasad, making it sound like Sharmaji's own problem.

“ But what can I do,” went on Sharmaji gamely. “ My small salary just about pays for our monthly frugal needs. Many others in important positions, like mine, take huge salaries, but I said, No! I am a servant of the people, and must live like them. I have no cash. I cannot raise money on this flat, for I am still paying off a loan incurred for sending my son Ashok to study abroad. I am helpless!” He pumped his arms, and spread out his hands in a gesture of anguish.

Prasad said something about whether there might be a possibility with SERVICE, but Sharmaji cut him short. “ Consider my position, it is a position of trust. I am in charge of a respected institution following in Gandhiji’s footsteps.” He paused impressively on mentioning the sacred name.

Mrs. Sharma came out of the kitchen. She was a large woman, a few inches taller than her husband, and not in the mood to mince words. “ You took money very easily from your Society, when you got your sister’s daughter married. Not a few thousand rupees, but two lakhs, I remember very well. Take from the Society now also. Everyone is doing it.”

Sharmaji was embarrassed at his wife bringing up that matter. She had never let him rest after that, always suggesting he could draw money at will from SERVICE, for all sorts of frivolous reasons, like buying her a new set of gold bangles. She had never understood that on that occasion he had behaved with most scrupulous propriety. By an act of intellectual daring, equalling the perspicacity of Lord Maynard Keynes himself, he had found the money for his sister’s daughter’s wedding, as was his duty. For the dowry, and the marriage feast and function, his sister had needed two more lakhs. She had come to him. What was he to do? If the money had not been produced, the marriage might have been called off, and that too to a software engineer on the point of setting off for Silicon Valley.

SERVICE had just then received fifty lakhs into its bank account from the Dutch Catholic Water for the World Mission, to undertake training of fifty communities in rain-shadow areas. By sheer chance, his cousin, the Secretary of an IT major, had dropped in from Bombay, and over the simple lunch that Sharmaji could afford had told him of the IPO about to be launched by his company. Everyone knew those days that the price of IT shares would take a quantum jump once they came on the market. He put his bold idea before his cousin as they were sitting fanning themselves after lunch, not failing to remind him that Sharmaji’s sister was like a sister to him also. Surprisingly, his cousin made no difficulties. He had not applied to the full limit of his quota, for frankly he didn’t have that much money. He would take five lakhs from Sharmaji and invest it in his own name. Having set out on this path, there was nothing for it but to carry it off with aplomb. Next day in the office, Sharmaji surprised his accountant’s officer, Gupta, by demanding five lakhs as imprest cash, which he would personally distribute to all the grassroots NGOs involved.

“ This is a very important project,” he had announced loftily. “ I want to make sure personally that every project head understands what he must do. It is the duty of the State to provide safe drinking water to all the people, but have they done so? No! It is now our responsibility. Gandhiji,” he paused as usual out of respect, “ would have wanted me to shoulder the task. It does not matter that it is hot. I shall go to every town, by bus or bullock cart, if necessary.”

With the money in hand, he raced to the airport to give the cash in person to his cousin. There should be no bank transactions, he had been warned. The next two

weeks he took to his bed, with a sudden attack of influenza. He was too weak to shave, or bathe, and could drink only *rasam*, every now and then. His staff came to visit him in his darkened bedroom, and he assured them that even death could not stand between him and his duty, but his wasted body kept him tied to his bed. The very first day the shares came on the market, his five lakhs had been turned into eight lakhs. Fear and anxiety choked him, whether Murthy, his cousin, would keep all the money to himself, and deny ever having received any cash from him. What a fool he had been not to see through Murthy's transparent ploy – he should have insisted on sending the money through the bank. Then, at least, Murthy would have been shamed in front of the family for sending Sharmaji to jail for doing his sacred duty by his sister. His bowels gave way and he had to run to the toilet three times that day. On purpose, the Municipality released no water that day, and he felt like an Englishman, having wiped himself with a torn piece of newspaper. He smelt in his bed, the sheets of which he had not permitted to be changed for two weeks, in any case. But Murthy, good fellow, an ornament to the family, was as good as his word. Seven lakhs were sent to him in a sealed package by courier – what a risk, in case the plane had crashed, there were so many rich people flying around whose *karma* deserved death – and Sharmaji was out of bed in a jiffy, cured of his debilitating flu at long last. However, he was in no state to travel to villages, everyone agreed, and he asked Gupta to go in his place, and disburse the five lakhs. Well, God's blessings, and his own cleverness, had helped him to get his niece married off without a hitch to a Silicon Valley software engineer. Murthy had made a lakh out of the transaction thought up by Sharmaji – Murthy had only played the role of a postman, so to speak – and he could at least have shared that extra lakh fifty-fifty, but what do you expect with business types, what do they understand of service to society?

His wife had whisked herself back to the kitchen, though he knew that her ears were tuned to every word that was said in the living room. There was no point in explaining to her, or Prasad, that the chance that helped him get his niece married does not come round every day. He must think of some other way out, for his wife was an irresistible force when it came to her family and their needs. God had to show the way. Thinking of God gave him an idea.

“How many days leave can you take?” he asked.

“I have ten days casual leave,” said Prasad promptly.

“There is a project, a very important project,” Sharmaji started weightily. “Christians Everywhere have asked us to undertake a study on slum living conditions, collect and tabulate data, and draw inferences for a typical slum. You are a Commerce graduate, but you took Sociology as a subject, and I can pay you post-grad going rates, say, Rupees three thousand a day, rather high, but we want quality work very quickly, so that would be justified.”

Prasad looked totally dismayed. “*Bawa garu*,” he remonstrated, “whatever I studied long ago, I have forgotten. I could never do statistics. And one would need assistants to interview these people, who are drunk most of the time. They

are also *goondas* who could beat you up. *Bawa garu*, the people living in slums these days are terrible people, and their drains overflowing with shit, I tell you, it is hell in there!”

Sharmaji frowned thoughtfully. “I started serving people twenty years ago under that good man, Dr. Barclay, of Goodnews Friends. You know, I took a great risk, I left my permanent Government post to do it,” he said fiercely, his Section Officer’s job in the Land Records Office being given by time the aura of an IAS Secretary’s post. “We never worried about dust, or pain, or inconvenience, or even grave risk to our lives. But what can I expect? Everyone is not made like me. Anyway, under Dr. Barclay’s personal direction, Goodnews Friends had completed a comprehensive study of the Keechudgally slum. A copy of that study I should still have among those files in the top shelf over the dining table. Let us use it; how do facts change in twenty years?”

“I am going to serve dinner any minute now, so don’t throw dust all over my table,” shouted Mrs Sharma from the kitchen. “Who serves all these people doing service all over the world? Me, I have to clean up, as if I was a *harijan*.”

Prasad intervened to pacify his sister. He tied one of Sharmaji’s *dhotis* to two chair-ends, as a screen protecting the dining area, climbed up on to a stool, and after some coughing, and mutterings about useless paper, brought down a large yellowing file.

“This is the study,” said Sharmaji triumphantly. “Photocopy it neatly, maybe make a few corrections to bring it up to date. Oh, and bring along your bio-data, we would need that for our files.”

Next morning, Sharmaji sat frowning over a fresh photo-copy of the study in his office, as Gupta hobbled in, dragging his game leg behind him. “Gupta, you know that slum study required by Christians Everywhere?” he said. “Well, I know one Mr. S.V. Prasad, a Sociologist, who has intimate knowledge of the Keechudgally slum, really the archetypical slum in our city. I said, ‘Do, the Study, but I will not pay you!’” He looked up at Gupta for effect, and noted that his assistant was suitably impressed. “‘If your study is of quality, I will consider suitable payment.’ This is the study. I am satisfied, though, mind you, if I had undertaken it myself, it might have been better, much better, but with all this work, where do I have the time? What are the going rates, say, for ten days work, though Prasad said he spent almost a month on it?”

Gupta suggested Rupees two thousand a day. “No, no, not for a study of this standard. We must be fair. Let us make out a check for Rupees thirty thousand.” Then, something caught his eye. “But I must make my observations also. Bring me a whiteout.” Prasad, the lazy oaf, had not even obliterated the date, or the Goodnews Friends logo from the pages. Grumbling that all the hard work had still to be done by him alone, Sharmaji carefully corrected each page.

