

Unlike all the others enjoying the bright summer morning in their casual clothes, *Sharmaji* was carefully wrapped up in his woollens, a long scarf wound round his bald head like a turban, for he feared the tricky European weather. They were a group of global protestors, expertly brought from around the world, to form a picket line outside the Swiss chateau where the World Bank was holding a meeting to discuss food security in impoverished countries. The provocation for the protest was a leaked paper that a former president of Harvard University, and present advisor to the Bank, had written on the vital role of modern pesticides to increase food crops. Christians Everywhere had swiftly organized a civil response to this blatant corporate attack on the Planet itself, and *Sharmaji*, as was to be expected, was representing South Asia.

The Swiss Police, in their neat grey uniforms had formed a cordon, leaving twenty yards clear of the wrought-iron gates. The protestors had been very politely informed that they could stand behind the police line, raise slogans if they wished, wave placards, but on no account to surge forward, or throw anything at the delegates, however harmless, on pain of instant eviction from Switzerland. Could they throw flowers, had asked a girl from Mexico, and the police had replied without a smile that they could not. A thin jeer, which almost sounded like a cheer, rose from the group as a cavalcade of black Mercedes cars swept through the gates towards the rather plain chateau deep within its grounds. Tall green trees shimmered in the sunlight, and beyond to the left were open fields with hardly a sole working in them. Just then a team of TV vans drew up and parked close to them. Cameramen with CNN, BBC, CBS, CBC logos emerged, led by a few brisk, important looking women interviewers.

*Sharmaji* was enjoying being in Europe once again, his fears of violence, that had kept him anxiously awake, during the long flight from India, dissipated by the calm and authoritative assurance of the Swiss police. He had also worried about lodgings, but Christians Everywhere had thoughtfully provided him with a single room, with attached bath, TV, a coffee-maker, and a welcoming bottle of red wine. He had seen to his delight before dropping off to a well-needed sleep that even the normal pay channels showing late-night movies of a ‘certain type,’ as he put it, were freely available. His hosts were not unaware that *Sharmaji*, for all his earnestness, found child-like enjoyment in the comforts and freedoms of European life. SERVICE was a valuable partner, the work of which had netted one million pounds in just one week before Christmas. What had done the trick was a single poster with *Sharmaji*’s squat figure in the foreground, and what looked like a sea of poor sari-clad Indian women linking hands before a field of maize, carrying the slogan ‘Will You Help Him Protect Their Fields?’ And now, here he was giving a firm, non-violent Gandhian message in the very heart of opulent Europe. Who better than he?

Suddenly, Arturo Pereira from Brazil was standing in front. “Sharma, Mr. Sharma, they want someone from Asia, who knows – how we say – problemes, problems about agriculture, to tell them why we are here – pesticides, dangers to health, land, crops. Here they are,” as a media lady bustled up. *Sharmaji* beamed, he was in his element. What could all these young people, laughing and jostling

each other all round him, tell the world about issues? They needed a man of experience, of commitment, like himself to lead them. Take this Pereira, for instance, just a young man out to have fun, nothing more. Last night, Sharmaji had excused himself early after dinner, he was tired, and in any case he did not need the orientation, which was planned, about the dangers of pesticide use. Leaving the dining hall, he had gone up a flight of steps, and round the corner found this Pereira holding that Finnish woman, Helga, in a crushing embrace. Both had smiled, and waved to him, and carried on. Such behaviour would never be tolerated in India, certainly never in his SERVICE centres. But you needed tradition to know how to behave, and where did they have tradition?

Cameras and mikes were being thrust at him. “ We are the people of the world, the simple people of the world,” said Sharmaji, slowly, with an accent he specially used when interviewed in Europe. “What do we want? We are not like these rich people, who need so much money for everything. Last night’s dinner, I could not believe what we paid, with this money, my people can eat for four months!” The interviewing lady nodded delightedly. “ And why do we need pesticides? To make rich food, to feed your European pigs? No, the answer is always, No! Our land is for feeding our own people, with our traditional, simple food!”

“ You have come here, Mr. Sharma, from India, to protest against the World Bank’s policy of helping your country’s farmers modernize their agricultural practices,” said the media woman. “You are head of a civil society collective of poor women called Service. Don’t you think they would want to make more money by following modern agricultural practices?”

“ Absolutely Not! They have an ancient, a spiritual relationship to their land,” he said firmly, noting from her expression that he had scored another hit. He was now in full swing. “ Their land is their Mother. No one in our country poisons their Mother, for money! I am determined for the sake of the people I lead to end my life here on Swiss soil, rather than permit pesticides on our fields! And my good friends here, who have come from all over the world, we have all the same focus. We have but one focus!”

‘We have one focus!’ echoed the jubilant group, led by Pereira, who was looking fixedly at Helga’s bosom. She gave him a dazzling blonde smile from across the gathering.

After the TV people had packed up and left, the police informed them that they all had to leave then, for some reason that was not clear, but they could assemble again next morning. Sharmaji was relieved. There was no place even to sit outside the chateau gates, and what was the purpose of loitering anyway? He had saved some project money by very clever management of funds. The extra bank interest earned was due solely to his hard work, and really belonged to no one. He drew a larger travel advance with that money, and he hoped he could buy an Omega watch with it. Saying something vague that he had to report to the Indian embassy, he detached himself from the group, and wandered around the clean

streets of Geneva. That fountain of water foaming over the lake was a marvel. He sat and watched it for sometime. In Geneva he had no fear that he would be approached by some tout or other, or attacked, so he could let down his guard and just enjoy himself. He wandered past all the famous shops, gazing through the windows, wondering how much money one needed to be really at home in Geneva. A World Bank person would not be just looking at all that glitter; he would go in and purchase what he wanted. He entered a few watch shops, asked for Omega watches, held them in his hand, looked at the prices, and then went away. They were expensive, but he should have one, he had always wanted one. He would think about them; conjure up images of how they looked, go over the specifications in the brochures he had stuffed in his pocket, and then take a decision. He was cool headed as always.

That evening they were all invited to dinner in a café by the lake. There was some music, and a few of the group danced. Pereira was dancing, but with a dark-haired Italian woman. What loose behaviour! As the waitresses in their red uniforms and white aprons came round to take orders, an officious Englishwoman stretched out a protecting hand and said: “Remember, only vegetarian food for Mr. Sharma. What do you have that is vegetarian?”

Sharmaji would not permit their hosts to be embarrassed. “Please, no trouble, I can eat anything you serve me, and with gratitude,” he said in his saintliest manner. “It is true I am a vegetarian at home, a strict vegetarian. But the Gandhian approach” – pause – “the Buddhist approach, is to treat all food as sacred. Nothing should be rejected. We should not kill, but we should eat with gratitude – and pleasure – what is put in front of us.”

There was an appreciative silence. Some old Swiss ladies turned, looked at Sharmaji, nodded, and smiled. They even came round later, took his address, and promised to visit his ashram, when they came to India. “What shall I bring for you?” asked the smiling Swiss waitress. “Fillet de perche, with tartare sauce and French fries,” said Sharmaji, in a soft, rapid whisper.

The next morning’s protest was petering out very much like the previous day’s, when a middle-aged Swiss functionaire, in blue blazer and grey trousers, approached the group, and fell into conversation with Pereira and a few others. It transpired that the World Bank wanted to meet a few of the protestors, their delegation, if you like, to discuss whether differing opinions could be bridged, whether there could be rapprochement. The leaders naturally gravitated towards Sharmaji and the TV cameras swung round.

“Where is the question of compromise?” asked Sharmaji loudly. “We are talking of values, and where values are concerned, there can be no compromise! We are not academics, to discuss ideas, we here are the world’s people, who wish to be heard!” He had raised his voice dramatically, and the group shouted “Hear Us! Hear Us!” into the cameras. “No! There is nothing to discuss – but as people, we are always ready for dialogue,” he said, even as the Swiss bureaucrat was turning away.

The question was who should represent the group, the people of the world, at the dialogue. They went to a nearby café to discuss and settle the issue. *Sharmaji* formed the centre of the decision-making circle, some others, the young European crowd, melting away, uninterested in serious dialogues. It was decided that *Sharmaji* would be the de facto leader of the dialogue group, which would have Arturo Pereira, representing Latin America, and Lungi N’kolo representing Africa.

“ I will come along, if all of you want me to,” said Lungi, a rather straight-forward woman in her early thirties. “ When I was at university in London, I thought talking to these people helped, but it does not. They know what they want, and they only want to hear their opinions from our mouths. But, OK, we have decided we will meet them in dialogue, so I shall come, but Sharma here must do the talking.” She gave a gurgling laugh. “ He is so good at it, I am not!” *Sharmaji* took this as a compliment – in fact weeks later back in India, he would recount how the Africans and the Latin Americans had no plan till he led them to put forward their ideas clearly and forcefully. The three were escorted to the Chateau, where they were in time to join the international delegates to the food security conference at a lavish lunch.

Assembled round the conference table, *Sharmaji* and his two colleagues were placed importantly at the head of the table. “ We are now to hear from the people,” said the World Bank Director who was leading the conference. “ Ms N’Kolo, Mr. Sharma, Mr. Pereira, you will have our full and respectful attention over the next half-hour. All of us here believe in dialogue, in helping each other, to help others. We together must help solve the food crises. We are not committed to any one particular food producing methodology over others. We are here with an open mind.”

It was *Sharmaji*’s show. He in turn welcomed such an open attitude to the most important issue facing humanity. All the delegates applauded at this point. He was willing to work with the World Bank, he paused at this point and looked at his two colleagues as if he had just pulled a rabbit out of a hat, but only, and only, he emphasized, if the World Bank was whole-heartedly willing to work only for the people. Again there was applause all round, a few Americans at the end of the table making quick notes on their pads. He would go wherever they wanted him to meet them, his age and health were no concern, but within the next few years, through rigorous discussions, they must jointly arrive at a solution to the problem of food security. The World Bank officials and others round the table were of the same mind. Lungi, to whom they paid extravagant respect, said the real matter was that poor people could not afford pesticides, they got into debt, their lands were too poor to use all these chemicals, and pesticides affected children, and killed birds. Ah! The Birds! Madame was right, charmingly so! She had reminded these hard-headed businessmen that there was a world outside their office rooms. A toxicology expert from Pesticlor said that as a boy he had always woken up to the music of bird calls. And now, most of time he was on the fifty-fifth floor of a glass and steel skyscraper in the middle of Manhattan. They crowded round

Madame, and extended invitations to several other conferences, but Lungi said no, she had to be with her children, and the other children of the women she worked with. Pereira spent most of the tea-break looking down the deep cleavage of a Venezuelan chief executive, who said a smiling goodbye, giving him two of her visiting cards.

When Sharmaji flew out of Geneva, he stretched out his left arm against the cold arm-rest of his seat, so that he could see the glint of his Omega watch every now and then. In his pocket were the addresses, telephone numbers, and email of the World Bank Director, who had invited him to three international conferences later that year, in one of which he would be keynote speaker.