

“ Society for Educational Resources Vitalising Indian Community Entrepreneurs,” was read out slowly, pausing at every word, by S.R. Rajagopalan, IAS, Principal Secretary, Forests. “ I don’t see any mention of tigers, here,” he said politely, but dismissively, raising his head from the file he had been studying in total silence for all of fifty seconds.

Sharmaji was sitting bolt upright in the chair directly facing the official, across a wide table, piled high with files and four differently coloured telephones. “ Sir, SERVICE is a Training Organization, with over twenty years experience facilitating development work...”

“ Excuse me,” said Rajagopalan, politely as ever, and picked up a telephone. “Yes, connect me to the Home Secretary, Hmm, what? He is away in Delhi attending a conference? Well, then connect me to the Joint-Secretary Home. And yes, ask the Deputy Wildlife Warden to come.” He turned back to Sharmaji expressionless, but apparently awaiting explanation.

Sharmaji gamely started once again. “ As I was saying, Sir, we are an old organisation dedicated to rural, and tribal training, and funds have been allocated to us from Friends of Tigers Everywhere to protect our tiger resources...”

“ The Foreign organization cannot allot funds directly to a Non-Governmental Agency,” cut in Rajagopalan, still politely but with an acid edge to his voice. “Without prior approval of the State Government, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, will not sanction release of funds. It is for us to take a view on how best the money under Project Tiger may be utilized. I have gone through your application carefully and I do not see any relevance between your experience, and tiger conservation. Excuse me.” The telephone had given a sharp tinkle. “ Hello, Balaji! Long time, *yaar*, since we met. You never seem to come to the Club, what’s the matter? Purushottam keeps you hard at work? I see. Well, just check this out, will you? I have an application here from one Mr. Sharma, yes, Mr. Vedavyas Sharma of SERVICE, yes, the usual acronym fund-catcher, has Home given them permission to work in sensitive areas in the State? Do they have clearance under Foreign Contributions Regulations Act? Please send me a file on their Record, will you? Thanks. And what else? How are the children doing? What? *arre bhai*, put her in another school. What about Flower Garden School? I know they are expensive, but I know Mrs Singh, and I’ll ask her to give you the special fee rate. I will speak to her.”

The Secretary looked up, vaguely surprised to see Sharmaji still sitting in front. The door opened behind Sharmaji, in his imagination almost a hundred yards away, and an ageing man in khaki with wispy hair shuffled into the room. He hung about uncertain whether to take a chair or not. The Secretary beckoned him round the table and gave him the file. “ I want a full Report by tomorrow how this NGO, SERVICE, has been included in our Tiger Project proposal to Government of India. Hmm? OK, thanks,” dismissing the older man.

The Secretary looked full at Sharmaji. “ Mr. Sharma, I have asked for an immediate report from the Deputy Wildlife Warden. We will look into this matter, and take a view on it. We will let you know our decision.” With that he rang the bell for the attender to show out his visitor. And that was that. Of course, no letter was ever received from the Secretary, nor could one be expected.

Sharmaji had felt somewhat aggrieved. He had spent a lot of his time, and SERVICE money, going up and down to Delhi, discussing the project in the India head office of Christians Everywhere, where, of course, he had been very cordially received as their key Indian partner. He had put it into their heads to recommend him as a partner to Friends of Tigers Everywhere, and that had not been easy. They had been worried about loss of focus. He had had to be subtle.

“ Development and Conservation are like two eyes to a poor Indian,” he had pontificated. “ If we look at Gandhiji’s work” – pause – “ we find an astonishingly modern perspective. And why is this so? Because, the environment means the land to Indians, our Mother. And animals, even the fierce tigers, are our brothers – our siblings,” he had rephrased himself swiftly, so as not to have the discussion diverted into gender questions. Christians Everywhere considered him an Original, a personification of the artless Indians of the Raj Legend, almost all of whom had disappeared in the hustle and bustle of growing Capitalism, but who had once abundantly populated the Jewel in the Crown. When Sharmaji had brought in the spiritual dimension linking tigers to Hinduism, they had decided he would be the best partner in the Tiger Project. He had been silently jubilant, for a fat project with ample funds had been secured; but the administrative guardian at the gate had undone all his work within five minutes. But, he had reflected, this was all part of the game of doing development work. You win some, you lose some; and with that, Sharmaji had put away all the files connected with the project into the bottommost shelf of his cupboard.

Hence, he was taken aback to receive, several months later, an invitation from the Chief Conservator of Forests to sit in on the special advisory committee of the State’s Tiger Project. Soon he found out that this did not betoken a change of heart in the Secretary. The Chief Conservator, whose office was half a city width from the power centres of the Secretariat, had received instructions that *one* member of civil society had to be inducted into the new advisory committee, as per World Bank norms. Sharmaji’s name was the only one his harassed staff could discover quickly. The committee had to be constituted in haste before the visit of the American Director of World Wildlife, who was coming to inspect the newly set up Bhramananda Reddy Tiger Reserve, which had already consumed ten million dollars worth of foreign grants.

Sharmaji was very proud of the fact that on the day of the first committee meeting, a white Ambassador staff car, with the national flag neatly rolled into its plastic cover, but erect as a penile symbol at the tip of the car’s hood, carried him to the Forest Department. He was then seated in the middle of the long conference table, crowded with several high-ranking conservators. Two chairs had been left vacant at the head, for the Minister and the Chief Conservator, who awaited the

Minister's coming in his own chamber, in the meantime discussing with several relatives, over long-distance telephone calls, the impending marriage of his daughter. But the Minister did not come; the calls got extended, and the gathered conservators disposed of several rounds of tea and *samosas*. Sharmaji was in his element. Since none in the gathering knew what was the status of this lone *civilian*, or the political power he might wield, everyone was extremely polite and attentive, and Sharmaji enthralled everyone with his jokes and his anecdotes.

Finally, the rapid entry of several liveried attenders, flinging open the door, indicated the arrival of the Minister, who came in first, followed by the Chief Conservator. Everyone stood to attention. Sharmaji pondered whether he, a representative of the people of India, should also stand up. As a concession, he lifted his ample bottom a few inches from the chair. The Minister was a tall, huge man, whose starched *khadi kurta* stood out like a tent around him, tight under his fat breasts, and jerking as his belly moved with every step or word he uttered. His lower lip hung over a square chin, a picture of ruthless power. The thin, wizened Chief Conservator, half his size, was almost lost to view.

The Minister was deeply unhappy. His voice slowly rose to a crescendo as he began the meeting. "I am deeply disturbed. I am holding Independent Charge of a number of Important portfolios: I am handling the Prime Minister's Tsunami Fund; the Jawaharlal Nehru Housing Scheme for Widows; the Indira Gandhi Adopt a Village Plan for Corporates; the Rajiv Gandhi Drinking Water Programme for Tribals; and Project Tiger. When I ask to see Tsunami victims, I am submerged in a sea of them; when I look around for villages to be given in adoption, there are half a million; there is no shortage of widows or tribals, either. But when I ask you high-paid forest conservators to show me one tiger – just one tiger – you turn up here with excuses! What do you mean there are no tigers in the Bhramananda Reddy Tiger Reserve! We have just spent ten million dollars on it! And the Director of World Wildlife is to visit it next week accompanied by the President himself!" He gathered himself, palpably struggling to regain his composure. "This looks to me like a political move to discredit me – whoever is doing this – and I can easily get to the bottom of this bad political game – he will suffer, I can promise. And you do this to me! I am the Minister who has created more jobs for conservators than anyone else. I said in the Cabinet, I don't care if there are more conservators than tigers – I want two trailing every tiger, everywhere. And now you do this to me – the keynote speaker of The Global Jungle 2005 Conference in Washington!" He was shouting by the time he finished.

There was a hushed silence round the room, middle-aged men shuffling their feet and looking at their toes, like schoolboys.

An old conservator stood up at long last. "Sir, We all know the urgency, the importance of the occasion. We have made all arrangements in the Bhramananda Reddy Tiger Reserve. The best cooks have been flown in from Delhi. There will be dances by Tribal girls from Assam. They dance in all important State events, and have received training in tribal dancing in Paris. The Guesthouse is beautifully decorated. But tigers, we could not see. I am an old man, with diabetes and blood

pressure. Sir, I walked over every inch of the area in the boiling heat. See, Sir, the blisters on my feet....” With that he moved out of his chair, removing his shoes and socks, to hold up lacerated feet for all of them to see.

The Minister was impatient. “*Arre, bhai*, I don’t doubt your sincerity. But tigers are not to be seen by slow old men. They don’t sit on the roadside for photo-ops. They hide. Someone has to pull them out by the tail when the American comes, or, or, I will close down the department. I will outsource the whole job to West India Hotels! If they were in charge, they would have brought tigers from Africa if I had asked them.”

The old conservator was not to be put off. “Sir, the poachers, Sir, have played havoc,” he said bravely, in the pin-drop silence of the room. “If you had not permitted that paper company to build those forest roads, Sir, I warned...”

The Minister quickly cut into this kind of thinking. “Nonsense! I tell you, Nonsense!” he yelled. “Nation building cannot stop just because of some animals, or *careless* departmental work. Now, what about that child that was attacked and killed in that village, what was it called, near the Reserve? TV stations made so much fuss. Anyway, that shows there was a tiger!”

No one spoke up, but the persistent old conservator. “Sir, it was a pig that bit the child. Sepsis set in, and since there was no doctor...”

The Minister’s belly almost jumped out of his *kurtha*. “A pig! I can’t show a pig to the American!”

A young conservator, who had been wrestling with himself for some time, to say something important, burst in brightly. “Sir, I saw a leopard, only two weeks ago, leaping across a glade. It was gone in a flash.”

The Minister relaxed dramatically. He smiled, and leaned forward cordially towards the young man. “There! I knew there will be tigers. Enthusiastic young men work! You will go far. Now, tell me, how do you know it was not a tiger? It was gone in a flash. Most probably it was a tiger you saw in the bad light. In a tiger forest there are tigers, not leopards.”

The young conservator, his courage evaporating, was unable to sustain a direct dialogue with the Minister. “Sir, it was mid-day, Sir. It had spots, Sir, it...” he said confusedly.

The Minister would have none of this cautious prevarication. “Spots, warts, how do we know? When a tiger leaps, stripes look like spots. Find this tiger; our American guest must see it next week. This must be done, whatever else you people do.”

Everyone turned towards the Chief Conservator, who, after all, was their leader. He was a quiet thoughtful man with a faraway look. He began softly. "When Lord Willingdon was Viceroy, he used to go on hunting parties, I believe..."

If there was a tiger anywhere in the vicinity, it was the Minister. He turned with a growl on the poor man. "You are a conservator, Sir, remember! Not the manager of a hunting party! My God, I am surrounded by incompetents. You will lose your job, and get the Prime Minister to dismiss me as well. Hunting is banned; you can't kill a rabbit without getting jailed!" Then, he spoke slowly in frozen anger. "We-must-show-a-tiger-to-this-American, do you understand? Not kill one for sport!"

The Chief Conservator for all his small size, and soft voice, had survived many vicissitudes in long, not undistinguished, years of service. "My Submission is that there is a solution, if Honourable Minister permits?" he said quietly, looking full into the furious face towering over him.

By now the Minister was like a tiring baited bull. "Of course, I permit. I know the solution. What is the solution?"

"A tiger used to be taken in a special compartment of the Viceroy's train so that it could be shot at the appropriate spot. In this case, since there is some urgency, and His Excellency the President is also coming, I submit, if Honourable Minister permits, we procure a good tiger from a zoo." The words of the Chief Conservator fell into the pregnant silence like a bomb. Many around the table had started to think the same thought, but speaking it out loud and clear was another matter. That was why that little man was chief.

All could see the light slowly dawn behind the Minister's eyes. "Yes, yes, I leave details to you," he said, with shy haste, like a man caught with his fly open. "I know nothing of all this. But, remember, you can't show a tiger on a chain. It must somehow be free, in the jungle."

Here was a chance for the young conservator to show off his brilliant foresight. "Sir, we will release it at some distance, and then with some noise chase it towards the road where you and the foreign delegation will be passing!"

The Minister turned back with a snarl. "No! No! You will get us killed. Or my armed 'Black Cat' guards will kill it in front of BBC, and CNN cameras. You will finish all of us. How many days of service have you left, before retirement?"

The Chief intervened quietly. "We will dope the animal, Sir, and lay it under a tree by the roadside. You will all see it!" He opened out his arms dramatically. "You will be silent so as not to wake the tiger. He will be lightly doped, so you will see the tail twitching. I and my staff will duck into covered pits when we hear the cars approach. After Honourable Minister and foreign delegation leave, we will come out, tie up the animal, and take him back to the zoo."

The Minister was happy at long last. “Excellent idea, Conservator Sahib! Old is gold as always. Young people go to cinemas, do nothing, get lazy. All forest officers must learn from you. Make sure it is a good looking animal. And, mind, no accidents!” The Chief Conservator assured him there would be none. He turned professionally to his staff.

“We must plan this meticulously. I want back ups, at least two more young tigers kept in reserve. Tap all zoos. You all know what to do.”

The Minister made ready to leave. “I knew it was all nonsense about there being no tigers. I will issue a press statement to the contrary. Pug marks have been seen all over the place, tiger shit, that sort of thing. Please make all arrangements. I must leave now. I have to address the Freedom from AIDS Society, and congratulate the Dutch delegation for helping us make this city the First AIDS Free City in India. I hope officials have more sense than last time, and don’t bring these fellows on to the stage and make us all shake hands with them. Idiots!”

As they all stood up, his eyes sweeping the room caught *Sharmaji*’s. For all his bulk, he moved forward swiftly, and grabbing *Sharmaji*’s arm requested him to accompany him in his own car. Everyone stood back respectfully, casting many admiring glances at the pair. A flurry of attenders, armed guards, and drivers opened the car door for *Sharmaji*, who found himself squashed beside the ample form of the Minister, and whisked away through the city at high speed, sirens blaring.

The Minister leaned towards *Sharmaji*, almost squeezing the breath out of him. “*Sharmaji*, we must maintain a diplomatic silence about our strategy,” confided the Minister. “There are so many miscreants in the Press, who are happiest when defaming their own country.”

Sharmaji understood him instantly and completely. “Ministerji, I am a patriot. In my own humble way, I am also a servant of the public, like yourself. We all know there are abundant tigers everywhere. But the skill to locate them, the indigenous knowledge, which our forefathers had, where is it now? Destroyed by globalization. We cannot let India down in front of foreigners.”

The Minister was very pleased with the response, though he was on his cell-phone most of the time *Sharmaji* was protesting his patriotism. The Minister assured *Sharmaji* with a squeeze of the arm that they were like brothers. When the cavalcade drew up at their destination, where a large crowd awaited the Minister with garlands, the Minister first instructed the driver to take *Sharmaji* wherever he wanted to go. Then turning to *Sharmaji*, and looking him full in the eyes, he asked simply: “Is there anything I can do?”

Sharmaji started to protest that meeting a great man like him was itself sufficient, when he remembered, and mentioned the incident with Mr. Rajagopalan, Principal Secretary for Forests. “I should like to serve the people, Sir, in the cause of tiger

conservation also, and foreign funds are readily available, but some bureaucratic hurdles...”

The Minister had opened the door and was half-way out of the car. “ He will be transferred. Come and see me day after tomorrow.”

Sharmaji was a happy man as he rode back in the Minister’s car to his flat.