

“What was the purpose in starting the Marxist classes, Mr. Sharma?” asked Harbajan Singh, the Deputy Director General of Police, Special Branch, with extreme politeness. Sharmaji looked round the old office room in police headquarters, with the noisy desert cooler in the window spitting droplets of water over him. With all his reservations, he was grateful it was a cool room, for a hot summer raged outside.

“As you know, a special focus of the work of our charitable organization is education,” he started in measured tones. “Awareness raising of people, of their rights and responsibilities, to help in the democratic functioning of our state.” He had been summoned by the police for an urgent meeting with the DIG in charge of intelligence, and he had come prepared.

The police officer looked at him with a friendly smile. “And you believe that the interests of the State are furthered by ordinary people learning Marxism,” he said, more as a flat statement than as a question.

“Well, our constitution defines us as a socialist society,” said Sharmaji defensively. Mr. Harbajan Singh looked up at his ceiling and smiled. He could be quite handsome for a Sikh, thought Sharmaji, if he would only shave a little.

“So in your *definition* a socialist State requires people to study Marxism?” asked his interrogator, even more pleasantly.

Sharmaji instinctively sensed he was being led into dangerous waters. This smiling policeman was far deeper than most of his ilk, he had a plan, he wanted to trap Sharmaji into some admission, but why? There must be a report against him, or SERVICE, or one of his stupid colleagues. He had had to engage university lecturers to give the classes, he had been forced to select those who could make things a little interesting, God knows, Marx was very boring, but he just couldn't come straight out and tell this smiling Sikh that ‘Leonard the Leninist’ had been harping on starting the classes, and at last Sharmaji had given in with a semblance of enthusiasm, saying something vague about the thirteenth thesis of Feuerbach, for he needed ‘Leonard the Leninist’ to approve his budget for Christians Everywhere. He had shrugged his shoulders metaphorically at the oddity of Christian development organizations being more revolutionary than the Indian communist parties. But now he needed to answer this policeman, somehow satisfactorily.

“We understand the compulsions of funding very well,” said the Sikh answering for him, “who better than the police, who always have to look for more funds to help us contain growing civil unrest?”

So, the fellow knew, then why was he harassing him? Sharmaji wanted to see behind that smiling mask of a face doubly hidden by that zareba of black hair and khaki turban. He had to pick his words. It would be dangerous to be condescending, but to appear as frightened as he was would be equally self-defeating.

“My record of public service speaks for itself,” said Sharmaji at long last. “I have never had any intention whatsoever of fomenting disturbances through an educational media.”

The police officer looked at his desk with a serious frown. “ We should not talk about personal records, Mr. Sharma, at this stage, that is better left unsaid, for after all it’s our duty to know everything about people under surveillance, know *everything*.” The man was quite unsmiling, and Sharmaji’s stomach gave a queer lurch.

Suddenly the DIG of Police, Special Branch, leaned back and laughed happily, while ringing his bell for the police orderly. “ What can I offer you, Mr. Sharma, tea or coffee? I wouldn’t recommend coffee, it’s full of chicory, and I am sure you as a South Indian Brahmin would drink only pure coffee, and that too made with peaberry beans, right? And you buy coffee beans from Krishna Stores every second week, am I right? I know how particular you are. Good, let’s have tea, they make it sugary sweet, but we Punjabis like only sweet things!”

After the differential orderly had deposited the tea and left, Mr. Harbajan Singh looked at Sharmaji with a fond smile as he sipped his tea noisily through his moustache. “ We are not worried about common human failings, money, women, we all have them, makes us men, right? But National Security is another matter altogether, I am sure you agree?”

Sharmaji’s disjointed explanations were listened to between noisy sips of tea. Suddenly, the police officer broke into his rambling defence. “ Why don’t you treat us as friends, Mr. Sharma? Why couldn’t you come straight to us and say, look, Leonard the Leninist wants Marxist classes – you wonder how I know – my dear fellow, *knowing* is our trade, and we are in daily touch with Scotland Yard, doesn’t look like it, right, seeing these shabby walls? But we are. You could have come to us as an honest law-abiding citizen and we would have solved all your problems by giving you *our Marxist lecturers*. The disgruntled fellows you have got know little about Marxism, they know enough only to rouse the disgruntled. You mentioned the thirteenth thesis of Feuerbach, well, Mr. Sharma what are the other twelve? You want to know? Here, read the book,” and he drew a Marxist text from his desk drawer, and threw it on the table. “ Please wait, I shall be back in a minute.”

The Sikh police officer was not back for a full forty-five minutes, letting Sharmaji stew in his doubts and fears. When he came back, he was accompanied by his stenographer to whom he dictated routine letters for the next half an hour. After his assistant had left, Mr. Harbajan Singh was immersed in some files for the next ten to fifteen minutes. Then he lifted his head and seemed to discover Sharmaji for the first time.

“ Well, Mr. Sharma, are you willing to cooperate? You need to be absolutely frank with me. You are free to go your own way of course at any minute. We are a modern security force working for the people of the world’s largest democracy, so everything is above-board. But in your interests I must inform you that Delhi has asked us to take a view on whether your registration under the Foreign Contributions Registration Act should be renewed. We can only express an honest opinion, we can do no more, they take all the decisions in Delhi. *They* will decide whether you are to continue receiving foreign donations, or not. Well? What is it to be?” And he rang the bell for the orderly and instructed him to put all the files in the car to take home. Clearly, he was impatient to be gone. Sharmaji was totally confused and looked his bewilderment. The police officer looked at him quizzically over large folded hands, his elbows thrust aggressively in front on the table.

“ Sharma, you have passed the test. If you had taken my meaning straight away, I would have immediately suspected you of playing a deep game, but now I know you just want your money and your livelihood, what’s wrong with that? I want a livelihood! I will spell out what I mean. For the next term, send all your lecturers back to their colleges where they can do minimal damage, they do poison the children’s minds, but when the kids leave college, they learn they have got to work to live, and soon forget all that nonsense. But these public classes are quite another thing, labour union leaders attend them, a few Muslims are starting to come – we are happy with them in their Masjids – and then all these women, my God, they can set fire to the country in no time! And what do you think we can do? Some of them are wives of senior officers! No, Sharma, get rid of the lot, and we will help you recruit a new set of Marxist lecturers we have trained. They know more, they can quote chapter and verse, and send disgruntled people back home knowing that revolution is not child’s play. One needs to study all of Marx, preferably in the original German, and also know in what philosophical context he wrote, Hegel, Plato, the Jesuit philosophers and the Taoists they studied, and all the rest of them. Revolution takes a life-time, while setting a match to a house, or starting a fight on Fridays, it’s the work of a moment.” He snapped his fingers in front of Sharmaji’s face.

Sharmaji was caught in a cleft stick. This man was very, very dangerous, he could smell the danger. The DIG would think nothing of shooting him out of hand right in that office, and have his decomposed body discovered in the Musi riverbed two weeks later. Most probably he had done that sort of thing before. And yet, his gorge rose at succumbing tamely to blatant threat.

“ Well, if the people you recommend have qualifications, better qualifications, we, I, can consider...” he temporized.

“Of course, they have better qualifications,” thundered Mr. Harbhajan Singh jovially. “You will be surprised when you meet them. One even has a Ph.D from the London School of Economics, eh, that means something to you, right? And we even have respected card-holding members of the communist party. Gilt-edged credentials to teach Marxism. Leonard the Leninist will double your budget. Come to think of it, I will fashion a special course on Lenin and the October Revolution – most of your teachers don’t even know it occurred in November, poor sods!”

The DIG of Police, Special Branch, led Sharmaji out of the room into the open, with his arms round his shoulders, for all the hangers-on to see. He stopped as if posing for a photograph.

“ My dear, Sharma, this has been a very good meeting. I am glad you will cooperate with us in the national interest. We both want the same thing, peace and progress, right? Good! And we will come to know who the potential trouble-makers are in that course, and deal with them. Don’t worry, old fellow, it’s just the official lingo I use gets in the way. No, no, no! We will give them *remedial education*, teach the fellows and some of the damned women, that there is a great deal of difference between social revolution – which is the stated objective of the State – and creating disturbances. Some of them are slow to learn, but they all learn ultimately, and go home, or wherever, quite happily, I assure you. Better this way.”

Declining the offer of a police car to take him home, Sharmaji thoughtfully made his way back. He consoled himself with the fact that the DIG Special Branch had left him no option, no option whatsoever, and in any case, it had never been his intention to start a revolution, as that damned policeman said that was a life-long business, better left to Leninists than interfered with, and if

these new teachers were qualified what objection could there be? After all the goal of the course was understanding of Marxism, and who better than trained Marxists, from the Party, from the LSE?