

The girl was tall, and pretty in a media sort of way, with short black hair curved in wings over her ears, from which dangled long thin silver creations. She was dressed in a tailored black suit, with the flaring white collar of her silk shirt tucked out over the lapels of her jacket. She had flung herself into a large cane chair, and was tapping the parquet wooden flooring of her studio with a pointy black shoe.

“ Really, Mr. Sharma, this is an opportunity of a lifetime,” she assured him with a bright smile, arching herself in a winning manner. “ You will introduce the film; before the start of every sequence, the camera fill focus on you, at different locations in your villages, doing whatever you do, and you will tell the audience what they are going to see next, why it is important, to them, to you, to the people of this country. In a real way the film is about you, your values, and how a man like you speaks for all of India. So you see, the theme of the documentary, well, it is a documentary feature, actually – well, the theme is that the people of India and Pakistan should work together for peace and prosperity – *this* will be brought out as the theme of your own life, what you stand for, what you work towards. Really, I would go for it, if I were you.”

To say that Sharmaji was dazzled would be an understatement. He had received a conference call linking up Indian financiers in America, movie makers in Bombay, and two politicians in Delhi, one in power and the other in opposition, and himself, of course. Very large sums were talked about with ease in several accents. A documentary that people *wouldn't fail to see* was what everyone seemed to want, a documentary which would *push the peace process forward*, an *emotional* documentary, which would go straight to the hearts of the people of both countries. But an impersonal documentary was *dullsville* said the film magnate, it should be about *a real person's* life and views, a special person who *sacrifices* everyday for the people. There was no way Sharmaji could say No after all that; a business class air-ticket to Bombay was delivered the next day, and there he was in Bollywood, already treated like a star!

The girl had switched on the LCD projector, and he saw a short video clip, with pictures of Gandhi and Jinnah, and then heard a searing tear, and there were two torn still photographs of the leaders against a black screen. “It's of course about today, but also about how the two nations were formed,” the girl said. “ We will go back and forth in time, and the film follows you as you grow up, how your own ideas develop, and how your values mature, how you give everything up to serve people, and yet all the time, you want that torn photo to be miraculously rejoined, become whole somehow!”

She then brought out an impressive cardboard file with the working script, and they sat together for some time, with heads bent together as she sketched out the flow of the film. Sharmaji was as much overwhelmed by the honour done to him as by her perfume. When he closed his eyes on the flight back, he could still see her bright fair face, her perfect teeth and soft red lips. The next seven weeks were given over wholly to filming on location. The several re-takes at every location had him tired and limp by the evening, and he would not have been able to work the next day had it not been for Rukmini's massaging his trembling frame. However much he rehearsed his lines, somehow the words just evaporated out of his head when the cameras rolled, and he would stutter, say the wrong thing, or just look awkward or stiff. The chief cinematographer, Pervez, was an old hand, and regaled everybody but Sharmaji with stories about stars and their stupidities. “ *Arre bhai!* Don't worry, you should have seen some of those asses in the Bombay Talkies days! Thank your stars we don't have to deal with a female prima donna! They are the worst, especially if a producer is keeping them. I tell you! But you are not half so bad. What can

we do, God made you like this, that's all!" Sharmaji hated Pervez's frankness, but forgot his rancour only after their third or fourth double whisky, later in the evening.

Finally, Pervez said he had taken enough shots of cows and cowdung to last him for a life-time, that Sharmaji was *heroic* to live among all that *rural idiocy*, and that he himself would be happy only when the plane touched down in Bombay. Later, Sharmaji had to rush to Bombay for re-takes in the studio for close-ups of his face, or for re-dubbing his own voice, wherever he had muffed it. He had never realized film-making was such an ordeal, stripping a person of all dignity, all self confidence. But at the end of each wretched attempt, the pretty girl would steadfastly make much of him, order real Scotch, or when they had packed up, take him to some sets to see stars in action. He was genuinely humbled to see their poise and self-confidence, the easy way they joked with everyone on the sets just before action, when he himself had lain sweating in bed, hours before he was called, desperately trying to remember his lines, how he should say them, how he should look. At long last, when he thought the nightmare would never end, he was released from his ordeals, and he went back thinking he had earned every rupee of his handsome fee.

The commercial promotion of the film was handled in a very professional manner, with a series of sneak previews, teasers, interviews, and other journalistic puffs in newspapers and talk shows. The docu-feature film, as it was called, was premiered to a distinguished audience of high officials, business magnates, professors, and the social elite, on Gandhi Jayanti Day in the special studio theatre of the Department of Communications and Broadcasting. Titled 'Sharmaji's Dream,' it wove a web of fantasy between historical episodes and Sharmaji's life, using historic documentary footage, and shots of everyday life in the present, with artful camera angles showing Sharmaji dreaming, working, singing, protesting, and dreaming again in a fictionalized story of his life. Somewhere within his dream of yesteryear was a song and dance routine, with a starlet acting as his wife to be. He was lost admiring himself on screen; he had never realized how good he looked; how eloquently he spoke. The film dripped with sentiments of peace and brotherhood, and Sharmaji got a standing ovation when the lights came on.

Mrs Viccaji of the Ladies Club was ready with a large rose garland. "Dear, dear Mr. Sharma, almost every sequence brought tears to my eyes. You see, I am old enough to remember the good old days, they were in reality good old days, you know, when all of us lived as a tight-knit community," she said. "I am going to kiss you in front of all these people for making such a beautiful, sensitive film. Waliullah Khan used to be our neighbour before partition, and he married Gokul Chand's daughter, and the reception was held in my garden. I baked the wedding cake myself, and what a problem I had finding proper icing sugar! He went to Karachi, you know, after partition, their marriage broke apart, and that poor girl was left with two children the government wouldn't admit back to our country, just think of it! It was settled only when I spoke to Nehru himself! None of us wanted any of this misery! Maybe your film will help bring back the old days. I hope so, dear Mr. Sharma."

The chief secretary, the minister for rural development, Chandramohan Reddy of United Cement, all shook Sharmaji's hand in turn, and people clapped again as he left on a bemused cloud. The film then opened in several select cinema houses across the country, and plaudits written by highly placed people kept pouring in. Sharmaji even began to think of pursuing a career in Bollywood, and started asking his wife every evening when he returned if anyone had called from Bombay.

The first sour note was struck when the secretary of the local Gandhi Bhavan wrote a letter in *The Hindu* lamenting the anti-national spirit of the film which placed Mahatma Gandhiji, the Father of the Nation, and Mr. Jinnah, who was responsible for Partition, on the same footing. The tearing apart of the photos of both, right at the very start, made no distinction between right and wrong. More angry letters followed. A member of the Shiv Sena complained that the documentary scenes of violence were so mischievously jumbled together that it made the Hindus look like culprits instead of as victims of a historic wrong. Certain cinemas in Bombay showing the film were pelted with stones, forcing them to close down.

Maulana Wahid went on the air to say that what pained him the most was the singing of *Vande Mataram* by some Bengali nationalists – to which, of course, he could have no objection – but this scene was followed by one of Muslims reading namaz. An unfortunate conclusion could be mischievously engineered that Muslims were now being forced to bow down during the song, which the community had steadfastly resisted for a hundred years. A hartal followed angry mobs closing down theatres in Gulbarga. Violence flared sporadically between people of ‘two communities’ in various towns across the country. An inconclusive televised debate on whether ‘*Sharmaji*’s Dream’ was Anti-National had the opposition walking out during question hour in parliament, after protesting that the film was a clandestine attempt of a tottering government to buy peace with militant Pakistan by denigrating the role of true Hindu nationalism in the Freedom Struggle.

During a meeting of the two Foreign Secretaries at Islamabad, the Pakistani counterpart requested that India should ban the provocative film since in a very unsubtle way it showed Pakistanis acting in a churlish way while portraying Indians as magnanimous, which, as everyone knew, was contrary to all known facts. The talks were broken off when the Indian expressed his inability to enforce censorship in an open society. Bishop Neelaiah noted during a Southern-Indian Christian Conference that dissolving the figure of Gandhiji on to the image of Christ on the Cross hurt the religious sentiments of his flock, and requested nuns to form a silent peaceful human picket line in front of the cinemas showing the film. Dalit leaders angrily noted that the hero of the film was one Sharma, a Brahmin, and linking him with Gandhi, a Bania, the film ignored the role of all other castes, and reaffirmed caste oppression as the ruling ideology. Sikhs in Amritsar held a rally against the film for showing only the massacre of Jallianwallah Bagh and the killing of Sikhs running helter skelter, thus deliberately glossing over the martial valour of their people.

One day *Sharmaji* was informed by the Director General of Police that an armed guard had been provided for his protection, and that he should not go anywhere without his gunmen. A starred question in Parliament asked the Home Minister whether he had investigated the financial sources behind the film, and whether it was true that the underworld mafia had deliberately made the film to ‘vitiate the atmosphere.’ Finally, the Censor Board removed its certificate from the film, and the agitations died down bit by bit, but it took another four months before police protection was withdrawn from *Sharmaji*’s residence.