

Hilda had taken a sabbatical – well, actually a long break for six to eight weeks – for reflection, spiritual renewal, and community service, so naturally she chose to come to Sharmaji’s SERVICE Rural Centre, since he was, perhaps, her best project. She was received with all ceremony, and outward shows of ecstasy at the airport, with rural women forming a loving circle around her, and putting flowers in her hair as they sang a traditional welcome, while Sharmaji himself placed a large garland of marigolds around her neck, and tried to hand her luggage over to Abraham, but she would have none of it.

“ Sharmaji! Thank you, thank you, thank you all,” beamed Hilda, “I will carry my own stuff. Look at me, I have come equipped to Serve!” She pirouetted round between the tightly packed taxi cabs, and indeed she was quite a sight, large horn-rimmed glasses separating her dyed auburn hair from her freckled nose, large white and yellow teeth grinning between the wrinkles that creased her cheeks, a dark green seaman’s rucksack strapped to her back, a laptop case clutched in her hand, a large flowered shirt ballooning over floppy breasts, and straggling over khaki shorts, out of which protruded very long, very white thin legs, ending in ill-fitting sandals. She put down her laptop, and exuberantly kissed Sharmaji on both cheeks, while his staff grinned round him. He hustled her into the Project SUV, which most of time did shopping duty for his wife, with an eager declamation that they had a lot to discuss, and he was looking for her help at a crucial theoretical juncture in the affairs of the nation.

The long dusty ride slowly brought them both to silence, gratefully acknowledged by Abraham and Rangulamma, riding at the back, who nodded off to sleep. That evening over dinner Sharmaji went over the recent history of his Society, with which in any case Hilda was well acquainted, and they parted early, since she had had a long intercontinental flight, and he could escape to his ‘unit’ to watch his favourite TV serial. When all was said and done, thought Sharmaji that night as he fell asleep, it was a stroke of luck that such a powerful lady had chosen to spend her ‘sabbatical’ in his project, the word would spread, he would see to that, and donor money could easily cascade, so he would gallantly put up with her rather irritating chatter.

Early next morning, when the sun had still not risen, and the first birds were beginning to call, Sharmaji was almost jolted out of his bed by loud thumping on his door.

“Sharmaji! I’m ready,” called out Hilda, and he saw peeping out of the window that she had changed her shirt for a bush jacket, and her feet were encased in white trainers, and that she was ready, but for what? “ I wanted to be up before you,” she said happily. “ I know you leave early every morning to work in the bio-diversity fields, and you can teach me everything about your system. I am going to Africa in October, and I want to tell them about you.”

He now remembered regaling her and several others over dinner in London with details about his daily work routine, but it was no use regretting it now; he had to get ready fast, though he had not had his morning cups of coffee, or read a newspaper, or even moved his bowels. She didn’t seem to notice his bleary eyes or puffed face, as he staggered along beside her. The women in the fields looked up in surprise at both of them, but with tact continued to work as if it was a daily occurrence. Hilda got down straight away on to her knees, laughing with the women and being shown what to do, while Sharmaji after a few vague attempts pretended to inspect the health of the plants further off. Dasgupta came to his rescue with papers in a file, and after feigning displeasure at being called away, Sharmaji reluctantly left the fields to retreat for a cup of coffee, and a lazy wash. Hilda was still very happy being energetic when he went back a couple of hours

later, and she told him that she had learnt a lot from the women though she knew not a word of Telugu. He guided her round the fields, and it was a totally successful morning except when he wrongly identified a castor patch as potatoes, but then as he said quickly his eyes were failing him now, the result of long periods of study.

The next few days, the same regrettable routine was followed, but he was braced for it, nobly feeling that any sacrifice for the people and the nation was worth it. But he did have Dasgupta interrupt him everyday to his obvious annoyance. However, he was quite unprepared for the next thunderbolt Hilda was to deliver. Lunch the third morning was quite tasteless, and his face clouded in a thunder of rebuke for the kitchen staff, when Hilda broke in chuckling to his left: “You don’t know what struggles I have had in the kitchen. Finally I had to put my foot down, and physically take charge of all those chillies, and salt and sugar, and measure out tiny, tiny quantities. It is still not as satvic as it could be, but I will personally supervise the cooking till we get real macro-biotic satvic dishes.” She beamed at Sharmaji, who mumbled his appreciation, and ignoring the uneatable food, satisfied himself by launching into a glowing lecture about the wisdom hidden in traditional Indian recipes. Later that afternoon when Hilda was taking a siesta, which he had insisted upon, wisely telling her that she needed to be careful in the tropics, and it was his duty to watch over her health, his driver cycled in from the nearby village with a flask of hot well-sugared tea, and a plate of deep-fried chilli bajjis.

As the weeks wore on, Sharmaji congratulated himself that he had managed to negotiate his way round the impracticalities imposed by Hilda, but his staff understood that it was important to humour this important lady, and after all she would have to return home some day, and they could all look forward to that. But imagine his shocked surprise on afternoon, and even more Dasgupta’s, when Hilda proudly marched into their low-roofed office building with thirty of the women, saying they had come to inspect the accounts.

Hilda announced that she, with Rangulamma’s help, had been training the women selflessly to understand accounts, and their joint responsibility to exercise the right of inspection. She was happy that the first bunch were now ready to help Sharmaji and his staff in the onerous duty of keeping accounts. Sharmaji looked sharply at Rangulamma, whose young, guileless face looked up at him artlessly, and he dismissed the thought that she had played politics. Rather, the blame was his that he had not detailed a mature person like Rukmini to chaperon Hilda. There was nothing for it but to go through the accounts, and Hilda whooped with pleasure when the women discovered a discrepancy: last week’s savings collected from them were not yet entered in the books. In fact, this was a time-honoured practice, the money being held in ‘a suspense account,’ to meet unforeseen contingencies, which in fact regularly occurred as dinners to be given to his guests, journeys to be undertaken by him, or for the purchase of something for the house that his wife urgently demanded. Once he had even put the money on a sure tip he had received from a punter, who knew all the jockeys, and had always been known to win, though not on that unfortunate occasion. It would be foolish to withdraw savings from his bank account, such as it was, and in any case Dasgupta was highly skilled in moving money around accounts; otherwise he would not have tolerated the insolent fellow for so long.

Sharmaji gravely reprimanded Dasgupta, who said that for the first time in thirty years of service he had temporarily used the funds to buy seeds for the bio-diversity fields, so that they would not miss the planting season. Sharmaji nodded when Dasgupta added he could not allow the women’s fields to fall into the hands of money-lenders; again gravely thanked the women, and brushing

aside all remonstrance insisted on issuing a check from his own account to make good the shortfall. Dasgupta was much moved, and dragging himself to the window, shook out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

The next evening a council of state was held in Sharmaji's 'unit,' with Dasgupta and Abraham sitting in chairs round a small cane table, while Rukmini as usual sat at his feet, her deep dark cleavage highlighted by the tight white blouse she wore, distracting him at that serious moment.

"She is training the women to vote representatives to the Executive Council," said Abraham gloomily.

"Women cannot be handled in Western fashion like this, Sir," chipped in Dasgupta slowly. "It is against culture, and stress is being created."

"I disagree. Hilda is doing very important work, work which we should have undertaken over the last several months," said Sharmaji in slow seriousness. "But what to do, so many new crises keep interrupting us in our work of empowerment... so how do we get benefit for the women from Hilda's noble efforts?"

"The women are very unhappy, Sir," said Rukmini, twisting round, her black silky skin rippling over her long bare middle. "They respect the older women you have nominated on to the Council. Illiterate or not they are respected and they think voting will destroy their unity."

Tearing his eyes away, Sharmaji caught on to the last word. "Yes, Unity is important, all important. This cannot be sacrificed. Hilda's motives are very good, but after all she is a stranger to our culture. We must hasten slowly, yes. Now, how to convince her that her methods are not appropriate?"

No one seemed to have any idea. The discussion dragged itself out to no conclusion, with Dasgupta retreating into speculative silence. Sharmaji had a troubled night.

The morning after next, when Hilda went out briskly towards the fields, she was surprised to see Sharmaji and Dasgupta already up, and talking in low voices with three young men. When the huddle parted, she saw with some alarm that the young men, boys really, were carrying what looked like automatic weapons. Sharmaji rapidly interposed his small rotund body between her and them, said something to them rapidly in pleading tones, seemed to make a promise, and led her away.

They didn't go to the fields that morning but sat on the verandah of his unit, sipping coffee and eating hot idlies. Sharmaji was unusually bitter, while Dasgupta stared stolidly at the floor.

"See how I waste my life, my efforts! This is what has happened to me over the last thirty years" said Sharmaji savagely. "When I am on the brink of success, not even that, just reaching some satisfaction over a job well done, everything has to stop because of someone else – someone who doesn't understand, who has no clue! These boys, what do they know about national priorities? Or about our history? They don't want – they don't want – white people in the village – that is racism! And by this they think they will bring about revolution!"

Hilda put a restraining hand on his arm. “You are a wonderful man, Sharmaji,” she said earnestly. “ And your staff are wonderful. I know you are frustrated. I would have liked to stay, I was getting along so well with the women, but the Western world has a lot to answer for, and some of us who are white know that, and we are trying to change things in the West, so that at least we don’t feel inferior when we meet people like you.”

Sharmaji was moved to tears, which he made no attempts to hide as the SUV rolled away in the morning light carrying their honoured guest. He was genuinely sad at her departure, but then he cheered up, taste will return to his meals.