

“A Million Protesters!” screamed the posters. “Yes, there will be a million protestors,” Sharmaji confidently assured the rural stringers of Telugu dailies, who had gathered to witness the clearing of a large maidan prior to a tent city springing up near the SERVICE Rural Centre. They photographed Sharmaji putting up colourful posters with messages in all international languages. Among the scattered English phrases, one could read: ‘Yes to Freedom! No to Aid!’ ‘India for Indians! Not for Bankers!’ ‘Develop People! Not Money!’ The largest poster showed the world’s people of all colours and wearing their varied national costumes circling the globe protectively, while Uncle Sam and his bankers toppled off. Another showed young men and women with raised clenched fists confronting a cowering group of black-coated fat men carrying a large bag marked with the \$ sign. The Global Alliance Against Banking was organizing a massive rally against the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank’s Hyderabad Conference of experts to plan financial intermediation initiatives to reduce global poverty.

The city had been chosen for the conference for several excellent reasons: it was Asia’s turn to host such a conference; the organizers wished to boost Indian morale which at that moment was at a low ebb; it was December and hence excellent weather could be forecast for this exotic city; the participants would appreciate the cooking; there would be several opportunities for banking leaders to be photographed with poor rural women; and above all since the airplanes would be full bringing home Indians for the Christmas break from America and Europe, the members of GAAB might find it just that much harder to mount a disruptive confrontation in a city whose police were not known to be soft with protestors.

GAAB had taken up the challenge, and promised a million protestors out on Hyderabad’s streets. Naturally, Sharmaji as a well-known and internationally recognized leader among NGOs was contacted to play host to the large army of angry global citizens who would be gathering from all corners of the earth to protect it and its people from Uncle Sam, his criminal bankers who were responsible for all the wars, and slavish international apparatchiks. Sharmaji had been gravely enthusiastic. He solemnly assured the GAAB flying protest committee that come what may, whatever the consequences to him later from his own virulent anti-people American-client government, he would face all as a Gandhian, and a humanist. But to make a success of it, close attention must be paid to details. When finally at the consultative meeting in Paris, as a demonstration of his personal willingness to sacrifice much for the common cause, he agreed to the sum offered, they had retired to have a well-earned dinner and to toast several times over the success of each Third World country over imperialism.

His staff had been equally enthusiastic, for Sharmaji, though always tight-fisted when it came to giving, could not possibly control all expenditures over such a vast scheme, and everyone of them could sanctimoniously put something by for the rainy day. Sharmaji was well aware of such possibilities, and was not unduly worried about losing money in dribs and drabs, as long as he had complete control over all the major contracts to be given out to make so many foreigners with different tastes and requirements comfortable and entertained under his stewardship. He spent the coming days driving hard bargains with experienced businessmen, caterers, shop-keepers and sundry suppliers. Everyone was amazed at his detailed knowledge of their own businesses, and how he was willing to spend hours at a time to save an extra rupee. Many gave in to him rather than listen to homilies on what they owed ‘good people,

foreigners, who were coming at great inconvenience to themselves to help India carry on its struggle for grassroots independence.’

When it came to sacrificing quality or money, Sharmaji chose the former, out of conviction, as he said, that even guests must be willing to put up with some discomfort to conform to some aspects of Gandhian simplicity, which was the only basis on which a new free India could be built. However, he had to walk a thin line here, for the great tent city should never get so shabby that he lost all chance for playing host to such a gathering again. His staff had the same cautionary thought, for most hoped to make their own international connections, and escape abroad to serve the world, so the tent city as it rose was well planned to arouse no resentment during its three days of occupation, while offering much in the way of participation in self-management. The biggest leaders would all be carefully housed in private houses of friends, each with a car and driver in continuous attendance. The great bulk of the kids could frolic in and out of their tents. With Gandhian inspiration, Sharmaji provided a spade for every tent, and slit-trench facilities at the back to answer calls of nature. When someone protested that there would be no cover for ‘foreign women,’ Sharmaji said ‘equality meant equality in every respect,’ he even got heated and asked what cover was available for a hundred million Indian rural women, and why should foreigners after fifty years of Independence be thought of as a more privileged group than our Indian women? There was no answer to this, and many young men among the staff had visions of seeing sights that would last them a lifetime.

As was to be expected, a million protestors did not turn up, but the twenty thousand who did were enough to keep media cameras busy for that whole week. Sharmaji’s villages supplied the largest contingent ferried everywhere by a long convoy of trucks. Several thousands came from different parts of India, and were accommodated in youth hostels, tourist homes, with relatives, or on college campuses. The two thousand or so youths from abroad were all offered places in the tent city, demarcated into blocks, each one imaginatively named after a country which had sent a group of protestors. Since ‘French’ North African countries had sent very few, their block was called ‘The Sahel,’ but it soon filled up out of free choice with Scandinavian girls.

While the days of protest marches would only be for the three days of the bankers conference, several pre- and post-events had been planned as part of the advocacy strategy for a people-centred world. The great Fernando Oliviera had come on a lecture tour, and he was accompanied by professor Lakshmi Ramachandran, the fiery political economist from Delhi, half his tall gangling self in size, but far more direct in condemnation of US imperialism. They shared the questions thrown at them after every intense presentation at college campus, and much more besides later whispered the volunteers on duty, but the elated mood around was certainly early Bolshevik, despising hypocritical bourgeois morality. Ikoku Yamamoto had also come early, but falling sick the very first day, had moved out to a room in a five-star hotel, which Sharmaji had to use his best persuasive skills to wrest from the bankers crowd, and she appeared only at the final debate in the tent city, pale and drawn, and restricted herself to nodding at times in approval. The most indefatigably active personage throughout that week in protest marches and at conferences was of course the famous documentary director, Lesley Guneseckara, with his broad white smile splitting his shiny bald head from the gray imperial below, his round black-clothed figure never tiring, even at three in the morning, his cameras turning, recording the people’s voice for all posterity.

But the force behind the great International Demo was Raul – the second Raul, as they said worshipfully, with reference to Fidel’s brother – Raul Ortega, who had set himself up in the Foreigner’s Guest House at the Rural Centre, a week before it all started to happen. Ramulamma found him far more likeable, capable and at ease immediately than most of the other foreigners who had come her way. The very first day, he changed his shoes for Hawaii chappals, and then changed his shorts back to full trousers when he sensed that the locals did not like to see their leaders in short pants. His grin and easy manners were infectious, and within two days he had picked up a smattering of Telugu and Hindi that everyone found both charming and incredible. Sharmaji who was all tensed up for the occasion started to relax under his masterful direction, and retired to his favourite verandah with a glass of Scotch that Raul had thoughtfully brought along. Raul who controlled the money flow would also take care of the organizing.

Raul looked at Ramulamma in a direct friendly way, neither suggestive nor patronizing, but with startling openness as if all possible relationships were equally possible. She had not known a man to look at her in such a way since she was in her teens, and Naresh the shepherd boy had liked her. Relaxed, she smiled with equal friendliness into his face, and he invited her with a laugh to join him in the lunch she had just brought him. As they laughed and ate together, he explained the meaning of all the posters with which he had quickly adorned the walls; who Ché had been; and what was the real difference between Mao and Stalin. In a very short time he was able to convey a lot of quite complex ideas in very simple terms, with an ingenious mixture of words from English, Hindi, and Telugu, buttressed by signs, smiles and quick acting out charades’ fashion. He explained politics with the help of a world map up on the wall, and she began to understand many things she had only guessed at before. She began to see that the Americans were the super rulers, and why there was so much resistance to their rule. She laughed at his boyish enthusiasm, though clearly he could not have been less than forty, but he was slim and handsome, with just a touch of gray at the temples.

As a good organizer himself, Raul quickly recognized her capacities in marshalling the village women, getting them to join in intelligently, resting them when not needed, and seeing to their comforts and having them up singing songs or shouting protests when cameras were turned on them. He looked after the great people, and she after the little people, and they made a good team. She knew little of his past life, but guessed at the dangers he had encountered, for coming in one morning with his toast and coffee she saw him emerge from the bathroom, fresh from a shower, drying his hair vigorously, a short towel wrapped round his lithe body. His skin was smooth and tight like a boy’s over his muscles, and he was in the prime of manhood, she saw with an indrawn breath. He smiled pleasantly back at her admiration, and as he bent to pick up his cup, she saw the mark of an old bullet wound under his left shoulder.

“ I wish I could tell you how I got it,” he said sensing her concern. “Gringos! Americanos! Poof! Poof!” He laughed, enjoying the hot coffee. “ Oh! That’s a long story of long ago! One day, when I have taught you enough English!”

She remembered other young men who had been shot, and understood that this handsome man was also like them, risking everything for a cause – only he had managed to survive, while the others had died, their mother’s milk still wet on their

lips. She understood now why he sometimes instinctively looked round suspiciously, why he seemed to be always careful, almost on edge deep down, despite all the overt friendliness and easy laughter. There were signs of a permanent watchfulness about him, very carefully hidden, but as noticeable to her as a dramatic start would be to others, for she still had vivid memories of her tragic youth, memories that had once haunted her but now remained as no more than dull throbbing to be ignored most of the times.

While the social distance between this sahib and her could never be bridged, she felt a wave of motherly sympathy for him, and determined to look after him well for the few days he was there. Even in that good weather, malaria could prostrate an unwary foreigner, so she very carefully fixed fine nylon netting to the back window of his guest room, but it would not stick to the frame closely, so she instructed the carpenter to nail it as well as he could. Later that evening over dinner in the kitchen, she was bitten viciously round the ankles by a swarm of mosquitoes, and she determined to go and check out that problem window. As she walked round the building in the dark, she was surprised to see Raul – she could not think of him as Raul sahib or Raul dora – already in his room instead of being in the conference hall with the others. She smiled fondly at his handsome profile for a moment as he bent over his laptop. Such a good man and so... so beautiful! With a triumphant nod he hit a key, and she saw pictures of people at the conference appear on his screen, one after the other, every photo in its own neat docket followed by a brief paragraph of writing. It looked like a series of bio-datas, but something more precise, she was trying to remember what, when he flashed his quick searching look at the window behind his head and shut the laptop with a snap. Then giving himself a stretch, he chuckled to himself, and left for the conference hall, humming a song. She was distracted by a thought that would not form in her head, but she checked the netting, found it secure and went back, trying to figure out what bothered her.

The great events of the next day wiped out all worries from her head, she was so busy. Raul was up there on the podium in the tent city, interrupting the morning invocation sung by the village women with an important announcement. She gathered upon enquiry that the country called Cuba was going to be attacked by the Americans once again – like Iraq – and that he was asking everyone to sign a petition to the UN to prevent a world catastrophe. Everyone was deeply alarmed. Many foreigners wanted to reach telephones to call their embassies, register their strong protests, or speak home to raise public opinion. She was called to help organize drivers, cars, special lunch baskets with sandwiches for guests who would be engaged on this duty to humanity.

Lady Scilly of Christians Everywhere told her to collect all the village women together. They should be taken in buses to the park in front of the legislative assembly where they would chant and sing and pray for peace. Several professors from all over, who had come with detailed papers challenging the assumptions of the bankers conference, were naturally disappointed, but fully agreed that the crisis demanded swift international action. Gentlemen of the press, who had been waiting to interview them about their objections to the bankers conference, heard instead strong statements against the impending action of American imperialists. It was only late in the evening of that busy day that everyone heard that it had been a false alarm, but everyone agreed that there never was smoke without fire, and started to take credit for thwarting the American move by quickly exposing it to world opinion. This self-congratulatory assumption rapidly grew into firm conviction, and toasts were raised to their victory,

and a great impromptu party started, leading to a wild bacchanalian night among the tents.

No one was up till lunch-time the next day, so the visit to the villages where Sharmaji was ushering an era of self-sufficiency was postponed for the day after. A routine protest meeting was called outside the bankers conference centre but not many of the youth responded, and an unexpected shower cut short that demonstration.

Ramulamma was busy over the next two days with the excursions to the villages, and organizing the village women to explain as best they could the steps they took to maintain bio-diversity by collecting neem seeds and cow dung, how they conserved water by using very little of it for washing or bathing, how food security was made a central theme of life by seeing to it that the men who did all the work ate first at any meal. Gender consciousness was strengthened by women getting together every evening and singing. Lady Scilly took great pride in the achievements of the women and Sharmaji, and the groups returned to their tent city uplifted, many of the visitors proudly refusing to waste bottled water by washing their hands with it, and eating their packed sandwiches carefully grasping them with tissues.

Ramulamma excused herself from accompanying the groups on the third day for all of a sudden Mrs. Govindaraja, her old patroness, asked her to take care of her grandchildren for the day, while she shopped with her daughter who would be leaving for America that very night. Ramulamma had known the children since they were born, and they had a great liking for her, and were very considerate, giving her no trouble at all, unlike the scene they would have created with their mother or grandmother. But she was indeed quite tired by four in the evening, what with having to take particular care that the children did not run out onto the crowded streets, as their mother went into one shop after another, and what with thinking over the events of the past few days. So, they were all glad when they returned to the grand hotel where Mrs. Govindaraja's daughter was staying with her children. Most of the hotel had been cordoned off for the bankers, and American and Indian security men stood guard everywhere in dark glasses, their pockets bulging with hand guns, dutifully pointed out to Ramulamma by the children. Since the hotel restaurant seemed out of bounds for the moment, they decided to go to their rooms for a cup of tea. While Mrs. Govindaraja and her daughter with a porter carrying their shopping went to the lift, the little girl, Malini, decided she needed to go immediately to the restroom, so Ramulamma took her round the corner of the marble staircase, and waited behind the thick marble pillar till she was done.

Cutting through her musings came the sound of a well-known voice, Raul's. Peering round, through the curtain of tall potted plants skirting the lobby fronting the Scherazade Bar, she saw him in deep conversation with a man she could never forget. Mahinder Reddy had aged, was heavier, but little had changed round his tiger eyes, or his thick bloated lips, smiling now in a way that still haunted her nightmares. Her heart leapt with fear for the trapped Raul, who puzzlingly was talking with all the self-assured confidence of a superior.

Raul looked at his watch. "Got to go now, Mahinder. I'm very glad your people and ours are cooperating so closely. Not like the old days, eh? This show isn't very much, just gas from aging queers, but we've got to watch everyone, you never know, right?"

Mahinder Reddy squared his shoulders. “Sir! Here is the latest list you wanted. With all details, Sir!”

Raul was up on his feet, taking an envelope with a sheaf of papers from the Indian. “You are a good man, Mahinder! We won’t forget, we never do!”

Trembling, Ramulamma shrank into her corner. She understood enough of what was said, just the sight of Mahinder Reddy, whom she never wished to see again, had sharpened her wits to imminent danger. Even twenty-five years after, she remembered as if it was yesterday how this man had pretended to be a sympathizer, a left-wing professor, given her shelter, only to get her to betray her lover to a terrible death. He must be very high up now in the secret police, and yet he acted as if Raul was a superior, what could it mean? She dared not face the conclusion that was staring her in the face.

She hushed Malini with a look and quickly disappeared with her into the lift. When it was time for her and Mrs. Govindaraja to leave, she pretended she needed to use the bathroom, and wasted another half-an-hour to make sure that she would not be noticed on the way out. While going through the lobby, she kept the sari paloo over her head in a sudden show of shyness, and got away into the night as if she was escaping with her life, it was possible she thought grimly that was what she was doing.

The next day there was a grand final protest march outside the conference centre, but she stayed in her little room with a headache. Many of the foreigners departed that evening, Lady Scilly coming up to her room especially to say a fond goodbye and a big thank you. The morning after as she went outside with heavy eyes to wash her face, she saw that the khalasis had already struck down half the tents, and were busy loading the canvas into several trucks. Everyone knew she was ill, so Raul Sahib would not have expected her to take him his breakfast. She waited for him to disappear into Sharmaji’s office, and then went over swiftly to the guest room. He had packed most of his stuff except for the briefcase, which lay invitingly open.

After a brief hesitation, she went to it and started to look through the papers. There was the envelope Mahinder Reddy had given him. She pulled out the papers; they were police reports with photos of several Indians who had taken part in the demonstration. Now she knew what it was that Raul Sahib had put into his laptop that night – they had been police reports of the foreigners, even good people like Lady Scilly.

“Find anything of interest, Ramulamma?” The tone was amused and affectionate as usual.

Startled at getting caught, she dropped the papers as she swung round, horrified and guilty.

Raul Sahib came forward companionably, scooped up the papers, and dropped them into his briefcase. “Yep! I didn’t think you were ill. I recognized you from the back hurrying into the elevator at the hotel, without saying ‘Hi.’ Now why would you do that? I didn’t tell that flatfooted gumshoe if you are worried. This is just between you and me, right?”

He sat down on the bed and looked at her speculatively. She felt like a trapped animal and could say nothing.

“You are wondering who I am? Come now on, you are a smart woman! Who do you think I am? I am American Police! You get that? Yes? Well, I actually work for the Company, but I can’t explain everything right now. The key question is, what do I do with you?”

From behind his trousers somewhere he had pulled out a gun, and pleasantly twirled it round by the trigger guard. “This is what they once called a Persuader. I think of it, in your case, more as a Convincer. Are you convinced that I am serious, that this is serious business?”

Again she understood everything, and nodded dully.

“Good. Now we shall put this away, shall we? I will show you what I would call a Persuader, in your case, that is.” He threw two thick wads of hundred-rupee notes on the table. “Take them, go ahead! Advance payment for services to be rendered. Go on! Take them!”

Ramulamma stood stock still, unable or unwilling to move.

“You are one strong clever woman,” he said pointing a long finger at her. “We can do business together. I need people like you to work for me, to take pictures, to write down names, to keep tabs generally, nothing dangerous, everything quite simple, really.”

He jumped to his feet suddenly and came close.

“Tell me, tell me, what’s your problem?” he asked not aggressively.

She shook her head dumbly and pointed to the cash. “Police money!” she croaked shaking her head.

He laughed and took a turn round the room. “Your guys are amateurs, they hurt people, hurt you, right? This Mahinder guy, right, that’s how you found out? He’s nasty. I’ve known guys like him in Guatemala. We got to Americanize all of you. That’s where I come in. Get rid of nasty guys, get rid of wooly-headed queers, lesbians, pinkos. What do you care for them? You want a decent life, right? I can give it to you – a home, money in the bank – say, maybe, just maybe a trip to the old US of A – mind I can’t promise, but just maybe. What do you say?”

He was smiling in his boyish way, his handsome head tilted to one side, challenging her, but she felt thick and stupid and stood without saying anything.

He pulled a chair towards him, turned it round, and sat down with his arms round the back. “Ramulamma, such offers don’t come every other day, so I want you to think it through carefully. What do you owe these people, these Indians who treat you like shit? Shit! You are a dalit, a harijan, an untouchable, right? No one here cares for you or your people. Did this Mahinder Reddy guy treat you according to whatever ramshackle law they have around here? Killed your man didn’t he? I guessed so. They

love to be brutal to those who are weaker. I have killed, killed armed guys who were against democracy. You saw that bullet wound, remember? They were not nice guys, right? Well work for me, work for the United States!”

He shrugged himself into his jacket, picked up his briefcase and suitcase and made for the door. “ Think about it, Ramulamma! The money is right there on the table for you. It can buy you a lot of happiness.” With a flippant salute he was gone.

She looked at the money for a long time. True, she could do a lot with twenty-thousand rupees. She could have a decent hut for a start with a waterproof roof. She could get herself a TV, some saris, and still have money in plenty for emergencies. True, Sharmaji didn’t care what happened to her. Mrs. Govindaraja might sniffle a little if she heard she was dead but would quickly forget, she had so many others to serve her. Who else really cared what happened to her? Maybe a dog. That’s how the others must have thought when they betrayed her man, her lovely man with high ideals, who used to lie close and warm beside her as she whispered her hopes into his ears, and ran her fingers over his smooth chest and down his belly.

The last buses were leaving the campus. Everyone was cheering, promising to keep in touch, to write, at least to email each other. Raul Sahib was turning to board the bus last, when Ramulamma came forward, her sari paloo over her head and the edge caught modestly between her teeth. She held out two wads of notes to Sharmaji.

“ I was cleaning Raul Sahib’s room, and found these he had forgotten.”

“Our people are poor, but totally dedicated! That is the least I have been able to achieve for our Peaceful Revolution,” said Sharmaji, seizing the chance to take part of the credit for himself. Everyone cheered him and Ramulamma, who quietly stepped back among the staff crowding round, some of whom gave her an incredulous look.

“ Well, I guess, if it weren’t for Sharmaji and Ramulamma I would have lost this money,” said Raul dangling the notes in his hand. “I guess I don’t have a right to all of it any more, so I am giving Sharmaji one bundle for that school some of you wanted to start for working dalit children.”

Everyone cheered wildly as he gave the money to Sharmaji while looking directly at Ramulamma.

Raul lifted a clenched fist at the door of the bus, and shouted as it drove off:
“Viva la Patria! Viva la Revolución! Viva el Socialismo! Hasta la Victoria Siempre!”

“Venceremos!” relied Sharmaji.