

The phone-call came early in the morning, before Sharmaji had finished his first cup of coffee. Vijay Kumar was at the other end. “*Hi! How are ya?* I hope I didn’t wake you up or anything, but we figured you would be drinking morning coffee, right? Dad! You were right, he is drinking coffee, would you believe that? We... we are sitting down to dinner. *Sharmaji!* The good news is that Dad and Mom will be coming over for a month’s holiday now that it is cool enough over there, and go visit friends, places. Sharmaji, could you fix them up with a convenient self-managed apartment suite sort of thing?... You can? Wonderful! That’s what I have been saying, things are leveling up so *faast*, there would be no difference between there and here pretty soon. But there is a problem... listen, listen, Mom wants a Brahmin cook for the month they are there, could you fix that? No problem? Great talking to you, and listen, while money is a problem everywhere now that the boom is over, I guess I can afford anything they may ask over there. So long! Will be writing a detailed email *to ya! Bye!*”

Sharmaji had been shouting his answers over the phone, in the belief that a long-distance call, particularly from as far away as California, required extra lung power, and also to convey his eager compliance to Vijay. His wife came out of the kitchen with a frown.

“What do you mean by telling them it is easy to arrange a Brahmin cook?” she asked indignantly. “There is no Brahmin cook available anywhere in town. And why do they want a Brahmin all of a sudden after eating cows and pigs and God knows what else in America? Hypocrites! A Harijan cook will do for them. These NRIs are worse than Harijans. I warn you, you will not find a Brahmin cook, and don’t you send my sister chasing out for one, she has enough troubles of her own!”

Sharmaji rarely took his wife seriously, and he ignored her this time as well. It was important to make Vijay Kumar’s parents happy and comfortable, for the Silicon Valley prodigy had exerted himself in forming a Friends of SERVICE Club, who sent over an annual Divali donation to the Society, which while not much, could be freely used by Sharmaji to meet his many incidental expenses. Further, Vijay Kumar had also paid his way over a couple of times to talk to the group about development, enabling Sharmaji to visit Hollywood and Disneyland.

In short order, Sharmaji had booked a suite in an apartment hotel with a nice view of the city, and also engaged a taxi and driver for the month, and paid an advance. He asked a few friends, and they promised to line up Brahmin cooks for him to interview. But days passed, and no one turned up for the job. He rang Vasanti, who ran a training institute for destitute girls.

“Sharmaji! Your requirement has been at the top of my mind for the last three weeks,” squealed Vasanti in her usual excited manner. “First I wanted only middle-aged men or women, you know, respectable types for your foreign guests, but they are all engaged. You see, the problem is that everyone these days wants a *permanent job*, no one is available just for a month. And as you know, young girls will not do, you know what I mean? They are *mad* about going to America! God knows what wiles she may use with a susceptible older man, and having been in America, with its constant high-pitched focus

on sex, most probably he may also want *a fling*? No, no, I know they are not like that, but neither you nor I want to be caught up in any nasty business, paternity suits, cases of sexual harassment or worse, you know what I mean? I know a lot of very respectable poor Brahmin families in the districts, and I have asked my contacts to select a very dependable type, famous in cooking, and send him over for a month. All right? Don't worry, everything will be all right."

Sharmaji's sense of confidence drained out completely on the Monday before the weekend of the couple's arrival back in India. He tried Vasanti once more, but her assistant after some hesitation told him 'madam was not available.' He tried all his friends in turn, and he got several and varied reasons why Brahmin cooks were just not available. The season was wrong, said one, and everyone was busily engaged making large orders of sweets. A widow was available but she flatly refused to stay for a month in a faraway apartment with people she did not know. Yes, it was true that Sharmaji had been most generous in saying Americans would pay whatever was demanded, but money was not so much an issue as jobs; now if he could have promised a job in America for a university-educated son, a Brahmin cook could have been arranged within an hour, in fact there would have been a mob outside his house. Good cooks were always available, but Brahmin cooks on the loose were a scarcity, they were going into so many other professions, now if the younger fellow from silicon valley was coming, a Brahmin call girl, top of the line, Iyer, Iyengar, Niyogi, Hebbar, could easily have been arranged. Sharmaji rang off. All this was not helping. He thought for a bit. He dared not ask his wife – that channel of information was out. But why should he only ask other fellows like himself? Why should he not consult a cook to find another cook of his choice? This struck him as a very good idea, and he walked out of his apartment with resolution.

But the problem was that he did not know any cooks, and he would once again have to consult all his friends over the phone. None seemed to know any cook on a first-name basis, except Wajid, who was most reassuring. "You want a Brahmin cook, you will get a Brahmin cook before the day is out. During the days of the Nizam there used to be a whole retinue of Brahmin cooks to make local delicacies. Someone in their families must still be cooking. Come around at four, and I shall take you to the spot."

As evening was falling fast, Wajid drove Sharmaji round to see Iqbal, whom Wajid said he always consulted on any matter of importance concerning food. A pleasant half-hour was spent in Iqbal's establishment, tasting various dishes even as they were being prepared for some party Iqbal was catering for that night.

"Sahibs, the person you want is Pandit Ram Charan's eldest son, Ravi, who failed all his exams, but remains a cook, a truly gifted cook. The poor fellow is out of work, for he has the habit of taking a little bhang after work... who can blame him? But people don't understand, they say he misbehaves, and won't believe that he is very dutiful and respectful of elders, only under bhang, he may joke a little, they should take it easy..." Sharmaji quickly intervened to say that while he himself saw no harm in a little bhang, these people were from America, had forgotten all about India, and he wanted to be hundred percent secure about anyone he put in that apartment for a whole month.

Iqbal sighed, and said he didn't know how to help old Pandit Ram Charan's son, Ravi, if even old Hyderabadis saw anything amiss in some casual taking of bhang after work, for relaxation. Could Sharmaji fix him up with a job in his Society, or recommend Ravi for some government posting? Sharmaji abjectly promised to help old Pandit Ram Charan's son Ravi in any way he could, but could Iqbal think of anyone else?

“Why not? *Arre*, it is not as if we have driven out all pandits!” said Iqbal indignantly. “Every *mohalla* in the olden days had a *bahman-ki-galli* – they were very particular, no sweeper could enter from the front. Their womenfolk would wash the street themselves. But we Muslims were always treated as brothers. But now, all those old streets and customs have been broken up, families have moved away, the thinking of young people has changed!”

Wajid and Iqbal lamented over the failings of the younger generation for a while, with Sharmaji joining in, in a desultory manner. He veered the conversation round to his urgent need of a Brahmin cook. “You just don't want any Brahmin cook, you want a superior Brahmin cook,” said Iqbal with conviction. “These are special friends from America. They are returning after God knows how many years, after eating only eating hamburgers and chips. They are looking forward already to tasting the dishes they relished in childhood! Where are they from? What is their native-place? You don't know, Sahib? *Arre*, that is the first thing we should know, otherwise how can we find a suitable cook? Go home, call your friends, find out these particulars, and we will surprise them with an excellent cook who will make the dishes their grandmother used to make!”

Thus reassured, Sharmaji returned home in better spirits than he had left it. He tried to call Iqbal several times during the week, but the master chef was not to be found. When he heard from Vijay Kumar that the old couple had taken off from San Francisco airport, he had himself driven straight to Iqbal's place, without even waiting to consult Wajid. Iqbal refused to hear a word till he had refreshed himself with a cup of tea, some *samosas* and *kachoris*, and a dish of *phirni*.

“Your guests are coming day after tomorrow, no problem,” said Iqbal with a big smile. “We will give them such a cook, they will remember even after death, for a few lifetimes. Call Rashid! Rashid is like my own son, I have personally taught him everything I know. I will do this big thing for you, the close friend of Wajid *mian*. I will give them Rashid for a whole month, never mind my problems!”

Sharmaji felt he was in a nightmare. Controlling his temper, he said what he wanted was a *Brahmin cook*, they wanted a *Brahmin cook*, no one other than a *Brahmin cook* would do.

“You mean, your guests want a Brahmin, a person of *Brahmin caste*, not someone who can do Brahmin cooking,” said Iqbal with scientific precision. “This puts a very different problem before us. Why did you not say so in the first place?”

Again, with great difficulty, Sharmaji said evenly that such was the case, and he was looking to Iqbal to help him out, and that too urgently, since the couple were already in their plane headed east.

“ You should have made things clear a long time ago, “ said Iqbal slowly. “ But even if you had, no one could have helped. There are no Brahmin cooks available. Times have changed. Did I ever tell you that in the days of the Nizams we had so many Brahmin cooks... I did tell you? Well then, you see how times have changed for the worse.”

They sat in silence, Iqbal lost in deep thought, Sharmaji in the hope that even now at the last minute Iqbal might find a solution.

“ I know what we will do, there will be no problem,” said Iqbal beaming at Sharmaji. “ I will still send Rashid to them, no, listen, but we will call him Ravi, son of Pandit Ram Charan. Who is to know? And in fact, Rashid was as much a son to Panditji as to me. He will be dressed like a Brahmin, he will wear the sacred thread, he knows the rituals, he saw Panditji perform them in his kitchen so many times. Don’t worry, we Hyderabadis never let each other down. Everything will be all right!”

But Rashid refused to accept the masquerade at first. “ What do you mean it is against religion!” thundered Iqbal. “ *Arre!* Idiot! This is acting! It is like the *Natak* you did at school – you once acted as a girl, then, did you lose your balls? It is not against religion. You are pleasing some old people, you will give them food. You will do good, and Allah will be pleased. What do you know? I know, I am a five-times *Namazi*, not like you youngsters, drinking, seeing cinema, immoral films, when you should be reading the *Koran Saharief*. I take full responsibility. You are my son, and you will do as I say.” There seemed to be nothing further for anyone to say.

When Vijay Kumar’s parents left for America, his mother was profuse in her thanks. “Sharmaji, I will tell Vijay how you looked after us both like a dear brother. A blood brother could not have done more. It brought back so many happy memories of the old days. Best of all was the young Brahmin boy you found for us. He cooked all our traditional dishes to perfection. And so religious, it brought back our faith in the motherland! Every morning he in his wet *dhoti* would clean the *puja* room, light the lamps, apply *kumkum* to the Gods, take *arthi*, do everything without being told. A very good religious boy. My husband offered to bring him to America to help our local *pujari*, but the boy’s old mother is dependent on him, so we gave him five-thousand rupees as a gift, and advised him to learn Sanskrit. I think they are calling our flight. Thank you very much once again. Bye! Bye!”