

He sat the lone man, on the other side of a long curved desk at the Global Sisterhood Centre. It was housed in an old bungalow with peeling white-washed walls, old-fashioned flagstone-flooring, and was shaded by large spreading trees, which were home to a cacophony of quarreling bird colonies. Five of the most powerful women in the country sat facing Sharmaji, and while they had all been frigidly polite, none smiled at one of his inane remarks, but acknowledged his apparent discomfort with a quick compression of lips, and neutral looks.

“ Mr. Sharma, it is good of you to come at such short notice. All of us wanted to meet you, *and help*, if at all possible,” said Professor Radhika, the current chair of the center, but he was left in no doubt that there was not much likelihood of help from any quarter to a fellow like him. She was a large powerfully-built woman, dressed conspicuously and plainly in a simple cotton sari, and gloried in her thick shock of short graying hair, styled in a carefully casual manner. She shook her head absently, letting thick gold earrings glitter among the gray curls. “We have been asked by the Ford Foundation to help them assess your work and the work of your Society, to progress your application for corpus funds – we are being very frank about this, Mr. Sharma, because as you may know the Sisterhood Centre works in a *transparent manner*. The traditional male approach has been to play power politics; we *oppose* such attitudes in politics, in the workplace, in the home, and in the working of civil society organizations. Women – please don’t think I am making an essentialist statement – suffering through socially experienced *oppression* have learnt to be transparent, to be inclusive, to be *supportive*. That is why we requested you to meet with us, so that jointly we may come to an understanding.”

Sharmaji with several years of experience in dealing with soft-spoken high government officials had no doubt in his mind that he was in the dock as an accused, not just in an ordinary trial, but in an inquisition, in which the least slip on his part could lead to a disastrous fate. Even if the large funds he had been angling for, for the last few years, could be forfeited, a damning reflection on his work, casually passed on over a cup of tea in any corridor of power by any of the women who sat opposite him, would ruin his work for good.

“ Professor Radhika, it is my good fortune that you are all taking a real interest in my humble work,” said Sharmaji unctuously. “ I am very glad that thanks to Ford I shall receive the benefit of your advice. I wouldn’t have had the courage to disturb you by myself.” He laughed deprecatingly, and saw that he had won no support from any of them.

“ Frankly, Mr. Sharma, we have *no interest* in the working of an NGO,” cut in Dr. Krishnakumari, who would be shortly retiring as Director of the National Education Foundation of India. “ In my opinion, *my personal opinion*, no civil society organization should be permitted to receive foreign funds, creating a back-door entry for imperial interests, and destabilizing our democracy, because frankly, none of you are accountable to the people, are you?” She had been a card-holding member of the Communist Party of India for over three decades, and had risen to her high position, partly through her family connections, and partly because her male superiors dreaded a whiplash retort from her tongue. She was tall and thin, wore thick glasses, and was defiantly dressed in a rich brocaded silk sari, for as she reminded everyone, she would *support* Indian weavers, and she *celebrated* Indian traditional crafts. “ Though I personally have *no* expectations of public benefit from the work of NGOs, I do insist that certain minimum standards be followed.”

Sharmaji was now sure that they were all in the know of some damning incident, some allegation, some malign rumour, but he was unsure which one, and he started to sweat that he may be unable to think of a glib riposte. “ Mr. Sharma, your style of functioning is unacceptable to us, as a group of *concerned women*,” said Mrs Janaki Prasad Rao, a beautifully preserved woman, who gloried in her marriage, her husband’s fame as a Supreme Court advocate who took up *pro bono* cases in the public interest, her wonderful son’s wonderful ad agency, and the intelligence of her peerless dog. “ Women cannot be denied their rights, their right to equality, their *right to sit at table*.” She wiped away a tremulous tear. “ You totally control your organization. You do not share power with women. You must learn to do this, dear Mr. Sharma, it will do you good, you will find women so supportive.”

Sharmaji heaved a non-transparent sigh of relief. So that was it. He was enough of a politician to know that an approach had been made. “ Madam, I couldn’t agree with you more! SERVICE would have reached the skies under women’s leadership! But the work is tedious and humble, and I have failed in my attempts so far to secure even the passing interest of any lady whose guidance we have sought. Now that you are taking an interest, my burden is lifted. Thank you! Any of you are welcome to join the Board, or all of you, why not! I will step back and be happy to be of any service, at your command.”

“ We are all very busy people, and we do not have the time to work with any NGO,” said Jyotilakshmi Devi, former minister for women’s welfare, and currently a member of parliament waiting for a berth. By her irritation she showed plainly she understood Sharmaji’s game-plan. She had been whispering into her cell-phone till that moment, and clearly was unhappy with both conversations. She spoke rapidly, in tones she used to harangue junior bureaucrats: “ It is for you to find suitable women members for your Board, and not to have us solve your problems. Why have you not done so, so far? All right, whatever the reasons, how are you going to improve matters in the near future? We have to say something to Ford – I would like to say something positive, for after all it is investment in our State – but my hands are tied when you are not gender sensitive at all! How can you ignore the gender question? Do you know how many dowry deaths occur every year because men, even top officials, are insensitive to the gender issue?”

Sharmaji’s stuttered explanations that all his decisions were taken only after detailed consultations with village women was brushed aside as of no consequence. The fifth woman at the table was a young person, a Dr. Sujatha, an anthropologist from Stanford, who had moved back to India with her American husband, the regional head of Times Warner News. She broke in rather mutinously: “ It is not a question of explanations about past issues, Mr. Sharma,” she said in Americanese, “ it’s more a matter of taking farsighted action to prevent violence on women. And when I say *violence* mean *violence*. When women are not in power, or even consulted, violence inevitably happens against women. Even this Centre has lost a member to domestic violence, despite all the support it offers, right, Radhika?” She reached over and touched the older woman’s hand compassionately.

“ Nothing could be done to help Mythili,” said Professor Radhika with another impatient shake of her head, which shot light off the gold earrings. “ She was obsessed with her man! I warned her how it would be. I told her to leave him immediately, and we would form a support group to fight the divorce, custody of the child, money for maintenance, everything. But no! She wanted to give him another chance, a third chance. Some women just crave to be *objects*! Nothing can be done for them, we just have to move on.”

Dr. Sujatha would not let go. “ Well, I don’t know. Women also have a right to love, and some men are weak, they need support too. Maybe if some of us had stayed with them, while they were going through their crisis...”

Dr. Krishnakumari burst in with an incredulous look. “ Who has the time, my dear? We all have our own hassles in our own homes, we just sweep it under the carpet and carry on. There are the larger public issues to contest, like enveloping globalisation. My God, it is wrecking the country, everyone is all that much poorer than ever before, and in the middle of all this, we cannot be perennially babysitting a stupid – I am sorry, but I must say it – a stupid woman!”

“ Though none of us can sit in on your Board, Mr. Sharma, perhaps, we can recommend one of our subordinates,” said Jyotilakshmi Devi with decision, switching off her cell-phone. “ I think Vijaya could monitor gender concerns in your organization. Call Vijaya!” An attender women hanging about near the door scurried away. In a few minutes, Vijaya, a thin middleclass woman, in a cheap blue printed nylon sari, came in and stood nervously before them. Professor Radhika explained what was required of her in measured tones. Vijaya said meekly that she had two small children, and having to go all the way to the SERVICE offices would add two more hours of travel daily, and she wouldn’t be able to manage. No, her husband could not take turns, since he was a clerk in a machine tools factory and left home at six in the morning.

Professor Radhika smiled across the table at Sharmaji. “ You see, how the system traps a woman into nothing short of serfdom, with husband, family, children, and then the man nowadays expects her to bring in a second salary! What can one do? It’s so disheartening. Right now I am working on a paper I expect to read at the Tokyo Conference next month which I am calling ‘ Sisterhood: Hearing the Truth; Responding with Commitment!’” The attender came in carrying a cell-phone and said it was from *peddamma*. With a frown Professor Radhika picked up the phone, and appreciably raised her voice: “ *Amma!* I cannot do anything, right now! I’m in the middle of an important meeting! No, I can’t leave and come home! You have had these pains before, that’s because you eat too much. You must begin to remember that you are in your eighties, and not eat pickles! Well, what do you want, pain or pickles? All right, when I come home this evening – it will be late – I will bring home some fresh curds, yes, I was in a hurry and I upset what we had. Or... get up, slowly, and set some for yourself!”

Professor Radhika gave her gold earrings another shake through her curls. “ I cannot stand it! That’s my mother-in-law! It’s really a power game she plays with me, but I give it back to her tit-for-tat. The old goat can very well look after herself, but she never tires of trying to make me into a docile *bahu*, Me?! You know why she is playing all this drama? She overheard me, I am sure, say I was planning to go and see this new Aamir Khan film. Well, I will see the film, and she can wait, she and her pains!”

Jyotilakshmi Devi turned to the waiting Vijaya. “ Remember the first discussion we had when we employed you? You are required to be of general assistance at the Centre in developing platforms for Sisterhood. Working in Mr. Sharma’s office develops such a platform, *in a new area*. You accepted the job, and you have got to do what we tell you. It is your responsibility to solve your household problems. Understand?” Vijaya nodded uncertainly.

Mrs Janaki Prasad Rao got up and embraced Vijaya tenderly. “ My dear, remember this is ‘sisterhood,’ and we think only of your good. Mr. Sharma, Vijaya will bring her children along with her to work, that’s all right? I knew it would be. Make available a cell-phone for Vijaya, Mr. Sharma, so if she misses the bus she can call and you can send round your car. Remember, Mr. Sharma, though Vijaya is junior staff, she is from the Global Sisterhood Centre, and she should receive all the respect you would show to one of us!” Vijaya hung her head. Sharmaji assented with a bland smile.

“These simple middleclass girls, they are such gems,” said Mrs Janaki Prasad Rao, after Vijaya had left the room. “ Girls like Vijaya personify the eternal values of our culture. Modernism has had a disastrous effect on what we as a people have stood for, for the last five thousand years! If Urmila were not my son’s wife, I would throw her out of the house in a minute. I tell her, ‘*dear, feminism is not infantile disorder.*’ Feminism respects the deep values we as Indian women have inherited – I am sorry, but I am an essentialist woman, I *glory* in our essentialism! Urmila wants the dear boy to cook her breakfast himself and serve her in bed. Where does he have the time? And all the money he makes for her, does she think it grows on trees? It’s infantile sex play, nothing else!”

Dr. Sujatha was frowning, and said somewhat churlishly she wished she had thought of having her husband cook her breakfast, but he made nothing but boiled eggs. Mrs Janaki Prasad Rao flew to embrace Dr. Sujatha and said they both could teach dear John how to cook real Indian food. Professor Radhika said, please, Janaki, teach my mother-in-law some good recipes, so she could have something interesting to eat when the cook went on leave, and Jyotilaksmi Devi cutting in acidly that it would be far more useful to teach the parliamentary cooks something decent. Sharmaji gingerly took leave of them all, and made his escape from the Global Sisterhood Centre.