

Instinctively, Sharmaji knew from the very start that he should not get involved, that it was folly to do so, and yet get involved he did— he put it down later, after wrenching, honest reflection to overweening pride, to ‘vaulting ambition.’ It all started that early February morning in his town flat, as he sat in his balcony, clad only in his banian and dhoti, drinking his morning cup of coffee and reading his morning newspaper. He was reading another report of a police encounter with Marxist-Leninist naxalites, with photographs of six young bodies stretched out in grotesque death among the bushes, when the door-bell rang. Thinking it was the maid-servant come unusually early, he went grumbling to the door, tucking in his loose dhoti, to find a somber delegation of human rights activists waiting at the door.

“ Sir! I am the least qualified to do what you are asking,” he said in a despairing voice, at the third repetition of their request. “You don’t know how much trouble I have with the police myself, whenever it comes to the question of receiving foreign funds. They are very suspicious, and my getting into the picture will not only not help your cause, but most probably I shall have to wind up my NGO!”

Veera Reddy, the ‘People’s Poet,’ as he was popularly known, was a slim man, with graying hair, and simple shabby clothes, who would pass unnoticed even in a small gathering, but when he spoke in meetings he commanded the instant respect of several thousands. He looked at Sharmaji with a level gaze. “ Sir, you have an established reputation in our country and in the world as a leader of civil society. These so-called encounters are nothing else than murder of young tribal and dalit boys and girls, who have taken to arms as a last resort. I do not agree with what they are doing; I never have; I want to bring about peace in all these jungle villages, where the government is waging a war. We are asking you only to be a member of a fact-finding committee, to help negotiate between the naxalites and the government. We have some hope now, because the ruling party’s high command also has said it wants peace.”

Though Sharmaji continued to protest for another hour, a vision was already forming in the back of his mind, of the glory he would be covered with if a peaceful resolution could be achieved of this intractable political problem. Even a Nobel Prize for Peace might come his way. His resistance to the idea weakened rapidly as his vision grew in depth and detail. He plunged into the peace efforts with his usual enthusiasm, and very much enjoyed being driven about in government cars to meetings in the secretariat, followed by tête-à-têtes with the chief minister, the director-general of police, and once even with the prime minister.

For a couple of months the talks teetered on the apparent brink of success, with much media coverage, only to break down catastrophically, followed by a spate of police encounters, which wiped out several groups of young naxalites. He was once again persona non grata with the police, an inspector from the intelligence bureau visited his office, and all his efforts seemed totally forgotten by media, which dropped him out of all sight. Grumbling and regretting his fruitless involvement in ‘politics,’ he went back to his rural centre to get back into the familiar ‘development’ groove. He found that the paper work he had neglected remained undone, and what caused him the most worry, deadlines

for submitting accounts, project proposals and budgets had slipped by without securing new funds.

One late afternoon, a week or so later, he was taking a walk along the dusty village road, composing an impressive explanation to his donors for the delay in communicating with them, of course highlighting the stress he had been under to resolve a national emergency, when an old, mud-encrusted white Ambassador drew up alongside, and two young men jumping out. They requested him to accompany them immediately to a secret high-level meeting of the peace committee. They could give him no further details, and he got into the car, thinking he might still retrieve some benefit for all the work he had done. The vehicle drove ahead at top speed, bumping appallingly over rutted village roads, even when darkness and dust swirled all around them. Sharmaji remonstrated, but the young men said it would just be a few minutes more, but it was a full hour before the vehicle drew up with a jerk in the middle of nowhere. Sharmaji got out on very stiff legs, only to be surrounded in an instant by half a dozen young men in olive drab fatigues. He realized with a shock he was a prisoner of the naxalites.

Unceremoniously, with no words exchanged, they hustled him into a decrepit jeep, blind-folded him, and thrust him to the floor. The rear metal gate banged shut, and they were off again on an even bumpier ride, his face bruised by the legs of his captors several times as the jeep careened down forest slopes, bounced over ridges, and once settled to twist and turn on the soft sand of a nallah. He was thankful when they stopped at last, but his relief was short-lived, as he was forced to crash through the dark forest at a pace he had never adopted, even in his youth. Rest came in the depth of the jungle, as dawn was breaking, a vile sweet tea was cooked over three stones, and then after ten minutes they were off again. When he sat down in protest, the leader unconcernedly pointed his automatic at Sharmaji and said he would be happy to kill him then and there if he wanted it that way. Almost blind with fatigue, his chest heaving uncontrollably, Sharmaji somehow rose to his feet and staggered on as fast as he could.

Hours later during a late afternoon rest, deep inside a banyan grove, a girl naxalite gave him some smelly, badly burnt pork to eat, and kneeling down, told him, not unkindly, that he had nothing to fear, and that 'no harm would be done to him illegally.' With that somewhat comforting thought he fell into a dead sleep, till being kicked awake and forced to start another rapid journey through the thick forest in the depth of night. Next morning, when he was gulping down his tea out of a rusted tin mug, the girl who had been kind to him pointed to a little stream below where they sat, and told him to shit, for later he wouldn't have the chance. Normally his bowels moved only after several cups of hot coffee, but he made an attempt, walking down to the stream with his thighs trembling with fatigue. As he unbuttoned his pants, he saw that the girl was perched on a stone, looking at him, her weapon at the ready. She laughed and told him to go ahead, she knew how men shat. He cleaned himself with water scooped up in the mug he had just used for coffee, and the girl laughed again at his grimace.

By afternoon they had reached a remote tribal village deep in the forested hills. It seemed at first glance to be populated only by the naxalite groups, most of the tribal inhabitants

having discreetly vanished into the jungle, except for a few older people left behind to cook food and serve. Most of the young people, lounged around, laughing, joking, or cleaning their guns. He was dumped in a clearing in the middle of the village. He sat nursing his bare torn feet; a sandal strap had snapped a long time ago; he had tried hopping on one leg, and then abandoned the other sandal also, and shuffled along on bare feet. His captors all had stout boots, but no one offered him a pair, in fact they had no spare pair to offer. He was filthy from head to foot; he stank; a grizzled three-day growth made his face feel stiff. In any case, the exhaustion he was in made the village, the trees, the naxalites, and the screeching birds swim round in circles as in an unreal dream.

“ Mr. Sharma, Good Afternoon!” said a voice in English, half humourously, and he looked up with a start to see a dark-faced young man, with a short clipped moustache, dressed in olive drabs like the rest, with a Sam Browne belt, holster and pistol, seating himself on a straight-backed chair in front of a small table. He was some sort of commander, and he glanced intently at a notebook while sipping a glass of water.

“ We can address you in English, Telugu or Hindi, whichever you are comfortable with,” continued the man. “ I chair this People’s Court, and with my two colleagues form the Panel that will go into all the charges laid against you.” Two other young men hastily sat down on either side of their leader, on upturned plastic buckets. Sharmaji stammered that Telugu was his mother tongue, and then the proceedings were conducted mostly in Telugu with a free sprinkling of English and Hindi words and sentences, whichever came to their tongues without effort.

“ You will address me only as Chairman,” said the leader or commander clearly. “ Remember this is a Court, a People’s Court. You can defend yourself. We do not believe in all that bourgeois farce of lawyers, and an anti-people legal system. But at this Court we will be fair, take your words at face value, and assess them against known facts. First, you will tell me all facts about yourself, your work, your activities, and why you decided to work against us, against the people as an agent of the police.”

Sharmaji was cross-questioned carefully, the commander or chairman, going back over his earlier statements, re-asking the same questions, checking his answers, asking for clarifications about any perceived discrepancies. Sharmaji realized he was fighting for his life, but in his exhausted state, try as he would, he could not be his usual clever self, and the words tumbled out of his mouth as of their own volition.

“ I am no agent of the police, or anyone else!” he cried for the umpteenth time. “ I was asked by Veera Reddy to help, to help save lives, your lives, and lives of people who are being killed in encounters by the police. I tried my level best, and I failed. That is not my fault – and I am no informer or agent!”

“ That is not the information placed before us,” said the chairman gravely. “We have strong circumstantial evidence that you are a police agent, and that you deliberately passed on information to help the police kill many soldiers of the people. I would advise you to be frank.”

Sharmaji broke down and wept uncontrollably, and a girl comrade was ordered to give him some water. In the interrogation that followed, the chairman showed that he had detailed and accurate information about whatever went on at the SERVICE center; he seemed to have knowledge about the petty fudging of accounts; the general misuse of programmes; and even about Sharmaji's secret relationship with Rukmini.

Sharmaji looked around wildly. How did they know so much? Surely this could be only a horrible dream? And then he saw Ramulu, his dismissed driver, looking at him in triumph from under a forage cap. So, the thieving, insolent rascal had become a naxal, and determined to have him killed, and why? Just for throwing him out of a low-paid job.

“ The facts as we know are not as you state. You are of bad character, and you run a bogus organization. Everything points to your being ‘a plant’ of the police. Cunningly involving yourself with our innocent bourgeois friends, you got a perfect chance to betray us to the police.”

When he heard this cold damning statement from the chairman, Sharmaji realized his end was at hand. There was nothing further to be done. He was too tired, exhausted, fed-up with this stupid life in which he had struggled so hard to make a living, gain a name, support a few people. Death was at hand, and he preferred death to living with everyone around him then, and everyone else he knew, with their stupidity, their arrogance...

“ Before we pass judgment, Mr. Sharma, we want you to realize that it is a just judgment. We are not murderers like the police, like your callous bourgeois society. We are Marxist Leninists, following the shining path of Mao Ze Dong!”

“ You are nothing of the sort,” said Sharmaji light-headedly, well past caring. “ You are just a bunch of ignorant kids, playing with guns, and after killing fools like me, you will get killed as well, without even knowing why you are dying!”

The chairman or commander looked at him with interest. “ As a bourgeois you can see the world only through a lens of false consciousness,” he said earnestly. “ We are not here to kill and be killed. We want to complete the New Democratic Revolution in India, cunningly thwarted by the Ruling Class and their political parties. These compradors after decades of pretence that they are nationalists have now become open lackeys of America in its re-colonization of the world. Our hammer blows are aimed at that principle contradiction between the poor of the third world and the new imperial power.”

“ You don't even know what is the principal contradiction,” laughed Sharmaji weakly, almost enjoying yourself. “ You speak like a bourgeois professor, full of empty theory. Marxism is all about material reality. Lenin and Mao created Revolution by knowing what were the real facts. Forget America and the bourgeois world. As far as you and your comrades are concerned the principal contradiction is between you and the police!”

The commander signaled him to go on. “ And you know what is the principal aspect of this contradiction?” continued Sharmaji in delirium. “ It lies in their superiority – not in arms, or courage, but in numbers, inexorable numbers. If you think you are like ‘fish in water,’ you are drinking up all the water, and you are flapping like fish on the beach, ready for slaughter.”

“You are just meaninglessly abusive, like any bourgeois, braving out the moment of your death,” said the commander judiciously. “ You have not said anything meaningful, or of material reality.”

“Oh, no? What is your understanding of the unity of opposites?” Sharmaji challenged. “ You confuse it with ‘One divides into Two, don’t you? You think that only means you winkle out who are your hidden enemies, don’t you? Wrong!”

“Well, instruct us,” said the commander in a level voice, as Sharmaji lay back on the ground, tired to death, with eyes closed.

“ Listen! Don’t think you fellows are the only ones ever to wish for Revolution,” said Sharmaji, levering himself up on his elbows. “We all wanted Revolution when I was a student. And I had an excellent history teacher, but you have only these badly translated pieces of paper – ‘the Unity of Opposites’ is a deep philosophical concept, a powerful Maoist mantra. It means whatever good you do, it will have a bad side, a dark side, and your strategy must minimize its effect always. You are trying to protect these tribals, but you are also driving them away in fear. They are the water for you fish, but all your water is receding fast in fear!”

The commander leaned forward to say something, hesitated, and then started again. But at that moment a series of low whistles broke out at the periphery of the clearing, and a new group sauntered in led by an older woman.

“ Greetings! Comrade Nehru,” said the woman, addressing the commander apparently by his nom de guerre. “ What is going on? A People’s Court? I know this fellow,” she added, looking indifferently at Sharmaji.

“ Vasantakka, Mr. Sharma is charged with being a police agent,” said Nehru standing up differentially in front of the legendary woman, and he rapidly told her of the charges laid in detail by Comrade Ramulu.

Vasantakka seemed mildly amused, though she was mostly disinterested in the business. “ Sharma was in jail during the Emergency and tortured. He used to be a firebrand in those days, till he decided he would rather be a bourgeois slob. That’s the fate of people who live in cities. Do what you like with him, but also make sure there are no hidden reasons for the charge against him. I am tired. I will rest for some time.” And with that pronouncement, with scarcely a glance at Sharmaji, she disappeared into a hut.

Commander Nehru went close up to Ramulu, and looked him up and down. “ You were trying to settle some personal scores by laying the complaint, were you not?” he asked

softly. “And do you know the punishment for making a misrepresentation for selfish reasons in front of a People’s Court?”

Ramulu trembled, and sank to the ground, clutching his commander’s knees. Nehru turned away abruptly, his mind made up. “Blindfold them both,” he commanded.

Sharmaji heard gun bolts being drawn back, and knew he was on the brink of eternity. He heard the shot even as he felt a terrific blow to his head, and he felt himself fall away, far away in blackness, into nothingness.

A splash of water woke him spluttering, he tried to lift his head, but then sank back, his head throbbing with pain. A tall thin man with a black beard was leering at him from on high.

“ Ah,ha! You have been visiting annalu,” said the man, “ Yes, it’s elder brothers’ signature all right. They always pistol-whip their unwanted guests and then leave them by the roadside for us truck-wallahs to transport back. Get up! Get up! I haven’t all day. You can come to the city with me, or sleep here, if you like.”

The truck-driver, and his much shorter cleaner, a lad in dirty black half-pants, Sharmaji noticed without curiosity, pulled him groaning to his feet, and into the high front-seat of the truck. The cleaner handed him a cup of tea as they started, a silver cut-out figure of the God Ganesh swaying in front of his tortured eyes. The truck-driver was a jovial fellow, asking him questions, and then without waiting for answers, launching into anecdotes, of the others he had rescued on the roadside.

“ They could have killed you easily. You are lucky,” he said sagely, as Sharmaji at last closed his eyes and fell into a fitful sleep. They were already in the city when he was nudged awake. No, he thanked them, he didn’t want them to take him anywhere. He would get down and catch an auto. The truck-driver left him with shouted advice about rubbing gingili oil into his sore head, and then fomenting it with hot water. An auto-wallah looked at him with contempt, but a customer was a customer, so with scant respect, he seated him, after slowly lighting a bidi, and they were off homewards. Sharmaji could picture his wife’s consternation when he got home, and her questions, and the questions of his staff who would stream in, and of curious neighbours, and the inevitable visit from the police. His mind distantly turned around thoughts of various stories he could concoct, of being too clever by half for the simple-minded extremists, or a tale of defiance, or of daring escape. Then, for the first time in his life, he decided to say nothing, nothing at all.