

Short Story

The Activist-Escapist

- N D Dani

The activist-escapist has a dual self or rather two selves linked intimately together like the two words linked in the title by a hyphen. He is strong on verbiage but extremely timid when it comes to action. Holding forth is his chosen forte. Ask him to step out of his forte-fort and he finds one or other excuse to withdraw into his shell. Anything is luscious fodder to his palate: politics, education, contemporary civilization, capitalism, Marxism, environment. You name it, he is willing to bite the bait. Frighteningly knowledgeable. Yes, that is the expression that describes him aptly. Once put on the rails he can go on and on with such ferocity and conviction that you are simply carried away. You feel ashamed of yourself for being so cocooned in your own little private world while the world outside you has so many things about which you are plain ignorant. Give him his favourite horse and he will continue to flog it till he can go no further. Give him the same horse again after a passage of some days and he will beat the same, much flogged and dead horse, to pulp with the zeal and whip of a freshly angry man out to inform and reform the world.

He loves to pick holes and when you point this out to him he silences you with the assertion that he has a mind of his own and never ever rode somebody else's bandwagon. He loves to ride his own bandwagon and loves to show this off. Not that he doesn't have a valid point to make. Many a times he talks enormous sense but he overdoes it and there lies the rub. However, it is the action part in which he is not willing to risk his neck. He loves to stick his neck out as far as he can stretch it but ask him to match his wordy zeal with action and he withdraws his neck into the safer zone of a refusal. If it is environment he will present before you an informed scenario of the consequences of the depredations on environment. Global warming, ozone layer depletion, fast depleting water table are not just words which even a school boy can throw at you. He is capable of explaining with precise scientific understanding what these terms mean and what they portend to humanity. With appropriate anger he will tell you that capitalists have drawn the entrails of the earth out to satiate their hunger for wealth. He will quote William Wordsworth, the poet from Cumberland, with gay abandon: "The world is too much with us/ Soon or late, getting and spending/ We lay waste our powers/ Little we see in nature, that is ours/A sordid boon!" You stand mesmerized by his memory, eloquence and messianic zeal. Twenty days later you happen to read in the day's newspaper about a protest march being carried out by a certain Save Environment group and you pick up the phone to inform the environment-activist friend about it. What is his response? "You see these protest marches are no good. Marches can not

solve the environment problem. Something more concrete needs to be done". You are surprised but you counter your friend: "But these marches do create awareness." Pat comes the reply: "Public is already aware about the degradation of the environment." You find your enthusiasm for the proposed march fading. You will need many more instances to discover that the activist-escapist is just like that. Activist in words, escapist in action.

He is the typical argumentative Indian. For every argument of yours he has an argument of his. What is more interesting is that he mixes the logical and the illogical with such finesse that first encounters can not expose his strategy to you. Your first encounters only make you feel elated at having met a truly concerned individual who has a penetrating insight into the most pressing problems of the day. Here is the man you were looking for. You love to listen to him analyzing the present day concerns with masterly analysis. Your admiration for the man continues to grow like the expectations of the novice politician who stood for election for the post of a corporator in the municipality and on the day of counting heard on the public address system that he was leading over his nearest rival. While he was basking in the first flush of anticipated victory confident that he would turn his constituency into heaven came the announcement that his rival had been elected. Your activist-escapist friend has the capacity of a lost municipality election to flatten your faith in his activism under the truckload of bricks of escape. He is a great admirer of Gandhi and lives out Gandhian simplicity in his own life. Electricity has been playing truant in your town and you and some of your friends decide to have a sit-in demonstration near the town powerhouse to draw the attention of the authorities of the electricity department to the plight of the town people. You rightly think that your activist-escapist friend is the best person to lead your group. He does meet you but excuses himself saying that demonstrations won't solve the electricity problem. When you remind him that this is a truly Gandhian weapon which Gandhi ji used so effectively, he counters you by snapping in your face: "Every thinker needs to be modified according to the changed times." Impeccable logic but employed at wrong time according to you and at right time according to him. He found his escape route with an argument and you are beginning to doubt the efficacy of your sit-in demonstration because you have great faith in him, thanks to his well-honed skill of cleverly hiding behind a façade of verbiage employed to pave the escape route for him. Recently I and a colleague happened to be in a small town in Uttar Pradesh. We had to catch a train to a place some 200 km away. I stood in a serpentine queue to wait for my turn but the shoving of several hands from the right and left side of the queue into the booking office window and the abysmally slow distribution of tickets by the booking clerk made my chances look slim. No GRP cop was in sight to check this melee. My train arrived right on the dot at platform no two and I was close to reaching the window. I was concentrating on the ticket and didn't see when my train left the platform as my view of my train was blocked by a train standing on platform no one. I had the ticket but my colleague, a grey haired man of fifty years, told me that our train had left

the platform. Our next train was six hours away and it was a passenger train. I could return the ticket and take a bus. However, I decided to lodge a complaint. Several other disappointed passengers told me that it was a routine practice there to open the window very late. I brushed aside my colleague's plea to forget the entire thing and to look for a bus. The station master in whose room the complaint book was kept didn't relish my idea but seeing me adamant gave way offering to help us in drafting the complaint. I said I could do this better than him and I wrote a long complaint against the railway services on that station including the GRP. I turned to my colleague to put his signatures as witness. My colleague was standing out of the room and dragged himself in at my call. When I told him to put his signatures he gave me a look that a goat gives to the butcher sharpening his knife. He did oblige me at last. He is a man who loves to hammer at the 'system' but would not raise his small finger to set things right in one's small way. This is the quintessential activist-escapist. Let me hasten to correct the impression, if any, that the activist-escapist type of person that I have in mind is the common rogue who uses words charged with high idealism to cover a deceitful interior. Yes, there is a breed of persons who can bandy about high idealism behind which they sharpen their axe and kill their victim whenever they have an opportunity to do so. No, my activist-escapist type is a completely different kettle of fish. He is fiercely honest and genuinely good at heart. He is genuinely concerned about the subjects on which he loves to hold forth. The only thing is that all his bravery is words- deep. If you scratch his words and try to find some bravery of action, he falls flat on the ground. He is timidity personified. His refusal to act is presented to the world in a highly sophisticated manner. Using all the sophistry at his command he will tell you that action is a useless and unnecessary piece serving no worthwhile purpose. His logic or the reverse of it is prompted by sheer lack of courage. The gap between his words and his deeds is not negotiated due to any duplicity in his moral make up but because he lacks courage to act. Let me explain this with the help of an illustration. The activist-escapist moves out of his house to cast his vote in the general election like a good citizen and after standing in the long queue under a blazing sun reaches before the polling officer only to be told that his name does not exist in the voter list. He returns home and after a few words about the inefficiency of the people who prepare the voter list puts the thing out of his mind. If you remind him that India has in place the RTI Act and ask him to complain through an application and ask the officer concerned why his name was deleted from the voter list, he shrugs your suggestion off. If you insist, he will tell you that the efforts are afoot to amend the RTI Act. He sought the escape route he wanted. You can never doubt his citizenship and his faith in the necessity of improving the democratic set-up of the country. At several forums he spoke about the need to strengthen the democracy in our country. However, others should do this strengthening part; his part is to rant, to suggest and to bemoan the poor shape into which democracy has fallen in India. His motto is: Ask me not to act, my action consists in my words. Sometimes he paints a terribly bad picture of things. Higher education has fallen into the hands

of sharks. Feminism has been high jacked by the capitalists. The communists are out to sell the country to the Maoists. Industrialization has ruined India and made all moral values disappear from our society. IITs have only produced first rate engineers sans moral values to be imported to the USA. At such times he is at his defeatist best. In these moments of self-induced depression no ray of hope seems to him to brighten the encompassing gloom. If you happen to suggest that it is better to light a candle than to rail against darkness, he disarms you with the exhortation, "Yes, that is what YOU people should DO." As for him, doing is his undoing. He is, in a sense, like Prufrock, the Eliotian chicken who can mouth high sounding intentions to himself but fails to deliver on those intentions when the opportunity presents itself. I say in a sense because unlike Eliot's schizophrenic Prufrock, the activist-escapist is ready to speak noble and brave thoughts loudly - may be from the rooftop - to anyone who is willing or even unwilling to hear him. Prufrock is a silent, withdrawn type who mumbles his thoughts to himself in his private fantasy. Also, unlike Eliot's character the activist-escapist has exposure over a much larger field of knowledge. Prufrock, as we know, had his exposure only in the erotic world before he lost most of his hair on his fantasy-filled head and his athletic arms turned too thin for the opposite sex. The activist-escapist has sublimated his baser (?) self into a higher self inhabited by opinions on purely cerebral things and matching vocabulary consisting of brave words. If you permit me to use the erotic metaphor more explicitly, I would submit that he is like a 'man' who announces his masculinity from a public address system, as it were, but if a woman dying to confront his 'masculinity', drags him into her bedroom - 'drags' because he is not willing - all that she can see, despite her best attempts at erotic stimulation and aggressive foreplay, is a perpetually drooping member. He would have told her only if he could: "Ask me not to perform, all my action is in my gurgling stream of words; none in my groins." It is another matter that depending upon whether he is aggressively championing the cause of affirmative action or building an escape route for himself, he changes his opinions with excellent sophistry. To change the metaphor, he is like the circus trapeze dancer who flashes before your unbelieving eyes from one hanging bar to another. If he misses the bar he can jump to the safety of the net under him and bounce back to his game. I suspect the activist-escapist in his higher incarnations knows what he is up to and loves to show his skills to the ajar-mouthed audience of his trapeze dance.

He dons three hats: defeatist, activist, escapist and like the clown in the circus can juggle his hats with such practiced alacrity that you do not know whether to admire him more for his skill in juggling or shout at him that he is a hoax. You are a mix of opposite feelings. You admire him and you are angry with him. You may decide never to speak to him because he is a wordy hoax of sorts but the next day you find your feet going in the direction of his house to listen to him and to stare at his knowledge and his masterly analysis of facts, events, behaviour.

That is your activist-escapist. You love him now, you loath him an hour later, only to fall in love with him again.



Book Review

Basavaraj Naikar: *The Frolic Play of the Lord*, Authors Press, New Delhi, 2010, Pp.180+x. Rs.475.

Book Review: **Chandrashekharaiiah**, Retired Professor of English, J.S.S. College of Arts & Science, Mysore, Karnataka

I have just read *The Frolic Play of the Lord*, an English translation of Chamarasa's (A.D. 1450) Kannada classic *Prabhulinga Lile* by Dr. Basavaraj Naikar in two sittings and felt so deeply influenced that I literally waded through each chapter or book in a quick succession. The visuals of the known and the unknown, the phenomena and the Noumena, the mundane and the spirituality, certainty and doubt, attachment and detachment, gross and the subtle and illusion and reality presented here as woof and weft of all the characters are both general and particular. The character of the mighty Allama who literally sculpted and blew life into the great ones like Basava and others sweeps across the work as an unparalleled colossus. In this work of twenty-five *Gatis* or Books Chamarasa's Allama is the quintessence of the spiritual glory as conceived by the best minds in Virasaiva epistemology. And those who are familiar with Chamarasa's original have enough reason to go on record that this excellent translation by Naikar in the form of exquisite prose-bits reflects the original in all its myriad spiritual colours and hues. The second priority of the translator seems to have arisen from his desire to explore the possibility of presenting Allama to our own time with all the facets of his multi-dimensional effulgence and yet simplistic spiritual persona. From this point of view *The Frolic Play of the Lord* is as much a reader's delight as it is of the translator. Retaining much of the subtleties of the old world aura of Virasaiva religion, philosophy, theology and spirituality, the work as such is a graphic narrative that in the hands of the translator has achieved a rare synthesis in terms of a reflective scripture that in its unhurried pace make a distinctive spiritual sense of the characters portrayed here. The story of *The Frolic Play of the Lord* as told in the Kannada is in itself an innovative one and conceived imaginatively by Chamarasa. He differs considerably from the similar narratives by Harihara, Harishwara, Parvatesha, Marirachavattisha and others. The newness or the novelty that is conspicuous in Chamarasa's work seems to be the result of the shift occurred over the centuries in regard to Allama, who until then was understood to be one who has transformed himself from that of a worldling to the highest level of spiritual eminence. Chamarasa's work is a sort of magical narrative glorifying the *lilas* or the sports of the divine entity in action. The translator in his beautifully minted proso-poetic bits has wrapped up all that in a style that has trans-created those magical moments charged with powerful spiritual overtones unveiling the work's philosophical and spiritual grandeur. luminous suggesting there is everything in rising and nor in falling. In this context each episode is a lesson in spirituality trans-created by Naikar investing his own experimental readings into the Virasaiva lore.