

The Do-gooders

- N D Dani

“Hello! Mrs Kaul, how are you? Going for the morning walk? How is Dollar?” “Dollar is fine, except that he gets constipation these days too often, Mrs Jolly.”

“Oh! Is the poor chap not yet alright? I told you to enrol him in the Course. I bet you didn't. You are such a non-believer. But how do you know your dear Dollar is a non-believer, too? Do enrol him. We are beginning a new Course next Monday. The chap will be as fit as a fiddle,” Mrs Jolly seemed insistent. Actually, Mrs Jolly was a teacher in a spiritual organization that offered spiritual-cum-yoga-cum-this-cum-that Course and part of her job was to enrol as many people as possible. She offered these Courses as panaceas for every ailment. Dollar, Mrs Kaul's Doberman, was having trouble in clearing his bowels and according to Mrs Jolly there could be no better medicine for his constipated bowels than the Course of guruji. To include dogs among the beneficiaries of her Course was indeed a brave act of charity; brave because a Doberman may refuse to do what humans did at these courses and may express his annoyance more menacingly than through a bark.

India is a land of panaceans; it is a land of the people who carry panaceas on a platter and will offer them, whether you will have them or not, free of charge. Your natural instinct to have a thing free may lure you into trying out the panacea. Sometimes they are so insistent that they leave little room for you to back out of their field of aggression. They are no respecters for others' privacy. They are like Insurance agents or like share sellers or like sellers of wares outside your house gate. Your polite request to be excused only meets with a very polite but aggressive request to give one chance to their remedy. Few people, even when knowing fully well the dubious quality of their so-called 'panacea', have the strength to resist their penetration into their privacy. Civilization makes social cowards of us all.

Last week, I had an encounter with one such noble soul, fired by sheer philanthropy. Unlike Dollar, I was woken in the middle of night with abnormal noise in my tummy and a strong pressure. I ran for the loo. Water fell from my bowels in bucketfuls for many minutes. In the morning I went to see Dr Jalota, my family doctor. Dr Mehta, my colleague, at the College dropped in out of a desire to enquire about my health as I had taken leave on that day. “Dani, you take apples. You must be feeling weak with so much water lost from your body. Apples will give you instant energy. You know that adage about the doctor and the apple,” Dr Mehta, a professor of literature, offered panacean advice gratis. “But

Mehta saab, apples have iron and iron has the tendency to aggravate the problem if you have acute diarrhoea,” I protested mildly. “You are right, Dani. Apples have iron. You had better take trifla. Do you know trifla is the best remedy for stomach ailments? Trifla contains three things: amla, harr and bahera. Amla is called amrit in Ayurveda,” Dr Mehta was not a person to miss any chance of offering advice to the needy. Frankly speaking, I was getting irritated. I kept my cool. “Mehta saab, trifla is a strong purgative.” Dr Mehta quickly finished his tea and wishing me a quick 'get-well-soon' stood up taking leave of me, “Dani, you see, I have an appointment with the dentist today. I must hurry up.”

These do-gooders come in many forms. They are the cocksure type. Doubt never enters their mind, at least not about the advice they are proffering you. They are like magicians who can produce a rabbit from their hat the moment they suspect that it is a rabbit that you want. It is another matter that you may not be looking for a rabbit but some other animal or not even an animal but they have a mind that is made-up. Hamlet would have loved these do-gooders for their sheer self-confidence. The poor prince of Denmark was assailed with so many doubts that by the time he could make up his mind, he had been exposed to his enemy Claudius and then nothing could save him. Sometimes I wonder if these do-gooders act with the same confidence in matters dear to their own heart or it is that they do so only when a friend or a relation or their neighbour is in some trouble. Which thought makes me suspect their motive for being a do-gooder. May be, just maybe, they want to look so knowledgeable. They want to impress. Human beings have this instinct to seek attention. What could be a better way than to give advice gratis and win not just attention but the gratitude of the recipient? Probably they give advice out of purely unselfish intent and it is uncharitable of the recipient to attribute motives to them. The problem is that their advice is many a time not just unnecessary but more than unhelpful. It can land you in grave trouble. One of my senior friends once became a victim of this. He is a chronic patient of dysentery and medicines only give him temporary relief. Once it so happened that he had a visitor at his house who promised to completely cure him of his long-standing malady. What did he propose to do? The visitor, known to this gentleman, said that he would wash his intestines thoroughly. No, you are right; you can't hold the intestines of a human being under the shower. The do-gooder said he would wash his intestines with saline water. My poor friend felt like a person who would give his right eye (or is it the left eye?) to get rid of a long standing disease. The visitor asked my friend to get a bucket full of water. He poured two kilograms of crushed table salt – it was brought from the market for the purpose – into the bucket full of five litres of water. When the salt was completely dissolved into the water, the visitor asked my friend to drink all of the five litres, not at one go but slowly. My friend begins his day with drinking one litre of plain water every day and drinking five litres of water, even salted water, was not much of a problem for him. The excitement began some minutes after my friend had consumed the salted water. His face swelled. His legs

swelled. His entire body swelled. My friend looked like a balloon filled with gas. The visitor was not prepared for this change. He didn't know how to puncture the balloon and get my friend back to his original shape. All that he did was kick his scooter leaving my friend to find his own devices to bring the balloon – actually his body – back to shape. I know the question that is popping up in your head is, “Why in the first place did my friend agree to drink five litres of water mixed with two litres of salt?” My friend is a professor of sociology, not of zoology. That's the first part of the answer. A man in trouble for long would catch even at a straw in the wind. That is the second half of my answer. The second narrative is still more hilarious and might have turned fatal to the victim. One of my relations had trouble in passing urine. He hadn't felt the urge for very long and that made him a little anxious. He called his brother-in-law (his wife's brother) who, in his wisdom, took him to the biggest chemist shop in the town. “Jijaji, why waste money on a doctor. This is not a big problem. I know Sharmaji at Vallabhdas,” the brother-in-law sounded genuinely concerned but confident and driven by a strong desire to save his Jijaji's money. The chemist gave a certain medicine, the size of a small pea, to relieve the patient. After a few minutes of swallowing the pea, sorry the pill, the patient passed urine. He felt relieved and blessed his relation. Then he had more piss. Then more piss. Still more piss. Piss showed no sign of stopping. The patient now had another problem. He was not able to control passage of water from his body and dehydration started showing its effects on his mental functions. When we went to the nursing home where the gentleman was admitted, we discovered that he was getting glucose via drip and was still in a semi-conscious state. When I came out, I thought it fit to speak to his relation. The man was in a state of guilt-cum-shock. All that he said was, “How would I know that one small pill, the size of a small pea, would make Jijaji (brother-in-law) pass gallons of water?”

In America that chemist would have been hauled over the coals. But that do-gooder, the brother-in-law of the patient, must have, I am sure, landed many a friend in nursing homes earlier, too.

Academic Lecture *Par Excellence*

- N D Dani

“Mr Chairman, Sir, and the august gathering of learned persons and students, of both sexes, I thank you for inviting me to deliver a lecture on ‘The Historical Vision of Professor Jigeshwari Prasad’”. So began the learned Professor of modern Indian history from the nearby University of Qaabilabad. Let me hasten to tell you that the lecture in question was theoretically an annual event but in practice the organizers skipped years. The lecture was organized under the auspices of Ashish Kumar Foundation. Ashish Kumar was a politician of dubious reputation but his largesse in making a bounty of twenty five lakhs to some of his admirers at the college had led to the institution of a chair in his name. DrVidwanAdarsh had gone from department to department, in fact

from teacher to teacher, to request them with folded hands to attend the lecture on Professor Jigeshwari Prasad. His sweating efforts had not gone waste. The lecture theatre was full to capacity. True, all the audiences were not teachers from the Arts faculty and the students from the Physics department filled the large number of vacant seats in the rather large hall. The HoD of Physics department was a chum of DrVidwanAdarsh and going by the unwritten rule of chumming, he had asked his students from all the Physics classes to make it a point to sit in the lecture hall and to listen to the lecture on 'The Historical Vision of Professor Jigeshwari Prasad' with rapt attention. Some students who expressed their inability to follow a lecture in the history subject were simply told to do as they had been instructed. Fear of poor marks in the Practicals made them fall in line with the other Physics students who were at their docilest best. Seated on the dais were DrVidwanAdarsh, MrRaghunath Prasad - Professor Jigeshwari Prasad's son and a successful businessman - and behind the podium was the learned Professor JaishankerKhatri, the renowned scholar of Modern Indian History at the University of Qaabilabad. Professor Jigeshwar Prasad was conspicuous by his absence from the dais for the simple reason that he had taken to his heavenly abode twenty five years ago. "Who was Jigeshwari Prasad, Renu?" asked DrGarima in hushed tones. She was from the department of Chemistry and obviously had never heard this name before. Renu wanted to present a sober and scholarly, albeit hypocritical, front and was trying hard to keep her thoughts away from her ten-year old son who must have returned home by now. She had rung him up and told him that she would reach home today late and asked him to have his lunch which the maid would serve to him. Her reverie was broken at DrGarima's hushed question. "Must be some historian-fishtorian. How would I know, Garima?" Professor Jigeshwari Prasad was one of the finest authorities on Modern Indian History. His books were considered highly authoritative and were sought by the students of Modern Indian History in their postgraduate classes in the university departments all over India. Candidates preparing for the Provincial Civil Services and the Combined Civil Services exam for the Central Services lapped up the information and brilliant interpretations presented by Professor Prasad in his dozen books. The government of India had honoured this truly devoted scholar of history with a Padma Bhushan. Several universities in India and two universities from Europe had conferred honorary PhD degrees on him. He had worked himself to the bone and this had begun to tell upon his health. He passed away while he was in his early sixties. His learning sat casually upon his shoulders and he brushed aside references to his scholarship with a wave of his right hand and an 'Unh' uttered in a tone of annoyance to his admirers and sycophants.

"Professor Jigeshwari Prasad taught at Qaabilabad University for thirty six years and not even once did I see him return home before eight. The usher of the Central Library had to tell Professor sahib that it was time to close the library." The lecture on 'The Historical Vision of Professor Jigeshwari Prasad' was in progress. "Professor Prasad was of the firm

opinion that students should devote at least eight hours daily to the study of history. His work on the revenue reforms by Lord Cornwallis has not been improved upon till date," informed the learned speaker to the learned audience, of both sexes. He went on his merry-go-round. "Professor sahib always asked us if we had read a particular book by a certain author. He would not be satisfied by our reply in the affirmative. He would ask us to give us a quick summary of the central thesis of the book. If we stumbled, he would proceed to tell us about the book himself." Professor Khatri had been a close student of the famous historian and who else was more qualified to share the details of the late historian's likes and dislikes in the matter of food. "Professor sahib was extremely fond of roasted gram sattu and in the summers he always had his breakfast of sattu and a cup of hot milk before proceeding to the department." At this the historian's son smiled. "Raghu was only eight years old then," informed the learned Professor, DrKhatri from the University of Qaabilabad to the learned audience, of both sexes. (Raghu was obviously the nickname of the middle-aged manMrRaghunath Prasad sitting on the dais.) "Raghu and I were great pals. As soon as Raghu would see me, he would ask me to come with him and play cricket with him. He always liked to do batting. I, of course, did the bowling and the fielding," informed the learned speaker to the learned audience, of both sexes. At the reference to his fondness for cricket and his shots to the far corners of the large compound of the university bungalow allotted to his father, the middle-aged man sitting on the dais, smiled again. He remembered Jaishankarbhai was always out of breath running from this end to the other to pick up the little ball. "Jaishankarbhai did real hard work to get his PhD," thought the middle-aged man sitting on the dais. He remembered how his father used to sometimes lose his otherwise calm temper and throw Jaishankarbhai's notes at him because they did not match up to his expectations. The middle-aged man now clearly remembered the day he heard his father saying to his mother, "I do not know how to help Jaishankar. He is a complete dud. But he has been very good to me and he is very gentle. I don't want to give up on him. I am rather duty-bound because I accepted him as a PhD student." His mother who taught at a local degree college only said, "Yes, you are right. Why don't you ask some bright PhD student of yours to help him out?" Let me remind the reader that those were the days when a student chose his guide rather than the other way round. PhD entrance tests were not even heard of in those hoary days and a student won over a tough teacher in the university department less by real aptitude for a doctorate degree than by perseverance and regular visits to the teacher's house. Teachers are not just teachers; they are human beings, too. The Hindi proverb 'Atishayragadkarejokoyee/Anal pragatchandantehoyee'(If you rub the Chandan tree too hard and for too long/ Fire would emerge from the otherwise cold timber of Chandan tree.) was nowhere as true as in winning a teacher to accept you as a PhD candidate. However, later if the teacher discovered that in some case his tenderness had had the better part of discretion, he could do nothing. Professors belonged to the old

system of moral values and once a teacher had put his hand of blessing on a student, he would see him through. Jaishankar was a donkey in work but his fundamentals were weak. The donkey in him did succeed in enabling him to touch the fifty-four plus cut-offline in MA, essential to become a lecturer, but a PhD demanded more. He had made a mistake in choosing Professor Jigeshwari Prasad as his PhD supervisor. Jigeshwari had a reputation for driving his PhD students under the rack. He wanted his PhD students to work hard on their fundamentals before they even thought of putting a synopsis together. Several of his students had left him in the first six months. Jigeshwari was not an easy-going scholar. Though courteous to the core, he never accepted anything shoddy or below par from his research students. Poor Jaishankar sometimes came to the verge of tears at his plight. "They also serve who only stand and wait." Jaishankar's humility and capacity for driving himself under the plough finally did pay off what with extra effort from his supervisor. Today he was delivering a scholarly lecture to a learned audience - of both sexes - (to choose his own words) on the historical vision of his supervisor and his guru.

"Why this Kolaveri Di?" Renu's mobile suddenly broke into a popular Hindi film song. She looked up at the mobile screen and ran out of the hall to answer the call. It was her son on the line. "When will you come home, mummy? You are never so late," the boy was a mixture of anger and tears. Renu said some consoling words to the boy and decided that enough was enough. She could not stay any longer to hear about Professor Jigeshwari Prasad's historical vision from Prof. Jaishankar Khatri's lips. She called up her driver on her mobile. In twenty minutes she was home. On the way, she had to buy her son's favourite vanilla ice-cream to appease the child.

After the scholarly lecture on the historical vision of Professor Jigeshwari Prasad was over, Dr Vidwan Adarsh, HoD, Modern History department of the College, stood up to do the summing. "I have no words to thank Professor Jaishankar Khatri for his truly enlightening, illuminating and highly knowledgeable lecture. Blah blah. I cannot thank enough the learned audience who seemed completely mesmerized by Professor Khatri's delivery. I am also grateful to Shri Raghunath Prasad, Professor Jigeshwari Prasad's son, who saved the lecture from becoming too heavy with his smiles." Thus ended the scholarly lecture on 'The Historical Vision of Professor Jigeshwari Prasad'.

After a quick repast, the learned speaker from the Qaabilabad University took leave of the teachers. He invited Dr Vidwan Adarsh to come to Qaabilabad. "Come to the University someday, Dr Adarsh. Excellent research work is being done in the department. In fact, I am working on a very interesting project. I am doing research on the history of the Khatri's.