

EMPEROR IN DISGUISE

When Shiva Jois had nothing better to do, he felt like roaming around in the roads, lanes, by lanes and gardens of Bangalore. That was his hobby. This was like the kings and emperors of the olden days who used to go around the town in disguise to find out more about the welfare of their subjects. Jois was never stable at home after his retirement. That was not his breed at all. It was the case even when he used to work. He would never be at his table. Sometimes, he used to say in jest that the best job for him would have been in the Survey Department. But the job he actually got was a different one and he had recently retired from that too.

One day, about three years ago, he was walking around for want of anything better to do. He walked through a by lane of Avenue Road and came near the Balepet Square. He just stood there wondering how wide these lanes were, when he was a child. He felt that they had become narrow and congested of late. He remembered the Akkipet Road, which he used to take to go to school everyday. He remembered having seen the movie "Flash Gordon" when the theatre Vijayalakshmi was still called Excelsior. Jois lost himself in these memories and just stood there on the edge of the road. Suddenly a youngster appeared and offered his salutations to Jois.

Jois, who always got excited at the sight of people, enthusiastically got down to a conversation with him. "Sir, I have some very good stock.. it is a student.. she is young.. are you interested?" Who did not know the reputation of Balepet? But still Jois stood there knowingly as if he was unaware of what he was being asked. He started with an innocent looking question as to what the fellow meant by "stock". He went ahead and continued asking questions which probed deep into the young man's trade. How many girls does he command, how many customers does an 'agent' manage to find each day; of which, what proportion would be local regulars and what proportion would be tourists; how young was the youngest customer and how old was the oldest; with how many customers did a girl sleep on an average day; what was the rate for sleeping with a guy and what was the duration one was entitled at that rate; what was the commission the young man received for this service of finding customers; could he make his ends meet with such an income; could one bargain on these deals... and so Jois went on a barrage of questions one after the other. He also went to the extent to ask the agent whether there was any discount for senior citizens. The agent promptly told him that they would charge double for old people and just dissolved round the corner. Jois had on that day ensured that no other pimp would approach him on any day in the future, before he left that corner and moved ahead.

When he thought that he had got that day's quota of his 'medicine for joblessness' he decided that it was time to go home. He now somehow wanted to walk up to the main bus stand. From there, he thought that he would take a bus back home and use his senior citizen pass, which he had bought

after standing in a queue for hours. He used to exhibit this pass to all his friends very proudly. It entitled him to a concessional travel in the State run city bus service. He could now travel back home, from the bus stand for a mere fifty paise. When he was walking ahead thinking about his pass, his attention was suddenly drawn towards a heap of books on the corner of a small by lane. Shiva Jois knelt down and started examining each book in the heap. There was a book on palmistry. A book which had half of its title page torn and said only "Banasawadiya...." There was a novel by a writer called Rainer Maria Rilke on which some reader had given his critical commentary by putting a short note - "Most boring book". There was a book that claimed to give away the secrets of managing a trip across Europe and the United States on just five dollars a day. There were several copies of James Hilton's "The Lost Horizon" and Bertolt Brecht's "Galileo Galeli". Jois guessed that these must have been textbooks. There was a pile of copies of a magazine called 'Debonair'. As Shiva Jois found it difficult to bend down and examine the books, he just settled down on the ground by squatting. He started flipping through 'Debonair'. The shopkeeper observed this. "It costs five rupees sir" - he whispered in a mysterious tone - "there are books which are even more interesting". As Jois flipped through more pages of the magazine, he realised what he meant by 'interesting'. He shifted his focus from that pile to the next. He found a magazine called 'BM Ads' which seemed to carry classified advertisements of all sorts of perversions with contact addresses. Jois wondered about the numerous professions people resorted to, to make a living. He also wondered about the publishers of such stuff - what would their world view be and what would be their thinking about the life on this earth. He found that these books were fighting with the realities and paradoxes of life - there was a copy of Kuvempu's "Janapriya Valmiki Ramayana" next to Rilke's novel. Above that was Gopalakrishna Adiga's book of poems - "Battalarada Gange". Shiva Jois thought that ultimately even the greatest poets had to hit the footpath and it seemed unavoidable. Jois smiled to himself and stood up. When he was about to hit the road again, he found a heap of books, which were up for sale at the rate of fifty paise per book.

Jois again bent down wondering whether something could still be available for fifty paise these days (apart from his concessional ticket in the bus specially given only for oldies). There was a book that predicted the future of scorpions for the year 1977. A book of crossword puzzles, with every page filled up. "Well" Jois thought "then this was the pattern of books that are available at such a low price - it is only the future of history!" When Jois was about to leave disappointed, he found a book on numerology. Jois bent down again with his usual curiosity, tossed and turned the book and asked the shopkeeper for the price: "What does this book cost?"

"Fifty Paise, fixed." The shopkeeper responded.

"Is there an old age discount?" Jois cracked his usual joke, which was his staple conversational point ever since he had acquired the old age pass.

"You can't even get half a cup of coffee for fifty paise these days" - the shopkeeper said - "If you want, you can take that book - know your 1977 free, but I want nothing less than fifty paise cash."

Jois put his hands into his kurta pocket, fumbled around and brought up a ten-rupee note. The shopkeeper was furious. But poor Jois had only two coins in his pocket - a twenty-five paise coin and a twenty paise coin. Ultimately the shop keeper accepted defeat and put up his hands -

"Okay sir," he said, "that would be a 10% old age discount" and accepted forty-five paise from Jois. "Old age discount?" Jois said, "Is it for the book or for me?" He walked out very pleased at his own joke. He somehow did not feel like getting into the bus again to have an argument with the conductor about the ten-rupee note he had. So Jois - the emperor in disguise - decided to leg his way back home, pleased with himself for having saved even the fifty paise of the old age ticket.

As soon as he came back home, Jois opened the book on numerology and just sat on his bed like a child who had bought a new book of comic strips. He did not even care to either drink water or have food. He took Shankaranarayana's calculator and made a few calculations. Somehow, it did not work out fine. He took refuge in the tables that he had learnt by heart, when he was a kid. He took the birth date, day, month, year, and the number of letters in his name and then added, multiplied and divided them. He was convinced that it was not difficult to master this art. He used this newly acquired technique on Shankaranarayana's name. He felt that the chap would have been better off if his name had been spelt as NARAIN instead of NARAYANA. He also found out that the registration number of the scooter did not tally with his son's name - possibly that was the reason why he had a minor accident last month. He would have to ask his son to change his scooter as soon as he comes back. He tried out his newfound talent on the residential phone. Good! It was a lucky number! That might be the reason why they were not getting astronomical bills. It seems there was a telephone bill for Six thousand rupees in that Bhaskara Rao's house. One would now know for sure if one could just check his number with the fellow's birthday.

The affliction of numerology caught on to Shiva Jois very easily and it was something that would not leave him alone. He started using this skill on every conceivable thing in the house. After trying it out once, the probable connection between that thing and numerology would break. But Jois continued with his experimentation. Ultimately he could anchor down on one thing for all his experimentations - a lottery ticket which he bought in the shop next to Malabar Lodge in Chamarajapet, when he was on an evening walk that did it. That day he had bought only one lottery ticket of the Karnataka State

Government. Goddess Luck smiled on him the very next week. Shiva Jois got modest prize money of ten rupees.

From then on numerology became his profession and obsession. It was as if the only objective of his life was to apply numerology to the lottery business. He would work out the lucky number for the lottery with the date of birth or he would work out the numerical equivalent of the names of his family members, or the name of the lottery. He would work out the lucky number after the birthdays of all his family members. He would then, on a secret corner of the ticket write the amount of prize money the ticket should get, according to his calculations. If it were a ticket suitable only to his son, then he would just take two or five rupees from him, without telling him what it was for. In this way, Jois had found an activity that kept him always busy.

Every evening, Jois used to get dressed up to get on to the roads. Chamarajapet was a good area for him to buy lotteries and to take an evening walk. The postal code of that area 560018 added up to his lucky number - two. But the shop next to Malabar Lodge was not so lucky. It was on the third main road. He always bought his tickets in a shop on the second main road. He would go to that shop - looking for a ticket. He would take the rupee notes that he would give the shopkeeper, pick its number up and make some calculations at home. He would then look at his watch and add the time dimension. On several occasions, Jois came back empty handed because the numbers on the tickets available in the shop did not match his calculations. Otherwise, he would spend about half an hour brooding on the tickets before buying them. He would spend another ten minutes, feeling and caressing the tickets, once he decided to buy it. Several times he would be dissatisfied even at this stage, and return the tickets to the shopkeeper. During the first few days, the shopkeeper used to get irritated at this behaviour. Gradually he got used to the ways of Jois. In a few days Jois was famous all over Chamarajapet and was referred to as Lottery Jois. Shiva Jois had evolved a method even to look up the results of the lottery. He had another shop on a different street for that purpose. In these three years, Jois' method of calculation was getting to be more and more complicated with new dimensions being added. However, he had never got a prize again, since his first encounter with ten rupees.

One fine day, Jois decided that he had to give up this obsession, especially in the light of not getting any positive results in the past three years. Once he had taken this decision, he did not know what to do. He hit the road again. That evening, he walked through Krishnarajendra Road, Narasimharaja Road, Jayachamarajendra Road, the City Corporation, and Kasturba Road to reach Mahatma Gandhi Road. He walked along the Mahatma Gandhi Road and reached the Brigade Road crossing. At that point, he decided to turn right on the Brigade Road. As soon as he turned right, he found a shop selling lottery tickets. Jois could just not resist his old temptation. He just stood there and made a

few quick calculations. He suddenly realised that he had never considered the agency number of the agent, in his calculations all these years! This was enlightenment for him and he quickly made a few more calculations to add this dimension. He chose a bundle and picked up the third ticket from the top and paid the money to the shopkeeper. He had a nice look at the ticket once again, folded it and put it in his pocket. Jois had no doubt in getting a prize this time. He felt like the Buddha who had a sudden enlightenment under the peepul tree. He now just had this mature self-actualisation at having solved all the mysteries of life. Jois was so pleased that he slowly whistled to himself as he walked ahead. The loud western music that emerged out of Bascos drummed straight on his tummy. Jois stood there for a moment. He remembered that, in the past, they used to put up the photographs of the girls who danced, on the showcase outside. He observed that it was not there now. For a moment he wondered:

How would it feel to sit through a strip tease?

"The old man cannot give up his lust.. but he is too old and cannot... he does not even have the nerve to enter...." That was an anonymous youngster who was trying to tease and taunt Jois from the faceless crowd behind. Shiva Jois smiled to himself. He had forgiven the boy with all kindness. He turned around and walked towards the Mahatma Gandhi Road. When there was a green signal for the pedestrian crossing, he crossed over and went up the elevated footpath on the other side of the Mahatma Gandhi Road. He felt slightly tired. He shivered at the chill around. Today's walk was unusually long for his age, he thought. He looked around and just collapsed on the roadside bench with a sigh. He took out the lottery ticket from his Kurta pocket and rechecked his calculations. He looked at the newly constructed Barton Tower for two full minutes, without batting an eyelid. He was very pleased at having solved all the mysteries of life, so simply by just purchasing a lottery ticket that day. He folded the ticket and put it back in his pocket.

Jois was watching the straight line of speeding vehicles running continuously on the Road. The vehicles on the road suddenly became still in his eyes, as he sat there on the bench, appearing to have fallen asleep.