

I carry the burden on my head.....

March 14. I was on my way to office when the mobile rang. 'Bad news boss, Chari Saab is no more' Paramesh said. I had met Chari just a few days ago and I was aware that his health was deteriorating but I had not imagined that the end would be so near.

It has been thirty years since I joined this company. In these thirty years I did not notice any appreciable difference in Chari. There was no 'crown' on his head, he was bald then too, his manner of speaking assertively and emphatically did not change, his exceptional intellect and memory did not weaken a bit, and his booming voice, particularly when he pulled up somebody, did not lose its telling impact on the listener [many have experienced this and would readily testify in support!]. And his skill of summing up the essence in one sentence, what a speaker took half an hour to convey, also remained unchanged.

I joined this company as a Welfare Officer. I was sent to Head Office to meet Mr Chari immediately. I went to our office on the 5th floor of the 'Nirmal' Building. My experience in the previous organisations was that Head Office was a place to wait indefinitely to meet the bosses. But when Chari was told that I had arrived at HO to meet him, he did not keep me waiting and called me in immediately. Thus began my thirty year long association with him.

I was quick to realise that Chari was an extraordinary person; his exceptional qualities were immediately visible in his mannerisms which were, if I may be permitted to use the word, strange. He would slide slowly in his chair during a long discussion and you could see only the top of his head and his large eyes at the edge of the table. In such a position he would stare at you for minutes, introducing long pauses in conversations, making you very uncomfortable. Sometimes he would hold a foot ruler in hand and he hold it on table as if he was holding a mast of a ship. Sometimes you would get a feeling of being 'measured' when he engaged in intense discussions and also when he maintained long silence.

Chari's father was an advocate who did not have a particularly good practice, so Chari's mother insisted that he should find employment and not practice law. Mr D. Madhukar [alias Madhukar Dongargaonkar] brought Chari from Hyderabad to Mumbai, and to Asian Paints. Madhukar knew Chari as an outstanding boy who everyone noticed in Nizam College at Hyderabad. [Mr. D. Madhukar was our Company's Executive Director then; subsequently he became MD of Berger Paints]. Chari was appointed on a salary of Rs. 400/-. Before joining Asian Paints, he was practising law for a brief period. Chari's pragmatism was as strong as his legal acumen. The Directors of our company realised this in the very first month of his work. In those days all employees who received a pay of Rupees Four Hundred or less were required to be covered under the ESI Scheme. So the employees had to pay contribution and so did the employers towards the scheme. 'Please raise my pay by four annas [twenty-five paise now]' Chari requested the Directors, 'so neither you will have to pay contribution nor I. Both of us will save money'. This 'raise' was immediately granted!

Although Chari's pragmatism and legal acumen was much talked about, Chari's attitude was very different. It resulted in his taking steps which were very unusual. I think it is George Bernard Shaw who has said 'A reasonable man adopts himself to the

world and an unreasonable man tells the world to adopt itself to him; so it is the unreasonable man who is responsible for any progress.' Very few have lived life in the spirit of this insight; it requires immense self-confidence and grit. In an excise case, this company was fined just a token one rupee for a technical non-compliance, Chari moved the appeal court and got the order [imposing fine] reversed! 'I made no mistake, so why should I be fined?' he asked. In another case a corrupt excise officer kept demanding money and harassed a group company. Chari filed a complaint to excise authorities and an affidavit in court stating this fact! That to challenge the government machinery is to commit hara-kiri, is understood by even a school going boy. But it is possible to 'tame' them using law was shown by Chari repeatedly. 'No employee should feel helpless, his self-confidence must be nurtured, managements of the organisations must ensure this and I will not be found wanting in it' he said. He lived and stood for this and to my mind this was his greatest contribution.

Chari never liked people who placed a value on expediency and not on principles. They were called 'donkeys' in private discussion with me. The list of such people included dozens in numbers! I would comment in lighter vein, 'Sir, in your life there are only two kinds of people - a few who you are fond of and all other donkeys!' He would respond that everybody must have an opinion on all political, social issues of importance and they must make up their mind after study and thought. In his opinion this was an essential quality required of a good manager. Sometimes he would spot this quality in a worker. Then you would find Chari engaging in long discussions with him. The decades of sixties and seventies saw militant trade unions resorting to violence. Industrial relations were based on fear and suspicion. Chari presented a bagful of books on labour laws to the union leader and advised him, 'Read and study these carefully before you act. Leading workers without understanding and appreciating all relevant factors can only take you and the workmen on the path of self-destruction.'

The manner of forming an opinion on any subject is unique to each individual. Unfortunately many individuals do not make a conscious effort to form a studied opinion. Their opinions are formed casually while watching TV or discussing with friends. [Isn't the passivity towards our own development very shocking?] Chari had mastered all the three techniques of self development: reading, thinking and reflecting. He had developed a unique way: For example, he bought a book on Bhopal Gas Tragedy and read it. Whenever any good article appeared in newspapers on that subject he would make a clipping [he always carried a small pair of scissors in his bag along with a foot rules and a gum stick] and paste it at the appropriate chapter in the book. It was not necessary that Chari agreed with all the opinions expressed in the article as long as it was well written. The result was that the reader of his copy of the book would get to read all aspects of the subject and moreover, the developments subsequent to the publishing of book. Chari's annotations would make a two hundred page book look very fat. Whenever he pasted an article he flipped through all earlier ones. People who listened to Chari were struck by his exceptional memory. I think one little secret of his amazing memory was his habit of annotating his books. He had, in his library, well over six thousand books.

Books remained his passion through out his life. He appeared so unfriendly to people in office but he made friends with some book sellers. I have seen book sellers speaking to him with deep respect. A good book seller can spot a real book lover almost

instinctively. Go to 'Tripathi Book Depot' at Kalbadevi [near Metro Cinema] and mention 'Chari' and watch how fondly and respectfully they speak of him. While collecting books also Chari yet again showed that he was different from other book lovers. He collected some early nineteenth century books in London. Such books like antiques fetch high price. London city has valuers who determine the price of such books. Chari had some books that were valued at London.

Passion for the books must have made him convert one bedroom of his home into his library. It has one table, three chairs, a settee for siesta and hundreds of books on the wall cabinets. The library also doubled as his office.

I knew that some important work awaited us whenever I was called to his residence on a Saturday. We would work from 9.30 to 5 in his library. No fun, no small talk. Sometimes we worked on court cases and sometimes on the draft agreements. At about 1.30 in the afternoon he would say, 'I know you want to have a beer now.' After making this baseless but convenient charge on me he would proceed to take a bottle out of the fridge!

Chari was likened to a tiger in office. He too did everything to foster this image! The business decisions are based on cold logic and are impersonal. They create an image of the business leader as a person focused only on his goals and one who is insensitive. Employees within the organisation fear that the insensitivity may hurt them, which in turn distances them from the management. Chari understood this very well. The people management practices instituted by him might appear impersonal, but they became the foundation of good industrial relations. He never considered strike and lock-outs as a good measure of the health of industrial relations. While dealing with the unions he always took care to emphasise, 'I will disagree with you but I will not be disagreeable'. As a result the achievements of Chari have been unparalleled. Mazdoor Congress gheraoed all managers in 1978 to press for their demands. The situation was very tense. Chari reached the factory at 9 pm. The employees made way for him, stood on both the sides of the road, welcomed him and shouted 'Chari Saab Zindabaad'. I have witnessed this unbelievable incident in the strife torn days. In 1986 it became evident that Mazdoor Kranti Union led by Datta Sawant would call for strike. Chari knew Datta Sawant well. Chari warned him, 'You seem to be all set to call for a strike. Please bear it in mind that the law is against you and under such circumstances even the Government will not be able to intervene. You are on a suicidal course and you will cause damage to all parties. Do not expect any support from us'. Chari believed that stating your position clearly in any situation was essential to a meaningful dialogue. He was a lawyer at heart; if his actions were likely to cause you any harm or damage, he always 'served a notice' on you.

It is this quality of straight talk and authenticity that earned him the friendship of stalwarts like Dina Bama Patil, Dattaji Salvi, GR Khanolkar, Ganesh Naik, and Dr. Datta Samant. It is not as if there were no disagreements; the respect for each other never suffered.

We must appreciate that where the investors are at work they do not tolerate work stoppage even for a minute. Very often managements of such companies approach industrial relations from a position of weakness and adopt the policy of appeasement. It becomes essential then to be fair and just in other words it becomes essential to

represent the workers' viewpoint effectively to the management. Chari performed this role of employee champion very effectively.

Chari thought management was all about maintaining a balance. The equilibrium may be between owners and managers, or management and workers or between company and suppliers. Anybody who has watched the business from close quarters will tell you that this is like rope balancing. You have to strike this balance between towering ambition and justifiable demands. Although our previous chairman CH Choksey and Chari respected each other there was enough scope for differences. These differences were never personal but always about striking balance. I have always felt that such differences are like 'Samudramanthan', they are inevitable between two highly opinionated persons but the outcome is good, it is 'Golden Mean'.

Although Chari had onerous corporate responsibility, he had not lost the 'child' in him. Those who met him in his official capacity never saw this aspect of his personality which added colour to it. Many of us who attended cocktail parties at his residence would remember evenings full of fun and frolic. Chari would always be the life and soul of such parties. After publication of my book 'Kunchale un Kalam' at the hands of Surve, Chari invited Narayan Surve for dinner along with some others and I. [Narayan Surve, acclaimed as a trend setting Marathi poet, had just received MP Government's Kabir Puraskar]. Chari made the party very lively; Surve enjoyed the party and was full of praise for Chari.

While on his way to Mansarovar, Chari stopped at Jammu station. He called a coolie. Chari wore his red shirt, red head gear and the badge, and got himself photographed in Amitabh Bachchan's pose in the film Coolie. This Amitabh Bachchan starrer 'Coolie' was just released and there were his posters showing him as coolie. He got this photograph laminated too and it adorned the wall of his library!

'Sir, I will write an article on you and the title would be 'Mee To Hamal Bharvahi' [This is a well-known line from Sant Tukaram's couplet which means I will be carrying the burden of this universe on my head. I would have said this to him several times. I really regret that I did not write it while he was around. Chari carried this burden on his head from 1958 till his last day, with a sense of duty and vigour.

This 'Coolie' did not charge for his services, he gifted success and confidence to Asian Paints!

Vivek Patwardhan

