

A Matter of Life and Death **By K.S. Ramachandran**

The last time I visited my daughter in America, she told me about a reality show on television called “Survivor.” The show was about what happens when total strangers are marooned together in a hostile environment for close to forty days. They were expected to be resourceful and tough in meeting the challenges of coexisting under those circumstances. But instead of comradeship, what developed was a spirit of mutual suspicion and cutthroat competitiveness. This was because the person who “survived” successive elimination rounds stood to win one million dollars.

When she mentioned a few other details from the show, I told my daughter to stop. “How times change,” I said, half to myself. “The very concepts of winning and losing are so different now from the way I understand them...I have a Survivor Story of my own. Would you like to hear it?”

Of course she would, she said. This was the tale I narrated to her.

In the early part of 1955 I had just begun my career as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service. My job title was Collector; and I was assigned to the Sambalpur district of Orissa.

One monsoon afternoon I was working in my office-cum-residence, a palatial mansion built right beside the banks of the Mahanadi river. A bright afternoon sun streamed in through the west facing French windows, which provided a spectacular view of the majestic Mahanadi, flowing nearly a mile wide at that point. Even so, it was at relatively lower levels. The recently completed Hirakud dam three miles upstream, at that time the world’s largest, was to store a fixed quantity of water in its reservoir all year to test its strength. The river’s peak ferocity would not be unleashed before August, about three weeks away.

The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted my thoughts. It was Shyam, the Superintendent of Police. He said, “Can I come over to see you right now?”

I said he was welcome, and asked what it was about, exactly. He replied, rather mysteriously, “I must tell you in person. I will be there in five minutes.”

I was rather intrigued by the urgency in his voice, because it was not like Shyam to barge in impulsively like that. A short while later, he walked in with a big smile. “Are you not going to order a round of coffee?” he asked as he settled comfortably in his chair. I rang for the chapraasi and told him to bring coffee for both of us.

Shyam was a couple of years younger than me and both of us were then in our 20’s. Technically, I was his boss since I was the head of the entire district administration. But neither of us let that fact overshadow our good-humored friendship.

I noticed that Shyam was not in police uniform, which meant he was off duty. My mind was racing ahead trying to anticipate what he might discuss. Some crime that he had cleverly solved, perhaps, or some new law and order problem in the district, or perhaps there was friction brewing between our officers. I shuffled through different scenarios as I waited for him to speak. Never in a hundred years could I have guessed the fantastic personal adventure he was about to unfold.

“Ram, please close the door and ensure that there is no interruption. No visitors, no phone calls and no flitting in and out with files. I will be done in 15 minutes.” I was beginning to get a bit impatient, thinking that Shyam was trying to sensationalize

something trivial. But I decided to humor him. The coffee arrived and the office door was closed.

“You know, I escaped the jaws of Death yesterday,” Shyam declared abruptly and waited for my reaction. My face displayed the shock and disbelief he expected, though inwardly I still suspected he might be exaggerating. With my attention riveted, he began his story.

“Yesterday, Surjyo Babu, the Resettlement Officer, had arranged to take me to the submersible area of the Hirakud Reservoir. We were going to inspect a village to be evacuated later this month, to plan the logistics of the operation.

“We could not leave as planned in the morning because I was delayed by some urgent work. Surjyo Babu said that we could start at 2 pm. He recommended an alternative to taking the tedious route to Jharsaguda 30 miles away to the north, crossing the Ib river, and retracing our route south on the other side of the river to our destination, Rampella village. Instead, we would use a fair-weather road barely 10 or 12 miles from Sambalpur, and cross over at a point close to the village. I agreed, and we set out together in his Jeep.

“When we arrived at the river crossing, we were annoyed to find that the fair-weather road was under water. The trial filling of the Hirakud reservoir had caused this submergence. As you know, the Ib river is the first and nearest major tributary of the Mahanadi, a mile upstream of the dam. As it happened, however, we found a boat for hire on the Ib riverbank.

“Surjyo Babu suggested that we row across to the other side; he stated he was a good oarsman, and pointed out that the river was only about 100 yards wide at that point. I was rather nervous, not being much of a swimmer. But Surjyo radiated confidence. I lobbed several questions at him – Is the river very deep? Is the current too strong? Can you row the boat all by yourself as I have never handled an oar before? And so on.

“He just laughed and said, ‘You should stop worrying. It is my responsibility to take you safely across.’

“So we finally got into the boat and moved it. Immediately, it was evident that the current was much stronger than we had expected, as our boat sped rapidly downstream. Surjyo instructed me to manipulate the tiller so that the boat would drift in the general direction of the western bank. We thought we might land about a mile downstream and have to trek back to our target village. What a miserable nuisance, I thought.

“In between operating the tiller, I sat tightly clutching the sides of the boat. You will laugh at me when I say that all it takes to turn this tough police officer to jelly is to add him to water!” He paused for a sip of coffee. I assured him that I would have been much more frightened than he had been. My brothers always teased me saying that I swam like a steel crowbar.

Shyam continued. “In a few minutes, the boat hit a rocky outcrop and got stuck. It was just sitting on top of it. Surjyo tried to use his oar as a bargepole to push the boat away from the rock. When that did not work, he stepped out of the boat and onto the rock to let the boat rise a little. I was horrified and screamed, ‘Hey, what are you doing, don’t push the boat into the water and leave me floating around helplessly!’ I could see he was getting vexed. He said ‘Okay, you also get onto the rock. When the boat gets released, we can both jump into it.’ In a momentary lapse of better judgment, I climbed out of the boat

and onto the rock. It worked – the boat was released, but in a flash, it broke loose from our hold and was swept away by the swift current.

“So there we were, a couple of castaways, not sure whether we should feel the horror or the humor of the situation or bemoan our combined stupidity. Since the river was lower than the steep banks on either side, we could not see any villagers who might still be working in their fields. In another couple of hours, the sun would set and there would be nobody within the horizon for the next twelve hours. I felt a chill down my spine at that dreadful prospect.

“I yelled out a long and loud shout for help. Surjyo did not have the voice for such bellowing. My stentorian shouts disappeared into the vast emptiness and produced no echoes. Surjyo suggested that he would swim across and organize a rescue from a neighboring village. But I grabbed his wrist in a strong grip and told him in no uncertain terms that he was not going anywhere leaving me all alone on this wretched rock. What if he saved himself and simply forgot about me? No, I told him, we would be saved together or die together.”

Shyam paused and sipped his coffee pensively. I was transfixed by the surreal nature of this escapade. I tried to visualize the two of them sitting on a rock surrounded by strong currents sprinting and swirling around them, eyeing each other, one with suspicion and the other with irritation. Surjyo was an elderly gentleman, slightly plump and wearing high powered spectacles. Shyam was a graduate from the prestigious Indian Institute of Science at Bangalore. But he had an athletic build and looked like he might be a long distance runner. The taciturn Surjyo tended to keep his thoughts to himself. He needed to be prodded to get a reaction. But I knew him well enough. He must have felt that Shyam was a mean fellow, holding him in a vice-like grip, as though placing him under arrest. “So how were you finally rescued yesterday?” I asked.

Having disposed of his coffee, Shyam resumed. “To answer your question Ram, we were not rescued yesterday,” he said.

“*What?* Are you serious?” I exclaimed.

“Absolutely. I am describing this exactly as it happened,” Shyam responded earnestly.

“When my yells for help only resulted in a sore throat for me, I stopped. As hard as I tried to figure out a solution, I drew a complete blank. The impossibility of relief and apparent certainty of doom eclipsed all constructive thoughts.

“The sun was sinking and the light subsided into pale dusk, which deepened slowly into utter darkness. My state of mind in sympathetic vibration sank, paled and plunged into an abyss of hopelessness. Why am I being punished, I asked God. I have never intentionally harmed anyone in my life. People believe that police officers are required to be brutal, but as you know, Ram, I mainly use my booming voice to intimidate criminals! I wondered what the sin was, for which I was being punished. And if the worst happened, would it not punish my wife and other members of my family for no fault of theirs?

“I recalled an incident about a fortnight ago when I was ordered to evacuate a village that was to be submerged. I was instructed to move out the recalcitrant villagers that very day. I went with enough trucks to carry all of them with their minimum basic personal effects. The villagers bluntly refused to leave, although they had been told in advance. I tried to explain that their village would be submerged in a few days. But they

were adamant. I had no other go besides using minimum force. I ordered my constables to physically lift them one by one and put them on the trucks. They bundled two or three villagers on to the vehicles. Then the village headman pleaded with me to stop the forcible evacuation and promised to implement the order.

“I watched as the men, women and children picked up little clods of earth from their land, and mementos from their dear ancestral home. Some even rolled on the ground to carry the dust of their village to wherever their destination would be. There was a great deal of wailing and lamenting and scenes of unbelievable pathos. I may be a hardened police officer, but I tell you tears welled up in my eyes at that scene. I had to pretend that some windblown grit was irritating them, while I wiped them off. I wondered if perhaps all those anguished souls had put a curse on me. Was this my nemesis for inflicting so much sorrow on a whole village? But I was only evacuating them for their own safety!

“I suddenly returned to the present with a rude shock. The river was rising! It had come up above my ankle, halfway up my shin. In panic I called out-‘Surjyo Babu, is the water level rising?’ He replied in his phlegmatic manner ‘Of course. If only you had let me go at 5 pm I could have organized a rescue and we would have been at our home in Sambalpur by now.’ I was wild at him for this ‘I told you so’ attitude. But I could not show my annoyance. I needed him desperately.

“You will remember last night the moon rose late. And we were perched on this rock, with the water inexorably rising up and up, now almost up to our knees. We held hard for our dear lives to whatever holds the outcrop provided. And I also clung on to Surjyo. ‘What happens if the water level comes up above our neck,’ I asked him with utter dread. He answered in a matter-of-fact tone, ‘Long before that, we would have been lifted by the buoyancy of the water and swept away by the river.’ My grip on him tightened partly from terror and partly out of fury at his casual sadistic reply. Having reached the climax of mental torture, I felt numb, as though the sheer pressure of tension had detached my mind from all feeling.

“It seemed to me that only God in his infinite mercy could save us. I would not call myself a religious person. I don’t follow any rituals, nor do I visit temples with any regularity. But at this stage, with watery Death creeping up my legs, surrender to God came unbidden to my heart. I began recalling from the dim labyrinths of my mind, various prayers to Siva, which my mother had taught me in my childhood. Siva, described as ‘Mrityunjaya’ the conqueror of Death, could end or extend my life that day. So I started chanting loudly.

“To my surprise, Surjyo also joined me in the chant. For all his apparent stoicism, he also needed it to hold his spirit high. I remembered my wife and family. Surely God would grant my prayers and reunite me with them. Their piety and righteousness should cancel any sins I might have committed unknowingly. Such thoughts may seem odd in broad daylight while we sit here comfortably, but in that inky darkness, perched at the brink of death, these thoughts were immediately relevant.

“Perhaps it was an hour later when I noticed that the water was going down. We continued to pray and chant. There was nothing else to be done. The whole world had gone to sleep. We were alone under the beautiful starry sky.”

He fell silent for a moment. I stared at him, at once incredulous and horrified by what he had endured. “My God, you really have been through a great ordeal Shyam,” I said. “I am really glad to see you back in one piece. Please go on, what happened next?”

Shyam's eyes took on a distant look, and his features relaxed as he continued. "It was moonrise that brought a glimmer of hope, like a messenger of light beyond the darkness. And it would be a softer, mellower light in which we would see the world.

"Surjyo and I began to talk, haltingly at first, but in a more relaxed manner as time passed. I knew it was important not to lose concentration. We had to be vigilant every moment. The slightest slip could cost us our lives. I plied Surjyo with hundreds of questions just to keep the conversation going. You know how he is normally, silent as the Sphinx. But last night he got into an expansive mood and regaled me with history, geography, agriculture, forestry, local folklore and much more about Sambalpur district. It was fascinating."

Shyam turned to me. "Did you know that merely on the basis of rumors that diamonds were being mined from Mahanadi riverbed, the East India Company formed a 'Hirakud Diamond Mining Company' in the early 19th century? When their officers visited Sambalpur for the first time, they realized it was all a myth. But the fertile lands of Sambalpur were far more valuable than diamonds. And so they plotted and schemed and intrigued. They got rid of the last king in 1840 and took over the whole kingdom of Sambalpur. Surjyo also said that the king released his 20 pet elephants into the jungles so that they did not have to serve the foreigners. According to him, the last of those elephants lived for 120 years and was shot only two years ago, being mistaken for a wild rogue elephant."

"My goodness, I had no idea he was such a fund of information," I said.

"Yes, and I am telling you the barest outline of the many interesting things he talked about," Shyam replied. "I am amazed in retrospect how we spent 12 hours chatting in this manner. I also discussed with him ideas of God, karma, reincarnation and other philosophical matters. These days one typically has neither the time nor inclination to engage in such conversation. But yesterday, as we endured our night on that rock, we seized upon those topics to save ourselves from the destructive vortex of self-pity and nameless terror.

"At last, the east began to brighten. Distant sounds of farmers taking their cattle to the fields came floating over the air. Somewhere we could hear a bullock cart trundling slowly. Birds flew here and there. The countryside was waking up. Every five minutes I let out a strident yell for help. It was nearly half an hour before a head peered over the riverbank. The villager looked astonished at seeing us sitting on a rock in the middle of the river, with no evidence of how we got there. Surjyo explained our plight to him in the Sambalpuri dialect.

"The villager ran to arrange a boat and boatmen. Hearing his shout, several others came running to the bank to gaze at us in wonder and to keep up our spirits. Half an hour later, we saw a boat approach from the upstream side with three or four crewmen. The current was not as swift as it was the previous day and the skilled boatmen had no problem in maneuvering it into position where we could step into it. In a few minutes, we were at the Ghat. We offered to compensate them for their help, but they refused it. They protested that helping people in distress was their Dharma. We forced them to accept by declaring that it was for a feast for everyone in the village. And we emptied our purses for them.

"We were both collapsing with fatigue. Neither was fit to drive the jeep. Fortunately, at Surjyo's request, someone in the village had informed his Sambalpur

office. Just as we were tottering into the jeep in which we had arrived, Surjyo's office car was spotted in the distance. His driver had thoughtfully brought another chap to drive the jeep back to headquarters. Surjyo and I got into the car and promptly dropped into a deep contented sleep. I slept all morning. Got up a couple of hours ago, had a refreshing bath and a sumptuous meal. And then decided you should be the first hear what happened," he concluded.

I congratulated him on his tenacity and faith. I told him that his deliverance from such a difficult ordeal must mean that he was destined for a higher purpose. I urged him to write an account of his experience to share with a wider audience. "Well, I will write it in Oriya and you can do the English version," he said. That was fifty years ago.

Shyam twirled a paperweight on my desk and smiled a wry smile. He said "You did not ask me the standard journalistic question about how or if this experience had changed me," and darted a glance at me. I smiled back at him. "Well you know me, ever the attentive listener," I replied.

Just then we heard footsteps and a knock on the door. Somebody was arguing with my chapraasi. I opened the door to find Surjyo standing there. "Excuse me, Mr. Ramchandran, I heard Shyam Babu is here, may I have a brief word with him?"

"Of course," I replied.

Shyam rose to meet him and the two men clasped hands and patted each other on the back like brothers. "Shyam Babu, my jeep is at your disposal for your visit to Rampella village tomorrow. I like your ideas for building a school and installing a well to supply fresh drinking water to the villagers. I know you would need a reliable interpreter on a regular basis, and I would be happy to offer my services. Oh, and feel free to stop by my house any time to borrow those books that you were interested in."

With that Surjyo left. Shyam looked at me and we both laughed. "Now you see how the experience has changed me," Shyam remarked. "For one thing, it has ignited in me a consuming interest in philosophy and ideas of God. When I was in despair sitting on that rock last night, I had some brief flashes of insight like lightning playing on clouds in the distant horizon. I regard them as signposts to the path to inner peace. I would like to explore those uncharted regions of my mind through regular study and meditation.

"I also was profoundly overwhelmed and transformed by the unconditional generosity and kindness of those simple villagers. I will be counting on your help, Ram, to implement those projects for them that Surjyo just referred to. In a sense, my entire attitude to the rural people of the submersible area has changed. Until now, they were on the fringes of my consciousness. I viewed them as no more than unavoidable impediments to my official deadlines. I now see the enormity of their sacrifice of their ancestral lands and entire settlements for the sake of the Hirakud project.

"As for Surjyo, I had taken him to be an intellectual lightweight. I see him in quite a different light now, and I am sure our friendship will continue to evolve. It is so easy to mistake show for substance. Surjyo will be a reminder to me to never judge anyone by first impressions."

He glanced at the clock and jumped up. "Oh, I am so sorry. I have overstayed by more than one hour, I apologize."

I assured him that there was no need for it.

"Thanks," he replied and grinned broadly.

“Just one final thing,” he added on his way out the door. “I’ve learned there is much wisdom in taking the longer route!”