

Shamu, our barber in Mysore



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Shamrao Adoni, born in 1904 (perhaps – few people kept accurate records those days), was one of the few barbers in our *mohalla* (neighbourhood) in Mysore. Almost all his clients knew him as Shamu. He had a cherubic face, a winning smile and a soft voice. And he had parables and patter for all occasions. So? What is so special about Shamu that he is worth remembering after so many years? Well, he changed the way men wore their hair over their heads in our mohalla in the second quarter of the 20th century. He was a *coiffeur par excellence*, besought by young men who wanted to look different and handsome.

Our mohalla, in the heart of the growing city of Mysore, was a typical building block of our town, planned according to the orthodox caste-based sutras. The mohalla covered a square with each side about three-quarter km. At the north end, the Brahmins lived on a street running East West, with a few temples interspersed between the homes. The most prominent and richest among them lived at the northeast corner. The next street had some Brahmins, the kshatriyas, and a few vyasyas. The following street had some vyasyas, the goldsmiths, the tailors, the clerks, and other such castes.

The next street was for menial castes such as barbers, dhobis, painters, masons, people who made a living by singing and telling mythological stories like Ramayana (Hari dasas), oil extractors, etc. At the end were a huge tank and a few temples, small and big, mainly at the North East and South West corners. The temples included quarters for the priests.

Conservancy lanes ran between the main streets. The lanes were used sweepers to enter the houses, clean the bathrooms and latrines, and carry away the night soil. The night soil carriers belonged to the Scheduled Castes. They were not allowed to live in the mohalla. Their place was outside the town, *Holageri*. During the 1940s, their settlement got a new name –Ashok Nagar. The credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi who advocated the upliftment of these people, and named them as Harijans (people of God).

By the time I was ten years old (1944) the tank had been drained out and a park of indifferent quality had been created by the Mysore City Municipality. Though some changes were taking place in the structure and composition of the mohalla, its essential character remained unchanged. All the houses, except those of a few rich Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vysyas, were row houses, built of mud, bamboo reinforced mud and/or unburnt bricks in mud mortar with low roof. The roof was country tiles on country wood beams and split bamboo purlins. The floor was stone or mud covered with *gobri leaping*. (Gobri leaping is a viscous mix of cowdung and water. The user pours this liquid over rammed mud, and spreads it uniformly by hand. Once dried, this cover keeps the floor dust free. The cover is hard enough to absorb the impact of bare feet walking on it without cracking.)

The street where barbers and other tradesmen lived also had buffalos, cows, donkeys, sheep, goats and poultry. Many lived in joint families. The roads were generally dirty, except the roads serving the

upper caste houses, which had clean circular patches in front of the entrance door. They were swept with brooms daily in the morning by the housemaid or a woman member of the house, and then covered with gobri leaping. Once the cow dung dried, ornamental designs were made in this patch with chalk powder. This custom had some religious sanction. It meant God had blessed the house. The rest of the road remained uncleaned except for an occasional visit by a municipal sweeper.

Shamu's father had a house in the third lane. He had two surviving daughters and three sons. None of Shamu's brothers and sisters had any interest in education. Shamu studied up to the 4th class. Then, his father took him out of school, and he went with his father on his daily rounds of shaving or hair cutting.

In those days, the Barber caste had another occupation besides hair cutting. They would play a musical instrument in a makeshift band, which was called upon to play in wedding and sacred thread (*upanayanam*) ceremonies. In these ceremonies, the band would play whenever ordered by the presiding priest. A high level of expertise in music was not necessary – synchronized noise was all that was required. In earlier days, these bands played devotional songs of *Haridasas* (persons who rendered folksongs in praise of lord) set to classical music. But after the advent of cinema, from around 1950 onwards, they shifted to playing popular film songs.

Shamu was a born entrepreneur. He was always looking for every opportunity to make money. He took great interest in hair cutting and music. He gained passable proficiency in playing clarinet to be a part of the band. In 1920, when he was 16 years old, he bargained with his father, and got allotted to himself a few families for hair cutting. The practice around 1920s was that every upper caste house had a family barber handed down to it from generation to generation. He was paid monthly in cash or sometimes in kind, and occasionally both ways. During festivities, he would get some sweets, some cash and some cloth. The monthly payment was pittance but the earnings of the most members of the upper class were also meagre.

As Shamu was growing up, the times were changing. Literacy was spreading in the upper class, and more upper class youths had started going to college. These graduates got jobs in Government, in teaching and sometimes in some bigger cottage industries like manufacture of Agarbathi sticks (sticks made by coating a foot long bamboo scantling with sandal oil and cow dung – used for burning in front of idols during religious events). The ruling Maharaja had encouraged setting up of some industries like hosiery, extraction of sandal oil, coffee curing, etc. The work of constructing a dam on river Cauvery and some railway works were in progress. The powerhouse near Sivamudram, where hydraulic turbines generated electricity from the 100-foot fall of the Cauvery river, had begun supplying electricity to Mysore, Bangalore and Kolar Gold Fields. It was one of the first of its kind in the country. Cheap power supply was a godsend for those who wanted to start small workshops

Overall, the salaries were higher and importantly regular. In other words, the salaried middle class was slowly rising.

A barber's job required him to go early morning to his regular customers. The barber carried with him a dirty jute or cotton rug tucked under the arm, and a steel box containing the razor, soap and other tools of the trade. Every third day and on the days of religious ceremonies, the barber would clean shave the customer's head and beard except for a pigtail (tuft), the size of which was determined by the customer's caste. Barbers would not extend their services to Harijans.

Sporting a moustache, its size and shape varied according to a person's choice and to some extent caste. Feudal set up and caste hierarchy ruled supreme. Brahmins did not have moustaches, while kshatriyas (ruling class) and zamindars sported big moustaches. The moustache would twirl up at the ends. In lower castes, if one had the moustache, it had to be drooping – they could not twirl up. Harijans and members of similar lowest castes were not allowed to have a moustache. The barber would also clean the armpit, trim the nails, clean the ears of wax, if asked for. The privileged could

also get a massage. But the times were changing – the bus, the train, and migration were making inroads into established customs slowly but surely.

The entrepreneur in Shamu was looking for opportunities. He approached my uncle, who was an accountant in the Maharaja's Band office. This office had an English band and an Indian band. If the royals wanted to entertain westerners, like the English Resident (representative of the British rulers), the English band would play. If it were some occasion like celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna, or Dussera, the Indian band would play.

Shamu was good enough to get into the Indian band on his own. But he was more interested in the English band, which would give him a beautiful uniform, a colourful turban, and some extra allowance. The English band instructor was an Irish man. Shamu managed to get under his skin, and starting with a mere flute, entered the realm of playing Uilleann bagpipes. The Irish tutor was thrilled, as this was an Irish instrument. It could play a wide range of notes in a sweeter tone than its Scottish counterpart could.

The Irish tutor had so far failed to get any other Indian to play this instrument. Being a bachelor and lonely in India, the tutor was thirsting for company. In Mysore, there were only a few Englishmen, and many of them considered the band tutor to be below their rank. Therefore, he did not have easy access to their company. The tutor was generous to a fault and Shamu did not lose any opportunity to make use of it. The attendance at the band office was not on fixed hours, but varied as per the needs of the band.

Once Shamu had a steady job, his and his parents' thoughts turned towards his marriage. They searched everywhere for a match that suited his rising status in the community. Finally, he was married to a daughter of a well-to-do barber from Bezwada (now Vijayawada). As she came in with some more money as dowry, Shamu wanted to open a hair-cutting saloon. Saloons were new. A few had come up near the City Market, but not elsewhere.

Through my father, Shamu managed to get a shop at the corner of a busy intersection, some distance from our mohalla, towards the inner city. With the help of the Irish tutor and my uncle, Shamu got very fine and prestigious made-in-Sheffield shaving instruments. He invested in a large Belgian mirror and a few chairs. He coaxed one of his younger brothers to be his assistant.

Now he asked my father to help choose a suitable name for his hair-cutting saloon. After much debate between Metropolitan and Cosmopolitan, he settled on Cosmopolitan. He purchased and framed prints of Western and Indian film stars – Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, Catherine Hepburn, Ashok Kumar, Sehgal, Mumtaz Shanti, Goharbai, and Sulochana – and hung them on the walls. He framed some photos of busts of Europeans in various types of men's hairstyle. His marketing instincts told him pretty feminine faces would not only attract customers from upwardly mobile segment but also help reduce irritation of waiting for their turn.

He did not forget the Gods. He hung a print of Lord Venkataramana of Tirupathi, of Hanuman, and of Rama's coronation near the cash desk. A small ledge with the idol of Lord Ganesha and Venkataramana completed the decorations.

Shamu believed in cash payment. He put up a prominent notice above the cash desk *Credit only tomorrow*. He never gave credit to any customer. He would not have extended credit even to my father. But, of course, my father never went to Shamu's saloon for a haircut. He continued with the old system under which Shamu came to our home. My father felt this tradition was in keeping with his status.

Shamu flourished with the gift of the gab and the sleekness of his hands.

My father passed away unexpectedly. After some time, Shamu told my mother that if her sons, i.e. my brother and I, wanted a haircut, we would have to come to his shop. Now, he was too busy and was discontinuing the practice of going to a client's house. That meant we had to pay cash.

As years passed, we could see he was prospering. He had renovated his house. He sported gold rings on his fingers. He added two swivel, height-adjustable chairs to his shop. He also invested in a gramophone, and played records of famous singers such as Sehgal, Amirbai, Honnappa Bahgavatar and Nagaiah on request. He brought two assistants from a distant village, who lived in his house. He once told my brother that local boys, besides being lazy, created trouble and misunderstanding for him.

Soon India became independent. Princes lost their kingdom, and control over the treasury. They were given a fixed income as a privy purse. The army of the Mysore Maharaja, mostly ceremonial after the fall of Tippu Sultan at the hands of the British, was disbanded. The palace began pruning its budget. The Irish tutor left. No one knew where he had gone, not even Shamu. My uncle had resigned from palace employment and started a flourishing business. A perceptible migration was taking place to towns like Mysore and Bangalore. There were now cars and city buses on the roads. Some roads had been tarred.

The caste barriers were rapidly coming down. The pigtail (tuft), an indicator of the caste had almost disappeared, except for a few who practiced priesthood. The fashion now was sporting what was called *crof* in the local language – sometimes short crew cut and sometimes long hair, as was the fashion. The fashion followed what Hindi movie stars like Ashok Kumar, Jairaj and Karan Diwan sported.

Shamu was in his mid forties. Prosperity brought him a lot of distraction. His children were in school and growing. One of them, I was told, had joined a gang of rowdies. There were rumours floating around that Shamu was visiting some women of ill repute. And that he had contracted some incurable disease associated with licentious life. His presence in the shop had become irregular.

In the meanwhile, I had graduated and had left Mysore in search of a job. My brother had moved to another locality in the town. It was perhaps after five to six years I went home on a long leave. When I happened to pass through the old locality, I observed that the Cosmopolitan saloon had disappeared. That night I asked my brother about Shamu. My brother told me that he had passed away, a victim of his own success. The revenue had dwindled due to leakage in the collections. Debts had started mounting up. Some prostitutes had squeezed him dry. His health had failed, and had died of a disease contracted by promiscuity and lack of proper treatment. My brother had no knowledge what happened to Shamu's children.

Shamu, a born entrepreneur of our mohalla, who brought a change in the way the people in that area sported their hair, and who created waves among the fashion conscious youth of the mohalla, had passed away into eternity.❖