

# Charted course

Short Story by 'Mini'

had always thought that 'pert' was just the right word to describe the girl next door. Sundari, for that was her name, was smart, saucy, tall and air and piquantly challenging everything she said, did or more. It was from her father, Mr. Subash, that I was to learn that 'pert' had a different connotation and was a new management technique. He was the high priest of a management consultancy and always spoke in a different wavelength from the rest of the crowd.

I had developed a sneaking sympathy for Sundari, having known her as a motherless girl for nearly six years. Now at 20, nicely tucked up at all the right places, she attracted more than passing attention. In a few months she would have completed her college course and reached the crossroads of life. For all the affection that Mr. Subash bestowed on her, he had little love for her. He was flying every fourth day to different places attending seminars and workshops in management techniques. I had always thought that management was nothing more than asking someone else to do the job. There was more to it than I thought, I was sure.

Regarding these seminars, I was told by one (my lord and master!) who had attended two of these that if you have attended one, you have attended all. So he had really attended one too many, my husband had. The drill is the same: they ask you to register yourself which means shelling out a few hundreds or thousands of your employer's money, receive some plastic folders scribbling pads ruled, if you please!, dot pens, chewing gum (No smoking!) and then listen to high falutin' baffle-babble (Made in USA) which you don't understand even if you tried, which you don't. The lunch sessions are fabulous, says my husband. Well, something is better than nothing to remember these seminars by!

## Mr. Subash

On those rare occasions when Mr. Subash had time to think of Sundari, he was a worried man. Though he was not in a frantic search of a son-in-law, his mind could see, was working in that direction. And he knew that his daughter's sights were set on an aristocrat's job. He looked to us to cheer Sundari's thoughts and ambitions to more earthy directions. Mr. Subash had a decided advantage in his match-finding efforts. The cream of the eligible bachelors passed through his hands. One day he came over to my husband and spoke in what must have thought was a peculiar manner about a particular prospect. It wasn't long before he brought him home on some pretext, making sure that those who scattered saw him. My husband and I were impressed. From that time that Sundari spoke with less warmth about her ambition to be a ministering angel of the air we could guess that Sundari's relations were not unfavourable.

It was not long before he called one day for tea. And as I had learned, it was about Sundari's

wedding. We were not surprised to learn that Sundari had consented to the marriage. Also present at tea were Mr. Subash's late sister's husband and his own father, a grand old man of 65. Somehow that session lacked the liveliness which one would have expected. Sundari sat with a bemused look, not a ripple of excitement on her face. If Mr. Subash had wielded the gavel, it would have completed the picture. After a couple of attempts to inject the element of jollity, I gave up. Who was I to dictate the moods of the session anyway? I reverted to the Samosas.

## The Three Ms.

Mr. Subash came to the point without much hedging. He wanted us to help him, especially me, to cope with the distaff side of things. He admitted he was rather inexperienced, when the grand old man butted in and said, "Oh! There is nothing to it really". But Mr. Subash took over again before the GOM could finish his piece. He didn't want the main subject on the agenda to go off the rails.

Mr. Subash continued, "You see, I want to do things my own way. Scientifically. I have seen one marriage—my own—and I do not wish that the momentum of things instead of conscious effort should govern its conduct." He pretended not to see the GOM's face assuming the hue of beetroot, and added: "After all every act of management is nothing but the optimum utilisation of the three Ms". It was said in true seminar style. For the benefit of the uninitiated like me he spelt out the three Ms as men, money and materials. Then he looked in my direction and clarified further. "Of course, man embraces woman"—a typical, well-rehearsed crack which he must have beaten to death in umpteen seminars. The GOM excused himself, unwilling to listen to any more of his son's effusions. But we couldn't, having partaken of those samosas.

Mr. Subash was on the air again. "We still have two months and six days—ample time if we go about things in the proper way. First, let each one of us prepare a list of all the things that we can think of which need to be bought, hired, loaned or done. Let's not ignore even the most trivial thing. Later, when we meet again, we can go through the lists and prepare a comprehensive master-list under different heads. We can then keep things firmly under control. Control is necessary to keep us progressing in the direction of the goal. This is where the CPM technique comes". He paused. "Well, I'll come to that later". He had finished, abruptly.

## CPM technique

His reference to the CPM took my breath away. I just couldn't understand why he was introducing politics into this. I decided to get to the bottom of the CPM and turned to the veteran by my side. He stalled my question long enough to reach home and refer to some cyclostyled material. Then he announced triumphantly that CPM was nothing but the 'critical path method.' I was back in

square number one after this illuminating clarification.

The next day there was another briefing session to be followed by more. They were getting to be more interesting and, of course, more confusing.

Mr. Subash was nothing if not proud of his profession and he wanted to practise what he professed. He wanted to be a pioneer of sorts—introducing the CPM technique in conducting a marriage. I had all my sympathies for Sundari. The GOM thought that the whole idea was hare-brained and lacked maturity. But Mr. Subash stuck to his critical path. There was, it must be admitted, a thoroughness in whatever Mr. Subash did. He prepared a big time-scale diagram, or whatever it is called. He allotted to all of us some code numbers and spelt out tasks and responsibilities. He pin-pointed the decision-making authority for each task and fixed the dates by which things were to be accomplished. The chart looked like a big zodiacal dispositional diagram, with circles interconnected by lines.

And then there was another chart which was more interesting. It gave the names of different activities (procuring coconuts, hiring cooks!). He drew up a list of 168 such activities, logically grouped under sub-heads. He spoke with passion about duration time, starting and finishing dates, cushion time and float. I was confused or rather jolly well befuddled. As if to put me at ease, he said that the network technique was nothing but simple arithmetic—just addition, subtraction and tabulation. Nothing to panic about, he kept reassuring me.

When Mr. Subash said, for the seventeenth time, that all we have to do is to plan, analyse, schedule and control, I thought I should do something about it. I thought I should give expression to my fears and doubts, and I did. I said, "Simple things are getting complicated. All we have to do is to go to the Kotwal Bazaar and get the coconuts at competitive prices. It's as simple as that. Why this chart and all?" The GOM came near to clapping hands in agreement with me.

Mr. Subash smiled patronisingly. "I am glad you raised that point", he said in the manner of one dealing with a heckler in the seminar. "You know there's a catch there, in what you suggested. You have to co-ordinate a variety of parallel activities and save on manpower and petrol. Now the coconut being a perishable, should not be thought of for another, yes, 55 days", he said, glancing casually at the scale diagram.

I was worried. It is my nature to worry, but this man was really giving me the creeps. I had quite a few 'activities' entrusted to me and buying coconuts was only one of them and here I was stuck for good with charts and floats and an adamant management man. In the recesses of my heart was some hope that the GOM, battle-scarred veteran of dozens of marriages, would ultimately come out and protest. But nothing happened.

## Not one inch

We hadn't moved one inch forward in the direction of practical achievement, though Mr. Subash had started planning everything more than two months ahead of 'finishing time'. He had scheduled things in such a way that fever was not building up. With barely a month to go, the only activity that had been completed was paying of advance to the hefty cook. One could see he was a slippery customer who would think nothing of breaking his plighted word for a couple of tenners. And here was Mr. Subash dreaming his dreams. Even the invitation cards which were due the previous week hadn't come. Fortunately, we had the cushion time to cope with just this kind of situation. Oh, God!

A heavy responsibility rested on me and I was practically in tears. It was at this juncture that Mr. Subash dropped a bombshell. He had received an invitation from UNESCO to join an experts faculty at the Asian Management Congress at Hong Kong. "A great honour it is", he said, "and I have got to go". He gave us all some last-minute instructions, assuring us that things just couldn't go wrong, the CPM way. He was confident that when he returned, a week before the marriage, things would be going along swimmingly. "Not a hitch", he said. And he left, just like that.

## In a jiffy

I went to meet the GOM. It looked as if he was waiting for Mr.

bles, sarees and children cluttered up every nook and corner of the house. Almost every day it was a shopping spree in different directions on different missions. Three weeks passed in a jiffy. And Mr. Subash returned.

To say that he was shocked out of his wits is a gross understatement. He tore his hair and swore at all and sundry, but the GOM was firmly on the saddle. He was in no mood to be displaced and things had gone too far for any change of government. It was beyond even Mr. Subash to take things back to the CPM course.

In spite of the fact that there were more people than invited resulting in frequent raids on the improvised kitchen, more noise than one could stand and the groom's father was missing at the crucial moments, the marriage was a huge success. Only, Mr. Subash was out of pocket by an extra three thousand rupees. He put out a limp hand in response to the congratulations he received from friends on celebrating the marriage on such a grand and efficient scale.

## Not for a million!

It was now the GOM's turn to 'sum up', as Mr. Subash would have it. "For ages", he said; "our marriages have been conducted on the CNC technique. Three elements are absolutely essential for a marriage to be worth its name."

For one suspense-packed minute he paused. I couldn't wait any longer. "What is CNC, Thatha? I asked. "Oh, that! It stands for crowd, noise and confusion. Without that a marriage is no marriage".

Mr. Subash winced, but I was on the side of the old dear. And so was Sundari. She wouldn't have missed it all for a million!