

By Gayatri Hazarika

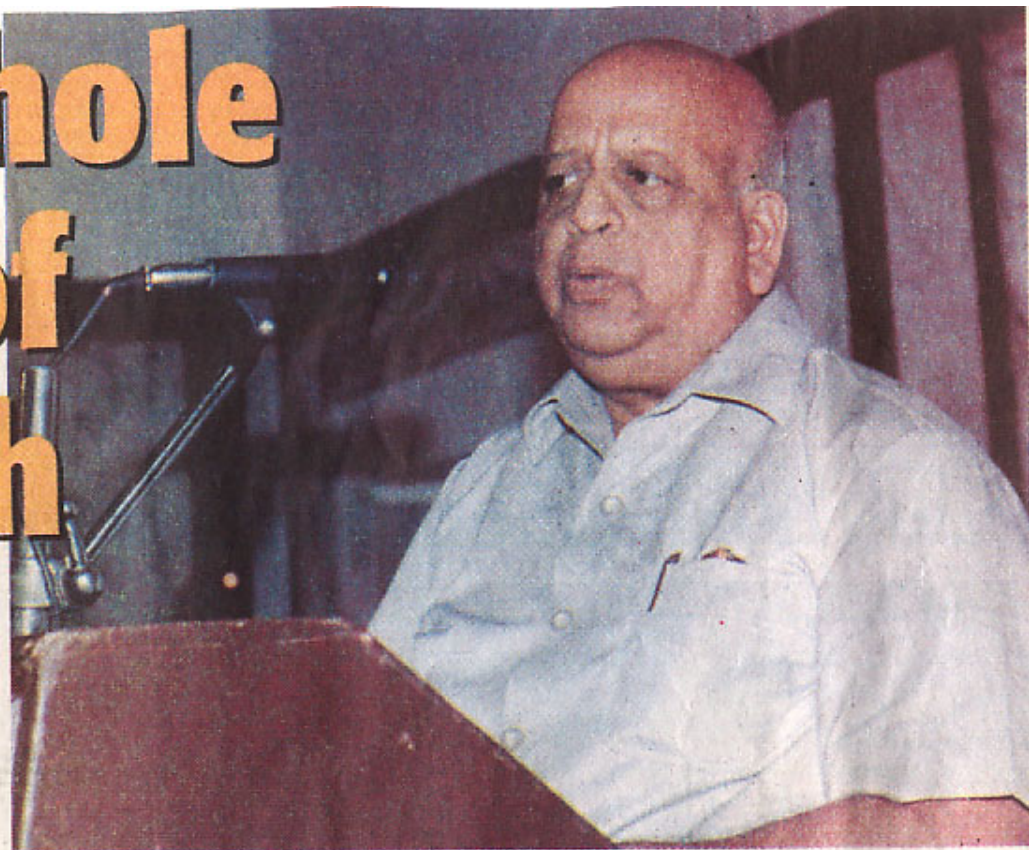
EXCITEMENT tingled the poise of the elegantly decked-up and gently murmuring ladies of Duchess Club in the plush Samavesh hall of Savera hotel on August 20 as former Election Commissioner TN Seshan, their star guest-speaker for the month, expected any moment, did not reveal the topic of his talk. He came, waited for the 350-odd members to fill up the hall at their leisure and said he did not have a topic in mind yet. "But I will speak the truth, as I know it, brutal."

It was a whole lot of "truth" he had learnt in his 50-year service as a bureaucrat and constitutional authority. Obviously it was difficult to organise his thoughts within a span of 30 minutes and he rambled from ancient and medieval Indian history, environment to female infanticide.

And 'brutal' he sure was. "I was curious to know whether this is one more club of rich women who don't know how to spend surplus

A whole lot of truth

The former chief election commissioner urges members of the Duchess Club to empathise with and work for underprivileged women



time," he said at the outset amidst a mild whiff of dissenting noises but added he was assured by the invitees that it was not.

"Don't confine your activities to distributing *kanji* on Sundays. No, no, no," he said. He exhorted them "to devise methods to empower women."

"Adopt a rural school where, you must be surprised to know, there are no decent toilets for girls, or some children of a rural district. I am willing to help you, even financially," he said.

"You do not represent the women of India at all," he said to

a rapt audience. "The sex-ratio of the country is only about 940 and in the states of Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttaranchal the female literacy is approximately 10 per cent," he added.

"At present female infanticide is rampant in Salem and Madurai districts," he said. "Don't be horrified but the most humane way to kill a female infant is to suffocate her with a pillow," he said.

"I don't want you to sympathise with the less-fortunate women. The only way to get some

real work done is to empathise (feeling what they feel) with them," he said.

Discrimination against women is perpetuated by women themselves, he noted. "Mothers refuse to sensitise their sons to women's needs. In spite of being victims of discrimination, mothers do the same to their daughters and daughters-in-law" he said.

"As the chief civil servant of India I used to wash vessels at home," he said, while noting that it is impossible to manage a career and a household without the cooperation of both spouses. ■