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Collected Plays

VOLUME ONE

TUGHLAQ
HAYAVADANA
BALI: THE SACRIFICE
NĀGA-MANDALA

Girish Karnad



Collected Plays

Volume One



Volume One offers four major plays from roughly the first half of Girish Karnad's career.

Tughlaq, an acknowledged classic of the contemporary stage, uses the troubled reign of a fourteenth-century sultan of Delhi to presciently dramatize the crisis of secular nationhood in post-independence India.

Hayavadana combines a twelfth-century folktale about 'transposed heads' with indigenous performance traditions to offer a path-breaking model for a quintessentially 'Indian' theatre in postcolonial times.

Nāga-Mandala draws on the folktale about a woman with a snake lover to explore gender relations within marriage. The play was presented by the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis as part of its thirtieth anniversary season.

Bali: The Sacrifice connects individual human sexuality to the historical debate on violence in Indian culture, and received its premiere at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester.

'These plays translated and performed in several languages during the last three decades have greatly contributed to the enrichment of contemporary theatre. Karnad's plays have great performability; he, in a way, is the director's playwright.'

— Suresh Awasthi, *The Book Review*

'*Tughlaq* is a play about the inevitability of corruption... showing up Tughlaq's cruel side. The play is full of allusions, resonant with Shakespearan situations and Ibsenian modes. It combines a historical flavour with a contemporary relevance.'

— Ranjit Hoskote, *The Free Press Journal*

'Girish Karnad makes this folk tale [*Nāga-Mandala*] stand on its head, letting it unfold dramatically... This is a fine play, powerful, gripping, and exciting... It uses tradition creatively and sensitively... It is fast-paced, well plotted, coherent, and controlled. The central conflict is sharply defined and brilliantly executed.'

— Makarand Paranjape, *Indian Express Magazine*

'A multi-faceted personality, a man with many identities—Karnad has been described in so many ways. *Tughlaq* [is]... an irreverent look at men who ruled the destiny of people... offer[ing] parallels with contemporary times—India after Nehru. *Hayavadan*... floored theatre buffs in Germany, England, Australia and America. *Nagamandala*... has not stopped being performed on stage round the world since it appeared in 1988.'

— *Sunday Times*

'...There have been a galaxy of litterateurs in Indian languages whose works can be classified as the world's best and translated not only in English but other languages. Girish Karnad is one of them.'

— *The Tribune*

'*Hayavadana* is full of humour, sly comments on politics, and comic hyperbole... a richly layered play, intersperse[d] [with] typical Indian elements like the folk tale... A notable achievement.'

— *The Hindu*

Collected Plays

Volume One

Tughlaq
Hayavadana
Bali: The Sacrifice
Nāga-Mandala (Play with a Cobra)

GIRISH KARNAD

With an Introduction by
Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker

OXFORD
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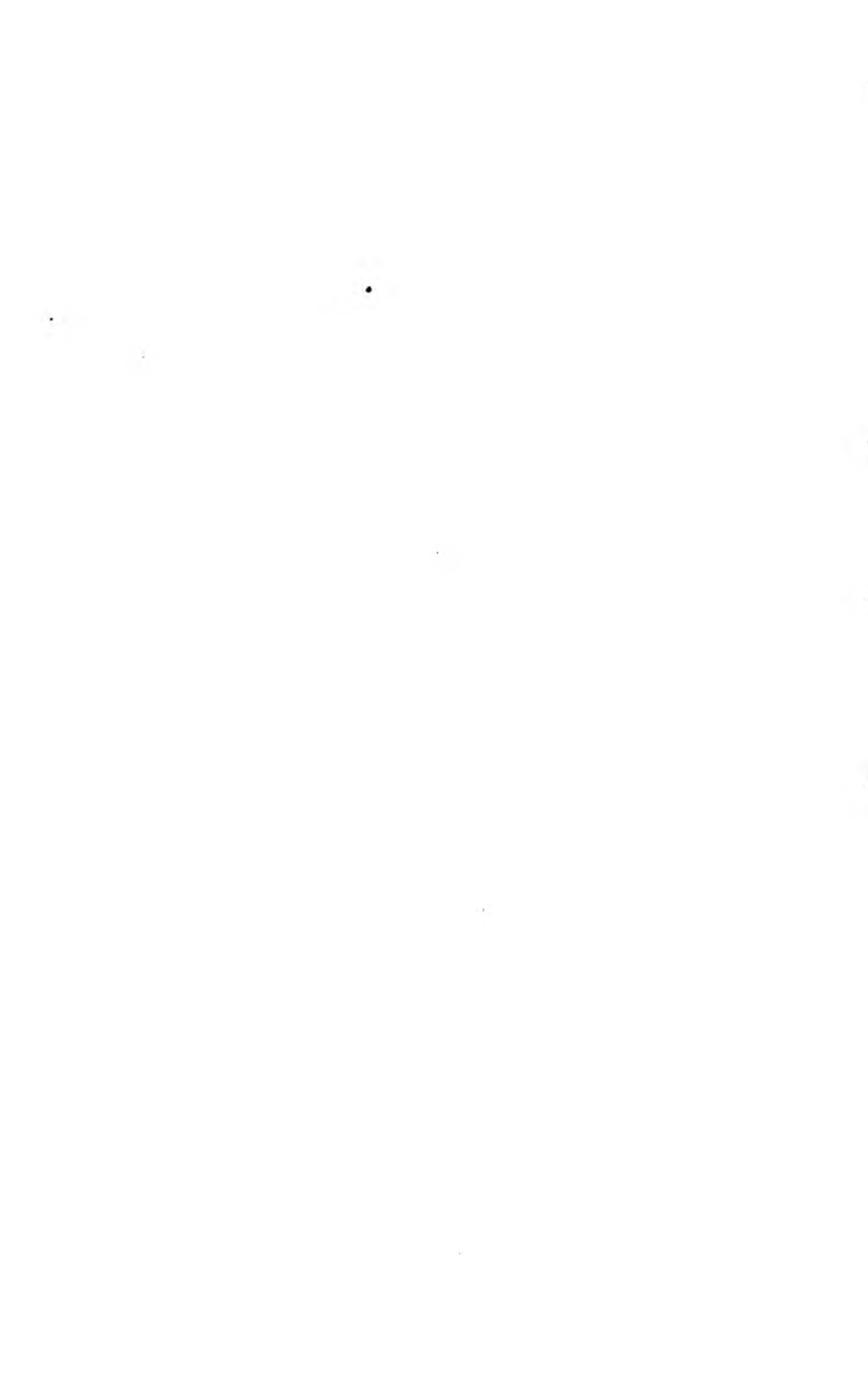
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INTRODUCTION

I

Girish Karnad (b. 1938) belongs to the formative generation of Indian playwrights who came to maturity in the two decades following independence, and collectively reshaped Indian theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century. The work of these playwrights has a historical connection with the modern theatre forms that emerged under the influence of Western models in metropolises such as Calcutta and Bombay during the colonial period. Their modernity, however, is shaped by the unprecedented experience of political autonomy and new nationhood, and entails a rejection rather than continuation of colonial theatre practices. In modern Indian theatre, the years leading up to and following independence in 1947 marked a period of disjunction during which both the commercialism of the Parsi stage (dominant until the 1930s) and the radical populism of the Indian People's Theatre Association (dominant during the 1940s) became unsatisfactory models for the future development of urban drama. This sense of disconnection from the immediate past led the more ambitious post-independence playwrights to rethink the issues of dramatic form and presentational style, to forge radical connections with an older past as well as the postcolonial present in India, and to put the resources of world

theatre (especially modern Euro-American theatre) to novel use. Along with such contemporaries as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir, G. P. Deshpande, and Mahesh Elkunchwar, Karnad is a playwright whose work reveals a determined and self-conscious effort towards a new Indian drama.

The members of Karnad's theatrical generation therefore share a number of important qualities that separate them as a group from their precursors. In varying degrees, these authors approach playwriting as a serious literary activity and drama as a complex verbal art, potentially connected to, but also independent of, theatrical practice: the play-as-meaningful-text is thus detached equally from the genres of commercialized entertainment and topical political performance. At the same time, they constitute the first group of modern playwrights in India who belong simultaneously to the economies of print and performance. All of them have had notable success on the stage, while their work has also circulated in print and become available for analysis, commentary, and interpretation outside the boundaries of performance. Each playwright is committed to an indigenous language (rather than English) as his medium of original composition, and hence to the literary and performative traditions of the region where that language is dominant. But each has also participated actively in the process of interlingual translation that gives his plays national (and often international) visibility, and establishes them as contemporary classics. In yet another perspective, Karnad and his contemporaries have rendered the role of 'dramatic author' largely synonymous with that of 'theorist' and 'critic'. By advancing theoretical and polemical arguments about form, language, style, purpose, and influence in a range of rhetorical genres, they have offered the first fully developed, often antithetical theories of dramatic representation and reception in the modern period in India, and formulated competing conceptions of the role of theatre in cultural and national life.

With drama as his chosen literary form and Kannada as his principal language of original composition, Karnad certainly exemplifies the transformative practices of his generation, but he has also carved out a distinctive niche for himself with respect to subject matter, dramatic style, and authorial identity. The majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or premodern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of the present. Karnad's engagement with myth (especially certain episodes in the Mahabharata) begins with *Yayati* in 1961, continues in *Hittina Hunja* (The Dough Rooster, 1980; rewritten in English as *Bali: The Sacrifice*, 2002), and culminates in *Agni Mattu Malé* (The Fire and the Rain) in 1994. The line of history plays moves from *Tughlaq* (1964) to *Talé-Daṇḍa* (Death by Decapitation, 1990) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). Folktales from different periods and sources provide the basis of *Hayavadana* (Horse-Head, 1971), *Nāga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra, 1988), and *Flowers: A Monologue* (2004). *Anjumallige* (literally, 'Frightened Jasmine,' 1977) is the only early play by Karnad with a contemporary setting—Britain during the early 1960s—and his most recent work, *Broken Images* (2004) is the only one to be set in present-day India. During the 1961–77 period, therefore, each successive play by Karnad marks a departure in a major new direction and the invention of a new form appropriate to his content—ancient myth in *Yayati*, fourteenth-century north Indian history in *Tughlaq*, a twelfth-century folktale interlineated with Thomas Mann's retelling of it in *Hayavadana*, and early-postcolonial Britain in *Anjumallige*. In the later plays this quadrangulated pattern repeats itself in a different order, creating a cycle of myth-folklore-history in *Hittina Hunja*, *Nāga-Mandala*, and *Talé-Daṇḍa* (1980–90), and a second cycle of myth-history-myth- contemporary life-folklore in *Agni Mattu Malé*, *Tipu Sultan*, *Bali*, *Broken Images*, and *Flowers* (1994–2004).

The dominant presence of the ancient and medieval past in Karnad's drama is a result of both personal and cultural compulsions. He has argued from the beginning that the deep-rooted narratives of myth, oral history, and legend constitute a vital connection between an author and his or her audience, and theatre is a particularly powerful medium for the communication of such culturally resonant fictions. Karnad belongs perhaps to the last generation of *urban* Indian writers who encountered the 'great' and 'little' traditions of myth, poetry, history, legend, and folklore at first hand in their earliest childhood, and internalized them deeply enough to have their adult authorial selves shaped by them. Such a vibrant culture of orality is no longer available to the Western playwright, and Karnad is fully aware that it is being rapidly eroded in India by the processes of urbanization, Westernized education, and economic development. Orality and print, however, are also carefully balanced in his oeuvre. All his major plays, from *Yayati* to *Agni Mattu Malé* and *Bali*, originate in remembered stories but depend extensively on printed sources for their textual complexity and weight. Karnad comes uncannily close, therefore, to the kind of modern writer T. S. Eliot imagined in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', one of the founding critical texts of twentieth-century modernism:

[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence;... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes the writer acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

Karnad's ability to contend with 'the timeless and the temporal together' is clearest in his juxtaposition of myth and history, in the simultaneous embrace of the ahistorical and the historical. The plays based on myth and folklore evoke a chronologically

indeterminate (but unambiguously premodern) realm of kings and queens, goddesses and concubines, horses and elephants, bullock carts and country fairs. They create character-types rather than individuals, but give them memorable voices, along with a local habitation and a name. The history plays draw extensively on printed sources, combine real-life individuals with fictional characters, and recreate particular places at particular moments in time. More than any of his contemporaries, Karnad therefore possesses a dramatic imagination that ranges widely in time and space, and allows him to 'speak through' a remarkably diverse cast of characters.

Karnad also persistently describes playwriting as the vocation that best expresses his self-perceptions and abilities, and the identity of playwright as his chosen literary identity, despite a multifaceted engagement with the media of film, television, and video, and a larger-than-life presence in the public realm. As an actor, director, screenplay-writer, high-profile administrator, and public figure Karnad has been—to use an Americanism—a 'celebrity' for more than three decades. No other contemporary author in India is more likely to be recognized on cinema and television screens or the pages of a magazine than within the covers of a printed book or on the stage, and certainly no other Indian playwright has been more visible in the national print and broadcast media. In addition, Karnad has held administrative positions in key cultural institutions, serving as Director of the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune (1974–5), Chair of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi (1988–93), and Director of the Nehru Centre in London (2000–3). Yet, as the double honour of the Jnanpith Award and the Kalidasa Samman (India's two most prestigious literary prizes) confirmed in 1999, Karnad makes very serious claims on our literary attention, and values the recognition of his work as a playwright above all other distinctions. He thus appears to have maintained a unique separation and balance between his contributions to 'high', 'popular',

and 'official' culture—between the responsibilities of authorship and the demands of the marketplace as well as the public sphere.

Furthermore, Karnad is atypical among contemporary playwrights in being the principal translator of his own plays, and an important commentator on the nature and contexts of his drama. With the exception of *Yayati*, he has rendered all his major plays from Kannada into English, and reversed the process with three recent plays—*The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), *Broken Images* (2004), and *Flowers* (2004)—which he wrote originally in English and then translated into Kannada. The acts of translation in both directions indicate Karnad's equal facility in the two languages (unique in an Indian-language playwright), and his interest in a wider audience, whether a play was written originally in Kannada or English. But they also indicate his desire to retain control over his plays, and occasionally to act as critic and censor of his own work. For instance, Karnad came to regard *Yayati* as part of his juvenilia, and although the play had successful productions in Kannada and Hindi, he did not translate it into English. A Hindi translation by B. R. Narayan was published in 1979, but the English translation by Priya Adarkar has not yet appeared in print. Similarly, *Anjumallige* and *Hittina Hunja* did not appear in English translations after the Kannada editions were published in 1977 and 1980, again because of the author's ambivalence towards those versions.

In a related practice, for more than three decades Karnad has used the forms of the newspaper or journal interview, the essay, and the author's introduction to comment extensively on his own new plays, the broader trajectory of his work, and the direction of both modern and contemporary Indian theatre. Because of the frequency with which he is interviewed in newspapers and magazines, Karnad's journalistic appearances are too numerous to mention, but two interviews recorded at very different phases in his career—the first with Rajinder Paul for *Enact* in 1971, and the second with me for *New Theatre Quarterly* in 1993 (published

in 1995)—showcase his ability to move between the particular and the general in theatre practice, and to address important cultural and political issues while commenting on his own work. In an essay titled 'Theatre in India' which first appeared in *Daedalus* (1989), and then in revised form as the Author's Introduction to *Three Plays* (Oxford University Press, 1994; cited hereafter as *TP*), Karnad offers an elegant commentary on the challenges confronting his generation in Indian theatre, and the impulses and questions that led to the writing of major plays such as *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*. Karnad's readers have come to expect this ongoing self-reflection on his part, so much so that the present volumes mark the first occasion when he has not introduced a new collection of his plays in English.

The publication of the two-volume *Collected Plays* thus offers Karnad's readers and critics an opportunity for the kind of discerning assessment of his drama that he has favoured and practiced for several decades. The playwright's controlling hand continues to be in evidence here. *Yayati* (1961) does not appear in the collection for the reasons mentioned earlier. Karnad has also excluded *Anjumallige*, the play set in 1960s London, and included *Hittina Hunja* only in the reworked English version of 2002 that he titled *Bali*. On the other hand, the author has included two very recent one-act plays which constitute a double bill and were written originally in English—*Broken Images* and *Flowers* (both 2004). The remainder of this Introduction is devoted to a sequential discussion of the plays first written between 1961 and 1988. The Introduction to volume two considers the plays from 1990–2004 in chronological sequence, and also takes up several issues of general significance to Karnad's career as a playwright: the relationship of various theatrical languages and the translator's role in a multilingual field; the relation of his plays to his work in the other media and his visibility as a public figure; and the most important stage interpretations and performance venues for his drama.

II

Yayati (1961) does not appear in the present collection, but it is the appropriate point of departure for a discussion of Karnad's work because it launched his career as a playwright, and established an approach to mythic narrative that has shaped many of the mature later plays. The play was written over a few weeks in 1960 as Karnad was preparing to leave India for a three-year stint as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and found himself caught up in his family's anxieties about the potential implications of his departure. The conflict centered on 'the terrible choice... implicit in the very act of going away', and was framed in idealistic terms: 'Should I...return home for the sake of my family, my people and my country,...or should I rise above such parochial considerations and go where the world drew me?' (TP 2). According to Karnad, his youthful ambition was to be a poet, and he had trained himself to write in English, the lingua franca of urban life in contemporary India. Hence he was surprised to find himself writing a play in Kannada about Yayati, the Chandravamshi king in the Mahabharata who exchanged his decrepitude with the youth of his youngest son, Puru, in order to stave off the curse of premature old age.

The play, however, proved to be much more than a fictional displacement of the conflict between family expectations and personal aspirations. 'When you follow the trail of the past,' the Sutradhar comments at the beginning of *Yayati*, 'you're like a lost wayfarer, groping in a huge cavern filled with the ruins of an old and unfamiliar mode of life. You grope...and yet you must listen to the call of the past, give it the ears of the present.' The result is 'a story of our ancestors, but we see our own image there' (1). As Karnad noted with the advantage of hindsight, the myth of Yayati 'enabled me to articulate for myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally. Whether to return home finally seemed the most minor of issues; the myth had nailed me to my past' (TP 3). Yet he also acknowledged that modern Indian

theatre offered him no appropriate theatrical form for his mythical content, and consequently his chosen form was an eclectic synthesis of the Greek tragic playwrights, Jean Anouilh, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene O' Neill. Karnad's tireless formal experiments in the later plays stem in part from this early paradox—that while the past 'had come to my aid with a ready-made narrative within which I could contain and explore my insecurities, there had been no dramatic structure in my own tradition to which I could relate myself' (TP 3). In practical terms, the immediate attention *Yayati* attracted among readers when it appeared in Kannada under the imprint of G. B. Joshi's Manohar Granth Mala in 1961 convinced Karnad that he had a future as a playwright in India, and prompted his return home at the end of the Rhodes scholarship period. The play itself resolved, as a literary work, the existential crisis that had generated and shaped it.

Yayati is a wordy, didactic, dialectical play in the style of Anouilh, but it prefigures Karnad's later work in the modernist thoroughness with which it reshapes mythical material, redistributes thematic emphases, and invents new characters to complicate the dramatic potential of a story. In the *Adiparvan*, the first major book of the Mahabharata, Yayati is a 'mighty' and 'invincible' descendent of the Kurus who has already achieved greatness as a king when he is cursed with premature old age for cohabiting with Sharmishtha, the Asura princess who is the rival and slave of his wife, sage Shukracharya's daughter Devayani. The epic does not question or criticize Yayati's motives when he demands that one of his sons assume the curse because he himself is 'not yet sated of youth' (191). On the contrary, Yayati curses his four older sons for refusing the challenge because 'the strict do not deem him a son who is contrary to his father,' and blesses his youngest son for accepting it. After a thousand years, Yayati assumes his old age again and gives the kingdom to Puru, because 'like a true son, Puru did my pleasure' (194). The myth validates the father's authority and the son's obedience,

reinforcing the counter-oedipal logic of filial relations in Hindu mythology.

Karnad restructures the story as an ironic drama of discontent, futility, and death. Yayati is a self-centered epicurean who invites the curse because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmishtha, although Devayani has warned him about the destructive consequences of his choice. Puru is a philosophical but self-hating 'outsider' who feels unsettled by the questionable legitimacy of his birth, and oppressed by the weight of dynastic tradition. When the curse is pronounced, Puru accepts it because he thinks the sacrifice of his youth would counteract his feelings of unworthiness, and enable him to fulfil his destiny as a Chandravamsha prince. However, in deviation from the Mahabharata story, Karnad's Puru has just returned home with a new bride, Chitrlekha, who tries to accept his sacrifice but commits suicide in revulsion against her blighted future. Too late, Yayati tries to atone for his actions by restoring Puru's youth and withdrawing into the forest, but Sharmishtha points out to him the inescapable foundations of his future: 'a corpse, a lunatic, a fallen woman' (Act IV). Like the effete figures in Eliot's poem who 'had the experience but missed the meaning', Puru ends the play on a note of stark bewilderment, unable to comprehend the point of what he has endured.

Karnad's portrait of an overbearing patriarch and a weak-willed son is a displaced expression of his resentment against the element of 'emotional blackmail' in family relations, and this method of indirect reference to the present characterizes all his myth and history plays. But the most memorable feature of *Yayati*—and a striking accomplishment for a twenty-two year-old author—is its quartet of sentient, articulate, embittered women, all of whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their own rights and privileges. Devayani the Brahman queen and Sharmishtha the slave-princess are caught in a fierce rivalry

that allegorizes the hierarchical divisions of caste while also visiting upon both women the destructive effects of Yayati's amoral desire. Such a triangulation, between two men and one woman or one man and two women, reappears so consistently in Karnad's myth and folk-based plays as to constitute a basic plot device as well as a central thematic. In *Yayati*, the fictional Chitrlekha adds another dimension to gender conflicts because, unlike Puru, she rejects the king's authority over her, and sees no reason why 'my life existence [should be] immolated at the altar of some empty bubble in the future' (Act IV). Before killing herself, she also reminds Yayati that incestuous adultery between them would be the logical implication of his assumption of Puru's youth. As the play's most complex female character, Sharmishtha is quite unlike her counterpart in the Mahabharata: she endures rather than seeks Yayati's attentions, knows that she is doomed by his pursuit of her, and confronts him with the immorality of his quest for a surrogate victim. In dialogue that is transparently contemporary, she also tries to dissuade Puru from assuming the curse because 'sacrificing oneself needlessly is a form of perversity. Pride in being self-denying all the time can become a fatal habit' (Act III). The performance history of *Yayati* reinforces the women's centrality: in Satyadev Dubey's celebrated production for the Indian National Theatre in 1967, for instance, Sunila Pradhan played Devayani, Tarla Mehta played Sharmishtha, Sulabha Deshpande was Swarnalata, and Rekha Sabnis was Chitrlekha, with Amrish Puri as Yayati and Dubey himself as Puru.

This chorus of unusual female voices, mixed in with the flawed male utterances, humanizes the myth and gives it ethical and dialectical weight. *Yayati* establishes at the outset of Karnad's career that myth is not merely a narrative to be bent to present purposes, but a structure of meanings worth exploring in itself because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the constraints of realism or the necessity of a contemporary setting. *Bali* and *Agni Mattu Malé*, the two later myth plays,

exhibit the same qualities at a higher level of skill and maturity. Like the characters of a Greek tragedy, Karnad's mythic figures have human depth even when they are caught in a predetermined course of action, and he does not hesitate to alter both character and event to create effective drama.

III

Karnad's next play, *Tughlaq* (1964), marked a radical change of direction after *Yayati*, and inaugurated a second genre that has since been central to his dramaturgy. While still at Oxford, he felt challenged by the verdict of noted Kannada critic Kirtinath Kurtkoti that modern Kannada drama had no first-rate historical plays, and began a process of self-education in pre-modern Indian history to search for a possible dramatic subject. The 'marvellous' discovery of the fourteenth-century sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq in an elementary-level textbook motivated Karnad to take on the full range of historiographic materials available at Oxford, which in turn led to a series of revelations about the uncanny persistence of the past in India. In the 1971 interview with Rajinder Paul, Karnad recalled that *Tughlaq* struck him as 'the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come [to] the throne of Delhi, including the Mughals', who nevertheless ended as 'one of the greatest failures' because of contradictions within his personality and the self-defeating nature of his politics. The twenty-year period of Tughlaq's decline as a ruler also offered a 'striking parallel' to the first two decades of Indian independence under Jawaharlal Nehru's idealistic but troubled leadership, and Nehru appeared remarkably like Tughlaq in his propensity for failure despite an extraordinary intellect. Yet the play was not meant either as an 'obvious comment on Nehru' or an 'exact parallel' of the present: rather, it addressed the emerging ambivalence of power relations in the political and public spheres which were based, for the first time in Indian history, on the principles of mass representation and enfranchisement. 'In a sense,'

Karnad observes, 'the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and *realpolitik*' ('In Search' 98).

This connection with a specific phase in post-independence politics was material to the play's genesis and early reception, but *Tughlaq* has emerged as a modern masterpiece because of its seemingly endless capacity to make history resonate with contemporary meaning, and to encapsulate political experience as it evolves under the conditions of modernity and postcolonialism. The power and cultural vitality of the play stem principally from the multifold engagement with history and politics that lies behind and beyond the words. *Tughlaq* is the first major post-independence play to engage with the sultanate period (twelfth to early-sixteenth century), which brought the 'golden age' of classical Hinduism to a decisive end, and introduced Islam as a dominant political and cultural force on the subcontinent. The sultanate represents an important phase of Islamic imperialism in India, but in the national imaginary it has been marginalized by the later periods of Mughal and British imperialisms. Karnad's play reinscribes the narrative of Tughlaq in the collective memory of contemporary audiences, refining legend and oral tradition through a detailed historical reenactment. In another perspective, *Tughlaq* is a play *about* history: about how it is written, transmitted, and accepted as a valid image of the past, and about how a 'historical play' relates to history itself. Even a superficial familiarity with Karnad's written sources confirms that our seemingly 'objective' views of Tughlaq come either from medieval Muslim historians like Zia-ud-din Barani, who regarded him as a dangerous heretic, or from orientalist British historians like James Mill and Vincent Smith, who regarded him as a type of the brilliant but unprincipled 'Oriental despot' that British rule had eliminated in India. Karnad revives the paradoxical Tughlaq of history and

occasionally constructs his dialogue verbatim out of various historical documents, especially Barani's contemporaneous account of Tughlaq's reign, the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi* (1357). He also follows the chronology of Tughlaq's reign closely, mixes historical characters (such as Barani, Najib, Sheikh Imam-ud-din, and the stepmother) with fictional inventions (such as Aazam and Aziz), and thus creates a complex ideological and intertextual connection between history, historiography, and his own fiction. The effect of such interlineation, moreover, is not to perpetuate but to problematize the received history of Tughlaq: the play urges contemporary Indian audiences to scrutinize the premodern and colonial institutions that have created their understanding of the past, and to question institutionalized history as a source of knowledge.

In a move that is characteristic of the historical parallel as a genre (and acknowledged by Karnad), *Tughlaq* also invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience by presenting an ostensibly self-sufficient historical narrative that viewers and readers can apply to their own situation. For the audience of the 1960s, Karnad's play certainly expressed the disenchantment and cynicism that attended the end of the Nehru era in Indian politics. A decade later, the play appeared to be an uncannily accurate portrayal of the brilliant but authoritarian and opportunistic political style of Nehru's daughter and successor, Indira Gandhi. Now (yet another thirty years later) *Tughlaq* seems concerned less with specific figures than with two general issues that have assumed increasing importance in the Indian political and public spheres. At one level, the play acts out the polarity between politics as the selfless extension of individual spirituality (Mahatma Gandhi) and vision (Jawaharlal Nehru), and politics as the self-serving, sometimes demonic expression of individual fantasies of power (evidenced in Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, and, more recently, in Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalist leaders). These two models of political action in turn imply

radically different relations between leaders and citizens, but by embodying both impulses within *Tughlaq*, Karnad also suggests an ironic identity between them.

At another level, *Tughlaq* offers an ironic, clearly prophetic commentary on the ideology of secularism and the forces that subvert that ideology. The 'idea of India' as an assimilative, tolerant, multiform political entity was central to the nationalist thinking that emerged under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, and others during the 1920s and 1930s. The demand for a separate Pakistan undercut this idea tragically and led to the trauma of partition in 1947. Since then, the emergence of ethnoreligious nationalisms in various parts of the country, the national frenzy over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, the unabated terrorist violence in Kashmir (which became embroiled in the global 'war on terrorism' after 11 September 2001), and the escalation of militant Hindu nationalism to a point which brought on India's first organized 'pogrom' against the minority Muslim population in the state of Gujarat in February 2002—these are only some of the events that have reduced the idea of secularism to 'an unattainable utopia'. Enmeshed in this experience, *Tughlaq* now invokes not merely the loss of political innocence in the 1960s but the gradual attrition of the larger political and cultural processes that created the imagined community of India as an independent nation in the mid-twentieth century. The religious issues in the play pose a question important to all 'traditional' or 'diverse' societies experimenting with democratic structures: whether religion can be, or indeed can be prevented from becoming, the primary basis of nationhood.

Predictably, the resonance of *Tughlaq* as a complex text has been reinforced over four decades by its status as a stage classic. The actors who have created the title role include such major performers as Om Shivpuri (Urdu, 1966 and 1972), Arun Sarnaik (Marathi, 1971), and Manohar Singh (Urdu, 1972, 1974, and 1982), as well as more occasional players like Kabir Bedi (English,

1970) and Ashok Mandanna (English, 2003). Shivpuri directed himself in the role, but the other productions also involve celebrated actor-director partnerships—between Sarnaik and Arvind Deshpande, Singh and Ebrahim Alkazi, and Bedi and Alyque Padamsee. Manohar Singh, in particular, established a reputation as ‘the actor born to play Tughlaq’: the image of him ‘looming large over the ramparts of Alkazi’s cognisance’ to enact a ‘Macbethian high drama’ at Purana Qila in 1974 has become an indelible memory for the Delhi audiences who watched that production. In a different location, C. R. Simha monopolized the role of Tughlaq in Kannada for three decades, from 1969 to 1999. The resilience of *Tughlaq* as a political vehicle also appears in the interpretive shifts through which successive productions have accommodated the changing politics of the nation since the 1970s. The move from the ‘disenchantment’ of the Nehruvian decades to a new phase of corruption and violence is evident in the program note to Arun Kuckreja’s Delhi production of *Tughlaq* in September 1975, three months after Indira Gandhi had suspended constitutional rights and turned India (temporarily) into a police state:

Our interpretation of the play is one in which the politics of the entire situation are all-important and the violence of the second half of the play evident. It is for this purpose that all the murders merely mentioned in the script are presented on stage. The choice of contemporary-looking costumes, the use of pop music and an abstract setting are all geared to one main purpose—to make the play as modern as possible, so that it has relevance to us today. The play now no longer remains merely the tragic history of a medieval monarch, but grows to larger proportions with Tughlaq himself becoming a symbol of our times. (Jacob, ‘Tughlaq’)

As a ‘symbol of the times,’ since the mid-1970s the visionary Tughlaq of the play’s first half has also receded, giving prominence to the vengeful tyrant of the second half. In the production directed by Prasanna in 1982, Manohar Singh appeared as a ‘loud and mad Sultan, short-tempered and violent, with little to offer

to his subjects. His idealism, scholarship or statesmanship are hardly in evidence' (Paul, 'Last Month'). Predictably, the communal issues in the play have become even more controversial, if not incendiary. Commenting on Arjun Sajnani's 2003 English production in Bangalore, G. N. Prashanth notes the 'movement from the Nehruvian "socialist" setting, through the Emergency, to what is now Savarkar's time', arguing that the play's present context is 'the rise of the Hindu Right' and its 'virulent' twenty-first century politics. To continue creating viable political meaning for present-day Indian audiences, directors of *Tughlaq* must now contend with a public sphere that has come to regard politics as empty of all morality.

IV

Karnad's third play, *Hayavadana* (1971), marked another major change of direction, not only in his playwriting but in post-independence theatre as a whole, because it was the first work to translate into notable practice the debate over the usefulness of indigenous performance genres in the development of a new, quintessentially 'Indian' theatre. Having explored the genres of mythic-existentialist and historical drama in *Yayati* and *Tughlaq*, Karnad had experienced the urge to 'begin again': In 1970–2 he held the prestigious Homi Bhabha Fellowship 'for creative work in folk theatre', and in 1971 he was a key participant in the 'National Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre' organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Given his predilection for taking on any form if (but only if) it served his authorial purposes, the endless arguments about the revitalizing effects of traditional forms prompted him to inquire what playwrights like him, 'basically city dwellers, [were] to do with this stream. What did the entire paraphernalia of theatrical devices, half-curtains, masks, improvisation, music, and mime mean? I remember that the idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument

with B. V. Karanth...about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music' (TP 12). The story about switched heads in the twelfth-century Sanskrit collection, the *Kathasaritasagara*, interested him initially because of the possibilities it offered for the use of masks on stage. However, refracted through Thomas Mann's philosophical novella *The Transposed Heads*, Karnad's distinctive view of femininity, and a reflexive double frame, the traditional conventions underwent a process of defamiliarization in *Hayavadana* that produced a genuinely original work for the urban Indian stage, and created a unique intellectual and theatrical excitement throughout the decade of the 1970s.

The play's credentials were impeccable and its timing fortuitous. In 1972 *Hayavadana* won both the annual Sangeet Natak Akademi award, and the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, for best Indian play. During the same year, in a rare transposition of languages, it received three major productions, not in the original Kannada (which would have been the obvious medium) but in Hindi: under the direction respectively of Satyadev Dubey for Theatre Group in Bombay, of Rajinder Nath for Anamika in Calcutta, and of B. V. Karanth (who had also composed the music) for Dishantar in Delhi. Undertaken simultaneously by three directors with a preference for important new plays, these productions pointed to the intense interest *Hayavadana* had generated within an engaged, experimentally-oriented national theatre community. Karanth's Kannada production, for the Bangalore-based group Benaka, followed in September 1972, while Vijaya Mehta directed the play in Marathi in 1983, incorporating elements of the Tamasha form. Karanth and Mehta also emerged as the play's most ambitious and persistent directors. Karanth revived his Hindi version in 1974 and 1982 and the Kannada version for the Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh in 1989, and undertook a new English version for the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Australia. In 1984, Mehta also took the play

to the Deutsches Nationaltheater, Weimar, for a German production with German actors. With this succession of major productions virtually complete by 1990, *Hayavadana* is still one of Karnad's most frequently performed plays, having found an enduring popularity with amateur urban theatre groups, college drama societies, and even audiences in the Indian diaspora.

In keeping with Karnad's interest in a usable 'structure of expectations', the outstanding quality of *Hayavadana* as an 'urban folk' play is that it joins the conventions of Yakshagana folk performance (stock characters, music, dance, masks, talking dolls, etc.) with a core narrative that poses philosophical riddles about the nature of identity and reality. In the *Kathasaritasagara*, the story of 'The Heads That Got Switched' contains a simple riddle. A woman travelling with her husband and her brother discovers the men's decapitated bodies in the temple of Parvati, receives a boon from the goddess to bring them back to life, but switches their heads by mistake. The resulting problem of 'true' identity has an unambiguous solution in this version: 'The one with her husband's head is her husband because the head rules the limbs and personal identity depends on the head' (Sattar 219). In the mythic genealogy of caste, first offered in the Purusha-sukta in the *Rg-veda* (Book 10, hymn 90) around 1000 BC, Brahmans emerged from Purusha's head, and the supremacy of that part of the body is so firmly established in the subsequent Hindu tradition that it overrides the implications of incest in the twelfth-century narrative (in some versions of the story, however, the second male is a friend rather than the woman's brother).

Thomas Mann's philosophical elaboration of this story in *The Transposed Heads* (1940) is a fully developed parable about conjugality, proscribed desire, and an 'accidental' disruption of identity that can be resolved only by death. Sita is married to Shridaman, who is cerebral, delicate, and sensitive, but she feels an intense physical attraction for his friend Nanda, who is visceral, strong, and emotionally crude. In Mann's version, the husband

beheads himself in Parvati's temple out of jealousy and despair; the friend follows suit out of guilt and fear; and the pregnant wife prepares to die in order to avoid ignominy for herself and her child. After the accident of transposition a holy ascetic grants Sita to the new Shridaman by using the same logic that appears in the folktale, but in Mann's text the supremacy of the head is both sustained and challenged far beyond the moment of crisis. The new bodies of the two men change inexorably until they are compatible with the heads once again; but the original bodies also exert their own subversive power, and change the heads indefinitely. Sita, to whom the man with the husband-head and friend-body had given 'full enjoyment of the pleasures of sense' for a time, finds herself yearning once again for the man with the friend-head and husband-body, and returns to him in full knowledge of the consequences of her action. Shridaman and Nanda kill each other in the forest, and Sita commits *sati* on their funeral pyre, leaving her precocious four-year old son behind to keep alive the memory of her strange sacrifice. The story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini in Karnad's *Hayavadana* follows elements of characterization and the order of events in Mann's novella closely enough to be considered, in some respects, a 'de-orientalized', contemporary Indian theatrical version of it. The play's real originality lies in the reflexive frames Karnad constructs for the story, and the thematic force of its representation of femininity, desire, and identity *in and for the present*, independent of its sources.

Karnad's first radical move is to multiply the contexts in which the problem of incongruity, as symbolized by the disjunction between head and body, appears. In the human world of Devadatta and Kapila, transposition offers a symbolic but temporary resolution to the problem of mind/body dualism: for a brief period of time, Devadatta-Kapila possesses the ideal mind as well as the ideal body, while the other hybrid being, Kapila-Devadatta, is deficient in both respects. But when each man's body reverts to its original

qualities, the problem of dualism returns, and the human condition appears as essentially one of disunity and imperfection culminating in death. Karnad diffuses this human 'tragedy' by placing it alongside two other realms of experience—the divine and the animal. Despite his comical appearance, the elephant-headed, pot-bellied Ganesha is the patron deity of scribes and performers, the remover of obstacles (*vighneshwara*), and the god of all auspicious beginnings—an embodiment of both divinity and perfection. On the other hand, Hayavadana, the horse-headed man who gives the play its title, lacks any vestige of divinity and appears painfully suspended between the animal and *human* worlds. Unlike the god, Hayavadana cannot endure to remain mixed up; unlike the humans, he does not possess a prior self that can reassert itself. But as in the human world, the head determines identity, even if that means the triumph of the animal over the human: Hayavadana achieves wholeness by relinquishing his human characteristics, and turning completely into a horse. This triple perspective on disrupted selves puts into practice Karnad's belief that the various conventions of Indian folk theatre create effects similar to those associated with Brecht's notion of 'complex seeing': 'the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem' (TP 14).

The second level of complication in *Hayavadana* involves the author's self-conscious manipulation of the structure of folk performance. While the action of folk theatre moves between a frame and the inner play, in *Hayavadana* there are two outer frames, both belonging to the historical present, which intersect unpredictably with each other and with the action of the inner play. The first frame consists of the Bhagavata, the female chorus, and the two male actors who are not merely *characters* in a folk performance but *performers* in a provincial troupe preparing

to enact the story of Padmini and her two husbands for a contemporary audience. Just as the action of the inner play is about to begin, the performance is disrupted by the appearance of Hayavadana, the talking horse who wants a solution to his own predicament. The disruption forces the characters of folk drama to revert to their 'real' personae as actors, and the performance of Padmini's story begins only after the Bhagavata has persuaded Hayavadana to leave and seek divine intervention for the solution of his problem. Similarly, the end of Padmini's story is not the end of the play: the two framing narratives continue until Hayavadana, who now reappears as a horse with a human voice, has lost—as he wants to—this last human attribute. The conventional folk structure of a play-within-a-play is therefore yoked in *Hayavadana* to a reflexive rehearsal format, whose function is to subject the defining conventions of folk performance to ironic scrutiny.

Beyond its philosophical reflection on identity and its self-reflexive structure, *Hayavadana* also resonates in present dramatic and cultural contexts because it gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage, and creates a space for the expression, even the fulfilment, of amoral female desire within the constraints of patriarchy. In this respect, the genre of 'urban folk' theatre to which both *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala* belong offers a radical contrast to the representation of women in the 'urban realist' drama of such playwrights as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, the early Badal Sircar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Jayawant Dalvi, and Mahesh Dattani. The essential basis of difference here is not the gender of the author, which continues to be exclusively male (Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambar, Tanvir, K. N. Panikkar, Ratan Thiyam), but the qualitatively different attitudes to gender that emerge *within* the plays when male authors move out of the urban social-realist mode into the anti-modern, anti-realistic, charismatic realm of folk culture. Plays such as *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala* (as well as Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* and Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*) are important in

the discourse of gender because they embody several principles largely absent in realist drama.

First, women in these works are objects of desire as well as desiring subjects, and they want something other than what society has ordained for them. The very presence of such desire violates the norms of feminine behaviour and disturbs established notions of propriety. Second, women succeed in their quest because of the interchangeability of male partners. The proscribed object of desire magically replaces the husband in three of these plays, usually in the *form* of the husband. Since the men can 'stand in' for each other, there is no unique male self to which the woman owes fidelity—a notion that questions the principle of male proprietorship, and hence undermines a basic premise of patriarchy. Third, while realist drama emphasizes and often romanticizes the maternal role, folk narratives stress the feminine but not necessarily the maternal. Or, to put it differently, fertility and motherhood are important in folk plays, but can be detached from the constraints of marital fidelity. In all these plays, the women want or get men they cannot legitimately have; each one accomplishes her desire, but only provisionally, and like the queen bee destroys her male partner (lover or husband) in the process. The ideology of urban folk drama thus manifests itself most conspicuously in the treatment of femininity, sexuality, desire, and power: although the challenge to patriarchy is not absolute, women in folk drama find the means of exercising an ambivalent freedom within its constraints, unlike their urban counterparts in such plays as Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* or Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*.

V

Nāga-Mandala (1988), which came seventeen years after *Hayavadana*, can be considered a companion play because it creates variations on many of the same themes. Written in 1987–8 during Karnad's residency as a Fulbright fellow at the University

of Chicago, the play combines another reflexive frame—this time about a fictional playwright who can continue to live only if he keeps awake for one whole night—with two oral tales that Karnad had heard several years earlier from his friend and mentor, A. K. Ramanujan. The first story, about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a king cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful young woman in a sari, and it ‘tells itself’ (as the inner play) to an audience composed of the playwright and the flames. This amalgamation of human, abstract, and magical elements creates a synthesis that is thematically and philosophically simpler than the polysemy of *Hayavadana*; it allows for innovative staging and rich visual effects, but appeals more to the fancy than the imagination.

By making Rani almost a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness, Karnad pares his drama of gender relations down to an elemental level. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to reimagine that world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. As the ill-tempered, tyrannical, two-dimensional husband, Appanna rapidly reduces her daily life to a featureless existence without companionship or community, except for the clandestine visits by Kurudavva, the old blind village woman. Because the marriage is unconsummated, Rani’s latent power as wife and mother also remains unrealized. The snake-lover’s magical visits in the form of the husband are thus virtually overdetermined by the familiar folk logic that beauty and innocence must triumph without the overt violation of moral norms. Once the visits have begun, Rani’s experience points to two qualities that have ‘realistic’ resonance in the context of the extended Indian family—the difference between ‘day’ and ‘night’ selves, and the liberating effects of sexual fulfilment. Rani is willing to accept that

the brutish husband of the day turns into the ardent lover at night because those are the conditions of her sexual initiation and emancipation: as Naga explains, 'the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits.'

The announcement of Rani's pregnancy begins a third movement in the inner play and marks the return of patriarchal control by the husband as well as the community, but by then she has matured from a girl into a woman, wife, and mother-to-be, and needs a definite resolution to her predicament. The snake ordeal is another magical way for Rani to 'get everything she has ever wanted', but her apotheosis, and the perfect life that follows, are riddled with irony and compromise. In a reversal of Rama's classic rejection of Sita, the wayward husband in the folktale has to accept the chastity of a wife who undoubtedly had a lover, and a child he knows he did not engender. For her part, Rani comes to realize that her two husbands were not the same person, and her new life of contentment is not free of remembrance and regret. Furthermore, as in *Hayavadana*, Rani's story does not end with the inner play. The characters in the frame narrative question the 'happily ever after' convention because it leaves too many questions unanswered, and the playwright creates two alternative endings, one tragic and one happy, to give the story of the snake-lover a conclusion as well. Once again, the use of folk material by an urban playwright serves as an occasion for reflections on the nature of writing and performance, the manipulation of conventions, and a reaffirmation of the centrality of women that is all the more significant because unlike Padmini, Rani moves from a position of total abjection to one of unqualified power.

More than any other full-length play by Karnad, *Nāga-Mandala* is a spare and simple text that can be transformed by the visual and spatial possibilities of staging—a quality reflected in its unusual performance history. It had a unique 'world premiere' at the University of Chicago in the spring of 1988; and in 1993 became the first contemporary Indian play to be produced by a

major regional American theatre company, the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis (I had the privilege of attending both these premieres). With the Paris-based Nirupama Nityanandan (a member of Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil) in the role of Rani, the Chinese-American actor Stan Egan as Appanna and Naga, and the African-American actress Isabel Monk as Kurudavva, the Guthrie production captured on a smaller scale the intercultural resonance associated with a work such as Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* (1987). In India, the play has been especially attractive to leading women directors, who have created an audience for it both at home and abroad. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry produced it in Punjabi in 1989, and took her production to the First International Theatre Festival in Tashkent the same year. Vijaya Mehta directed the play in Marathi in 1991, and in German for the Berlin Festival of India in 1992. Amal Allana produced *Nāga-Mandala* in Hindi in 1998, as had Rajinder Nath in 1991. Given the premodern setting of the play, its proximity to the life of the average urban Indian woman is not self-evident, but the polarities of love and lovelessness, perplexity and fulfilment it assigns to the relationships of men and women within marriage speak across the particularities of form and content (especially in performance), and make a distinctive contribution to the ongoing dialogue on gender.

VI

Bali (1980/2002), the last play included in this volume, represents a chronological anomaly, and perhaps because of its unusual dating creates bold new variations on narrative and emotional patterns that also appear in the plays preceding and following it—*Hayavadana* (1971) and *Nāga-Mandala* (1988). *Hittina Hunja*, the first version of the play published in Kannada in 1980, was performed in both Kannada and Hindi (in notable productions by B. V. Karanth and Satyadev Dubey, and less successful versions by Prema Karanth and Lankesh), but not translated into English at that time. In 2002, Karnad reworked the play completely in

English for a production at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre in England, and published this version in 2004 alongside another original English play, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. While the majority of Karnad's plays achieve a fixed form through publication in Kannada and subsequent translation into various other languages (especially English), *Bali* has evolved over two decades, and achieved its definitive form not in Kannada but in English. 'I first came across the myth of the Cock of Dough when I was still in my teens,' Karnad comments in the Preface; 'since then, my career as playwright has been littered with discarded drafts of dramatized versions of it. But looking back, I am happy closure eluded me, for the myth continued to reveal unexpected meanings with passing years' (70). This long thematic gestation has a curious equivalence at the level of performance. In Dubey's Hindi production of the early 1980s (which, coincidentally, was titled *Bali*), Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah had played the central roles of the King and the Queen; in the 2002 English production, they played the older characters of the Mahout and the Queen Mother, giving physical embodiment not only to the passage of time in their own lives as actors but to the intergenerational tensions and class conflicts that undergird the play's meaning.

Like *Hayavadana*, *Bali* has a specific premodern source—the thirteenth-century Kannada epic, *Yashodhara charite*, which can in turn be traced back to two eleventh- and ninth-century Sanskrit epics. Through the same process of 'realistic' fictional elaboration that marks his approach to myth and folklore from *Yayati* onward, Karnad transforms the story of the dough figurine that comes alive at the moment of sacrifice into a mature philosophical exploration of love, jealousy, desire, betrayal, and violence between men and women who are bound by the ties of blood and marriage, or encounter each other in the perfect freedom of anonymity. In comparison with Karnad's earlier work, the novelty and strength of *Bali* lies in the unconventionality of its four characters, and the seriousness with which it yokes intimate personal acts to structures

of religious belief and practice. The promise of motherhood within the licit boundaries of marriage is the motivating force in *Nāga-Mandala* and (with qualification) in *Hayavadana*. Both Padmini and Rani are simple, childlike beings: their adulterous relationships are unwilling and temporary, and their desires are fulfilled through supernatural intervention. In *Bali* the queen is childless, and although this lack is an inescapable point of reference in her life, it is not (at least for her) a source of obsessive guilt or shame. Aroused by the mahout's song, she seeks him out for an anonymous coupling that violates the boundaries of caste and class, but when challenged, refuses to profess guilt for her action or to atone for it through a propitiatory ritual. More than any other female character in Karnad's drama, she is a transgressive presence, deprived of conventional feminine roles by chance and circumstance, but self-possessed and cerebral enough not to surrender to the pressures of conformity.

The queen mother is similarly removed from the two-dimensional 'mother-in-law' of myth and folklore. What alienates her from the barren and unfaithful queen is not only a mother's possessiveness and anger, but fundamental differences of belief that insert larger cultural questions into their personal antagonisms. She also, however, accepts her subsidiary status in the life of the younger couple, and in an atypical move, turns her vindictiveness in part against her own son. The familiar narrative of two women vying for the upper hand in relation to a man becomes, in *Bali*, a destructive dance in which there are no winners, only losers. The two male characters in the play, in contrast, are arranged in relations of perfect antithesis and hierarchical reversal: the cultivated, sensitive, and valiant but impotent king versus the crude, amoral, and cowardly but potent mahout with his irresistible song. The dualisms of mind and body, culture and nature that Karnad had addressed in *Hayavadana* reappear in this play, but as unavoidably separate qualities that cannot be brought together. Furthermore, the radical disparities between the mahout and the royal couple

underscore not an egalitarian message about the union of a queen and her servant, but the eventual irrelevance of that act to the long-term disequilibrium of the royal marriage.

The true originality of *Bali* is that it assimilates the sexual issues to a historically-nuanced meditation on the nature and psychology of violence. In the Preface, Karnad describes violence as 'the central topic of debate in the history of Indian civilization'—a debate in which Hinduism has been ranged against Jainism and Buddhism (*Two Plays*, 69). Karnad also chooses to address not the public and political carnage of war and conquest (which led, for instance, to emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism), but the legitimization of violence in ritual practices that individuals (such as the queen mother) regard as private acts of faith and worship. The central 'problem' in the play is thus not the queen's adultery but the deep spiritual rift between her Jainism—which aligns itself with compassion, mercy, and non-violence—and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband's family. The king has embraced Jainism in principle, but his instinctive propensity for violence is evident in every scene, whether it is set in the past or the present. When he compels the queen to join him in the symbolic sacrifice so that his desire for atonement may be satisfied, her imagination breathes life into the sacrificial object and leads to her own death. As Karnad notes, the Jain position that 'intended violence condemns one as surely as actual violence' gives the argument a 'complex ethical twist', and creates a solipsistic world without the possibility of real absolution (70). More broadly, the Jain-Hindu debate of the premodern period casts an ironic light on the endemic violence of the postcolonial present in India—a problem addressed directly in both *Tughlaq* and *Talé-Daṇḍa*.

Written and performed over twenty-five years, and connected through *Bali* to his most recent work, the plays in this volume chart the trajectory of Karnad's career as a playwright, and establish some significant correlations of form and content. History as represented in *Tughlaq* is a medium for public and political

experience, and a parallel for the present life of the nation; its appropriate mode is realism, and it foregrounds the actions of men. Myth and folklore, the basis for *Hayavadana*, *Bali*, and *Nāga-Mandala*, evoke the private and the personal; they are compatible with the resources of both realism and an essentially theatrical anti-realism (music, mime, magic), and foreground the lives of women. Their fictional characters—articulate individuals as well as types—are involved in a quest for fulfilment and wholeness that leads sometimes to qualified happiness and at other times to death. The plays belonging to the later part of Karnad's career, collected in volume 2, continue these patterns by taking up other periods in Indian history and other mythic episodes, but they also open up a complex new dialogue between languages and initiate entirely current narratives.

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TUGHLAQ

***Tughlaq* was first presented in English by the Theatre Group of Bombay at the Bhulabhai Desai Auditorium in August 1970. The principal cast was as follows:**

KABIR BEDI	Tughlaq
STANLEY PINTO	Aazam
BUBBLES PADAMSEE	Aziz
SABIRA MERCHANT	Step-Mother
PROTAP ROY	Najib
PRADEEP KHAITAN	Barani
GERSON DA CUNHA	Shaikh Imam-ud-din
ZAFAR HAI	Shihab-ud-din
NOEL GODIN	Ratan Singh
KERSEY KATRAK	Shaikh Shams-ud-din
FARROKH MEHTA	Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid
Directed by	ALYQUE PADAMSEE
Set designed by	PILOO POCHKHANWALA
Music by	KERSEY LORD

for
KRISHNA BASRUR
with affection and admiration

Scene One

AD 1327

The yard in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi. A crowd of citizens—mostly Muslims, with a few Hindus here and there.

OLD MAN: God, what's this country coming to!

YOUNG MAN: What are you worried about, grandfather? The country's in perfectly safe hands—safer than any you've seen before.

OLD MAN: I don't know. I've been alive a long time, seen many Sultans, but I never thought I would live to see a thing like this.

YOUNG MAN: Your days are over, old man. What's the use of Sultans who didn't allow a subject within a mile's distance? This King now, he isn't afraid to be human—

THIRD MAN: But does he have to make such a fuss about being human? Announce his mistakes to the whole world—invite the entire capital?

OLD MAN: And get kicked by an infidel too. It's an insult to Islam.

YOUNG MAN: That's good that! Insult to Islam! So you want to teach him Islam, do you? Tell me, how often did you pray before he came to the throne?

THIRD MAN: That isn't the point.

YOUNG MAN: That's precisely the point. Not even once a week, I bet. Now you pray five times a day because that's the law and if you break it, you'll have the officers on your neck. Can you mention one earlier Sultan in whose time people read the Koran in the streets like now? Just one?

OLD MAN: What's the use? One must act according to it...

THIRD MAN: All this about the Hindus not paying the jiziya tax. That's against the Koran, you know. A Mowlvi told me that—

HINDU: Now, now, don't look at *me* when you say that. We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'Pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous.

YOUNG MAN: Ungrateful wretch!

OLD MAN: But this wretch is our best friend, Jamal. Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the Prophet an incarnation of his god...

(The Public Announcer comes out and beats his drum. Silence.)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! In the name of the Allah it is hereby announced that Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin of Shiknar, had filed a suit against His Merciful Majesty, that his land had been seized illegally by the officers of the State and that he should be given just compensation for the loss of the land and the privation resulting therefrom. The Kazi-i-Mumalik having considered this matter carefully and in full detail has declared...

(He pauses for effect. The audience is tense and the Announcer looks pleased.)

...has declared that the Brahmin's claim is just...

(Commotion in the crowd. The Announcer silences them with a couple of drum beats and continues.)

...that the Brahmin's claim is just and that His Merciful Majesty is guilty of illegal appropriation of land. The Kazi-i-Mumalik has further declared that in return for the land and in compensation of the privation resulting from its loss the said Vishnu Prasad should receive a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the State Treasury.

(Renewed commotion. But the Announcer isn't finished yet.)

His Merciful Majesty has accepted the decision of the Kazi-i-Mumalik as just and in addition to the grant of five hundred silver dinars has offered the said Vishnu Prasad a post in the Civil Service to ensure him a regular and adequate income.

(Beats the drums again and retires.)

OLD MAN: What folly is this! May Heaven guide our Sultan.

HINDU: I don't believe a word of it. There's something more to this, that much is obvious—

(The Announcer comes out followed by Muhammad, the Kazi and the retinue.)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Warrior in the Path of God, the Defender of the Word of the Prophet—May peace be upon him—the Friend of the Khalif, the Just, His Merciful Majesty, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq.

CROWD: Victory—to the King.

MUHAMMAD: My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my kingdom—without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace—not just peace but a more purposeful life.

And to achieve this end I am taking a new step in which I hope I shall have your support and cooperation. Later this

year the capital of my empire will be moved from Delhi to Daulatabad.

(The crowd reacts in bewilderment. Muhammad smiles.)

Your surprise is natural. But I beg you to realize that this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after careful thought and discussion. My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and, as you well know, its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital, it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad. This is only an invitation and not an order. Only those who have faith in me may come with me. With their help I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world.

(Exits with the retinue.)

OLD MAN: You can go to the Kazi-i-Mumalik for small offences. But who do you appeal to against such madness?

THIRD MAN: This is tyranny! Sheer tyranny! Move the capital to Daulatabad! Such things never happened in his father's days—may his soul rest in peace. Now he has got his father's throne. He isn't happy with that and—

YOUNG MAN: What do you mean?

THIRD MAN: What?

YOUNG MAN: What did you mean by that—when you said he had got his father's throne?

THIRD MAN: Don't try to threaten me, boy. The whole capital saw it.

YOUNG MAN: Saw what?

THIRD MAN: You know what.

YOUNG MAN: Were you there?

THIRD MAN: There were others—my friends—

YOUNG MAN: Hang your friends! Were you there?

THIRD MAN: No!

YOUNG MAN: Well, I was. And I tell you it was an accident.

THIRD MAN: I see.

YOUNG MAN: It was. The elephant suddenly went wild. The crowds must have frightened it. It just ran and dashed against the wooden pandal. And the pandal collapsed.

OLD MAN: Very convenient.

THIRD MAN: And to think the procession had been arranged by the father in his honour!

YOUNG MAN: But the Sultan had gone to the mosque to pray! The old Sultan should never have had the procession at prayer time—You all know it was prayer time and the Sultan never misses a prayer!

HINDU MAN: Yes, yes, we know that. But tell me. How did the elephant know it was time for prayer?

(Laughter.)

THIRD MAN: All right, don't trust my word. But do you think a man like Sheikh Imam-ud-din would lie? Well, he said in clear loud words that it was murder. And he said it publicly—I was there!

OLD MAN (*eagerly*): You've seen the Sheikh?

THIRD MAN: Why, of course. Only a week ago. In Kanpur. What a man! What a voice! The audience was spell-bound. And he said the Sultan's guilty of killing his father and brother, he said. He said so many other things too—about Islam and what's happening to it. It was the most inspiring speech I've ever heard. The audience went wild and burnt down half of Kanpur. You think he would talk like that if he wasn't sure?

OLD MAN: They say he looks like the Sultan.

THIRD MAN: No—not very much. People exaggerate, you know.
But he has a certain resemblance—some gestures, you know,
some mannerisms—

HINDU MAN: Perhaps that's where he gets his habit of making
speeches.

THIRD MAN: Watch your words, infidel. Don't you dare mock a
saint like him.

(The Guard comes out of the Court.)

GUARD: All right, all right. Go home! What are you waiting for?
The show's over! Go home—

(The crowd disperses. Only Aazam remains, hanging around.)

Well, what do you want?

AAZAM: Nothing, I just wanted to see the Brahmin. He hasn't
come out yet, has he?

GUARD: Oh, get away. Wants to see the Brahmin, if you please.
Be off—

(Aazam retreats. The Guard looks into the Court and shouts.)

Come out—come out. Don't be scared, Your Highness.

(The Brahmin comes out.)

Perhaps Your Highness will want an escort to see you safely
home! Complaining against the Sultan! Bloody Infidel! Get
going, I'm already late.

BRAHMIN: Yes, yes. Certainly. Good-bye.

GUARD: Good-bye.

*(Goes in and shuts the door. The Brahmin starts to go. Aazam
follows him and then slowly taps him on the shoulder.)*

AAZAM: Ho...ooo...

*(The Brahmin whirls round and pulls out a dagger as he turns.
Aazam jumps back.)*

AAZAM: Oops...

(They watch each other. Aazam's jaw falls in surprise.)

AAZAM: Who? Not...not...

BRAHMIN: Aazam?

AAZAM: Aziz? What on earth...

(Gives a shout of joy, lifts Aziz up and whirls him round and round ecstatically.)

AZIZ: Let me down—let me down—

(Aazam lets him down.)

And hold your tongue. If they find out, I'm finished, man.

AAZAM: But—I don't see you for years and then—this—this?

AZIZ: Shut up!

(They move off and sit under a tree.)

AAZAM: I thought something was funny. I mean, a man wins a case against the King himself—you would expect him to come out triumphantly—I mean, holding his head high? Not hide inside! Listen, Brahmins don't carry daggers around like that.

(Aziz quickly hides the dagger.)

AZIZ: What are you doing here?

AAZAM: I am where there is a crowd. Look, today's earnings. And you won't believe me if I tell you where they hide their money—

AZIZ: So your bad habits continue, do they?

AAZAM: Not habit. Occupation. Anyway, I'm just a common pickpocket. But you are up to no good either, I can see that. A Muslim dhobi can't become a Brahmin that easily.

AZIZ: For God's sake, keep your voice down. Now look, if I tell you the truth, will you keep it to yourself?

AAZAM: Depends on what I get out of it—All right, you're an old friend. I'll keep quiet for nothing. So?

AZIZ: Did you hear the royal proclamation the other day?

AAZAM: Which one? There are so many.

AZIZ: You know, the one on the second anniversary of his coronation. (*Mimicking a public announcer.*)

‘Henceforth people may file a suit against the Sultan himself for the misbehaviour of his officers... No one need have any fear... Justice will be done...’ Et cetera. Well, I was at the end of my tether then. There’s no future in being a *dhobi* these days. So I did a bit of thinking. There’s a Brahmin called Vishnu Prasad whose land had been confiscated recently. I shaved my head and went to him. I said I would buy the land.

AAZAM: Please, a little slowly. I—you know I’m not very bright. But what’s the point? I mean the land was confiscated, wasn’t it?

AZIZ: Exactly, that’s what he said too. But I said, ‘Never mind about that’. So he sold me the land—backdating the contract. And I filed my suit. Well, here I am. Five hundred silver dinars for nothing, and a job in His Merciful Majesty’s own Civil Service.

AAZAM: But what if he had cut off your head instead?
(*Aziz laughs.*)

Anyway, why did you have to dress up in these ungodly clothes? Couldn’t you have come like a proper Muslim?

AZIZ: (*Scandalized.*) But then what would happen to the King’s impartial justice? A Muslim plaintiff against a Muslim king? I mean, where’s the question of justice there? Where’s the equality between Hindus and Muslims? If, on the other hand, the plaintiff’s a Hindu...well, you saw the crowds.

AAZAM: Complicated!

AZIZ: It’s a bit too subtle for you. Anyway here’s my offer. From tomorrow I join the Civil Service. Why don’t you come along too? I’ll get you a job under me. You know, a Brahmin with a Muslim friend—the Sultan will like that.

AAZAM: No thanks, I’m quite happy—

AZIZ: Come along. It won't be for long. I didn't intend to be a Brahmin all my life! There's money here and we'll make a pile by the time we reach Daulatabad.

AAZAM: And then?

AZIZ: How should I know?

Scene Two

A room in the palace. Muhammad is bent over a chess-board, smiling with suppressed excitement. The Step-Mother enters.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad—

MUHAMMAD: Ah, there you are! Absolutely at the right moment. If you had come a minute earlier, the world would have been so much poorer.

STEP-MOTHER: Really? That sounds very important.

MUHAMMAD: But it is. I have just solved the most famous problem in chess. Even al-Adli and as-Sarakhi said it was insoluble. And it's so simple—

STEP-MOTHER: Who were they?

MUHAMMAD: Mother! How can you ask? They were the greatest chess players the world's ever seen.

STEP-MOTHER: What do I know about your chess? You'd better write to Ain-ul-Mulk about it. He'll love it!

MUHAMMAD: Funny you should mention him. I was just thinking of him—but not with reference to chess. You see, my dear friend Ain-ul-Mulk, the companion of my childhood, my fellow champion in chess, is at this very moment marching on Delhi.

STEP-MOTHER: What? What do you mean?

MUHAMMAD: Exactly what I said. He is marching on Delhi with an army of thirty thousand.

STEP-MOTHER: But why, Muhammad?

MUHAMMAD: I don't know. The last letter I wrote to him asked him to be the Governor of the Deccan. I need a strong man there and I thought he would like it.

STEP-MOTHER: But there must be some other reason! (*No reply.*) What are you going to do now?

MUHAMMAD: Do the best I can. But I don't even have six thousand soldiers—Look, I was so happy about this problem and now you've ruined it all. Anyway, you came for something?

STEP-MOTHER: It doesn't matter any more.

MUHAMMAD: But it does, certainly.

STEP-MOTHER: I was worried about your late nights. These days you never seem to go to bed at all. I just wanted to know why.

MUHAMMAD (*smiles*): And you think you've found the answer? Look, if I was that worried about Ain-ul-Mulk why would I waste my time on this?

(*Points to the chess-board.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Then what do you do all night?

MUHAMMAD (*theatrical*): I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow but it's only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that. I look at the Pleiades and I think of Ibn-ul-Mottazz who thought it was an ostrich egg and Dur-rumma who thought it was a swallow. And then I want to go back to their poetry and sink myself in their words. Then again I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: 'Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let's laugh and cry

together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with—ours now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!

But then how can I spread my branches in the stars while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth? I wish I could believe in recurring births like the Hindu; but I have only one life, one body, and my hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for it. Tell me, how dare I waste my time sleeping? And don't tell me to go and get married and breed a family because I won't sleep.

STEP-MOTHER (*bursts into laughter*): I don't know what to do with you. I can't ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance. Even Ain-ul-Mulk doesn't seem to stop you—

MUHAMMAD: Mother, suppose I die fighting Ain-ul-Mulk—

STEP-MOTHER: Stop it!

MUHAMMAD: No, really. Suppose I die in the battle. What of it? Why should I waste my last few days worrying? I am not worried about my enemies. I'm only worried about my people.

STEP-MOTHER: Pompous ass! As though other kings didn't do that.

MUHAMMAD: No, they didn't. Look at the past Sultans of Delhi. They couldn't bear the weight of their crown. They couldn't leave it aside. So they died senile in their youth or were murdered.

STEP-MOTHER (*sharply*): Please, Muhammad—

MUHAMMAD: What?

STEP-MOTHER: Nothing—I can't bear to see you joking about murder.

MUHAMMAD: Why not?

STEP-MOTHER: I can't. That's all.

(Silence. They are both tense now.)

MUHAMMAD: So you too believe that piece of gossip!

STEP-MOTHER: What gossip?

MUHAMMAD (*mocking*): What gossip? What scandal? You know perfectly well what I mean.

STEP-MOTHER: Don't be silly. I didn't mean anything of that kind.

MUHAMMAD: But you do believe it? And why shouldn't you? After all my own mother believes it. The whole court believes it. My Amirs believe it. Why shouldn't my step-mother believe it?

STEP-MOTHER (*flaring up*): Shut up, fool! I've told you I won't have you calling me that?

MUHAMMAD (*suddenly calm, but with deliberate viciousness*): I know. But you are my step-mother!

(Silence. Enter the Door-Keeper.)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. Vizier Muhammad Najib and Zia-ud-din Barani to see you, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Send them in.

(The Door-Keeper goes out. The Step-Mother lowers the veil on her face. Najib and Barani enter.)

NAJIB, BARANI: In the name of Allah.

MUHAMMAD: Come in, come in. I was just saying to Mother...

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, why don't you tell them about your chess?

MUHAMMAD: Because they aren't interested. Barani is a historian—he's only interested in playing chess with the shadows of the dead. And Najib's a politician—he wants pawns of flesh and blood. He doesn't have the patience to breathe life into these bones. One needs Ain-ul-Mulk for that. So Najib, how far have we reached?

NAJIB: I'm doing my best, Your Majesty. But I don't think we'll get more than six thousand. The odds against us are very heavy...

BARANI: May I know what odds, Your Majesty?

NAJIB: ...but another equally important problem has cropped up, Your Majesty. Sheikh Imam-ud-din is in Delhi.

MUHAMMAD: Aha! Then we should take his blessings before we leave.

NAJIB: Yes, Your Majesty, and get rid of him.

BARANI: What a terrible thing to say about a holy man like that!

MUHAMMAD (*smiles to the Step-Mother, explaining*): Najib is upset because the Sheikh criticizes me publicly—demands that I abdicate. The Sheikh thinks I'm incompetent.

NAJIB: It's worse than that. He has become a backbone of the rebels. As for what else he says, you may ask Barani.

MUHAMMAD: So you've heard him, Barani. What's he like? Is it true he looks like me?

BARANI (*flustered*): A little, Your Majesty. But—how did Najib know I had heard the Sheikh? Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I don't like being spied upon.

NAJIB: It's my job to know. That's why I asked you to come here with me now.

MUHAMMAD: Surely a historian doesn't need an invitation to watch history take shape! Come, what does he say?

BARANI: It's as Your Majesty said... He says the Sultan is a disgrace to Islam.

MUHAMMAD: That's all? I could find worse faults in me. What else?

(*Silence.*)

NAJIB: He says Your Majesty has forfeited the right to rule, by murdering your father and brother at prayer.

(The Step-Mother and Barani react sharply, but Muhammad is still. A short pause.)

MUHAMMAD *(quietly)*: Did he say that?

BARANI *(almost in a whisper)*: Yes, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: So now they talk about it openly, do they?

BARANI: He said it in the heat of the moment, Your Majesty. I'm sure he didn't mean it. Your Majesty must ignore these little things.

MUHAMMAD: Do you really think parricide is a little thing? And fratricide? And the pollution of prayer? It's not what people say, Barani, it's their crooked minds that horrify me. Look at my own mother—she won't talk to me now—not because father died but because my brother died in the accident. He was more amenable to her whims and he would have made a better king for her. So she believes I killed them. Do you know, I've just found out that even this step-mother of mine thinks I am a murderer.

(Silence.)

NAJIB *(quietly)*: What about the Sheikh, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD *(in a tired voice)*: Let him babble. He is a saint, it's his privilege.

NAJIB: But we must do something. In Kanpur, they're still rioting and he started it. Now he's here—in the capital.

BARANI: But His Majesty is right. The people have been told that they have a right to criticize the Sultan, to voice their grievances openly. Surely this is the time to show that the Sultan means it—that they were not empty words. The people will surely respond to His Majesty's courage, honesty and justice...

NAJIB *(groans)*: Courage, honesty and justice! My dear Barani, we are dealing with a political problem!

BARANI: I know and that's where they count most. Because that's where the Kingdom of Islam which the Prophet—may peace

be upon him—has gifted us must blossom. Oh! You won't understand it. Your Hindu childhood has twisted your attitudes beyond repair.

NAJIB: Do you know why I gave up Hinduism? Because it didn't speak of the salvation of society. It only talked of the soul—my individual soul—while a poor, frenzied world screamed in agony around. So I became a Muslim. Islam is worried about this world, I said, it'll bring the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But I know now—it won't work. There's only the present moment and we must grasp it firmly.

MUHAMMAD (*ironic but affectionate*): So what does the present moment demand now?

BARANI: It's obvious, Your Majesty. He wants the Sheikh dead.

NAJIB: Nonsense! That'll make him a martyr. You can't kill the dead. If we kill him now, we're finished. We might as well surrender to Ain-ul-Mulk.

BARANI (*startled*): Surrender to whom?

MUHAMMAD: Ain-ul-Mulk. He is marching on Delhi.

BARANI: I don't believe it! (*Silence.*) But you mustn't act hastily, Your Majesty. There's obviously been some misunderstanding. (*Earnestly.*) You know Ain-ul-Mulk. He is a good man and he worships you. You know he isn't the treacherous type.

MUHAMMAD (*in anguish*): But why now? Can't he see that I've no time for 'misunderstandings' now? He knows how important it is for me to concentrate on moving to Daulatabad.

BARANI: But there must be some way of finding out why he's doing this. Please send an envoy... Send me... I'll go...

NAJIB: What's the point? We can't waste our time on that. A traitor's a traitor, friend or saint, and he must be crushed.

BARANI: But don't you want to know why?

NAJIB: I do know why. It's obvious.

(The rest look at him in surprise.)

MUHAMMAD: It is?

NAJIB: Your Majesty, when you came to the throne, there was anarchy in Avadh and you made Ain-ul-Mulk the Governor there. He crushed the rebels, restored law and order, and the people in Avadh adore him. He's happy there, secure. Then suddenly he gets your letter making him the Governor of the Deccan, asking him to leave immediately. Is it surprising he should suspect a knife in his back?

(Silence.)

MUHAMMAD: God, why didn't I think of that?

BARANI: But Najib did, Your Majesty, and didn't warn you.

NAJIB: Would His Majesty have listened to me if I'd warned then?
His Majesty loved Ain-ul-Mulk—too much.

BARANI: And you hate him?

NAJIB: Dear Barani, not hate, just suspicion. It's my job to be suspicious and I can't exempt anyone from it.

STEP-MOTHER: No one?

NAJIB: No, Your Highness.

STEP-MOTHER: Not even the Sultan?

NAJIB *(senses a trap, but calmly)*: No, not even the Sultan, Your Highness.

STEP-MOTHER *(flaring up)*: Muhammad—
(Muhammad silences her with a gesture of impatience.)

MUHAMMAD: So, Najib, what do you propose?

NAJIB: I can't think of anything right now, Your Majesty—except that the Sheikh has a striking resemblance to you.

(Muhammad, startled, stares at Najib.)

BARANI: What has the Sheikh got to do with this?

MUHAMMAD *(slowly)*: You are a devil, Najib! *(Pause. Then briskly.)*

Good. We'll think about that. In the meantime, the army should be ready to march. We'll start for Kanauj the day after tomorrow in the evening.

STEP-MOTHER: And who'll look after the administration here, Muhammad?

MUHAMMAD: Najib will be here.

(The Step-Mother obviously doesn't like the answer. Najib smiles ironically but not too openly.)

Besides I have invited Shihab-ud-din, the Prince of Sampanshahr, to be here in my absence. You see, the Amir there doesn't like me very much, so I thought inviting his son would be a nice friendly gesture.

BARANI: What's all this, Your Majesty? I can't follow a thing. But my heart trembles for you.

MUHAMMAD: Forgive me if I let you down, Barani, but I must play this game my own way. Come, Najib, we must see the Commander-in-Chief. Mother, if you'll excuse us. *(Bows to her.)*

STEP-MOTHER: Can Barani stay for a while? I want to talk to him.

MUHAMMAD: Why, yes, certainly.

(Muhammad and Najib go out. Silence.)

STEP-MOTHER: I don't know what to say, Barani. I mustn't complain against my own son—

BARANI: Your Highness may place full trust in me.

STEP-MOTHER: I know. That's why I asked you to stay. I am worried about him. You know what he is like. He is such an intelligent boy and he works so hard for the people. He doesn't even go to bed these days. *(Pause.)* But he is so impulsive—and when he gets into one of his moods I don't know what he'll do next. *(Pause.)* You are a sober man, Barani, level-headed and honest, and he needs friends like you. I just wanted to ask you... Oh, God! It all sounds so stupid.

BARANI: I fully understand Your Highness's feelings.

STEP-MOTHER: It's not that. It's just that I don't like so many of his advisers and friends. (*Suddenly.*) Please promise me not to leave him—ever—whatever he does.

BARANI (*overwhelmed to the point of tears*): May God help me to retain such confidence untarnished. I won't leave His Majesty, Your Highness, I promise you. I love him too much to do that.

STEP-MOTHER: Look at him now. He won't show it, but Ain-ul-Mulk has hurt him. And this Sheikh Imam-ud-din—I don't know what he's going to do.

BARANI: It's not for me to advise, Your Highness, but I have to mention it. I am not jealous of Najib and I admire his integrity. But sometimes I am bothered by his influence on the Sultan.

STEP-MOTHER: I know. I am watching. I'll wait for a few days. (*With sudden violence.*) If he goes on like this, I won't wish his fate even on a dog!

(*Barani, driven to tears by her maternal concern, looks up startled by the venom in her voice.*)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Slave of the Lord, the Merciful, the ever-Victorious Sultan Muhammad has declared that this evening after the prayer a meeting will be organized in the yard in front of the Great Mosque. Sheikh Imam-uddin, who is revered all over India as a Saint and as one who stands in the Grace of Allah, will address the meeting. He will analyse His Merciful Majesty's administration and show where His Majesty has inadvertently taken wrong measures—measures harmful to the country and the Faith. His Majesty himself will be present at the meeting to seek direction from the Revered Sheikh, and the citizens of Delhi are requested to attend the meeting in large numbers and do likewise. Attention! Attention!

Scene Three

The yard in front of the Great Mosque. Muhammad and Sheikh Imam-ud-din and a few odd servants of the palace. No one else. There is a long silence.

MUHAMMAD (*suddenly*): I can't bear this any longer!

IMAM-UD-DIN: Why Your Majesty? You should be happy if no one turns up.

MUHAMMAD: Do you think I would have gone to the trouble of arranging this meeting if I didn't want my people to hear you? I don't want my people to be dumb cattle, Sheikhsahib, and I do not claim to be omniscient myself. I am quite willing to learn from you—even eager.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Will you be as eager when you hear me out, I wonder? You know I am not the type to sweeten my words because the Sultan himself is present.

MUHAMMAD: Don't I know it? The whole of Delhi has heard of the courage and integrity of Sheikh Imam-ud-din. I would not have taken so much trouble for anyone else.

(*Claps. A servant enters and bows.*)

Go at once and tell the Vizier I want everyone here—all the Khans, Amirs, Sardars—everyone—at once!

IMAM-UD-DIN: But Your Majesty, I haven't come here to speak to a collection of courtiers—

MUHAMMAD: And I'm afraid I can't go now from door to door asking people to come. I should have issued renewed orders at the Court today. We have been waiting for over half an hour—and not a soul has come yet!

IMAM-UD-DIN: They say we look alike, but we don't think alike, do we? What's the point in my addressing a gang of sycophants? I want to speak to the people who are willing to act, who are willing to do something for Islam and the country. If no one comes today, well, no matter. I'll go to the market-place tomorrow and speak there.

(Muhammad signs to the servant to go. He goes out.)

MUHAMMAD: Would you believe me if I told you I have never consciously tried to go against the tenets of Islam?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Please, Your Majesty, even you can't believe that! I can quote scores of transgressions. If they weren't wilful, they could only be results of ignorance. But I can't believe that in a scholar of your eminence. Perhaps you are sincere. But if one fails to understand what the Koran says, one must ask the Sayyids and the Ulema. Instead you have put the best of them behind bars in the name of justice.

MUHAMMAD: They tried to indulge in politics—I couldn't allow that. I have never denied the word of God, Sheikhsahib, because it's my bread and drink. I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there. But I am alone in my life. My kingdom has millions—Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should I call on God to clean up the dirt deposited by men?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Because only the Voice of God, the Holy Word, can do it. Please listen to me, Your Majesty. The Arabs spread Islam round the world and they struggled and fought for it for seven hundred years. They are tired now, limp and exhausted. But their work must continue and we need

someone to take the lead. You could do it. You are one of the most powerful kings on earth today and you could spread the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. God has given you everything—power, learning, intelligence, talent. Now you must repay His debt.

MUHAMMAD: No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl—I have to gallop.

IMAM-UD-DIN: And you will do it without the Koran to guide you? Beware, Sultan, you are trying to become another God. It's a sin worse than parricide.

MUHAMMAD (*refusing the bait*): Only an atheist can try to be God. I am God's most humble slave.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Yes. And slaves have often tried to replace their master.

MUHAMMAD: My congratulations, Imam-ud-din Sahib. For a saint you are very good at innuendoes—I know all about slaves. My grandfather was one and he seized power. But that was in mundane politics. The analogy doesn't work here.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Religion! Politics! Take heed, Sultan, one day these verbal distinctions will rip you into two.

MUHAMMAD: Don't I know it? I still remember the days when I read the Greeks—Sokrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods, Aflatoon who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself—and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am—torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. (*Smiles.*) I'm sorry. But it can't be done.

IMAM-UD-DIN: You are a learned man. You may be able to manage this delicate balance within yourself. But a kingdom needs not one king but a line of rulers. Will they manage this balance? Where are these brilliant successors of yours? Where are these guarantors of your balanced future?

MUHAMMAD: There is none—yet. But I haven't lost hope. I shall find them and teach them to think like me. They are only cattle yet, but I shall make men out of a few of them. Look, Sheikhsahib, in Kanpur you found so many honest men that they burnt down the whole of Kanpur. They are still on the rampage there and your words inspire them. Now you've come to Delhi and there isn't even a fly to listen to you. They are staying away—at home, safe and secure. They don't want you here. Do you know why?

(*Silence.*)

Because they suspect you now. The moment they heard that I, the Sultan, was organizing a meeting in which you, my severest critic, was going to speak—they became suspicious. Why should the Sultan sponsor his worst critic? They have smelt a trap. And wisely they have stayed away.

IMAM-UD-DIN (*stunned*): Was this a trap?

MUHAMMAD: No, I promise you.

IMAM-UD-DIN: But—you knew this would happen?

MUHAMMAD: I didn't *know*. But I half expected it. I know my people.

IMAM-UD-DIN: So they think I'm your spy—and you knew it when you arranged this meeting!

MUHAMMAD: Believe me, Sheikhsahib, I'm sorry I am not disappointed. Yes, they will now decide you are a spy—they'll greet you as a spy in the market-place tomorrow. But now you do see what I mean, don't you? You are revered as a saint and you have risked your life by speaking out against the Sultan. Yet a trick—and they suspect you. It's futile to think

of them as members of the *dar-ul-Islam*. Generations of devout sultans have twisted their minds and I have to mend their minds before I can think of their souls.

(There is a long silence. Then Sheikh Imam-ud-din starts to move down slowly.)

IMAM-UD-DIN: My turn to congratulate you. Your experiment was a brilliant success. Yes, I have learnt my lesson. Thank you—and good-bye.

MUHAMMAD: Good-bye? You are not going?

IMAM-UD-DIN: You have finished my work for me. You don't want me to wait longer, do you? For an audience which won't turn up?

MUHAMMAD: I need your help, Sheikhshahib.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Don't play any more games with me—

MUHAMMAD: There's no time for games. I am desperate. Ain-ul-Mulk of Avadh is marching on Delhi at this very moment.

IMAM-UD-DIN: What? Your intimate friend and confidant? Why? No, I don't wish to know why. That's politics and you know your way there. But why tell me this?

MUHAMMAD: Because I want peace. I am willing to make peace, but how can I do it? I don't even know why he has turned against me. He won't even see my official envoys. *(Pause.)* But he will see you.

(The Sheikh is about to speak. But Muhammad goes on.)

He respects you as every Muslim in India does. He will trust your word. That's why I'm asking you—will you please go as my envoy and dissuade him from this folly? Please, Sheikhshahib, I'm not asking you only for my sake, but for all the Muslims who will die at the hands of Muslims if there is a war.

(Pause.)

IMAM-UD-DIN: I don't trust your motives.

MUHAMMAD: What do my motives matter? You can't deny that this war will mean a slaughter of Muslims at the hands of fellow-Muslims. Isn't that enough for the great Sheikh Imam-ud-din? You have attacked me for inaction. You can't turn away now when you are offered a chance. You can't!

IMAM-UD-DIN: I know I can't.

MUHAMMAD: So you agree?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Do you leave me an alternative?

MUHAMMAD (*slowly*): I'll never be able to thank you enough for this.

(*Claps his hands. A servant enters and bows.*)

Bring the robes of honour for the royal envoy. At once!

(*The servant departs.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: You don't mean the robes are ready?

MUHAMMAD: Forgive me, Sheikhsahib, but I knew you wouldn't refuse.

IMAM-UD-DIN: But what about Ain-ul-Mulk? Won't he also think of me as your spy? It won't take long before he comes to know of this. (*Indicates the empty auditorium.*)

MUHAMMAD: He is not a fool. Besides, he won't know. There isn't time. We have to start before nightfall. Ain-ul-Mulk has already started and we must meet him near the plains of Kanauj.

(*The servant brings the robes of honour and the headdress on a golden plate. Muhammad takes the robe and goes near the Sheikh.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN (*stopping him*): If you want peace, what does it matter where we meet him?

MUHAMMAD: I do want peace. But I can't leave anything to chance. If Ain-ul-Mulk refuses or resorts to treachery, I have to have my army in a safe place. I owe it to my soldiers.

(*Pause.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: You know, Sultan, I'm just beginning to understand why they say you are the cleverest man in the world.

MUHAMMAD: I am an incompetent fool. Will you accept the robes now?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Very well.

(He puts on the robes. Muhammad places the headdress upon him. They stand facing each other. The dress makes them look even more alike.)

I wish I could be more sure of you...

Scene Four

The Palace. Shihab-ud-din is reading a few letters. There is an announcement.

DOOR-KEEPER (*announcing*): Her Highness the Queen Mother. (*Shihab-ud-din leaps up. The Step-Mother enters and he bows to her.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Welcome, Your Highness. I am most honoured by the visit, but, had Your Highness sent for me, I would have come myself.

STEP-MOTHER: I suddenly felt frightened, Shihab-ud-din. I couldn't bear the tension any longer. Has there been any further news?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'm afraid not, Your Highness. The last bulletin was received a week ago. Your Highness knows the contents. There has been nothing since then. I'm sorry but—

STEP-MOTHER: No, no, please, don't apologize. I don't know what I should have done without you here. You know when Muhammad said he was inviting you to look after Delhi, I didn't understand him at all. I couldn't see why he had to ask you, rather than a local Amir. I know now—he couldn't have chosen a better man.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I am most grateful for Your Highness's trust, but I did very little. The credit should go to Vizier Muhammad Najib.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh! Don't talk to me about him. Thanks to you,
I didn't have to deal with him.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Your Highness's most humble servant.
(*The Door-Keeper enters.*)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. Sardar Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*excited*): He is here? Send him in at once.
(*The Door-Keeper goes out.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Who is that?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: My adopted brother, Your Highness.

STEP-MOTHER: Him! He'll have news of the front then!
(*Ratansingh enters and bows to the Step-Mother. Shihab-ud-din goes to him in great excitement and embraces him.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Welcome, Ratansingh. What happened?

RATANSINGH: His Majesty is back in Delhi. We arrived a few
minutes ago.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh, then I must go.

RATANSINGH: Forgive me, Your Highness, but His Majesty has
gone to see the Vizier. He has asked me to inform Your
Highness that he will be here any minute.
(*The Step-Mother doesn't like it. But she swallows it.*)

STEP-MOTHER: But I can't understand it. Why didn't he send word
he was coming? Why this secrecy?

RATANSINGH (*hesitates*): I don't think it was meant to be secret,
Your Highness. It's just that His Majesty seems much affected
by the death of Sheikh Imam-ud-din.

STEP-MOTHER: What? Sheikh Imam-ud-din dead?

RATANSINGH: Yes, Your Highness. He was killed in the battle.
(*Her face goes white.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But what was the Sheikh doing in the battle?

DOOR-KEEPER (*off-stage*): The Warrior in the path of God, the
Victorious, the Mighty, His Majesty the Sultan.

(Muhammad enters with Najib and Barani.)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*bows*): In the name of Allah. May He shower greater successes on Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: That's no way to welcome, Shihab-ud-din. Come—
(They embrace.)

I am grateful to you for looking after my people in my absence.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Your Majesty's humble slave.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, what's this about Sheikh Imam-ud-din?

(Muhammad freezes. Then slowly.)

MUHAMMAD: Did you have to mention it now? It was a terrible sight. They brought his body into my tent and I felt—as though it was I who was lying dead there and that he was standing above me looking at me. I should have been there—in his place.

(Pause.)

BARANI: It's a great loss to Islam.

STEP-MOTHER: And what about Ain-ul-Mulk? I hope he's dead too.

MUHAMMAD: I let him go.

(General surprise.)

STEP-MOTHER: You didn't! You couldn't have!

NAJIB: I hate to say it on this happy occasion, Your Majesty, but that would be really tossing another torch into the chaos in Avadh.

BARANI: Your Highness must forgive me, but His Majesty deserves congratulations on his courage. He has shown there are things more valuable than vengeance.

NAJIB: Not that again!

MUHAMMAD: I didn't just set him free, Najib. I gave him back the Kingdom of Avadh, *and* I promised not to send him to the Deccan.

NAJIB: We are helpless if Your Majesty insists on... (*Stops.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Why, Muhammad? Why did he deserve such special treatment?

MUHAMMAD: I'll tell you what happened. You remember the chess problem I solved the other day? Well, when they brought Ain-ul-Mulk before me, I said: 'Look, I have solved the famous problem set by al-Adli!' He didn't say a word. I drew a sketch on the floor and showed him the solution. He said he liked it, then looked harder for a couple of minutes and said: 'No, there's a flaw here.' And he actually showed me where I had gone wrong! Think of that! I had spent days on that wretched problem and he spots a flaw within half a minute. I had to forgive him.

BARANI: You are a great man, Your Majesty,...

MUHAMMAD (*laughing*): And you are a good man, Barani, and that's more important. Look at Najib—look at the expression on his face! He can't even believe I can be generous.

NAJIB: I am suspicious by nature, Your Majesty; fortunately my duty also demands it of me.

MUHAMMAD: We must go now. Najib, Delhi will observe a day of mourning tomorrow for Sheikh Imam-ud-din. And there will be no festivities to celebrate the victory. When men like him die, it's a sin to be alive. Come, Mother. Good-bye, Shihab-ud-din and many, many thanks.

(*All except Shihab-ud-din and Ratansingh go. A brief silence.*)

RATANSINGH: I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then flagellates himself in remorse.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What are you talking about?

RATANSINGH: I'm silent.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'm sorry. But you have never liked the Sultan, I don't know why. After all that he has done for the Hindus—

RATANSINGH: Yes indeed, who can deny that! He is impartial! Haven't you heard about the Doab? He levied such taxes on the poor farmers that they preferred to starve. Now there's a famine there. And of course Hindus as well as Muslims are dying with absolute impartiality.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What's that got to do with Sheikh Imam-ud-din?

RATANSINGH: I don't know. But I tell you I'm glad to survive the Sultan's impartiality.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Must you spin riddles?

RATANSINGH: And do you really want to know the truth? All right. Because you insisted, I went to fight alongside the Sultan. I went and saw him in Kanauj. He didn't seem too pleased to see me. He actually scowled. A Sultan's scowl is a terrible thing.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: So?

RATANSINGH: Next day I see what the scowl is doing. Sheikh Imam-ud-din is to go and propose peace to Ain-ul-Mulk. A platoon of soldiers is to accompany him. And I am placed in the front rank of the platoon. You know what that means. The front rank never survives a battle.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Go on.

RATANSINGH: The Sheikh is delighted about being the Sultan's peace emissary. He looks gorgeous—all dressed up in royal robes, a royal turban, even royal slippers, and sitting on the royal elephant. In fact, he looks exactly like the Sultan.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*suspicious*): And the Sultan? What was he doing?

RATANSINGH: I didn't know it then, but he was hiding behind some hills with the rest of the army. Laying a trap.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: A trap?

RATANSINGH: So we marched towards Ain-ul-Mulk's army, led by the gorgeous Sheikh on the royal elephant. The elephant halted about a hundred yards away from the enemy. The

Sheikh stood up on it and tried to say something when a trumpeter on our side sounded the charge! The battle was on—Yes, my dear Shihab, Ain-ul-Mulk didn't start the battle. We did!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: And the Sultan?

RATANSINGH: I couldn't understand what was happening. Neither did the Sheikh, obviously. His face was twisted with fear but he was shouting at the top of his voice asking us to stop. He didn't stand a chance. Arrows poured into him and within minutes he looked a gory human porcupine.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: And the Sultan? Didn't he do anything?

RATANSINGH: He did! The Sheikh plunged down from the elephant and over his corpse we fled in confusion. The enemy was convinced the Sultan was dead and they pursued us. They walked right into the trap. It was the bloodiest massacre I've even seen... We won! (*Pause.*) Sheikh Imam-ud-din was murdered, you know. In cold blood.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Oh my God!

RATANSINGH: This isn't all. There's a longer history to all this, (*Pause.*) Do you want to hear it? (*Pause.*) Listen, in a few days the nobles of the court and the prominent citizens of Delhi are going to hold a secret meeting to discuss... (*Stops.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What?

RATANSINGH: How should I know? I haven't attended the meeting yet.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: How do you know about it?

RATANSINGH: Ah! That's Delhi for you! They were looking for recruits and the moment they realized the Sultan had tried to kill me off, they discreetly approached me and invited me. They have asked you too, incidentally. They hope you won't be too apathetic toward the attempted disposal of your adopted brother!

(Silence.)

I have accepted the invitation, of course. Would you like to come along too?

(Silence.)

Why, Shihab, you look pale!

Scene Five

A house in Delhi. A collection of Amirs, Sayyids, etc. Shihab-ud-din and Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'll be plain with you. If you don't like the present administration, that's your problem. I'm an outsider in Delhi. I've nothing to do with it.

AMIR I: But that's the whole point, don't you see? You're the only man he won't suspect.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I hope that's not a point against him.

AMIR II: Besides, the people in Delhi never trust each other. It's the climate. They have to have an outsider to lead them!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Lead them in what?

AMIR I: Just consider this. Why is he taking us to Daulatabad? Have you wondered about that? I'll tell you. He wants to weaken the Amirs. You see, we are strong in Delhi. This is where we belong. But Daulatabad is a Hindu city and we'll be helpless there. We'll have to lick his feet.

AMIR III: And it's no use his saying stay behind if you like. We have to be in the capital!

AMIR II: Look at what's happening in Delhi. Just look at it! You can't take a step without paying some tax or another. There's

even a tax on gambling. How are we to live? You can't even cheat without having to pay tax for it. (*Laughter.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But he has done a lot of good work. Built schools, roads, hospitals. He has made good use of the money.

SAYYID: Then why can't he collect it the right way? The Koran sanctions only four taxes, but...(*Looks at Ratansingh and stops.*)

RATANSINGH (*smiles*): Carry on, sir. Don't mind me. I'm here because Shihab's here; otherwise I am invisible!

SAYYID: Well...uhm, he could tax the Hindus. The *jiziya* is sanctioned by the Koran. All infidels should pay it. Instead he says the infidels are our brothers...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*getting up in disgust*): Come, Ratansingh, let's go. This is worse than I thought. They don't deserve to kiss the hem of the Sultan's dress.

(*The others are offended and retreat.*)

RATANSINGH: Ah, well...

(*Gets up. At this point an old man who has been sitting in a corner all along steps forward.*)

SHEIKH: Shihab-ud-din—

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I said I am not going to associate...

SHEIKH: Shihab-ud-din, I have never asked anything of anyone but Allah. Today I implore you. In the name of Allah, help us.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*impressed by the old man's age and sincerity*): Who are you?

SAYYID (*contemptuously*): Don't you know? He is Sheikh Shams-ud-din Tajuddarfim?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Sheikh Shams-ud-din? Sir, what is a holy man like you doing in this company?

SHEIKH: Yes, you are right. I should shut myself up in a mosque and devote myself to Allah. I shouldn't get mixed up in the

treacherous games of politicians. I know and I had hoped my life would be like that. But Allah isn't only for me, Shihab-ud-din; He's for everyone who believes in him. While tyranny crushes the faithful into dust, how can I continue to hide in my hole? Haven't you heard what's happening to the leaders of Islam today? Sheikh Haidari is in prison. Sheikh Hood in exile...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I know. But they dabbled in politics.

SHEIKH: Is it so reprehensible to be concerned about people? Is it a crime to speak out for oneself and one's family? What politics did Sheikh Imam-ud-din indulge in? That he was open, frank and honest?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I don't know enough about that. But to me it seems clear that if the Sultan is to be blamed for that death, so are all the citizens of Delhi. I sometimes feel the Sheikh must have almost wished for death after what happened in Delhi.

AMIR I: What did happen in Delhi?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: You know that better than me! He came here to speak to the people and not a soul turned up to hear him. Not one of you had the courage to come to the meeting and now you have the cheek to blame the Sultan for his death.

(The others whisper and chuckle in derision.)

SHEIKH: So you don't know what actually happened behind the scenes?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Behind the scenes?

(More derisive laughter.)

SHEIKH: Yes, behind the scenes. It's true the Sultan invited the whole of Delhi to hear the Sheikh. Yet, on that very afternoon, soldiers went from door to door threatening dire consequences if anyone dared to attend the meeting.

(Silence.)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*slowly*): Does the Sultan know this?

(*More laughter.*)

SHEIKH: They were his orders! And do you know, while the Sultan stood in front of the Great Mosque with the Sheikh and got more and more agitated at the empty auditorium, his soldiers were hiding in the streets around, stopping those who tried to come? You don't believe it? Look here...

(*Unbuttons his shirt and shows a wound on his shoulder.*)

I tried to force my way to the Great Mosque and this is what I got for it. Who else would do this to an old man?

RATANSINGH: There, you see! That explains why he had to invite you from Sampanshahr to look after Delhi in his absence. There's confidence for you!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*doggedly*): Perhaps. But it's done me no harm.

RATANSINGH: Of course not. Had he meant to harm you, you wouldn't be here to talk about it!

SHEIKH: Will you only think about yourself, Shihab-ud-din? You are the strong, the powerful in this country. You have the capacity to set things right. Won't you worry a little about the people? The citizens of Delhi don't wish to go to Daulatabad, but they are weak. Will you do nothing for them? How many people like Sheikh Imam-ud-din have to die before you'll be ready to act?

(*No reply.*)

AMIR I: We have to act now—while the army here is still tired and disorganized. We have to do something while you're here. If you won't join us, will you at least promise not to fight against us?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I know too much now to remain neutral.

RATANSINGH (*with a sudden burst of anger*): Then why not join them? Even my infidel blood boils when I think of Sheikh Imam-ud-din and Sheikh Shams-ud-din here. You accuse the people of Delhi of cowardice and yet you won't raise a finger

to correct an obvious wrong. (*Gets up.*) Come, let's go to the palace. The problem of justice won't bother us there.

AMIR I: You must help us, Shihab-ud-din.

SHEIKH: Islam needs your help.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What do you want me to do? You don't need me. You need my father. He is the strong man and even the Sultan is afraid of him. But you're in a hurry. I can only swell your numbers—little else.

RATANSINGH: Don't be stupid, Shihab. Don't tell me you still think the Amirs want to fight the Sultan in the open.

(*Shihab-ud-din looks up at him sharply. Ratansingh smiles and turns to the rest.*)

You see what it is. Shihab is an intelligent young man but he's just too nice! You see his father...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Don't, Ratan...

RATANSINGH: Come on, everyone knows about it! His father is supposed to have killed my father by treachery and usurped the kingdom. Shihab can't forget that. He wants to make up for it. That's why I'm here, as his adopted brother. And that's why he just can't stand the mention of treachery. (*To Shihab-ud-din.*) Don't overdo it. You'll have to face it some day. After all, what did the Sultan do to Sheikh Imam-ud-din?

SAYYID: It's not going to be easy. We can't afford to make mistakes.

AMIR II: I know. I have been trying to think of some way. But it just gives me a headache.

(*A long silence.*)

RATANSINGH: I have a plan. It's perfect.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Yes?

RATANSINGH: Yes. The Sultan, as you know, is a fanatic about prayer. He has made it compulsory for every Muslim to pray five times a day.

SAYYID: That's his only saving grace.

RATANSINGH: Quite! Even the soldiers have to pray, and while they pray, they are not allowed to carry arms. Which means that at the time of prayer, the whole palace is unarmed.

(Long pause.)

AMIR II: It takes a Hindu to notice that! *(Half terrified by the simplicity of it all.)* So?

RATANSINGH: Next Tuesday the Amirs here will be seeing the Sultan for the Durbar-i-Khas. See that you prolong the meeting till the prayer hour. Pray with him. You'll only need an extra couple of hundred soldiers outside the palace. The muezzin's call to prayer will be the signal for attack!

(There is an uncomfortable silence.)

AMIR II *(quietly)*: Fantastic!

SAYYID: But kill someone during prayer...

AMIR I: And a Muslim too...

RATANSINGH: Where's your Holy Koran? The tyrant doesn't deserve to be considered among the faithful. And then, he killed his own father during prayer time, after all.

AMIR I: That's true. But...

RATANSINGH: That's my plan. Think of a better one if you can.

AMIR I: But we'll have to smuggle arms into the palace.

AMIR II: That can be arranged.

AMIR I: You are sure?

AMIR II: Of course, I'm sure. I think this is a brilliant plan.

AMIR III: It is simple.

(They all talk animatedly.)

SHEIKH: No, we can't have it!

(Sudden silence as they all turn to Sheikh Shams-ud-din).

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Why, pray?

SHEIKH: You can't pollute the time of prayer. It's a sacred time. We can't stain it with the blood of a Mussulman.

AMIR II: O come, we can always make up later. Do penance for it.

SHEIKH: But prayer isn't penance. Remember we are here to save Islam, not to insult it.

AMIR I: Don't get excited. Islam will benefit in the long run.

SHEIKH (*to Shihab-ud-din, pleading*): You can't agree to this, Shihab-ud-din. You are the only sensible person here. You can't agree to this sacrilege. You can't do this to Islam...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Does your Islam work only at prayer? You have persuaded me to do what I had sworn never to do—you, Your Holiness. I'm sure the Lord will not mind an interrupted prayer. (*To the others.*) All right, let's get down to the details. We have to work everything out carefully. (*Suddenly.*) Must we do this, Ratan? Must we?

Scene Six

The palace. Muhammad, Najib and Barani. Silence for a while. Muhammad is restless and paces up and down.

BARANI: Why are you both so quiet? .

NAJIB: Oh, shut up!

MUHAMMAD: Please, Najib.

(Silence again. The Door-Keeper enters.)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. The Amirs have come for the Durbar-i-Khas.

MUHAMMAD: Send them in.

(The Door-Keeper goes out. Barani and Najib stand up. The Amirs enter along with Shihab-ud-din. They greet each other.)

AMIR I: In the name of Allah.

(Najib smiles to himself.)

MUHAMMAD *(with obvious warmth)*: Come in, come in. Please take your seats. I am glad you have all come on time. I want to finish the Durbar-i-Khas as soon as possible. I have promised the Imam I'll be at the mosque for today's prayer. That doesn't give us much time, I'm afraid. Are there any special problems any of you wish to raise?

(No reply.)

Excellent! I have only two topics myself. Not much to discuss there, but naturally I want to inform the Durbar-i-Khas before announcing them to the public. First, I am very happy to inform you that Abbasid Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad has accepted my invitation to visit our capital.

(Silence.)

AMIR I: Who is he, Your Majesty?

AMIR II: I'm afraid I have never heard of that name...

MUHAMMAD: Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. Abbasid Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad is not exactly famous. He is a member of the hallowed family of the Abbasid Khalifs.

(Silence while the Amirs digest this bit of news which obviously makes no sense to them.)

BARANI: It's good news that a descendant of the last Khalif is visiting us, Your Majesty.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: May I compliment His Majesty on his wisdom?

MUHAMMAD: Wisdom? What a strange word to use. Why wisdom? A visit by the descendant of the Khalif could show how faithful I am or how religious or even perhaps, how modest. But why do you say 'wisdom'? Do you think I am inviting him to placate the stupid priests?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I didn't mean to...

MUHAMMAD: You know, since Sheikh Imam-ud-din died I have been asking myself just one question. I am a king. I wear the royal robes. I have honoured myself with the title of Sultan. But what gives me the right to call myself a King?

(The Amirs are baffled.)

Am I a king only because I am the son of a king? Or is it because I can make the people accept my laws and the army move to my commands? Or can self-confidence alone justify it? I ask you—all of you—what would you have me do to become a real king in your eyes?

(Silence.)

NAJIB (*disapproving*): Your Majesty—

MUHAMMAD: You are all silent. The others only tell me what I should not do but not what I should. Until I know what else to do, Shihab-ud-din, I have to go on clutching the sceptre in my fist. But I am not happy and I am turning to tradition and history now and seeking an answer there—in the blessings of the Abbasid Khalif.

AMIR I: The sins of Delhi will be washed clean by the visit of so great a man.

MUHAMMAD: You bring tears to my eyes. But the great man isn't coming to Delhi. We shall be in Daulatabad by then.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I implore Your Majesty not to move the capital to Daulatabad. I am not from Delhi myself and have no stake in it. But I know the people of Delhi are very unhappy about the move. I have seen—

MUHAMMAD: What am I to do, Shihab-ud-din? I have explained every reason to them, shown how my empire cannot flourish with Delhi as its capital. But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven't even opened their eyes to the light of today? Let's not waste more time over that. They'll see the point soon. It's getting late and I must come to the more important news. From next year, we shall have copper currency in our empire along with the silver dinars.

AMIR I: Whatever for? I mean what does one do with a copper coin?

MUHAMMAD: Exchange it for a silver coin! A copper coin will have the same value as a silver dinar.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But I don't understand, Your Majesty. How can one expect a copper coin to have the same value as a silver one?

MUHAMMAD: It's a question of confidence. A question of trust! The other day I heard that in China they have paper currency—

paper, mind you—and yet it works because the people accept it. They have faith in the Emperor's seal on the pieces of paper.

AMIR I (*whispers to the next man*): I told you he's mad!

MUHAMMAD: What was that?

AMIR I: I was just saying people here won't accept copper currency.

MUHAMMAD: Then why not say it aloud? Because people are afraid, will you mistrust me too? Laugh at me if you like, criticize me, but please don't distrust me. I can order you all to obey me but tell me, how do I gain your full trust? I can only beg for it. (*Pleading.*) I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don't understand me, ask me to explain myself and I'll do it. If you don't understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don't let me down, I beg you. I'll kneel before you if you wish, but please don't let go of my hand.

(*He kneels before them. The Amirs almost recoil at this sudden gesture.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*embarrassed*): But, Your Majesty, it's not for a king to beg. He must command. We are your ever-willing servants.

MUHAMMAD: Is this your voice alone, Shihab-ud-din, or do the rest of the Amirs agree with you?

AMIRS: Of course we all do—no question of it—Your Majesty should trust us...

MUHAMMAD: Thank you!

(*Gets up, walks up to the throne, picks up a copy of the Koran lying on it.*)

Will you all then take an oath on the Koran to support me in my measures?

(*A long tense silence.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Does His Majesty distrust me so much that he needs an oath on the Koran from us?

(Muhammad turns to him in a sudden burst of rage, then controls himself and replaces the Koran on the throne. Silence again. The Door-Keeper enters.)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. It's the hour of prayer, Your Majesty.

(Muhammad stands silent for a while. The atmosphere is very charged.)

MUHAMMAD *(very slowly)*: We'll all pray here.

(The Door-Keeper bows and exits. At the same moment, the Muezzin's voice is heard calling the faithful to the prayer.)

MUEZZIN *(off-stage)*: Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!

Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar

Ashahado La Elaha Illilah

Ashahado La Elaha Illilah

Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah

Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah

Haiyah Alis Salaat—Haiyah Alis Salaat

Haiyah Salil Falaa—Haiyah Salil Falaa

Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar

La Elaha Illilah...

(As soon as the Muezzin's call begins, Muhammad unbuckles his sword and places it on the throne. About a dozen servants enter with pots of water, in which those on the stage wash their hands, faces, heads and feet. Another servant brings about a dozen mats on a plank and takes them round. Each person picks up a mat and spreads it facing west. They start praying. Muhammad leads the prayer. Half-way through the prayer a commotion is heard off-stage. Taking that as a cue, Shihab-ud-din and the Amirs get up and pull out their daggers.)

BARANI *(frightened)*: What's this? What's this?

(The Amirs step towards the throne, near which Muhammad is praying. Suddenly from behind the curtain near the throne about

twenty Hindu soldiers rush in with spears and surround the Amirs. One or two Amirs try to run out but the soldiers bar their way. The Amirs stand frozen in fear, then slowly throw down their daggers. The soldiers drag them away—all except Shihab-ud-din. While all this is going on, Muhammad goes on praying unconcerned. Only after finishing the prayer does he step down from the throne. Silence for a while.)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: How did you guess?

MUHAMMAD: Do you really want to know?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: You aren't worried about hurting my feelings, are you?

MUHAMMAD: There was a letter in my letter-room today. A strange letter—strange because, unlike all the others, it didn't abuse me and it was signed. *(Pause.)*

By Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN *(smiles)*: Do you really think I'll believe that? It's the oldest trick in the world.

MUHAMMAD: Why should I lie to a dead man?

(Takes out the letter from his robe and holds it before Shihab-ud-din. Shihab-ud-din looks crushed and frightened.)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN *(almost to himself)*: But does he say why he is doing this to me?

NAJIB: He has disappeared—without a trace!

MUHAMMAD: Let me ask you something. Why did you go against me? What wrong have I done you?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What's the point? You won't understand it anyway.

MUHAMMAD: Won't I? Or could it be that you don't know?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN *(suddenly violent)*: Get on with your killing, Muhammad. Or does your hand refuse to rise against me? Beware! You won't be able to trap me with your wiles. I am not Ain-ul-Mulk to live crushed under your kindness.

(Muhammad slowly takes out his dagger. Shihab-ud-din is getting more and more frightened. He is almost screaming now as he speaks.)

You want to solve all problems in the flash of a dagger, don't you? But you can't stop this uprising now. My father distrusts you and I've already written to him, about everything here... everything...

NAJIB: Sorry, but Ratansingh has sent those letters to us.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN *(screaming)*: Where will you hide my corpse? How will you gag my voice? Kill me—but you won't stop this—this will go on—

MUHAMMAD: I could have killed you with a word. But I like you too much.

(Stabs him. Then almost frenzied, goes on stabbing him. Hits out at Shihab-ud-din's dead body with a ferocity that makes even the soldiers holding the body turn away in horror.)

BARANI: Your Majesty—he's dead!

(Muhammad stops, then flings the dagger away in disgust.)

MUHAMMAD *(anguished)*: Why must this happen, Barani? Are all those I trust condemned to go down in history as traitors? What is happening? Tell me, Barani, will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in the silence?

(He is trembling. At a sign from Najib, the soldiers lay the body down on a mat and go away. Muhammad stares at the body.)

Najib, see that every man involved in this is caught and beheaded. Stuff their bodies with straw and hang them up in the palace-yard. Let them hang there for a week. No, send them round my kingdom. Let every one of my subjects see them. Let everyone see what... *(Chokes.)*

BARANI: What will that achieve, Your Majesty? What's the use? *(Pause.)*

NAJIB: We must do something about Shihab-ud-din's father. He is a powerful man and he won't like this.

MUHAMMAD (*regaining control of himself*): Don't worry about him. Make a public announcement that there was a rebellion in the palace and that the nobles of the court tried to assassinate the Sultan during prayer. Say that the Sultan was saved by Shihab-ud-din who died a martyr's death defending him. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair. Invite his father to it and see that he is treated with the respect due to the father of a loyal nobleman.

BARANI: Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics?

NAJIB: Your Majesty, if this incident is to be kept a secret, we'll have to hang everyone who was here—even the Hindu guards. They remained loyal to Your Majesty but they have seen it all and are bound to talk. It does mean more corpses. But then, that'll only make the show more impressive.

MUHAMMAD: Najib. I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I can see that now. They'll only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke should rise from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now.

BARANI: May Heaven protect us!

MUHAMMAD: Call on Heaven while you can, Barani—you may not get another chance. What hopes I had built up when I came to the throne! I had wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to become a further step in knowledge, every step to lead us nearer to God. But our prayers too are ridden with disease and must be exiled. There will be no more praying in the kingdom, Najib. Anyone caught praying will be severely punished. Henceforth let the moment of prayer walk my streets in silence and leave without a trace.

NAJIB: But that would only be playing into the hands of the

Ulema, Your Majesty. I suggest we say there'll be no more prayers till Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, the descendant of the Khalif, visits us. God alone knows when he'll come. Besides, it'll make a beautiful little paradox!

(Muhammad does not reply. Najib goes out. Barani sobs. Muhammad stands staring at Shihab-ud-din's corpse. Barani gets up, takes the silken cloth from the throne and starts spreading it on the corpse. But Muhammad casts the cloth aside.)

MUHAMMAD: Don't cover him, Barani. I want my people to see his wounds.

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Merciful Sultan Muhammad has ordered—that within the next month every citizen of Delhi must leave for Daulatabad. No one should remain behind in Delhi. Anyone who attempts to stay behind or to go elsewhere will be severely punished. All arrangements have been made to ensure the comfort of citizens on the way to Daulatabad. All the needs of the citizens, regarding food, clothing or medicine, will be catered to by the State. It is hoped that every citizen will use these amenities to the full and be in Daulatabad as soon as possible. Attention! Attention!

Scene Seven

A camp on the Delhi-Daulatabad route. Aziz, still dressed as a Brahmin, and Aazam. A Hindu woman is kneeling in front of Aziz.

HINDU WOMAN: Please let me go, sir... My child... Please have mercy on it...only for a day, sir...

AZIZ: I told you I can't. No one can be allowed out of sight until we reach Daulatabad. I'm sorry, but I have my orders.

HINDU WOMAN: But I'll return tomorrow... I swear by my child I will... It's dying. Your Excellency, I have to take it to a doctor...

AZIZ: But what can I do? There's the hakim's tent. Go to him. He'll give you some medicine. *(In a low voice.)* I've told you what you can do. I could try and bribe my senior officials, but you'll have to pay for it.

HINDU WOMAN: But I haven't got a paisa on me, Your Excellency. And what will I give the doctor? My husband's also ill, sir, please, I hold your feet—please let me go.

AZIZ: I can't waste any more time on you. There's a lot of work here. Stop screaming and get back to your tent—I said, get back to your tent!

(The Hindu woman goes out, weeping.)

AAZAM: Poor thing! Why don't you let her go? The doctor may help her.

AZIZ: Have you seen the child? No witch-doctor can save it now. My niece had that illness and went out like a light. It's a waste of good money and she's going to need every paisa of it. I'm doing her a favour! And watch out for paise, Aazam; they're going to cost a lot soon.

(Footsteps are heard off-stage. Aziz buries his head into his books. A family comes in. A man with a woman and six kids. They come and stand. Aziz continues to read. Aazam, embarrassed, wanders around without looking at them. The family waits patiently.)

Three more families! They must be walking on their knees. *(Looks up and stares at the man.)* So you've come at last, have you? Perhaps you went to visit your in-laws on the way. Don't you know the orders? You were supposed to be here well before sunset.

MAN: What was I to do, Your Excellency? There were two corpses there on the road. Poor things! They must have walked till their hearts gave out. I thought, sinner that I am, I would at least give them a decent burial.

AAZAM: Poor souls. From which camp were they, do you think?

AZIZ: I hope you checked whether they were Muslims before burying them.

MAN: Who's to do all that, Your Excellency? I did what I could.

AZIZ: And what if they were Hindus, pray? You know they don't bury their dead. You'll be in trouble if someone finds out. Actually I ought to send you back to dig them up again. It's against the orders to insult or cause harm to Hinduism—

MAN: I just didn't think of it, Your Excellency. Sinner that I am, I thought I would lighten the burden of my sins by giving them a resting place.

AZIZ: Leave the corpses alone in future. What did you do in Delhi, sinner that you are?

MAN: I am a Kafir, Your Excellency. I have to guard the dead bodies in the palace yard—those executed by the Sultan, you know. I have to guard them for a week, ten at a time, sir, and then dump them in the canal outside the city. There again I have to guard them against thieves.

AZIZ: Thieves? Ugh!

MAN: Isn't it terrible, Your Excellency? But there it is. That's what men have come to. The relatives of the dead have to pay us before taking the bodies. Well, if the orders had been obeyed I would have built a house by now. But no, they won't pay—even for the dead! They come at night and steal them. Not just the poor. Even the rich folk—the most respectable people of Delhi! I could tell you a name or two and you wouldn't believe it. It is terrible. People won't stop at anything once they get into the habit of thieving, that's certain.

(Aziz looks at Aazam and laughs. Aazam grimaces.)

AZIZ: So this is your family. All eight here?

MAN: Yes, sir.

AZIZ: Get on with you there. There's a tent kept for you. Yes! Whatever happens to the others, people like you mustn't die. The Sultan will need a lot more like you soon. So what are you going to do till the Sultan arrives in Daulatabad? Another couple of children?

MAN: Well, we have decided to get married first, Your Excellency.

AAZAM (*in disgust*): Oh God!

MAN (*apologetic*): Couldn't find time for it in Delhi, sir.

AAZAM: Go away. Go away!

(*The family goes off.*)

God, what a dirty man! I am feeling sick.

AZIZ: I like such people. They are the real stoics.

AAZAM: I just keep thinking of that poor woman. Why don't you let her see the doctor? I'm sure she'll come back. Look, if you

want money, tell me. There are enough rich men in this camp. I'll get some in to time.

AZIZ: Don't you do anything of the kind! You'll ruin us both if they catch you.

AAZAM: We'll be ruined anyway ultimately. If not today, then tomorrow. What other future's there for us? One day my fingers will slow down. I'll get caught. Then, no arms! No legs! A torn mat and a begging bowl, that's all.

AZIZ: You are a hopeless case, you know. Pathetic! You've been in Delhi for so many years and you're as stupid as ever. Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world—politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is—politics! It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks I used in our village to pinch a few torn clothes from people—if one uses half that intelligence here, one can get robes of power. And not have to pinch them either—demand them! It's a fantastic world!

(The Hindu woman is heard wailing.)

AAZAM: That's that Hindu woman. Her child's dead. She'll complain against you now. If you go on like this, Aziz, we'll soon keep the Kafir company in Daulatabad.

AZIZ: Don't call me Aziz. I've told you. As for her, I've only obeyed my orders. Besides I'm a Brahmin and she won't complain against a Brahmin to a Muslim officer. That'll send her straight to hell. In any case—and listen to this carefully—we won't stay in the Sultan's service for long. I heard some rumours in Delhi. The Sultan's going to introduce copper coins soon. And a copper coin will have the same value as a silver dinar. What do you say to that?

AAZAM *(making a face)*: Eyah! There's no fun in stealing copper coins.

AZIZ: Shut up! Just listen to what I'm telling you—you are not going to pinch any coins, you are going to make them. Make counterfeit coins, you understand? If your fingers are getting restless, use them there. (*Noise off-stage.*) Ha! There's the next lot!

(*Buries his head in his books.*)

Scene Eight

AD 1332

The fort at Daulatabad. Two sentries—one young, the other past his middle-age. Night.

YOUNG MAN: What time do you think it is, grandfather?

OLD MAN: Must be just past midnight.

YOUNG MAN: Only that? Good God! When I was in the army, less than two seconds seemed to divide the lamp-lighting hour from the daybreak. Now the night scarcely moves.

OLD MAN: It's only when you wait for the morning that the night stands still. A good sentry must forget that morning even exists.

YOUNG MAN (*looking down the side of the fort*): What a fantastic fort! I have a good head but even I feel giddy when I look down. And isn't that long white thing the road from Daulatabad to Delhi?

OLD MAN: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: They say it's the widest road in the world. But it looks no bigger than a thin snake from here.

OLD MAN: And five years ago that snake bit a whole city to death.

YOUNG MAN: What a fort! What a magnificent thing! I met a foreign visitor the other day and he said he has been round the world and not seen any fort as strong as this anywhere. No army could take this.

OLD MAN: No, invariably, forts crumble from the inside.

YOUNG MAN: You don't love this fort very much, do you, grandfather?

OLD MAN: I am a man of the plains, son. I find it hard to breathe in this eagle's nest.

YOUNG MAN: You are from Delhi?

OLD MAN: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: Was it hard, coming from Delhi to here?

OLD MAN: I survived. But my family was more fortunate. They died on the way.

YOUNG MAN (*sympathetically*): I am sorry. The arrangements must have been very bad.

OLD MAN: Oh no. The merciful Sultan had made perfect arrangements. But do you know, you can love a city like a woman? My old father had lived in Delhi all his life. He died of a broken heart. Then my son Ismail. He was six years old—would have been ten now! The fine dust that hung in the air, fine as silk, it covered him like a silken shroud. After him, his mother.

(*Silence. The young man is embarrassed.*)

YOUNG MAN: Tell me more about this fort, grandfather. Is it true there is a strange and frightening passage within this fort? Dark, they say, like the new moon night.

OLD MAN: Yes, it's a long passage, a winding tunnel, coiled like an enormous hollow python inside the belly of the fort. And we shall be far, far happier when that python breaks out and swallows everything in sight—every man, woman, child, and beast.

(Footsteps off-stage.)

YOUNG MAN *(raising his spear)*: Who is that?

MUHAMMAD: Muhammad.

YOUNG MAN: Muhammad? What Muhammad?

OLD MAN: Shut up, fool. It's the Sultan.

(Muhammad walks in—almost in a trance.)

BOTH: In the name of Allah!

MUHAMMAD *(to the old man)*: Go and tell Barani I want to see him.

(The old man bows and retires.)

YOUNG MAN: I beg Your Majesty's pardon for my impertinence.
I didn't realize...

MUHAMMAD: Don't worry. You were doing your duty.

(Goes to the edge of the wall and looks down.)

YOUNG MAN: Your Majesty must forgive my impudence, but I beg Your Majesty not to go too near the edge of the fort. It's a very steep fall.

MUHAMMAD *(smiles)*: You are new here, aren't you?

YOUNG MAN: Yes, I am, Your Majesty. I was in the army all these years. They sent me here yesterday. I am very sorry if I've said anything wrong, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Don't apologize at every word. If you stay here long enough you'll anyway learn to ooze spittle before everyone. Be yourself at least until then. How old are you?

YOUNG MAN: Nineteen, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. There was a half-built gate nearby trying to contain the sky within its cleft. Suddenly something happened—as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky—all melted and merged and flowed in my blood-stream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky. Suddenly a sentry called from far. ‘Attention!’ Attention! And to that challenge the half-burnt torch and the half-built gate fell apart.

No, Young man, I don’t envy you your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you. Look at me. I have searched for that moment since then and here I am still searching for it. But in the last four years, I have seen only the woods clinging to the earth, heard only the howl of wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs. Another twenty years and you’ll be as old as me. I might be lying under those woods there by then. Do you think you’ll remember me then?

(No answer.)

Come, why are you silent?

YOUNG MAN (*scared*): Your Majesty must forgive me, Your Majesty. But I don’t understand what Your Majesty is saying.

MUHAMMAD (*incensed*): You don’t understand! You don’t understand! Why do you live? Why do you corrupt the air with your diseased breath? (*Suddenly calm.*) I’m sorry. It’s my turn to apologize. It isn’t your fault. You are also one of them.

(Uncomfortable silence. Barani enters.)

BARANI: In the name of Allah. Your Majesty sent for me?

(Muhammad waves the sentries away.)

MUHAMMAD: I couldn't bear the walls any more. When I came here I felt I needed an audience—someone to confess my self-pity to. You were asleep?

BARANI: No, Your Majesty. I was reading a book by Imam Abu Hanifa.

MUHAMMAD: Fortunate! You can read when you don't feel sleepy. I can't sleep. I can't read. Even Rumi, who once used to transport me, has become simply a web of words. Do you know, five years ago I actually used to pray to God not to send me any sleep? I can't believe it now.

BARANI: Why don't you see a hakim, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD: What can a hakim do? You are a historian, Barani, you are the man to prescribe remedies for this. Have you heard the latest news? Fakr-ud-din has risen against me in Bengal.

BARANI: Oh, I'm...

MUHAMMAD: Yes. And there's been another uprising in the Deccan. In Ma'bar, Ehsanshah has declared himself independent: Bahal-ud-din Gashtasp is collecting an army against me. The drought in Doab is spreading from town to town—burning up the country. Only one industry flourishes in my kingdom, only one—and that's of making counterfeit copper coins. Every Hindu home has become a domestic mint; the traders are just waiting for me to close my eyes; and in my whole kingdom there are only two people I can trust—Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din's father. What should I do, Barani? What would you prescribe for this honeycomb of diseases? I have tried everything. But what cures one disease just worsens another.

BARANI: I am a humble historian, Your Majesty: it's not for me to prescribe. But since Your Majesty has done me the honour of confiding in me, may I make a suggestion? It is a difficult thing to suggest to a king and I beg you to forgive me if it

hurts. But you are a learned man, Your Majesty, you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That's where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses.

MUHAMMAD: You want me to retire from my throne? (*Laughs.*) Barani, if you were capable of irony, I would have thought you were laughing at me. But, as usual, you mean it, which makes it harder. I wish it was as easy as that. I have often thought of that myself—to give up this futile see-saw struggle and go to Mecca. Sit there by the Kaaba and search for the peace which Daulatabad hasn't given me. What bliss! But it isn't that easy. It isn't as easy as abandoning the patient in the wilderness because there's no cure for his disease. Don't you see—this patient, racked by fever and crazed by the fear of the enveloping vultures, can't be separated from me? Don't you see that the only way I can abdicate is by killing myself? I could have done something if the vultures weren't so close. I could have crawled forward on my knees and elbows. But what can you do when every moment you expect a beak to dig into you and tear a muscle out? What can you do? Barani, what vengeance is driving these shapes after me?

BARANI: Your Majesty...

MUHAMMAD: You know what my beloved subjects call me? Mad Muhammad! Mad Muhammad! (*Suddenly pleading.*) How can I become wise again, Barani?

BARANI: Your Majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? You won't let your subjects pray. You torture them for the smallest offence. Hang them on suspicion. Why this bloodshed? Please stop it, and I promise Your Majesty something better will emerge out of it.

MUHAMMAD: But for that I'll have to admit I've been wrong all along. And I know I haven't. I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history but I have to do it within this life. I've got to make them listen to me before I lose even that!

(The old man comes in running.)

OLD MAN: In the name of Allah—a calamity, Your Majesty—the Nayab Vizier has sent word—

MUHAMMAD: What is it?

OLD MAN: Vizier Muhammad Najib is dead. His body was found in his bed. The Nayab Vizier says it is murder...

Scene Nine

A hide-out in the hills. Aziz and Aazam are stretched out on the floor.

AAZAM: It's so hot—I'm fed up, I'm fed up of life, I'm fed up of the whole bloody world.

AZIZ: Why don't you just go and commit suicide?

AAZAM: Tried once. Went and jumped into a well. But the cold water cheered me up so much that I had a good swim and went back home. I don't think I could try again.

AZIZ: You'll never learn to do a thing properly.

AAZAM: But how come I steal properly? I have never made a mistake while stealing. Why am I a thief, Aziz? Why aren't we like other people? Have a nice home, till a farm and live happily?

AZIZ: How many happy people have you met? Besides, a man must commit a crime at least once in his lifetime. Only then will his virtue be recognized!

AAZAM: Aw, shut up!

AZIZ: No, truly. Listen. If you remain virtuous throughout your life no one will say a good thing about you, because they won't need to. But start stealing—and they'll say: 'What a nice boy he was! But he's ruined now...' Then kill and they will

beat their breasts and say: 'Heavens! He was only a petty thief all these days. Never hurt anyone. But alas!' Then rape a woman and the chorus will go into hallelujahs: 'He was a saint, a real saint and look at him now...'

AAZAM: Well, you have robbed and killed. Now all you have to do to become a saint is rape.

AZIZ: Presently, presently. No hurry. What's the point in raping for sheer lust? That's a mug's game. First one must have power—the authority to rape! Then everything takes on meaning.

AAZAM (*giggles*): So you want power, do you? What do you want to be, a Sultan?

AZIZ: Laugh away, stupid. You'll soon see. It all depends on whether Karim will bring the goods.

AAZAM (*seriously*): But no, Aziz, why are you so dissatisfied? We have such a nice establishment here. We take enough money from travellers and the other robbers are scared to death of you. There's no limit to what we can amass here.

AZIZ: I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding. You rob a man, you run, and hide. It's all so pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class'—that's being a real king!

AAZAM: May Allah shower His blessings on Your Majesty! Is there a post for your humble slave at the court?

AZIZ: Oh, yes! You are brainless. So you'll make a good nobleman—an Amir.

AAZAM (*in disgust*): Eah! I don't like that. I don't think I could be anything but a common pickpocket. What about a court thief? (*Aziz bursts into laughter.*)

AZIZ: That's beautiful, Aazam! A court thief! I'd never thought of that. It opens up all sorts of possibilities... There's Karim now!

(Karim comes in with a man, bound and gagged.)

You are late. Are you sure this is the right man?

KARIM: No need to worry.

AZIZ: Excellent. Here you are. *(Gives him a purse.)* I'll send for you if there's any more work.

(Karim salaams and exits.)

AAZAM: Who is this animal?

AZIZ: Wait and see. Untie him first.

(Aazam unties the man. Aziz stares at him and an expression of horror spreads on his face.)

My God! I'll kill that ass Karim! He's brought the wrong man!

MAN: I told him so. I told him who I was. I told him clearly. The rascal wouldn't listen. Tied me up. Me! Let the Sultan hear of this outrage. He'll whip you to death.

AZIZ, AAZAM: The Sultan?

AZIZ: We beg your pardon, sir. There's been a mistake. Karim was supposed to bring someone else—a Turk merchant. But—may we know who you are?

MAN: You'll soon know, you scoundrels. I am Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. The descendant of Khalif Abbasid. I am the Guest of Honour of His Majesty.

AAZAM: Ya Allah!

(Aziz and Aazam prostrate themselves in front of him.)

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You'll pay for this! I've come all the way from Arabia and not a soul dared touch me. They trembled at the mention of my name. And now this outrage! You'll hear more about this—

AZIZ: Forgive us, Your Worship. It was a mistake. There's been a slip somewhere. It's just that you are alone—I mean the Sultan's Guest of Honour—from the Holy Family of the Khalifs—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Mind your own business, slave. I'll have an

entourage as soon as the Sultan knows I've arrived. He is sending a special convoy from Daulatabad.

AZIZ: Then perhaps Your Worship will allow us to make amends for this sacrilege by following you? We'll be your slaves till you reach Daulatabad.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Hm! You may redeem yourself that way. Get up. No need to prostrate yourself so long. Yes, I do need guides. It's an unfamiliar country and the people here are treacherous. The moment they know you are a foreigner they're out to rob you. Yes, you'll do till the entourage arrives.

AZIZ: But haven't you been here before, Your Worship? Haven't you seen the Sultan?

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: I haven't. But I shall soon.

(In the meantime, Aazam has spread a mat on which Ghiyas-uddin sits imperially. Aazam offers him some fruits to eat.)

AZIZ: Forgive me if I am talking beyond my station, Your Worship. But I must warn you that the Sultan is in a suspicious frame of mind, we hear. There have been a lot of deaths since he came to Daulatabad.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Yes, I've heard all that. I'm not worried.

AZIZ: Recently he flogged a man to death, had his body filled with straw and strung up in the market place—all because the man claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet—may peace be upon him.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You talk too much. What's your name?

AZIZ: Aziz, Your Worship, and this is Aazam. I realize I sound impertinent, Your Worship. We are happy to follow you to Daulatabad, be your slaves to make up for our sacrilege. But Your Worship will forgive us for being worried about our necks—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You don't need to worry. I have got the Sultan's letter with me—and the ring he sent as a mark of recognition.

(*Shows the ring.*) I know there are no precious stones in it. But that would have attracted too much attention.

AZIZ: The Sultan is a wise man. But Your Worship has no friends or acquaintances in Daulatabad?

GHIYAS-UD-DIN (*irritated*): You ask too many questions for a slave. No, no friends there. You just hold your tongue and follow me. (*Aziz laughs. Ghiyas-ud-din looks at him, suddenly suspicious. Aziz bursts into loud laughter and jumps up.*)

AZIZ: Caught him, Aazam! He fell into my trap like a mouse. This is the goods, Aazam, this is it! I had heard he was here—without a paisa on him but boasting of his good fortune—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: What do you mean?

AZIZ: In five minutes, you won't need to know any meanings.

AAZAM (*frightened*): Don't kill him, Aziz, please don't! He's the Khalif's grandson—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN (*frightened*): Kill me? But why? What'll you gain by killing me? I've nothing—you know that—I'll get nothing till I reach Daulatabad—I'm a poor man. Why kill me?

AAZAM: He is right, Aziz.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: It's the truth, I swear. That's how I've come here alive—no one could get anything out of me. What do you want from me? Look, if you come with me to Daulatabad, I'll see you'll get something too—

AZIZ: I am not going with you. I am going in your place.

AAZAM: Aziz, listen—

AZIZ: Shut up! Don't waste your breath! We'll never get an opportunity like this again. Arabia must be full of the Khalif's descendants. They were a fertile lot, the Khalifs. Now the Sultan's picked this rat up from the gutters for some game of his own. Who will worry about this fool when people are dying without food in Daulatabad? Get out now. Get out. You'll just make things worse.

(Aazam goes out.)

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Don't kill me, please, I'll kiss your feet. Take everything—my ring, letters, everything. I'll go back. I'll go back to my village. I won't bother you. Please don't kill me. I'll kiss your feet. Please let me go. *(Embraces his legs.)*

AZIZ: No!

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: No? No! No! I knew it. I knew something like this would happen. It was too good to be true—to grow up in filth, live in filth—and then a letter from nowhere. A hope—a ray of light. Now my fate will change, I thought, now I'll be happy. Now things will start afresh. So I started. But I knew it was too good—good things don't come like that—they don't stay—

(He gives Aziz a sudden push. Aziz falls down on the floor. Ghiyas-ud-din runs out.)

AZIZ *(shouts without getting up)*: Stop him, Aazam. Stop him. *(Jumps up and runs out. Noise of a scuffle.)*

AZIZ *(off-stage)*: That's it, Aazam! Bravo!

GHIYAS-UD-DIN *(off-stage)*: Don't kill me, please.

(A scream. Then silence. Aazam comes in running. He is covered with blood. He is sweating, trembling and weeping. After a while Aziz comes in, with Ghiyas-ud-din's turban on his head.)

AZIZ: Why are you crying, you clown?

AAZAM: Don't talk to me—God! God! Why did I stop him? Why didn't I let him go?

(Aziz opens Ghiyas-ud-din's bundle.)

AZIZ: You are a funny creature. You have seen enough corpses to last you seven lives. You have stuffed them with straw, practised obscenities on them. And still you can't see a man die. *(Takes out a robe and puts it on.)* How do I look, eh? The great-grandson of the Khalif!

(Aazam looks away. Aziz slaps him on the back.)

Laugh, you fool, laugh. Celebrate! What are you crying for?
Look, look at the palace doors. They are opening for us.
Dance, dance, you son of an ass—

(Sings.)

Grandson of the Khalif! Great grandson of the Khalif! Great-
great-great-grandson of the Khalif!

(Sings and dances in a circle, clapping his hands. Aziz looks at him angrily. Then slowly his face breaks into a smile and soon he is laughing.)

Scene Ten

The Palace. Muhammad is looking out of the window. The Step-Mother comes in.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, do you know what's happening outside?

MUHAMMAD: Yes.

STEP-MOTHER: Why are you doing it?

MUHAMMAD: What else can I do? I said the new copper coins would have the same value as the silver dinars. Now I can't go against my own orders.

STEP-MOTHER: But this is sheer folly! The Vizier says there are five hundred carts out there and they are all full of counterfeit coins. Are you going to exchange them all for silver?

MUHAMMAD: There's nothing else for it. I should have expected this but didn't—that was my fault. If I don't withdraw the coins now, the whole economy will be in shambles. It's in a bad enough state already.

STEP-MOTHER: Five hundred carts on the first day! And what about tomorrow and the day after? You are just legalizing robbery—

MUHAMMAD: It's all their wealth. I can't let my whim ruin them.

STEP-MOTHER: And how is a treasury full of counterfeit coins going to help them? Will that revive your economy?

MUHAMMAD: Don't worry, Mother. The coins aren't going into the treasury. They'll all be heaped in the new rose garden.

STEP-MOTHER: What's the matter with you? You spent years planning that rose garden and now—

MUHAMMAD: Now I don't need a rose garden. I built it because I wanted to make for myself an image of Sadi's poems. I wanted every rose in it to be a poem. I wanted every thorn in it to prick and quicken the senses. But I don't need these airy trappings now; a funeral needs no separate symbol.

STEP-MOTHER: Then why don't you stop the funeral? Why this unending line of corpses? Muhammad, I have been hearing rumours lately. The Amirs and Khans are apparently getting upset because you are hounding them about Najib.

MUHAMMAD: I am not hounding them. I merely want to find out who murdered Najib.

STEP-MOTHER: Is it true five of them have fled?

MUHAMMAD: Not five—four. The fifth committed suicide. Amir Jalal-ud-din.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh God!

MUHAMMAD: He told his wife he knew who had killed Najib. One of his servants overheard the conversation.

STEP-MOTHER (*alarmed*): Please, don't go on like this. Please. Najib's dead. Finished. You can't drive the nobles to rebellion for his sake?

MUHAMMAD: Don't you think it strange that an Amir like Jalal-ud-din should kill himself in order to save the murderer? It must be someone very special.

STEP-MOTHER: I'm glad Najib's dead. He was leading you astray. It's because you wouldn't trust anyone as much as him that the kingdom's in this state! The Ulema are against you; the

noblemen are against you; the people hate you. It's all his fault. I'm glad he's dead. He should have died a long time ago.

MUHAMMAD: Najib wasn't loyal to me; he was loyal to the throne. The day he turned against me I would have known I'd made a mistake.

STEP-MOTHER: Why not forget him? What good is it to the throne—

MUHAMMAD: I must know who killed him and why.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, how long are you going to torment yourself like this?

MUHAMMAD: Not for long. The Amirs will return. If they don't, I'll be sorry for their families.

STEP-MOTHER: You frighten me, Muhammad, you really do. Please stop this. Muhammad—please—for my sake.

(*No reply.*)

Won't you? I appeal to you.

(*No reply.*)

All right. I killed him. I had him murdered.

MUHAMMAD (*exploding*): For God's sake, don't joke about it! And don't try to be noble and save me from the moronic Amirs and Khans. This isn't a small thing.

STEP-MOTHER: I am perfectly serious. I had him poisoned.

MUHAMMAD: Stop it! Why are you tormenting me now? Don't you see how you're burning out my guts with your infantile dramatics?

STEP-MOTHER: Why shouldn't I have killed him? It was easier than killing one's father or brother. It was better than killing Sheikh Imam-ud-din.

MUHAMMAD: I killed them—yes—but I killed them for an ideal. Don't I know its results? Don't you think I've suffered from the curse? My mother won't speak to me—I can't even look

into a mirror for fear of seeing their faces in it. I had only three friends in the world—you, Najib and Barani. And now you want me to believe you killed Najib. Why are you doing this to me?

STEP-MOTHER: It's only seven years ago that you came to the throne. How glorious you were then, how idealistic, how full of hopes. Look at your kingdom now. It's become a kitchen of death—all because of him. I couldn't bear it any longer.

MUHAMMAD: But you don't know that for the past few months he had been advising me against violence, do you? He wanted me to hold back my sword for the stability of the throne.

STEP-MOTHER: Then why didn't you?

MUHAMMAD: Because I couldn't. Not now. Remember Shihab-uddin of Sampanshahr? He was the first man I killed with my own hands. And I had a glimmer then of what now I know only too well. Not words but the sword—that's all I have to keep my faith in my mission. Why should Najib be sacrificed for that?

STEP-MOTHER: You had your share of futile deaths. I have mine now.

MUHAMMAD (*shouting*): No, they were not futile. They gave me what I wanted—power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act. Strength to recognize myself. What did your little murder give you?

(*Suddenly freezes. Stares at her. Then quietly.*)

Woman, woman, so you are also one of them! So that's what you too wanted! Mother is annoyed she can't control me. And now you too are trying the same game, aren't you? Get rid of Najib, so you could control me?

STEP-MOTHER: I want nothing for myself. You are my life, Muhammad. You know that. If I had wanted power, I wouldn't have confessed.

MUHAMMAD: You needn't have confessed. I would have found out on my own. Or else, the Amirs would have rebelled. And then, what power? Clever you. You thought I wouldn't punish you, didn't you? Because I love you more than I have loved anyone in my life. That was the price of your love, wasn't it?
(*Suddenly in agony.*) Mother! Why did you have to do it?

STEP-MOTHER (*puts her hand on his shoulder*): Listen to me—

MUHAMMAD: Don't touch me! There's only one punishment for treachery—death!

(*Claps twice.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Don't be a fool, Muhammad. I'm telling you for your own sake. My death won't make you happy. You have enough ghosts to haunt you. Don't add mine to it.

MUHAMMAD: The others died unjustly. You deserve to die—
(*Two soldiers enter.*)

You are worse than an adulteress. But I can't think of a worse punishment for you. Take her to prison.

(*The Step-Mother stands petrified. The soldiers are also baffled.*)

(*Screaming.*) Take her away!

(*The soldiers hold her. She tries to break away.*)

Tell the Nayab Vizier I want her stoned to death publicly tomorrow morning.

STEP-MOTHER (*finding her voice*): Not that, Muhammad, don't do that to me—please.

MUHAMMAD: That's how an adulteress dies. Take her away.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, please—

(*She is dragged away. Muhammad stands looking stunned. Then suddenly he falls to his knees and clutches his hands to his breast.*)

MUHAMMAD: God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please, don't let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of You. Why am I become a pig

rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with Your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of Your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg—have pity on me. I have no one but You now. Only You. Only You... You... You... You...

(Enter Barani.)

BARANI: In the name...

(Stops. Muhammad raises his head.)

MUHAMMAD: Come in, Barani. You've come at the right moment.

You have saved me from treason, you know. I was trying to pray! Think of that—no one in my kingdom is allowed to pray and I was praying. Against my own orders! But what else could I do, Barani? My legs couldn't hold me up any longer.

BARANI *(smiles)*: You needn't worry, Your Majesty. I'm here because I insisted on bringing the joyful tidings myself—

MUHAMMAD: Joy? It's such a long time since I heard that word.

BARANI: We have just received a letter from your Governor. The good news is that we can all pray now, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: What's the use? I was trying to pray—but I could only find words learnt by rote, which left no echo in the heart. I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me. *(Shouting.)* And why should I deserve that madness? I have condemned my mother to death and I'm not even sure she was guilty of the crime...

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! Muhammad Tughlaq who craves only for the mercy of Allah and for the blessings of the Khalifs, hereby announces that His Worship Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad, son of His Worship Abdul Kahir, grandson of His Worship Yusuf, great-grandson of His Worship Abdul Aziz, great-great-grandson of His Imperial Holiness Abbasid Al-Mustansir, the Khalif of Baghdad, will bless and purify Daulatabad by arriving here tomorrow afternoon. And Muhammad is sure that the citizens of this city will collect in large numbers to welcome this Saviour.

This is a holy day for us—a day of joy! And its glory will be crowned by the fact that the Public Prayer, which has been mute in our land these five years, will be started again from next Friday. Henceforth every Muslim shall pray five times a day as enjoined by the Holy Koran and declare himself a Faithful Slave of the Lord. Attention! Attention!

Scene Eleven

A plain outside the fort of Daulatabad. Crowds of citizens.

FIRST MAN: Prayer! Prayer! Who wants prayers now?

SECOND MAN: Ask them to give us some food.

FIRST MAN: There's no food. Food's only in the palace. It's prayers for us.

SECOND MAN: The Amirs have food.

FIRST MAN: We starve and they want us to pray. They want to save our souls.

THIRD MAN: Is it true the Sultan has opened up his granary?

SECOND MAN: There was not a grain in it! Not a skin of paddy.

FIRST MAN: And they want us to pray.

THIRD MAN: The other day my younger brother came here from our village. He says it's much worse there. We are better off here, he says. They have to pay twenty grains of silver for a fistful of wheat. And the scenes he saw on his way here! Ugh!

SECOND MAN (*getting annoyed*): Hm...

THIRD MAN: He says the roads are lined with skeletons. A man starved to death right in front of his eyes. In Doab, people are eating barks off the trees, he says. Yes, and women have to make do with skins of dead horses.

SECOND MAN: Shut up.

THIRD MAN: In Baran—that's where Barani, the Sultan's friend, comes from you know—they have to eat burnt strips of skin, he says. No one knows what animals—

SECOND MAN: Why don't you shut up?
(The crowd listens, tensely.)

THIRD MAN: He says we are much better off here. Not them. On his way here he saw people crowding round a butcher's shop. You know why? To catch the blood spurting from the slaughtered beasts and drink it!

SECOND MAN: Shut up, you butcher—
(He attacks the third man. There's a fight. The second man throws the third man down, sits on his chest and beats him. He is crying even as he beats. The others watch.)

FIRST MAN: Why do they need prayer?
(Music and the announcers are heard from the two sides of the stage.)

ANNOUNCER I: Attention! Attention! The Slave of the Lord, the Upholder of the Word of the Prophet—may peace be upon him—the Friend of the Khalif, the Faithful, Muhammad Tughlaq—

ANNOUNCER II: Attention! Attention! The Protector of the Faith, the Descendant of the Holy Khalif al-Mustansir, Amir-ul-Mominin Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad—

(Aziz, Aazam and their entourage enter from one side. Exactly at the same moment, Muhammad and his entourage step down from the fort. There is tense silence. Muhammad stares at Aziz as though he is not quite sure what is happening. The Hindu woman of Scene Seven steps out of the crowd and stares at Aziz. Her husband pulls her back. Muhammad steps forward and embraces Aziz.)

MUHAMMAD: Welcome to our city, Your Holiness, welcome to our poor land. My kingdom rejoices at the arrival of your gracious presence. We have waited for years for this joyful

moment. Our streets have waited in silence for the moment when the call to the holy prayer will echo through in them again. And each year has been a century. We have waited long, Your Holiness, and our sins have become shadows that entwine round our feet. They have become our dumbness and deprived us of prayer. They have become the fiery sun and burnt up our crops. Now the moment has come for me and my people to rejoice. Only you can save me now, Your Holiness, only the dust of your feet on my head can save me now—

(Falls to his feet. The crowd gasps. Then everyone kneels.)

AZIZ: Amen.

(Muhammad gets up. They embrace again. They depart to the accompaniment of the announcements.)

HINDU WOMAN: It's him! It's him—

THIRD MAN: Who?

HINDU WOMAN: He killed my child! Those eyes—I'll never forget them—he killed my child...*(Screams.)* He killed my child...*(Keeps on screaming.)*

FIRST MAN: What's it?

SECOND MAN: I didn't hear. Something about a child—

ANOTHER MAN: She says someone killed her child—

FIRST MAN: Who killed the child?

SECOND MAN: I didn't hear properly. Probably the Sultan—

FIRST MAN: Who else will kill her child?

THIRD MAN: It's murder, that's what it is. To ask us to live without food. My daughter died without food. She was murdered.

FIRST MAN: How long are we going to starve like this?

SECOND MAN: Just a fistful of rice—a piece of meat would be enough—

FIRST MAN: We don't want any prayer. We want food—

SEVERAL VOICES: Yes, food—we want food—not prayers—

A SOLDIER: Quiet! Quiet!

FIRST MAN (*shouting*): Kill us, kill us. Don't starve us to death.
Kill us quickly...

SECOND MAN: They'll kill us, will they? Let's see who kills whom?
Bring them down.

ALL: Bring him down—let's see—So they'll give us poison instead
of food, will they? Kill him—kill him—Show him what we
can do—

(*Confusion. Some of them mob the soldier and beat him. A group
of soldiers arrives and starts beating them, ordering them to keep
quiet. The riots begin.*)

Scene Twelve

The Palace. Aziz is eating some fruit. Aazam enters.

AAZAM: Aziz—

AZIZ: Shut up! I've told you not to call me by that name.

AAZAM: I'm fed up of these games, Aziz, I'm going.

AZIZ: Going? Where?

AAZAM: I don't know. But I've bribed two servants of the palace. They are to bring two horses. They'll be here with the horses inside of half an hour. So hurry up.

AZIZ: Fool, now you've probably made them suspicious. I've told you a hundred times nothing can happen to us here. You're asking for the butcher's block.

AAZAM: Have you seen the city? The people are like mad dogs. They have been screaming, burning houses, killing and marauding for a whole week now. Have you ever stepped out of the palace?

AZIZ: Of course not.

AAZAM: I have. Twice.

AZIZ: Twice! Is your skull filled with dung? Twice! How did you go out?

AAZAM: There's a secret passage. I discovered it the day we came here. I have been through it. Twice. And do you know what

the city is like? In the northern part, the houses are like forts, the streets narrow as the little finger. And they are choked with dead bodies. Corpses and flies. It stank so much I almost fainted—I can't stand it any longer, Aziz. Today the people are a little quieter. They are tired; besides, they have to dispose of the bodies. Tomorrow they'll start again...

AZIZ: Now look. Why don't you think? Just once—once in your lifetime? How do you know the servants won't betray you? Listen to me. Stay in the palace. It's the safest place now.

AAZAM: Safe? This palace? Ha! The Sultan's mad. How can you trust him? Don't you know how he can slaughter people? How can you trust this lord of skins? It's better to trust servants. Listen. You know there are those heaps of counterfeit coins in the garden outside my window?

AZIZ: I hope they haven't scared you. After all, quite a lot of them are our handiwork.

AAZAM: On the night we came here, I was so nervous I couldn't sleep. So I was standing by the window, looking at those heaps. They looked like giant ant-hills in the moonlight. Suddenly I saw a shadow moving among them. I stared. It was a man wandering alone in the garden. He went to a heap, stood there for half an hour, still as a rock. Then he dug into the heaps with his fists, raised his fists and let the coins trickle out. It was frightening. And you know who it was? Your Sultan. He does that every night—every single night—it's like witchcraft—

AZIZ: So you are running away because the Sultan has insomnia? What about all that you were hoping to achieve? And what happens to me if you go? How will Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid explain the disappearance of his disciple?

AAZAM: You come with me too, Aziz. I can't go alone. I've tied all our presents in a bundle. It's a huge bundle. Will last us for ever. You are a clever man, Aziz. I know I am a fool. I can't

survive without you... It's time. The horses will probably have come. Let's go. Come on...

AZIZ: I order you to stay, Aazam.

AAZAM: I can't. I can't. I'll die of fright here.

AZIZ: All right then. Go. Get out, you traitor.

AAZAM: What else can I do? I wish you would come too. Look. We'll forget all this wealth, these courts, this luxury and live in peace. Please come...please, Aziz, I'll kiss your feet—

(No reply.)

I'm going, Aziz...

(No reply.)

Good-bye.

(Goes out.)

AZIZ: Idiot!

Scene Thirteen

Another part of the Palace. Muhammad and Barani.

MUHAMMAD: May I know why, Barani?

BARANI: It's as I said. Your Majesty, I have just received a letter from Baran and it says my mother's dead. I couldn't be by her side in the last moments of her life. I must be there at least for her funeral.

MUHAMMAD: What did she die of, do you know?

BARANI: I don't know, Your Majesty. The letter didn't say anything more.

MUHAMMAD: I see. (*Pause.*) And you will return to the court after the funeral, won't you?

BARANI (*evasive*): I don't know, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: If you are only going for the funeral, why shouldn't you be able to come back?

BARANI (*desperately*): I don't know.

MUHAMMAD: Don't you? Because I do. She died in the riots, didn't she, when my soldiers butchered everyone in sight—old men, women, children, everyone? So you see, even I know what is happening in my kingdom. I may be responsible for that massacre, I accept. But have I really fallen so low that even you have to lie to me?

BARANI (*almost crying*): I don't know. I don't know. Please don't ask me. I beg of you.

(*Silence. A soldier enters running.*)

SOLDIER: In the name of Allah. A terrible thing—Your Majesty, I don't know how to—

MUHAMMAD: What is it now?

SOLDIER: Your Majesty, Aazam Jahan, the friend of His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, is dead.

BARANI: Dead?

SOLDIER: Murdered, Your Majesty. I was on sentry duty at the mouth of the secret tunnel from the palace. I heard a scream. I ran to the spot. It was Aazam Jahan. He was lying in a pool of blood.

BARANI: Heaven have mercy on us!

MUHAMMAD: Was anyone else there?

SOLDIER: Two horsemen, Your Majesty. They had a big bundle with them. But before I could even shout, they were gone. I didn't even see their faces—

MUHAMMAD: Did he say anything before he died?

SOLDIER: No, Your Majesty. He was alive for a while. When I went near I thought—I thought—

MUHAMMAD: Yes?

SOLDIER: I thought he was laughing—giggling. But of course it could be just—his dying breath—

(*There is a long silence. Muhammad stares at the soldier, stunned and incredulous.*)

MUHAMMAD: Not a word of this to anyone. Not even to His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. No one in the palace must know. You understand?

SOLDIER: Yes, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Go back to your place. And ask the doorman to fetch His Holiness—at once.

SOLDIER: Yes, Your Majesty.

(Goes out.)

MUHAMMAD (*almost to himself*): Don't you think it absurd that a man who has just come from Arabia should prefer the bloody streets to the palace?

BARANI: But I don't understand, Your Majesty, I can't understand how—

MUHAMMAD: You wanted to see history form in front of your eyes, didn't you? Just wait a few moments, and you'll see not just the form but the coiled intestines of it.

BARANI (*wounded*): Your Majesty is a learned man and has every right to laugh at a poor fool like me. But I implore Your Majesty to understand I am not going because my life here has been futile. I have spent seven years in your presence and the greatest historians of the world would have given half their lives to see a year in it. Your Majesty has given me a gift—

MUHAMMAD: Must there be a farewell speech before you go? You want to go. Go. That's all there is to it.

(Silence.)

BARANI (*suddenly remembering*): But the public prayer! It's to start within half-an-hour! It wouldn't be right to start it when the palace is in mourning. Your Majesty must—

MUHAMMAD: No, no, no! This is the first public prayer in my kingdom after a silence of five years! We are praying because a holy man like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid has come to our land and blessed us! We can't let anything stop that! *(Laughs.)* Oh Barani, Najib should have been here now. He would have loved this farce.

(Aziz enters with soldiers. Barani and Muhammad bow. The soldiers bow and retire.)

AZIZ (*blessing them*): May Heaven guide Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: I hope Your Holiness is well.

AZIZ: Who would have grounds for complaint when the generosity of Your Majesty looks after him?

MUHAMMAD: I hope Your Holiness has not been too inconvenienced by the riots. I was busy and couldn't attend to your needs personally. And now that I see you, I stand a bearer of evil tidings. We have just received some tragic news. (*Pause.*) Aazam Jahan's body has been found outside the palace. He was murdered.

AZIZ: May Allah save our souls. What's happening to this world? What's Man coming to if even an innocent like Aazam Jahan isn't to be spared the sword?

MUHAMMAD: Who are you?

(*Silence. For a moment no one speaks. Aziz is obviously frightened.*)

Who are you? How long did you hope to go on fooling us with your masquerade?

BARANI: But Your Majesty—

MUHAMMAD: Answer me. Don't make me lose my temper.

AZIZ: I am a dhobi from Shiknar. My first name was Aziz. There have been many others since then.

BARANI: But—what about His Holiness?

MUHAMMAD: Do you know the punishment for killing a saint like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid? And for deceiving me and my subjects?

AZIZ (*bolder*): No, Your Majesty, though I have never underestimated Your Majesty's powers of imagination. But it would be a gross injustice if I were punished, Your Majesty.

BARANI: What's happening here?

AZIZ: 'Saint' is a word more appropriate for people like Sheikh Imam-ud-din. I doubt if Your Majesty would have used it for Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. I know I am a dhobi and he was a descendant of the Khalif. But surely Your Majesty has never associated greatness with pedigree.

MUHAMMAD: Be careful, dhobi. Don't overreach yourself.

AZIZ: I daren't. But may I say that since Your Majesty came to the throne, I have been your most devout servant? I have studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of Your Majesty's with the greatest attention. I insist I am Your Majesty's true disciple.

MUHAMMAD: Don't try to flatter me. I am accustomed to it.

AZIZ: It's hardly flattering you, Your Majesty, to say I am your disciple. But I have watched Your Majesty try to explain your ideas and acts to the people. And I have seen with regret how few have understood them.

BARANI (*who is just beginning to comprehend*): Your Majesty, this scoundrel is trying to spread a net of words around you. It's dangerous even to talk to him. He must be punished forthwith.

AZIZ: Come, sir, let's be sensible. You know His Majesty will never do that to me.

MUHAMMAD: Won't I?

AZIZ: Forgive me. But Your Majesty has publicly welcomed me as a saint, started the public prayers after a lapse of five years in my honour, called me a Saviour. Your Majesty has even—forgive me for pointing it out, I wasn't responsible for it—fallen at my feet, publicly.

BARANI: Villain—

AZIZ: But I am not a common blackmailer, Your Majesty. I stand here on the strength of my convictions and my loyalty to you.

MUHAMMAD: What do you want to say?

AZIZ: I was a poor starving dhobi, when Your Majesty came to the throne and declared the brotherhood of all religions. Does the Sultan remember the Brahmin who brought a case against him and won? I was that Brahmin.

MUHAMMAD: Was the disguise necessary?

AZIZ: I believe so. (*Pause.*) Soon after that Your Majesty introduced the new copper currency. I succumbed to its temptation.

BARANI: God... God...

AZIZ: There was enough money in that business, but too much competition. Soon it became unprofitable, so we took the silver dinars and went to Doab and bought some land there for farming.

BARANI: But this is nonsense! There has been famine there for five years...

MUHAMMAD: That's exactly his point. They got the land dirt-cheap and collected the State subsidy for farmers. When they were discovered, they ran into the hills and became robbers. (*With mock humility to Aziz.*) Am I right?

AZIZ: Dare I contradict what the whole world knows about His Majesty's acumen? But Your Majesty missed out an important stage in my life. Your officers track down criminals with the zest of a tribe of hunters and there was only one way to escape them. We joined them. We had to shift the corpses of all the rebels executed by the State and hang them up for exhibition. Such famous kings, warriors and leaders of men passed through our hands then! Beautiful strong bodies and bodies eaten-up by corruption—all, all were stuffed with straw and went up to the top of the poles.

One day, suddenly, I had a revelation. This was all human life was worth, I said. This was the real meaning of the mystery of death—straw and skin! With that enlightenment, I found Peace. We left the camp and headed for the hills.

MUHAMMAD: Yes, that was a rather important stage.

AZIZ: One day I heard about a beggar who claimed to be Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid and was on his way to the capital—I couldn't resist the temptation of seeing my master in person. I admit I killed Ghiyas-ud-din and cheated you. Yet I am Your

Majesty's true disciple. I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to His Majesty's words?

BARANI: This man should be buried alive this minute!

AZIZ: I only acted according to His Majesty's edicts.

MUHAMMAD (*exploding*): Hold your tongue, fool! You dare pass judgement on me? You think your tongue is so light and swift that you can trap me by your stupid clowning? Let's see how well it wags when hanging from the top of a pole. I haven't cared for the bravest and wisest of men—you think I would succumb to you, a dhobi, masquerading as a saint?

AZIZ (*quietly*): What if I am a dhobi, Your Majesty? When it comes to washing away filth, no saint is a match for a dhobi.

(*Muhammad suddenly bursts into a guffaw. There is a slight hysterical tinge to the laughter.*)

MUHAMMAD (*laughing*): Checkmate! Checkmate! I don't think I have ever seen such insolence. This man's a genius—all right, tell me. What punishment should I mete out to you for your crimes?

AZIZ: Make me an officer of your State, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: That would be punishing myself—not you.

AZIZ: All these years I have been a beggar, wasting my life, and I'm not proud of that. I beg Your Majesty to give me a chance to show my loyalty. I'm ready to die for my Sultan.

MUHAMMAD: I don't know why I am acting like a fool. Yet perhaps a State office really would be the best punishment for you. You'll have to return to Arabia after Aazam Jahan's funeral, and disappear on the way. Can you do it?

AZIZ: It certainly won't be the first time I've done that.

MUHAMMAD: Good, then go to the Deccan. I'll give you a letter for Khusrau Malik appointing you as an officer under him. He'll look after you.

AZIZ: What can I say? How can I express my gratitude? In the name of the Prophet—may peace be upon him, I swear—

MUHAMMAD: Don't overdo it. It's time for the prayer. Remember, you are still His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid and you have to be there to lead the prayer. Be off now.

AZIZ: Your Majesty's most faithful servant.

(Bows and retires. Muhammad slowly moves to the throne. He looks tired, dispirited. There is silence for a while. Barani can't contain himself any longer.)

BARANI: But why? Why?

MUHAMMAD: All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then—you meet him—punishment for wanting too much!... As he said, 'One day suddenly I had a revelation'.

BARANI: By all the history I know, I swear he'll stab you in the back. This is sheer folly. He is a ruthless scoundrel and Your Majesty knows he won't keep trust. Once he has power in the Deccan, his ambition will know no barriers. He is bound to find unlimited scope for his villainy there. He is bound to rebel against the Sultan. How can you not see that, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD: I forgave Ain-ul-Mulk once and you were on my side then.

BARANI: But how can one mention Ain-ul-Mulk in the same breath as this rascal?

MUHAMMAD: Last week I received a letter from Ain-ul-Mulk. He has invited me and my subjects to his capital to stay there until the famine here subsides.

BARANI: He is a great man, a great friend of yours—

MUHAMMAD: A friend? How are you so sure it's his friendship that invites us to his capital? You know that, since the day he killed Sheikh Imam-ud-din, he has lost his hold on people. His maulvis won't support him, his people don't trust him. He

needs my support now. How do you know he isn't inviting me to strengthen himself?

BARANI: Then... Your Majesty isn't accepting the invitation?

MUHAMMAD: There is only one place to go back to now. Delhi. Back to Delhi, Barani, I have to get back to Delhi with my people.

BARANI: But why—why are you doing this to yourself and your people? Your subjects starve for you—struggle for you—die for you—and you honour this murderer? What's the logic in it? It's criminals like him that deserve to die. Death would be too simple a punishment for him. It wouldn't be enough if you flogged the skin off his back. It wouldn't be enough if you had his tongue pulled out. It wouldn't even be enough if you had him put in a sack and tied to a running horse—

MUHAMMAD: Bravo! I doubt if even that dhobi could have thought of so many tortures—

(Barani shudders as though he were slapped in the face.)

If justice were as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow. Anyway, what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the blinding madness of the day? Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness—madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow of violence. But I am not alone, Barani. Thank Heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a Companion to share my insanity now—the Omnipotent God! *(Tired.)* When you pass your final judgement on me, don't forget Him.

BARANI: Who am I to pass judgement on you, Your Majesty? I have to judge myself now and that's why I must go and go immediately. I am terrified when I think of all the tortures

I recommended only a moment ago. I am a weak man, Your Majesty. I don't have your strength to play with violence and yet not be sucked in by it. Your Majesty warned me when I slipped and I am grateful for that. I ask Your Majesty's permission to go while I'm still safe.

(Waits for an answer. There's no answer. Muhammad is sitting on the throne with his eyes closed.)

Your Majesty—

(No answer.)

Your Majesty—

MUHAMMAD *(opening his eyes)*: Yes?

BARANI: Is Your Majesty not feeling well?

MUHAMMAD: I am suddenly feeling tired. And sleepy. For five years sleep had avoided me and now suddenly it's flooding back. Go, Barani. But before you go—pray for us.

(Closes his eyes again. Barani bows and exits, obviously in tears. There is silence on the stage for a while, and then a servant comes in.)

SERVANT: In the name of...

(He sees that Muhammad is asleep and goes out. Muhammad's head falls forward on his chest in deep sleep. The servant re-enters with a shawl which he carefully wraps round the Sultan. He is about to go out when the Muezzin's call to prayer is heard. The servant turns to wake the Sultan, then after a pause, goes out without doing so.)

MUEZZIN *(off-stage)*: Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!

Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!

Ashahado La Elaha Illilah

Ashahado La Elaha Illilah

Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah

Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah

Haiyah Alis Salaat—Haiyah Alis Salaat

Haiyah Salil Falaa—Haiyah Salil Falaa

Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!

La Elaha Illilah...

(As the Muezzin's call fades away, Muhammad suddenly opens his eyes. He looks around, dazed and frightened, as though he can't comprehend where he is.)

HAYAVADANA

NOTE

Hayavadana was originally written in Kannada and I must express my thanks to the Homi Bhabha Fellowships Council for the fellowship which enabled me to write the play.

The central episode in the play—the story of Devadatta and Kapila—is based on a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, but I have drawn heavily on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads* and am grateful to Mrs Mann for permission to do so.

My special thanks are also due to Mr Rajinder Paul who persuaded me to translate the play into English and first published this translation in his journal, *Enact*.

In translating this play, I have not tried to be consistent while rendering the songs into English. Some have been put in a loose verse form while, for others, only a straightforward prose version has been given.

GIRISH KARNAD

Hayavadana was first presented in English by the Madras Players at the Museum Theatre, Madras on 7 December 1972. The cast was as follows:

S. RAMACHANDER	The Bhagavata
A.V. DHANUSHKODI	Actor I/Devadatta
S. KRISHNASWAMY	Hayavadana
E. RAGHUKUMAR	Actor II/Kapila
A. RATNAPAPA	Padmini
VISHALAM EKAMBARAM	Doll I
BHAGIRATHI NARAYANAN	Doll II
LAKSHMI KRISHNAMURTY	Kali
AMAN MITTAL	Child
Directed by	LAKSHMI KRISHNAMURTY YAMUNA PRABHU
Music by	B.V. KARANTH

for
S_____

Act One

The stage is empty except for a chair, kept centre-stage, and a table on stage right—or at the back—on which the Bhagavata and the musicians sit.

At the beginning of the performance, a mask of Ganesha is brought on stage and kept on the chair. Pooja is done. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by his musicians.

Then the mask is taken away.

O Elephant-headed Herambha
whose flag is victory
and who shines like a thousand suns,
O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi,
seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake,
O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness,
we pay homage to you and start our play.

BHAGAVATA: May Vighneshwara, the destroyer of obstacles, who removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavours with success, bless our performance now. How indeed can one hope to describe his glory in our poor, disabled words? An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly—whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his

crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangalamoorty, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend? Be that as it may. It is not for us to understand this Mystery or try to unravel it. Nor is it within our powers to do so. Our duty is merely to pay homage to the Elephant-headed god and get on with our play.

This is the city of Dharmapura, ruled by King Dharmasheela whose fame and empire have already reached the ends of the eight directions. Two youths who dwell in this city are our heroes. One is Devadatta. Comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence, Devadatta is the only son of the Revered Brahmin, Vidyasagara. Having felled the mightiest pundits of the kingdom in debates on logic and love, having blinded the greatest poets of the world with his poetry and wit, Devadatta is as it were the apple of every eye in Dharmapura.

The other youth is Kapila. He is the only son of the ironsmith, Lohita, who is to the King's armoury as an axle to the chariotwheel. He is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds which require drive and daring, in dancing, in strength and in physical skills, he has no equal.

(A scream of terror is heard off-stage. The Bhagavata frowns, quickly looks in the direction of the scream, then carries on.)

The world wonders at their friendship. The world sees these two young men wandering down the streets of Dharmapura, hand in hand, and remembers Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama.

(Sings.) Two friends there were

—one mind, one heart—

(The scream is heard again. The Bhagavata cannot ignore it any more.)

Who could that be—creating a disturbance at the very outset

of our performance? (*Looks.*) Oh—It's Nata, our Actor. And he is running. What could have happened, I wonder?

(*The Actor comes running in, trembling with fear. He rushes on to the stage, runs round the stage once, then sees the Bhagavata and grabs him.*)

ACTOR: Sir, Bhagavata sir—

BHAGAVATA (*trying to free himself*): Tut! Tut! What's this? What's this?

ACTOR: Sir...oh my God!—God!—

BHAGAVATA: Let me go! I tell you, let go of me!

(*Freeing himself.*) Now what's this? What...

ACTOR: I—I—I—Oh God! (*Grabs him again.*)

BHAGAVATA: Let me go!

(*The Actor moves back.*)

What nonsense is this? What do you mean by all this shouting and screaming? In front of our audience too! How dare you disturb...

ACTOR: Please, please, I'm—sorry... But—but...

BHAGAVATA (*more calmly*): Now, now, calm down! There's nothing to be afraid of here. I am here. The musicians are here. And there is our large-hearted audience. It may be that they fall asleep during a play sometimes. But they are ever alert when someone is in trouble. Now, tell us, what's the matter?

ACTOR (*panting*): Oh—Oh—My heart... It's going to burst...

BHAGAVATA: Sit down! Sit. Right! Now tell me everything quietly, slowly.

ACTOR: I was on my way here... I was already late... didn't want to annoy you... So I was hurrying down when... Ohh!

(*Covers his face with his hands.*)

BHAGAVATA: Yes, yes. You were hurrying down. Then?

ACTOR: I'm shivering! On the way... you see... I had drunk a lot

of water this morning...my stomach was full...so to relieve myself...

BHAGAVATA: Watch what you are saying! Remember you are on stage...

ACTOR: I didn't do anything! I only wanted to...so I sat by the side of the road—and was about to pull up my dhoti when...

BHAGAVATA: Yes?

ACTOR: A voice—a deep, thick voice... It said: 'Hey, you there—don't you know you are not supposed to commit nuisance on the main road?'

BHAGAVATA: Quite right too. You should have known that much.

ACTOR: I half got up and looked around. Not a man in sight—no one! So I was about to sit down again when the same voice said...

BHAGAVATA: Yes?

ACTOR: 'You irresponsible fellow you, can't you understand you are not to commit nuisance on the main road?' I looked up. And there—right in front of me—across the fence...

BHAGAVATA: Who was there?

ACTOR: A horse!

BHAGAVATA: What?

ACTOR: A horse! And it was talking.

BHAGAVATA: What did you have to drink this morning?

ACTOR: Nothing, I swear. Bhagavata sir, I haven't been near a toddy-shop for a whole week. I didn't even have milk today.

BHAGAVATA: Perhaps your liver is sensitive to water.

ACTOR (*desperate*): Please believe me. I saw it clearly—it was a horse—and it was talking.

BHAGAVATA (*resigned*): It's no use continuing this nonsense. So you saw a talking horse? Good. Now go and get made up...

ACTOR: Made up? I fall to your feet, sir, I can't...

BHAGAVATA: Now look here...

ACTOR: Please, sir...

(He holds up his hand. It's trembling.)

You see, sir? How can I hold up a sword with this? How can I fight?

BHAGAVATA *(thinks)*: Well then. There's only one solution left. You go back...

ACTOR: Back?

BHAGAVATA: ...back to that fence, have another look and make sure for yourself that whoever was talking, it couldn't have been that horse.

ACTOR: No!

BHAGAVATA: Nata...

ACTOR: I can't!

BHAGAVATA: It's an order.

ACTOR *(pleading)*: Must I?

BHAGAVATA: Yes, you must.

ACTOR: Sir...

(The Bhagavata turns to the audience and starts singing.)

BHAGAVATA: Two friends there were

—one mind, one heart—

Are you still here?

(The Actor goes out looking at the Bhagavata, hoping for a last minute reprieve. It doesn't come.)

Poor boy! God alone knows what he saw—and what he took it to be! There's Truth for you... Pure Illusion.

(Sings.) Two friends there were

—one mind, one heart—

(A scream in the wings. The Actor comes rushing in.)

Now look here...

ACTOR: It's coming. Coming...

BHAGAVATA: What's coming?

ACTOR: Him! He's coming... (*Rushes out.*)

BHAGAVATA: Him? It? What's coming? Whatever or whoever it is, the Actor has obviously been frightened by its sight. If even a hardened actor like him gets frightened, it's more than likely that our gentle audience may be affected too. It's not proper to let such a sight walk on stage unchallenged. (*To the wings.*) Hold up the entry-curtain!

(Two stage-hands enter and hold up a half-curtain, about six feet in height—the sort of curtain used in Yakshatgana or Kathakali. The curtain masks the entry of Hayavadana, who comes and stands behind it.)

Who's that?

(No reply. Only the sound of someone sobbing behind the curtain.)

How strange! Someone's sobbing behind the curtain. It looks as though the Terror which frightened our Actor is itself now crying!

(To the stage-hand.) Lower the curtain!

(The curtain is lowered by about a foot. One sees Hayavadana's head, which is covered by a veil. At a sign from the Bhagavata, one of the stage-hands removes the veil, revealing a horse's head. For a while the horse-head doesn't realize that it is exposed to the gaze of the audience. The moment the realization dawns, the head ducks behind the curtain.)

BHAGAVATA: A horse! No, it can't be!

(He makes a sign. The curtain is lowered a little more—just enough to show the head again. Again it ducks. Again the curtain is lowered. This goes on till the curtain is lowered right down to the floor. Hayavadana, who has a man's body but a horse's head, is sitting on the floor hiding his head between his knees.)

Incredible! Unbelievable!

(At a sign from the Bhagavata, the stage-hands withdraw. The Bhagavata goes and stands near Hayavadana. Then he grunts to himself as though he has seen through the trick.)

Who are you?

(Hayavadana lifts his head, and wipes the tears away. The Bhagavata beckons to him to come centre-stage.)

Come here!

(Hayavadana hesitates, then comes forward.)

First you go around scaring people with this stupid mask. And then you have the cheek to disturb our show with your clowning? Have you no sense of proportion?... Enough of this nonsense now. Take it off—I say, take off that stupid mask!

(Hayavadana doesn't move.)

You won't?—Then I'll have to do it myself!

(Holds Hayavadana's head with both his hands and tries to pull it off. Hayavadana doesn't resist.)

It is tight. Nata—My dear Actor...

(The Actor comes in, warily, and stands open-mouthed at the sight he sees.)

Why are you standing there? Don't you see you were taken in by a silly mask? Come and help me take it off now.

(The Actor comes and holds Hayavadana by his waist while the Bhagavata pulls at the head. Hayavadana offers no resistance, but can't help moaning when the pain becomes unbearable. The tug-of-war continues for a while. Slowly, the truth dawns on the Bhagavata.)

Nata, this isn't a mask! It's his real head!

(The Actor drops Hayavadana with a thud. Hayavadana gets up and sits as before, head between knees.)

Truly, surprises will never cease! If someone had told me only five minutes ago that there existed a man with a horse's head, I would have laughed out in his face.

(To Hayavadana.) Who are you?

(Hayavadana gets up and starts to go out. The Actor hurriedly moves out of his way.)

Wait! Wait! That's our green room there. It's bad enough that you scared this actor. We have a play to perform today, you know.

(*Hayavadana stands, dejected.*)

(*Softly.*) Who are you?

(*No reply.*)

What brought you to this? Was it a curse of some *rishi*? Or was it some holy place of pilgrimage, a *punyasthana*, which you desecrated? Or could it be that you insulted a *pativrata*, dedicated to the service of her husband? Or did you...

HAYAVADANA: Hey...

BHAGAVATA (*taken aback*): Eh?

HAYAVADANA: What do you mean, Sir? Do you think just because you know the *Puranas* you can go about showering your Sanskrit on everyone in sight? What temple did I desecrate? What woman did I insult? What...

BHAGAVATA: Don't get annoyed...

HAYAVADANA: What else? What *rishi*? What sage? What? Whom have I wronged? What have I done to anyone? Let anyone come forward and say that I've caused him or her any harm. I haven't—I know I haven't. Yet...

(*He is on the point of beginning to sob again.*)

BHAGAVATA: Don't take it to heart so much. What happened? What's your grief? You are not alone here. I am here. The musicians are here. And there is our large-hearted audience. It may be that they fall asleep during a play sometimes...

HAYAVADANA: What can anyone do? It's my fate.

BHAGAVATA: What's your name?

HAYAVADANA: Hayavadana.

BHAGAVATA: How did you get this horse's head?

HAYAVADANA: I was born with it.

BHAGAVATA: Then why didn't you stop us when we tried to take it off? Why did you put up with our torture?

HAYAVADANA: All my life I've been trying to get rid of this head. I thought—you with all your goodness and *punya*... if at least you manage to pull it off...

BHAGAVATA: Oho! Poor man! But, Hayavadana, what can anyone do about a head one's born with? Who knows what error committed in the last birth is responsi...

HAYAVADANA (*annoyed*): It has nothing to do with my last birth. It's this birth which I can't shake off.

BHAGAVATA: Tell us what happened. Don't feel ashamed.

HAYAVADANA (*enraged*): Ashamed? Me? Why should I...

BHAGAVATA: Sorry. I beg your pardon. I should have said 'shy'.

HAYAVADANA (*gloomy*): It's a long story.

BHAGAVATA: Carry on.

HAYAVADANA: My mother was the Princess of Karnataka. She was a very beautiful girl. When she came of age, her father decided that she should choose her own husband. So princes of every kingdom in the world were invited—and they all came. From China, from Persia, from Africa. But she didn't like any of them. The last one to come was the Prince of Araby. My mother took one look at that handsome prince sitting on his great white stallion—and she fainted.

ACTOR: Ah!

HAYAVADANA: Her father at once decided that this was the man. All arrangements for the wedding were made. My mother recovered—and do you know what she said?

ACTOR, BHAGAVATA: What?

HAYAVADANA: She said she would only marry that horse!

ACTOR: What?

HAYAVADANA: Yes. She wouldn't listen to anyone. The Prince of Araby burst a blood-vessel.

ACTOR: Naturally.

HAYAVADANA: No one could dissuade her. So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion. She lived with him for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up—and no horse! In its place stood a beautiful Celestial Being, a *gandharva*. Apparently this Celestial Being had been cursed by the god Kubera to be born a horse for some act of misbehaviour. After fifteen years of human love he had become his original self again.

BHAGAVATA: I must admit several such cases are on record.

HAYAVADANA: Released from his curse, he asked my mother to accompany him to his Heavenly Abode. But she wouldn't. She said she would come only if he became a horse again. So he cursed her...

ACTOR: No!

HAYAVADANA: He cursed her to become a horse herself. So my mother became a horse and ran away prancing happily. My father went back to his Heavenly Abode. Only I—the child of their marriage—was left behind.

BHAGAVATA: It's a sad story.

ACTOR: Very sad.

HAYAVADANA: What should I do now, Bhagavata Sir? What can I do to get rid of this head?

BHAGAVATA: Hayavadana, what's written on our foreheads cannot be altered.

HAYAVADANA (*slapping himself on the forehead*):

But what a forehead! What a forehead! If it was a forehead like yours, I would have accepted anything. But this!... I have tried to accept my fate. My personal life has naturally been blameless. So I took interest in the social life of the Nation—Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the Socialist Pattern of Society... I have tried everything. But where's my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man, Bhagavata Sir. But how? What can I do?

(Long silence. They think.)

BHAGAVATA: Banaras?

HAYAVADANA: What?

BHAGAVATA: If you go to Banaras and make a vow in front of the god there...

HAYAVADANA: I've tried that. Didn't work.

BHAGAVATA: Rameshwaram?

HAYAVADANA: Banaras, Rameshwaram, Gokarn, Haridwar, Gaya, Kedarnath—not only those but the *Dargah* of Khwaja Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of Our Virgin Mary—I've tried them all. Magicians, mendicants, maharshis, fakirs, saints and sadhus—sadhus with short hair, sadhus with beards—sadhus in saffron, sadhus in the altogether—hanging, singing, rotating, gyrating—on the spikes, in the air, under water, under the ground—I've covered them all. And what did I get out of all this? Everywhere I went I had to cover my head with a veil—and I started going bald. *(Pause. Shyly.)* You know, I hate this head, but I just can't help being fond of this lovely, long mane. *(Pause.)* So—I had to give the miss to Tirupati.

(Long silence.)

BHAGAVATA: Come to think of it, Hayavadana, why don't you try the Kali of Mount Chitrakoot?

HAYAVADANA: Anything you say.

BHAGAVATA: It's temple at the top of Mount Chitrakoot. The goddess there is famous for being ever-awake to the call of the devotees. Thousands used to flock to her temple once. No one goes now, though.

HAYAVADANA: Why not?

BHAGAVATA: She used to give anything anyone asked for. As the people became aware of this, they stopped going.

HAYAVADANA: Fools!

BHAGAVATA: Why don't you try her?

HAYAVADANA (*jumps up*): Why not? I'll start at once...

BHAGAVATA: Good. But I don't think you should go alone. It's a wild road. You'll have to ask a lot of people, which won't be easy for you. So...

(*To the Actor.*) You'd better go with him.

ACTOR: Me?

BHAGAVATA: Yes, that way you can make up for having insulted him.

HAYAVADANA: But, Bhagavata Sir, may I point out that his roadside manners...

ACTOR: There! He's insulting me now! Let him find his own way. What do I care?

BHAGAVATA: Come, come, don't let's start fighting now. (*To Hayavadana.*) Don't worry. There's no highway there. Only a cart-track at best.

(*To the Actor.*) You've no reason to feel insulted. Actually you should admire him. Even in his dire need, he doesn't lose his civic sense. Be off now.

HAYAVADANA (*to the Actor*): Please, don't get upset. I won't bother you, I promise.

(*To the Bhagavata.*) I am most grateful...

BHAGAVATA (*blessing him*): May you become successful in your search for completeness.

(*The two go.*)

Each one to his own fate. Each one to his own desire. Each one to his own luck. Let's now turn to our story.

(*He starts singing. The following is a prose rendering of the song.*)

BHAGAVATA (*sings*): Two friends there were—one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang.

FEMALE CHORUS (*sings*): Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning

of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?

BHAGAVATA (*sings*): They forgot themselves and took off their bodies. And she took the laughing heads, and held them high so the pouring blood bathed her, coloured her red. Then she danced around and sang.

FEMALE CHORUS (*sings*): A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky.

(*Devadatta enters and sits on the chair. He is a slender, rather good-looking person with a fair complexion. He is lost in thought. Kapila enters. He is powerfully built and darker.*)

KAPILA (*even as he is entering*): Devadatta, why didn't you come to the gymnasium last evening? I'd asked you to. It was such fun...

DEVADATTA (*preoccupied*): Some work.

KAPILA: Really, you should have come. The wrestler from Gandhara—he's one of India's greatest, you know—he came. Nanda and I were wrestling when he arrived. He watched us. When I caught Nanda in a crocodile-hold, he first burst into applause and said...

(*Notices that Devadatta isn't listening and stops. Pause.*)

DEVADATTA (*waking up*): Then?

KAPILA: Then what?

DEVADATTA (*flustered*): I mean...what did Nanda do?

KAPILA: He played the flute.

DEVADATTA (*more confused*): No...I mean...you were saying something about the wrestler from Gandhara, weren't you?

KAPILA: He wrestled with me for a few minutes, patted me on the back and said, 'You'll go far.'

DEVADATTA: That's nice.

KAPILA: Yes, it is... Who's it this time?

DEVADATTA: What do you mean?

KAPILA: I mean—who—is—it—this—time?

DEVADATTA: What do you mean who?

KAPILA: I mean—who is the girl?

DEVADATTA: No one. (*Pause.*) How did you guess?

KAPILA: My dear friend, I have seen you fall in love fifteen times in the last two years. How could I not guess?

DEVADATTA: Kapila, if you've come to make fun of me...

KAPILA: I am not making fun of you. Every time, you have been the first to tell me about it. Why so reticent this time?

DEVADATTA: How can you even talk of them in the same breath as her? Before her, they're as...

KAPILA: ...as stars before the moon, as the glow-worms before a torch. Yes, yes, that's been so fifteen times too.

DEVADATTA (*exploding*): Why don't you go home? You are becoming a bore.

KAPILA: Don't get annoyed. Please.

DEVADATTA: You call yourself my friend. But you haven't understood me at all.

KAPILA: And have you understood me? No, you haven't. Or you wouldn't get angry like this. Don't you know I would do anything for you? Jump into a well—or walk into fire? Even my parents aren't as close to me as you are. I would leave them this minute if you asked me to.

DEVADATTA (*irritated*): Don't start on that now. You've said it fifty times already.

KAPILA: ...And I'll say it again. If it wasn't for you I would have been no better than the ox in our yard. You showed me that there were such things as poetry and literature. You taught me...

DEVADATTA: Why don't you go home? All I wanted was to be by myself for a day. Alone. And you had to come and start your chatter. What do you know of poetry and literature? Go back to your smithy—that's where you belong.

KAPILA (*hurt*): Do you really want me to go?

DEVADATTA: Yes.

KAPILA: All right. If that's what you want.

(*He starts to go.*)

DEVADATTA: Sit down.

(*This is of course exactly what Kapila wants. He sits down on the floor.*)

And don't speak...

(*Devadatta gets down on the floor to sit beside Kapila. Kapila at once leaps up and gestures to Devadatta to sit on the chair. Devadatta shakes his head but Kapila insists, pulls him up by his arm. Devadatta gets up.*)

You are a pest.

(*Sits on the chair. Kapila sits down on the ground happily. A long pause.*)

DEVADATTA (*slowly*): How can I describe her, Kapila? Her forelocks rival the bees, her face is...

(*All this is familiar to Kapila and he joins in, with great enjoyment.*)

BOTH: ...is a white lotus. Her beauty is as the magic lake. Her arms the lotus creepers. Her breasts are golden urns and her waist...

DEVADATTA: No. No!

KAPILA: Eh?

DEVADATTA: I was blind all these days. I deceived myself that I understood poetry. I didn't. I understood nothing.

Tanvee shyama—

BOTH: ...*shikharidashana pakvabimbadharoshthee—Madhyekshama chakitaharinee prekshana nimnanabhiih.*

DEVADATTA: The Shyama Nayika—born of Kalidasa's magic description—as Vatsyayana had dreamt her. Kapila, in a single appearance, she has become my guru in the poetry of love. Do you think she would ever assent to becoming my disciple in love itself?

KAPILA (*aside*): This is new!

DEVADATTA (*his eyes shining*): If only she would consent to be my Muse, I could outshine Kalidasa. I'd always wanted to do that—but I thought it was impossible... But now I see it is within my reach.

KAPILA: Then go ahead. Write...

DEVADATTA: But how can I without her in front of me? How can I concentrate when my whole being is only thinking of her, craving for her?

KAPILA: What's her name? Will you at least tell me that?

DEVADATTA: Her name? She has no name.

KAPILA: But what do her parents call her?

DEVADATTA (*anguished*): What's the use? She isn't meant for the likes of me...

KAPILA: You don't really believe that, do you? With all your qualities—achievements—looks—family—grace...

DEVADATTA: Don't try to console me with praise.

KAPILA: I'm not praising you. You know very well that every parent of every girl in the city is only waiting to catch you...

DEVADATTA: Don't! Please. I know this girl is beyond my wildest dreams. But still—I can't help wanting her—I can't help it. I swear, Kapila, with you as my witness I swear, if I ever get her as my wife, I'll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I'll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra...

KAPILA Ts! Ts! (*aside*): This is a serious situation. It does look as though this sixteenth girl has really caught our Devadatta

in her net. Otherwise, he isn't the type to talk of such violence.

DEVADATTA: I mean it! What's the use of these hands and this head if I'm not to have her? My poetry won't live without her. The *Shakuntalam* will never be excelled. But how can I explain this to her? I have no cloud for a messenger. No bee to show the way. Now the only future I have is to stand and do penance in Pavana Veethi...

KAPILA: Pavana Veethi! Why there?

DEVADATTA: She lives in that street.

KAPILA: How do you know?

DEVADATTA: I saw her in the market yesterday evening. I couldn't remove my eyes from her and followed her home.

KAPILA: Tut! Tut! What must people have thought?

DEVADATTA: She went into a house in Pavana Veethi. I waited outside all evening. She didn't come out.

KAPILA: Now tell me. What sort of a house was it?

DEVADATTA: I can't remember.

KAPILA: What colour?

DEVADATTA: Don't know.

KAPILA: How many storeys?

DEVADATTA: I didn't notice.

KAPILA: You mean you didn't notice anything about the house?

DEVADATTA: The door-frame of the house had an engraving of a two-headed bird at the top. I only saw that. She lifted her hand to knock and it touched the bird. For a minute, the bird came alive.

KAPILA (*jumps up*): Then why didn't you tell me before? You've been wasting precious time...

DEVADATTA: I don't understand...

KAPILA: My dear Devadatta, your cloud-messenger, your bee, your pigeon is sitting right in front of you and you don't even know it? You wait here. I'll go, find out her house, her name...

DEVADATTA (*incredulous*): Kapila—Kapila...

KAPILA: I'll be back in a few minutes...

DEVADATTA: I won't ever forgot this, Kapila...

KAPILA: Shut up!... And forget all about your arms and head. This job doesn't need either Rudra or Kali. I'm quite enough.
(*Goes out.*)

DEVADATTA: Kapila—Kapila... He's gone. How fortunate I am to have a friend like him. Pure gold. (*Pause.*) But should I have trusted this to him? He means well—and he is a wizard in his smithy, in his farm, in his fields. But here? No. He is too rough, too indelicate. He was the wrong man to send. He's bound to ruin the whole thing. (*Anguished.*) Lord Rudra, I meant what I said. If I get her, my head will be a gift to you. Mother Kali, I'll sacrifice my arms to you. I swear...

(*Goes out. The Bhagavata removes the chair. Kapila enters.*)

KAPILA: This is Pavana Veethi—the street of merchants. Well, well, well. What enormous houses! Each one a palace in itself. It's a wonder people don't get lost in these houses.

(*Examines the doors one by one.*)

Now. This is not a double-headed bird. It's an eagle—This? A lotus. This is—er—a lion. Tiger. A wheel! And this? God alone knows what this is. And the next? (*In disgust.*) A horse!—A rhinoceros—Another lion. Another lotus!—Where the hell is that stupid two-headed bird? (*Stops.*) What was the engraving I couldn't make out? (*Goes back and stares at it. Shouts in triumph.*) That's it! Almost gave me the slip! A proper two-headed bird. But it's so tiny you can't see it at all unless you are willing to tear your eyes staring at it. Well now. Whose house could this be? (*Looks around.*) No one in sight.

Naturally. What should anyone come here for in this hot sun?
Better ask the people in the house.

(Mimes knocking. Listens. Padmini enters humming a tune.)

PADMINI: ...Here comes the rider—from which land does he come?...

KAPILA *(gapes at her. Aside)*: I give up, Devadatta. I surrender to your judgement. I hadn't thought anyone could be more beautiful than the wench Ragini who acts Rambha in our village troupe. But this one! You're right—she is Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled into one.

PADMINI: You knocked, didn't you?

KAPILA: Er—yes...

PADMINI: Then why are you gaping at me? What do you want?

KAPILA: I—I just wanted to know whose house this was.

PADMINI: Whose house do you want?

KAPILA: This one.

PADMINI: I see. Then who do you want here?

KAPILA: The master...

PADMINI: Do you know his name?

KAPILA: No.

PADMINI: Have you met him?

KAPILA: No.

PADMINI: Have you seen him?

KAPILA: No.

PADMINI: So. You haven't met him, seen him or known him. What do you want with him?

KAPILA *(aside)*: She is quite right. What have I to do with him?
I only want to find out his name...

PADMINI: Are you sure you want this house? Or were you...

KAPILA: No. I'm sure this is the one.

PADMINI (*pointing to her head*): Are you all right here?

KAPILA (*taken aback*): Yes—I think so.

PADMINI: How about your eyes? Do they work properly?

KAPILA: Yes.

PADMINI (*showing him four fingers*): How many?

KAPILA: Four.

PADMINI: Correct. So there's nothing wrong with your eyes. As for the other thing, I'll have to take you on trust. Well then. If you are sure you wanted this house, why were you peering at all those doors? And what were you mumbling under your breath?

KAPILA (*startled*): How did you know?

PADMINI: I am quite sane...and I've got good eyes.

KAPILA (*looks up and chuckles*): Oh, I suppose you were watching from the terrace...

PADMINI (*in a low voice, mysteriously*): Listen, you'd better be careful. We have any number of thefts in this street and people are suspicious. Last night there was a man standing out there for nearly two hours without moving. And today you have turned up. It's just as well I saw you. Anyone else would have taken you to the police. Beware! (*Aloud.*) Now tell me. What are you doing here?

KAPILA: I—I can't tell you.

PADMINI: Really! Who will you tell it to?

KAPILA: Your father...

PADMINI: Do you want my father or do you want the master of this house?

KAPILA: Aren't they the same?

PADMINI (*as though explaining to a child*): Listen, my father could be a servant in this house. Or the master of this house could be my father's servant. My father could be the master's father,

brother, son-in-law, cousin, grandfather or uncle. Do you agree?

KAPILA: Er—yes.

PADMINI: Right. Then we'll start again. Whom should I call?

KAPILA: Your father.

PADMINI: And if he's not in?

KAPILA (*lost*): Anyone else.

PADMINI: Which anyone?

KAPILA: Perhaps—your brother.

PADMINI: Do you know him?

KAPILA: No.

PADMINI: Have you met him?

KAPILA: No.

PADMINI: Do you know his name?

KAPILA (*desperate*): Please, please—call your father or the master or both, or if they are the same, anyone... please call someone!

PADMINI: No. No. That won't do.

KAPILA (*looking around; aside*): No one here. Still I have to find out her name. Devadatta must be in agony and he will never forgive me if I go back now. (*Aloud.*) Madam, please. I have some very important work. I'll touch your feet...

PADMINI (*eager*): You will? Really? Do you know, I've touched everyone's feet in this house some time or the other, but no one's ever touched mine? You will?

KAPILA (*slapping his forehead as he sinks to the ground*): I'm finished—decimated—powdered to dust—powdered into tiny specks of flour. (*To Padmini.*) My mother, can I at least talk to a servant?

PADMINI: I knew it. I knew you wouldn't touch my feet. One can't

even trust strangers any more. All right, my dear son! I opened the door. So consider me the door-keeper. What do you want?

KAPILA (*determined*): All right! (*Gets up.*) You have no doubt heard of the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara.

PADMINI: It's possible.

KAPILA: In which case you'll also know of Devadatta, his only son. A poet. A pundit. Knows the Vedas backwards. Writes the grandest poetry ever. Long, dark hair. Delicate, fair face. Age twenty. Height five feet seven inches. Weight...

PADMINI: Wait a minute! What's he to you?

KAPILA: Friend. Greatest in the world! But the main question now is: What's he going to be to you?

(*Sudden silence.*)

PADMINI (*blushing as the import of the remark dawns on her*): Mother!

(*Runs in. Kapila stands, staring after her.*)

KAPILA: Devadatta, my friend, I confess to you I'm feeling uneasy. You are a gentle soul. You can't bear a bitter word or an evil thought. But this one is fast as lightning—and as sharp. She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel. But what can one do? You'll never listen to me. And I can't withdraw now. I'll have to talk to her family...

(*Follows her in.*)

BHAGAVATA: Need one explain to our wise and knowing audience what followed next? Padmini is the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura. In her house, the very floor is swept by the Goddess of Wealth. In Devadatta's house, they've the Goddess of Learning for a maid. What could then possibly stand in the way of bringing the families together? (*Marriage music.*) Padmini became the better half of Devadatta and settled in his house. Nor did Devadatta forget his debt to Kapila. The old friendship flourished as before. Devadatta—

Padmini—Kapila! To the admiring citizens of Dharmapura,
 Rama—Sita—Lakshmana.

(Enter Devadatta and Padmini.)

PADMINI: Why is he so late? He should have been here more than
 an hour ago.

(Looks out of a window.)

DEVADATTA: Have you packed your clothes properly?

PADMINI: The first thing in the morning.

DEVADATTA: And the mattresses? We may have to sleep out in the
 open. It's quite chilly. We'll need at least two rugs.

PADMINI: Don't worry. The servant's done all that.

DEVADATTA: And your shawl? Also some warm clothes...

PADMINI: What's happened to you today? At other times you are
 so full of your books, you even forget to wash your hands
 after a meal. But today you've been going on and on and on
 all morning.

DEVADATTA: Padmini, I've told you ten times already I don't like
 the idea of this trip. You should rest—not face such hazards.
 The cart will probably shake like an earthquake. It's dangerous
 in your condition. But you won't listen.

PADMINI: My condition! What's happened to me? To listen to you,
 one would think I was the first woman in this world to
 become pregnant. I only have to stumble and you act as
 though it's all finished and gone...

DEVADATTA: For God's sake, will you stop it?

PADMINI *(laughs)*: Sorry! *(Bites her tongue in repentance.)* I won't
 say such things again.

DEVADATTA: You've no sense of what not to say. So long as you
 can chatter and run around like a child...

PADMINI *(back at the window)*: Where is Kapila?

DEVADATTA: ...and drool over Kapila all day.

PADMINI (*taken aback*): What do you mean?

DEVADATTA: What else should I say? The other day I wanted to read out a play of Bhasa's to you and sure enough Kapila drops in.

PADMINI: Oh! That's biting you still, is it? But why are you blaming me? He was your friend even before you married me, wasn't he? He used to drop in every day even then...

DEVADATTA: But shouldn't he realize I'm a married man now? He just can't go on as before...

PADMINI: Don't blame him. It's my fault. He learnt a bit about poetry from you and I thought he might enjoy Bhasa. So I asked him to come. He didn't want to but I insisted.

DEVADATTA: I know that.

PADMINI: Had I realized you would be so upset, I wouldn't have.

DEVADATTA: I'm not upset, Padmini. Kapila isn't merely a friend—he's like my brother. One has to collect merit in seven lives to get a friend like him. But is it wrong for me to want to read to you alone? Or to spend a couple of days with you without anyone else around? (*Pause.*) Of course, once he came, there wasn't the slightest chance of my reading any poetry. You had to hop around him twittering 'Kapila! Kapila!' every minute.

PADMINI: You aren't jealous of him, are you?

DEVADATTA: Me? Jealous of Kapila? Why do you have to twist everything I say...

PADMINI (*laughs. Affectionately*): Don't sulk now. I was just trying to be funny. Really you have no sense of humour.

DEVADATTA: It's humour for you. But it burns my insides.

PADMINI: Aw, shut up. Don't I know how liberal and largehearted you are? You aren't the sort to get jealous. If I were to fall into a well tomorrow, you wouldn't even miss me until my bloated corpse floated up...

DEVADATTA (*irritated*): Padmini!

PADMINI: Sorry, I forgot. I apologize—I slap myself on the cheeks. (*Slaps herself on both cheeks with her right hand several times in punishment.*) Is that all right? The trouble is I grew up saying these awful things and it's become a habit now. But you are so fragile! I don't know how you're going to go through life wrapped in silk like this! You are still a baby...

DEVADATTA: I see.

PADMINI: Look now. You got annoyed about Kapila. But why? You are my saffron, my marriage thread, my deity. Why should you feel disturbed? I like making fun of Kapila—he is such an innocent. Looks a proper devil, but the way he blushes and giggles and turns red, he might have been a bride.

DEVADATTA (*smiles*): Well, this bride didn't blush.

PADMINI: No one taught this bride to blush. But now I'm learning from that yokel.

(*They both laugh. She casually goes back to the window and looks out.*)

DEVADATTA (*aside*): Does she really not see? Or is she deliberately playing this game with him? Kapila was never the sort to blush. But now, he only has to see her and he begins to wag his tail. Sits up on his hind legs as though he were afraid to let her words fall to the ground. And that pleading in his eyes—can't she really see that? (*Aloud.*) Padmini, Kapila isn't used to women. The only woman he has known in his life is his mother.

PADMINI: You mean it's dangerous to be with him? The way you talk one would never imagine he was your best friend.

DEVADATTA (*incensed*): Why do you have to twist everything I say...

PADMINI (*conciliatory*): What did I say? Listen, if you really don't want to go to Ujjain today, let's not. When Kapila comes, tell him I'm ill.

DEVADATTA: But...you will be disappointed.

PADMINI: Me? Of course not. We'll do as you feel. You remember what the priest said—I'm your 'half' now. The better half! We can go to Ujjain some other time... In another couple of months, there's the big Ujjain fair. We'll go then—just the two of us. All right? We'll cancel today's trip.

DEVADATTA (*trying to control his excitement*): Now—if you aren't going to be disappointed—then—truly—that's what I would like most. Not because I'm jealous of Kapila—No, I'm not, I know that. He has a heart of gold. But this is your first baby...

PADMINI: What do you mean first? How many babies can one have within six months?

DEVADATTA: You aren't going to start again?

PADMINI: No, no, no, I won't say a word.

DEVADATTA (*pinching her cheek*): Bad upbringing—that's what it is. I don't like the idea of your going out in a cart in your present condition, that's all.

PADMINI: Ordinarily I would have replied I had a womb of steel, but I won't—in the present condition.

(*Both laugh.*)

All right. If you are happy, so am I.

DEVADATTA (*happy*): Yes, we'll spend the whole day by ourselves. The servants are going home anyway. They can come back tomorrow. But for today—only you and me. It's been such a long time since we've been on our own.

KAPILA (*off-stage*): Devadatta...

PADMINI: There's Kapila now. You tell him.

(*She pretends to go in, but goes and stands in a corner of the stage, listening. Kapila enters excited.*)

KAPILA: I'm late, ain't I? What could I do? That cartman had kept the cart ready but the moment I looked at it, I knew one of

the oxen was no good. I asked him to change it. 'We won't reach Ujjain for another fortnight in this one,' I said. He started...

DEVADATTA: Kapila...

KAPILA: ...making a scene, but I stood my ground. So he had to fetch a new one. These cart-hirers are a menace. If ours hadn't gone to Chitrapur that day...

DEVADATTA: Kapila, we have to call off today's trip.

KAPILA (*suddenly silenced*): Oh!

DEVADATTA (*embarrassed*): You see, Padmini isn't well...

KAPILA: Well, then of course...

(*Silence.*)

I'll return the cart then.

DEVADATTA: Yes.

KAPILA: Or else he may charge us for the day.

DEVADATTA: Uhm.

KAPILA (*aside*): So it's off. What am I to do for the rest of the day?

What am I to do for the rest of the week? Why should it feel as though the whole world has been wiped out for a whole week? Why this emptiness? Kapila, Kapila, get a tight hold on yourself. You are slipping, boy, control yourself. Don't lose that hold. Go now. Don't come here again for a week. Devadatta's bound to get angry with you for not visiting. Sister-in-law will be annoyed. But don't come back. Go, Go! (*Aloud.*) Well then—I'll start.

DEVADATTA: Why don't you sit for a while?

KAPILA: No, no. We might upset sister-in-law more then with our prattle.

DEVADATTA: That's true. So come again. Soon.

KAPILA: Yes, I will.

(*Starts to go. Padmini comes out.*)

PADMINI: Why are you sitting here? When are we going to start?

We are already late...

(They look at her, surprised.)

KAPILA: But if you aren't well, we won't...

PADMINI: What's wrong with me? I'm in perfect health. I had a headache this morning. But a layer of ginger paste took care of that. Why should we cancel our trip for a little thing like that?

(Devadatta opens his mouth to say something but stays quiet.)

(To Kapila.) Why are you standing there like a statue?

KAPILA: No, really, if you have a headache...

PADMINI: I don't have a headache now!

DEVADATTA: But, Padmini...

PADMINI: Kapila, put those bundles out there in the cart. The servant will bring the rest.

(Kapila stands totally baffled. He looks at Devadatta for guidance. There's none.)

Be quick. Otherwise I'll put them in myself.

(Kapila goes out. Padmini goes to Devadatta. Pleading.)

Please don't get angry. Poor boy, he looked so lost and disappointed, I couldn't bear to see it. He has been running around for us this whole week.

DEVADATTA *(turning his head away)*: Where's the box in which I put the books? Let me take it.

PADMINI: You are an angel. I knew you wouldn't mind. I'll bring it. It's quite light.

(Goes out.)

DEVADATTA *(to himself)*: And my disappointment? Does that mean nothing to you? *(Aloud.)* Don't. I'll take it. Please, don't lift anything.

(Goes in after her.)

BHAGAVATA: Why do you tremble, heart? Why do you cringe

like a touch-me-not bush through which a snake has passed?
The sun rests his head on the Fortunate Lady's flower.

And the head is bidding good-bye to the heart.

(Kapila, followed by Padmini and Devadatta, enters miming a cart-ride. Kapila is driving the cart.)

PADMINI: How beautifully you drive the cart, Kapila! Your hands don't even move, but the oxen seem to know exactly which way you want them to go.

(Kapila laughs happily.)

Shall we stop here for a while? We've been in this cart all day and my legs feel like bits of wood.

KAPILA: Right! Ho—Ho...

(Pulls the cart to a halt. They get down. She slips but Devadatta supports her.)

PADMINI: What a terrible road. Nothing but potholes and rocks. But one didn't feel a thing in the cart! You drove it so gently—almost made it float. I remember when Devadatta took me in a cart. That was soon after our marriage. I insisted on being shown the lake outside the city. So we started, only the two of us and Devadatta driving—against my advice, I must say. And we didn't even cross the city-gates. The oxen took everything except the road. He only had to pull to the right, and off they would rush to the left! I've never laughed so much in my life. But of course he got very angry, so we had to go back home straight!

(Laughs. But Kapila and Devadatta don't join in.)

Kapila, what's that glorious tree there? That one, covered with flowers?

KAPILA: Oh that! That's called the Fortunate Lady's flower—that means a married woman...

PADMINI: I know! But why do they call it that?

KAPILA: Wait. I'll bring you a flower. Then you'll see.
(Goes out.)

PADMINI (*watching him, aside*): How he climbs—like an ape. Before I could even say ‘yes’, he had taken off his shirt, pulled his *dhoti* up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back: like an ocean with muscles rippling across it—and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless.

DEVADATTA (*aside*): She had so much to talk about all day, she couldn’t wait for breath. Now, not a word.

PADMINI (*aside*): He is like a Celestial Being reborn as a hunter. How his body sways, his limbs curve—It’s a dance almost.

DEVADATTA (*aside*): And why should I blame her? It’s his strong body—his manly muscles. And to think I had never *ever* noticed them all these years! I was an innocent—an absolute baby.

PADMINI (*aside*): No woman could resist him.

DEVADATTA (*aside*): No woman could resist him—and what does it matter that she’s married? What a fool I’ve been. All these days I only saw that pleading in his eyes stretching out its arms, begging for a favour. But never looked in her eyes. And when I did, took the whites of her eyes for their real depth. Only now I see the depths. Now I see these flames leaping up from those depths. Now! So late! Don’t turn away now, Devadatta, look at her. Look at those yellow, purple flames. Look how she’s pouring her soul into his mould. Look! Let your guts burn out. Let your lungs turn to ash, but don’t turn away. Look and don’t scream. Strangle your agony. But look deep into these eyes—look until those peacock flames burn out the blindness in you. Don’t be a coward now.

PADMINI (*aside*): How long can one go on like this? How long? How long? If Devadatta notices...

(*Looks at Devadatta. He is looking at her already and their eyes meet. Both look away.*)

PADMINI (*aloud*): There he comes. All I wanted was one flower and he's brought a heap.

(*Kapila comes in, miming a whole load of flowers in his arms and hands. He pours them out in front of her.*)

KAPILA: Here you are. The Fortunate Lady's flowers.

PADMINI: And why a 'Fortunate Lady', pray?

KAPILA: Because it has all the marks of marriage a woman puts on. The yellow on the petals. Then that red round patch at the bottom of the petals, like on your foreheads. Then, here, that thin saffron line, like in the parting of your hair. Then—uhm...oh yes—here near the stem a row of black dots, like a necklace of black beads—

PADMINI: What imagination! (*To Devadatta.*) You should put it in your poetry. It's good for a simile.

DEVADATTA: Shall we go? It's quite late.

PADMINI: Let's stay. I have been sitting in that cart for I don't know how long. I didn't know the road to Ujjain was so enchanting.

KAPILA: The others take a longer route. This is a more wooded area, so very few come this way. But I like this better. Besides, it's fifteen miles shorter.

PADMINI: I wouldn't have minded even if it were fifteen miles longer. It's like a garden.

KAPILA: Isn't it? Look there, do you see it? That's the river Bhargavi. The poet Vyasa had a hermitage on its banks. There's a temple of Rudra there now.

DEVADATTA (*suddenly awake*): A temple of Rudra?

KAPILA: Yes, It's beautiful. And—there—beyond that hill is a temple of Kali.

(*Two stage-hands come and hold up a half-curtain in the corner to which he points. The curtain has a picture of Goddess Kali on it. The Bhagavata places a sword in front of it.*)

It was very prosperous once. But now it's quite dilapidated.

DEVADATTA (*as though in a trance*): The temple of Rudra!

KAPILA: Yes, that's old too. But not half as ruined as the Kali temple. We can have a look if you like.

PADMINI: Yes, let's.

DEVADATTA: Why don't you go and see the Kali temple first?

KAPILA: No, that's quite terrible. I saw it once: bats, snakes, all sorts of poisonous insects—and no proper road. We can go to the Rudra temple, though. It's nearer.

PADMINI: Come on. Let's go.

DEVADATTA: You two go. I won't come.

PADMINI (*pause*): And you?

DEVADATTA: I'll stay here and watch the cart.

KAPILA: But there's no fear of thieves here. (*Sensing the tension.*) Or else. I'll stay here.

DEVADATTA: No, no. You two go. I'm also a little tired.

PADMINI (*aside*): He has started it again. Another tantrum. Let him. What do I care? (*Aloud.*) Come, Kapila, we'll go.

KAPILA: But perhaps in your condition...

PADMINI (*exploding*): Why are you two hounding me with this condition? If you don't want to come, say so. Don't make excuses...

KAPILA: Devadatta, it's not very far. You come too.

DEVADATTA: I told you to go. Don't force me, please.

PADMINI: Let's not go. I don't want the two of you to suffer for my sake.

DEVADATTA (*to Kapila*): Go.

KAPILA (*he has no choice*): Come. We'll be back soon. (*Kapila and Padmini go out.*)

DEVADATTA: Good-bye, Kapila. Good-bye, Padmini. May Lord Rudra bless you. You are two pieces of my heart—Live happily

together. I shall find my eternal happiness in that thought. (*Agonized.*) Give me strength, Lord Rudra. My father, give me courage. I'm already trembling, I'd never thought I would be so afraid. Give me courage, Father, strengthen me.

(He walks to the temple of Kali. It's a steep and difficult climb. He is exhausted by the time he reaches the temple. He prostrates himself before the goddess.)

Bhavani, Bhairavi, Kali, Durga, Mahamaya, Mother of all Nature, I had forgotten my promise to you. Forgive me, Mother. You fulfilled the deepest craving of my life. You gave me Padmini—and I forgot my word. Forgive me, for I'm here now to carry out my promise.

(Picks up the sword.)

Great indeed is your mercy. Even in this lonely place some devotee of yours—a hunter perhaps or a tribesman—has left this weapon. Who knows how many lives this weapon has sacrificed to you. (*Screaming.*) Here, Mother Kali, here's another. My head. Take it, Mother, accept this little offering of my head.

(Cuts off his head. Not an easy thing to do. He struggles, groans, writhes. Ultimately succeeds in killing himself.)

A long silence. Padmini and Kapila return to the cart.)

PADMINI (*enters talking*):...he should have come. How thrilling it was! Heavenly! But of course he has no enthusiasm for these things. After all...

(Notices Devadatta isn't there.)

Where's Devadatta?

(They look around.)

He said he'd stay here!

KAPILA (*calls*): Devadatta—Devadatta—

PADMINI: He's probably somewhere around. Where will he go? He has the tenderest feet on earth. They manage to get blisters, corns, cuts, boils and wounds without any effort.

KAPILA (*calls*): Devadatta.

PADMINI: Why are you shouting? Sit down. He'll come.

(*Kapila inspects the surrounding area. Gives a gasp of surprise.*)

What's it?

KAPILA: His footprints. He has obviously gone in that direction.

(*Pause.*) But—that's where the Kali temple is!

PADMINI: You don't mean he's gone there! How absurd!

KAPILA: You stay here. I'll bring him back.

PADMINI: But why do you have to go? There's nothing to fear in this broad daylight!

KAPILA (*hurrying off*): It's very thickly wooded there. If he gets lost, he'll have to spend the whole night in the jungle. You stay here. I'll come back in no time.

(*Runs out.*)

PADMINI (*exasperated*): He's gone! Really, he seems more worried about Devadatta than me.

(*She sits down. Kapila goes to the Kali temple—but naturally faster than Devadatta did. He sees the body and his mouth half opens in a scream. He runs to Devadatta and kneels beside him. Lifts his truncated head and moans.*)

KAPILA: You've cut off your head! You've cut off your head! Oh my dear friend, my brother, what have you done? Were you so angry with me? Did you feel such contempt for me, such abhorrence? And in your anger you forgot that I was ready to die for you? If you had asked me to jump into fire, I would have done it. If you had asked me to leave the country, I would have done it. If you had asked me to go and drown in a river, I would have accepted. Did you despise me so much that you couldn't ask me that? I did wrong. But you know I don't have the intelligence to know what else I should have done. I couldn't think—and so you've pushed me away? No, Devadatta, I can't live without you. I can't breathe without you. Devadatta, my brother, my guru, my friend...

(Picks up the sword.)

You spurned me in this world. Accept me as your brother at least in the next. Here, friend, here I come. As always, I follow in your footsteps.

(Cuts off his head. It's an easier death this time. Padmini, who has been still till now, moves.)

PADMINI: Where are they? Now Kapila's disappeared too. He couldn't still be searching for him. That's not possible. Devadatta's too weak to have gone far. They must have met. Perhaps they're sitting now, chatting as in the old days. For once, no bother of a wife around. No, more likely Devadatta's sulking. He's probably tearing poor Kapila to shreds by just being silent and grumpy. Yes, that would be more like him.

(Pause.)

It's almost dark. And they aren't back. Shameless men—to leave me alone like this here!

No, it's no use sitting here any longer. I had better go and look for them. If I die of a snake-bite on the way, serve them right. Or perhaps, so much the better for them.

(Walks to the temple, slowly. Rubs her eyes when she reaches there.)

How dark it is! Can't see a thing. *(Calls.)* Kapila—Kapila—Devadatta isn't here either. What shall I do here? At this time of the night! Alone! *(Listens.)* What's that? Some wild beast. A hyena! It's right outside—what shall I do if it comes in? Ah! It's gone. Mother Kali, only you can protect me now.

(Stumbles over the bodies.)

What's this? What's this?

(Stares at the bodies and then lets out a terrified scream.)

Oh God! What's this? Both! Both gone! And didn't even think of me before they went? What shall I do? What shall I do? Oh, Devadatta, what did I do that you left me alone in this state? Was that how much you loved me? And you, Kapila, who looked at me with dog's eyes, you too? How selfish you

are, you men, and how thoughtless! What shall I do now?
Where shall I go? How can I go home?

(Pause.)

Home? And what shall I say when I get there? What shall I say happened? And who'll believe me? They'll all say the two fought and died for this whore. They're bound to say it. Then what'll happen to me? No, Mother Kali, no, it's too horrible to think of. No! Kapila's gone, Devadatta's gone. Let me go with them.

(Picks up the sword.)

I don't have the strength to hack off my head. But what does it matter how I die, Mother? You don't care. It's the same to you—another offering! All right. Have it then. Here's another offering for you.

(Lifts the sword and puts its point on her breast when, from behind the curtain, the goddess's voice is heard.)

VOICE: Hey...

(Padmini freezes.)

Put it down! Put down that sword!

(Padmini jumps up in fright and, throwing the sword aside, tries to run out of the temple. Then stops.)

PADMINI: Who's that?

(No reply.)

Who's that?

(A tremendous noise of drums. Padmini shuts her eyes in terror. Behind the curtain one sees the uplifted blood-red palms of the goddess. The curtain is lowered and taken away and one sees a terrifying figure, her arms stretched out, her mouth wide open with the tongue lolling out. The drums stop and as the goddess drops her arms and shuts her mouth, it becomes clear she has been yawning.)

KALI *(completes the yawn)*: All right. Open your eyes and be quick.

Don't waste time.

(Padmini opens her eyes and sees the goddess. She runs and falls at her feet.)

PADMINI: Mother—Kali...

KALI (*sleepy*): Yes, it's me. There was a time—many years ago—when at this hour they would have the *mangalarati*. The devotees used to make a deafening racket with drums and conch-shells and cymbals. So I used to be wide awake around now. I've lost the habit. (*Yawns.*) Right. What do you want? Tell me. I'm pleased with you.

PADMINI: Save me, Mother...

KALI: I know. I've done that already.

PADMINI: Do you call this saving, Mother of all Nature? I can't show my face to anyone in the world. I can't...

KALI (*a little testily*): Yes, yes, you've said that once. No need to repeat yourself. Now do as I tell you. Put these heads back properly. Attach them to their bodies and then press that sword on their necks. They'll come up alive. Is that enough?

PADMINI: Mother, you are our breath, you are our bread—and—water...

KALI: Skip it! Do as I told you. And quickly. I'm collapsing with sleep.

PADMINI (*hesitating*): May I ask a question?

KALI: If it's not too long.

PADMINI: Can there ever be anything you don't already know, Mother? The past and the future are mere specks in your palm. Then why didn't you stop Devadatta when he came here? Why didn't you stop Kapila? If you'd saved either of them, I would have been spared all this terror, this agony. Why did you wait so long?

KALI (*surprised*): Is that all you can think of now?

PADMINI: Mother...

KALI: I've never seen anyone like you.

PADMINI: How could one possibly hide anything from you, Mother?

KALI: That's true enough.

PADMINI: Then why didn't you stop them?

KALI: Actually if it hadn't been that I was so sleepy, I would have thrown them out by the scruff of their necks.

PADMINI: But why?

KALI: The rascals! They were lying to their last breaths. That fellow Devadatta—he had once promised his head to Rudra and his arms to me! Think of it—head to him and arms to me! Then because you insisted on going to the Rudra temple, he comes here and offers his head. Nobly too—wants to keep his word, he says—no other reason!

Then this Kapila, died right in front of me—but 'for his friend'. Mind you! Didn't even have the courtesy to refer to me. And what lies! Says he is dying for friendship. He must have known perfectly well he would be accused of killing Devadatta for you. Do you think he wouldn't have grabbed you if it hadn't been for that fear? But till his last breath—'Oh my friend! My dear brother!'

Only you spoke the truth.

PADMINI: It's all your grace, Mother...

KALI: Don't drag me into it. I had nothing to do with it. You spoke the truth because you're selfish, that's all. Now don't go on. Do what I told you and shut your eyes.

PADMINI: Yes, Mother...

(Eagerly, Padmini attaches the severed heads to the bodies of the men. But in her excitement she mixes them up so that Devadatta's head goes to Kapila's body and vice versa. Then presses the sword on their necks, does namaskara to the goddess, walks downstage and stands with her back to the goddess, her eyes shut tight.)

PADMINI: I'm ready, Mother.

KALI *(in a resigned tone)*: My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway, so be it!

(Again the drums. The curtain is held up again and the goddess disappears behind it. During the following scene, the stage-hands, the curtain as well as the goddess leave the stage.

Padmini stands immobile with her eyes shut. The drums stop. A long silence follows. The dead bodies move. Their breathing becomes loud and laboured. They sit up, slowly, stiffly. Their movement is mechanical, as though blood-circulation has not started properly yet. They feel their own arms, heads and bodies, and look around, bewildered.

Henceforth the person with the head of Devadatta will be called Devadatta. Similarly with Kapila.

They stand up. It's not easy and they reel around a bit. Padmini is still.)

DEVADATTA: What—happened?

KAPILA: What happened?

(Padmini opens her eyes, but she still doesn't dare to look at them.)

PADMINI: Devadatta's voice! Kapila's voice!

(Screaming with joy.) Kapila! Devadatta!

(Turns and runs to them. Then suddenly stops and stands paralysed.)

KAPILA: Who...?

DEVADATTA: Padmini?

KAPILA: What—happened? My head—Ooh! It feels so heavy!

DEVADATTA: My body—seems to weigh—a ton.

PADMINI *(running around in confusion)*: What have I done? What have I done? What have I done? Mother Kali, only you can save me now—only you can help me—What have I done? What have I done? What should I do? Mother, Mother...

DEVADATTA *(a little more alive)*: Why are you—crying?

KAPILA: What's—wrong?

PADMINI: What shall I tell you, Devadatta? How can I explain it, Kapila? You cut off your heads. But the goddess gave you

life—but—I—I—in the dark... Mother, only you can protect me now—Mother! I—mixed up your heads—I mixed them up! Forgive me—I don't deserve to live—forgive me...

KAPILA (*looking at Devadatta*): You mixed up...

DEVADATTA: ...the heads?

(*They stare at each other. Then burst into laughter. She doesn't know how to react. Watches them. Then starts laughing.*)

DEVADATTA: Mixed-up heads!

KAPILA: Heads mixed-up!

DEVADATTA: Exchanged heads!

KAPILA: Heads exchanged!

DEVADATTA: How fantastic! All these years we were only friends!

KAPILA: Now we are blood-relations! Body-relations! (*Laughing.*)
What a gift!

DEVADATTA: Forgive you? We must thank you...

KAPILA: We'll never be able to thank you—enough...

DEVADATTA: Exchanged heads!

(*They roar with laughter. Then all three hold hands and run round in a circle, singing.*)

ALL THREE (*together*):

What a good mix!

No more tricks!

Is this one that

Or that one this?

Ho! Ho!

(*They sing this over and over again until they collapse on the floor.*)

KAPILA: Oooh—I'm finished!

PADMINI: ...Dead!

DEVADATTA: Nothing like this could have ever happened before.

PADMINI: You know, seeing you two with your heads off was bad

enough. But when you got up it was terrible! I almost died of fright...

(They laugh.)

KAPILA: No one will believe us if we tell them.

PADMINI *(suddenly)*: We won't tell anyone.

DEVADATTA: We'll keep our secrets inside us.

PADMINI: 'Inside us' is right.

(Laughter.)

KAPILA: But how can we not tell? They'll know soon...

DEVADATTA: No one'll know.

KAPILA: I'm sure they'll...

DEVADATTA: I'll take any bet.

KAPILA: But how's that possible?

DEVADATTA: You'll see. Why worry now?

PADMINI: Come. Let's go.

KAPILA: It's late.

DEVADATTA: No Ujjain now. We go back home!

KAPILA: Absolutely.

PADMINI: This Ujjain will last us a lifetime. Come.

(They get up. Every now and then someone laughs and then all burst out together.)

PADMINI: Devadatta, I really don't know how we're going to keep this from your parents. They'll guess as soon as they see you bare-bodied.

DEVADATTA: They won't, I tell you. They take us too much for granted.

KAPILA: What do you mean?

DEVADATTA: Who ever pays attention to a person he sees every day?

KAPILA: I don't mean that...

PADMINI: I'm not so sure. I'm afraid I'll get the blame for it ultimately.

DEVADATTA: Stop worrying! I tell you it...

KAPILA: But what has she got to do with you now?

DEVADATTA (*stops*): What do you mean?

KAPILA: I mean Padmini must come home with me, shouldn't she? She's my wife, so she must...

(*Exclamations from Devadatta and Padmini.*)

PADMINI: What are you talking about, Kapila?

KAPILA (*explaining*): I mean, you are Devadatta's wife. I have Devadatta's body now. So you have to be my wife.

PADMINI: Shut up!

DEVADATTA: Don't blather like an idiot! I am Devadatta...

PADMINI: Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

KAPILA: But why, Padmini? I have Devadatta's body now...

DEVADATTA: We know that. You don't have to repeat yourself like a parrot. According to the Shastras, the head is the sign of a man...

KAPILA (*angry now*): That may be. But the question now is simply this: Whose wife is she? (*Raising his right hand.*) This is the hand that accepted her at the wedding. This the body she's lived with all these months. And the child she's carrying is the seed of this body.

PADMINI (*frightened by the logic*): No, no, no. It's not possible. It's not. (*Running to Devadatta.*) It's not, Devadatta.

DEVADATTA: Of course, it isn't, my dear. He is ignorant. (*To Kapila.*) When one accepts a partner in marriage, with the holy fire as one's witness, one accepts a person, not a body. She didn't marry Devadatta's body, she married Devadatta—the person.

KAPILA: If that's your argument, I have Devadatta's body, so I am Devadatta—the person.

DEVADATTA: Listen to me. Of all the human limbs the topmost—in position as well as in importance—is the head. I have Devadatta's head and it follows that I am Devadatta. According to the Sacred Texts...

KAPILA: Don't tell me about your Sacred Texts. You can always twist them to suit your needs. She married Devadatta's body with the holy fire as her witness and that's enough for me.

DEVADATTA (*laughs*): Did you hear that, Padmini? He claims to be Devadatta and yet he scorns the Texts. You think Devadatta would ever do that?

KAPILA: You can quote as many Texts as you like, I don't give a nail. Come on, Padmini...

(*Takes a step towards her. But Devadatta steps in between.*)

DEVADATTA: Take care!

PADMINI: Come, Devadatta. It's no use arguing with this rascal. Let's go.

DEVADATTA: Come on.

KAPILA (*stepping between them*): Where are you taking my wife, friend?

DEVADATTA: Will you get out of our way or should...

KAPILA: It was you who got in my way.

DEVADATTA (*pushing Kapila aside*): Get away, you pig.

KAPILA (*triumphant*): He's using force! And what language! Padmini, think! Would Devadatta ever have acted like this? This is Kapila's violence.

DEVADATTA: Come, Padmini.

KAPILA: Go. But do you think I'll stay put while you run away with my wife? Where will you go? How far can you go? Only to the city, after all. I'll follow you there. I'll kick up a row in the streets. Let's see what happens then.

(Devadatta stops.)

PADMINI: Let him scream away. Don't pay him any attention.

DEVADATTA: No. He's right. This has to be solved here. It'll create a scandal in the city.

PADMINI: But who'll listen to him? Everyone will take you for Devadatta by your face.

KAPILA: Ha! You think the people in Dharmapura don't know my body, do you? They've seen me a thousand times in the wrestling pit. I've got I don't know how many awards for body-building. Let's see whom they believe.

PADMINI (*pleading*): Why are you tormenting us like this? For so many years you have been our friend, accepted our hospitality...

KAPILA: I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body...

PADMINI: Shut up, you brute.

DEVADATTA: Suppose she did. There's nothing wrong in it. It's natural for a woman to feel attracted to a fine figure of a man.

KAPILA: I know it is. But that doesn't mean she can just go and live with a man who's not her husband. That's not right.

PADMINI (*crying out*): How can we get rid of this scoundrel! Let's go—Let's go anywhere—to the woods—to the desert anywhere you like.

KAPILA: You'll have to kill me before you'll really escape me. You could. I don't have the strength to resist Kapila.

PADMINI (*using a new argument*): But I gave you life—

KAPILA: That was no favour. If you hadn't, you would have been a widow now. Actually he should be grateful to me because my wife saved his life. Instead, he's trying to snatch you away.

(Padmini moans in agony.)

DEVADATTA: This way we won't get anywhere, Kapila.

KAPILA: Call me Devadatta.

DEVADATTA: Whatever you are, this is no way to solve the problem.

KAPILA: Of course not. If marriage were a contract, it would be.

But how can Padmini's fancy be taken as the solution?

DEVADATTA: Then what is the solution to this problem?

(They all freeze.)

BHAGAVATA: What? What indeed is the solution to this problem, which holds the entire future of these three unfortunate beings in a balance? Must their fate remain a mystery? And if so shall we not be insulting our audience by tying a question mark round its neck and bidding it good-bye? We have to face the problem. But it's a deep one and the answer must be sought with the greatest caution. Haste would be disastrous. So there's a break of ten minutes now. Please have some tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your own solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry.

(The stage-hands hold a white curtain in front of the frozen threesome, while the Bhagavata and others relax and sip tea.)

Act Two

The white curtain is removed.

BHAGAVATA: What? What indeed is the solution to this problem, which holds the entire future of these three unfortunate beings in a balance?

Way back in the ages, when King Vikrama was ruling the world, shining in glory like the earth's challenge to the sun, he was asked the same question by the demon Vetala. And the king offered a solution even without, as it were, batting an eyelid. But will his rational, logical answer backed by the Sacred Texts appeal to our audience?

(Sings.)

The future pointed out by the tongue
safe inside the skull is not acceptable to us.

We must read the forehead which Brahma
has disconnected from the entrails.

We must unravel the net on the palm
disclaimed by the brain.

We must plumb the hidden depths of the
rivers running under our veins.

Yes, that would be the right thing to do.

So our three unfortunate friends went to a great *rishi* in search of a solution to their problem. And the *rishi*—

remembering perhaps what King Vikrama had said—gave the verdict:

(In a loud, sonorous voice.)

As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini.

(The three spring to life. Devadatta and Padmini scream with delight and move to one corner of the stage, laughing and dancing. Kapila, brokenhearted, drags his feet to the other corner.)

DEVADATTA *(embracing Padmini)*: My Padmini...my lovely Padmini...

PADMINI: My King—My Master...

DEVADATTA: My little lightning...

PADMINI: The light of my joy...

DEVADATTA: The flower of my palm...

PADMINI: My celestial-bodied Gandharva... My sun-faced Indra...

DEVADATTA: My Queen of Indra's Court...

PADMINI *(caressing his shoulders)*: Come. Let's go. Let's go quickly. Where the earth is soft and the green grass plays the swing.

DEVADATTA: Let us. Where the banyan spreads a canopy and curtains off the skies.

PADMINI: What a wide chest. What other canopy do I need?

DEVADATTA: My soft, swaying Padmini. What other swing do I want?

PADMINI: My Devadatta comes like a bridegroom with the jewellery of a new body...

DEVADATTA *(a manly laugh)*: And who should wear the jewellery but the eager bride?

PADMINI: Let's go. *(Pause.)* Wait. *(She runs to Kapila.)* Don't be

sad, Kapila. We shall meet again, shan't we? (*In a low voice, so Devadatta can't hear.*) It's my duty to go with Devadatta. But remember I'm going with your body. Let that cheer you up. (*Goes back to Devadatta.*) Good-bye, Kapila.

DEVADATTA: Good-bye.

(*They go out, laughing, rubbing against each other. Kapila stands mute for a while. Then moves.*)

BHAGAVATA: Kapila—Kapila... (*No reply.*) Don't grieve. It's fate, Kapila, and...

KAPILA: Kapila? What? Me? Why am I Kapila?
(*Exits.*)

BHAGAVATA: So the roads diverged. Kapila went into the forest and disappeared. He never saw Dharmapura again. In fact, he never felt the wind of any city again. As for Devadatta and Padmini, they returned to Dharmapura and plunged into the joys of married life.

(*Padmini enters and sits. She is stitching clothes, Devadatta comes. He is carrying in his hands two large dolls—which could be played by two children. The dolls are dressed in a way which makes it impossible to decide their sex.*

Devadatta comes in quietly and stands behind Padmini.)

DEVADATTA: Hey!

PADMINI (*startled*): Oh! Really, Devadatta. You startled me. The needle pricked me! Look, my finger's bleeding.

DEVADATTA: Tut—Tut! Is it really? Put it in my mouth. I'll suck it.

PADMINI: No, thanks. I'll suck it myself. (*Sees the dolls.*) How pretty! Whose are these?

DEVADATTA: Whose? Ours, of course! The guest is arriving soon. He must have playmates.

PADMINI: But the guest won't be coming for months yet, silly, and...

DEVADATTA: I know he isn't, but you can't get dolls like these any time you like! These are special dolls from the Ujjain fair.

PADMINI: They are lovely! (*Hugs the dolls.*) They look almost alive—such shining eyes—such delicate cheeks. (*Kisses them.*) Now sit down and tell me everything that happened at the fair. You wouldn't take me with you...

DEVADATTA: How could I—in your condition? I went only because you insisted you wanted to keep your word. But I'm glad I went. A very funny thing happened. There was a wrestling pit and a wrestler from Kamarupa was challenging people to fight him. I don't know what got into me. Before I'd even realized it, I had stripped and jumped into the pit.

PADMINI (*fondling the dolls*): You didn't! You've never ever wrestled before...

DEVADATTA: Didn't think of anything. I felt 'inspired'! Within a couple of minutes, I had pinned him to the ground.

PADMINI (*laughs out*): What would your father say if he heard of this?

DEVADATTA: My few acquaintances there were quite amazed.

PADMINI (*caressing his arm*): That day in the gymnasium you defeated the champion in a sword-fight. Now this! Don't overdo it: people may start suspecting.

DEVADATTA: Of course they won't. I was standing there bare-bodied and not a soul suspected. A friend even asked me if I'd learnt it from Kapila.

PADMINI: You have, after all!
(*They laugh.*)

DEVADATTA: You know, I'd always thought one had to use one's brains while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But this body just doesn't wait for thoughts—it acts!

PADMINI: Fabulous body—fabulous brain—fabulous Devadatta.

DEVADATTA: I have been running around all these days without even proper sleep and yet I don't feel a bit tired. (*Jumps up.*) Come on, we'll have a picnic by the lake. I feel like a good, long swim.

PADMINI (*mocking*): In my condition?

DEVADATTA: I didn't ask you to swim. You sit there and enjoy the scenery. Once our son's born, I'll teach you to swim too.

PADMINI: You go on about it being a son. What if it's a daughter?

DEVADATTA: If she's a daughter like you, I'll teach the two of you together.

PADMINI: Ready!

(*He pulls her to him.*)

Now—now—what about the picnic?

DEVADATTA: Quite right. First things first.

PADMINI (*pause*): Devadatta...

DEVADATTA: Yes?

PADMINI: Why do you—have to apply that sandal oil on your body?

DEVADATTA: I like it.

PADMINI: I know, but...

DEVADATTA: What?

PADMINI (*hesitating*): Your body had that strong, male smell before—I liked it.

DEVADATTA: But I've been using sandal oil since I was a child!

PADMINI: I don't mean that. But—when we came back from the temple of Kali—you used to smell so manly...

DEVADATTA: You mean that unwashed, sweaty smell Kapila had? (*Incredulous.*) You liked that?

PADMINI (*pause. Then lightly*): It was just a thought. Come on, let's start. We'll be late.

(*They go out. A long silence.*)

DOLL I: Not a bad house, I would say.

DOLL II: Could have been worse. I was a little worried.

DOLL I: This is the least we deserved. Actually we should have got a palace. A real palace!

DOLL II: And a prince to play with. A real prince!

DOLL I: How the children looked at us at the fair! How their eyes glowed!

DOLL II: How their mothers stared at us! How their mouths watered!

DOLL I: Only those beastly men turned up their noses! 'Expensive! Too expensive!'

DOLL II: Presuming to judge us! Who do they think they are!

DOLL I: Only a prince would be worthy of us.

DOLL II: We should be dusted every day...

DOLL I: ...dressed in silk...

DOLL II: ...seated on a cushioned shelf...

DOLL I: ...given new clothes every week.

DOLL II: If the doll-maker had any sense, he'd never have sold us.

DOLL I: If he had any brains, he should never have given us to this man...

DOLL II: ...with his rough labourer's hands.

DOLL I: Palms like wood...

DOLL II: A grip like a vice...

DOLL I: My arms are still aching.

DOLL II: He doesn't deserve us, the peasant.

(Devadatta comes running in, tosses the dolls in the air, catches them and kisses them.)

DEVADATTA: My dolls, your prince has arrived! The prince has come!

DOLL I *(in agony)*: Brute! An absolute brute!

DOLL II *(in agony)*: Beast! A complete beast!

DEVADATTA (*runs to the Bhagavata*): Here, Bhagavata Sir, take these sweets. You must come to the feast tomorrow at our house.

BHAGAVATA: What's it for?

DEVADATTA: Haven't you heard? I've got a son like a gem—a son like a rose—Yippee...

(*He goes out dancing some Lezim steps. A long silence.*)

DOLL I: Is that little satan asleep yet?

DOLL II: Think so. God! It's killing me...

DOLL I: ...crying, all day...

DOLL II: ...making a mess every fifteen minutes.

DOLL I: What have we come to! One should never trust God.

DOLL II: It's our fault. We should have been wary from the moment we saw that child in her dreams.

DOLL I: We should have noticed she was bloating day by day.

DOLL II: We should have suspected foul play then.

DOLL I: It wasn't our fault. How could we know she was hiding this thing inside her?

DOLL II: How she was swelling! Day by day! Week by week! As though someone were blowing air into her...

DOLL I: How ugly she looked...

DOLL II: ...not to her husband, though!

DOLL I: When they were alone, he would place his hand on her belly and say, 'Is he kicking now?'

DOLL II (*seriously*): We should have been on our guard.

DOLL I (*dispirited*): We should.

DOLL II: And then comes this little monster.

DOLL I: ...this lump of flesh...

DOLL II: It doesn't even have proper eyes or ears...

DOLL I: ...but it gets all the attention.

DOLL II (*in disgust*): Ugh...

DOLL I (*sick*): Awk...

(*Devadatta and Padmini enter with the child, for which a wooden doll may be used. They walk across the stage, engrossed in talking to and about the child, and go out.*)

DOLL I: A spider's built its web around my shoulders.

DOLL II: Yesterday a mouse nibbled at my toe.

DOLL I: The other day a cockroach ate my left eye.

DOLL II: Six months—and not a soul has come near us.

DOLL I: Six months—and not a hand has touched us.

DOLL II: Six months and we reach this state. What'll happen in
a year's time?

(*Padmini and Devadatta enter.*)

PADMINI: Listen.

DEVADATTA: Yes.

PADMINI: You mustn't say 'no'—at least this time.

DEVADATTA: To what?

PADMINI: We'll take him to the lake.

DEVADATTA: In this cold?

PADMINI: What if it's cold? He's older now. There's no need to
mollycoddle him. I grew up running around in heat and cold
and rain—and nothing happened to me. I'm all right.

DEVADATTA: No, it's unnecessary trouble for everyone.

PADMINI: What do you mean trouble? What's happened to you
these days? You sit at home all day. Never go out. You've
forgotten all your swimming and sports.

DEVADATTA: I'm a Brahmin, Padmini. My duty...

PADMINI: I've heard all this!

DEVADATTA: It was fun the first few days because it was new. All
that muscle and strength. But how long can one go on like

that? I have a family tradition to maintain—the daily reading, writing and studies...

PADMINI: I don't know.

DEVADATTA (*affectionate*): Now look here, Padmini...

(*Puts his hand round her shoulder. She suddenly shudders.*)

Why? What happened?

PADMINI: Nothing—I don't know why—I suddenly had goose flesh.

(*Pause.*)

DEVADATTA (*withdrawing his hand*): Do you know where I've kept the copy of *Dharma Sindhu*? I've been looking for it.

PADMINI: I think I saw it on the shelf. Must be there...

(*Devadatta goes to Doll I, moves it aside and picks up the book. Doll I shudders.*)

DOLL II: Why? What happened?

DOLL I: He touched me, and...

DOLL II: Yes?

DOLL I: His palms! They were so rough once, when he first brought us here. Like a labourer's. But now they are soft—sickly soft—like a young girl's.

DOLL II: I know. I've noticed something too.

DOLL I: What?

DOLL II: His stomach. It was so tight and muscular. Now...

DOLL I: I know. It's soft and loose.

DOLL II: Do you think it'll swell up too?

(*They laugh.*)

DOLL I (*holding its hands in front of its stomach to suggest a swollen belly*): It'll swell a little...

DOLL II (*holding its hands a little farther in front*): —then more...

DOLL I (*even further*): —more and...

DOLL II (*even further*): —and more until...

DOLL I: ...if it's a woman...

DOLL II: ...there'll be a child...

DOLL I: ...and if it's a man...

DOLL II: BANG!

(They roll with laughter. Padmini comes in with the child. She sings a lullaby.)

PADMINI: Here comes a rider!
 From what land does he come?
 Oh his head a turban
 with a long pearly tail.
 Round his neck a garland
 of virgin-white jasmines.
 In his fist a sword
 with a diamond-studded hilt.
 The white-clad rider
 rides a white charger
 which spreads its tossing mane
 against the western sky,
 spreads its mane like breakers
 against the western sky.
 Sleep now, my baby
 and see smiling dreams.
 There he comes—here he is!
 From which land does he come?
 But why are the jasmines on his chest
 red O so red?
 What shine in his open eyes?
 Pebbles O pebbles.
 Why is his young body
 cold O so cold?
 The white horse gallops
 across hills, streams and fields.
 To what land does he gallop?
 Nowhere O nowhere.

(Half-way through the lullaby, Devadatta comes in and sits by Padmini's side, reading. They don't look at each other. At the end of the lullaby, they fall asleep.)

DOLL I *(in a hushed voice)*: Hey.

DOLL II: Yes?

DOLL I: Look.

DOLL II: Where?

DOLL I: Behind her eyelids. She is dreaming.

DOLL II: I don't see anything.

DOLL I: It's still hazy—hasn't started yet. Do you see it now?

DOLL II *(eagerly)*: Yes, yes.

(They stare at her.)

DOLL I: A man.

DOLL II: But not her husband.

DOLL I: No, someone else.

DOLL II: Is this the one who came last night?

DOLL I: Yes—the same. But I couldn't see his face then.

DOLL II: You can now. Not very nice—rough. Like a labourer's.

But he's got a nice body—looks soft.

DOLL I: Who do you think it is?

DOLL II: I—It's fading. *(Urgently.)* Remember the face!

DOLL I: It's fading—Oh! It's gone!

DOLL II: And she won't even remember it tomorrow.

(Padmini and Devadatta sit up.)

PADMINI: Are you ill?

DEVADATTA: Why?

PADMINI: You were moaning in your sleep last night.

DEVADATTA: Was I?

PADMINI: Aren't you feeling well?

DEVADATTA: Who? Me? I'm fine.

(Gets up energetically to show how well he feels. Suddenly grabs his shoulder with a groan.)

PADMINI: What's wrong? Tell me.

DEVADATTA *(avoiding her eyes)*: Nothing. I went to the gymnasium yesterday morning. Then went swimming.

PADMINI: To the gymnasium? After all these years? But why?

DEVADATTA: I just felt like it. That's all. Don't go on about it.

PADMINI *(without irony)*: Are you going again today?

DEVADATTA *(flares up)*: No, I'm not. And there's no need to laugh. I know I've made a fool of myself by going there. I won't again.

(Goes out. Long pause.)

PADMINI: What are you afraid of, Devadatta? What does it matter that you are going soft again, that you are losing your muscles? I'm not going to be stupid again. Kapila's gone out of my life—forever. I won't let him come back again. *(Pause.)* Kapila? What could he be doing now? Where could he be? Could his body be fair still, and his face dark? *(Long pause.)* Devadatta changes. Kapila changes. And me?

(Closes her eyes.)

DOLL I: There he is again.

DOLL II: In the middle of the day?

DOLL I *(doubtful)*: I'm not sure this is the usual visitor. This one looks rougher and darker.

DOLL II: It's him all right. Look at his face.

DOLL I: He goes to her...

DOLL II: ...very near her...

DOLL I *(in a whisper)*: What's he going to do now?

DOLL II *(even more anxious)*: What?

(They watch.)

DOLL I (*baffled*): But he's climbing a tree!

DOLL II (*almost a wail of disappointment*): He's dived into a river!

DOLL I: Is that all he came for?

DOLL II: It's going...

DOLL I: ...going...

DOLL II: Gone! Wretched dreams! They just tickle and fade away.

(*Padmini wakes up and mimes putting the crying child to sleep.*)

PADMINI (*suddenly vicious*): Change! Change! Change! Change! Change! The sand trickles. The water fills the pot. And the moon goes on swinging, swinging, swinging, from light to darkness to light.

(*Devadatta comes in. He is now completely changed to his original self.*)

DEVADATTA: A pundit's coming to see me. He wants me to explain some verses to him. Can you keep some sweets and lime-juice ready?

PADMINI: Yes. (*Pause.*) Did you hear...? The maid was telling me.

DEVADATTA: What?

PADMINI: Kapila's mother died this morning. (*Pause.*) Poor thing! She'd been bed-ridden all these years, ever since...

DEVADATTA (*snapping at her*): What did you expect me to do about it? (*Then embarrassed.*) Get the lime-juice ready soon. (*They go out.*)

DOLL I: Each one to his fate!

DOLL II: Each one to her problems!

DOLL I: As the doll-maker used to say, 'What are things coming to!'

DOLL II: Especially last night—I mean—that dream...

DOLL I: Tut! Tut! One shouldn't talk about such things!

DOLL II: It was so shameless...

DOLL I: I said be quiet...

DOLL II: Honestly! The way they...

DOLL I: Look, if we must talk about it, let me tell.

DOLL II: You don't want to talk about it. So.

DOLL I: You don't understand a thing. They...

DOLL II: What do you know? Last night...

DOLL I: Let me! In that dream...

DOLL II: I'm...

DOLL I: Shut up!

DOLL II: You shut up!

(They start arguing, then fighting. They roll on the ground, on top of each other, biting, scratching, hitting each other. They shout, scream and giggle. As they fight, the giggles become louder and more frantic. Their clothes get torn. At last they lie side by side panting, bursting with little giggles. Then they sit up. Padmini enters, looks at them.)

PADMINI: Just look at the dolls! The baby's really torn them to rags. How long can we go on with them! *(Calls.)* Listen.

DEVADATTA *(entering)*: Yes.

PADMINI: We must get new dolls for our baby. These are in tatters.

DEVADATTA: You're right. I hadn't noticed.

PADMINI: The Ujjain fair is to be held in another four days. Why don't you go and get new dolls there? If you start today you'll be there in time for it. It's unlucky to keep torn dolls at home.

DOLL I *(to Doll II)*: Did you hear that? She wants to throw us out...

DOLL II: She wants new dolls.

DOLL I: The whore.

DOLL II: The bitch.

DOLL I: May her house burn down.

DOLL II: May her teeth fall out.

DEVADATTA (*to Padmini*): All right.
(*He picks them up by their collars.*)

DOLL I: See how he picks us up. Like stray puppies.

DOLL II: That ball of flesh will remain here. But it's the dung-heap for us.

DEVADATTA (*to Padmini*): It'll take me more than a week to go to Ujjain and come back. Shall I ask one of the neighbours to get them for us?

DOLL I (*to Devadatta*): You wretch—before you throw us out watch out for yourself.

DOLL II: Cover your wife before you start worrying about our rags.

PADMINI (*to Devadatta*): Who knows what sort of dolls they'll get for us? We must bring things ourselves for our baby.

DEVADATTA: But...

PADMINI: If you don't want to go, say so. Don't...

DEVADATTA: Shall I ask one of the servants to come and sleep here at night while I'm away?

PADMINI: No need. We are not in the middle of a forest.

DOLL I (*to Devadatta*): Watch out, you fool...

DOLL II: Refuse, you idiot...

DEVADATTA: All right. I'll start at once. Take care of yourself.
(*He drags the dolls out.*)

DOLL I: Villain...

DOLL II: Rascal...

DOLL I: Swine...

DOLL II: Bastard...

(One can hear them screaming curses as he takes them out. Padmini stands watching him go. Then to the child in her arms.)

PADMINI: My poor child, you haven't yet seen the witching fair of the dark forest, have you? Let's go and see it. How can I describe it to you? There's so much. Long before the sun rises, the shadows of twigs draw *alpanas* on the floor. The stars raise *arati* and go. Then the day dawns and the fun begins. The circus in the tree-tops and the cock-fights in a shower of feathers. And the dances! The tiger-dance, and the peacock-dance, and the dance of the sun's little feet with silver anklets on the river. In the heart of the forest stands the stately chariot of the shield-bearer. It's made of pure gold—rows of egrets pull it down the street, and rows of flames of the forest salute it with torches. Then the night comes, and our poor baby is tired. So we blow gently and out goes the moon. But before we leave, there's one more thing to do. Right outside the fair, watching it from a distance, stands the tree of the Fortunate Lady. It's an old tree, a close friend of ours. We have to say 'hello' to it. All right?

(She goes out with the child. A long silence. Kapila enters. He too is as he was at the beginning of the play, tough and muscular.)

BHAGAVATA: Who? Kapila?

KAPILA: Yes.

BHAGAVATA: It's such a long time since we met.

KAPILA: Yes.

BHAGAVATA: Where are you now?

KAPILA: Here.

BHAGAVATA: Here? In this jungle! It's difficult to believe any man could live here.

KAPILA: Beasts do. Why not men?

BHAGAVATA: What do you do?

KAPILA: Live.

BHAGAVATA: Have you had any news from the city?

KAPILA: Long ago. Father sent word asking me to come back. I said, 'I won't come. No need for you to come here either!' That's all.

BHAGAVATA: You mean—you don't know your father died last year? Also your mother...

KAPILA (*expressionless*): No.

BHAGAVATA: And Padmini has a son.

KAPILA: I see.

BHAGAVATA: Why this anger, Kapila?

KAPILA: What anger?

BHAGAVATA: It shows in the way you stand, you move.

KAPILA: All that is your poetry.

(*Moves on.*)

BHAGAVATA: Kapila! Kapila!

(*Kapila goes round the stage once. He mimes picking up an axe and felling a tree. A long silence. Only the soundless image of Kapila cutting the tree.*

Padmini enters, child in arms. She is scared and walks in rapidly. She sees Kapila and stands transfixed. Kapila doesn't see her for a while and when he does, stands paralysed. A long silence.)

KAPILA (*slowly*): You?

PADMINI: Yes.

KAPILA: Here?

PADMINI: My son had never laughed with the river or shivered in the wind or felt the thorn cut his feet. So I brought him out. I lost my way in the woods.

KAPILA: You shouldn't have lost it this far.

PADMINI: The wrong road stuck to my feet; wouldn't let go.

KAPILA: You shouldn't have lost it this far. Wild beasts—robbers—pathless paths—all sorts of dangers.

PADMINI: I asked the villagers. And the pilgrims. And the hunters. And the tribesmen. When there wasn't anyone any more, I asked myself. Everyone saw to it that I didn't lose the wrong road.

(Pause.)

KAPILA: Is that your son?

PADMINI: Yes. And yours.

KAPILA: Mine?

PADMINI: Your body gave him to me.

KAPILA: Mine? *(Erupting.)* Not mine. I'm Kapila, Padmini. I didn't accept it that day. But I accept it now, I'm Kapila.

PADMINI *(softly)*: And how's Kapila?

(The Bhagavata sings. The following is a prose rendering of the song.)

BHAGAVATA: Once I spread my wings, and kicked away the earth and flew up. I covered the seven continents, the ten shores and measured the sky.

Now because you have a child at your breast, a husband on your thighs, the red of rust on the lips of your late-opening mouth, I pick a picture here, and there a card of fate, and live for the grace of a grain—an astrologer's bird.

KAPILA: Can I look at him?

PADMINI: That's why I brought him.

(Kapila looks at the child.)

KAPILA: What's wrong with me? You've come so far and I haven't even asked you to sit down. Why don't you go in and take a little rest?

(She goes in with the child. He stands as in a daze. She comes out without the child.)

KAPILA: Why...

PADMINI: I don't need any rest.

(Long silence.)

KAPILA: How are you?

PADMINI: I'm well. No illness, problems or difficulties.

KAPILA: Your son looks exactly like you.

PADMINI (*a slight pause*): And you.

(*Kapila doesn't reply.*)

He has the same mole on his shoulder.

KAPILA: What mole?

(*She comes to him and points out the mole on his shoulder.*)

PADMINI: This one. Which other could it be? That's the only one you have on your shoulder.

KAPILA: Oh! I hadn't seen it. I don't much look at this body.

PADMINI (*quietly*): Do you despise it that much?

(*No reply.*)

Why have you tortured it so?

(*Takes his hand in hers.*)

When this went to you, it was so soft, like a prince's. These arms were so slender and fair. Look at them now. Why have you done this to yourself?

KAPILA: When this body came to me, it was like a corpse hanging by my head. It was a Brahmin's body after all: not made for the woods. I couldn't lift an axe without my elbows moaning. Couldn't run a length without my knees howling. I had no use for it. The moment it came to me, a war started between us.

PADMINI: And who won?

KAPILA: I did.

PADMINI: The head always wins, doesn't it?

KAPILA: Fortunately, yes. Now I can run ten miles and not stop for breath. I can swim through the monsoon floods and fell a banyan. The stomach used to rebel once. Now it digests what I give. If I don't, it doesn't complain.

PADMINI: Must the head always win?

KAPILA: That's why I am Kapila now. Kapila! Kapila with a body which fits his face.

PADMINI: What a good mix

No more tricks

Is this one that

Or that one this?

Do you remember the song we sang in the Kali temple?

KAPILA: So?

PADMINI: Nothing. I often remember it. It's almost my autobiography now. Kapila! Devadatta! Kapila with Devadatta's body! Devadatta with Kapila's body! Four men in a single lifetime.

KAPILA (*suddenly*): Why have you come away from him?

PADMINI: What do you want me to say?

(*They freeze.*)

BHAGAVATA: How could I make you understand? If Devadatta had changed overnight and had gone back to his original form, I would have forgotten you completely. But that's not how it happened. He changed day by day. Inch by inch. Hair by hair. Like the trickling sand. Like the water filling the pot. And as I saw him change, I couldn't get rid of you. That's what Padmini must tell Kapila. She should say more, without concealing anything. 'Kapila, if that *rishi* had given me to you, would I have gone back to Devadatta some day exactly like this?' But she doesn't say anything. She remains silent.

KAPILA (*to Padmini*): Why have you come here?

PADMINI: I had to see you.

KAPILA: Why? (*No reply.*) Why? Why did you have to come just when I thought I'd won this long and weary battle? Why did you have to pursue me just when I had succeeded in uprooting these memories? I am Kapila now. The rough and violent Kapila. Kapila without a crack between his head

and his shoulders. What do you want now? Another head? Another suicide? Listen to me. Do me a favour. Go back. Back to Devadatta. He is your husband, the father of this child. Devadatta and Padmini! Devadatta and Padmini! A pair coupled with the holy fire as the witness. I have no place there, no peace, no salvation. So go. I beg of you. Go.

(*A long silence.*)

PADMINI: I will. If you want me to.

KAPILA (*almost a moan*): Oh God!

PADMINI: Why?

KAPILA: Nothing. Another memory—when I too was asked to go—Yes, go back. Now.

PADMINI: I will. But can I ask a little favour? My son's tired. He's asleep. He has been in my arms for several days now. Let him rest a while. As soon as he gets up I'll go. (*Laughs.*) Yes, you won, Kapila. Devadatta won too. But I—the better half of two bodies—I neither win nor lose. No, don't say anything. I know what you'll say and I've told myself that a thousand times. It's my fault. I mixed the heads up. I must suffer the consequences. I will. I'm sorry I came. I didn't think before I started. Couldn't. But at least until my child wakes up, may I sit here and look at you? Have my fill for the rest of my life? I won't speak a word.

(*Long pause.*)

KAPILA: What does it matter now whether you stay or go? You've done the damage. I had buried all those faceless memories in my skin. Now you've dug them up with your claws.

PADMINI: Why should one bury anything?

KAPILA: Why shouldn't one? Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness?

PADMINI: Whose incompleteness? Yours?

KAPILA: Yes, mine. One beats the body into shape, but one can't

beat away the memories trapped in it. Isn't that surprising? That the body should have its own ghosts, its own secrets? Memories of touch—memories of *a* touch—memories of a body swaying in these arms, of a warm skin against this palm—memories which one cannot recognize, cannot understand, cannot even name because this head wasn't there when they happened.

PADMINI: Kapila...

KAPILA (*without anger*): Why did you come? You came. You touched me. You held my hand, and my body recognized your touch. I have never touched you, but this body, this appendage, laughed and flowered out in a festival of memories to which I'm an outcaste.

PADMINI: Poor Kapila!

KAPILA: Don't pity me.

PADMINI: Be quiet, stupid. Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn't your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river: the flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom. Until that's done, you'll continue to be incomplete.

(*Kapila raises his head and looks at her. She caresses his face, like a blind person trying to imprint it on her finger-tips. Then she rests her head on his chest.*)

My Kapila! My poor, poor Kapila! How needlessly you've tortured yourself.

(*Kapila lifts her up and takes her in.*)

BHAGAVATA: You cannot engrave on water
nor wound it with a knife,
which is why
the river
has no fear
of memories.

FEMALE CHORUS: The river only feels the
pull of the waterfall.
She giggles, and tickles the rushes
on the bank, then turns
a top of dry leaves
in the navel of the whirlpool, weaves
a water-snake in the net of silver strands
in its green depths, frightens the frog
on the rug of moss, sticks and bamboo leaves,
sings, tosses, leaps and
sweeps on in a rush—

BHAGAVATA: While the scarecrow on the bank
has a face fading
on its mudpot head
and a body torn
with memories.

(Devadatta enters. He is holding a sword in one hand, and in the other, two dolls, made of cloth.)

BHAGAVATA: Who! Devadatta?

DEVADATTA: Where does Kapila live here?

BHAGAVATA: Uhm—well—Anyway, how are...you...

DEVADATTA: If you don't want to tell me, don't. I can find out for myself.

BHAGAVATA: There. Behind those trees.

DEVADATTA: How long has Padmini been here?

BHAGAVATA: About four or five days.

DEVADATTA: Amazing! Even a man like me found the road hard.
But how quickly she covered it—and with a child in her arms.

BHAGAVATA: Devadatta...

(Devadatta moves on.)

Devadatta moves on. There are only two words which make

sense to him now—Kapila and Padmini! Kapila and Padmini! The words sweep him along to the doorstep of Kapila's hut. But suddenly he stops. Until this moment he has been rearing to taste the blood of Kapila. But now he is still and calm.

(Kapila comes out.)

KAPILA: Come, Devadatta. I was waiting for you. I've been expecting you since yesterday. I have been coming out every half an hour to see if you'd arrived. Not from fear. Only eager.

(Padmini comes out and stands watching them.)

KAPILA *(to Devadatta)*: You look exactly the same.

DEVADATTA *(laughs)*: You too.

KAPILA *(points to the sword)*: What's that?

DEVADATTA *(extending the hand which holds the dolls)*: Dolls. For the child. I came home from the fair. There was no one there. So I came here.

(Padmini steps forward and takes the dolls. But neither speaks. Padmini goes back to her place and stands clutching the dolls to her bosom.)

KAPILA: Come in and rest a while. There'll always be time to talk later.

(Devadatta shakes his head.)

Why? Are you angry?

DEVADATTA: Not any more. *(Pause.)* Did my body bother you too much?

KAPILA: It wasn't made for this life. It resisted. It also had its revenge.

DEVADATTA: Did it?

KAPILA: Do you remember how I once used to envy you your poetry, your ability to imagine things? For me, the sky was the sky, and the tree only a tree. Your body gave me new

feelings, new words. I felt awake as I'd never before. Even started writing poems. Very bad ones, I'm afraid.

(They laugh.)

There were times when I hated it for what it gave me.

DEVADATTA: I wanted your power but not your wildness. You lived in hate—I in fear.

KAPILA: No, I was the one who was afraid.

DEVADATTA: What a good mix. No more tricks.

(They laugh.)

Tell me one thing. Do you really love Padmini?

KAPILA: Yes.

DEVADATTA: So do I.

KAPILA: I know.

(Silence.)

Devadatta, couldn't we all three live together—like the Pandavas and Draupadi?

DEVADATTA: What do you think?

(Silence. Padmini looks at them but doesn't say anything.)

KAPILA *(laughs)*: No, it can't be done.

DEVADATTA: That's why I brought this. *(Shows the sword.)* What won't end has to be cut.

KAPILA: I got your body, but not your wisdom.

DEVADATTA: Where's your sword then?

KAPILA: A moment.

(Goes in. Padmini stands looking at Devadatta. But he looks somewhere far away.)

BHAGAVATA: After sharing with Indra
his wine
his food
his jokes
I returned to the earth
and saw from far—

a crack had appeared
in the earth's face—
exactly
like Indra's smile

(Kapila returns with his sword. They take up positions.)

KAPILA: Are you still in practice?

DEVADATTA: Of course not. But you'd learned well. And you?

KAPILA: I learnt again. But one's older now—slower at learning.

DEVADATTA *(pause)*: You realize it's immaterial who's better with
a sword now, don't you?

KAPILA: Yes, I do.

DEVADATTA: There's only one solution to this.

KAPILA: We must both die.

DEVADATTA: We must both die.

KAPILA: With what confidence we chopped off our heads in that
temple! Now whose head—whose body—suicide or murder—nothing's clear.

DEVADATTA: No grounds for friendship now. No question of
mercy. We must fight like lions and kill like cobras.

KAPILA: Let our heads roll to the very hands which cut them in
the temple of Kali!

(Music starts. The fight is stylized like a dance. Their swords don't touch. Even Padmini's reaction is like a dance.)

BHAGAVATA *(sings)*: Like cocks in a pit
we dance—he and I,
foot woven with foot
eye soldered to eye.
He knows and I know
all there's to be known:
the witch's burning thirst
burns for blood alone.
Hence this frozen smile,

which cracks and drips to earth,
and claw-knives, digging flesh
for piecemeal death.

The *rishi* who said 'Knowledge gives rise to forgiveness' had
no knowledge of death.

*(Kapila wounds Devadatta who falls to his feet and fights. He stabs
Kapila. Both fight on their knees, fall and die.)*

A long silence. Padmini slowly comes and sits between the bodies.)

PADMINI: They burned, lived, fought, embraced and died. I stood
silent. If I'd said, 'Yes, I'll live with you both', perhaps they
would have been alive yet. But I couldn't say it. I couldn't say,
'Yes'. No, Kapila, no, Devadatta. I know it in my blood you
couldn't have lived together. You would've had to share not
only me but your bodies as well. Because you knew death you
died in each other's arms. You could only have lived ripping
each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. You forgave
each other, but again, left me out.

BHAGAVATA (*without leaving his seat*): What is this? It's a sight to
freeze the blood in one's veins. What happened, child? Can
we help you?

PADMINI (*without looking at him*): Yes, please. My son is sleeping
in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters
who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They
loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow
up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five
take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura.
Tell him it's Devadatta's son.

BHAGAVATA: And you?

PADMINI: Make me a large funeral pyre. We are three.

BHAGAVATA: You mean you are performing *sati*? But why, child?

PADMINI (*puts the dolls on the ground*): Give these dolls to my son.
I won't see him. He may tempt me away from my path.

(At a sign from the *Bhagavata*, two stage-hands come and place a curtain in front of Padmini.)

Kali, Mother of all Nature, you must have your joke even now. Other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation.

(Does *namaskara*. The stage-hands lift the curtain, slowly, very slowly, very slowly, as the song goes on. The curtain has a blazing fire painted on it. And as it is lifted, the flames seem to leap up. The female musicians sing a song. The following is a prose rendering of it.)

FEMALE CHORUS (*sings*): Our sister is leaving in a palanquin of sandalwood. Her mattress is studded with rubies which burn and glow. She is decked in flowers which blossom on tinderwood and whose petals are made of molten gold. How the garlands leap and cover her, aflame with love.

The Fortunate Lady's procession goes up the street of laburnums, while the *makarandas* tie the pennants and the *jacarandas* hold the lights.

Good-bye, dear sister. Go you without fear. The Lord of Death will be pleased with the offering of three coconuts.

BHAGAVATA (*picks up the dolls and comes downstage*): Thus Padmini became a *sati*. India is known for its *pativratas*, wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands; but it would not be an exaggeration to say that no *pativrata* went in the way Padmini did. And yet no one knows the spot where she performed *sati*. If you ask the hunting tribes who dwell in these forests, they only point to a full-blossomed tree of the Fortunate Lady. They say that even now on full moon and on new moon nights, a song rises from the roots of the tree and fills the whole forest like a fragrance.

FEMALE CHORUS (*sings*): Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning

of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?

A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky.

(When the song ends, the Bhagavata does a namaskara to the audience. The audience should get a definite feeling that the play has ended when a scream is heard in the wings.)

BHAGAVATA: What's that? Oh! Nata, our Actor!

(Actor II comes rushing out. He doesn't even see the Bhagavata in his desperate hurry.)

Why is he running? Where's the National Anthem?

(Actor II suddenly stops in his tracks.)

ACTOR II: The National Anthem!

BHAGAVATA: What?

ACTOR II: How did you know?

BHAGAVATA: Know what?

ACTOR II: Please, Bhagavata Sir, how did you know...

BHAGAVATA: Know what?

ACTOR II: About the National Anthem.

BHAGAVATA: What do you mean?

ACTOR II: Please, Sir, I beg of you. I implore you. Don't make fun of me. How did you know it was the National Anthem...

BHAGAVATA: Why? Haven't you seen an audience...

ACTOR II *(relieved)*: Phew! That! Ram Ram!

BHAGAVATA: Why? What happened?

ACTOR II: What happened? Sree Hari! Look...

(Lifts his hand. It's trembling.)

BHAGAVATA: Why? What...

ACTOR II: I almost died of fright...

BHAGAVATA: Really?

ACTOR II: I was coming down the road, when I heard someone singing at a distance, at the top of his voice. He was singing, ' *Jhanda Ooncha Rahe Hamara* (May our flag fly high!) Then he proceeded to *Sare Jahan se Acchha Hindostan Hamara* (Our India is better than the whole world). Then *Rise, Rise my Kannada Land*. Then *Vande Mataram*...

BHAGAVATA: Then?

ACTOR II: I was baffled. A true patriot at this time of the night? I had to find out who it was. A house—a big, thick fence around with not a gap in it. But I managed to find a hole to crawl through. I was just half-way in when I saw...

BHAGAVATA: What?

(*The Actor wipes his brow.*)

Come on, what did you see?

ACTOR II: A horse!

BHAGAVATA (*eager*): A horse?

ACTOR II: Yes. It turned to me and in a deep, sonorous voice said, 'Friend, I'm now going to sing the National Anthem. So please do stand up to attention!'

BHAGAVATA: Listen, Nata, are you sure...

ACTOR II: I swear...

BHAGAVATA: No, no, what I mean is...

(*Commotion in the wings.*)

What's that now?

(*Actor I enters with a boy of about five. The boy is very serious, even sulky. There's not a trace of laughter on his face. He is holding the two cloth dolls which we have already seen, but the dolls are dirtier now. The commotion comes from Actor I, who is so busy trying to make the child laugh—making faces at him, clowning, capering, and shouting—he doesn't notice the Bhagavata.*)

BHAGAVATA (*delighted*): Oh! Nata! You again!

ACTOR I (*turns around and sees the Bhagavata*): Oh, Sir, it's you!

BHAGAVATA: Well well, you'll live to be a hundred.

ACTOR I: Why? What have I done?

BHAGAVATA: I was just thinking of you and you turned up. Just now this Nata (*pointing to Actor II*) was saying he saw a horse-headed man and I wondered if it was Hayavadana. So I remembered you.

ACTOR II: Bhagavata Sir...

ACTOR I (*ignoring Actor II*): There's an actor's fate in a nutshell for you. Always remembered for someone else.

BHAGAVATA: Where's Hayavadana now? Has he come back?

ACTOR I: I don't know, Sir. He chased me away the moment we reached the Kali temple. Wouldn't let me stay there a minute longer.

BHAGAVATA: Oh! I very much hope the goddess granted him what he wanted. (*Sees the child.*) Who's this child?

ACTOR I: Him? Well? (*To the child.*) Go on, tell him.
(*The child remains silent. Doesn't answer any questions.*)

BHAGAVATA: Who are you, child? What's your name? Where are your parents?

ACTOR I: You see? Not a word. Children of his age should be outtalking a dictionary, but this one doesn't speak a word. Doesn't laugh, doesn't cry, doesn't even smile. The same long face all twenty-four hours. There's obviously something wrong with him.

(*Bends before the child and clowns a bit.*)

See? No response—no reactions. When he grows up, he should make a good theatre critic.

ACTOR II (*restless*): Bhagavata Sir...

BHAGAVATA (*to Actor I*): Where did you find him?

ACTOR I: In a tribal village of hunters. On my way back I had to stay a night there and a tribal woman brought him to me. Said, 'This is not our child. It's from the city. Take it back'.

BHAGAVATA: A child of this city? (*Actor I nods.*) How strange!
(*Notices the dolls.*) But—but—these dolls...

(*Tries to touch the dolls. The child reacts violently and moves away angry, terrified.*)

ACTOR I: I was about to warn you! Whatever you do, don't touch his dolls! At other times he'll starve and freeze to death rather than say a word. But touch the dolls and he'll bare his fangs. He almost bit off my finger once.

ACTOR II: Bhagavata Sir...

BHAGAVATA (*to Actor I*): But Nata—(*Pause.*) Child, let me see your shoulder.

(*The child moves back.*)

No, no, I won't touch the dolls. I promise you. Just your shoulder.

(*Inspects his shoulder. Then with a cry of triumph.*) Nata...

ACTOR II: Bhagavata Sir...

ACTOR I: Yes...

BHAGAVATA: Look, the mole. It's Padmini's son... There's no doubt about it.

ACTOR I: Padmini? Which...

ACTOR II (*shouting at the top of his voice*): Bhagavata Sir!

(*Actor I and the Bhagavata react.*)

BHAGAVATA: Yes? Why are you shouting?

ACTOR II: I have been calling you for the last half-an-hour...

BHAGAVATA: Yes, yes. What's it?

ACTOR II: You said I'd seen a horse-headed man. I didn't. What I saw was a complete, perfect, proper...

(*A voice is heard off-stage singing the third stanza of 'Jana Gana Mana'.*)

There it is!

(*All stare in the direction of the song. A horse enters the stage singing.*)

HORSE: *Tava Karunaruna Rage*
Nidrita Bharata Jage
Tava Charane Nata Matha
Jaya Jaya Jaya He Jaya Rajeshwara

(Comes and stands in front of them.)

Hohoo! What's this? Mr Bhagavata Sir! My Actor friend! Well, well, well! What a pleasant surprise! Delightful! How are you, Sir, how are you?

BHAGAVATA: It's not—not Hayavadana, is it?

HAYAVADANA: Your most obedient servant, Sir.

BHAGAVATA: But what...

ACTOR II: You mean you know this horse?

BHAGAVATA *(bursts into a guffaw)*: We're old friends.

ACTOR I *(laughing)*: Fellow-pilgrims!

HAYAVADANA: But not fellow-travellers. What?

(They roar with laughter. Suddenly the boy too starts laughing. Doubles up with laughter. The dolls fall out of his hand as he claps his hands.)

THE BOY *(clapping his hands)*: The horse is laughing! The horse is laughing!

ACTOR I *(jumping with delight)*: The boy is laughing!

HAYAVADANA *(goes to the boy)*: Why, my little friend, you may laugh, but I may not?

(The boy is in hysterics.)

DEVADATTA: That's Padmini's son, Hayavadana.

HAYAVADANA: Padmini? I am not aware of...

BHAGAVATA: You don't know her. But this poor child—he hadn't laughed, or cried, or talked in all these years. Now you have made him laugh.

HAYAVADANA: Delighted. Delighted.

BHAGAVATA: But tell me: you went to the goddess to become a complete man, didn't you? What happened?

HAYAVADANA: Ah! That's a long story. I went there, picked up a sword which was lying around—very unsafe, I tell you—put it on my neck and said: 'Mother of all Nature, if you don't help me, I'll chop off my head!'

ACTOR I: Then?

HAYAVADANA: The goddess appeared. Very prompt. But looked rather put out. She said—rather peevishly, I thought—'Why don't you people go somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid heads? Why do you have to come to me?' I fell at her feet and said, 'Mother, make me complete'. She said 'So be it' and disappeared—even before I could say 'Make me a complete man!' I became a horse.

ACTOR I: I am sorry to hear that...

HAYAVADANA: Sorry? Whatever for? The goddess knew what she was doing. I can tell you that. Ha Ha! Being a horse has its points. (*Pause.*) I have only one sorrow.

BHAGAVATA: Yes?

HAYAVADANA: I have become a complete horse—but not a complete being! This human voice—this cursed human voice—it's still there! How can I call myself complete? What should I do, Bhagavata Sir? How can I get rid of this human voice?

BHAGAVATA: I don't know what to advise you, Hayavadana.

HAYAVADANA: That's why I sing all these patriotic songs—and the National Anthem! That particularly! I have noticed that the people singing the National Anthem always seem to have ruined their voices, so I try. But—but—it—it doesn't seem to work. What should I do?

(*He starts to sob.*)

BOY: Don't cry, horse. Don't cry. Stop it now.

HAYAVADANA: No, I won't cry. The boy's right. What's the point of shedding tears?

BOY: Don't cry. You are nice when you laugh.

HAYAVADANA: No, I won't cry. I won't give up trying either. Come, little friend, let's sing the National Anthem together.

BOY: What is that?

BHAGAVATA: How could he? He has been brought up in a forest.

HAYAVADANA: Then sing some other song. Look, if you sing a song, I'll take you round on my back.

BOY (*excited*): Yes—please.

HAYAVADANA: Well, then, what are we waiting for? Get on my back. Quick.

(*The Bhagavata seats the child on the horse's back.*)

BOY: Hiyah—Hiyah—

HAYAVADANA: No, no. You sing first. Then we start.

BHAGAVATA: Sing, son.

(*The boy sings and the horse goes around in a slow trot.*)

BOY: Here comes a rider.
 From what land O what land?
 On his head a turban.
 Sleep now, sleep now.
 Why his chest
 Red O red?
 Why his eyes
 Pebbles O pebbles?
 Why his body
 Cold O cold?
 Where goes the horse?
 Nowhere O nowhere.

(*As the song ends, the horse comes and stands in front of the Bhagavata.*)

HAYAVADANA: Mr Bhagavata Sir...

BHAGAVATA: Yes.

HAYAVADANA: It seems to me the rider described in the song is dead. I am right?

BHAGAVATA: Er—I think so—yes.

HAYAVADANA: Who could have taught this child such a tragic song?

BOY: Mother...

BHAGAVATA: What's there in a song, Hayavadana? The real beauty lies in the child's laughter, in the innocent splendour of that laughter. No tragedy can touch it.

HAYAVADANA: Is that so?

BHAGAVATA: Indeed. What can match a child's laughter in its purity?

HAYAVADANA: To be honest, Mr Bhagavata Sir, I have my doubts about this theory. I believe—in fact I may go so far as to say I firmly believe—that it's this sort of sentimentality which has been the bane of our literature and national life. It has kept us from accepting Reality and encouraged escapism. Still, if you say so, I won't argue. Come, child, let's have another song.

BOY: I don't know...

HAYAVADANA: Then sing the same song again.

BOY: You laugh first.

HAYAVADANA: Laugh again? Let me try. (*Tries to laugh.*) Ha Ha Ha! No, it's not easy to laugh—just like that.

BOY (*mimes whipping*): Laugh—laugh...

HAYAVADANA: All right. All right. I'll try again. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!—Huhhuh...Heahhh...

(*His laughter ends up as a proper neigh.*)

ALL: What's that?

BHAGAVATA: Hayavadana—Hayavadana...

HAYAVADANA: Heahhh...

(His human voice is gone now. He can only neigh and leaps around with great joy.)

BHAGAVATA: Careful—careful. Don't drop the child...

(But the horse is too happy to listen. It prances around, neighing gleefully. The boy is also enjoying himself, singing bits of the song and urging the horse on.)

BHAGAVATA: So at long last Hayavadana has become complete. *(To the Actors.)* You two go and tell the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara that his grandson is returning home in triumph, riding a big, white charger.

ACTOR II: And the dolls?

BHAGAVATA: Throw them away. There's no further need for them. *(The Actors go out with the dolls.)*

Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the elephant-headed Ganesha. He fulfils the desires of all—a grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse. How indeed can one describe His glory in our poor, disabled words?

Come, Hayavadana, come. Enough of this dancing. Our play is over and it's time we all prayed and thanked the Lord for having ensured the completion and success of our play. *(Hayavadana comes and stands by the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata helps the child down. At this point the curtain, with the fire painted on it—which has been there all the time—is dropped and Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta step forward and join the Bhagavata in prayer.)*

Grant us, O Lord, good rains, good crop,
Prosperity in poetry, science, industry and other affairs.
Give the rulers of our country success in all endeavours,
and along with it, a little bit of sense.

BALI: The Sacrifice

***Bali: The Sacrifice* was first presented at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, on 31 May 2002. The cast was as follows:**

NASEERUDDIN SHAH

The Mahout

NEVE TAYLOR

The Queen

GARY TURNER

The King

RATNA PATHAK SHAH

The Queen Mother

Directed by

NONA SHEPPHARD

Designed by

MARSHA RODDY

Music by

ANDREW DODGE

Commissioning Producer

VAYU NAIDU

QUEEN: As the world is divided
 into two orbs:
 one lit up by the sun
 the other hid in the shade,
 so also the human soul,
 the habitation of gods,
 is split into two realms—
 one of the spirits that adore
 the blood and gore
 of the bright, shining blade
 slicing smoothly
 through the lamb
 and the other
 ruled by the spirits that bid
 you pause
 before you use
 the knife on a sapling
 or clap in the air—
 lest you harm a life.

*Lights brighten to reveal the whole stage:
The inner sanctum of a ruined temple.
The pedestal on which the deity once stood is still intact. But as for
the image, only the feet survive, suggesting a standing figure.
In front of the pedestal is a low stone platform, meant for flowers,
incense, myrrh and other ingredients of worship.*

When the play begins, the stage is dark.

We see two indistinct figures inside the sanctum: the Mahout and the Queen. They are sitting apart from each other.

Pause.

The King enters the courtyard of the outer temple. He has a torch in his hand.

He enters and sits on the outer steps of the temple. The two in the inner sanctum are unaware of his presence.

Long pause.

KING: So we begin our tale—
 and in any tale
 the King and the Queen
 sitting on the throne
 should merge into one
 —she on his lap
 become half his royal frame
 or entwined in bed, tangled together
 they must turn
 into a four-armed deity
 thrashing and moaning
 for the good of the land.
 But
 woe betide the times
 where the King sits alone
 outside on the steps
 racked by sighs
 while the Queen is trapped
 in her lover's thighs.

MAHOUT: Who are you?

(No reply.)

Tell me.

QUEEN: Let me go.

(Pause.)

Please—

MAHOUT: Go.

(She moves.)

But before you go, tell me your name.

(Pause.)

Come on. What are you being so cussed about?

QUEEN: Why do you want my name?

MAHOUT: Ts! I told you—

(Pause.)

QUEEN: Please, it's getting late. I'm getting worried. Let me go.

MAHOUT: A name. Any name would have done. In fact, most women would have had a name coined and ready before stepping in here like this. But you!

(Pause.)

I'll tell you something, you haven't seen me properly yet. I am ugly. Ugly as a bandicoot. I know. But I've had women. Plenty. When I've wanted a woman—needed a woman—my voice has never failed me. Can't remember any names though.

QUEEN: Then why do you want mine?

MAHOUT: After all, it's a matter of courtesy, isn't it? A mere formality. You can't just sleep with a woman and let her go—just like that. So you say 'What's your name?' She gives some name and that's the end of that. But you—the way you reacted to the question—recoil as though I had slapped you. Even in the dark I could feel that. After everything we'd done? God! I'm suffocating in here. I am going to open the window—

QUEEN: Look, I could also do with some fresh air. And it is getting late. I can't stay here any longer. Please let me go. We'll go our separate ways and not see each other again.

MAHOUT: That's why I want your name.

QUEEN: And I won't tell you.

(Pause.)

I hope you realize we are both repeating ourselves.

(He goes and opens the window. She sinks into the darkest corner of the room. The moonlight streams into the sanctum and lights it up.)

MAHOUT: Nice. The mist's cleared. Nice breeze. It's a beautiful night. Full moon. You can see every leaf in the tree. It's such a bright night, you won't know when it dawns. It'll flow from one into the other, seamlessly.

(The Queen makes a sudden move to the door and tries to open it, but he is faster than her and grabs her. There is a scuffle. He drags her back and literally throws her into a corner. She moans in pain.)

Don't. Don't make me angry. You don't know my temper.

I have beaten women black and blue. You won't like it.

Don't try any tricks. I don't like it.

(She sits up, rubbing her wrists.)

QUEEN: It's been lovely meeting you. Every minute of it. And you're ruining it.

MAHOUT: Listen, I could easily drag you to the window and see your face. You know that.

(Pause.)

But that won't be nice. Not after the time we've had together.

So I say: you want to keep your face hidden? Fine! But tell me your name. I'm letting you off easy.

QUEEN: Let's say, my name is ... Kāmalatāsurasundari.

(Pause.)

MAHOUT: Trying to be funny, aren't you? I would have accepted any name earlier. But not now. Now I am curious. Now I want to know. Not be lied to. That's another thing I hate. Being taken for a moron.

QUEEN: I am not taking you for a moron.

MAHOUT: I don't like being taken for a moron just because I am ugly.

QUEEN: Why do you keep saying that?

MAHOUT: Because I am ugly. I know that. And I say it before others do.

QUEEN: I won't say it.

MAHOUT: Surely you have said it to yourself? When you came in here, the lamp was burning, you saw my face.

QUEEN: Yes.

MAHOUT: And what did you think?

QUEEN: I wasn't thinking. I was...just...

(He waits. She doesn't complete the sentence.)

MAHOUT: But you saw my face.

QUEEN: I suppose so.

MAHOUT: How did it strike you?

QUEEN: I don't know.

(Pause.)

MAHOUT: That's not nice.

QUEEN: But it's true.

MAHOUT: You came in here barely two hours ago. And you don't know what you thought of my face? That's not nice. Not nice at all.

(He moves so that the moonlight falls directly on his face.)

Well, you can see me now. What do you say?

QUEEN: If you mean you are not tall and fair with an aquiline nose and ruby lips—I live surrounded by such men and I am sick and tired of them.

MAHOUT: You are avoiding my question.

QUEEN: No, I'm not. Your looks don't matter to me. I came here because I heard you sing. You have a heavenly voice.

(Pause.)

I wanted the company of your voice.

MAHOUT: Then why did you put the light out as soon as you came in? You couldn't bear to see my mug while making love to me?

QUEEN: I didn't want you to see my face.

MAHOUT *(laughs)*: Why? Are you ugly?

QUEEN: No, I don't think so. People usually describe me in flattering terms. Of course, they don't always mean what they say.

MAHOUT: I wish you would let me see your face. Just a glimpse.

QUEEN: No.

MAHOUT: Look, I am a low-caste mahout, the King's elephant keeper.

(Looks at his arms.)

And you? I am probably bleeding all over. There. You've almost scratched my skin off. Such long nails. You are no bazaar woman, I can see that. You are from the upper floors. And you haven't done a day's work. That's for sure. Those nails are for a dainty life.

QUEEN *(laughs)*: You're right. They're not used to scrubbing the floor.

MAHOUT: I don't see many rich women. I'm not allowed near them. So it's not likely that I would have seen you. Or recognize you. So why are you hiding your face?

(She changes the subject.)

QUEEN: I'm sorry I hurt you.

MAHOUT: That's all right. I liked it. I like everything about bed. Everything. That's why I am good. I am good. Aren't I?

(No reply.)

Better than your husband?

QUEEN (*reacts*): How dare you!

(*The authority in her voice surprises him.*)

He is the best of men.

MAHOUT: Maybe. But what about in bed?

QUEEN: There too.

MAHOUT: Then why are you here?

QUEEN: You won't understand that.

MAHOUT (*aggressive*): Are you saying I am stupid?

QUEEN: No, I'm not. So please don't keep saying that. My coming here has nothing to do with my husband. He is a marvellous person—affectionate, gentle, trusting.

MAHOUT: And if he's awake when you reach home now, what'll you tell him?

QUEEN: I'll say I'd gone out for a walk.

MAHOUT: In the streets? At midnight? And he'll accept that?

QUEEN: Will you please let me go? Please. I'm really getting scared.

MAHOUT: Any children?

QUEEN: Don't.

MAHOUT: Any children?

QUEEN: Don't let's talk about it.

MAHOUT: Why not?

QUEEN (*sharply*): I don't want to talk about it.

MAHOUT (*retreating*): All right. All right.

QUEEN: I want to go home.

(*The Mahout ignores her remark.*)

MAHOUT: I'll accept I am not very good at certain things. Like counting. I was lucky I was born in my caste. We only have to deal with elephants—and the elephants don't mind an ugly, misshapen man who can't count.

(*The Queen hums a tune to herself. It is not 'real' humming as much*

as an expression of her mood. It's evident that the Mahout does not hear her sing. He goes on talking.)

You know why I am so ugly? I was born on a full moon. There was an eclipse. As you know, the worst thing you can do to yourself is to be born during an eclipse. The sun or the moon—the god whose eclipse it is—is already in the grips of the demons. The beneficial powers of that god are weak at that moment, often ineffective. So it's free for all as far as the forces of evil are concerned. A baby about to be born is fair game. It'll be maimed. Or blind. Or even if it looks normal, something will be wrong inside. The brain may be damaged. You won't know till the baby grows up. My mother knew all this and was scared. She was lying there on a torn piece of mat and she heard sparrows chirping. In the middle of the night? She looks up and what does she see? Up in the eaves, a snake had crept into a sparrow's nest and was gobbling up the eggs. She screamed in terror. And I was born. Like this. (*The Queen Mother enters the courtyard. She has a large silver tray in her hands and on it an object, about two foot high, covered by a saffron cloth. There are flowers, incense sticks etc. in the tray, and a sword.*)

People mock at mahouts. Call us 'low-born'. But where would all your princes and kings be without us, I want to know. What would happen to their elephants? No elephants. No army. No pomp and splendour. No processions. No kings! Ha!

QUEEN: Let me warn you—if we get caught together here, it won't be pleasant for either of us.

MAHOUT: Several times I have asked God—Oh! Do you ever talk to God?

QUEEN: No.

MAHOUT: Believe in one?

QUEEN: No. Though I have often wished He was there.

MAHOUT: But He is there. If you don't believe in Him, who do you believe in?

QUEEN: The Saviour.

MAHOUT: Ah! you are a Jain, then. No God, but twenty-four Saviours! Never could understand that. Who do you talk to when you are lonely—when you are in trouble?

QUEEN: They're all there.

MAHOUT: But no God, eh? Funny what people will come up with. But believe me, there is God. I talk to him. In my village, outside the village limits, there's this banyan tree—enormous—hundreds of years old. And there's our God. A stone. But not on the ground. The hanging roots of the banyan have taken hold of Him and actually lifted Him up. The roots look like trunks of elephants cradling our God. The God of the Mahouts. Sometimes when I am sad, I am lost, I am upset, I ask God. Of course, you can't demand anything of Him. He meant everything to be as it is, you see. But I'm human, so I ask, 'Why have you made me so ugly? Why not handsome, like the Commander-in-Chief? Or the King? Why so ugly?' So God says: 'Are the people laughing at you?' I say: 'No, not any more. Not after I knocked the teeth of a couple of fellows out!' God says: 'Well, I gave you the strength to do it. Didn't I?' So I argue: 'But a handsome face! If I had one, then I wouldn't need these muscles to shut them up!' So God says: 'Would you exchange your voice for good looks?' That puts me in a proper spot. But God knows my answer in advance. 'No, I wouldn't,' I reply, so God says, 'Why not leave it at that?'

QUEEN: You're not ugly, you know. You are lonely.

MAHOUT (*defensive*): I live alone, if that's what you mean. That's all right by me.

QUEEN: That's why you are holding me prisoner. You don't want to know my name. You want someone to talk to.

MAHOUT: I have my God.

QUEEN: God is no substitute—for anything!

MAHOUT (*angry*): All right, people avoid me. So what? They gather to hear me sing. Then they run away. So what are you saying?

QUEEN: That *that* may be a blessing. You can be surrounded by people who are talking—fawning on you—and you can be lonely. So lonely you are terrified. I should know.

MAHOUT: Is that why you came here?

QUEEN: No. I came here because I heard you sing. I had to come. But let me tell you something. Nobody has ever talked to me like you have. Nobody.

(*Pause.*)

I have to go back, but I like you.

(*Long pause.*)

MAHOUT: I think I'll let you go.

(*Pause.*)

Go.

(*She stands up with alacrity.*)

QUEEN: Thank you. I'll never forget you.

(*He strides to the window, almost angry at himself for letting her go. She covers her face with her sari and prepares to leave. He sees the Queen Mother outside. He can't see her full figure, so twists to get a better glimpse of her.*)

There's someone there...in the courtyard.

(*The Queen freezes.*)

There's someone...there...outside the main door.

QUEEN: Who's there?

MAHOUT: A woman, I think.

QUEEN: Are you lying?

MAHOUT: If you think I'm lying, go out. See for yourself.

QUEEN: What's she doing?

MAHOUT: Must have just come in. Didn't see her earlier.

QUEEN: What's she doing?

MAHOUT: Just standing there. Still. Like a statue.

(Pause.)

She is holding something in her hands, a bundle of some sort.

QUEEN: Is she alone?

MAHOUT: Yes. That's odd. Very odd. I mean—a woman, alone? At this time of the night?

QUEEN: What's she doing?

MAHOUT: That's what I want to know. I mean why here? A ruined temple. Most people would think it's haunted, evil. A wayfarer? At night? And then the traveller's shelter is just round the corner. Anyone would go there!

QUEEN: Anyone else with her?

MAHOUT: I don't know, I can't see.

QUEEN *(scared)*: Are you trying to be funny?

MAHOUT: Stop repeating yourself like a parrot. Come and see.

Quick. She is about to move...

(The Queen moves to the window and looks out. Just at that moment, the Queen Mother outside moves out of sight.)

QUEEN: Where?

MAHOUT: She's come in. Inside the temple.

(He sees the Queen's face.)

I have seen your face somewhere before.

(The Queen turns her face away.)

MAHOUT: Don't be absurd. After all that we've done together... I mean, this coyness, this fuss...

QUEEN: Look, no one must know I'm here. Please. I must go home. Immediately. Oh God! Is there any other way out of here?

MAHOUT *(laughs)*: There's that hole there. If you could fly out, try. Listen, numbskull. This is the inner sanctum. It has a single door.

QUEEN: Please, please, help me. Here—

(Reaches for her necklace, an almost automatic gesture.)

MAHOUT *(irritated)*: Keep it. If I'd wanted that bauble, I wouldn't have waited so long. That's your estimate of every lower-caste man, isn't it? He's a good lay and all he wants is a piece of gold. I am an elephant keeper, madam, not a fence, selling stolen jewellery. And if someone decides to investigate, I'll get my hands chopped off.

QUEEN: Please, please, keep your voice down. They mustn't know we're here—

MAHOUT: You aren't very bright, are you? I'm sure she is not alone. There must be others. We know there's no God's image here. But they may not. If they are travellers, before leaving in the morning, they may decide to bow down to the deity in here—

QUEEN: I can't stay here till the morning—

MAHOUT: And I don't want to get caught with you, whoever you are. God alone knows whose wife you are. I don't want to— Now listen. Listen! Let's see what they do. Let's see! If they try to come in, there's only one way to stop them. Let them know there's a couple in here...a man and a woman. So if anything like that happens, we have to raise our voices...make noise...

QUEEN: Oh God!...I must get away. Please, please help me!

MAHOUT: For goodness sake, don't start crying now. If they hear you, they'll decide you're in trouble and come to the rescue. People are so bloody nosey these days. Be quiet now and listen!

(They listen, crouching next to the door, tense with fear.)

Outside, the Queen Mother, carrying the silver tray, comes to where the King is sitting. He gets up and, as though in a trance, removes the saffron cloth to see the object it is covering. He holds out the cloth in such a way that the audience cannot see the object.

He stares at the object and his stance changes as though the object

has communicated some message to him. He covers it again. Does namaskara to it.

The Queen Mother, with a nod of her head, signals to him to go ahead.

He takes the sword from the tray, ties it round his belt, picks up the torch and walks up the steps.

He knocks on the door. The knock startles the two inside. The Queen jumps to her feet and tries to run behind the pedestal. The Mahout grabs her.)

MAHOUT (in a whisper): Don't panic. Do as I say. Do as I tell you... Just laugh. Be merry. Come on.

(The Queen tries to laugh but the attempt ends in a moan. The Mahout laughs loudly, theatrically. But he is scared. It's not easy. Knock.)

MAHOUT: We must pant.

QUEEN: Pant?

MAHOUT: Yes, yes, pant. Heavy breathing. You and me—
(He pants heavily.)

Let them think something's going on...that we're making love here. You see what I mean? Sin in the inner sanctum. They'll slap themselves on their cheeks, say what's the world coming to, curse us and go away. Come on... Pant... heavy...

(He demonstrates panting.)

Hunnh... Hunnh... Yes. Like that. Come on.

(The Queen moans in anguish.)

That's it. Oh God! You're good, good, this is heaven. Yes. This is...aaaah... Come on. Come. Come. Aah.

(The King knocks again. The Queen curls up in fear. The Mahout increases his labours.)

Good. Oh God, you are good! uh...uh...uh... You're like no one I know... Oh! you are good—good...

(Knocking again. The Mahout yells.)

Hey, who's that? Are you deaf? Can't you hear I am with my woman? Go away. (*To the Queen.*) Come now...yes... Turn this way. That's it... Oh you're divine...

(*Urging her*)

Come on. Moan. Groan. Laugh.

(*The King knocks.*)

You bastard, get the hell out of here. Or else...I'll bash your brains out... Stamp you into mud...

QUEEN: Oh God!

MAHOUT (*to her*): Yes, that's right...

(*Knock again.*)

Bloody hell! Are you deaf? Or are you deliberately asking for trouble? I'll...I'll...

(*Knock again.*)

I said I'll kill you.

(*Knock again.*)

All right.

(*Jumps up. Picks up his stick.*)

QUEEN: No!

MAHOUT: So what do you want to do? Sit here all night while they knock? I'll give the rascals a taste of my stick...

(*Rushes to the door. The Queen, frightened, goes and crouches in a corner. The Mahout opens the door and raises the stick to hit out. He sees the King and freezes.*)

Oh my God! The King!

(*Reels back.*)

Your...Majesty...

(*The King steps in with the torch in his hand. The torch further lights up the interior. The King looks around for the Queen, while the Mahout quickly ties his dhoti in a knot.*)

I touch your feet, Your Majesty, there's no one here. It's just me! I fall to your feet, sir. Last night a bat entered the elephant stables, so we had to clear up the place. So I came here to sleep. But I am alone, sir, there's no one here. Only me...

KING (*calls*): Amritamati...

(*The Mahout recoils in horror. The King calls again.*)

Amritamati...

(*The Queen gets up from behind the pedestal and comes out.*)

MAHOUT: Oh...God...the Queen! Forgive me, sir. I...didn't know. We didn't do anything, sir. I swear to you. I sang...she listened... Her Majesty was about to go back soon...

(*The King goes to her. Pushes back the veil covering her face. Takes the torch to her face. She recoils. He stares at her. Silence. Dazed, he looks at her as though he can't recognize her. Pinches her cheek as though to make sure she is there.*)

QUEEN (*gently*): Please...don't...

(*The King wakes up with a start. He is obviously embarrassed by what he's been doing.*)

KING (*dazed and without malice*): Is it you? I don't want to hurt you.

(*He turns, goes to a ring in the wall and sticks the torch into it. Then, in sheer exhaustion, leans his head against the wall.*)

A long pause.

The Queen moves up to him. Almost in a whisper)

QUEEN: Let's go.

KING: Go?

(*She takes him by his hand and tries to lead him away. He does not move. They look at each other.*)

QUEEN (*gently*): Why did you come here?

(*Pause.*)

Why did you? Until he saw you—

KING: I'm concerned about you. You about him.

QUEEN: I am talking about us both.

(*Pause.*)

Until he saw you, he didn't know who I was. I was just a woman, any woman. Now he can gloat.

KING (*spits out contemptuously*): Him!

QUEEN: No, me. For one night, I was nameless.

MAHOUT (*scared*): Madam... Your Majesty... I swear to you I won't breathe a word of this to anyone. Who'll believe me anyway? They'll laugh at me... If I speak to any soul, may my tongue get worms in it. Rot and fall away. Please, madam. Please, sir—

KING: Shut up!

MAHOUT: If I shut up, Your Majesty, how will you know? I mean... you must hear me out. You could have me beheaded. Cut to pieces. Trampled under an elephant's foot. But that would be wrong, sir. Very wrong. I didn't do anything. A bat flew into the elephant stables last night, so I came here to sleep for a night. And I was singing by myself. Alone. I do that often. And she came. I didn't know who she was. It was dark. I was sitting here, singing, and she came in and she came to me and—

KING: I said shut up!

(*The King draws his sword and is about to slash at the Mahout when—*)

QUEEN: Your Majesty—

(*The Queen Mother on the steps too suddenly stands up as though she has sensed something. The King freezes, stares, uncomprehending, at the sword. Then almost with a sense of hopelessness, lets it slide back into the scabbard. The Mahout heaves a sigh of relief.*)

MAHOUT: Of course, how could I forget? You are a Jain. You can't indulge in violence. You aren't permitted to shed blood. Ooh! I forgot that—

(*He giggles in sheer relief. Giggling and talking to himself he retires to his corner.*)

Whew! That was close!... I mean... how could you draw the sword? You aren't allowed to kill. Huh!

(*The Mahout sits on his mattress. The King and the Queen stand, looking at each other, not knowing what move to make next. Lights slowly dim, plunging the pair into darkness. But we continue to see the Mahout as he begins to drink. Total darkness.*)

SINGER: Memories slide
 meld and fuse.
 Discrete moments
 get flung together
 strung in a single moment.

(Lights come on the Queen and the King, acting young.)

QUEEN: You there! What are you doing?

KING: Don't look. Look away—Don't come near—

QUEEN: You are peeing on our tree!

KING: I say...look away. Wait till I finish.

QUEEN: You are taking too long. You've got your leg wet.

KING: You startled me. I didn't know anyone was around.

QUEEN: I saw you. This garden is only for girls. Who are you?

KING: I am a prince.

QUEEN: Ohho! So you're the prince who's come to be my husband.

But you are so—small. Don't husbands have moustaches?

KING: I'll grow my moustaches in good time, don't let that worry you. You aren't all that big yourself. You are like a doll—a rag doll.

QUEEN: If you tease me, I'll go and tell Father.

KING: Then you talk to me with respect. Is that how one talks to one's husband? 'You there!' 'You here!'

QUEEN: My maid does.

KING: I'm not going to marry a house-maid. I am a prince.

QUEEN: Good. Then I'll ask you a riddle. See if you can solve it.

KING: Tcha! I have no time for riddles. Solve them yourself.

QUEEN: You don't like riddles? What kind of a prince are you? In my house, everybody loves riddles.

KING: Even your father?

QUEEN: Him too. He knows millions of them. Millions of billions.

KING: Why should a king solve riddles? He must rule. He must fight wars. He must make proclamations. He has other things to do.

QUEEN: He does that too. And he knows proverbs.

KING: Can he throw a stone? Can he hunt lions?

QUEEN (*impressed*): You can hunt lions?

KING: Aw! Easy.

QUEEN: Will you show me? I have never seen a hunt. Never!

KING: I know. You are Jains, aren't you? Your kings can't hunt. Your Saviours are all stark naked.

QUEEN (*miffed*): And...and...and my maid says your goddess eats meat.

KING: She does too. But she is dressed in such gorgeous saris. Bright, shiny silk saris. Clothed from neck to toe.

QUEEN (*losing the argument*): Your goddess eats...chicken...and goats...and...and...

KING: But she is decked in gold. What kind of a king is your father? Can't he even afford a jockstrap for your Saviour? Not even a piece of rag to cover his shame?

(*The Queen's eyes fill up.*)

QUEEN: You're making fun of me. You are making me cry. I don't want to marry you. I'll go and tell Mother.

(*He quickly intercepts her exit.*)

KING: Hey, hey! Listen! I'll show you something, if you promise not to cry.

(*Looks around for something.*)

I could show you how to knock a bird off a branch but I haven't got my catapult with me.

QUEEN: I am going.

KING: Show me a bird and I'll try to get it down with a stone, without a catapult.

(*They look around.*)

QUEEN: I can't see any.

KING: It's midday.

QUEEN: Their babies must be sleeping.

KING: All right then, I'll knock a bird down from the branch in the evening. Just for you. Don't tell anyone. Otherwise your parents will be furious. So will mine.

QUEEN: If you show me, I'll let you pee on my rose bush. We can make babies.

KING: What's that? Revolting!

QUEEN: Why were you peeing here then?

KING: Because I haven't had a pee since morning. The front yard is full of guests. So I came here. It's got nothing to do with making babies.

QUEEN: It does too. That's why no boy is allowed to come in here. How did you get in?

KING: I made a hole in the hedge and crept in.

QUEEN: You should have waited till you became my husband.

KING: Why?

QUEEN: My maid says that if a boy pees on a bush and then if a girl smells the flowers from that bush, that's how babies are made.

KING: Really? I didn't know that.

QUEEN: You don't know a lot of things.

(Suddenly)

There!

KING: What?

QUEEN: A bird. There!

KING: Ah, yes. Shush now. Be absolutely quiet.

(Picks up a stone, tiptoes nearer to the bird, takes aim and flings the stone. He shouts in triumph.)

Got it!

(They run to the fallen bird. The Queen recoils in horror at the sight of the bird.)

QUEEN: Oh God! Blood. Poor birdie! It's bleeding.

(The Queen kneels down and gently picks up the bird. She keeps caressing the bird and whispering to it. The King watches, almost mesmerized.)

Poor baby! Poor dear baby!... Oh poor thing. Please, fetch some water. Please.

KING: I'm sorry, but it's no use. It's dead.

QUEEN: Dead? No. No. It can't be. It can't be. Wake up. Wake up, poor birdie.

KING: Here!

(He gently tries to take the bird from her hand but she doesn't let him.)

We have to bury it now.

QUEEN *(refusing to relinquish the bird)*: But why did you kill it?

KING *(not accusing)*: You wanted to see it knocked down.

QUEEN: But I didn't want you to kill it.

KING: I didn't realize—I'm sorry.

QUEEN: I didn't mean you to hurt it.

KING: I know that now. Stupid of me—

QUEEN: Poor birdie!

KING *(trying to take the bird again)*: Your hand is covered with blood. Go wash your fingers. I'll bury the bird.

QUEEN *(withdrawing)*: That was not nice.

(He accepts that rebuke in silence.)

You are cruel. You'll hurt it more. I won't give it to you. Wake up, birdie!

(Runs off with the bird. He stands staring after her. Long pause. Suddenly he calls out.)

KING: I am sorry.

SINGER: Memories slide,
 meld and fuse.
 Discrete moments
 get flung together
 strung in a single moment.
 Then the moment
 distends, spreads
 into years.

(The King and the Queen are older.)

QUEEN: And Your Majesty has been urinating on my rose bush again!

KING *(almost shouting with joy)*: Really? You are sure?

(The Queen nods. Holds up four fingers.)

Four months? Four! Why didn't you tell me all these days?

QUEEN: You know why. *(Whispers)* I waited till I was sure.

(He laughs delightedly. Kisses her all over. Then suddenly lifts her up and whirls her around.)

Please—Please—you'll drop me.

KING *(plonking her down on the pedestal)*: Never! I love you.

You're pregnant! Pregnant! Oh, you're beautiful. And wonderful and glorious and...

QUEEN *(laughing)*: Stop being silly.

KING: I am so happy. The entire kingdom will burst into festivities. But first we must tell Mother. She will be ecstatic.

This is what she's been praying for...

QUEEN: Yes, we must. She first of all.

KING: Come. *(Calls out)* Mother! Mother!

(They rush to the Queen Mother's quarters, she blushing, he laughing. The Queen Mother enters.)

MOTHER: What's it? Why are you shouting?

KING: Mother! Bless us—

MOTHER: You have my blessings. Always. What's happened now?

KING: Happy news. The happiest possible. We're going to have a baby—

(The Mother looks at him warily.)

MOTHER: Are you sure?

KING: Of course we are sure.

(The Mother shuts her eyes and clutches her hands in a quick prayer. The King and the Queen come forward and touch her feet. The Mother lifts her daughter-in-law by her shoulders and embraces her. Smoothens her hair.)

MOTHER: God bless you! You have made our family tree bloom.

May you beget a son whose glory blinds the eight directions.
(Gently seats her down.)

Now, the next couple of months are most precious. You need to take special care.

KING: Yes, Mother. She'll be your obedient daughter-in-law.

(The Queen blushes, laughs.)

MOTHER: Good. Now I must go to my shrine and celebrate. We must thank the gods for this most wonderful gift.

KING: Yes, Mother.

MOTHER: I'll send you the offering.

(Goes away. The King and the Queen return to their original place.)

QUEEN: Yes! Yes! Now I'll show them. I'll show those swine.

All these years I have waited for this moment. Prayed for it.
Cringing at their glances—

KING: They meant well. They were only anxious.

QUEEN: They were vicious.

KING: As subjects of this land, they were interested in an heir.
Fair enough.

QUEEN: Your subjects. For me, they were my judges, my interrogators, torturers—all clubbed together against me.

KING: 'Against' you?

QUEEN: Can you men even imagine what it feels like? To pretend you are unaware of their gaze as they scrutinize the roundness of your belly, the stain on your thigh! Line after line of carrion crows, watching, waiting, ready to caw at the palmful of blood that spurted. And spurt it did—every month—every bloody month. How I hated myself when that happened.

KING: Surely you can forget all that in your moment of triumph.

QUEEN (*suddenly laughs, tousles his hair*): Yes, I can. For you. You could have taken another wife. You didn't.

KING: Of course I didn't.

QUEEN: Sometimes I wished you had.

KING: You did?

QUEEN: Yes, purely for bearing children. Then I could make love to you—for its own sake—to make love. You don't know how I have pined for that. And now I can look forward to it.

KING: You mean it will get even better?

(*They laugh and embrace.*)

QUEEN: You are sure your mother isn't unhappy?

KING: Unhappy! Are you mad? She's wanted a grandson as badly as we've wanted a son.

QUEEN: All these years, she had some hope of getting you another queen. Now...

KING: She'll have a grandchild instead. Look, we can't change her. I can't bring myself another mother. She can't get herself another son. And (*laughing*) I won't look for another wife. So that seems to be a fairly unalterable situation.

(*Kisses her.*)

I wish you would stop being so full of doubts. About yourself. People don't dislike you—

QUEEN: She does. And I can't blame her. Because of me, you deserted her faith—her Mother Goddess.

(*The Queen moves to the window. Looks out.*)

I'm afraid.

KING: Of what?

QUEEN (*points out*): That bit of the thatched roof there. You have considerably built a wall round it to hide the shed. But the roof shows. As though it refuses to be dismissed.

KING: The earth there couldn't take a higher wall.

QUEEN: It's the shed in which your mother keeps her animals.
(*Pause.*)

All these years I've been pretending that it doesn't exist. That I couldn't hear the bleat of sheep being taken out at night.
(*Pause.*)

For slaughter.
(*Pause.*)

You sleep through it. You've grown up with those sounds. I haven't. They often wake me up—keep me awake. But I've pretended I didn't mind.

KING: I know. I'm sorry.

QUEEN: Because I didn't want to hurt your mother.

KING: Why are you bringing it up now?

QUEEN: When your mother says she'll celebrate, what does she mean?

KING (*gently*): Darling, how does it concern us? She doesn't make any demands on us.

QUEEN: The animals are graded according to the occasion. Poultry is offered at daily rites. Sheep, goats for the more important rituals. Then buffalo.

KING: You know that's been the family tradition.

QUEEN: Weren't human beings also offered in sacrifice to the goddess once?

KING: Yes. But that was generations ago.

QUEEN: So you see, a tradition can be given up. Or at least changed.

KING: Mother will not agree to give up her practices. You know

that. She feels she owes it to our ancestors. We've been through all this before.

QUEEN: But now it concerns our child. What offerings will be considered worthy of a royal birth, do you think?

(No reply.)

They say when you were born, every inch of the earth for miles around was soaked in blood.

KING: People exaggerate.

QUEEN: Yes, you're right. I shouldn't be complaining about the scale. Just the thought. Of bloodshed. Even a single drop of blood.

(Pause.)

I don't want it. Not in the name of our child.

KING (*calmly*): I know how you feel. But look at it this way. She has accepted the fact that we will not be party to her violent rites. And she carries them out in her own separate shrine. In her shell. Let's leave it at that.

QUEEN: I don't want to hurt her. She can live by her beliefs. But we are Jains. Our son will be a Jain. He will have to uphold the principle of compassion for all living beings, of non-violence. Should we allow a blood rite to mark his arrival? It would be wrong. Terribly wrong!

(*Suddenly she is overtaken by nausea. The King supports her. She retches. When she recovers, he takes her back to the pedestal. She sits on it. He moves to the Queen Mother's quarters.*)

KING: Mother—

MOTHER: Yes—

KING (*gently*): Mother, please don't get upset. But—

MOTHER: You don't have to beat around the bush. Come out with it.

KING: I want you to promise me that there will be no blood sacrifices in honour of our child.

(Pause.)

MOTHER: I was expecting this.

KING: Please, Mother.

MOTHER: You are denying me the right to my worship!

KING (*firmly*): No, Mother, I'm not.

MOTHER: You're treating my goddess as though she were a cheap, tribal spirit. And you are cutting off my path to her.

KING: Try and be sensible, Mother. No one is stopping you from worshipping your goddess or from your own form of worship. But I am a Jain. My son will be a Jain—a Jain King. I cannot have his birth greeted with the infliction of death.

MOTHER: You were not born a Jain. You were born my son. But you betrayed me and my faith. Instead of choosing the woman and bringing her to your faith, you chose hers.

KING: I accepted the faith because I found truth in it and compassion for the world in pain. I don't want to add to the pain. I will not let anyone do it. Certainly not in the name of my son.

MOTHER: He is my grandson too. I too have prayed for him. For me, he is the gift of my goddess.

KING: A king can follow only one path and I have chosen mine.

MOTHER: My feelings don't matter to you. It's mother, ranting and raving as usual. All right. Let her have her way. I'll move out of the palace.

(*The King tries to remonstrate.*)

I shall live in a separate cottage outside the palace.

KING: Mother, this is your home. This is where you gave birth to me, brought me up. We don't want you to go. Please, don't. I am only talking of this one occasion.

MOTHER: My gods have already been expelled from this house and live, shunned and starved, like outcastes. I should have followed them out. But I was blinded by my love for you.

(*Pause.*)

But I want you to promise me something.

KING: Yes?

MOTHER: I shall live away from the palace, in a corner of my own. And there, I shall live as I please. With my gods. My sacrificial animals. No further interference from you two.

KING: All right, Mother.

MOTHER: Promise.

KING: I promise.

MOTHER: All right. Will you arrange to have a cottage built next to the shrine for me? And a shed for my animals? Or should I look to it myself?

KING: I'll attend to it.

(He turns to go.)

MOTHER: Before you go, son—

(He stops. He's been expecting this too.)

I don't want to be nasty. But I am your mother and it worries me. Are you sure she's pregnant?

KING: Yes, I am.

MOTHER: Have you checked with the palace nurse?

KING: No, but she has.

MOTHER: I wanted to, but decided against it. If she heard that I was making enquiries, she would immediately decide I was doubting her word.

KING *(laughs)*: But you are. However, there's no cause for it.

MOTHER: You should check personally.

KING: I'll accept my wife's word for it.

MOTHER: You know what happened last time.

KING: I do. But—

MOTHER: I hope it's not a repetition.

KING: She was still a child then. She knew very little. She was under such pressure to produce an heir. Her period was

delayed by a few weeks and everyone went to town about her being pregnant. She too got carried away.

MOTHER: She claimed to be pregnant.

KING: She wanted to be pregnant. She was desperate.

MOTHER: She showed all the signs. Not just the stopping of periods. Her belly began to show. She had morning sickness—

KING: She couldn't have feigned all that.

MOTHER: Her problem is that she has too much imagination.

KING: She is sensitive.

MOTHER: She lives wrapped up in herself. She should listen to the world around her. Open her eyes to it: ears to it.

KING: She's been a good wife. A good queen.

MOTHER: You became the laughing stock of the world. You had to swallow public humiliation.

KING: Not swallow. Face. A king sometimes has to do that.

MOTHER: Soon after it came to light that it was a false pregnancy, I overheard two palace maids, giggling. 'A hen doesn't need a cock to lay eggs,' one of them was saying. 'She can do it on her own!' I could have died of shame.

KING: I hope you didn't dismiss them from service for saying so.

MOTHER: I did.

KING: Tongues won't wag any less outside the palace.

MOTHER: It was your palace. Yours and hers. That's why I couldn't chop that tongue off!

(The King shrugs. The Mother walks out. As the lights brighten, we see the Mahout, still drinking. He casts surreptitious glances at the King and the Queen. Long pause. The Queen moves to the King.)

QUEEN *(softly)*: Let's go. Please.

(The King does not respond.)

MAHOUT: Why are you hanging on here? Why don't you go back to the palace—

KING (*in agony*): Oh God! God! God!

MAHOUT: I thought I was gone, finished, no more life. Now that I have been granted a few more years, I'd like to be left in peace. Go back to the palace.

QUEEN: I swear to you. It won't happen again. Ever. Please.

(*The King does not respond. Pause.*)

All right...

(*She moves to the door.*)

KING: No. Please. Stay!

(*She stops.*)

It won't take long.

QUEEN (*surprised, in a whisper*): What won't take long?

KING: I'll tell you. Let me recover. I'll tell you what's to be done.
(*Pause.*)

Let me get my breath. After all I've been through. Hours...

QUEEN (*taken aback*): How long have you been here?

(*He shrugs.*)

Have you been standing out there...all this while? Listening to everything going on inside?

(*Unbelieving*)

Oh God!

KING: What else could I do?

(*As the King speaks, lights change. The Mahout's song begins in the background, not sung by the Mahout but represented by a melody played on a wind instrument by a musician who appears on stage, while the Mahout mimes singing. A beam lights up the King as he relives his agony, moment by moment.*)

At midnight, he started singing in the distance. I felt you wake up. I felt you slide out of my bed. You got up. Left. I opened my eyes, saw you press yourself against the window and listen. And then, slip away. I followed. Through the biting chill and

you didn't even have a shawl on... You went out of the royal garden...into the street. You entered this ruined temple. The singing stopped. Those noises began. Those horrible, animal noises of copulation. I couldn't...breathe.

(The Queen covers her face in horror.)

I was numb. Couldn't breathe. I needed fresh air. I ran. I ran back into the garden.

(The King runs into the garden. Almost breaks out into a scream but gags himself with his fists. Sits clutching his head. Controls himself.)

The Queen Mother enters. Sees him from a distance.)

MOTHER: Son—

(The Queen takes a sudden intake of breath.)

Son—

KING: Mother! What are you doing here?

MOTHER: You know my prayers finish only at midnight. Tonight they went on a little longer. The lights. The songs. It was beautiful. I was on my way back when I saw you. What are you doing here at this hour?

KING: I felt suffocated in the palace, hot. Needed a breath of fresh air. So I came here.

MOTHER: You felt hot? In the depth of winter? I'm freezing. And you should be wearing something warmer.

KING: Thank you. I'm fine.

MOTHER: Don't be silly. Look, even the swans are frozen in the lake. *(Laughs.)* They could be images carved in ice. Hot!

(Pause. She notices something is wrong. She goes nearer. He half turns away lest she notice his state.)

But you are sweating. And your eyes are bloodshot. Are you all right?

(Long pause.)

Son—

KING: Yes?

MOTHER: What is it? What's wrong?

KING: Me? Nothing.

MOTHER: Don't try to fool me. I know you. The moment I saw you from there, I knew. Even in the dark. There's something wrong, isn't there? Very wrong.

KING: What do you want me to say? I told you there's nothing wrong. I felt like a walk in the open—

MOTHER: Give me your hand.

(She takes his hand and places it on her own head.)

If you don't tell me what's on your mind, let my skull splinter into a thousand shards.

(The King withdraws his hand, as though stung.)

KING: Mother, why are you hounding me? Why don't you leave me alone?

MOTHER: You are telling lies. You are trying to hide something from your own mother. Must be something really serious.

(Pause. Fiercely)

Tell me. Tell me. I can't help you unless you tell me.

KING: Around midnight, I had a dream. It woke me up.

MOTHER: Yes? What was it?

KING: In the dream... *(Pause.)* I saw that the royal swan in our garden had got caught in mud and was flapping its wings.

MOTHER: It was asking for help.

KING: I don't know. I suppose so...

MOTHER: It was caught in mud. Trapped. And crying out for help?

KING: Yes.

MOTHER: Then?

KING: Nothing. I woke up. Felt wide awake. So I came out for a walk.

MOTHER: And you came to check if the swans were all right?

KING: No. Not really. I don't know. Perhaps yes. It was a vivid dream. It felt real.

(Laughs.)

Anyway the swans are there, safe, fast asleep. That's all. Are you happy now?

MOTHER: No, I'm not.

KING: I've told you the truth.

MOTHER: I know. And I'm glad you told me. It's a bad dream.

KING: Now, Mother...

MOTHER: It doesn't augur well.

KING: Don't start on that, Mother.

MOTHER: Dreams speak to us. They come to warn us.

KING: Now you know why I was reluctant to tell you about it.

MOTHER: Dreams have spoken to me. And whenever I ignored them, I suffered. Like when I lost your father. I was warned. You know that. I still blame myself. A dream like this is like an epidemic. The longer you ignore it, the more it spreads. Eats into more of the family and the populace. It's fortunate I came to know right now.

(He makes a dismissive gesture.)

You go back to your bed. Or wander around the garden. But then take this shawl. Leave the dream to me.

KING: And where are you going?

MOTHER: I'm going back to my goddess. She'll save us.

I know precisely what needs to be done.

KING: What are you going to do?

MOTHER: Don't ask.

(Long pause. The King waits.)

There's going to be a heavy mist soon. And you are dripping wet. Go back and change and go to bed.

KING: Why don't you tell me what you intend to do?

MOTHER: I shall offer the goddess a hundred fowl in sacrifice.
(*The King has anticipated something like this but cannot suppress a gasp. The Queen, too, concealed in the darkness, gasps.*)

A hundred fowl. If we slake her parched throat, we may yet avert disaster.

(*Lights change: we see the King, the Queen and the Mahout.*)

MAHOUT: I knew it! I knew it would finally skewer me. No, no, that's not right, Your Majesty. A hundred fowl—I know what that slaughter means. It's witchcraft. Whip me, Sir, brand me. But don't don't take away my voice.

KING: Be quiet!

MAHOUT: What'll happen to me, if I lose my voice? I have nothing else...only my songs. Please, please, don't destroy me by taking them away.

QUEEN: Don't be alarmed. I'll see that nothing happens to you.

MAHOUT: Thank you, madam. You are like a mother to me. I'll never forget your kindness—
(*He literally touches her feet.*)

QUEEN (*no irony*): Trust me. I shall not deprive the world of your voice. I shall not desecrate it.
(*Caresses his hair.*)

KING (*turning his face away in disgust*): Bravo!

QUEEN: Spare me your disgust. You take your blood and gore. I'll choose his voice—

KING: Will you at least let me finish?

QUEEN: Yes?

KING: I refused. There was no question of any bloody rite.
(*The lights change. The King and the Mother.*)

Mother, please. Don't do anything. Let things be. Please.

MOTHER: I am not asking you to join in.

KING: I know. It's just—I don't want you to do anything. No rites. No sacrifices. (*Pause.*) Please, Mother, this once. No bloodshed.

QUEEN (*from the dark*): Why didn't you tell her there was no dream? No swan. That you'd made it up.

KING: Had I? I'm not so sure. I was talking about the swan. But I was thinking of you.

MOTHER (*baffled*): Are you trying to stop me? When I moved out, you promised that I would be allowed to live on my own terms.

KING: Mother, you don't have to do anything, because... there was no dream. That was a lie. I made it up.

(*The Mother stares at him, not comprehending.*)

MOTHER: No dream?

KING: No. The dream was a piece of fiction. So you don't have to do anything about it.

(*He puts his palm on her head.*)

Here. I swear I made it up. Are you satisfied?

(*Withdraws his hand. The Mother is still trying to make sense.*)

MOTHER: No dream? Why did you say there was one then?

KING: I had to tell you something.

MOTHER: You're hiding something from me.

KING (*suddenly*): In God's name! Is there no way to escape this hell?

(*The Queen Mother stares at him.*)

MOTHER (*quietly*): If you are going through hell, why isn't she here by your side? She figures in it somewhere, doesn't she? That's why you are tying yourself into such knots. At this time of the night. Where is she?

(*Pause.*)

You are running away from her, aren't you?

(*Pause.*)

Why?

(Pause.)

I'll promise you something. On oath. Take me to her now.
And I'll give up my faith and become a Jain.

(Pause.)

That's what you've always wanted. She has always wanted.

(Pause.)

You won't accept the offer. Why?

(The truth dawns on her. She steps back in horror.)

Oh my mother! Don't tell me! I knew it would happen ultimately... But don't tell me she's done it... She is with someone. A lover! Oh my God—

(The King turns away.)

When? Tonight?... It has to be. You were happy enough with her last evening... Is she in the palace?

(No answer.)

No. You mean she is lying between someone's thighs this moment?

KING: Mother—

MOTHER: Oh horrible! Horrible ! Where? Where is she? Tell me—
In some hole? A god-forsaken garret? Where? Where did you see them?

KING: Control yourself—

MOTHER: Has she fallen so low? The whore—And you. How can you stand here like this? I should cut her to pieces... feed her to wolves and vultures. Do it, son, now!

KING: Don't be hysterical, Mother—

MOTHER: Throw her bones to the dogs. She has betrayed you. You are not bound by your vows now. All this nonsense about non-violence. It had to go. Let it go. Kill the harlot and her lover. If you won't do it, I'll do it. Let me fetch my sacrificial knife from the temple. I'll—

(She turns to go to the temple. He holds her back.)

KING: Calm down, Mother. Please—

MOTHER: What kind of a man are you? You have lost your manhood. You, you impotent...

(Spits in his face. He reels back. But that action suddenly calms her. She suddenly realizes what she has done. Quickly moves forward and wipes his face.)

Forgive me. Forgive me.

(They look at each other. Their deep fondness for each other is clear in that look.)

I am becoming decrepit—and still I haven't learnt to control my temper.

(He smiles.)

All right. You won't shed blood. Then throw her out. Get yourself another wife.

(He does not respond. Incredulous)

Surely you are not going to...forgive her? Continue as though nothing has happened?

KING: I don't know what to do.

MOTHER: You love her. But such love is meant for harlots. She has drowned our family in sin. She has called out to demonic forces.

KING: Mother, please. Please, help me.

MOTHER *(gentle)*: Do you think I like tormenting you—my only child, the light of my life?

KING: Help me. Please.

(Pause.)

I am lost—

MOTHER: We have to do something.

(She looks at him, deeply moved. Comes to him.)

You won't offer a living animal in sacrifice.

KING: I can't.

MOTHER: So what if it isn't living? Will that do?

KING: What do you mean—

MOTHER: No, I don't mean a carcass. Silly ass! What you offer to the gods, you have to partake of. If it isn't living...

(Laughs.)

How dumb can you be! All right. There will be no bloodshed. We'll compromise.

KING: If anything has to be done, it'll be done by me. Promise. Not you. Nor anyone else. Mother, whatever's happened, concerns me, my wife. And I need her. *(Anguished)* I can't let her go.

(The Mother stares.)

MOTHER: All right. Go to her. I'll come there with the offering. There'll be no bloodshed.

KING: Thank you.

MOTHER: Go there and wait. I'll follow you.

(As though answering an unasked question)

I'll smell her out.

(The Mother goes back to the silver tray on the steps of the temple. The King moves to the Queen.)

QUEEN *(tense)*: And so?

KING *(calls out)*: Mother—Mother—

QUEEN *(aghast)*: She's here? You brought her here with you?

KING: No. I didn't. She...smelt us out.

QUEEN: If only I knew you, as she does.

KING *(goes to the door)*: Mother—

(The Mother gets up, picks up the tray, and walks into the sanctum.)

There. Put it down.

(The Mother places the tray on the low platform in front of the altar.)

Now, Mother. Leave us. Please.

(The Mother doesn't move.)

I'll attend to everything.

(The Mother goes out of the temple. The King goes to the tray and is about to take off the saffron cloth when they all freeze.)

SINGER: The hunter,
 dagger bright but sheathed,
 back arching, the axe poised to strike
 but frozen.
 The dog
 lunging behind, unmoving.
 Patterns dotting welcome
 on the winter's starry floor.
 Why then suddenly
 as the mists roll back
 does my heart tremble
 at the hound's burning eye?

(The King takes off the saffron cloth covering the tray in which the offering is kept. The Mahout cannot resist stepping forward to take a look. Amidst ritual materials like flowers, saffron, myrrh and camphor stands a life-size replica of a cock with its head raised and beak open, as though it was crowing. The Queen gasps.)

KING: This is the offering. A sacrifice of dough. A substitute for a live fowl.

(The Queen stares at the cock of dough. The King, as though to reassure her)

It's dough. Inanimate.

(The Mahout begins to giggle, more from relief than in derision.)

Don't you dare!

(The Mahout retires to his corner trying to suppress his giggles.)

Don't you dare!

(He turns and looks at the Queen. Trying to make it all sound normal, he holds the sword over the cock.)

All you have to do is place your right hand on the back of my fist. Like this.

(Demonstrates by placing his left hand on the back of his right.)

And I'll push the blade into this lump of dough. We will, together. That's all. That'll be the end of it.

QUEEN: This is a temple! You want to violate it?

KING: But it's only dough. There's no violence in it.

QUEEN: But...but...this sword. This plunging in of the blade. The act...it's violence.

KING: There's no bloodshed.

QUEEN: Then why are you doing it? Why? Blood at least makes sense if you believe in bloodthirsty gods. But this... you can't knowingly fool yourself.

KING: It's a small thing. A symbolic gesture...

(The Queen looks at the King, almost with compassion. He stares at her numbly.)

QUEEN: You have taken this on to save me, haven't you? To ensure that your mother doesn't contaminate me with her violence?

(Pause.)

You are a good man. I have always known that.

(Pause.)

Perhaps, I don't deserve you.

KING *(softly)*: I want you back. I can't live without you.

QUEEN: Nor can I.

KING: But we can't go back as though nothing has happened. Something has happened. Something terrible. We can't leave it to Mother to handle. It's my problem. Ours.

QUEEN: We'll face it together. But not here. At home.

KING: And take this cock home with us?

(A new note has crept into the conversation which chills her.)

QUEEN: Take it home? Why?

KING: How else do we tackle the problem?

QUEEN: I don't understand...

(Pause.)

KING: How do we face the problem...

(He looks at the cock.)

...without this?

QUEEN: How will it help?

KING: I don't know. But I have a feeling it will.

QUEEN: How?

KING: I don't know. But when I was waiting outside, lost, adrift, sunk in misery, Mother brought the offering. I looked at it and I felt better.

(Pause.)

I felt help was on its way.

(Pause.)

It sort of signalled to me.

(Pause.)

I could feel the reassurance. Don't keep questioning, it said, surrender.

(Pause. The Queen stares.)

Look at it. Just look. Please. And perhaps you'll see what I mean. I'm sure you will. It's there to help.

QUEEN: Perhaps. And you want to harm it?

KING: Not harm. Sacrifice. That's the whole point of its being there. That's its whole purpose.

QUEEN: Do you realize that those words would sum up my life as well?

(Pause.)

I won't take part in it.

KING (*desperate*): You don't have to believe! Merely carry out the rite. Along with me. That's enough.

(*She shakes her head firmly.*)

QUEEN: Why are you doing this to yourself? You are like a child. You want to hurt me. But you are hurting only yourself.

KING: But I have to do something. And I don't know what!

QUEEN: All right. Go ahead. Do as you wish. If it makes you feel better. I am going home.

KING: But you can't. I can't let you go.

QUEEN: Can't?

KING: Because we are husband and wife—coupled in the eyes of God, joined together with the sacred fire as the witness. We are bound by our vow—to do everything together.

QUEEN: You want me to play your wife so I can damn myself as an adulteress?

KING: Look, we don't know everything about this world. There may be...powers...forces we know nothing about.

(*Pause.*)

Who knows, if we had listened to Mother we may not have lost our child...

(*She looks at him horrified. Pause.*)

QUEEN: What did you say?

KING: I don't know—I mean—what do I—

QUEEN: So I lost my baby because I didn't follow your mother's orders? Because I didn't kill and maim?

KING: I am not saying that.

QUEEN: Yes, you are. Late in my life, I become pregnant and I have a miscarriage—and you are saying that it was a punishment meted out to me for my defiance.

KING: I didn't say punishment—

QUEEN: I lost my baby! I still haven't got over it. You know that.

I still feel devastated by it. And you are now saying it was chastisement for my wickedness.

KING: Listen to me—

QUEEN: A curse I deserved? And all these years—when you were being loving and understanding, the ideal husband—you were only pretending. That's what you believed?

KING: I am not holding you responsible for your miscarriage. But you can't blame it on me or Mother either.

QUEEN: Sometimes I've felt—I had to abort to prove to you I was pregnant. To show you the proof.

KING: What are you talking about?

QUEEN: And I suppose that's why I haven't become pregnant since then. Your mother's goddess in her wrath has made me sterile! And all those years you have agreed with that—God! How I loathe you and your mother and your whole—

KING: No, I didn't. But can you blame me for believing that now? Now—after this betrayal—this treachery?

QUEEN: All right. Go ahead. Believe what you like. But I'll not agree to the sacrifice. I'll never.

(Sudden laughter is heard from a distance. The Queen looks up surprised. The lights change. The Queen Mother enters from behind the pedestal, laughing. She is energetic, ebullient, a dancing, spectral figure, not the person we have seen earlier.)

MOTHER (*laughing*): Bravo! Excellent! Excellent! More power to you!

QUEEN: What do you want?

MOTHER: We should strip ourselves bare and stand naked face to face. Let us. There's no one else. No one else can be here.

QUEEN: Why have you come here?

MOTHER: Don't agree to the sacrifice. Refuse. Let him plead. Don't yield. That's what I've come to tell you.

QUEEN: What are you up to now?

MOTHER: Me? Why?

QUEEN: This sudden, new tack? Is it some new game? A new opening?

MOTHER: Don't be so suspicious. I mean it. Don't agree to the sacrifice. Don't yield to his entreaties. The more you refuse, the more will my son suffer. Let him.

QUEEN: You've hated me from the day I stepped into this palace.

MOTHER: The only relationship in the world which does not wither and fade away is that of hate. That'll keep us together—at least so long as my son remains a Jain.

QUEEN: I refuse to discuss my religion with you.

MOTHER: I couldn't care less about your religion. It's my son's that concerns me.

QUEEN: You brought up your son drenched in bloody sacrifices, bile and gore. In violence. He was bound to turn away. He's a good man.

MOTHER: What do you know of violence? Or of pain? You seem so averse to blood that I wonder you didn't prefer to remain a virgin. For many years I was childless. Then—one day—I became pregnant.

(The Queen turns away.)

QUEEN: I don't want to know.

MOTHER: Of course you don't. You have a fickle womb. False pregnancy! Miscarriage! Mine is made of steel. We were ecstatic. But labour began and the child refused to come out. They said the foetus was set transverse in the womb. For four days and nights I screamed in pain. I prayed for death so my child could live. Ultimately they pinned me down to the floor, spreadeagled, and the nurse shoved her hand into my uterus, twisted him around and pulled him out. I was screaming through the gag they had thrust into my mouth. You couldn't

begin to imagine what I went through then. I knew I was going to die. I cast one last glance at my darling son—a farewell look, I thought—and saw him drenched in blood, half-wrapped in my placenta, and I began to laugh. I lived. I drowned him in blood. You, however, are drowning him in guilt.

QUEEN: I'll never agree to the offering.

KING (*in the dark*): Please don't say that. Please.

MOTHER: Twist the knife in his wound. Let him flagellate himself, revel in self-hatred. He is the offering, don't you see? Make him bleed. It'll please the gods.

QUEEN: You disgust me.

(*The Queen Mother laughs. Disappears laughing. The lights change.*)

MAHOUT (*inebriated*): I may be speaking out of turn, sir, but I think you are being hard on yourself. And there's no need for it. I mean, a woman slips but it doesn't have to be for the worse. I mean, take me. I am ugly, I know. People have called me all sorts of names. But I tell you. I have known a few women. They say there are six types of women...

KING (*gravely*): And what about the seventh?

MAHOUT (*stumped*): I only thought there were six.

KING: No one's written about her. While she sinks her teeth into the man and drinks blood, plucks his entrails like strings, the man's head only laughs and sings.

MAHOUT (*laughs*): You're joking, aren't you? You took me in there for a minute, I tell you. I thought you were serious. No, no, no, Your Majesty. You've got to take your life in your stride. That's what I firmly believe. Do you believe in God? Of course not. Stupid of me to ask. But if you did, then you would have had someone to talk to now. To ask for guidance, if you see what I mean. You can't dictate to Him, or demand things of Him. But you can ask. And if I were you, I would ask: 'God,

why has this thing happened? What did you intend when you sent a bat into the elephant stables which brought this elephant-keeper into our lives? Surely you had a design?' And God might say to you—'Might', mind you, I am not saying He will—you never can say what God will answer, that's what makes Him what He is, doesn't it? But I reckon God might say: 'Look at the benefits!'

KING: Benefits. Quite right! We never gave any thought to the benefits.

MAHOUT: There! What did I tell you? Talk to God—ask Him—it makes you see things in a new light. The benefits. Now, there's a thing or two I've noticed about your queen.

KING: You have? What kind of thing?

MAHOUT: Touch her here on her shoulder. Rub gently. And you'll see for yourself what happens.

KING: The right shoulder!

(Goes near the Queen and inspects her shoulders.)

The right one. Here? I see. I must bear that in mind. I knew that sometimes caressing and pressing her down here—near the hips—that worked like magic. But this right shoulder thing, this is new to me.

QUEEN: Enough, sir. Please, you are making it worse for yourself.

KING *(ignoring her, to the Mahout)*: Any other—shall I say, vulnerable—spots, would you say? Erogenous?

QUEEN: Don't you dare. I am not a piece of meat for you to pick and paw at.

MAHOUT: Sorry, lady. Didn't mean to upset you. I meant it all in good humour. Between the three of us, you know. Didn't mean to hurt.

QUEEN *(to the King)*: How could you!

KING: What a pundit. A veritable sage. A guru. A man of divine wisdom...and beauty.

MAHOUT (*reacting*): Oh, don't worry about her sense of beauty. She put out the light as soon as she came in. I told you she knows what to do.

KING (*suddenly losing patience*): Enough of you. Go away!

MAHOUT: No. I won't. I am not going anywhere. I am staying. I came here first. I came here to have a drink and then sleep and that's what I'm going to do. Haven't had a moment to oneself and then one has to put up with rudeness. I was thinking of going. But now I won't. I'll stay.

(*Sits in his corner. Takes out a bottle and takes a long swig.*)

Yes, one more thing. Why do you carry that sword around if you aren't going to use it? Eh? I mean, it's like fangs in a sparrow's beak, isn't it? Pretty useless.

Oh, don't mind me. Go on. Cluck...clucking...

(*Burps.*)

I'm leaving in the morning. May have to walk for days before I get another job. So have to rest properly. Mind you, there is no shortage of kings in this land...nor of queens!

(*Laughs.*)

I'll tell you what. If you want to hang me by the tallest tree—make an example of me, you know—why don't you make an image of me with dough—

(*He giggles.*)

...with dough and string it up. After all, if you find it fit for gods, I don't see why dough shouldn't be good enough for you.

(*Pause.*)

Would a man of dough satisfy her though? Goodnight.

(*He covers himself and goes to sleep and is soon snoring.*)

QUEEN (*calmly*): Before we start again! I didn't say it earlier because I didn't want to hurt you. But it's the truth.

(*Pause.*)

I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me.

KING: How can you be so crass? So brazen? You—

QUEEN: Because it just happened. Without my willing it. It just happened. That's all.

KING: And you didn't pause to ask if I deserved it? I who have loved you all these years—above everything—
(*The Mahout's song, that is the music, begins.*)

QUEEN: I was sleeping by your side. His singing woke me up. The song was so—don't know how to describe it. But suddenly the notes caressed me, enveloped me. They carried me away. For a brief moment, nothing mattered. The palace. Me. You. Only the song. I felt like a flame burning bright. Pure. When I came to my senses, I was here. By his side. That's all there is to it. It just happened.

(*Pause.*)

And what happened was beautiful.

KING: No. I can't believe it's you. This isn't you! Why are you doing this to me? Because I blamed the miscarriage on you?

QUEEN (*gently*): No, of course not.

(*Pause.*)

I want to come back to you. I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed. Because I didn't plan it. It happened. And it was beautiful.

(*A long pause. He stares at her.*)

I'm sorry. If this rite is going to blot the moment out, that would be the real betrayal. I'll do anything else.

KING: Anything else?

QUEEN: Yes. I promise.

KING: There's only one thing I want.

(*Pause.*)

You. I want you back. All this...this ritual...this...this here...all this is only so I can get you back.

QUEEN: I am yours. I'll never betray you again.

KING: Prove it.

QUEEN (*not quite sure*): I will. Let's go back—

KING: No. Here.

QUEEN: What do you mean?

KING: Prove that you'll be mine. Here. Now. In this place. After all, this is where it all happened. Here in front of this... absent God...

(*Startled, she looks at the Mahout who is fast asleep.*)

You promised. Before it dawns. I won't ask for anything else. Come—

(*He extends his hand. She takes it. He leads her gently to where the Mahout is sleeping. Then he unbuckles his sword and turns to her. She stands petrified as he approaches her.*)

QUEEN (*in horror*): What's happened to you? What are you doing?

KING: You promised.

QUEEN: But...but you can't...not here.

KING: Yes, here.

(*He kneels in front of her and pulls her down, gently, almost pleading, to her knees. Then as she kneels in front of him, he begins to undress her. Takes off her pallu. The Mahout moans in his sleep. Startled, she looks at him. The King, gently*)

Don't be afraid. Let him wake up. Let him see. What does it matter? Let the whole world see. We are coupled in the eyes of God. We need not be ashamed of anything. We must strip ourselves of any sense of shame. Become naked like our Saviours.

(*He loosens her hair. Kisses her shoulder. Caresses her bosom. Kisses her gently in the cleft. She shudders. He tries to untie her blouse. Suddenly the Mahout moans in his sleep and she reacts. Tries to get away. But the King has anticipated that. They struggle. The Mahout sits up with a start.*)

QUEEN (*viciously*): Get away from me...

(She pushes the King aside and rolls away. He reaches out for her violently and then stops. He laughs.)

KING: The fowl leave us no choice. Don't you see? There's no alternative!

QUEEN: Get away from me.

(The Queen is trembling with humiliation, almost on the verge of tears. Suddenly she turns to the Mahout on his mat and then looks back at the King, defiantly.)

KING: Yes, go back to that savage ape—that ugly beast—

(The Mahout, has been, until now, sitting and watching in a kind of alcoholic stupor. He can barely understand what's going on. Now he reacts.)

MAHOUT *(roars)*: Enough!

(Gets up.)

Enough, I say. I've had enough. I won't put up with any more. The insults. The abuses—no more. I've had enough. Now pick up that toy of yours and get out of here. Out! You may be the royalty. You may cut me to pieces tomorrow. But tomorrow's tomorrow. But now I tell you what to do. Pick that up and get out of here.

(The King's hand automatically reaches out for his sword. But there's no sword round his waist.)

Stop reaching out for that sword...as though you are suffering from the itch. Pick that up now. Take it away. Now!

(Pause.)

Now, are you going to do as I say or aren't you?

(They watch each other tensely.)

You won't? Then I'll do it myself.

(He reaches out for the cock. Then stops.)

QUEEN: Go on. Go on. Don't hesitate now. Throw it out.

(The Mahout looks at her. Then back to the cock.)

Don't be afraid, Mahout. Go ahead. Nothing'll happen to you. You've my word—

(Pause.)

Go on.

(*The Mahout slowly steps back.*)

You coward!

(*The Mahout goes back to his corner and starts rolling his mat, wrapping up his meagre belongings.*)

You coward! Didn't you hear him call you an ape—an ugly beast? I'll stand by you. Fling it out—you—you—

MAHOUT (*quietly*): Madam, if you want to plunge your hand into a snake-pit, go ahead!

QUEEN (*imitating the Mahout*): And so the cock scared even our elephant man. Did it? I suppose now I have only this cock to make love to—

KING: Beware. Don't mock it.

QUEEN: Mock the cock? No, surely not. After all, not even that ape could lift that cock. All right then. I'll throw it out myself. (*She reaches to the fowl, as though to pick it up.*)

KING: Amritamati, please—

(*In the distance she hears the laughter of the Queen Mother. Stops.*)

MOTHER: Twist the knife in his wound, let him suffer, make him bleed.

KING: Don't. Please, don't—I beg of you—

(*She stares, then looks around as though she is waking up.*)

MAHOUT: Listen, the two of you. Stop playing with these things, these forces. Look at those bats—hanging on the roof. Silent. Still. Watching us. Waiting for some signal. Go now. Fetch a witch-doctor. Let him deal with it. Take my advice. These things can eat into you. Go back to the palace. As for me, I am leaving town.

(*Pause. The Mahout stands looking at the Queen.*)

QUEEN (*gently*): I think I'll let you go.

MAHOUT: Thank you. I'll never forget you.

(Goes out. Pause. The Queen turns to the King.)

QUEEN: He's gone. The moment's gone. I am making you suffer.

We are here. I love you. I don't want you to suffer. *(Pause.)*

I agree to the sacrifice.

KING: You do?

QUEEN: Yes.

KING: Then come.

(He raises the sword. The Queen places her hand on the hilt of the sword.)

SINGER: Fowl, bird, cock of nine new moons,
 bless us. Raise us from our darkness,
 cleanse us of our sins.
 Your curse covers not as words
 but as the dying breath of an infant,
 grows as the thorny cactus between bleached
 rib-cages.
 Remove the poison from the seed.
 Remove the rust from the blade.
 The worm from the flower.
 Only you can save us now.
 Only you.
 Cock.
 Divine Bird, help us—

(The King tries to plunge the sword into the cock when the cock begins to crow.)

COCK: Cock...a...doodle...doo—Cock...a...doodle...doo.

(Total silence. The King drops the sword and stumbles back.)

KING: What's that? What's that?

QUEEN: It's alive. The cock...is crowing. The cock's crowing!

(Bursts into laughter.)

The cock's crowing!

(Kneels in front of the cock. Picks a palm full of grains from the tray and holds it up for the cock.)

Here. Have some. Come on. Eat. Cluck...cluck...

KING: Stop it! Stop it!

QUEEN: Come on, please, eat. Have some.

KING *(screams)*: Amritamati!

QUEEN: Cluck...cluck... Have some.

KING: Have you gone mad? It isn't alive! It's dough—

QUEEN *(ignoring him)*: Come, Cockoo... Have shum...
(Lallates as to a child.)

KING: I said stop it—Look!

(He picks up the dough and squashes it into a mass.)

It's dough. Plain and simple! Dough.

(The Queen looks up at him in sudden hatred, picks up the sword and lunges at him to stab him. She freezes. She stares at the sword in her hand, horrified.)

A cock crows outside. That takes the King by surprise. He turns to the door.

Suddenly, she presses the point of the blade on her womb and impales herself on the sword. Collapses into his arms.

The King holds her, uncomprehending, listening to the cock's crowing. It's dawn.

The Queen is lit by a beam. She stands up and they both sing.)

BOTH: In the World once divided into two orbs—
 one lit up by the sun,
 the other, hid in the shade,

 the orb in the shade
 opens itself to the light
 And warmth of the sun.

Night gives in to day.
Death yields to life.
Like monsoons piled on monsoons
So life follows life.

And through the days,
through endless rainy nights
through life after life
we hear the cock crow.

NĀGA-MANDALA

Play with a Cobra

NOTE

Nāga-Mandala is based on two tales from Karnataka which I first heard several years ago from Professor A. K. Ramanujan. But that is only the least of the reasons for dedicating this play to him.

I wrote *Nāga-Mandala* during the year I spent at the University of Chicago as Visiting Professor and Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence. I am most grateful to Professor Stuart M. Tave, Dean, Division of Humanities, and Professor C. M. Naim, Chairman, Department of South Asian Language and Civilizations as well as to the Council for International Exchange of Scholars for having made that visit possible. I am further indebted to Professor Naim for persuading me to write the play.

I am conscious that Naga's long speech on p. 276 owes much to Jean Anouilh, although I have been unable to identify the play.

GIRISH KARNAD

Nāga-Mandala was first presented in English by the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis on 16 July 1993, as part of its thirtieth birthday celebrations. The principal cast was as follows:

RICHARD OOMS

The Man

MIRIAM LAUBE

The Story

NIRUPAMA NITYANANDAN

Rani

STAN EGI

Appanna/Naga

ISABELL MONK

Kurudavva

WILLIAM FRANCIS MCGUIRE

Kappanna

Directed by

GARLAND WRIGHT

Set Designed by

DOUGLAS STEIN

Music by

DAVID PHILIPSON

for
A. K. RAMANUJAN
friend, guru, hero

Prologue

The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified.

It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls.

A man is sitting in the temple. Long silence. Suddenly, he opens his eyes wide. Closes them. Then uses his fingers to pry open his eyelids. Then he goes back to his original morose stance.

He yawns involuntarily. Then reacts to the yawn by shaking his head violently, and turns to the audience.

MAN: I may be dead within the next few hours.

(Long pause.)

I am not talking of 'acting' dead. Actually dead. I might die right in front of your eyes.

(Pause.)

A mendicant told me: 'You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month.' I laughed out loud when I heard him. I thought nothing would be easier than spending a night awake.

(Pause.)

I was wrong. Perhaps death makes one sleepy. Every night this month I have been dozing off before even being aware of it. I am convinced I am seeing something with these eyes of

mine, only to wake up and find I was dreaming. Tonight is my last chance.

(Pause.)

For tonight is the last night of the month. Even of my life, perhaps? For how do I know sleep won't creep in on me again as it has every night so far? I may doze off right in front of you. And that will be the end of me.

(Pause.)

I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. And he said: 'You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death.'

(Pause.)

I hadn't realized my plays had had that much impact.

(Pause.)

Tonight may be my last night. So I have fled from home and come to this temple, nameless and empty. For years I've been lording it over my family as a writer. I couldn't bring myself to die a writer's death in front of them.

(Pause.)

I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night I shall have nothing more to do with themes, plots or stories. I abjure all story-telling, all play-acting.

(Female voices are heard outside the temple. He looks.)

Voices! Here? At this time of night? Lights! Who could be coming here now?

(He hides behind a pillar. Several Flames enter the temple, giggling, talking to each other in female voices.)

I don't believe it! They are naked lamp flames! No wicks, no lamps. No one holding them. Just lamp flames on their own—floating in the air! Is that even possible?

(Another three or four Flames enter, talking among themselves.)

FLAME 3 (*addressing Flame 1, which is already in the temple*):

Hello! What a pleasant surprise! You are here before us tonight.

FLAME 1: That master of our house, you know what a skinflint he is! He is convinced his wife has a hole in her palm, so he buys all the groceries himself. This evening, before the dark was even an hour old, they ran out of *kusbi* oil. The tin of peanut oil didn't go far. The bowl of castor oil was empty anyway. So they had to retire to bed early and I was permitted to come here.

(*Laughter.*)

FLAME 2 (*sneering*): *Kusbi* oil! Peanut oil! How disgusting! My family comes from the coast. We won't touch anything but coconut oil.

FLAME 1: But at least I come here every night. What about your friend, the kerosene flame? She hasn't been seen here for months. She is one of the first tonight.

FLAME 4: Actually, from today on I don't think I'll have any difficulty getting out...and early.

FLAME 1: Why? What's happened?

(*The other Flames giggle.*)

FLAMES: Tell her! Tell her!

FLAME 4: My master had an old, ailing mother. Her stomach was bloated, her back covered with bed sores. The house stank of cough and phlegm, pus and urine. No one got a wink of sleep at night. Naturally, I stayed back too. The old lady died this morning, leaving behind my master and his young wife, young and juicy as a tender cucumber. I was chased out fast.

(*Giggles.*)

FLAME 3: You are lucky. My master's eyes have to feast on his wife limb by limb if the rest of him is to react. So we lamps have to bear witness to what is better left to the dark.

(They all talk animatedly. New Flames come and join them. They group and regroup, chattering.)

MAN *(to the audience)*: I had heard that when lamps are put out in the village, the flames gather in some remote place and spend the night together, gossiping. So this is where they gather!

(A new Flame enters and is enthusiastically greeted.)

FLAME 1: You are late. It is well past midnight.

NEW FLAME: Ah! There was such a to-do in our house tonight.

FLAMES: What happened? Tell us!

NEW FLAME: You know I have only an old couple in my house. Tonight the old woman finished eating, swept and cleaned the floor, put away the pots and pans, and went to the room in which her husband was sleeping. And what should she see, but a young woman dressed in a rich, new sari step out of the room! The moment the young woman saw my mistress, she ran out of the house and disappeared into the night. The old woman woke her husband up and questioned him. But he said he knew nothing. Which started the rumpus.

FLAMES: But who was the young woman? How did she get into your house?

NEW FLAME: Let me explain: My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself, never told the story, nor sung the song. So the story and the song were being choked, imprisoned inside her. This afternoon the old woman took her usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night, when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out, just as the old lady was coming in. Thus, the story and the song created a feud in the family and were revenged on the old woman.

FLAME 1: So if you try to gag one story, another happens.

FLAMES (*all together*): But where are they now, the poor things?
...How long will they run around in the dark? What will
happen to them?

NEW FLAME: I saw them on my way here and told them to follow
me. They should be here any moment... There they are! The
story with the song!

(*The Story, in the form of a woman dressed in a new, colourful sari, enters, acknowledges the enthusiastic welcome from the Flames with a languid wave of the hand and goes and sits in a corner, looking most despondent. The Flames gather around her.*)

NEW FLAME: Come on. Why are you so despondent? We are here
and are free the whole night. We'll listen to you.

STORY: Thank you, my dears. It is kind of you. But what is the
point of your listening to a story? You can't pass it on.

FLAMES: That's true...What can we do? Wish we could help.
(*While the Flames make sympathetic noises, the Man jumps out from behind the pillar and grabs the Story by her wrist.*)

MAN: I'll listen to you!

(*The Flames flee helter-skelter in terror. The Story struggles to free herself.*)

STORY: Who are you? Let me go!

MAN: What does it matter who I am, I'll listen to you. Isn't that
enough? I promise you, I'll listen all night!

(*The Story stops struggling. There is a new interest in her voice.*)

STORY: You will?

MAN: Yes.

STORY: Good. Then let me go.

(*He does not.*) I need my hands to act out the parts.

(*He lets her go.*)

There is a condition, however—

MAN: What?

STORY: You can't just listen to the story and leave it at that. You must tell it again to someone else.

MAN: That I certainly shall, if I live. But first I must be alive to... That reminds me. I have a condition, too.

STORY: Yes?

MAN: I must not doze off during the tale. If I do, I die. All your telling will be wasted.

STORY: As a self-respecting story, that is the least I can promise.

MAN: All right then. Start. (*Suddenly.*) But no! No! It's not possible. I take back my word. I can't repeat the story.

STORY: And why not?

MAN: I have just now taken a vow not to have anything to do with themes, plots or acting. If I live, I don't want to risk any more curses from the audience.

STORY (*gets up*): Good-bye then. We must be going.

MAN: Wait! Don't go. Please.

(*Thinks.*)

I suppose I have no choice.

(*To the audience.*)

So now you know why this play is being done. I have no choice. Bear with me, please. As you can see, it is a matter of life and death for me.

(*Calls out.*)

Musicians, please!

(*Musicians enter and occupy their mat.*)

The Story and the Song!

(*Throughout the rest of the play, the Man and the Story remain on stage. The Flames too listen attentively though from a distance.*)

(*To the Story.*) Go on.

Act One

The locked front door of a house with a yard in front of the house, and on the right, an enormous ant-hill. The interior of the house—the kitchen, the bathroom as well as Rani's room—is clearly seen.

STORY: A young girl. Her name...it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was—well, any common name will do—

MAN: Appanna?

STORY: Appanna.

(Appanna enters, followed by Rani. They carry bundles in their arms, indicating that they have been travelling. Appanna opens the lock on the front door of the house. They go in.)

APPANNA: Have we brought in all the bundles?

RANI: Yes.

APPANNA: Well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go.

(Rani looks at him nonplussed. He pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from the outside and goes away. She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone.)

RANI: Listen—please—

(She does not know what is happening, stands perplexed. She cannot even weep. She goes and sits in a corner of her room. Talks to herself indistinctly. Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night.)

...So Rani asks him: 'Where are you taking me?' And the Eagle answers: 'Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you.' So Rani says: 'Do they? Then please, please take me to them—immediately. Here I come.' So the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas...

(She falls asleep. Moans 'Oh, Mother!' 'Father' in her sleep. It gets light. She wakes up with a fright, looks around, then runs to the bathroom, mimes splashing water on her face, goes into the kitchen, starts cooking. Appanna comes. Opens the lock on the front door and comes in. Goes to the bathroom. Mimes bathing, then comes to the kitchen and sits down to eat. She serves him food.)

RANI: Listen—*(fumbling for words)* Listen—I feel—frightened—alone at night—

APPANNA: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice!

(Pause.)

RANI: Please, you could—

APPANNA: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?

(Finishes his meal, gets up.)

I'll be back tomorrow, for lunch.

(Appanna washes his hands, locks her in and goes away. Rani watches him blankly through the window.)

STORY: And so the days rolled by.

(Mechanically, Rani goes into the kitchen, starts cooking. Talks to herself.)

RANI: Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she sleeps between them. So she is not frightened any more. 'Don't worry,' they promise her. 'We won't let you go away again ever!' In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani.

She refuses to go. 'I am not a stag,' he explains, 'I am a prince'...

(Rani sits staring blankly into the oven. Then begins to sob. Outside, in the street, Kappanna enters, carrying Kurudavva on his shoulders. She is blind. He is in his early twenties.)

KAPPANNA: Mother, you can't do this! You can't start meddling in other people's affairs the first thing in the morning. That Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth. He can't stand other people. Why do you want to tangle with him?

KURUDAVVA: Whatever he is, he is the son of my best friend. His mother and I were like sisters. Poor thing, she died bringing him into this world. Now a new daughter-in-law comes to her house. How can I go on as though nothing has happened? Besides, I haven't slept a wink since you told me you saw Appanna in his concubine's courtyard. He has got himself a bride—and he still goes after that harlot?

KAPPANNA: I knew I shouldn't have told you. Now you have insomnia—and I have a backache.

KURUDAVVA: Who's asked you to carry me around like this? I haven't, have I? I was born and brought up here. I can find my way around.

KAPPANNA: Do you know what I ask for when I pray to Lord Hanuman of the Gymnasium every morning? For more strength. Not to wrestle. Not to fight. Only so I can carry you around.

KURUDAVVA (*pleased*): I know, I know.

(*Suddenly Kappanna freezes.*)

What is it? Why have you stopped?

(*He doesn't answer. Merely stands immobile and stares. A touch of panic in Kurudavva's voice.*)

What is it, Kappanna? Kappanna!

KAPPANNA: Nothing, Mother. It's just that I can see Appanna's front door from here.

KURUDAVVA (*relieved*): Oh! For a moment I was worried it was that—who-is-that-again? That witch or fairy, whatever she is—who you say follows you around.

KAPPANNA: Mother, she is not a witch or a fairy. When I try to explain, you won't even listen. And then, when I'm not even thinking of her, you start suspecting all kinds of—

KURUDAVVA: Hush! Enough of her now. Tell me why we have stopped.

KAPPANNA: There doesn't seem to be anyone in Appanna's house. There is a lock on the front door.

KURUDAVVA: How is that possible? Even if he is lying in his concubine's house, his bride should be home.

KAPPANNA: Who can tell about Appanna? He's a lunatic.

KURUDAVVA: You don't think he could have sent his wife back to her parents already, do you? Come, let us look in through the window and check.

KAPPANNA: Of course not, Mother! If someone sees us—

KURUDAVVA: Listen to me. Go up to the house and peep in. Tell me what you see.

KAPPANNA: I refuse.

KURUDAVVA (*tearful*): I wouldn't have asked you if I had eyes.
I don't know why God has been cruel to me, why he gave me
no sight...

KAPPANNA (*yielding*): All right, Mother.
(*They go near the house. Kappanna peers through the window.*)

KAPPANNA: The house is empty.

KURUDAVVA: Of course it is, silly! How can anyone be inside when
there is a lock outside on the door? Tell me, can you see
clothes drying inside? What kind of clothes? Any saris? Skirts?
Or is it only men's clothes?

KAPPANNA: I can't see a thing!

RANI: Who is it? Who is that outside?

KAPPANNA: Oh my God!
(*Lifts Kurudavva and starts running.*)

KURUDAVVA: Stop! Stop, I tell you! Why are you running as though
you've seen a ghost?

KAPPANNA: There is someone inside the house—a woman!

KURUDAVVA: You don't have to tell me that! So what if there is a
woman inside the house? We have come here precisely
because a woman is supposed to be in the house.

KAPPANNA: Mother, what does it mean when a man locks his wife
in?

KURUDAVVA: You tell me.

KAPPANNA: It means he does not want anyone to talk to his wife.

RANI (*comes to the window*): Who is it?

KAPPANNA: Let's go.
(*Starts running again. Kurudavva hits him on the back.*)

KURUDAVVA: Stop! Stop! (*To Rani*) I am coming, child! Right now!
Don't go away! (*To Kappanna*) He keeps his wife locked up
like a caged bird? I must talk to her. Let me down—instantly!
(*He lets her down.*)

You go home if you like.

KAPPANNA: I'll wait for you here under the tree. Come back soon.
Don't just sit there gossiping.

KURUDAVVA (*approaching Rani*): Dear girl...

RANI: Who are you?

KURUDAVVA: Don't be afraid. I am called Kurudavva, because I am blind. Your mother-in-law and I were like sisters. I helped when your husband was born. Don't be frightened. Appanna is like a son to me. Is he not in?

RANI: No.

KURUDAVVA: What is your name?

RANI: They call me Rani.

KURUDAVVA: And where is Appanna?

RANI: I don't know.

KURUDAVVA: When did he go out?

RANI: After lunch yesterday.

KURUDAVVA: When will he come back?

RANI: He will be back for lunch later in the day.

KURUDAVVA: You don't mean, he is home only once a day, and that too...only for lunch?

(*No reply.*)

And you are alone in the house all day?

(*Rani begins to sob.*)

Don't cry child, don't cry. I haven't come here to make you cry. Does he lock you up every day like this?

RANI: Yes, since the day I came here.

KURUDAVVA: Does he beat you or ill-treat you?

RANI: No.

KURUDAVVA (*pause*): Does he... 'talk' to you?

RANI: Oh, that he does. But not a syllable more than required.
'Do this', 'Do that', 'Serve the food'.

KURUDAVVA: You mean—? That means—you are—still—hmm!
Has he...?

RANI: Apart from him, you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!

KURUDAVVA: That's not what I meant by 'talk'. Has your husband touched you? How can I put it? (*Exasperated.*) Didn't anyone explain to you before your wedding? Your mother? Or an aunt?

RANI: Mother started shedding tears the day I matured and was still crying when I left with my husband. Poor her! She is probably crying even now.

(*Starts sobbing.*)

KURUDAVVA: Dear girl, it's no use crying. Don't cry! Don't! Come here. Come, come to the window. Let me touch you. My eyes are all in my fingers.

(*She feels Rani's face, shoulder, neck through the bars of the window.*)

Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like young mango leaves. Lips like rolls of silk. How can that Appanna gallivant around leaving such loveliness wasting away at home?

RANI: I am so frightened at night, I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here, alone—Kurudavva, can you help me, please? Will you please send word to my parents that I am, like this, here? Will you ask them to free me and take me home? I would jump into a well—if only I could—

KURUDAVVA: Chih! Chih! You shouldn't say such things. I'll take care of everything.

(*Calls out.*)

Son! Son!

KAPPANNA (*from behind the tree*): Yes?

KURUDAVVA: Come here.

KAPPANNA: No, I won't.

KURUDAVVA: Come here, you idiot.

KAPPANNA: I absolutely refuse, Mother. I told you right at the start that I won't.

KURUDAVVA: Honestly!

(Comes to him.)

Listen, Son. Run home now. Go into the cattle shed—the left corner—

KAPPANNA: The left corner—

KURUDAVVA: Just above where you keep the plough, behind the pillar, on the shelf—

KAPPANNA: Behind the pillar—on the shelf—

KURUDAVVA: There is an old tin trunk. Take it down. It's full of odds and ends, but take out the bundle of cloth. Untie it. Inside there is a wooden box.

KAPPANNA: A wooden box. All right—

KURUDAVVA: In the right hand side of the wooden box is a coconut shell wrapped in a piece of paper. Inside are two pieces of a root. Bring them.

KAPPANNA: Now?

KURUDAVVA: Now. At once. Before Appanna returns home.

KAPPANNA: Mother, listen to me. If he finds you here—

KURUDAVVA: Don't waste time now. Do as I say. Run.

(Gets up and comes back to the house. Kappanna leaves.)

Are you still there?

RANI: Yes. Who is that?

KURUDAVVA: My son, Kappanna. Oh, don't let his name mislead you. He isn't really dark. In fact, when he was born, my husband said: 'Such a fair child! Let's call him the Fair One!'

I said: 'I don't know what Fair means. My blind eyes know only the dark. So let's call this little parrot of my eyes the Dark One!' And he became Kappanna.

RANI: And where have you sent him?

KURUDAVVA: I'll tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me. My father wore himself out trudging from village to village, looking for a husband. But to no avail. One day a mendicant came to our house. No one was home. I was alone. I looked after him in every way. Cooked hot food specially for him and served him to his heart's content. He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you', he said.

RANI: And then?

KURUDAVVA: 'Feed him the smallest piece first', he said. 'If that gives no results, then try the middle-sized one. Only if both fail, feed him the largest piece.'

RANI (*entranced*): And then?

KURUDAVVA: One day a boy distantly related to me came to our village and stayed with us. That day I ground one of the pieces into paste, mixed it in with the food, and served him. Can you guess which piece I chose?

RANI (*working it out*): Which one now? The smallest one, as the mendicant said? No, no, surely the biggest piece.

KURUDAVVA: No, I was in such a hurry I barely noticed the small one. The biggest scared me. So I used the middle-sized root.

RANI: And then?

KURUDAVVA: He finished his meal, gave me one look and fell in love. Married me within the next two days. Never went back to his village. It took the plague to detach him from me.

(*Rani laughs.*)

KAPPANNA (*entering*): Mother—

KURUDAVVA: Ha! There he is! Wait!

(Goes to him.)

Have you brought them?

(Kappanna gives her the two pieces of root. Kurudavva hurries back to Rani.)

Are you still there?

RANI: Yes, I am.

KURUDAVVA: Here.

RANI: What is that?

KURUDAVVA: The root I was telling you about.

(Rani Starts.) Here. Take this smaller piece. That should do for a pretty jasmine like you. Take it! Grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband. And watch the results. Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch. He will make you a wife instantly.

RANI: But I am his wife already.

KURUDAVVA: Just do as I say.

(Rani takes the piece. Kurudavva tucks the other one in the knot of her sari. Kappanna whistles. She turns.)

That must be Appanna coming.

RANI *(running in)*: Go now, Kurudavva. But come again.

KURUDAVVA: I shall too. But don't forget what I told you.

(Kurudavva starts to go. Appanna crosses her.)

APPANNA *(suspicious)*: Who is that? Kurudavva?

KURUDAVVA: How are you, Appanna? It's been a long time—

APPANNA: What are you doing here?

KURUDAVVA: I heard you had brought a new bride. Thought I would talk to her. But she refuses to come out.

APPANNA: She won't talk to anyone. And no one need talk to her.

KURUDAVVA: If you say so.

(Exits.)

APPANNA (*so she can hear*): I put a lock on the door so those with sight could see. Now what does one do about blind meddlers? I think I'll keep a watch dog.

(*Opens the door and goes in. To Rani.*)

I am lunching out today. I'll have my bath and go. Just heat up a glass of milk for me.

(*Goes into the bathroom. Mimes bathing. Rani boils the milk. Pours it in a glass and starts to take it out. Notices the piece of root. Stops. Thinks. Runs out. Sees that he is still bathing. Runs back into the kitchen, makes a paste of the root.*)

APPANNA (*dressing*): Milk!

(*Rani jumps with fright. Hurriedly mixes the paste into the milk. Comes out and gives Appanna the glass of milk. He drinks it in a single gulp. Hands the glass back to her. Goes to the door, ready to put the lock on. She watches him intently. He tries to shut the door. Suddenly clutches his head. Slides down to the floor. Stretches out and goes to sleep on the door-step, half inside and half outside the house. Rani is distraught. Runs to him. Shakes him. He doesn't wake up. He is in deep sleep. She tries to drag him into the house, but he is too heavy for her. She sits down and starts crying.*)

APPANNA (*groggily*): Water! Water!

(*She brings a pot of water. Splashes it on his face. He wakes up slowly, staggers up. Washes his face. Pushes her in. Looks the door from outside. Goes away. Rani watches, stunned. Slowly goes back to her bedroom. Starts talking to herself. It becomes night.*)

RANI: ...So the demon locks her up in his castle. Then it rains for seven days and seven nights. It pours. The sea floods the city. The waters break down the door of the castle. Then a big whale comes to Rani and says: 'Come, Rani, let us go...' (*She falls asleep. Midnight. Kappanna enters carrying Kurudavva. Stumbles on a stone. They fall.*)

KURUDAVVA: Thoo! That's the problem with having eyes: one can't see in the dark. That's why I have been telling you to let me go out on my own at least at night—

KAPPANNA: Go! Go! From this point on you can certainly go on alone. I refuse to come any closer to that house. And what are you doing, Mother? Suppose he is in the house. And he hears you. What will you say? That you have come to gossip with his wife in the dead of night?

KURUDAVVA: Shut up! We are here only to find out if the lock is gone yet. If it's gone, he is inside now. That means success is ours. We'll leave right away.

(Goes and touches the door. It is closed. Tip-toes to feel the latch. The lock is still there. Recoils in surprise.)

I can't believe it. The lock is still there! *(Thinks.)*

Perhaps he has taken her out to the fields or the garden!
(Laughs.)

RANI *(wakes up)*: Who is that?

KURUDAVVA: Me.

RANI *(comes running)*: Who? Kurudavva? This time of the night?

KURUDAVVA: What happened, child? Why is the lock still there?
(No reply.)

Did you feed him the root?

RANI: Yes.

KURUDAVVA: And what happened?

RANI: Nothing. He felt giddy. Fainted. Then got up and left.

KURUDAVVA: That's bad. This is no ordinary infatuation then.
That concubine of his is obviously—

RANI: Who?

KURUDAVVA: Didn't want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazaar woman. She has your husband in her clutches. Squeezes him dry. Maybe she's cast a spell. There is only one solution to this—

RANI: What?

KURUDAVVA *(giving her the bigger piece)*: Feed him this largest piece.

RANI: No!

KURUDAVVA: Yes!

RANI: That little piece made him sick. This one—

KURUDAVVA: It will do good, believe me. This is not hearsay. I am telling you from my own experience. Go in. Start grinding it. Make a tasty curry. Mix the paste in it. Let him taste a spoonful and he will be your slave. And then? Just say the word and he will carry you to my house himself.

(Rani blushes.)

Son! Son!

(To Rani) Remember. Don't let anything frighten you.

(Rani goes into the kitchen. Kurudavva wakes up Kappanna. They exit. It gets brighter. Appanna comes. He has a vicious-looking dog on a chain with him. He brings it to the front yard and ties it to a tree stump there. Then comes to the front door and unlocks it. The dog begins to bark. Surprised at the bark, Rani peers out of the window.)

RANI: Oh! A dog—

APPANNA: That blind woman and her son! Let them step in here again and they'll know! I'll bathe and come to eat. Serve my food.

(Goes to the bathroom and starts bathing. Rani takes down her pot of curry. Removes the lid. Takes out the paste of the root.)

RANI *(to the Story)*: Shall I pour it in?

STORY: Yes.

(Rani prays silently to the gods and pours the paste into the curry. There is a sudden explosion. She runs and hides in a corner of the room. The curry boils over, red as blood. Steam, pink and dangerous, coils out of the pot. Rani shuts her eyes in fear. Appanna calmly continues his bath. It is evident he has heard nothing.)

RANI: Oh my god! What horrible mess is this? Blood. Perhaps poison. Shall I serve him this? That woman is blind, but he isn't. How could he possibly not see this boiling blood, this

poisonous red? And then—even if he doesn't see it—how do I know it is not dangerous? Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? That little piece made him ill. Who knows...?

(Slaps herself on her cheeks.)

No, no. Forgive me, God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, Mother, how could I, your daughter, agree to such a heinous act? No, I must get rid of this before he notices anything.

(She brings the pot out. Avoids the husband in the bathroom. Steps out of the house. Starts pouring out the curry. Stops.)

No! How awful! It's leaving a red stain. He is bound to notice it, right here on the door-step! What shall I do? Where can I pour it, so he won't see?

STORY: Rani, put it in that ant-hill.

RANI: Ah, the ant-hill!

(Runs to the tall ant-hill. Starts pouring the liquid into it. The dog starts howling in the front yard.)

APPANNA: Rani! See what is bothering the dog!

(Surprised at receiving no reply.) Rani! Rani!

(Goes to the kitchen, drying himself. She is not there. Comes to the front door looking for her. By this time Rani has poured the curry into the ant-hill and is running back to the house. The moment she turns her back to the ant-hill, a King Cobra lifts its hood, hissing, out of the ant-hill. Looks around. It sees Rani and follows her at a distance. By the time she has reached the front door of her house, it is behind a nearby tree, watching her.

Rani comes to the front door and freezes. Appanna is waiting for her.)

APPANNA: Rani, where have you been?

(No answer.)

I said, where have you been? Rani, answer me!

(Moves aside so she can go in. But the moment she steps in,

Appanna slaps her hard. Rani collapses to the floor. He does not look at her again. Just pulls the door shut, locks it from outside and goes away. There is not a trace of anger in anything he does. Just cold contempt. The dog barks loudly at the King Cobra which watches from behind the tree, hissing, excited, restless. Appanna goes away. Rani goes to her bedroom. Throws herself down in her usual corner, crying.

When it is dark, the Cobra moves toward the house.

The barking becomes louder, more continuous. Rani wakes up, goes to the window, curses and shouts. Goes back to bed. The Cobra enters the house through the drain in the bathroom.)

STORY: As you know, a cobra can assume any form it likes. That night, it entered the house through the bathroom drain and took the shape of—

(The Cobra takes the shape of Appanna. To distinguish this Appanna from the real one, we shall call him Naga, meaning a 'Cobra'.

Naga searches for Rani in the house. Finds her sleeping in the bedroom. He moves nearer her and then gently caresses her. She wakes up with a start.)

RANI: You—you—

NAGA: Don't get up.

RANI: But, when did you come? Shall I serve the food?

NAGA (*laughs*): Food? At midnight?

RANI: Then something else. Perhaps—

(Doesn't know what to say. Stands dazed, leaning against the wall.)

NAGA: Why don't you sit? Are you so afraid of me?

(She shakes her head.)

Then sit down.

RANI: No.

NAGA: I will go and sit there. Away from you. Will you at least sit then?

(Moves away, sits on the floor at a distance from her.)

Now?

(Rani sits on the edge of the bed. Long silence. She is dozing but struggles to keep her eyes open.)

NAGA: You are very beautiful.

RANI *(startled)*: Hm? What? Do you—want something?

NAGA: No. I said you are very beautiful. Poor thing!

RANI: Poor thing—?

NAGA: That a tender bud like you should get such a rotten husband.

RANI: I didn't say anything!

NAGA: You didn't. I am saying it. Did it hurt—the beating this morning?

RANI: No.

NAGA: Locked up in the house all day... You must be missing your parents.

RANI *(struggles to hold back a sob)*: No.

NAGA: They doted on you, didn't they?

(She suddenly bursts out into a fit of weeping.)

NAGA *(startled)*: What is it?

(Rani continues to howl.)

I know, you want to see your parents, don't you? All right. I'll arrange that.

(She looks at him dumbfounded.)

Truly. Now, smile. Just a bit. Look, I'll send you to them only if you smile now.

(Rani tries to smile. A new outburst of barking from the dog.)

Oh! Does this dog carry on like that all night? How long is it since you have had a good night's sleep?

RANI: But—

NAGA *(happy to see her react)*: But what?

RANI: Nothing.

NAGA (*in order to provoke her*): Listen to that racket! Have you had even one good night's sleep since coming here?

RANI: But—

NAGA: What are you 'but'ing about? But what?

RANI: But you brought the dog here only this morning! There was no problem all these days.

NAGA (*trying to cover up*): Yes, of course.

RANI: Till this morning, once the housework was over, what was there to do? I used to sleep through the day and lie awake at night. Today this wretched dog has been barking away since it was brought here. That's why I was dozing when you came in. I'm sorry—

NAGA (*teasing*): Quite right! That won't do any more. From tomorrow I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night—

RANI (*uncertain*): At night?

NAGA: Yes. I shall come home every night from now on. May I? (*Rani laughs shyly. Pause. She is sleepy.*)

May I sit by you now? Or will that make you jump out of your skin again?

(*Rani shakes her head. Naga comes and sits very close to her. When she tries to move away, he suddenly grabs her, with frightening speed.*)

NAGA: Don't be afraid. Put your head against my shoulder. (*She slowly puts her head on his shoulder. He gently puts his arm around her.*)

NAGA: Now, don't be silly. I am not a mongoose or a hawk that you should be so afraid of me. Good. Relax. Tell me about your parents. What did all of you talk about? Did they pamper you? Tell me everything—

(*She has fallen asleep against his chest. He slowly unties her hair.*)

It is long and thick and covers them both. He picks up her hair in his hand, smells it.)

NAGA: What beautiful, long hair! Like dark, black, snake princesses!

(He lays her down gently. Gets up. Goes to the bathroom, turns into his original self and slithers away. Morning. Rani wakes up, and looks around. No husband. Comes to the front door. Pushes it. It is still locked. Baffled, she washes her face, goes to the kitchen and starts cooking.

The dog starts barking. Appanna comes. Pats the dog.)

APPANNA: Hello, friend! No intruders tonight, eh?

(He unlocks the door and steps in. At the noise of the door, Rani comes out running. She is laughing.)

RANI: But when did you go away? I'm...

(Freezes when she sees the expression of distaste on his face.)

APPANNA: Yes?

RANI: Oh! Nothing.

APPANNA: Good.

(Goes to the bathroom. Rani stares after him, then returns to the kitchen.)

RANI: I must have been dreaming again—

(Appanna bathes, then eats silently as usual and leaves. It grows dark. Night. Rani lies in bed, wide awake. A long silence. The Cobra comes out of the ant-hill and enters the darkened front yard of her house. The dog suddenly begins to bark. Then, sounds of the dog growling and fighting, mixed with the hiss of a snake. The racket ends when the dog gives a long, painful howl and goes silent. Rani rushes to the window to see what is happening. It is dark. She cannot see anything. When silence is restored, she returns to her bed.

The Cobra enters the house through the drain and becomes Naga. In the bathroom, he washes blood off his cheeks and shoulder and goes to Rani's room. When she hears his step on the stairs, she covers her head with the sheet. Naga comes, sees her, smiles, sits on the

edge of her bed. Waits. She peeps out, sees him, closes her eyes tight.)

NAGA: What nonsense is this?

(Without opening her eyes, Rani bites her forefinger. Gives a cry of pain.)

What is going on, Rani?

RANI *(rubbing her finger)*: I must be going mad.

NAGA: Why?

RANI *(to herself)*: His visit last night—I assumed I must have dreamt that. I am certainly not dreaming now. Which means I am going mad. Spending the whole day by myself is rotting my brain.

NAGA: It is not a dream. I am not a figment of your imagination either. I am here. I am sitting in front of you. Touch me. Come on! You won't? Well, then. Talk to me. No? All right. Then I had better go.

RANI: Don't. Please.

NAGA: What is the point of sitting silent like a stone image?

RANI: What do you—want me to say?

NAGA: Anything. Tell me about yourself. About your parents. Whatever comes into your head. If you want me to stay, tell me why. If you want me to go, say why.

RANI *(pouting)*: What can I say if you behave like this?

NAGA: Like what?

RANI: You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a...stupid snake.
(Naga laughs.)

It's all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying.

NAGA: What should I do then? Stop coming at night? Or during the day?

RANI: Who am I to tell you that? It's your house. Your pleasure.

NAGA: No, let's say, the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits. So I won't come at night if you don't want me to.

RANI (*eyes filling up*): Why do you tease me like this? I am sick of being alone. And then tonight, I was terrified you might not come—that what I remembered from last night may have been just a dream. I was desperate that you should come again tonight. But, what am I to say if you spin riddles like this?

NAGA (*seriously*): I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like *that* during the day. Like *this* at night. Don't ask me why.

RANI: I won't.

NAGA: Come. You slept like a child in my arms last night. You must be sleepy now. Come. Go to sleep.

RANI (*moves into his arms, suddenly stops*): But, what is this? (*Touches his cheek.*)

Blood on your cheeks! And your shoulders! That looks like tooth-marks. Did you run into a thorn bush or a barbed-wire fence on your way here?

NAGA: Don't worry about it.

RANI: Wait. Let me apply that ointment Mother gave me. Where is it? I took it out the other day when I cut my thumb slicing onions. Where did I put it? Oh, yes! The mirror-box!

(*She rushes to the mirror-box and opens it. Before Naga can move away so Rani won't see his reflection, she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright. He moves with lightening speed, pulls her away from the mirror and holds her in his arms. She is trembling.*)

NAGA: What is it? What is it, Rani?

(*He gently shuts the mirror-box and pushes it away. Rani turns and looks at where he had been sitting.*)

RANI: When I looked in the mirror, I saw there—where you were sitting—instead of you, I saw a—

(Mimes a cobra hood with her fingers.)

—sitting there.

NAGA: What? A cobra?

RANI *(silencing him)*: Shh! Don't mention it. They say that if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house.

NAGA: All right. Suppose a cobra does come into this house...

RANI: Don't! Why are you tempting fate by calling that unmentionable thing by its name?

NAGA: ...why shouldn't it come with love?

RANI: May God bless our house and spare us that calamity. The very thought makes me shudder.

NAGA: I am here now. Nothing more to fear.

(They sit on the bed together.)

RANI: Oh no! What am I to do with myself? In all this, I forgot to put the ointment on your wounds.

(She tries to get up. He forces her down. She gently touches his wounds. Shivers.)

Your blood is so cold. It's the way you wander about day and night, heedless of wind and rain—

(Stares into his eyes. Suddenly shuts her eyes and clasps him.)

NAGA: What is it now?

RANI *(looking up)*: Since I looked into the mirror, I seem to be incapable of thinking of anything else. Father says: 'If a bird so much as looks at a cobra—'

NAGA: There! Now you said 'cobra'. Now he is bound to come—
(He mimes a cobra's hood with his hand.)

RANI: Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me. Father says: 'The cobra simply hooks the bird's eyes with its own sight. The bird stares—and stares—unable to move its eyes. It doesn't feel any fear either. It stands fascinated, watching the changing colours in the eyes of the cobra. It

just stares, its wings half-opened as though it was sculpted in the sunlight.'

NAGA: Then the snake strikes and swallows the bird.

(He kisses her. The Flames surround them and dance, and sing. Naga and Rani join them).

FLAMES: *Come let us dance
through the weaver-bird's nest
and light the hanging lamps
of glow-worms
through the caverns in the ant-hill
and set the diamond
in the cobra's crown ablaze
through the blind woman's dream
through the deaf-mute's song
Come let us flow
down the tresses of time
all light and song.*

Act Two

Rani is sitting in a corner, hiding her face behind her knees, her arms wrapped around her legs. Naga is watching her with a smile, from the bed. The Flames are watching them humming the last lines of the song.

FLAMES (*sing*): *Come let us flow
down the tresses of time
all light and song.*

(As the song fades away)

NAGA: What is it now?

RANI: Go away! Don't talk to me.

NAGA: But why are you crying?

RANI: I said be quiet.

(Pause.)

I didn't know you were such a bad man. I should have known the moment you started using honeyed words.

(Pause.)

Had I known, I would never have agreed to marry you. What will Father and Mother say if they come to know?

NAGA: They will say: 'Good! Our daughter is following nicely in our footsteps—'

RANI (*exploding*): Quiet! I warn you, I am your wife and you don't have to answer anyone about me. But I will not have you say such things about my parents. They are not like—like—like dogs!

NAGA (*laughs*): What have dogs done to deserve sole credit for it, you silly goose? Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crabs, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows—even the geese! The female begins to smell like the wet earth. And stung by her smell, the King Cobra starts searching for his Queen. The tiger bellows for his mate. When the flame of the forest blossoms into a fountain of red and the earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark limestone caves from the womb of the heavens to the dark netherworlds, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms—everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere.

RANI: Goodness! Goats have to be sacrificed and buffaloes slaughtered to get a word out of you in the mornings. But at night—how you talk! Snakes and lizards may do what they like, but human beings should have some sense of shame.

NAGA (*suddenly looks out*): It is almost dawn. I must go.

RANI: No! No!

NAGA: Listen! The drongo. And the *koel*.

RANI: Why don't those birds choke on their own songs? Who has given them the right to mess about with other creatures' nights?

NAGA: I'll be back again at night.

RANI: Only at night? Not for lunch?

NAGA: Of course. There's always that. (*Pause.*) Listen, Rani. I shall come home every day twice. At night and of course again at mid-day. At night, wait for me here in this room. When I come

and go at night, don't go out of this room, don't look out of the window—whatever the reason. And don't ask me why.

RANI: No, I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle—none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. So I can too, can't I?

(Runs to him and embraces him.)

While the above scene is in progress, Kurudavva and Kappanna have arrived outside. As usual, he lowers her to the ground and sits under the tree. She goes to the door. Stumbles over the dog. Surprised, she feels it, makes sure it is dead. Feels the lock on the door. Calls out in a whisper.)

KURUDAVVA: Kappanna!

KAPPANNA: Yes.

KURUDAVVA: Come here.

KAPPANNA: No, I won't.

KURUDAVVA: I said come here. This fool doesn't understand a thing. Quick. Something funny is happening here.

(Reluctantly, Kappanna comes to the door.)

Look here.

KAPPANNA: A dog. And it is dead!

KURUDAVVA: It wasn't here the night before. And the lock is still there. I wonder what the silly girl has gone and done. Look inside the house. Can you see anything?

KAPPANNA *(looking)*: No!

KURUDAVVA: Listen.

(They listen. Naga walks toward the bathroom.)

KAPPANNA: Footsteps.

KURUDAVVA: It's a man.

KAPPANNA: Appanna! He is inside. He will be out any minute!

KURUDAVVA: He can't! What about the lock? *(Thinks.)* And if Appanna locked the door from the outside, who is in there

now? Look, look. See who it is.

KAPPANNA: I can't see anything from here.

KURUDAVVA: Try the window at the back.

(Reluctantly he goes to the backyard. Naga goes to the bathroom, turns into a King Cobra and goes out of the drain, just as Kappanna arrives at the spot and sees the Cobra emerge.)

KAPPANNA *(screams)*: Snake! Snake! A cobra!

(Rushes to the front door, picks up Kurudavva and starts to run.)

KURUDAVVA: Where?

KAPPANNA: In the backyard! Out of the bathroom drain!

KURUDAVVA: Then why are you running? It isn't following us, is it? It should be gone by now. Let me down! Let me down!
(Rani hears the commotion, comes running to the front door.)

RANI: Who is it? Kurudavva?

KURUDAVVA: Let me down! Yes, it's me, child.
(Comes back to the door.)

KAPPANNA: Don't go too near, Mother. It may still be there—

RANI: What is it. Kurudavva? Who was that shouting?

KURUDAVVA: I won't come any closer. I'll speak from here.
Kappanna says he saw a cobra there.

RANI: Where?

KURUDAVVA: Coming out of your bathroom drain.

RANI: Oh my God! I hope he didn't go to the bathroom—
(Rushes to the bathroom, calling out to Appanna.)

Listen—listen—

(She is relieved to find it empty. Comes back to the front door.)

KURUDAVVA: Who are you calling? Appanna?

RANI: Yes, he left just a few minutes ago. I think he's gone—thank God!

KURUDAVVA: He must be inside the house. We have been here the last half hour. No one has come out.

RANI: He certainly isn't in the house!

(Pushes the door.)

There! The door is locked from the outside. It wouldn't be if he was in here, would it? Perhaps you didn't see him come out?

KURUDAVVA: May be so. Well, my child, have you started your married life?

RANI *(blushing)*: Yes, Kurudavva.

(Yawns.)

KURUDAVVA *(laughs)*: Tired? Poor thing! So you see the power of my root? Didn't I tell you your husband will cling to you once he tastes it?

(Rani, embarrassed, tries to laugh.)

KURUDAVVA: Well, my work is done. I'll be off now. Bless you. Burn incense in a ladle and stick it into the drain. Keeps the reptiles out.

RANI: Please come again.

(Kappanna lifts up Kurudavva. They talk in whispers.)

KAPPANNA: If the steps we heard were Appanna's, well, he certainly hasn't come out of the house.

KURUDAVVA: Of course, he is in there. Once couples start playing games, they begin to invent some pretty strange ones. Come on. Let's go.

(They move. Rani thinks for a while, goes into the bedroom. Kappanna, carrying Kurudavva, suddenly stiffens. Stands frozen, staring at something in the distance.)

KURUDAVVA: Kappanna—Kappanna—

(He does not respond. She hits him on his back in an effort to wake him up. But he is immobile.)

KURUDAVVA *(panicky)*: Kappanna! What is it? Why do you act like this? Kappanna—

(He suddenly wakes up.)

KAPPANNA: Eh? Nothing.

KURUDAVVA: What do you mean nothing? Giving me a scare like that—

KAPPANNA: You won't believe me if I tell you. It was her again—

KURUDAVVA: Why shouldn't I believe you if you talked sense? Just admit it's one of the girls from a nearby village, instead of making up fancy stories about some—

KAPPANNA: She is not a village girl. Which village girl will dare step out at this hour? And I am not making up stories. That day she floated out from the haunted well. Just now she stepped out of the cemetery. Looked at me. Smiled and waved.

KURUDAVVA: Perhaps she is an ogress. Of demon birth. Or someone from the netherworld, perhaps. A spirit. Why don't you just say who it is—

KAPPANNA: You won't let me—

KURUDAVVA: When you talk like this I feel we are falling apart. It's a fear I have never felt before.

KAPPANNA: Mother, just listen—

KURUDAVVA: Shut up now!

(They exit, arguing. It gets brighter. It is mid-day. Appanna enters. Sees the dead dog.)

APPANNA: What's wrong with this dog? Why is it asleep in the hot sun?

(Whistles. Then comes nearer and inspects.)

It is dead! Dead! I paid fifty rupees for it!

(Rani comes to the front window and looks out.)

APPANNA: Something has bitten it. Perhaps that cobra—from that ant-hill...

(To Rani.) This was no ordinary hound. It cornered a cheetah once. It must have sensed the cobra. It must have given a fight. Didn't you hear anything at night?

(She shakes her head. He gets up.)

APPANNA: I'd better go and find an Untouchable to bury the carcass.

(Appanna exits. Rani stares after him nonplussed. Touches herself on her cheek.)

RANI: But last night... he had blood on his cheeks... and shoulders.

Now...

(Goes to the kitchen. Starts cooking. Appanna comes, bathes, sits down to eat. She serves him food. He gets up. Locks the door and goes away.

While all this is going on, the Story narrates the following.)

STORY: The death of the dog infuriated Appanna. He next brought a mongoose. The mongoose lasted only one day. But it had evidently given a tougher fight: its mouth was full of blood. There were bits of flesh under its claws. Bits of snakeskin were found in its teeth.

Rani fainted when she saw the dead mongoose. That night he did not visit her. There was no sign of him the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started visiting again, his body was covered with wounds which had only partly healed. She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him. But she never questioned him about them. It was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him.

(It gets dark on stage. Rani hurriedly lights the lamps in the house.)

RANI: Wait now. Don't be impatient. It won't be long... It will open out. Reach out with its fragrance.

(Rushes into her bedroom. Waits tensely. Suddenly jumps up, breathes in deeply.)

There it is... The smell of the blossoming nightqueen! How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!

(Naga comes, they embrace. They make love. Naga plays with her loose hair. She suddenly laughs.)

NAGA: What is it?

RANI: Thank God.

NAGA: Why?

RANI: All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the morning, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry. But my real anxiety began as the evening approached. I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed, my whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home—that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far-away tree—it is sunset. The chorus of crickets spreading from one grove to another—it is night. Now he will come. Suppose he doesn't tonight? Suppose the nightqueen does not blossom? Suppose it's all a dream? Every night the same anxiety. The same cold feeling deep within me! Thank God. That's all past now.

NAGA: Why?

RANI: I have definite evidence to prove I was not fantasizing.

NAGA: What evidence?

RANI: I am pregnant.

(He stares at her, dumbfounded.)

Why are you looking at me like that? There is a baby in my womb.

(He stares blankly.)

We are going to have a baby.

(Pause.)

It doesn't make you happy?

(Anguished.) What am I going to do with you? Laugh? Cry? Bang my head against the wall? I can never guess how you'll react. I thought you would dance with joy on hearing the news. That you would whirl me around and fondle me. Feel my stomach gently and kiss me. All that—

(Pause.)

Actually, I was also afraid you might not do anything of the sort. That's why I hid the news from you all these months. I can't make any sense of you even when it is just the two of us. Now a third life joins us! I didn't know if that would be too much for you. So I was silent.

(Her eyes fill up.)

What I feared has come true. What kept me silent has happened. You are not happy about the baby. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes you are so cold-blooded—you cannot be human.

(Forcibly puts his hand on her belly.)

Just feel! Feel! Our baby is crouching in there, in the darkness, listening to the sounds from the world outside—as I do all day long.

NAGA (*dully*): I am glad you hid the news from me all this time. Even now, try to keep from speaking about it as long as possible. Keep it a secret.

RANI: From whom?

NAGA: From me.

RANI: What are you talking about? I have already told you. How can it be a secret again? And how long can it remain a secret? Another fifteen days? Three weeks?

NAGA (*sadly*): I realize it cannot remain a secret for long. That is why I said, as long as possible. Please, do as I tell you.

RANI (*blankly*): Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The snarl in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you.

(He is silent.)

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But

now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit—I could bear it. But now—sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

(Naga opens his mouth to say something.)

RANI: I know. Don't ask questions. Do as I say.

NAGA *(laughs)*: That is not what I was going to say.

RANI: You don't want the child, do you? If I had remained barren, I could have spent my whole life happily trying to work out whether all of this was real or a dream. But this is no dream now. Dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb.

(Suddenly.)

What shall I do? Shall I have an abortion?

(Naga stares, blankly.)

I may find a sharp instrument in the kitchen—a ladle, a knife. Or I can ask Kurudavva's help. No, it's too late. It's five months old. Too big to be kept a secret. Forgive me. I know it's my fault. But the secret will be out whatever I do.

NAGA: It's almost morning. I must go.

RANI *(waking up)*: What?

NAGA: I have to go.

RANI *(gently)*: Go.

(She turns away. Naga takes a step to go. They both freeze. The lights change sharply from night to mid-day. In a flash, Naga becomes Appanna: Pushes her to the floor and kicks her.)

APPANNA: Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?

RANI: I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong!

APPANNA: You haven't? And yet you have a bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I'll let you get away with that? You shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut—!

(He beats her. The Cobra watches this through a window and moves about, frantic. Neither notices it.)

APPANNA: I swear to you I am not my father's son, if I don't abort that bastard! Smash it into dust! Right now—

(Drags her into the street. Picks up a huge stone to throw on her. The Cobra moves forward, hissing loudly, drawing attention to itself. Rani screams.)

RANI: Oh my God! A snake! A cobra!

(Appanna throws the stone at the Cobra which instantly withdraws. Rani uses this moment to run into the house and lock herself in. Appanna runs behind her and bangs on the door.)

APPANNA: Open the door! Open the door, you whore! All right then, I'll show you. I'll go to the Village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna.

(He exits. She rushes to her bedroom. Lights change to night. She is crying on the floor. Naga comes and sits glumly nearby.)

RANI: Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village? Why don't you kill me instead? I would have killed myself. But there's not even a rope in this house for me to use.

NAGA: Rani, the Village Elders will sit in judgement. You will be summoned. That cannot be avoided.

RANI: Look at the way you talk—as if you were referring to someone else. After all, you complained to the Elders about me. Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn't a whore.

NAGA: I'm sorry, but it can't be done. Rani, listen. You do trust me, don't you?

RANI: You ask me that? Isn't all this a result of trusting you?
(*Suddenly helpless.*) Who else is there for me?

NAGA: Then listen to me carefully. When you face the Elders, tell them you will prove your innocence. Say you will undertake the snake ordeal.

RANI: Snake ordeal? What is that?

NAGA: You know the ant-hill under the banyan tree. Almost like a mountain. A King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into the ant-hill—

RANI (*screams*): What?

NAGA: Yes. And pull out the King Cobra. And take your oath by that Cobra.

RANI: I can't! I can't!

NAGA: There is no other way.

RANI: Yes, there is. Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll die like your dog and your mongoose.

NAGA: No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth.

RANI: What truth?

NAGA: The truth. Tell the truth while you are holding the cobra.

RANI: What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA: Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI: And if I lie?

NAGA: It will bite you.

RANI: God!

(And then gently, almost menacingly.)

And suppose what I think is the truth turns out to be false?

NAGA: I'm afraid it will have to bite you. What you think is not of any consequence. It must be the truth.

(Anguished.)

I can't help it, Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be.

RANI: Oh, God!

NAGA *(gets up)*: All will be well, Rani. Don't worry. Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have ever wanted.

(He turns to go.)

RANI: Wait!

(She suddenly runs to him and embraces him.)

Please hold me tight. I'm afraid. Not of the cobra. Nor of death! Of you. For you. You say you'll become my slave tomorrow. That we will be together again. Why then does your heart hammer so frantically? I had not even noticed it until now. And now, why is it fluttering like a bird ambushed in a net? Why this welcome to my child?

(He slowly moves her away. Unable to look at him, unable to keep quiet, she leans her forehead against the wall.)

The night is almost over. You must go. But I know this is not a morning like any before. Tomorrow won't be a day like any other day. I don't want any tomorrows. Or days after. I want this night to last forever. Remain unchanged. I mustn't let you go. I must listen to my heart and hold you back. Take you like a baby in my arms and keep you safe.

(As she talks, Naga moves down the steps, turns into a snake and goes away. She suddenly turns to him. He is not there.)

Listen. Please. Wait.

(She rushes out. Runs to the front door. Lifts her hand to open the latch. And freezes.)

But the door...I had locked it from inside. And it is still locked.

(A new thought occurs to her. Almost unconsciously, she runs to the bathroom. Looks inside, it is empty.)

Where are you? Where are you?

(Sudden commotion. Crowds of villagers fill the stage from all sides. The three Elders come and take their positions near the ant-hill. The stage becomes the village square.)

ELDER I: Dear child, we have done our best. But you refuse to listen to us. We have no alternative now but to give in to your demands.

ELDER II: It brings no credit to the village to have a husband publicly question his wife's chastity. But Appanna here says: since the day of our wedding, I have not once touched my wife or slept by her side. And yet she is pregnant. He has registered the complaint, so we must judge its merits.

ELDER III: The traditional test in our Village Court has been to take the oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand. Occasionally, the accused has chosen to plunge the hand in boiling oil. But you insist on swearing by the King Cobra. The news has spread and, as you can see, attracted large crowds.

ELDER I: This Village Court has turned into a Country Fair. Such curiosity is not healthy for the village, nor conducive to justice.

ELDER III: Listen to us even now. If something goes wrong and the Cobra bites you, not just your life but the life of the child you carry will be in jeopardy. We risk the sin of killing your unborn child.

ELDER II: To risk visiting such a sin on the whole village and on the Village Elders purely for a personal whim of yours is not right. Think again. Listen to us. Desist from this stupidity.

ELDER I: We shall be content if you go through the ordeal of the red-hot iron.

RANI: I am young and immature. I know nothing. But I ask pardon of the Elders. I must swear by the King Cobra.

(The Elders discuss animatedly among themselves.)

ELDER I: All right. If you insist. Come now child. Truth shall prevail. Come.

(Rani steps up to the ant-hill. The crowds surge forward. The Cobra rears its head out of the ant-hill. The crowd steps back in terror. Even Rani is scared and runs back. The Cobra waits, swaying its hood. Rani steps farther and farther back. The Cobra goes back into the ant-hill.)

ELDER II: Go on, child. Don't delay now.

RANI: I am scared. Please, if the Cobra bites me, what shall I do?
I am afraid—

(Runs to Appanna.)

Please, please, help me—

APPANNA: You whore!

ELDER III: Appanna, there is no need to be vituperative. She may have erred. But she is a child yet. Even we feel shaken by the sight of the King Cobra. So her fright is quite understandable.

ELDER I: If you are afraid, there is no need to go through with the ordeal. Accept your guilt. We shall then go on to consider the punishment.

RANI: But I have not done anything wrong. I am not guilty of anything. What shall I plead guilty to?

ELDER II (*angry*): Listen to me. We have been patient until now because of your youth. We have given in to your whims. But you have tested us enough. Either confess or accept the ordeal.

ELDER III: Remember, child, you have a choice of ordeals even now.

RANI (*looking at the ant-hill*): All right. I shall take my oath, holding the red-hot iron.

(A roar of disappointment from the crowds. But the Elders are delighted.)

APPANNA: This is ridiculous! You can't allow this harlot...

ELDER I: Heaven be praised. It's a load off our conscience.

ELDER II: We have been saved.

ELDER III: Hurry up now. Heat the iron rod. Quick!

(In all this confusion, Kurudavva enters calling her son.)

KURUDAVVA: Kappanna, my son! Where are you? Can you hear me?

RANI: Kurudavva—

KURUDAVVA: Has my son come here? Why is he teasing me like this? Kappanna—

RANI: Kurudavva—

(Tries to rush after her but is stopped by Appanna.)

APPANNA: Where do you think you are going?

ELDER I: Do you know that old woman? Don't you know she has gone mad?

ELDER II: Her son disappeared a week ago.

ELDER III: We have all told her he is not in the village. But she won't listen. Wanders around day and night calling him.

KURUDAVVA: Kappanna, son—

RANI *(snarling at Appanna)*: If you don't let go, I'll—

(Taken aback by her fury, Appanna lets her go.)

ELDER III: Let her. The rod isn't hot yet.

RANI *(runs to Kurudavva)*: Help me, Kurudavva. Help me, please!

KURUDAVVA: Do you know where he is? He—

RANI: It's me. Rani. What shall I do? I don't know...

KURUDAVVA: My Kappanna is gone. Melted away.

RANI: I am innocent, Kurudavva. I haven't done anything, what shall I do?

KURUDAVVA: I woke up. It was midnight. I heard him panting. He was not in his bed. He was standing up...stiff...like a wooden pillar. Suddenly I knew. There was someone else in the house. A third person.

RANI (*mesmerized*): Who was it?

KURUDAVVA: If only I had eyes! I would have seen her. I would have recognized. But what can one do with these pebbles? When he tried to tell me I didn't listen. I was deaf. A temptress from beyond? A *yaksha* woman? Perhaps a snake woman? But not a human being. No. What woman would come inside our house at that hour? And how? She wasn't even breathing. I shouted: 'Who are you? What do you want from us? Go away!' Suddenly the door burst open. The rushing wind shook the rafters. He slipped from my hands and was gone. Never came back.

ELDER I: Rani—

KURUDAVVA: Now I wander about calling him. They tell me he is not in the village. They think I am mad. I know he is not here. I know he won't come back. But what can I do? How can I sit in the house doing nothing? I must do something for him.

ELDER II: Rani—

KURUDAVVA: I must go. Look for my son. Can't waste time like this. Kappanna. Son, it's your Mother. Don't torment me now, child...

(*Goes out. Rani stands staring in her direction. Then turns to the Story.*)

RANI: Why should she suffer like this? Would sight have helped? Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds?

(*The crowd has become restive. So Rani's remaining questions get lost in the increasing hubub. We only see her addressing the Story, who does not answer.*)

ELDER I: Silence! Silence!

(The crowd falls silent. Only the last part of Rani's dialogue is heard.)

RANI *(to the Story)*: Why should I let you push me around? Isn't it better to accept the kiss of the Cobra and the dark silence of the ant-hill?

ELDER II: Come, child. The iron rod is hot and ready.

RANI: No. I'll opt for the ordeal by the Cobra.

(Goes to the ant-hill, plunges her hand into it and pulls the Cobra out.)

ELDER III: Be quick now.

RANI: Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two...

APPANNA *(triumphant)*: There. She admits it. Two, she says. Two! Who are they?

RANI: My husband and...

APPANNA: And—say it, who else?

RANI: And this Cobra.

(Suddenly words pour out.)

Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me.

(The Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. Music fills the skies. The light changes into a soft, luminous glow. Rani stares uncomprehending as the Cobra slips back into the ant-hill. There are hosannas and cheers from the crowd.)

ELDER I: A miracle! A miracle!

ELDER II: She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!

ELDER III: Indeed, a Goddess—!

(They fall at her feet. The crowd surges forward to prostrate itself)

before her. Appanna stands, uncomprehending. The Elders shout, 'Palanquin! Music!' They lift her into the palanquin. Then, as an afterthought, Appanna is seated next to her. The couple is taken in procession to their house.)

ELDER I: Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity.

ELDER II: Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty.

ELDER III: Bless us, Mother. Bless our children.

(All disperse, except Rani and Appanna. Appanna opens the lock on the door, throws it away. He goes in and sits, mortified, baffled. She comes and stands next to him. Long pause. Suddenly he falls at her feet.)

APPANNA: Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind.

RANI: Hush, now!

(She gently takes him in her arms. Music starts in the background and the words they speak to each other cannot be heard.)

STORY: So Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. For Appanna's concubine was present at the trial. When she saw Rani's glory, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. Thus Rani even got a life-long servant to draw water for her house. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant.

(Her last sentence is drowned in the hubub created by the Flames as they prepare to leave. 'That was a nice story!', 'Has it dawned yet?', 'I don't want to be late', 'Poor girl!')

MAN (*exasperated*): These Flames are worse than my audience. Can't they wait till the story is over?

FLAMES: But isn't it?... It will be dawn soon.

MAN: It can't be. No one will accept this ending.

STORY: But why not?

MAN: Too many loose ends. Take Kappanna's disappearance, for instance.

STORY: Oh, that is Kurudavva's story. If you are interested in that one, you may find her yet, meet her unexpectedly as you met me here, in some remote place. Even in the market place perhaps. Or someone in the audience may know. Or you can invent the missing details. That would be quite in order. I am only Rani's story.

MAN: Even then, the present ending just doesn't work.

STORY: And why not?

MAN: It's all right to say Rani lived happily ever after. But what about Appanna, her husband? As I see him, he will spend the rest of his days in misery.

(Appanna suddenly moves out of Rani's embrace. Speaks to himself.)

APPANNA: What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing?

STORY: Well then, what about her?

(Rani does not speak but responds restlessly to the Story's following dialogue.)

STORY: No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? When did the split take place? Every night this conundrum must have spread its hood out at her. Don't you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer?

MAN: So? The story is not over then?

STORY: When one says, 'And they lived happily ever after', all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores, or a wife who is going bald.

(As the Story speaks, Rani and Appanna come together, smile, embrace and are plunged into darkness.)

MAN: But that ending lacks something. *(Remembering.)* Of course, the Cobra!

STORY: Yes, the Cobra. One day the Cobra was sitting in its ant-hill and it thought of Rani and said: 'Why should I not go and take a look?'

(During the above dialogue, the Cobra enters the house, takes on his human form.)

NAGA: Why should I not take a look? I have given her everything. Her husband. Her child. Her home. Even her maid. She must be happy. But I haven't seen her. It is night. She will be asleep. This is the time to visit her. The familiar road. At the familiar hour. *(Laughs.)* Hard to believe now I was so besotted with her.

(Goes into Rani's bedroom. Rani is sleeping next to her husband, her head on his shoulders, her long loose tresses hanging down from the edge of the cot. Her child is by her side. There is a quiet smile of contentment on her face. Naga looks at the group and recoils in sudden anguish. Covers his face as though he cannot bear to see the scene.)

NAGA: Rani! My queen! The fragrance of my nights! The blossom of my dreams! In another man's arms? In another man's bed? Does she curl around him as passionately every night now? And dig her nails into his back? Bite his lips? And here I am—a sloughed-off skin on the tip of a thorn. An empty sac of snake-skin. No. I can't bear this. Someone must

die. Someone has to die. Why shouldn't I kill her? If I bury my teeth into her breast now, she will be mine. Mine forever!

(Moves to her swiftly. But stops.)

No, I can't. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out my sac of poison. Withdraw your veils of light, Flames. Let my shame float away in the darkness. Don't mock, gecko. Yes, this King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake. Yes, that is it. A grass snake. A common reptile. That's what I am and I had forgotten that. I thought I could become human. Turn into my own creation. No! Her thighs, her bosom, her lips are for one who is forever a man. I shed my own skin every season. How could I even hope to retain the human form? For me—yes, only her long locks. Dark, jet-black snake princesses.

(Smells them.)

They are like me. Reptilian. Cold. Long. They are right for me. I shall summon my magical powers for the last time—to become the size of her tresses. To become so thin, so small, that I can hide in them, play with them, swim away in their dark flow.

(Presses her hair to his body.)

Become their size now! Enter her tresses! Make love to them. They have no sensation. They will not disturb her dreams. But for you, that will suffice.

(A beam of light on him. The rest is plunged into darkness. Long dark hair appear to descend and cover him. He covers himself with the hair and dances.

Finally, Naga ties a tress into a noose and places it around his neck. The stage slowly becomes dark.

Long silence.

Then Kurudavva's voice is heard in the distance.)

KURUDAVVA'S VOICE: Son! Where are you?

(Lights comes on. Rani, Appanna and child are sleeping.)

KURUDAVVA'S VOICE: Kappanna—

(Appanna sits up.)

APPANNA: Yes?

RANI *(waking up)*: What is it?

APPANNA: I thought I heard someone calling me.

KURUDAVVA'S VOICE: Kappanna! Where are you?

RANI: The poor soul! Kurudavva.

APPANNA: In my sleep, it sounded like my mother calling me—

RANI: Poor you!

(Tries to sit up. Groans and clutches her hair.)

APPANNA: What is it?

RANI: My head. It feels so heavy. Ahh! Please. Can you give me
a comb? My head weighs a ton. I must comb my hair.

(He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. There is something caught up in her tresses.)

(To Appanna.) Could you please help?

APPANNA: Certainly.

(He combs her hair. He has to struggle to get the comb through. A dead cobra falls to the ground.)

A cobra! Stay away!

(They look at it from afar)

RANI: Oh! Poor thing, it is dead!

APPANNA *(examining the dead snake)*: You know, it seems to have
got caught in your hair and strangled itself. Your long hair
saved us, Rani. The Elders were right. You are no common
person. You are a goddess.

RANI: We are not important. But our son is the blossom of our
family. He has been saved. He has been given the gift of life
by the Cobra, as by a father.

APPANNA: So?

RANI *(almost to herself)*: A cobra. It has to be ritually cremated.
Can you grant me a favour?

APPANNA: Certainly.

RANI: When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son.

APPANNA: As you say.

RANI: And every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate its death.

APPANNA: But aren't you going too far? I mean—that's done only for one's own father. And I am still alive.

RANI: Please don't say no.

APPANNA: Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out.

(He exits. She sits staring at the snake. Her eyes fill with tears. Music. She bows down to the dead snake, then picks it up and presses it to her cheeks. Freezes. The Story of course is gone.)

FLAMES: Is it really over?...Oh! What a lovely tale! etc.

MAN (*looks out*): No sign of any light yet!

FLAME 3: Pity it has to end like that.

FLAME 2: These unhappy endings...

FLAME 4: Why can't things end happily for a change?

MAN: But death! It's the only inescapable truth, you know.

FLAME 5: Don't be so pompous!

FLAME 1 (*sharply*): Then why are you running away from it?

FLAME 2: If darkness were the only option, we might as well have embraced it at home!

MAN: But—that's how the story is. That's how it ends. I'm not to blame.

FLAMES: Stop making excuses! You are a playwright, aren't you? The story may be over. But you are still here and still alive!... Listen, we don't have much time left... Get on with it, for goodness' sake, etc.

MAN: All right! All right! Let me try.

(The Flames rush back to their corners and wait expectantly.

Rani and Appanna are sleeping, with the child next to them.

Rani suddenly moans and sits up, holding her hair. Appanna wakes up.)

APPANNA: What is it?

RANI: My head! It hurts—as though someone were pulling out my hair! Ahh! Please. Can you give me a comb? I can't bear the pain.

(He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. She gives the comb to Appanna.)

Would you please help?

(He takes the comb. Combs her hair. A live snake falls out of her hair and lies writhing on the floor.)

APPANNA: A snake! Stay away! It's tiny, but it's a cobra, all right.

And alive. How did it get into your hair? Thank god for your thick tresses. They saved you. Wait. We must kill it.

(Backs away from the snake, then runs out, shutting the bedroom door behind him. Searches for a stick in the kitchen.

Rani watches the snake transfixed.)

APPANNA: Isn't there a stick anywhere here?

RANI *(softly, to the Cobra)*: You? What are you doing here? He'll kill you. Go. Go away. No! Not that way. He's there. What shall we do? What shall we do? Why did you ever come back here, stupid? *(Suddenly)* My hair! Of course, Come, quick. Climb into it.

(She lets her hair down to the floor.)

Quick now. Get in. Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?

(Appanna comes in with a stick.)

It went that way—toward the bathroom.

(Appanna rushes out of the bedroom, toward the bathroom, looking for the snake. Rani pats her hair.)

This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, for ever.

(Picks the baby up. Turns to the Man, gives him a thumbs-up sign. Walks out triumphant.)

It gets brighter. The Flames disappear, one by one.

We are back in the inner sanctum of the temple. The Man is sitting alone. He looks up. Sunlight pours in through the cracks in the temple roof. It is morning. The man vigorously stretches himself, bows to the audience and goes out.)

APPENDIX 1*

Note on *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *Nāga-Mandala*¹

My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries.

In my childhood, in a small town in Karnataka, I was exposed to two theatre forms that seemed to represent irreconcilably different worlds. Father took the entire family to see plays staged by troupes of professional actors called *natak companies* which toured the countryside throughout the year. The plays were staged in semipermanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and were illuminated by petromax lamps.

* Condensed from Introduction, *Three Plays: Nāga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, Girish Karnad, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹ This is a considerably revised and expanded version of my paper, 'In Search of a New Theatre', in *Contemporary India*, Carla M. Borden, ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Once the harvest was over, I went with the servants to sit up nights watching the more traditional *Yakshagana* performances. The stage, a platform with a back curtain, was erected in the open air and lit by torches.

By the time I was in my early teens, the *natak companies* had ceased to function and *Yakshagana* had begun to seem quaint, even silly, to me. Soon we moved to a big city. This city had a college and electricity, but no professional theatre.

I saw theatre again only when I went to Bombay for my postgraduate studies. One of the first things I did in Bombay was to go and see a play, which happened to be Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, directed by the brilliant young Ebrahim Alkazi.

I have been told since then that it was one of Alkazi's less successful productions. The papers tore it to shreds the next day. But when I walked out of the theatre that evening, I felt as though I had been put through an emotionally or even a physically painful rite of passage. I had read some Western playwrights in college, but nothing had prepared me for the power and violence I experienced that day. By the norms I had been brought up on, the very notion of laying bare the inner recesses of the human psyche like this for public consumption seemed obscene. What impressed me as much as the psychological cannibalism of the play was the way lights faded in and out on stage. Until we moved to the city, we had lived in houses lit by hurricane lamps. Even in the city, electricity was something we switched on and off. The realization that there were instruments called dimmers that could gently fade the lights in or out opened up a whole new world of magical possibilities.

Most of my contemporaries went through some similar experience at some point in their lives. We stepped out of mythological plays lit by torches or petromax lamps straight into Strindberg and dimmers. The new technology could not be divorced from the new psychology. The two together defined a stage that was like nothing we had known or suspected. I have often wondered whether it wasn't that evening that, without being actually aware of it, I decided I wanted to be a playwright.

At the end of my stay in Bombay, I received a scholarship to go abroad for further studies. It is difficult to describe to a modern Indian audience the traumas created by this event. Going abroad was a much rarer

occurrence in those days; besides, I came from a large, close-knit family and was the first member of the family ever to go abroad. My parents were worried lest I decide to settle down outside India, and even for me, though there was no need for an immediate decision, the terrible choice was implicit in the very act of going away. Should I, at the end of my studies, return home for the sake of my family, my people and my country, even at the risk of my abilities and training not being fully utilized in what seemed a stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere, or should I rise above such parochial considerations and go where the world drew me?

While still preparing for the trip, amidst the intense emotional turmoil, I found myself writing a play. This took me by surprise, for I had fancied myself a poet, had written poetry through my teens, and had trained myself to write in English, in preparation for the conquest of the West. But here I was writing a play and in Kannada, too, the language spoken by a few million people in south India, the language of my childhood. A greater surprise was the theme of the play, for it was taken from ancient Indian mythology from which I had believed myself alienated.

The story of King Yayati that I used occurs in the Mahabharata. The king, for a moral transgression he has committed, is cursed to old age in the prime of life. Distraught at losing his youth, he approaches his son, pleading with him to lend him his youth in exchange for old age. The son agrees to the exchange and accepts the curse, and thus becomes old, older than his father.² But the old age brings no knowledge, no self-realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not even participated. The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions.

While I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back, I am amazed at how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future. By the time I had finished working on *Yayati*—during the three weeks it took the ship to reach England and in the lonely cloisters of the college—the myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable

² In the Mahabharata, King Yayati has five sons; after the elder four refuse their father, the youngest yields to his entreaties.

to arrive at rationally. Whether to return home finally seemed the most minor of issues; the myth had nailed me to my past.

Oddly enough the play owed its form not to the innumerable mythological plays I had been brought up on, and which had partly kept these myths alive for me, but to Western playwrights whom until then I had only read in print or seen on stage only in Bombay: Anouilh (his *Antigone* particularly) and also Sartre, O'Neill, and the Greeks. That is, at the most intense moment of self-expression, while my past had come to my aid with a ready-made narrative within which I could contain and explore my insecurities, there had been no dramatic structure in my own tradition to which I could relate myself.

Indeed this contradiction haunts most contemporary playwriting and theatre in India. Even to arrive at the heart of one's own mythology, the writer has to follow signposts planted by the West, a paradoxical situation for a culture in which the earliest *extant* play was written in AD 200! The explanation lies in the fact that what is called 'modern Indian theatre' was started by a group of people who adopted 'cultural amnesia' as a deliberate strategy. It originated in the second half of the nineteenth century in three cities, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. None of these seaports built by the British for their maritime trade had an Indian past of its own, a history independent of the British. These places had developed an Indian middle class that in all outward respects aspired to 'look' like its British counterpart. The social values of this class were shaped by the English education it had received and by the need to work with the British in trade and administration.

Inevitably the theatre it created imitated the British theatre of the times, as presented by visiting troupes from England. Several new concepts were introduced, two of which altered the nature of Indian theatre. One was the separation of the audience from the stage by the proscenium, underscoring the fact that what was being presented was a spectacle, free of any ritualistic associations and which therefore expected no direct participation by the audience in it; and the other was the idea of pure entertainment, whose success would be measured entirely in terms of immediate financial returns and the run of the play: the practice of selling tickets to cover costs.

Until the nineteenth century, the audience had never been expected to pay to see a show. Theatre had depended upon patronage—of kings,

ministers, local feudatories, or temples. With the myth-based story line already familiar to the audience, the shape and success of a performance depended on how the actors improvised with the given narrative material each time they came on stage. Actors did not rehearse a play so much as train for particular kinds of roles, a system still followed in folk and traditional theatre forms. The principle here is the same as in north Indian classical music, where the musician aims to reveal unexpected delights even within the strictly regulated contours of a raga, by continual improvisation. It is the variability, the unpredictable potential of each performance that is its attraction. The audience accepts the risk.

With the new theatre, in conformity with the prevailing *laissezfaire* philosophy, risk became the producer's responsibility, the factor determining the company's investment policy. The audience paid in cash to see a show guaranteed as a 'success' and in return received as much entertainment as could be competitively fitted within the price of a ticket. A performance became a carefully packaged commodity, to be sold in endless identical replications.³

The proscenium and the box office proclaimed a new philosophy of the theatre: secularism—but a commercially viable secularism.

The secularism was partly necessitated by the ethnic heterogeneity of the new entrepreneurial class. In Bombay, for instance, the enterprises were financed by the Parsis, who spoke Gujarati. But the commonly understood language was Urdu, popularized by the Muslim chieftains who had ruled over most of India since the sixteenth century. Naturally many of the writers employed by the Parsi theatre were Muslim. And the audience was largely Hindu!

The consequences of this secularism were that every character on stage, whether a Hindu deity or a Muslim legendary hero, was alienated from his true religious or cultural moorings; and myths and legends, emptied of meaning, were reshaped into tightly constructed melodramas with thundering curtain lines and a searing climax. Unlike traditional

³ Interestingly, although in Bombay ticketing of shows was the logical result of bringing theatre within the free market economy, in Bengal, where the Anglophile landed gentry had immediately made theatre their exclusive privilege, ticketing was the means by which this privilege was attacked and the form made accessible to the middle class.

performances, which spread out in a slow, leisurely fashion, these plays demanded total attention, but only at the level of plot. Incident was all. Even in *natak companies* run entirely by Hindus, the basic attitude was dictated by this Parsi model.

There was, however, a far more important reason for the superficiality of the fare. The audience that patronized the Parsi theatre professed values it made no effort to realize in ordinary life. Whereas in public it accepted the Western bourgeois notions of secularism, egalitarianism, and individual merit, at home it remained committed to the traditional loyalties of caste, family, and religion. Only a society honest enough to face squarely the implications of this division within itself could have produced meaningful drama out of it. But as the new bourgeoisie claimed to be ashamed of the domestic lifestyle to which it nevertheless adhered tenaciously, the theatre certainly would never be allowed to acknowledge and project these contradictions.

It is possible to argue, as Ashis Nandy has done, that this inner division was not psychologically harmful at all but was a deliberate strategy adopted by this class to ensure that its personality was not totally absorbed and thereby destroyed by the colonial culture. Whatever the case, the effect on drama was to render it sterile. Despite its enormous success as spectacle over nearly seventy years, the Parsi theatre produced no drama of any consequence.

With the advent of 'talking' films in the 1930s, the Parsi theatre collapsed without a fight. In the West, movies diminished the importance of theatre but did not destroy it. In India, professional theatre was virtually decimated by the film industry, which had learned most of its tricks from the theatre and could dish out the made-to-order entertainment on a scale much larger than the theatre could afford and at cheaper rates. India has not seen a professional theatre of the same proportions since.

In the process of settling down, the Parsi theatre had absorbed several features of traditional or folk performing arts, such as music, mime, and comic interludes. In Maharashtra, for instance, where this theatre flourished and continues to survive, its greatest contribution was in the field of music, in the form of a rich and varied body of theatre songs. However, to my generation of playwrights, reacting against memories of the Parsi stage in its decadence, music and dance seemed irrelevant to

genuine drama. The only legacy left to us then was a lumbering, antiquated style of staging.

Yet there was no other urban tradition to look to, and in my second play, having concluded that Anouilh and Co. were not enough, I tried to make use of the Parsi stagecraft. This time the play was historical and therefore, perhaps inevitably, had a Muslim subject. (I say inevitably, for the Hindus have almost no tradition of history: the Hindu mind, with its belief in the cycle of births and deaths, has found little reason to chronicle or glamourize any particular historical period. Still, independence had made history suddenly important to us; we were acutely conscious of living in a historically important era. Indian history as written by the British was automatically suspect. The Marxist approach offered a more attractive alternative but in fact seemed unable to come to terms with Indian realities. Even today Marxist ideologues are lost when confronted with native categories like caste. It was the Muslims who first introduced history as a positive concept in Indian thought, and the only genuinely Indian methodology available to us for analysing history was that developed by the Muslim historians in India.)

My subject was the life of Muhammad Tughlaq, fourteenth-century sultan of Delhi, certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures. After a reign distinguished for policies that today seem far-sighted to the point of genius, but which in their day earned him the title 'Muhammed the Mad', the sultan ended his career in bloodshed and political chaos. In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik.

The stagecraft of the Parsi model demanded a mechanical succession of alternating *shallow* and *deep* scenes. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain—normally depicting a street—as the backdrop. These scenes were reserved for the 'lower class' characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as *link* scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interiors of palaces, royal parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the

street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place.

The spatial division was ideal to show the gulf between the rulers and the ruled, between the mysterious inner chambers of power politics and the open, public areas of those affected by it. But as I wrote *Tughlaq*, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain the accepted balance between these two regions. Writing in an unprecedented situation where the mass populace was exercising political franchise, in however clumsy a fashion, for the first time in its history, I found the shallow scenes bulging with an energy hard to control. The regions ultimately developed their own logic. The deep scenes became emptier as the play progressed, and in the last scene, the 'comic lead' did the unconventional—he appeared in the deep scene, on a par with the protagonist himself. This violation of traditionally sacred spatial hierarchy, I decided—since there was little I could do about it—was the result of the anarchy which climaxed Tughlaq's times and seemed poised to engulf my own.

(An aside: whatever the fond theories of their creators, plays often develop their own independent existence. In his brilliant production of *Tughlaq*, E. Alkazi ignored my half-hearted tribute to the Parsi theatre and placed the action on the ramparts of the Old Fort at Delhi; and it worked very well.)

Another school of drama had arisen in the 1930s, at the height of the struggle for national independence. When social reform was acknowledged as a goal next only to independence in importance, a group of 'realistic' playwrights had challenged the emptiness and vapidness of Parsi drama. The contemporary concerns of these playwrights gave their work an immediacy and a sharp edge lacking in the earlier theatre, and a few plays of great power were written. While trying to awaken their audience to the humiliation of political enslavement, many of these new playwrights made a coruscating analysis of the ills that had eaten into Indian society. This was essentially the playwright's theatre; the plays were presented by amateur or semiprofessional groups and were mostly directed by the playwrights themselves. Unlike in the Parsi theatre, where a hardheaded financial logic was the guide, here the writers, the actors, and the audience were all united by a genuine idealism. They created a movement, if not a theatre, for the times.

Although its form aimed at being realistic, it must be pointed out at once that this drama concentrated on only a small corner of the vast canvas explored by Western realistic theatre.

The door banged by Nora in *The Doll's House* did not merely announce feminist rebellion against social slavery. It summed up what was to be the main theme of Western realistic drama over the next hundred years: a person's need to be seen as an individual, as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstance. Indian realism, however, could not progress beyond analyses of social problems, for in India, despite the large urban population, there really has never been a bourgeoisie with its faith in individualism as the ultimate value. 'Westernization' notwithstanding, Indians define themselves in terms of their relationship to the other members of their family, caste, or class. They are defined by the role they have to play. In Sudhir Kakar's words, they see themselves in 'relational' terms in their social context, and they naturally extend the same references to theatre as well.

Let me give an example. A few years ago Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* was presented in Madras. Eddie Carbone, the play's protagonist, is an Italian dock worker. He is a good man, but tragedy is brought about by his incestuous passion for his orphaned niece. He harbours two young, illegal Italian immigrants in his house, one of whom falls in love with the niece. Consumed by jealousy, Eddie breaks his code of honour, betrays the immigrants to the authorities, and is killed by one of them.

The audience watching the play in Madras was English-educated, familiar with Western literature. Many of them frequently travelled abroad and had a living contact with the Western way of life. The production was a success. But most of the audience entirely missed the element of incest in the play; rather, they chose to ignore it as an unnecessary adjunct to an otherwise perfectly rational tale. After all, Eddie was his niece's guardian, a surrogate father. It was only right that he should be interested in her welfare. You certainly could not blame him for trying to safeguard her future. On the contrary, the illegal immigrants emerged as unsympathetic, for they had betrayed their host's confidence by seducing the niece's affections.

Even apart from considerations of social duties that led the Madras audience to write its own *A View from the Bridge*, Eddie Carbone perfectly fits an Indian archetype: the father figure aggressing toward

its offspring. Our mythology is replete with parental figures demanding sacrifices from their children—as in my own *Yayati*; Eddie's position was not one in which the Indian audience was likely to find any tragic flaw.

To get back to realistic theatre, its great improvement over the Parsi theatre was that it took itself seriously both as art and as an instrument of social change. Yet it remained saddled with the European model. Bernard Shaw was its presiding deity. The proscenium continued, only now the grand spectacles gave way to the interior set with the invisible fourth wall. And that three-walled living room succinctly defined the basic limitation of this school of writing.

From Ibsen to Albee, the living room has symbolized all that is valuable to the Western bourgeoisie. It is one's refuge from the sociopolitical forces raging in the world outside, as well as the battleground where values essential to one's individuality are fought out and defended. But nothing of consequence ever happens or is supposed to happen in an Indian living room! It is the no-man's-land, the empty, almost defensive front the family presents to the world outside.

Space in a traditional home is ordered according to the caste hierarchy as well as the hierarchies within the family. Whether a person is permitted inside the compound, allowed as far as the outer verandah, or admitted into the living room depends on his or her caste and social status. And it is in the interior of the house, in the kitchen, in the room where the gods are kept, or in the backyard, where family problems are tackled, or allowed to fester, and where the women can have a say. Thus the living room as the location of dramatic action made nonsense of the very social problems the playwright set out to analyse, by distorting the caste dimensions as well as the position of women in the family.

How could these playwrights have so misunderstood the geography of their own homes? The three-walled living room was a symptom of a much more serious malaise: the conceptual tools they were using to analyse India's problems were as secondhand and unrealistic as the European parlour. The writers were young, angry, and in a hurry. The concepts defined for them by their English educators were new and refreshing and seemed rational. If the tools didn't quite fit the shifting ambiguities of social life, reality could be adjusted to fit these attractive imports. It could be argued that the refusal to go beyond the living room

exactly mirrored the reluctance of these Westernized, upper-caste writers to go to the heart of the issues they were presenting.

To my generation, a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, to take off from. And where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again by trying to understand what experience this audience expected to receive from theatre? This at least partly meant looking again at the traditional forms that had been sidelined by the Parsi theatre. The attempt, let me hasten to add, was not to find and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations—and conventions—about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn.

The most obvious starting point should have been the Sanskrit theatre. *Sakuntala* and *Mrcchakatika*, two Sanskrit masterpieces, had been presented successfully on the Marathi stage in the early part of this century. Recently, Ratan Thiyam, K. N. Panicker, and Vijaya Mehta have brought Sanskrit plays alive again for today's audience. But no modern playwright has claimed, or shown in his work, any allegiance to Sanskrit sensibility. Sanskrit drama assumed a specific social setting, a steady, well-ordered universe in which everyone from the gods to the meanest mortals was in his or her allotted slot. Even in its heyday it was an elitist phenomenon confined to a restricted group of wealthy and educated courtiers, remote from the general populace.

Along with this court theatre there had existed other, more popular forms—more flexible, varying in their emphasis on formal purity. The exact relationship between Sanskrit theatre and these popular forms is of course difficult to determine. Sanskrit was not a language spoken in the homes; it was the language of courtly, literary, and philosophical discourse. The popular forms, on the other hand, used the natural languages of the people. Further, most of these languages came into their own as vehicles for literary expression only about AD 1000, by which time Sanskrit literature—particularly drama—was already moribund. Even the aesthetics of these two theatre traditions differed. Sanskrit drama underplayed action and emphasized mood. It avoided scenes that unduly excited the audience. The popular forms wallowed in battles and hard-

won marriages, blood and thunder. The biggest hurdle from our perspective is that unlike in Sanskrit, in which plays were written down, this class of performing arts used no written texts and depended on improvisation within limits prescribed by their separate conventions, making it difficult to trace their historical growth. But in India as has often been pointed out the past is never totally lost; it coexists with the present as a parallel flow. A rich variety of regional theatre forms still exists, with a continuous history stretching over centuries, though through these centuries they have undoubtedly undergone changes and even mutilations.

For the first two decades after independence, how traditional forms could be utilized to revitalize our own work in the urban context was a ceaseless topic of argument among theatre people. The poet Vallathol had given a new identity to *Kathakali*, Shivaram Karanth a new lease on life to *Yakshagana*. Habib Tanvir has gone to areas in which the traditional troupes operate, taking with him his urban discipline. He has taught, lived, worked, and toured with the local troupes and evolved through them a work that is rich, vital, and meaningful.

But what were we, basically city-dwellers, to do with this stream? What did the entire paraphernalia of theatrical devices, half-curtains, masks, improvisation, music, and mime mean?

I remember that the idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument with B. V. Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music. The play is based on a story from a collection of tales called the *Kathasaritsagara* and the further development of this story by Thomas Mann in 'The Transposed Heads'. Two young men behead themselves and, when brought back to life, find that their heads have got mixed up.

The story initially interested me for the scope it gave for the use of masks and music. Western theatre has developed a contrast between the *face* and the *mask*—the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present, to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face 'writ large'; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature. (This is why characters in *Hayavadana* have no real names. The heroine is called

Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadatta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply 'the dark one.') Music—usually percussion—then further distances the action, placing it in the realm of the mythical and the elemental.

The decision to use masks led me to question the theme itself in greater depth. All theatrical performances in India begin with the worship of Ganesha, the god who ensures successful completion of any endeavour. According to mythology, Ganesha was beheaded by Shiva, his father, who had failed to recognize his own son (another aggressive father!). The damage was repaired by substituting an elephant's head, since the original head could not be found. Ganesha is often represented onstage by a young boy wearing the elephant mask, who then is worshipped as the incarnation of the god himself.

Ganesha's mask then says nothing about his nature. It is a mask, pure and simple. Right at the start of the play, my theory about masks was getting subverted. But the elephant head also questioned the basic assumption behind the original riddle: that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect.

It seemed unfair, however, to challenge the thesis of the riddle by using a god. God, after all, is beyond human logic, indeed beyond human comprehension itself. The dialectic had to grow out of grosser ground, and I sensed a third being hovering in the spaces between the divine and the human, a horse-headed man. The play *Hayavadana*, meaning 'the one with a horse's head', is named after this character. The story of this horse-headed man, who wants to shed the horse's head and become human, provides the outer panel—as in a mural—within which the tale of the two friends is framed. *Hayavadana*, too, goes to the same Goddess Kali and wins a boon from her that he should become complete. Logic takes over. The head is the person: *Hayavadana* becomes a complete horse. The central logic of the tale remains intact, while its basic premise is denied.

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions—the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds—permit the

simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for 'complex seeing'. And it must be admitted that Brecht's influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productions, went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre. The theatrical conventions Brecht was reacting against—character as a psychological construct providing a focus for emotional identification, the willing-suspension-of-disbelief syndrome, the notion of a unified spectacle—were never a part of the traditional Indian theatre. There was therefore no question of arriving at an 'alienation' effect by using Brechtian artifice. What he did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of nonnaturalistic techniques available in our own theatre.

Nāga-Mandala is based on two oral tales I heard from A. K. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women—normally the older women in the family—while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.

They thus express a distinctly woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions. The position of Rani in the story of *Nāga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into.

Many of these tales also talk about the nature of tales. The story of the flames comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general: they have an existence of their own, independent of the teller and yet live only when they are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long

but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales.

It needs to be stressed here that these tales are not left-overs from the past. In the words of Ramanujan, 'Even in a large modern city like Madras, Bombay or Calcutta, even in western-style nuclear families with their well-planned 2.2 children, folklore...is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away'.⁴

The basic concern of the Indian theatre in the post-independence period has been to try to define its 'Indianness'. The distressing fact is that most of these experiments have been carried out by enthusiastic amateurs or part-timers, who have been unable to devote themselves entirely to theatre. I see myself as a playwright but make a living in film and television. There is a high elasticity of substitution between the different performing media in India; the participants—as well as the audiences—get tossed about.

The question therefore of what lies in store for the Indian theatre should be rephrased to include other media as well—radio, cinema, audio cassettes, television, and video. Their futures are inextricably intertwined and in this shifting landscape, the next electronic gadget could easily turn a mass medium into a traditional art form.

Perhaps quite unrealistically, I dream of the day when a similar ripple will reestablish theatre—flesh-and-blood actors enacting a well-written text to a gathering of people who have come to witness the performance—where it belongs, at the centre of the daily life of the people.

⁴ A. K. Ramanujan, 'Introduction', *Folktales from India* (New Delhi: Viking, 1993), p. xiii.

A. K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', in *Another Harmony*, Stuart H. Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan, eds, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

A. K. Ramanujan, 'Telling Tales', *Daedalus*, Fall, 1989.

APPENDIX 2*

Note on *Bali: The Sacrifice*

It is a tribute to the astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi that he saw so clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India. Violence has been the central topic of debate in the history of Indian civilization. Vedic fire sacrifices, conducted by Brahmin priests, involved the slaughter of animals as offerings to the gods, which the Jains found repugnant. To the Jain, indulging in any kind of violence, however minor or accidental, meant forfeiting one's moral status as a human being. Later, the Buddhists too joined the debate, arguing for non-violence, but from their own philosophical standpoint.

The dialectic found some resolution when the Brahmins renounced blood sacrifice. Miniature figurines, made of dough, were substituted for live animals, a practice that continues to this day. Still, the Jains argued that this was no solution. Although no animals were slaughtered and no meat consumed, these figures of dough, mimicking the forms of real animals, clearly carried the original violent impulse within them. And why dough rather than, say, mud or chalk? Because an offering makes sense only if it is meant as food for gods and is, therefore, cooked and consumed by the devotees. Thus the priests had merely replaced actual violence with violence in intention, which, said the Jains, was no less

* Taken from Preface, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Bali: The Sacrifice: Two Plays* by Girish Karnad (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

dehumanizing. This argument gave the debate a much more complex ethical twist. The Jain position raises the question: if intended violence condemns one as surely as actual violence, that is, if one is morally responsible for merely intending to commit an act one has not actually carried out in real life, is one not shutting oneself up in a solipsistic world, a bleak, guilt-ridden existence with no hope of absolution?

For *Bali: The Sacrifice*, I have drawn upon the thirteenth-century Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, by Janna, which in turn refers back through an eleventh-century Sanskrit epic by Vadiraja to the ninth-century Sanskrit epic, *Yashastilaka*, by Somadeva Suri. Some elements of the tale have been traced back to the first century.

Stories and legends play multiple roles in Indian culture. As the late Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal of All Souls, Oxford, has pointed out: 'Great epics, apart from being the source of everything else, constitute an important component of what we may term as moral philosophical thinking of the Indian tradition. ... Professional philosophers of India over the last two thousand years... have very seldom discussed what we call moral philosophy today.... The tradition itself was very self-conscious about moral values, moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as difficulties of what we call practical reason or practical wisdom. This consciousness found its expression in the epic stories and narrative literature.'

I first came across the myth of the Cock of Dough when I was still in my teens. Since then, my career as playwright has been littered with discarded drafts of dramatized versions of it written in Kannada. But looking back, I am happy that closure eluded me, for the myth continued to reveal unexpected meanings with passing years. Though many of these versions were presented on stage, helping me to come to terms with the tale, I must remember with gratitude an early production, in Hindi, by Satyadev Dubey, featuring Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak Shah, Sunila Pradhan and Satyadev himself.

I rewrote the play from scratch, not for the first time but this time in English, when the Leicester Haymarket Theatre commissioned me to write for them. The decision to end the play with the Queen impaling herself on the sword was the outcome of the rehearsals at Leicester. However, it is equally conceivable that she kills the King: indeed, such a development would be more in accord with the original myth. The

action could also end with the two staring at each other, frozen in horror, as she is poised to lunge at him.

I must also acknowledge the kindness of Neelum Singh, who has retyped innumerable drafts and put up cheerfully with my niggling alterations.

Plays by Girish Karnad in English

<i>Tughlaq</i>	1972
<i>Hayavadana</i>	1975
<i>Nāga-Mandala</i> (Play with a Cobra)	1990
<i>Talé-Daṇḍa</i>	1993
<i>The Fire and the Rain</i>	1998
<i>The Dreams of Tipu Sultan</i>	2004
<i>Bali: The Sacrifice</i>	2004
<i>Two Monologues</i>	2005
<i>Flowers</i>	
<i>Broken Images</i>	

Translation

<i>Evam Indrajit</i> by Badal Sircar	1974
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Dates refer to the year of publication. All the plays have been published by Oxford University Press, except *Talé-Daṇḍa*, which was initially published by Ravi Dayal, Publisher.



'You have probably not seen anything quite like it. Drawing on a myth to ask questions about religious tolerance and violence, it is both alien and completely accessible. ...Tragedy and comedy, the universal and the deeply personal, spark off each other. ...[*Bali* is] enjoyable [and] thought-provoking.'

— Lynn Gardner, *The Guardian*

'The blending of [the various] narratives into an integrated theatrical unit shows the hand of a master craftsman. *Naga-Mandala* is a technical triumph.'

— *Sunday Herald*

'Karnad is a brilliant playwright who can sweep you along with his words and his imagination. [*Bali*] is the kind [of play] that thrives on layers of subtleties that make you want to sit down and sort out the zillions of thoughts it stirs up. ...A powerful play that stay[s] with you long after you have finished the last line.'

— *The Hindu*

'...playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator all rolled into one...Karnad is a renaissance man. Karnad's celebrity is based on decades of prolific and consistent output...'

— *India Today*

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VOLUME TWO

TALÉ-DANḌA

THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

THE DREAMS OF TIPU SULTAN

TWO MONOLOGUES

FLOWERS • BROKEN IMAGES

Girish Karnad



Collected Plays

Volume Two



Volume Two contains three full-length plays and two monologues from the latter half of Girish Karnad's career.

Talé-Daṇḍa depicts the violent history of an anti-caste movement in twelfth-century Karnataka as a parallel of the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' agitations of the late 1980s.

The Fire and the Rain, commissioned by the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, develops a little-known myth from the Mahabharata into an explosive narrative of passion, betrayal and parricide with complex philosophical underpinnings.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997) explores the secret inner world of a man whose public life was a continual war against British colonialism. It was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast in London as a radio play to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence.

Flowers (2004) reflects on the opposition between spiritual and erotic experience by means of a folktale in which a priest persuades his god to perform a miracle.

Broken Images deals with problems of authenticity and bad faith created by globalization, through a confrontation between a writer and her electronic image.

Published together for the first time, these texts display Karnad's unique ability to use ancient myth, premodern history, and folklore as resonant parallels for modern experience, both private and public.

'*Prajavani*, the largest circulated Kannada daily, acclaimed *Talé-Daṇḍa* for its brilliant analysis of the ills that plague Indian society today, while *Kannada Prabha* declared it "the most significant landmark since *Tughlaq*". *Talé-Daṇḍa* is undoubtedly the best play to appear in the last ten years.'

— T. P. Ashok, Critic

'The script rescues Tipu from colonial perceptions and presents him refracted through history in a different perspective, that of Independent India. More importantly, the play is, in a collective sense a reclamation of history, a truth too close to our heart for it to ever fail as a play.'

— Elizabeth Roy, *The Hindu*

'Karnad has taken an insignificant tale from the epic and wrought an electrifying script [*The Fire and the Rain*] from the raw material...exploiting its dramatic potential to the fullest. ...A delectable read.'

— *The Weekend Observer*

'[*The Fire and the Rain*] is a most complexly structured...tightly constructed...play in which every word, phrase...allusion resonates with more than one...meaning, all circling around the themes of inclusion/exclusion, drama/reality...and ultimately human choice. Karnad [has] an awesome command over his dramatic material.'

— Shanta Gokhale, *The Book Review*

'What begins as an interrogation of the politics of language identity travels through the bylanes of affluent middle-class divide of the Bangalore city's topography to reach the conflict deep within Manjula's heart, her relationship with her invalid sister, the central character of [*Broken Images*].'

— Rama Srinivasan, *The New Indian Express*

'[*Broken Images* is] a brilliant script.'

— Smita Rao, *The Times of India*

'There are a number of twists and turns that takes the story breathlessly forward on a journey of jealousy, creative insecurity, adultery and every shade of human emotion whose canvas is as wide as one's imagination and the ability to read between the lines.'

— S. Nanda Kumar, *Deccan Herald*

Collected Plays

Volume Two

Talé-Daṇḍa
The Fire and the Rain
The Dreams of Tipu Sultan
Two Monologues:
Flowers
Broken Images

GIRISH KARNAD

With an Introduction by
Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker

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INTRODUCTION

I

In terms of the chronology of composition, the plays of Girish Karnad constitute two natural and distinct sequences, the first beginning with *Yayati* in 1961 and concluding with *Hittina Hunja* in 1980, and the second beginning with *Nāga-Mandala* in 1988 and continuing into the present with the two recent monologues, *Broken Images* and *Flowers* (2004). In terms of form and content the plays reveal equally distinct and recurrent patterns of thematic engagement with ancient myth (*Yayati*, *Hittina Hunja*, *Agni Mattu Malé*), premodern and modern history (*Tughlaq*, *Talé-Daṇḍa*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*), the timeless but recognizably traditional world of folktales (*Hayavadana*, *Nāga-Mandala*, *Flowers*), and carefully chosen aspects of contemporary life (*Anjumallige*, *Broken Images*). In terms of effect and significance, however, Karnad's oeuvre has been less orderly: the attention he had attracted with *Yayati* was followed by the spectacular successes of *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* in print and performance (circa 1964–74), but *Anjumallige* (1977) and *Hittina Hunja* (1980) had little impact in either medium, and did not appear in English translations (in Karnad's authorial practice, a certain sign of his dissatisfaction with the plays). In hindsight, therefore, *Nāga-Mandala* emerges as his first successful play after a seventeen-year interval, and its

composition signals the end of an unusually unproductive period in Karnad's life as a playwright.

I have discussed the plays of the 1961–88 period in the Introduction to volume one of this collection. An apt point of departure for a discussion of the later plays, collected in the present volume, is the event that brought forth *Nāga-Mandala* and launched the second significant phase in Karnad's theatrical career: his tenure as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Chicago in 1987–8. Oddly reminiscent of the Rhodes Scholarship period during which Karnad had written his first two plays, the year-long Fulbright grant offered him the intellectually stimulating environment of a major international university, the relative freedom of a research appointment, and perhaps most important, daily contact for several months with his friend and acknowledged mentor, A. K. Ramanujan. Two folktales that Ramanujan had shared with Karnad some years earlier resurfaced to form the core of *Nāga-Mandala* when C. M. Naim, Chair of the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, encouraged Karnad to write and direct a new play at the University Theatre. The student production of *Nāga-Mandala* in Spring 1988 represented an unusual collaboration between a major contemporary Indian playwright and the diasporic scholarly community, as well as the atypical beginning of what has subsequently been a distinguished performance history for the play. In many respects, *Nāga-Mandala* is a companion piece and 'sequel' to *Hayavadana* rather than a work of striking originality: it continues the turn from the public to the private and the personal that the earlier play had begun, and takes a more elemental approach to the complication and subversion of conjugality. Its unique significance in Karnad's career, however, is that it re-energized and refocused his playwriting, and led later to collaborations that resulted in other major work.

Karnad returned from Chicago in the summer of 1988 to a high-profile five-year appointment as Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and a political sphere far removed from the

delicate play of fancy and fantasy in *Nāga-Mandala*. Four years after Operation Bluestar and the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the secessionist Khalistan movement among the Sikhs in Punjab had become quiescent, but the country was poised on the verge of that radical renegotiation of majority-minority relations, secularism, and protective discrimination that was to shape the crisis-ridden politics of the next decade and more. In 1989, the National Front Coalition government of V. P. Singh decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission that 27% of the positions in the central administration and public sector corporations should be reserved for members of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Supporters of the policy promoted it as a necessary corrective measure; opponents described it as a political ploy for creating a large 'vote bank' that would favour candidates eager to woo socially disadvantaged groups. The perceived divisiveness of the Commission's recommendations, and the opportunity they offered for cynical political manipulation, sparked off nationwide protests and horrific acts of self-destruction on the part of young upper-caste students who claimed that their future had been irredeemably compromised. The Bharatiya Janata Party withdrew its conditional support from Singh's government, and in September of the same year L. K. Advani began a 'Rath Yatra' (in a Toyota-Chariot) from Somnath to Ayodhya, where he promised the demolition of the controversial sixteenth-century mosque, the Babri Masjid, and the construction of a temple to Lord Rama on the same site.

The mutually contradictory nature of these events was self-evident to any reflective observer. The Mandal Commission's recommendations underscored the ritual divisions and economic inequalities within mainstream Hindu society; in direct negation of this fragmentation, Advani's rhetoric sought to claim a monolithic, benevolent identity for Hinduism, reimagine India as a unified Hindu nation, and inflame collective sentiment against the largest group of religious others, the Muslims. In actuality,

in both inter-religious and intra-religious perspectives (Hindus vs. Muslims on the one hand, the upper castes vs. the 'untouchables' on the other), the deep divisions within the Indian polity had emerged fully, and were generating conflicts more destructive than the 'disenchantment and cynicism that marked the end of the Nehru era'. A quarter-century earlier Karnad had intuited the crisis of India's secular nationhood in *Tughlaq*; written in 1989, *Talé-Daṇḍa* is a play about the nation that acknowledges and contends with the reconfiguration of Indian politics in the post-Indira Gandhi years.

II

The essential method of *Talé-Daṇḍa* is the same as that of *Tughlaq*: to understand the present one must return to the past, because the premodern history of India prefigures and encompasses the drama of modernity. But where *Tughlaq* confronts the problem of majority and minority religions (Hinduism and Islam) turning against each other, *Talé-Daṇḍa* goes further back in time to uncover the history of the majority religion turning against itself. This is a necessary move because the play responds to a later moment in the political evolution of India-as-nation—the decisive shift in the late-1980s from secular to religious (and more specifically Hindu) nationalism, which suppressed individual styles of charismatic leadership in favour of mass politics fuelled by communal feeling. In pursuing their program Hindu nationalists follow what T. N. Madan describes as the 'basic premise of communalism... that the political interests of a religious community are unaffected by ethnic, linguistic, class, or any other divisions within the community. Rather, these interests are defined antagonistically in relation to other similarly conceived religious communities' ('Religion' 61). The second claim, put forward not so much by Hindu ideologues as by political theorists attempting to explain the rise of religious extremism in modern societies, is that the simultaneous appearance of secularization and

fundamentalism is only 'apparently contradictory, for in truth it is the marginalization of faith, which is what secularism is, that permits the perversion of religion. There are no fundamentalists or revivalists in traditional society' (Madan, 'Secularism' 749).

Karnad's play is a rejoinder to the claims that Hinduism is a monolithic cultural unity which can unproblematically oppose rival systems of belief like Islam, and that religious intolerance is a problem created by a secularized modernity. The play's historical narrative centers on the twelfth-century *Virasaiva* movement of religious reform and protest, led by the poet-saint Basavanna, which flourished for a time in the city of Kalyan (in present-day Karnataka) under the patronage of King Bijjala, but ended in violence when the new community translated its opposition to caste into practice by arranging a marriage between a brahmin girl and an untouchable boy. To focus on the hierarchical disunity of Hinduism, Karnad foregrounds the problem of caste and relegates the devotional, mystical, and poetic features of the movement to the background. And to highlight the pervasiveness of violence in a 'traditional' society, he incorporates the conflicts not only across caste boundaries within brahminical Hinduism, but also between Hinduism and reformist religions like Buddhism and Jainism. Two further arguments emerge from this representation: for Hinduism to claim an exclusive right in the constitution of an Indian nation is to flout a long-term history of racial and religious diversity, and for Hinduism to claim a pristine pre-Islamic past is to deny its own history of reform, protest, sectarianism, and violence.

Caste appears in *Talé-Daṇḍa* as the basis of Hindu socioreligious organization across class divisions, and the play presents the philosophical dialectic of caste as well as the practical consequences of the opposing positions. The *Virasaiva* communitarians (who call themselves *sharanas*) have exchanged the boundaries of caste for the bonds of friendship, fellowship, equality, humanity, and social change. The radicalism of such a fellowship inspires King

Bijjala, especially because as a caste barber whose ancestors reinvented themselves as kshatriyas, he has found full acceptance only among the *sharanas*. The contrary position is set forth by the priest Damodara Bhatt, who defends caste's 'logic of inequality' by arguing that 'a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity'. For him the beauty of Hindu *dharma* is that it allows all individuals to be always and only themselves: 'One's caste is like one's home—meant for oneself and one's family. It is shaped to one's needs, one's comforts, one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can accommodate all differences from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari' (56). The conceptual difference here is between fellowship and family, affiliation and filiation, corresponding to the opposing conceptions of caste as extrinsic or intrinsic. For the orthodox it is like a skin that cannot be cast off; for the *sharanas*, it is a cast of mind that can be separated from the corporeal body and neutralized through reason. Karnad's pessimistic conclusion, which applies to the twelfth-century history of the *sharanas* as well as to present-day cultural politics in India, is that caste is ultimately untranscendable, even for those who repudiate it. The movement of the *sharanas* remains an oasis of reform and protest in a desert of orthodoxy, and their own opposition to caste is too self-conscious and obsessive, devolving merely into a desire to challenge brahminism at every opportunity. The brahmin-untouchable marriage is thus a classic example of the right deed done for the wrong reason, and the ensuing blood-bath destroys the very movement the union was meant to celebrate.

In the short Preface to the English translation of *Talé-Daṇḍa* (1993), Karnad commented that he wrote the play in 1989 'when the "Mandir" and "Mandal" movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers [the *Virasaivas*] were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they

offered'. The events within the play offer a covert commentary on both facets of the present crisis because Karnad seeks to enforce the identity between communal and caste violence, and to show that the effects of intra-religious conflict are very similar to those of inter-religious conflict. Throughout *Talé-Daṇḍa* we could substitute the category of religion for the category of caste, and the terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' for the terms 'brahmin' and 'untouchable', without modifying the play's thematics or its interlocked movements of transgression and punishment. This possibility of substitution nullifies the argument that one kind of violence or fanaticism is godly while another is godless, a point emphasized in Basavanna's most transportable insight: 'violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity' (29). With caste and communalism persisting as the dominant sources of present-day political violence in India, the relevance of *Talé-Daṇḍa*, like that of *Tughlaq*, appears overdetermined and inexhaustible, and both plays have taken on cautionary and prophetic qualities of a similar kind.

This thematic density, however, is at variance with the stage history of *Talé-Daṇḍa*, which appears especially truncated in comparison with the rich theatrical life of *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*. Since the play deals with a central event in the history of Karnataka that continues to resonate (in some ways, ironically) in the present-day practices of *Virasaivism*, its most notable productions have fittingly been in Kannada. Of these, Jayateertha Joshi's version for the Karnataka Nataka Rangayan (Mysore), and C. R. Jambe's production for Ninasam (Heggodu) in 1992 attracted special attention. Ramgopal Bajaj translated the play into Hindi under the title *Rakt-Kalyan*, and Ebrahim Alkazi directed that version for the National School of Drama Repertory Company in 1992, returning to a history play by Karnad exactly a decade after his London revival of *Tughlaq*. But there has been no major

English production of *Talé-Daṇḍa*, and several prominent directors who have distinguished records in relation to Karnad—B. V. Karanth, Satyadev Dubey, Shyamanand Jalan, and Rajinder Nath, to name a few—have not taken up this play. When *Talé-Daṇḍa* was published in Kannada in 1990, many reviewers, especially those in Karnataka, saw it as Karnad's return to serious playwriting and placed it beside *Tughlaq*. Fifteen years later it continues to be regarded as a significant commentary on the relation of religion to politics, but there is evidently less interest in maintaining a consistent presence for it on the stage.

At an intertextual level quite removed from the public life of the play, *Talé-Daṇḍa* is also an extended tribute to A. K. Ramanujan, and the culmination of a long-standing intellectual relationship between two leading post-independence authors from Karnataka. Karnad was drawn to his older contemporary from early adulthood because Ramanujan's brilliance as a poet, translator, and scholar of Tamil and Kannada literature seemed to offer an exemplary model as well as an antithesis to his own interests as a playwright, actor, and filmmaker (he sometimes jocularly describes his entire creative career as an attempt to give artistic form to Ramanujan's intellectual insights!). The Fulbright fellowship year in Chicago channelled the earlier exchanges into new and concrete directions. Karnad dedicated the 1989 English translation of *Nāga-Mandala* to Ramanujan in acknowledgment not only of the folktales he had passed along, but the rich conversations between them that had circled endlessly around oral culture, folklore, and the *Virasaiva* tradition. *Talé-Daṇḍa* was substantially indebted to these discussions as well as to *Speaking of Siva* (1973), the brilliant collection of Kannada *vacanas* in which through translation and commentary Ramanujan had accomplished the first major recuperation of this premodern socioreligious and literary movement for a contemporary readership in English. In *Talé-Daṇḍa* Karnad breathed a different kind of life into the poetic texts and historical events by developing a dramatic structure that would 'explain' the relation of poetry

and religious mysticism to political economy and social radicalism, and in the English version of the play he incorporated a generous selection of old and new translations of the *vacanas* by Ramanujan. Following his mentor's example (though not his method), he also avoided the sentimental simplifications of hagiography and sought to invent an action around the figure of Basavanna that was psychologically complex, historically plausible, and theatrically sustainable. The Author's Note to *Talé-Daṇḍa* speaks of Ramanujan's pervasive presence in the play, made more poignant by the circumstance that he died in July 1993 a few months before the English text appeared in print.

III

In the summer of 1993 Garland Wright, Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, directed *Nāga-Mandala* as part of the theatre's thirtieth anniversary season, and then commissioned Karnad to write a new play for possible production during the 1994–5 season. Karnad found his subject in the rather obscure myth of Yavakri(ta) that he had encountered decades earlier in C. Rajagopalachari's prose retelling of the Mahabharata. The play, titled *Agni Mattu Malé* (The Fire and the Rain) was written originally in Kannada but rendered immediately into English for a workshop with professional actors at the Guthrie, and the entire process of change and revision took place in English. The production at the Guthrie did not materialize due to Garland Wright's departure from the theatre, but in Kannada, Hindi, and English, *Agni Mattu Malé* has chalked up perhaps the most extraordinary performance record and range of reader responses among Karnad's plays.

A surprising feature of this reception is a persistent violation of authorial intent that goes beyond the 'artistic licence' theatre directors usually exercise and playwrights usually accept (Karnad, in particular, has always allowed directors the freedom to interpret his plays according to their artistic understanding). In C. Basavalingaiah's well-received Kannada production, the play concluded with the

entrance of a pregnant Vishakha, carrying the child of the lover (Yavakri) whose death she herself had brought about. In 1998, for the first and only time in his career Karnad took public exception to a director's handling of his work when he described Prasanna's Hindi production of the play for the National School of Drama Repertory Company (titled *Agni Aur Barkha*) as a 'travesty'. On the questionable grounds that the performance was well over three hours long, Prasanna had cut the last fifteen minutes of the play and eliminated the role of the Brahma Rakshasa entirely, thus creating unexplained gaps and inconsistencies in the action. By common consensus, the most spectacular and successful production of the play was by Arjun Sajani in English (Bangalore, 1999), but when Sajani reworked the play as a commercial Hindi film titled *Agnivarsha* (casting Amitabh Bachchan as Indra), he failed to mention Karnad as the author of the original! In contrast, readers ranging from the philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi to the historian Ramachandra Guha and the theatre critic Shanta Gokhale have lavished praise on the play, and the composer Bhaskar Chandavarkar has described it as not only Karnad's best work but one that he will be unable to surpass.

The attributes of *Agni Mattu Malé* as a text and performance vehicle more than explain the intensity of these responses, both negative and positive. It is a dense, intellectually ambitious, autumnal play structured around ideas (witness the long and unusual 'notes' at the end of the English translation) and a plethora of tangled relationships which unfold with a rare economy and intensity of words and emotions. Karnad has noted that the year spent in the company of South Asia scholars at the University of Chicago had stimulated his interest in orthodox Hinduism and the complex organization of Hindu society. In *Talé-Daṇḍa* this interest was directed at the sociopolitics and psychology of caste at a specific moment in premodern history; in *Agni Mattu Malé* Karnad reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice in the contexts of Vedic

ritual, spiritual discipline (*tapasya*), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin.

Once again Karnad amplifies and alters an obscure myth for a multilayered reflection on cultural codes, modes of representation, and forms of attachment. The story of Yavakri in Chapters 135–8 of the Vana Parva in the Mahabharata is a cautionary tale about the misapplication of powers that human beings receive from the gods after great penance. Yavakri, the son of sage Bharadwaja, acquires knowledge of the Vedas from Indra after years of *tapasya*, but uses it to molest the daughter-in-law of sage Raibhya, whom he resents. Raibhya in turn creates a demon (*rakshasa*) and a spirit in the form of his daughter-in-law, both of whom pursue Yavakri and kill him. Bharadwaja places a curse on Raibhya—that he will die at the hands of his own son—and then kills himself in remorse. Sometime later Parvasu indeed mistakes the deerskin his father Raibhya is wearing for a wild animal, and accidentally kills him. Involved with his younger brother Aravasu in a fire sacrifice, Parvasu initiates another cycle of evil when he falsely accuses the latter of patricide (and hence of brahminicide). Aravasu then begins his own penance to the Sun God, and when granted a boon, asks for Yavakri, Bharadwaja, and Raibhya to be restored to life. Lives that were destroyed due to human lapses are restored through divine intervention.

In his elaboration of the myth, Karnad forges closer connections between the principal characters, gives them rounded personalities, and inserts an unambiguous intentionality into their actions. Yavakri and Vishakha are not strangers in *Agni Mattu Malé* but lovers whose relationship both precedes and follows Vishakha's marriage to Parvasu, making her more than merely a passive object of Yavakri's lust. Her marriage itself appears to be an arid contract: after a frenzy of sensual gratification Parvasu has abandoned Vishakha to Raibhya's care, and the relationships between the three are startling in their lovelessness and malevolence.

The real Vishakha (not a spirit) also brings about Yavakri's death because of her very desire to keep him alive: what is a magical act of vengeance in the Mahabharata turns into tragic irony in *Agni Mattu Malé*. Similarly, Paravasu kills his father out of deliberate hatred, not accidentally or in ignorance, and although he does not instigate the destruction of the fire sacrifice at the end, he does choose death within the *yajna* enclosure as an act of expiation. The same quality of active volition extends to the play's supernatural characters. In the Mahabharata version the Rakshasa is a device for bringing about Yavakri's death; in Karnad's play, his return to the spirit world becomes entangled with painful ethical choices in the human world.

In a more radical move, Karnad invents the parallel story of Arvasu's relationship with the tribal girl Nittilai, and develops Arvasu (his variant spelling of the name) as the antithesis to Raibhya, Paravasu, and Yavakri. As an actor and as Nittilai's lover, Arvasu counterpoints the brahminism and asceticism of the other male characters, and enables Karnad to systematically contrast the life of discipline and sacrifice with the life of instinct and emotion. This split between nature and culture, body and mind appears in such earlier plays as *Hayavadana* and *Bali*, but in *Agni Mattu Malé* the duality is expressed for the first time as the explicit opposition between brahmin and shudra, with Arvasu functioning as the connective link between the two worlds. As ascetic males Yavakri, Raibhya, and Paravasu have a will to power that empties their spirituality of moral value, and Paravasu's patricide and his false denunciation of Arvasu are of course acts of deliberate evil. Arvasu, in contrast, has committed himself to love and community, and is prepared to renounce his twice-born status for the sake of Nittilai. The play thus associates brahminism with mind-games, egocentrism, sterility, and ruthlessness, and shudra culture with love, compassion, freshness, and hope, although the contrast is not simplistic or absolute. As Karnad himself points out, among the brahmins the transgressive woman (Vishakha)

is chastized but not punished, whereas among the hunters Nittilai pays with her life for choosing Arvasu over her husband. Ironically, Arvasu loses Nittilai because of his inability to abandon orthodoxy at a crucial moment—even as he lags behind to perform the last rites for Yavakri, Nittilai is given away to another man.

Arvasu's identity as actor further complicates the treatment of brahminism, because in terms of both origin and practice theatrical performance complements Vedic ritual and has a place within it, although the *profession* of acting is particular to the shudra caste. In the Notes to the play Karnad argues pointedly that theatre as theorized and practiced in antiquity is not the 'secular' counterpoint to a *yajna* but a parallel performance that can even offer a welcome diversion from the rigours of ritual. The distinction here is not between the sacred and the secular, but between two complementary forms of the sacred, performed by agents on different rungs of the caste hierarchy; the actor's shudra identity is an accepted part of the hierarchy of roles, not a violation of it. The metatheatrical commentary on the actors' craft in the play thus becomes an occasion for revisiting, and celebrating, the myth of the divine origins of theatre. But the most intricate relationship Karnad explores is that between representation and reality—the 'reality' of the fictional characters, that is. When Parvasu contaminates the fire sacrifice by his acts of murder and betrayal, the distinction between fiction and fact is erased in the performance as well. The demonic role Arvasu has assumed in the play-within-the-play temporarily becomes his real self, leading to the desecration of the *yajna* site and the death of Parvasu. A little later, Nittilai loses her life because she cannot resist her human impulse to rush to Arvasu's aid when the enclosure erupts in flames, even though she is in hiding from her tribe. Finally, the redemptive act that ends the crisis within the community is not performance of either kind (the *yajna* or the inner play), but Arvasu's 'real-life' decision to sacrifice his own happiness with Nittilai for the sake of the Brahma Rakshasa's release. All these

interlinked elements make *Agni Mattu Malé* Karnad's most ambitiously metatheatrical play, one in which performance is not just a framing device but a thematic preoccupation and an intrinsic part of the main action.

In the broadest sense, *Agni Mattu Malé* is a drama of sacrifice and expiation. The fire sacrifice is a propitiatory ritual intended to end the community's suffering, but it is corrupted in multiple ways by Parvasu; his death is a form of personal atonement, but the communal crisis is resolved through other painful resignations. Parvasu also offers up Vishakha's life, first to his sensual appetite and then to his lust for fame, while Vishakha unwittingly sacrifices Yavakri to her very love for him. Nittilai dies for the sake of Arvasu, and Arvasu surrenders Nittilai for the common good. The play's unusual capacity to move readers and audiences is certainly bound up with this succession of victims and a pervasive sense of loss.

IV

After *Agni Mattu Malé*, the primacy of Kannada as the language of original composition in Karnad's drama comes to an end. For three decades he had argued that he could be a playwright only in Kannada—what happened to his plays after composition and initial publication was a matter not of his intentions but of the multilingual conditions of print and theatrical performance in India. In an interview that appeared in the *Sunday Herald* on 21 February 1999, Karnad reiterated that 'a language is something you need to develop over a whole lifetime. After having written in Kannada for about 25–30 years, I feel I know how to write in Kannada now...I don't have time to go into a new adventure, looking at and mastering an entire new subject because to be able to speak is not enough. You have to go into the language, you have to go into its possibilities'. In rendering his plays into English, he also often expressed regret that some particular social or dialectal aspect of the original Kannada could not be captured in translation,

making English a less precise medium for his work. Kannada thus retained its primary position in his playwriting, despite the reciprocal relationship between the two languages.

However, all of Karnad's new plays after 1994—*The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), *Broken Images* (2004), and *Flowers* (2004)—are written originally in English and then translated by him into Kannada. Two older plays, *Anjumallige* and *Hittina Hunja* were written and published originally in Kannada in 1977 and 1980, respectively, but in Karnad's own words they were 'rewritten so completely in English that you could consider them virtually new creations in English'. This shift in language accommodates new circumstances and contexts in Karnad's career as a playwright. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast as a radio play in London on 15 August 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence. It was directed by Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts, and cast Saeed Jaffrey in the title role. Karnad chose to write it originally in English because that was the language of first performance, as also of the historical source material he had consulted. The play was performed in Kannada (as *Tipu Sultan Kanda Kanasu*) by the Karnataka Nataka Rangayan under C. Basavalingaiah's direction in 1999, and in English again by the Madras Players (under N. S. Yamuna's direction) in 2000, the same year that the Kannada text was published. Karnad rewrote *Anjumallige* in English as *Driven Snow* for a workshop with British actors organized by Jatinder Verma in 2000, and *Hittina Hunja* as *Bali* for a production at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, in 2002. English is a peculiarly appropriate medium for *Broken Images* (2004) because the play deals with a Kannada woman writer who unexpectedly produces an international bestseller in English. The play was, however, promptly translated into Kannada under the title *Odakalu Bimba*, and received simultaneous Kannada and English productions in Bangalore in 2005, both directed by Karnad in association with K. M. Chaitanya, with Arundhati Nag and Arundhati Raja, respectively, in the role of Manjula Nayak.

The second monologue in English, *Flowers* (2004), has yet to be performed or translated.

With the post-1994 plays, therefore, Karnad has ceased to be 'a playwright only in Kannada' and emerged as the only truly bilingual practitioner in contemporary Indian theatre. His renegotiations of language are obviously determined by multiple factors, both private and public. Karnad's 'real' mother-tongue, Konkani, was not the first language of his childhood because he grew up in Karnataka. Kannada, in turn, has not been the first language of communication within his family because his wife as well as his children were brought up speaking only English. Beyond this, the growing imperialism of English in both the private and public spheres in urban India means that balancing its claims against those of even a major literary language such as Kannada is a much more difficult task at the turn of the century than it was in the 1960s or 1970s. Broadly speaking, published translations and productions in English have widened Karnad's audience at home, while the various commissions by theatre companies abroad have given him increasingly greater international visibility. More than other contemporary Indian-language playwrights, he appears to have benefitted from the global reach of English without relinquishing his firm hold on the language-world of Kannada. As the plays after *Agni Mattu Malé* demonstrate, this versatility opens up a whole new range of subjects for Karnad, and diversifies his drama both formally and thematically.

V

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997) can be described as the long-awaited history play in which, after dealing with precolonial Indian history in two earlier works, Karnad confronts British colonialism in its crucial early stages of military expansion—paradoxically, at the invitation of the British, and for a celebration of Indian independence. The playwright notes that his 'obsession' with Tipu was something else he inherited from A. K. Ramanujan,

who had begun but left unfinished a novel in English on the subject, and mentioned to him the secret diary in which Tipu had recorded his dreams. In 1987 Karnad located a copy of this diary at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library. In 1990, he was among the public figures who voiced strong support for Sanjay Khan's teleserial, *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*, on the grounds that Tipu needed to be given his due as a major figure in Karnataka history, a visionary, and a patriot. When the BBC approached Karnad in 1996 about a play relating to the independence theme, he 'didn't have to think twice' about the subject, and produced a work in which the impulse towards a complex poetic rehabilitation of Tipu is clearly evident. The historical symbolism of the play was realized brilliantly in 1999 when C. Basavalingaiah staged it in the precincts of Tipu's summer palace, Daria Daulat in Srirangapatna, to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the sultan's death.

In many important respects *Tipu Sultan* follows the model of the history play established in *Tughlaq* and *Talé-Danda*. It draws upon a range of historical sources to present convincing portraits of the principal characters, but creates an imaginative plot and resonant dialogue to contain their experience. It deals with a controversial protagonist who can be characterized in radically opposite ways, depending on the observer's viewpoint—as a heroic figure of anticolonial resistance (comparable to the Rani of Jhansi) in one perspective, and a treacherous but fallible (and even foolish) adversary in another. The image in the play of a polity in crisis, both because of internal dissensions and the presence of a powerful alien adversary, carries the same potential for application to contemporary problems that had made the history of *Tughlaq* and *Talé-Danda* politically relevant in present-day India. As in *Tughlaq*, the presence of a court historian, Hussain Ali Kirmani, among the play's characters enables Karnad to reflect on the process of history-writing and the many conduits of history—oral and written, unofficial and official, objective and

subjective, dominant and subaltern. The play also juxtaposes larger-than-life figures such as Tipu, Haidar Ali, Nana Phadnavis, Lord Cornwallis, and Arthur and Richard Wellesley against a large cast of less prominent historical individuals (Kirmani, Tipu's principal queen and sons, numerous courtiers, and military officials), as well as ordinary citizens and soldiers. The result, as in the earlier plays, is a historical reconstruction that succeeds as a dramatic fiction through its polyphony of voices.

In other respects, *Tipu Sultan* stands apart in Karnad's oeuvre because as a play about colonialism it has to grapple with the inescapable psychodrama of East vs. West, Europe vs. the non-European other, white vs. non-white, and colonizer vs. colonized. Avoiding any partisan parade of heroes and villains, Karnad creates ambitious and determined players in both camps who are sucked into the vortex of a major transitional moment in Indian history, politics, and culture. There are several important strategies in the portrayal of Tipu Sultan that unfold simultaneously. Karnad interlineates 'textualized' history with legend, lore, and memory because all these modes of transmission are germane to the story of Tipu. The ruler's fabled persona as the Tiger of Mysore thus figures prominently in the action, both as oral legend and as a military reality that the English must contend with. Karnad also casts his protagonist in multiple and contradictory roles—as a beloved ruler, legendary warrior, loving father, and visionary dreamer, but also as the Machiavellian schemer who plots with the French against the English, the defeated soldier who enters into humiliating treaties with the enemy, and the gullible commander who is eventually betrayed by his own side. The perceptions of Tipu that have the greatest energy, however, are those with Brechtian-materialist overtones: they underscore Tipu's excitement over the 'new ideas' of Europe, his understanding of political economy, his interest in the link between commerce and empire, and his desire for an up-to-date army. In this analysis, the tragedy of Tipu's fall is not only that it made way

for a full-scale colonial takeover, but that it destroyed a visionary who shared the modernizing impulses of the European Enlightenment, and could meet the English on their own terms (much to their chagrin).

Karnad's portrayal of the English characters, while near-Manichean in some scenes, is more in line with the conventional view of colonial conquest and the attendant cultural relations. Ethically, the main English characters in the play are rational, calculating, pragmatic, and ruthless, although their resentment of Tipu's apparent invincibility is also an aspect of what Homi Bhabha terms colonial ambivalence, while their racist contempt for all natives anticipates the unqualified colonialist denigration that Edward Said calls orientalism. Karnad's principal thematic argument is a familiar one: the English succeeded in India not only (or even principally) because of their superior weapons and warfare, but because of their ability to play off members of the native ruling elite against each other. This accounts for the crucial quadrangulation between the Wellesleys, Tipu Sultan, the (absent) Nizam of Hyderabad, and Nana Phadnavis, and the dynamic is interesting from the teleological perspective of the postcolonial present because it depicts the decentered nature of power relations in the absence of a 'national' idea. Karnad's Tipu is a proto-nationalist who resists as long as he can the Englishman's schemes to rob his land, even as he understands that the English 'believe in the destiny of their race' and are willing to die in faraway places for their dream of England. At home, however, his appeals to a common faith fail to rally the Muslim Nizam to his side, and the instinctive hostility between Hindu and Muslim princes alienates him from the Marathas, although he issues a prophetic (and purely political) warning to the Nana about England's territorial ambitions. The pained scenes of Tipu's peace treaties with the English emphasize that a complex, civilized, and prosperous culture was betrayed into subjection because of the pursuit of petty self-interest by key functionaries. In hindsight,

the 'traitorous' collaboration between English and native armies across racial and cultural lines thus becomes the perfect prelude and antithesis to the invention of India-as-nation by nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalists.

The three-layered structure that contains this drama of colonial encounter is perhaps the most striking feature of *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. The basic division—between the scenes from the present which show Hussain Ali Kirmani's attempts to write an 'objective' account of the dead Tipu for the English, and the intermittent scenes from the past which portray the sultan—gives the play a powerfully elegiac quality, because Tipu's life is framed throughout by his death. For Kirmani, a participant-observer in Tipu's tragedy, the matter of history consists not of facts (which concern the English) but with the memories of a fabled ruler that are fading all too quickly. The play begins and ends with memory: Kirmani and Colin Mackenzie serve as the chorus for a highly selective and reflexive history that unfolds cyclically, beginning with the day of Tipu's last battle and returning to it via crucial stages in his slide towards defeat and death. In a subtle, deconstructive move, Karnad also reveals that the interests of the appointed historian are at variance in some respects with 'actual' history. Kirmani disclaims that Tipu ever sent an embassy to Malarctic, the French governor-general of Mauritius, whereas the very first scene with Tipu shows him talking about Malarctic's role in arranging a royal delegation from Mysore to France. The third layer of the action contains Tipu's dreams—partly narrated and partly enacted—along with his interpretations of three of them. Each of the four dreams is a political allegory of his reign; some contain imaginary characters while others conjure up key historical figures like Lord Cornwallis and Haidar Ali. The last dream is the most poignant because it is a fantasy of victory in the midst of defeat and death. The insertion of this dream text into history introduces a level of experience even more evanescent than memory, and makes *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* Karnad's most poetic play.

VI

The two short monologues in English that conclude this collection—*Broken Images* and *Flowers* (2004)—form a radical coda to Karnad's forty-year career as a playwright because they initiate new subjects and forms. *Broken Images* takes up a debate that has grown steadily edgier since independence—the politics of language in Indian literary culture, specifically in relation to the respective claims of the modern Indian languages and English, which must also be recognized now as an Indian, though not an indigenous, language. As a successful author of short and long fiction in Kannada and a teacher of English in a Bangalore College, Manjula Nayak, the play's only character, has led a rather typical literary life. When she unexpectedly publishes a stunning first novel in English that transforms her into the Literary Phenomenon of the Decade, the breakthrough arouses admiration, but also dismay and resentment that she has 'betrayed' Kannada for the sake of fame, fortune, and a vastly expanded audience. (So far, these are the standard terms of the debate over language, and except for the missing Booker Prize, Manjula's story is a transparent send-up of Arundhati Roy's runaway success with the *The God of Small Things*.) Manjula's conversation with her own television image (her doppelgänger) soon reveals, however, that she is an impostor who has passed off her dead sister Malini's novel as her own. The switch to English, hailed as an inspired act of self-fashioning on the author's part, turns out in reality to be an act of dishonesty, desperation, and cowardice, the implication being that the material lure of English as a medium can only lead the Indian-language author to prostitute herself. Significantly, the value of the novel itself is not in dispute—titled *The River Has No Memories*, it is a superbly accomplished autobiographical fiction about a lifelong invalid who 'breathed, laughed, dreamt in English'. What the play impugns is the opportunism of the Kannada author who tries to cash in on a dead sibling's talent.

This almost-Aristotelian structure of revelation and reversal encapsulates the basic arguments in the language debate as they have unfolded in the post-independence period, and points to the striking tenacity of certain oppositions. During the 1950s and 1960s, the difference between the indigenous tongues and English was routinely cast as a choice between integrity and corruption, wholeness and fragmentation, rootedness and rootlessness, decolonization and recolonization. Conversely, Indian-English writers (especially vocal spokesmen such as Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, Keki Daruwalla, and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra) claimed that English was not a deliberately chosen or elitist medium, but simply a 'natural' expression of their private and social experience. In *Broken Images* Manjula Nayak presents the same arguments in defence of her sudden transition—her novel, she insists, spontaneously 'burst out in English', and she was somehow able to intuit and emphasize with the experience of a crippled woman well enough to craft a masterpiece about it. But all these 'literary' justifications are discredited when Manjula is exposed as a plagiarist. What remains is her self-interested argument that looking for larger audiences and making money are not illegitimate pursuits for a writer, leading to a rather bald conclusion about the contaminating effects of English.

By all accounts, this dialectic faithfully represents the impassioned charges that major authors across the spectrum of Indian languages (U. R. Anantha Murthy, B. Jayamohan, Rajendra Yadav, and Gurdial Singh, to name some) have continued to level against English in public forums of all kinds. What is remarkable is that, framed in these terms, the debate sidelines three developments that have transformed the language issue in India since the 1980s, for better or for worse. First, in the aftermath of the 'Rushdie revolution' the quality and quantity of writing in English by Indians bears little relation to the traditions of 'Indo-Anglian writing' as they had emerged before and after independence, so that a new theoretical and critical vocabulary is necessary to deal

with the body of English works that counterpoints writing in the Indian languages. The generation of R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand has to be distinguished from the generation of midnight's children or midnight's orphans, however one may wish to name the new literary progeny. Second, the rapid growth of the global Indian diaspora has also repositioned many of the major Indian-English writers and absorbed them into the international literary establishment, so that India is no longer the primary context for their writing. Novelists such as Githa Hariharan and Shashi Deshpande, who live and publish in India, inhabit a qualitatively different literary landscape from novelists such as Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, and Vikram Seth. Admittedly, regardless of location Indian writers in English reach much larger audiences than those who write in the 'regional' Indian languages or even in the majority language, Hindi, and one may use this commonality of medium as a reason to reject them equally. But the differences between them still have to be recognized in a circumspect assessment of literary contexts: globalism has rapidly eroded the status of *all* stay-at-home writers, whatever their medium, although its effect on Indian-language authors has been especially dire. Third (and somewhat paradoxically), through the phenomenon of translation into English and other languages, Indian-language authors do inhabit a larger and more dynamic literary world than their predecessors—a change that Karnad knows well at first hand.

Indeed, it is intriguing to consider the figure of Manjula Nayak as a displaced version or anti-self of Karnad himself, in terms of both gender and experience. Karnad occupies a special place in the language debate by virtue of writing originally in Kannada as well as in English, and in translating from one language into another. Due to the quality and versatility of his talent he has not led a life of struggle or obscurity as an author, and has not spent his life in a humdrum profession. Instead of remaining a 'regional' author, he has commanded national visibility from the beginning

of his career—not in the genre of fiction but drama. He is also one of the best-known contemporary Indian playwrights abroad. Karnad's own authorial career, in short, seems to counteract the premise in *Broken Images* that English is the necessary bridge to literary and material success for Indian authors, or that English and the Indian languages are mutually exclusive media. The discussion in the play is a complex and accurate recapitulation of the classic grounds of the language debate, but a partial gloss on conditions at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In another perspective Karnad's portrayal is especially insightful, because the issue of a class system in contemporary Indian literature involves not only language but genre. Karnad could have chosen to portray a fellow playwright in *Broken Images*, but he is well aware that a *play* in English, however successful its author, cannot compete with a *novel* in English, because of the qualitative differences between novels and plays as literary artifacts. Fiction in English by Indian and Indian diaspora authors now commands a global readership and appears in academic curricula around the world; Indian plays in English occupy a distinctly subservient position, not only in relation to print genres such as fiction, non-fiction, and criticism in English, but also in relation to plays in Indian languages such as Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi, Malayalam, and Manipuri. The same is true of theatre professionals in the Indian diaspora who write and direct plays in English, such as Jatinder Verma in London or Rahul Varma in Montréal. Their works remain outside the cultural mainstream and command an audience infinitely smaller than the audience for the fiction of Rushdie, Mistry, Ghosh, and others. Accordingly, when Karnad takes on literary politics in *Broken Images* he immediately relates language to genre. The central issue in the play does not involve drama at all but the radically unequal status of fiction written in two contemporary languages, Kannada and English. The exclusion of Karnad's own lifelong form from the discussion is both an acknowledgment of the power of fiction in English and an

imaginative leap into the world of other writers. The formal device of a character being interrogated by her own mechanically reproduced self, the crisp dialogue, and Karnad's fine ear for an up-to-date conversational idiom also make this a technically accomplished play.

Flowers, in contrast, returns to the world of folklore, and is the first work in this genre to focus on male rather than female desire, thus registering a small but important shift in Karnad's dramaturgy. The legend of Veeranna on which the play is based belongs to the Chitradurga region, and became widely known when the Kannada writer T. R. Subbanna (known as TaRaSu) included it in his 1952 novel, *Hamsageethe* (Swan Song). The protagonist of the novel is a singer called Venkatasubbayya, and early in the narrative Subbanna briefly inserts him into the tale of Veeranna, *archaka* of the Hidambeshwara temple. The married priest has been passionately in love with a mistress to whom he takes the offerings from the temple after the evening prayers. One day the *palegar* (chieftain) discovers a hair in the *prasada* and demands an explanation from Veeranna, who claims that the hair belongs to god. Challenged by the chieftain to prove the truth of his claim, the priest in turn challenges god to display hair or accept his head in punishment, and enters a meditative trance to the accompaniment of Venkatasubbayya's song. When the chieftain arrives the next day to expose Veeranna's lie, the *shivalinga* has indeed sprouted long silken hair, and when (urged by the singer) he pulls out a tuft to test its authenticity, blood begins to ooze from the crown of the *lingam*. Overwhelmed by a sense of sin at having injured his deity, Veeranna beheads himself in the sanctum.

In Subbanna's version of the legend the priest's wife and mistress are mentioned only in passing at the beginning. The heart of the narrative is the triangulated contest between the priest, the temple singer, and the chieftain, and the contrast between the brahmins' moral certainty and the insecurity of the shudra king. Karnad preserves the core event of the *shivalinga*

sprouting hair, but recasts the legend as a conflict between religious devotion and erotic love, undergirded by the priest's guilt at his daily betrayal of his wife. The monologue is a swan song of another kind, a recounting of the nameless priest's experience as he prepares to drown himself in the temple tank. As in Karnad's earlier folk-based plays, the relationships in *Flowers* form a pattern of triangulated desire, this time between a man and two women. The drama highlights the spiritual and aesthetic intensity with which the priest has devoted himself to the task of worshipping and beautifying the *lingam*—an intensity that is transferred to the body of the courtesan-mistress. This mingling of the spiritual and the carnal is short-lived, however. The miracle of the *shivalinga* confirms the power of the priest's worship and marks him as one of the chosen, but it also ends his life.

The introspective, confessional male voice of the priest in *Flowers* has no precursor in Karnad's drama. Instead, it evokes the figure of Praneshacharya, the priest whose role Karnad had created in the celebrated 1970 film version of U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*. As the 'crest jewel of Vedantic learning' Praneshacharya is the spiritual leader of a community rather than a caretaker in a local temple, but both men sublimate their sexuality into religious fervour, and find sudden release after a lifetime of repression in an illicit union. In both works, renunciation gives way to sensuality, resistance to temptation, purity to pollution. Praneshacharya's liaison with the untouchable prostitute Chandri precipitates a sexual and spiritual crisis that is still unresolved at the end of the novel, though it ends his circumscribed existence in the *agrahara*. Similarly, in *Flowers* the priest's sexual awakening in the home of the courtesan Ranganayaki turns his world of ossified routine upside down, and begins the cycle of falsehood and concealment that culminates in the lie about the *lingam* sprouting hair. He therefore enacts Praneshacharya's extended crisis in a highly accelerated form, and by the end of the monologue is poised on the verge of self-destruction. Furthermore, both works offer an

ironic variation on what the West calls the whore-madonna syndrome: sensuality is the province of the always ripe and ready courtesan, the world of dull duty and routine belongs to the shrivelled wife. This is arguably a chauvinistic position, though in Karnad's portrayal the priest's voice has an endearing innocence and honesty rather than an alienating arrogance. An assessment of the monologue's theatrical effectiveness must wait, however, until it is performed in English, Kannada, or another language.

VII

The body of journalistic, performance-related, critical, and scholarly commentary on Girish Karnad is already one of the most extensive in post-independence theatre, so that a general introduction to his drama does not need to go beyond a sequential overview of the qualities and contexts of his major plays. There are three aspects of his career, however, that deserve brief consideration because they have a direct as well as indirect bearing on the plays: his place in a multilingual theatre culture; the relation of playwriting to his work in the media of film and television; and his presence as an engaged intellectual in the always volatile Indian public sphere.

It is important to recognize that Karnad's translations of his own plays from and into Kannada and English are only a small part of the process by which his work has circulated within and outside India, and acquired an enduring afterlife. As the last five decades have demonstrated, in Indian theatre the prompt recognition of new plays as contemporary classics does not depend so much on publication or performance in the original language of composition as on the rapidity with which the plays are performed and (secondarily) published in other languages. Works such as *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* are showpieces of this process of dissemination-through-translation, including between them every major Indian language, as well as European languages such as Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, and German. The multidirectional movement is of central importance in a polyphonous culture because a classic

in one language enriches theatre in numerous other languages: it makes a playwright's work available to major interpreters in multiple locations, and generates notable performances and texts for reading. Alyque Padamsee's English production of *Tughlaq* in 1970, Arvind Deshpande's Marathi production of 1971, Ebrahim Alkazi's Urdu productions of 1972, 1974, and 1982, and Satyadev Dubey's Marathi production of 1989 were landmark events in their respective languages as well as a confirmation of the play's 'national' standing. Similarly, Vijaya Mehta's Marathi productions of *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala* (1983 and 1991) extended her range as a director, while her German productions (1984 and 1992) transplanted the plays in a unique European venue, the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar. Hence, while B. V. Karanth, C. Basavalingaiah, and C. R. Jambe are the most important interpreters of Karnad's plays in Kannada, the major directors of his plays in other languages (in addition to those mentioned above) include Om Shivpuri, Kumar Roy, Shyamanand Jalan, Rajinder Nath, Prasanna, Amal Allana, and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. It is no exaggeration to say that theatres in Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, and Punjabi, among other languages, are infinitely richer for having absorbed Karnad's drama. This performance-centered activity has an important textual parallel when the translator is also a major playwright. The Marathi translation of *Tughlaq* is by Vijay Tendulkar, paralleling Karnad's translation of Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* into English (1974), and of Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Wasansi Jeernani* and *Dharmaputra* into Kannada (2004). While an editor at Oxford University Press, Madras, in the 1960s, he persuaded the company's head office in London to publish A. K. Ramanujan (a fundamentally bilingual author and a leading translator) in the Oxford Poets series. Karnad has thus contributed at multiple levels to the all-important contemporary culture of translation—as the translator of his own and others' work, as a facilitator, and as a playwright whose work can be widely appropriated in other languages.

Karnad's extensive work in the media of film and television is remarkable for other reasons, and raises a different series of issues in relation to drama. As a literary playwright he maintains an authorial persona similar to that of contemporaries such as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, G. P. Deshpande, and Mahesh Elkunchwar, all of whom approach drama primarily as a verbal art and a mode of sublimated self-expression. These authors engage with the processes of performance and production exclusively in connection with their own work, and at the invitation of other directors and theatre groups because they do not direct themselves (the English and Kannada productions of *Broken Images/Odakalu Bimba* in 2005 mark Karnad's debut as a stage director of his own work in both languages). Yet in another respect Karnad stands apart from all the playwrights mentioned above, because outside the theatre he is a prize-winning actor, director, and screenwriter for film and television in Kannada, Hindi, and English. His first significant screen role was as Praneshacharya in *Samskara*, under Pattabhi Rama Reddy's direction, in 1970. The following decade witnessed a vital partnership between Karnad as actor, Vijay Tendulkar as screenwriter, and Shyam Benegal as director. His leading roles in *Nishant* (1973), *Manthan* (1976), and *Umbartha* (1982) helped to launch and sustain the Middle Cinema movement in Hindi, while the commercial but 'serious' film *Swami* (1978) drew him into the competitive world of Bombay cinema. Over the same period Karnad also directed a number of significant feature films: *Vamsha Vriksha* (with B. V. Karanth, 1971), *Kaadu* (1973), and *Ondanandu Kaaladalli* (1978) in Kannada; and *Godhuli* (with B. V. Karanth, 1977), *Utsav* (1984), and *Cheluvi* (1993) in Hindi. *Samskara* won the national award for best film in 1971, *Vamsha Vriksha* the national award for best direction in 1972, and *Kanaka-Purandara* the award for best documentary in 1988.

What does this unique engagement with multiple media in multiple capacities imply for Karnad's life as a playwright? His simplest explanation is economic: he took on work in film and

television so that he could earn a living and pursue his first love, drama. The trajectory of his career also shows that his leanest years as a playwright, from 1972 to 1987, were among his busiest in film and television, so that drama and the popular media would seem to stand in an inverse relation to each other—one waxing while the other wanes. When Karnad received the Jnanpith Award and the Kalidasa Samman in 1999, he commented that the two prizes would contribute greatly to his financial independence and enable him to ‘retire’ from films, giving him more time to write. In moments of candour, he has also repeatedly expressed great dislike for the actor’s job. These may be Karnad’s private sentiments, but the distinctions he has earned for his work in cinema and television also confirm his talent for these media, and his ability to engage a serious audience. There is also an unmistakably ‘literary’ bent to his acting and filmmaking. *Samskara* brought a major novel to the screen; Benegal’s films had screenplays by Tendulkar; *Utsav* was based on Shudraka’s Sanskrit play, *Mrichchakatika*; *Ondanondu Kaaladalli* was a Kannada adaptation of Akira Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurai*; *Cheluvi* was based on ‘The Flowering Tree’, a folktale transcribed by A. K. Ramanujan; and so on.

A different kind of connection between playwriting, film, and television appears in Karnad’s personalized conception of ‘drama’: human beings pretending to be someone else and acting out a story that is of interest to the viewers. Drama in this sense is common to all the media that represent human beings in action, although for Karnad plays occupy the centre, and the other activities—acting, directing, screenplay-writing, and television production—are ancillary occupations that feed off an essentially dramatic sensibility and feed back into it. In his 1993 interview with me Karnad expressed satisfaction at the fact that ‘we see much more drama around us than ever before... [and] more people are involved in the “business” of drama than ever before’ (‘Performance’ 363). More recently, in his International Message on World Theatre Day (27 March 2002) he returns to the account

of the first-ever dramatic performance in the *Natyashastra* to re-emphasize the uniqueness of theatre in relation to the mechanical media:

Radio, films, television and video inundate us with drama. But while these forms can engage or even enrage the audience, in none of them can the viewer's response alter the artistic event itself. The Myth of the First Performance points out that in theatre, the playwright, the performers and the audience form a continuum, but one which will always be unstable and therefore potentially explosive. That is why theatre is signing its own death warrant when it tries to play too safe. On the other hand, that is also the reason why, although its future often seems bleak, theatre will continue to live and to provoke.

There is perhaps no better summation of Karnad's work as a playwright than his move to locate the strength of theatre in its potential for failure; notwithstanding a charmed career, he is eventually a poet of incompleteness, fallibility, and loss.

In yet another perspective, Karnad's success in multiple cultural modes has also made him an unusually visible artist-intellectual for several decades. His activities in theatre, film, and television are reported regularly in the journalistic media, and his positions on various issues, both regional and national, carry weight. During the 1960s and 1970s, Karnad's contributions to public discourse were mainly in the spheres of cultural practice and cultural policy, as evidenced in his Bhabha Fellowship from 1970–2, his participation in the Sangeet Natak Akademi's National Roundtable on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre in 1971, and his Directorship of the Film and Television Institute in Pune from 1974–5. As Director of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1988–93) and the Nehru Centre in London (2000–3), and as a frequent commentator on Indian theatre and the arts in numerous national and international forums, he has continued these forms of cultural engagement. He is also not a 'political' playwright of the same kind as Utpal Dutt, G. P. Deshpande, or even Vijay Tendulkar. But like many other Indian intellectuals, since the late

1980s Karnad has had to negotiate a difficult new phase in the politics of the nation, and his stand against religious nationalism has led inevitably to confrontation and controversy.

The experience of writing *Talé-Daṇḍa* appears to have been the turning point in this respect. Karnad was the first Kannada writer to denounce Advani's Rath Yatra (on Bangalore Doorsdarshan) the very day that it began, and prepared the way for similar criticism by other writers. In 1994, when the BJP accused the Muslim community in Hubli of impeding a flag-raising ceremony at Iddgah Maidan (although the rights to the Maidan were then under litigation), Karnad held a press conference in New Delhi to focus attention on the harassment of the Muslims. In 1997 he delivered the keynote address (entirely in Marathi) at the 70th annual Marathi Sahitya Sammelan before an audience of 70,000 in Nagar, pointing to the irony that a country in which the military has been famously neutral in political matters, political parties with an adversarial agenda have adopted a militaristic mode of organization in the name of 'discipline'. Interpreted (and hailed) widely as a much-needed castigation of groups like the Shiv Sena and the RSS, the speech was published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* under the title 'Citizen as Soldier', and remains remarkable for the clarity with which it analyses the fundamentalist urge to stifle debate. Most recently, in 2003, Karnad was among a group of Kannada writers who insisted that the government of Karnataka curb BJP and Bajrang Dal activism over Baba Budan Giri, a Sufi hill in the Chikmagalur district that had long been known for its multi-religious following, but was being claimed as another Hindu shrine 'forcibly taken over by Muslims'. Each one of these events since 1989 has made Karnad the target of demagogic denunciations and threats of retaliation; each one reconfirms his cosmopolitan commitment to an open society based on respect for the rights of others. As the representation of large-scale political processes in plays such as *Tughlaq* and *Talé-Daṇḍa* shows, the principles of secularism and human fellowship

are difficult values that founder in the face of self-interested opposition. But in the quotidian world Karnad affirms what the plays imply: unexamined certitudes are synonymous with death; doubt and uncertainty are the signs of life.

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TALÉ-DANĐA

NOTE

During the two decades ending in AD 1168, in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers. Together they created an age unmatched in the history of Karnataka for its creativity, courageous questioning and social commitment. Spurning Sanskrit, they talked of God and man in the mother-tongue of the common people. They condemned idolatry and temple worship. Indeed, they rejected anything 'static' in favour of the principle of movement and progress in human enterprise. They believed in the equality of sexes and celebrated hard, dedicated work. They opposed the caste system, not just in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the wrath of the orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed.

Talé-Daṇḍa literally means death by beheading (*Talé*: Head. *Daṇḍa* Punishment).

Offering one's head, either on completion of a vow or in penitence, was a common practice in medieval Karnataka.

Basavanna often uses the word to express his outrage at a particularly unpleasant situation or accusation, to mean something like 'May my head roll' or 'I offer my head—'.

The translations of the free verse lyrics by Basavanna used in the play are all by A. K. Ramanujan, who brought this extraordinary body of work to the attention of the world outside. Three

of them have already appeared in his anthology, *Speaking of Siva* (Penguin Books, 1973). The rest he translated specially for this English version. Tragically, Ramanujan died a few months before it was published.

In Karnataka, as elsewhere in India, a man has only to open his mouth and his speech will give away his caste, his geographical origins, even his economic status. In the original Kannada version of *Talé-Daṇḍa*, the language of the play engages with the implications of this fact for a situation in which a group of people are trying to fight caste and social inequality. For obvious reasons, this aspect of the problem is not explored in the English translation.

GIRISH KARNAD

SAMBASHIVA SHASTRI	Brahmin, Jagadeva's father
AMBA	Jagadeva's mother
BHAGIRATHI	Brahmin woman
SAVITRI	Jagadeva's wife
JAGADEVA	<i>Sharana</i> , Brahmin by birth
MALLIBOMMA	<i>Sharana</i> , Tanner by birth
SOVIDEVA	Bijjala's son
RAMBHAVATI	Bijjala's queen
DAMODARA BHATTA	Queen's priest
KALLAPPA	Bijjala's bodyguard
BIJJALA	King of Kalyan
BASAVANNA	The great <i>Sharana</i> saint poet
MANCHANNA KRAMITA	Brahmin, adviser to the king
GUNDANNA	<i>Sharana</i>
KALAYYA	<i>Sharana</i>
KAKKAYYA	<i>Sharana</i> , Skinner by birth
GANGAMBIKA	Basavanna's wife
HARALAYYA	<i>Sharana</i> , Cobbler by birth
KALYANI	Haralayya's wife
SHEELAVANTA	Haralayya's son
MADHUVARASA	<i>Sharana</i> , Brahmin by birth
LALITAMBA	Madhuvarasa's wife

KALAVATI	Madhuvarasa's daughter
INDRANI	Courtesan
MARAYPPA	Boy attendant
BANKANNA	Boy attendant
EERAVVA	Queen's maid
RACHAPPA	Palace guard

Brahmins, palace servants, crowds, tribals, *sharanas*, Indrani's woman, soldiers and messengers.

Scene One

AD 1168

The Brahmin quarter of the city of Kalyan. Sambashiva Shastri's house. The Shastri is lying in bed in a room. He is ill. Next to him sit his wife, Amba, and her friend, Bhagirathi. Savitri, the Shastri's daughter-in-law, aged about fourteen, mixes medicine in the kitchen. Suddenly the Shastri begins to call out.

SHASTRI: Jagganna—Jagadeva—Come here, son. Where are you?
Come soon.

AMBA: Please stop that. You have ripped your throat to shreds calling for him.

SHASTRI: Get him here, immediately. Tell him I want him here.
I feel scared when he's not near me. Jagganna—

BHAGIRATHI: Poor soul! How he torments himself! Can't you send for Jagganna again, Ambakka?

AMBA: I would have. But is there any point? They say there is a crowd of about twenty thousand people around the Treasury. Govind says he was almost trampled to death reaching Jagganna. And after all that, Jagganna had no time for him. He was only concerned about the Treasury. If he cared, don't you think he would have looked in here some time during these four days? He knows his father is ill—

SHASTRI: Is Jagganna here? Why hasn't he come? Jagadeva...
Jagganna...

AMBA (*wiping her tears*): Jagganna's inflicting every torture in hell
on us for having borne him.

BHAGIRATHI: Besides, is it wise to antagonize the Yuvaraj and the
royal family like this? Robber barons, after all. I wouldn't put
anything past them.

SHASTRI: I'm afraid. Jagganna...

AMBA: He has seen with his own eyes what happened to his father
when he stood up to the King. The whole world collapsed
around us.

SHASTRI (*enraged*): I'm screaming my head off here and all you
do is stand there. Go, bring him. Instantly. Go. Jagadeva—
(*He tries to get up but, racked by a vicious coughing fit, falls back
panting.*)

AMBA: Savitri—Savitri—

BHAGIRATHI: Is the medicine ready, Savitri? Hurry up.
(*Savitri rushes from the kitchen with the medicine. She hands it
over to Amba, who pours it into the Shastri's mouth. He quietens
down.*)

BHAGIRATHI: Why can't that Basavanna see some sense? In every
household in Kalyan, it's the same story. Father against son—
brother against brother.

AMBA: And our son sent Savitri back to her parents just to show
us how annoyed he is. But why blame Basavanna, Bhagirathi?
We must suffer what's written in our foreheads.

(*Jagadeva and Mallibomma enter the street in front of the house.
They are both around nineteen. They are in high spirits.*)

JAGADEVA: Come in.

MALLIBOMMA: Don't be silly. I shouldn't have even stepped into
this Brahmin street. And you want me to come into your
house? No, thank you.

JAGADEVA: Come on. Let's show them.

MALLIBOMMA: You go in now. I'd better return home, too.

JAGADEVA: That won't do. You must come in. Don't be afraid. I'm here. Come on!

(He starts dragging Mallibomma by his arm. Mallibomma resists.)

BHAGIRATHI *(getting up)*: Jagganna's come. I'll be off.

(She goes out. Savitri follows her to the door and watches her husband from a distance.)

JAGADEVA: Don't make a fuss, Malli. Or else—

MALLIBOMMA: No, please, listen to me—

BHAGIRATHI *(at the door)*: Why, Jagganna, your poor father is killing himself there crying out for you. And you hold court here?

JAGADEVA: How does that concern you? You'd better look after your husband. You know where he is—

BHAGIRATHI *(to Mallibomma)*: Who are you, boy?

JAGADEVA: He's my friend, Mallibomma.

BHAGIRATHI *(ignoring Jagadeva)*: This is a Brahmin household. Do you mind standing a little aside so the women of the house can move about freely? What are we to do if you plant yourself on the doorstep like a feudal chieftain?

(Mallibomma, mortified, tries to move aside but Jagadeva doesn't let him.)

JAGADEVA: This is my house, Bhagakka, and he is a friend of mine. My friends will come here when they like and stand where they choose. If that's not to your liking, you are free to stay as far from here as you wish.

BHAGIRATHI: I'd do just that, son, except that your mother, poor thing, is alone and without help. And I gather that before taking off with your *sharana* cronies, you sent your wife home to her family—just to spite your parents?

AMBA (*comes out*): Come in, Jagga. Why are you standing on the steps like a stranger?

JAGADEVA: Mother, you tell Mallibomma yourself. I won't set foot in the house unless he comes in with me.

MALLIBOMMA: No, really, I must go.

AMBA: Come in, Malli.

MALLIBOMMA (*explaining*): You see, Ma'am... I'm the son of Tanner Kariya.

(*Pause.*)

AMBA: My son won't come into the house unless you do. So come in, please. I'll have the house purified later. Please, I beg of you—with folded hands—

MALLIBOMMA (*horrified*): Oh, Ma'am. Please don't say such things.

AMBA: Then come in.

(*The doors of neighbouring houses fill up with women, children and old men watching.*)

JAGADEVA: Look how they've collected! You'd think there were some kind of acrobatics going on here. (*Loudly*) Are you all listening? All attention? This is my friend Mallibomma. He is the son of a tanner. And I am taking him inside our house. Are you satisfied? Come on, Mallibomma—

(*The three step into the house. Mallibomma is half dead with embarrassment. Jagadeva is surprised to see Savitri behind the door.*)

JAGADEVA (*growls*): When did you come back? Didn't I say I would send for you?

AMBA: I sent for her. I was alone here. You went off with the *sharanas* and didn't even bother to check if we were dead or alive here. How much can one ask of the neighbours? So embarrassing to—

JAGADEVA: But I had no choice, Mother. I had to go. It would have been disastrous if I hadn't! Listen. That day, Accountant

Kishtachari's son casually mentioned to me that the Prince was planning to open the doors of the Treasury. And instantly I smelt mischief! The King is not in town. Basavanna is away. And the lock of the Treasury cannot be touched unless either the King or his Treasurer is physically present: that is the law. So why should Prince Sovideva pick this moment to inspect the accounts? Most intriguing...

AMBA (*spreading a mat*): Sit down, Malli. (*To Jagadeva*) I hope you don't need to be reminded that you have a father—and that he has cried himself hoarse calling out to you.

JAGADEVA (*looks into the bedroom*): He's asleep? Good! (*Comes out.*) I went from door to door, immediately, waking up the *sharanas*. I lost my voice telling everyone that something sinister was going on. But no one would move.

AMBA: Can't the King's Treasurer handle his own affairs?

JAGADEVA: I told you, Basavanna wasn't in town. He was away in Bannoor with Kakkayya, initiating the untouchables there into our fold. (*To Mallibomma*) Do you know—Basavanna himself told me—all the untouchables there have accepted our faith and become *sharanas*!

MALLIBOMMA (*excited*): Marvellous! (*To Amba*) The problem, Ma'am, is that once Basavanna involves himself in such matters, nothing will make him budge. Even if we had sent for him, he would have ignored us. One can't say what might have happened if Jagganna hadn't taken it upon himself to rally the *sharanas* that day. The Prince would have fixed the accounts and ruined Basavanna's reputation!

JAGADEVA (*laughing*): But once the *sharanas* were up, there was no stopping them. No less than five to six thousand—

MALLIBOMMA: Five to six? More, more. There were at least ten—

JAGADEVA: But that was later. Initially, no one would react. There were barely—

MALLIBOMMA: Ma'am, you should have seen how they treated Jagganna—like a real leader! For the past four days fifteen thousand *sharanas* have been following his commands implicitly—

AMBA: I see, and he gave up all that glory for the sake of his ailing father! Very noble of him, I'm sure.

JAGADEVA (*pleading*): Please, Mother, try to understand. I would have come home sooner. But there was no way I could leave till Basavanna himself returned and took charge. That Prince was in the Treasury—and no trick is too filthy for him. Basavanna returned from Bannoor just half an hour ago. Didn't even go home. Came to the Treasury direct and, do you know, the first thing he said was 'I am sorry to hear your father is unwell. You go home. I am here. I'll come and meet your father later.' Can you imagine? In the middle of all that confusion! (*To Mallibomma*) He is no ordinary man, I tell you. I'm sure he's the incarnation of the divine bull, Nandi.

(*The Shastri moans inside. Jagadeva gets up and goes in.*)

MALLIBOMMA: Jagganna, take your father's head on your lap. Rub his forehead. He'll feel better.

(*Jagadeva does as told, but awkwardly. Mallibomma speaks to Amba.*)

We didn't know his father was so ill, Ma'am. I would certainly have sent him home sooner—

SHASTRI: Put it down on the floor.

AMBA: He's up.

(*She goes in. Mallibomma watches from the outer room.*)

SHASTRI: Why are you sitting idle? Pick it up. Put it on the floor.

JAGADEVA: Father, I'm here. I shan't go away again. Don't be afraid.

SHASTRI: Take it off the bed. Be quick. Why are you ignoring it? Pick it up—

JAGADEVA: Pick what up, Father?

SHASTRI: Me.

JAGADEVA: What are you saying?

SHASTRI: It's lying there unattended. Put it on the floor, fold its legs, otherwise it won't fit on the bier. Jagganna—where is Jagganna? Send for the bamboos and rope.

JAGADEVA: I'm here.

SHASTRI: Not you—I want my son! There is so much to do. Your mother. Attend to her hair. Her head has to be shaved—

AMBA: I can't take this. God, what have I done in my past lives to have to put up with all this?

(She runs in weeping. Mallibomma, seeing the seriousness of the situation and aware that his continued presence will only create more problems, quietly slips away. Savitri stands in the doorway, watching Jagadeva, and weeps.)

SHASTRI: Jagga—

JAGADEVA: I'm here.

SHASTRI: Not you. My son! He has to be there for the cremation. Tell him the corpse is beginning to stink. It'll get worse. Call him. Jagganna—come. Remove the corpse—

Scene Two

Bijjala's palace.

The Chamber of Queen Rambhavati. She is unwell and mostly sits on a couch, reclining against the wall. Sovideva, her son, aged twenty, paces up and down. Adjacent to the Chamber is the god's room with a linga in it. In size, the linga is large enough to be worthy of the palace. The priest, Damodara Bhatta, aged thirty, is performing the pooja.

SOVIDEVA (*screaming*): I shall bury them alive! Hack them to pieces and feed them to my hounds!

RAMBHAVATI: Calm yourself! Don't get into a fight with those *sharanas*, son. If your father comes to know, there'll be—

SOVIDEVA: It's he who encourages those sons of slaves. It's because of him that the vermin can be so brazen, so impudent. I am the Yuvaraj of the Kalachurya dynasty—and those louts have the insolence to make a fool of me in front of the whole city? They know they can get away with anything—

(Damodara Bhatta does arati before the linga. Mother and son stand and fold their hands. The priest steps out of the room, extends the arati towards the two. They spread their palms to receive the warmth of the flame and put a few coins in the plate.)

RAMBHAVATI: Come, Sovi. Sit next to me.

SOVIDEVA: No, I won't.

RAMBHAVATI: Come on.

(She forces him to sit by her side.)

Why do you want to tangle with those *sharanas*? Leave the King's affairs alone—

SOVIDEVA: Stop telling me what to do! I'm sick and tired of being at the receiving end all the time. I won't put up with it any more—

RAMBHAVATI *(tired)*: Do as you wish. Just don't upset your father, that's all. He takes out his bad temper on me and I've just had enough.

SOVIDEVA: Basavanna has been systematically defrauding the Treasury. Accountant Kishtachari has evidence to show he had bilked us of thirty thousand sovereigns. And yet he continues to be the King's Treasurer—our Minister of Finance! Father is totally in his thrall, I tell you. And so are you!

RAMBHAVATI: What am I to do? Do you think your father ever listens to me?

SOVIDEVA: Why not? If only you would put your mind to it! Each one of your stepsons was awarded his own independent domain by the time he was eighteen. That mongrel brood! They get their claims! You are a princess of the Hoysala dynasty. Bijjala's favourite Queen. And I am your only son. And what do I have? A jangling bell to keep me occupied.

RAMBHAVATI: Don't say that, son. Who do I have other than you?
(Damodara Bhatta has finished his pooja. He comes out.)

DAMODARA: Forgive me for interrupting, Your Majesty. It was a mob no less than fifteen thousand strong that encircled the Treasury. Yet you should have seen how disciplined they were, how restrained! For four days they sat there, surrounding the building, ungrudging, even cheerful, until Basavanna himself came on the scene and sent them home. It was a prodigious display of loyalty to Basavanna. Would the *sharanas* be as loyal to the King? One wonders.

RAMBHAVATI (*dubious*): I don't know. Basavanna can be obstinate. But I don't think he is treacherous.

SOVIDEVA (*explodes*): There you are! So I am the villain. I should now humbly crawl...

DAMODARA: 'Miraculous' is the only word for the speed with which the news spread. Barely an hour had elapsed after the Yuvaraj had the locks opened—and there they were, thousands of them, swarming from every corner of Kalyan. Certainly points to an efficient network of spies within the court, doesn't it?

RAMBHAVATI: But did you find any evidence against Basavanna?

DAMODARA: I had warned the Yuvaraj against this—this adventure, Your Majesty. Basavanna is not one to drown in shallow waters. And suppose we had managed to prove our charges. What of it? He would merely be proven a corrupt officer of the court, like any other. If one aims to catch a tusker, one must dig a pit capacious enough to take him in entire.

(*Kallappa enters.*)

KALLAPPA: I fall at your feet, Ma'am. The Master is here.

RAMBHAVATI (*getting up, flustered*): Already? Why couldn't he let us know a little in advance? (*Shouts.*) Eeravva! Eeravva! Go call Eeravva, for heaven's sake. Ask her to get the *arati* ready—

KALLAPPA: The master doesn't want any of it, Ma'am. He's already in the palace, on his way here.

RAMBHAVATI: Eeravva! (*Suddenly noticing Damodara Bhatta.*) You may go, sir. You know how he is—

(*Damodara Bhatta nods and leaves with a smile. Sovideva tries to go out with him.*)

KALLAPPA: The young Master is to remain here.

SOVIDEVA: Which snivelling spy informed him I was here? I must go. (*To Rambha*) You make some excuse for me—

(*Sovideva tries to go out. But Kallappa steps in his way, quietly but firmly.*)

SOVIDEVA (*to his mother*): So you see how I am treated in my own house—like a toothless hound?

BIJJALA (*roars from outside*): Where is that son of a whore?

RAMBHAVATI: Come here, son. And whatever he says, keep your mouth shut.

(*Bijjala enters.*)

BIJJALA: Is he hiding in here?

RAMBHAVATI: What nonsense is this? You shouldn't rush in like this—without *arati* or saffron-water to cast out the evil eye. Wait there now. Beyond the doorstep. Eeravva!

BIJJALA: May your Eeravvas and Paaravvas be cast to perdition. Is that accursed fruit of our family here?

(*He sees Sovideva.*)

Come out. Come out. Aren't you ashamed to hide under a woman's backside, your blood-sodden rag, you—

(*Sovideva steps out.*)

What were you up to in my absence? Who gave you the right to tamper with the Treasury locks?

(*He starts beating up Sovideva. Sovideva does not resist.*)

RAMBHAVATI: I beg you, don't. Don't beat him, please. I implore you in the name of our family God, I touch your feet. He's a grown-up man. Don't humiliate him like this.

(*To Sovideva*)

Go—go away from here!

BIJJALA: What! He's not leaving his mother's home empty-handed, is he? Eeravva, a sari and a blouse-piece for our son. And be quick—

RAMBHAVATI: Stop it. Please! At least for my sake. Or do away with me first. Once you're rid of me, do what you will with him. But I can't bear this. Please. I fall at your feet!

BIJJALA: Rambha! Rambha! All this is your doing. You, with your pampering and swaddling, you have turned him into a royal eunuch. And I am the greater fool for having let your tears

stop me. If only I had birched the skin off his back as I had with his brothers. If only I had tied him up in a bundle and dowsed him in the river. But you had to get in the way and cry and wail. It's all your doing...

RAMBHAVATI: You treat him as one shouldn't even one's bitterest enemy. Why? What has my son done to deserve this from you?

BIJJALA: What hasn't he done? He fiddles with the Treasury locks when he shouldn't have. And then, on top of it, when Basavanna actually arrives on the scene, he attempts to run away, like a rabbit. Fifteen thousand people blocked his way and applauded and roared with laughter as Basavanna led him back by hand into the Treasury and had the doors sealed behind them. I reached the city gates this morning, exhausted, aching all over, and what news greets me, do you think? 'Basavanna and the Yuvaraj were closeted in the Treasury for eleven days, checking accounts. They have only just finished'! Checking accounts, my bloody foot. (*To Sovideva*) Did you find a broken cowrie missing from the coffers? A counterfeit coin unaccounted for in the books?

(*No reply.*)

When Basavanna puts something down on paper, it's there for good. As if planted by Brahma himself. And that's why he continues to be the King's Treasurer. Are you listening, nincompoop? Are you? Then speak out. You are quick enough to find the wrong limb to do the wrong things. But you can't find your bloody tongue—

RAMBHAVATI: Please, don't be abusive!

BIJJALA: Madam, this is not your parental home. Let's not have any of your Hoysala sanctimonious humbug here. I am a Kalachurya. Rough-hewn. Blunt. I have asked my son a question. And I am waiting for an answer. You keep out of it!

RAMBHAVATI: And what have you done to justify calling him your

son? He has come of age and you haven't even thrown a scrap of land at him—

BIJJALA: Land? At this bumpkin? I give him a kingdom—And what do I do with the people in there? Push them into a bottomless pit? I fetched him a golden bride. He only had to conduct himself with a bit of sense and his father-in-law would have given him half his kingdom. He couldn't keep her. And now he aspires to be a king, does he? Let's see. Kallappa!

(Kallappa enters.)

Kallappa, this scion of the Kalachuryas craves to be a king, we are told. Now, in order to be a ruler, what is the primary qualification? Surely the ability to kick people around? That is why they say to be born a king in this life you need to have been a donkey in your last. You've heard that? Good. Now my son and heir will try to deliver a kick on your behind. But you must not let it land. If his foot touches you, I shall skin you alive, mind. Now honourable Yuvaraj, proceed. Go on. Kick him.

(Sovideva tries to kick Kallappa. But Kallappa is too agile for him. Sovideva makes several attempts but to no avail. Bijjala is red with excitement and frustration as he watches.)

Faster, son. Move. Why are you stuck there, leg out, like a dog pissing? Hit out. From the hip, you oaf.

(Exasperated, he turns to Rambha.)

This is the first lesson they teach in the gymnasium. And he can't manage it!

(Impatient, he jumps in.)

My turn now, Kallappa. If my toe so much as grazes you, you'll pay with your head.

(Bijjala takes aim and kicks. The kick catches Kallappa squarely on his behind. He crashes to the floor. Bijjala roars triumphantly. Then turns to Sovideva.)

You next. Ready?

(He sends Sovideva reeling with a well-aimed kick.)

Kallappa, two gold sovereigns for you. Tell the clerk. He'll pay you. It's not your fault you lost. Bijjala hasn't lost his touch yet.

(Kallappa bows to him and exits, brushing his behind. Bijjala glares after him.)

That sly bastard! I shall never know if he hasn't made an ass of me.

(Rambhavati, who has not watched any of the above, opens her eyes and pushes Sovideva out. Then she sits back, crying. Bijjala sits next to her, tired, defeated.)

BIJJALA: So many, so many women came and went. Not one of them could keep hold of me. Then you came. The world knows there hasn't been another. And then... *(Spits.)* this rat has to crawl out of your womb.

(Noise outside.)

What's that commotion, Kallappa?

Kallappa *(enters)*: Basavanna is here for an audience, Master.

BIJJALA: I knew it! Seat him in the inner chamber. Not the audience hall, mind you. He is too unpredictable.

(Kallappa exits.)

RAMBHAVATI: I'm baffled by your infatuation for that man. He mocks your son in front of the world, and instead of tarring his face in public you invite him into the inner chamber?

BIJJALA *(glares at her)*: You and your son! In all these fifteen years, you haven't understood a thing about Basavanna, have you? Or about me, for that matter! Who am I? I am Bijjala, the Emperor of Kalyan, the strong-shouldered Kalachurya conqueror! And yet—what is my caste? Tell me.

RAMBHAVATI: What has that to do with it?

BIJJALA: I have asked you a question. Answer it!

RAMBHAVATI: We are Kshatriyas.

BIJJALA: Your family—the Hoysalas, *you* may be Kshatriyas. But

I am a Kalachurya. Katta churra. A barber. His Majesty King Bijjala is a barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads. And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire: what is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a barber! One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber—a shepherd—a scavenger!

(Pause.)

In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the *sharanas*: Basavanna and his men. They treat me as—as what?—(*Almost with a sense of wonder.*) as a human being. Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a vision! And what prodigious courage! And he has the ability. Look at those he has gathered around him: poets, mystics, visionaries. And nothing airy-fairy about them, mind you. All hard-working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station. And all this is happening in the city of Kalyan—*my* Kalyan!

RAMBHAVATI: Then why don't you join them too? That may solve the problem—

BIJJALA: It'll solve nothing. They are insufferable moralists. You know that verse of Basavanna's?

Do not steal.

Do not kill.

Do not ever lie.

Do not rage...

and so on. It's not, as you can see, an ethics designed for rulers. Worse still is their *bhakti*, their relentless devotion, their incessant craving for the Lord's grace. I've built temples to keep my subjects happy. But the one truth I know is that I exist and God doesn't.

(*She giggles.*)

What are you giggling about?

RAMBHAVATI: Suddenly, you were as you used to be in those days—our early years together, when you'd talk and talk and insist on my listening. Remember?

BIJJALA: Is that all you have to say? Doesn't anything interest you women except marriage and husbands and children?

RAMBHAVATI: Have you left us anything else?

(*Commotion outside.*)

BIJJALA: What the devil's that noise, Kallappa?

KALLAPPA (*enters*): Crowds, thronging to take a look at Basavanna, Master.

BIJJALA: Why? Don't the numb-skulls know he lives in this city?

KALLAPPA: Well, Master, it's this thing they say that happened in the Treasury—

BIJJALA: What?

KALLAPPA: This morning, Master...They say Basavanna performed a miracle. That's why these crowds—

RAMBHAVATI: A miracle?

KALLAPPA: Yes, Ma'am. A miracle. There was a miracle. And the whole city was witness to it.

Scene Three

The inner chamber of the palace. Basavanna is talking to an old woman. Three or four domestics are grouped around them, listening.

BASAVANNA: But, Guddevva, your daughter-in-law is still young. So it's up to you to take a sensible view of things. May I suggest something?

GUDDEVVA: Will anyone say no to you?

BASAVANNA: They say you have a sweet voice and that you know many songs by the Tanner Chennayya—

GUDDEVVA (*blushing*): Ayyo! Who told you all that?

BASAVANNA: Why don't you hand over your house to your daughter-in-law for a few days? Let her look after it. You come over to our house...

GUDDEVVA: No, thank you. You collect all those low-caste people in your house, don't you—even the untouchables? I'd rather not rub shoulders with them—

BASAVANNA (*laughs*): They'll be there, certainly. But you can choose where you want to sit. Sing what you feel like singing. They'll sing too. Then you decide whether you would like to visit us again. What do you say?

(The heralds proclaim the King's entry from outside.)

HERALDS: *Mahārajādhirāja Kālanjarapurādhishwara Suvarna-Vrishabhadhwaja Damaru-toorya-nirghoshana Kalachūrya-Vamsha-Kamala-Bhāskara Triambaka-pāda-padma-madhupa Nisshankamalla Bhujabala-Chakravarti Bijjala-Devaraj* (Crescendo.) *Bho parāk! Bho parāk!*

(*Bijjala enters followed by his Brahmin adviser, Manchanna Kramita. Basavanna bows. The King looks at him expectantly. Basavanna says nothing. A long pause.*)

BIJJALA: I presume you don't like our new titles.

BASAVANNA: The ears overflow, Your Majesty.

MANCHANNA: I am acutely aware they do not do full justice to His Majesty's achievements.

BASAVANNA: Perhaps His Majesty's glory would have been better served if there had been a little less Sanskrit and a little more of our mother tongue.

BIJJALA: There! Ask the honourable Manchanna Kramita: I predicted you would react like that. He composed the titles. I had to have a new stone inscription erected and he kindly obliged.

MANCHANNA: One cannot expect the common tongue to possess the grandeur and resonance of Sanskrit.

BASAVANNA (*ignoring him*): If Your Majesty's titles continue to proliferate at this pace, I fear that all the rocks in our kingdom stacked together will not be enough to contain them.

MANCHANNA: What greater spur to expand our Empire beyond its present confines? It's fortunate for us that the neighbouring kingdoms of the Chola and Pandya are better known for their boulders than for their arts.

BASAVANNA (*flares up*): A new rock inscription. And to justify it, a new campaign. A dozen battles. A hundred new hero stones, to be greeted by the wails of a few thousand fresh widows and

orphans. And then to finance this senseless self-indulgence, another wave of taxes, demands and extortions.

MANCHANNA: This life is transient, Basavanna. We shall all be gone one day. But these inscriptions will outlast the ages and sing of our King's magnificence to distant generations.

BASAVANNA: Inscriptions need eyes to decipher them. Panegyrics need tongues to sing them. Meaning is generated by this moving body and it is this human body that should be our primary concern.

(Manchanna is about to retort, when Bijjala decides to take matters in hand.)

BIJJALA: Why don't you visit the court more often, Basavanna? Having you here is like adding a dose of strong spices to bland food.

BASAVANNA: Forgive me, sir. I got distracted.

(He offers the King a bunch of keys.)

These are the keys to the Treasury. Your Majesty was kind enough to entrust them to my care. But they feel heavy now. I must implore you to relieve me of this weight.

BIJJALA: And if I refuse?

BASAVANNA: I shall leave them by the Shiva-linga in the palace.

(Pause.)

BIJJALA: These last couple of years I've barely seen you at the court, except on an occasional festival day. The kingdom bristles with gossip about the deteriorating relations between the King and his Treasurer. I gather you have even written songs mocking my kingship and sung them to your congregation. Yet I have not uttered a word of rebuke nor asked you to surrender the keys—

BASAVANNA: I hope my stand has been clear, sir. I work in the Treasury not for the King's pleasure but because that wealth belongs to the people. As a guardian of the people, the King

has a right to it. But no other member of the royal family is entitled to have access to it.

BIJJALA: Answer my question first. Would any other king have been as lenient and accommodating as I?

BASAVANNA: No, sir. I accept. And I am most grateful for Your Majesty's indulgence.

BIJJALA: Good then. Listen to me. Let the past be forgotten. It was a childish prank. My son is an imbecile—

MANCHANNA: Your Majesty, that's a preposterous...

BIJJALA (*ignoring him*): Shall I have him brought here, bound and gagged, and roll him at your feet?

BASAVANNA: It would be wrong to attribute my resignation to the Prince alone. Our congregation grows day by day and has started making greater demands on my time.

(*Pause.*)

BIJJALA: That's one of the things that irks me about you. 'The Prince'! Why do you insist on calling him a Prince? It's a title which even the King's bastards flaunt. It would make the Queen happy if you called him the Yuvaraj. I would be pleased. The court knows that—

BASAVANNA: A Yuvaraj is an heir to the throne, sir. I was not aware Your Majesty had so anointed him.

BIJJALA: Of course, I haven't. Dear man, do you imagine for a moment that my other sons will sit by meekly while I bestow that privilege on this ass? They'll tear me to shreds. Nevertheless, when only one prince is present in the capital, it's customary to address him as the Yuvaraj.

BASAVANNA: Perhaps a new custom, sir? I'm not aware of it. But it matters little what he is called, except that the title of Yuvaraj entails certain responsibilities.

BIJJALA: You aren't going to start on that again—

BASAVANNA: Yes, I am, sir. For it can bear repetition. Kingship is a calling. A source of living, yes, but also a duty and a service to humanity. It is not an inheritance, not a family gift but a right to be earned, to be justified by diligent application.

BIJJALA (*soothing*): Don't I know it? We discussed all this thread-bare fifteen years ago—

(*To Manchanna Kramita, smiling.*)

—when I threw out the Chalukyas and grabbed their throne!

BASAVANNA: But the same words are unacceptable to you when applied to your son.

BIJJALA (*explodes*): Yes, because he's my son. My son! Do you have even the faintest idea of what a son means? My dear fellow, there are over a hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas* in this city of Kalyan who light the lamp every evening in your name for having given them a new life. And though they all know you have a son, a good half of them don't even know what that poor devil is called. What kind of a father are you? Have some sense, Basavanna. Or, at least, read the sacred texts to acquire some. A son is the final goal of human existence! It may be that he drinks your blood and chews your bones to mash. But he is the one who'll keep your soul fed till eternity.

BASAVANNA: For a *sharana*, physical parentage is of no consequence. A person is born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge.

BIJJALA: That's what *you* believe. As a child, you tore up your sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you. But don't you delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins, and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sands and die! (*Suddenly*) You don't wish to look after the Treasury any more? So be it. Give me the keys.

BASAVANNA: It's not bare relationships that matter but the meanings one brings to them. I know why Prince Sovideva tried to set a trap for me. Because he hungers for your attention. He wants a few nods of affection from you. Seat him next to you, talk to him—

BIJJALA: Perhaps that's how Brahmin boys are reared. But he is a Kshatriya. His only problem is that he hasn't tasted the lash enough. Let's not worry about my son any more. Shall we turn to your bhaktas instead?

BASAVANNA (*puzzled*): Sir?

BIJJALA: Kallappa, let them in.

(*To Basavanna*)

We'll start with the servants of the palace, who've known you over the years.

(*Kallappa lets a group of half a dozen people enter. They ignore the King, rush in and fall at Basavanna's feet. Some cling to his legs. Others weep.*)

BASAVANNA (*taken aback*): What's all this nonsense? What are you doing?

OLD MAN: Forgive us. Forgive us, Basavanna. We didn't realize you were such a great soul—

BASAVANNA: What's got into you?

WOMAN: I've been married four years. Four children, all dead at birth. Save the next one for me, please.

KALLAPPA: Enough now. You'll get more time later. You know there are others waiting outside. Move on.

(*He herds them out, and lets in a new lot who also rush to clasp Basavanna's feet.*)

BASAVANNA: No! No! What foolishness is this? (*To a woman*) Rangavva, will you at least tell me what this is all about?

RANGAVVA: Is there anything you don't know, Basavanna? You performed the miracle—

BASAVANNA (*aghast*): I did what?

OLD MAN (*placating*): Not you, but Lord Shiva. On your behalf—
He performed it—

RANGAVVA: They say you had borrowed money from the Treasury.
For your good works. Fifty thousand sovereigns. And Shiva
replaced the whole amount. When the young Master tried to
catch you, there was nothing amiss.

BASAVANNA: No, never!

OLD MAN: Each empty coffer filled up right in front of their eyes.
They actually had to shake the sacks to fit the coins in. Money
kept pouring in.

BASAVANNA (*anguished*): Do you really believe I would steal money
from the Treasury?

OLD MAN: It's not like that. Not for yourself. It was all to feed the
sharanas—to give alms and—

RANGAVVA: Not for your own expenses, but for God's work.

BASAVANNA: So the Prince is right. I'm a thief!

RANGAVVA (*her eyes filling up*): Why do you say such dreadful
things? May our tongues rot if we malign a saint like you!
Don't tease us...

(*She goes out wiping her tears, followed by the others. Bijjala signals
Kallappa to stop further admissions.*)

BIJJALA: Hope you're enjoying this outburst of devotional ecstasy.

BASAVANNA (*anguished*): What's all this, Your Majesty?

MANCHANNA: In the good old days, fire sacrifices had to be
performed and animals ritually slaughtered before the Vedic
gods consented to descend to the earth. But since the winds
of *bhakti* started sweeping across the continent, the gods
seem only too eager to act. The devotee weeps and God
performs a miracle. The devotee laughs and He performs
another. Our gods have been transformed into a mob of
perpetual conjurers.

BIJJALA (*to Basavanna*): Today your companions would rather you were a thief so they can turn you into a wonder-worker. Tomorrow the same enthusiasts may damn you as a murderer so they can prove you've experienced Lord Shiva himself! I am an ordinary king. I want no truck with the gods. I go by the laws of the land. Which is why this mass hunger for divine grace bothers me greatly. It should bother you too.

BASAVANNA: Let them damn me as a thief, condemn me as a miracle-monger. I don't care. But to be damned as a devotee in the presence of all the great devotees! *Talé-danā!*

I don't have in me
bhakti enough
 to equal a sixth
 of a mustard seed.
 I'm an *ekke*, a swallow-wort
 among mangoes.
 How can I shamelessly
 call myself a devotee
 in front of the *sharanas*
 of our Lord of the meeting of rivers?

Will Shiva perform miracles for the sake of a buffoon like me, a shameless buffoon? I beg Your Majesty to excuse me.

BIJJALA (*calls*): Kallappa! (*To Basavanna*) Are you going home?

BASAVANNA: No, sir. I've distressing news from Maddur. If I leave now, I may reach by sun-down.

BIJJALA: Oh, yes! Some of your young followers have got into a fight with the Jains there, haven't they? Good. You'll have a restraining influence on them. Situations rarely seem to improve when left to my officers.

BASAVANNA: I shall look to it, Your Majesty. Along the way I want to call on Jagadeva and his mother. I was in the Treasury when his father died—

BIJJALA (*ignoring the last remark*): Kallappa, have a pair of guards ready to accompany Basavanna—

BASAVANNA: I need no escort, sir.

BIJJALA: The throngs outside are bursting with the delirium of bhakti. I don't want any more miracles right now, thank you.

BASAVANNA (*bows*): *Sharan*, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA: Good-bye.

(*Basavanna leaves along with Kallappa. A long pause.*)

MANCHANNA: You can't blame the Yuvaraj, sir. Not if you've seen the goings-on in Basavanna's house. Food for all the devotees that flock there, day and night. Gifts. Clothes. How can he afford such lavish hospitality? His affluence is a source of dismay to the whole city.

BIJJALA: I'm happy to know my son is not alone in his benighted existence. With a hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas* resident in the city, do you think I would choose to remain ignorant of their finances? I can account for every penny spent in that house.

(*Manchanna Kramita tries to hide his astonishment.*)

I came to this city ten years ago and I brought Basavanna with me as my Treasurer. Along with him came the *sharanas*, each one convinced that work is worship, that his work is no mere profession but a calling.

Every *sharana* seeks only to earn the day's keep, makes no extra demands, treats profits with contempt. So who benefits? From every corner of the country, trade and commerce have come pouring into Kalyan, and now the city is bursting at its seams with money and activity. Even those who despise the *sharanas* for their beliefs need them for their economic enterprise—as indeed I do—and so they pour money into the *sharana* coffers. Basavanna does not need to defraud me! If only my idiot son had asked me first—(*Calls out*) Kallappa!

Has the mob thinned? It's time we proceeded to the audience hall.

KALLAPPA (*enters*): Thinned, Master? Vanished is more like it. They've all followed Basavanna out. There isn't a soul left behind to swat a fly!

Scene Four

The Brahmin quarter of Kalyan. Sambashiva Shastri's house. The post-funeral rituals are going on. The mantras can be heard. Basavanna and Kakkayya enter the street in front of the house, followed by a noisy crowd, mostly consisting of men and children. Basavanna stops, turns, folds his hands before the crowd.

BASAVANNA: I beg of you. Don't follow me around like this. There was no miracle in the Treasury. Don't shame me with this wanton talk of God's miracles!

MAN: There are those who saw with their own eyes—and you deny it? Not ten but fifty thousand witnesses swear to it—

MAN 2: How many miracles have you performed so far, Basavanna?

BASAVANNA: How many shall I say? Will eighty-eight do?
Showing off my eighty-eight miracles
my *bhakti* has become
a carnival wardrobe.

It's in such tatters, I can't find a patch large enough to hide my shame.

CROWD (*shouts*): Basava is Shiva! Shiva is Basava! Victory to Saint Basavanna! Glory to the Treasurer of Faith!
(*Basavanna stands, non-plussed.*)

KAKKAYYA: You go on, Basavanna. I'll hold them here. (*To the crowds*) You stay here with me. Stand back!

BASAVANNA: Thank you, Kakkayya.

(Basavanna enters the house. Some members of the family, who had collected at the door to watch the crowds, disperse hurriedly when they see Basavanna come in. No one greets him. He sits quietly in a corner. Amba comes in. Long pause.)

BASAVANNA: I heard of his illness in Bannoor. I hoped to call on him as soon as I returned to Kalyan, but there was this business at the Treasury. Never got to see him again. God's will.

AMBA: You used to come here often, with my husband. But you haven't been here in a long while. You've become a big man.

BASAVANNA: What am I to say, Ambakka?

AMBA: People are under your spell. They say Lord Shiva performs miracles for you. That's good. God did nothing for us in this house—not that we are worthy of it!

(She starts crying.)

BASAVANNA: Why the tears, Ambakka? You have your son Jagadeva—

AMBA: Yes, he is there. But will he stay? Why have you come here, Basavanna? I have this cold fear in the pit of my stomach... why have you come? My son is home again. He has brought his wife back. There are signs that he may settle down again to a normal life. But to accomplish this his father had to give up his life. Have you come to take him away again? Let today's ceremony be over. Let the house be cleansed to set up life again. Then do as you wish.

BASAVANNA: Do you want me to go away?

(A side door opens and the Head Priest enters.)

PRIEST: The Brahmins have received their parting fee and are ready to leave. No one may remain here.

(Amba hurries out. Basavanna doesn't move.)

The rites are over. The Brahmin who has invoked the departed spirit on himself is about to leave. No outsider may see him. It's a bad omen.

BASAVANNA: Omens don't bother me.

PRIEST: As you wish.

(He peeps into the room.)

Please, come.

(Three Brahmins step out, followed by Jagadeva, who is now clean-shaven and wears a sacred thread. He is startled to see Basavanna. The Head Priest signals one of the Brahmins to go out by the back door. He does so.)

PRIEST: Jagadeva, go, sweep the floor after him and apply cowdung, so the ground he's stepped on is purified again.

(Commotion outside. Shouts of 'Basavanna!' 'Victory to the Treasurer of Faith!' are heard. Basavanna turns to go out.)

JAGADEVA: Sit, Basavanna. Don't go. Please. I'll be back—

(Jagadeva goes out by the back door.)

PRIEST *(to Basavanna)*: Rituals for the departed are being performed in this house. Couldn't you find a different venue for your antics?

(The Priest and the Brahmins depart. Jagadeva enters hurriedly. Long pause.)

JAGADEVA: Are you angry with me—that I should have reverted to my caste? This sacred thread—these rites—

BASAVANNA: No.

JAGADEVA: Then perhaps you find it comic—this Brahmanical masquerade—

BASAVANNA: What I feel is beside the point.

JAGADEVA: I had to do it. For my mother's peace of mind.

(Pause.)

Father kept calling out for me in the last few days of his life. His throat gave out but I didn't come. Now, these last eleven days I have been seeking him, invoking him limb by limb on two absurd little pebbles. I am calling out to him, now that he's gone! Isn't that just like me?

(Pause.)

Just like my father too. For all his fire sacrifices, penance and meditations, when it came to facing death, he couldn't take it. He was afraid. He used to weep with fear. Do you think my life too will be like that? A tale of fear, defeat, futility?

BASAVANNA: It needs courage to accept that one is afraid. To be able to say 'This fear of mine—This is my truth now'—that may be the ultimate triumph.

(Commotion outside. The crowds are getting more riotous. Basavanna makes a move to go.)

JAGADEVA: Where are you going?

BASAVANNA: They won't leave you in peace while I stay here. Besides, I must reach Maddur before dark.

JAGADEVA: I have to talk to you, Basavanna. I have so much to discuss. Must you go to Maddur today?

BASAVANNA: Yes, some of our people have occupied a Jain temple there by force. They are threatening to smash the naked idols in it and turn it into a Shiva temple. Things could go out of hand—

JAGADEVA: And what will you do once you get there? I know. Rebuke our own people. Hold them responsible. You don't know how the Jains bait us, provoke us—

BASAVANNA: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity.

The rich
will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?
My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,

the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving shall ever stay.

JAGADEVA: Haven't you heard? In Ablur, Ramayya, the Solitary Saint, led the attack on a Jain temple. He threw the non-believers out and established his rights to their temple by performing a miracle. His head flew around like a pigeon—

BASAVANNA: Isn't this life abundant enough? Do we need more miracles?

JAGADEVA (*suddenly*): There was no miracle in the Treasury.

BASAVANNA: No, there wasn't. I know that.

JAGADEVA: So long as I was there, there was not a whisper of it.

BASAVANNA: It's sad, but even among the *sharanas* there's no shortage of credulity.

(*Pause.*)

JAGADEVA: Tell me. Who started this rumour about a miracle? Was it you?

(*Pause.*)

BASAVANNA: Since you ask, you must think so.

JAGADEVA (*excited*): I led the march to the Treasury. Here my father was breathing his last. My mother, alone and helpless, was banging her head against the wall. And I was at the Treasury! You know why? To make sure that Basavanna's honour remained untarnished. To establish his glory in perpetuity. That's why! Tomorrow I shall be the talk of the town, I told myself. I shall be the hero of the *sharanas*. I could see myself taken out in procession, hoisted on the shoulders of my friends and companions! And what happened? I came home. For eleven days I immersed myself in these death rituals. And this morning, as I emerged from them, I was

told—Basavanna has performed a miracle. Basavanna! No mention of me. In front of my own house, only hosannas to Basavanna!

BASAVANNA: I too have been performing rituals of sorts these last eleven days. Locked up in the Treasury. (*Pause.*) All this glory!

My men in their love for me,
with praise and more praise,
have impaled me on a stake of gold!

JAGADEVA: Everyone my father trusted let him down. The King, you, I, even God. Finally, there was nothing left for him but to shed tears. Do you know how a man crumbles when he loses power? In the service of the court, father was tall and imposing and walked with long, confident strides. Weighed each word before parting with it. But the moment Bijjala threw him out, he shrank, like a piece of soaked cloth. Even his voice went shrill. It was loathesome—

BASAVANNA (*gently*): You must not judge too easily.
(*Pause.*)

I have just left the King's service myself.
(*Jagadeva looks at him in astonishment. Then slowly.*)

JAGADEVA: Do you know what you are? You are a manipulator. A clever, conniving trickster.

BASAVANNA (*pained*): Why do you say that?

JAGADEVA: Father had seen through you. 'Don't trust Basavanna', he would say, 'He's an impostor—'

BASAVANNA: I'm sorry. But I don't believe your father would ever say that.

JAGADEVA: Do you mean...I'm lying?

BASAVANNA: Yes, you are. But why?

JAGADEVA: You and I must have been enemies through the last seven births. That's why, no matter what I say, you can still make me feel small. You turn me into a worm in the eyes of the people.

(Commotion outside. The Chief Priest enters.)

PRIEST: If you don't leave now, they'll break in. Please—

JAGADEVA: Look, I'm here to worry about that. Why don't you keep out of it?

PRIEST: Your mother asked me. So...

(He goes out.)

BASAVANNA *(gets up)*: I'd better go.

JAGADEVA: Don't, Basavanna. Please. Who's there to talk to if you go? Who else will even have an inkling here of what I'm saying? Perhaps I'm stupid. Perhaps you have cast one of your spells on me. But there's no one left for me but you.

BASAVANNA: Come here. Shut your eyes.

(Jagadeva does as told. Basavanna places his palm on his head.)

Repeat after me: *Om namah Shivāya.*

(Jagadeva repeats the words. This is done three times. Then Basavanna withdraws his hand.)

JAGADEVA: You torment me till my heart screams murder. Then to be soothed back to sleep, who do I need but you?

BASAVANNA: No one is on his own. The Lord has tied us to one another with bonds beyond our comprehension. I'll tell you something—something I have not breathed to anybody else. One night the mystic Allama and I were sitting talking late into the night. He is one of the few I know to have attained a state of grace. So I asked him: 'What is this I? How do I recognize it?' And Allama replied: 'I'll show you. Watch.' And right there, even as I was watching, his whole life poured out of his body.

(Pause.)

Like shadow puppets, row after endless row. His birth. Childhood. His youth in Banavasi. His lust for the dancer Kāmalatā. Her death. The *linga* he found on the palm of a buried skeleton. A procession of events. A pantomime in which I

even saw myself and my associates. Everything. Not just the ordinary or the simple or the holy or the beautiful. Along with that, the grotesque and the evil. Filth beyond belief. As though a river full of spring blossoms also carried decaying flesh, rotten limbs, uprooted hair, a flood of pus—the stench interwoven with the fragrance. I couldn't bear it. 'No, this is not you, Great Saint', I cried out. He smiled and said: 'You are watching, aren't you?' Then there was, suddenly, a point when I was so overwhelmed by the beauty and the horror that I shut my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, he was there but fast asleep. We didn't talk about it the next day—or ever again. Even now, as I think of it, I can feel myself shiver.

JAGADEVA: Why are you telling me all this?

BASAVANNA: I don't know. Just felt like telling you. I don't know why Allama treated me to that vision either.

(Stones crash on the roof. There is a roar from the crowd outside. Shouts of 'Basavanna, come out!' 'Darshan!' 'Darshan!' are heard. Amba enters.)

AMBA: Spare us, Basavanna. Your devotees are throwing stones for you—

BASAVANNA *(gets up)*: I did not mean to trouble you. But I seem to have succeeded in doing just that. *(Smiles.)* My life seems to have become one long apology.

(He says 'Sharan' and goes out. The crowd surrounds him with enthusiasm, follows him out. Jagadeva, Amba, Savitri and the Head Priest watch.)

PRIEST *(relieved)*: Well, the rest is easily attended to. Nothing utilized in today's rituals may be put to use again. Not the wood, not the pots, not the left-overs. Burn what you can. Consign the rest to the river. Everything should be disposed of.

JAGADEVA: But I too was used in the rituals. So what do I do with myself?

Scene Five

Basavanna's house. He is with two sharana youths—Kalayya and Gundanna. Kakkayya, the untouchable saint, who is in his seventies, is sitting near by.

BASAVANNA (*angry*): Shall I come in person then and tell him?

GUNDANNA (*laughs*): That will be hurling a thunderbolt at a sparrow. He isn't a bad fellow, really, that officer! Someone has been setting him up—

BASAVANNA: There's such a thing as common humanity!

KALAYYA: Basavanna, these tribals have brought their god with them. You should see that idol. Rolling eyes. A tongue lolling out. It's very funny.

GUNDANNA (*laughs*): I think—the sooner you initiate them into our fold the better!

BASAVANNA: A roof over their head first, and a piece of land to spread their mats on. We can minister to their spiritual needs later.

GUNDANNA: All right. We'll keep you informed.

(While the above conversation is going on, a group of visitors enters: Madhuvarasa, a Brahmin by birth, with his wife Lalitamba, and daughter Kalavati, aged about twelve; Haralayya, a cobbler by

birth, along with his wife Kalyani and son Sheelavanta, of about fifteen years; their friends. They are led in by Gangambika, wife of Basavanna.

They all greet each other with 'Sharan, Basavanna', 'Sharan, Kakkayya', etc.)

GANGAMBIKA: Gundanna, I have kept a few bags of paddy, lentils, salt and spices for them in the room outside. Pick them up on your way out.

GUNDANNA: Yes, Gangakka.

BASAVANNA (*restless*): I really ought to go with you now. But I'm expecting Kukke Shetty, the trader. If I finish with him soon, I'll follow. Otherwise I'll be there the first thing tomorrow morning.

KALAYYA: That may not be necessary though. *Sharan.*
(*Gundanna and Kalayya exit.*)

HARALAYYA: Is that about the refugees from Andhra, Gangakka? They say a band of tribal shepherds is camping on the river-side.

BASAVANNA: There's famine raging in Andhra. These poor souls have trecked for weeks in search of food and shelter. But our people won't let them stray this side of the river because of their low caste. I tell you, for sheer inhumanity our people have no equal.

MADHUVARASA: Had you been the Treasurer to the King now, a thing like that wouldn't have taken a moment! But our *sharanas* mocked you then, for serving a worldly King.
(*Basavanna shrugs vaguely, goes to the door and looks out.*)

GANGAMBIKA: Are you expecting someone?

BASAVANNA: Some dispute in Kukke Shetty's family. They want me to adjudicate.

GANGAMBIKA: They aren't here yet. So you might at least talk to those who are!

BASAVANNA (*abashed, to the visitors*): Oh! Oh! So you're here to see me? (*Explaining*) You see what it is. I have a formula. If a visitor wears a smile on his face as he approaches this house, he's here to see my wife. If he's scowling, he's here to see me.

GANGAMBIKA (*blushing*): Enough now!

BASAVANNA: All of you seemed so happy, I naturally assumed—
(*He notices that they are dressed up.*)

Well, now! What's on! Some festival? New sarees, new turbans. You look grand. Is it some special occasion? But Lalitakka, you don't look too happy—

MADHUVARASA (*laughs*): Heh! Heh! Isn't it to be expected that a mother will feel a little upset at the prospect of her daughter's wedding?

BASAVANNA (*excited*): Truly? So Kalavati is getting married, is she? Did you hear that, Ganga?

GANGAMBIKA: They just told me. I'm so happy—

MADHUVARASA: We have the engagement ceremony tomorrow evening. You must all come. Kakkayya, you too—

BASAVANNA: Of course, we'll be there. (*To Gangambika*) Just think—that little girl who was toddling around only the other day now at the threshold of life! I feel my bones creaking.
(*Laughter all round.*)

KALYANI: Go on, Sheela, touch their feet. Don't stand there like a wax doll—

HARALAYYA: He's grown into a proper buffalo. Still needs to be told everything.

(*Sheelavanta touches Basavanna's feet.*)

We expect you at the betrothal tomorrow, Basavanna.

BASAVANNA: God be praised! There must be some extraordinary conjunction of stars tomorrow. Two betrothals on the same day!

(*Laughter.*)

GANGAMBIKA: You're the limit! Where are you? There's only one betrothal.

KALYANI: It's been decided to bring Kalavati for our Sheela. Bless them, Basavanna—

BASAVANNA: What's that?

(His eyes suddenly fill with tears. He cannot speak. Kakkayya looks stunned, uncomprehending. A long, strange silence. Then Madhuvarasa starts, with great deliberation.)

MADHUVARASA: Naturally, we are gratified to notice that even you are taken by surprise. It's evident you did not anticipate that your efforts would bear fruit so soon—

GANGAMBIKA: Sheelavanta is waiting for your blessings.

BASAVANNA *(with a start)*: Bless you! Bless you! Our good wishes are always with you. You must seek the blessings of elders—
(Basavanna gestures towards Kakkayya. Sheelavanta touches Kakkayya's feet. Basavanna relapses into silence. A strange anxiety fills the room. Haralayya's face reddens; he turns to his wife, perplexed but also angry.)

MADHUVARASA *(clears his throat)*: We came here secure in our belief that you would welcome this alliance with joy. Instead, we see you both startled—even troubled.

HARALAYYA: Your hand wouldn't even bless the boy!

KAKKAYYA *(slowly, gently)*: You know my profession is tanning. In terms of 'caste', that's low, even lower than you, Haralayya. When one grows up that far down, there's nothing one doesn't know about the horror of caste. So I ask you: have you given this alliance enough thought?

MADHUVARASA: How can you even ask? Kalavati is our only daughter, Sheelavanta their only son—

KALYANI *(looking at her husband for support)*: We have given enough thought to the wedding arrangements, Kakkayya. A *sharana* boy marries a *sharana* girl. No need for much fuss there, is there?

(Pause.)

But if you're going to see it as a Brahmin girl marrying a cobbler's son—well, we don't know how to answer you.

GANGAMBIKA: Sister, you know my husband would never think like that! It's not like him—

KALYANI: Who knows what thoughts will strike whom at what time.

KAKKAYYA: We are all *sharanas*. We have surrendered ourselves to Lord Shiva. There is no caste among *sharanas*, neither Brahmin nor cobbler. This alliance is a cause for celebration. And yet—

MADHUVARASA: Yes?

KAKKAYYA: The worldly surround us. Will they take kindly to it? Will they accept?

HARALAYYA: What do they have to do with this wedding?

MADHUVARASA: Should we care if the ignorant scream their heads off? Should it affect us? Why should I sneer at others, Kakkayya? Till the other day, even I mocked the *sharanas*, ridiculed them at the slightest pretext. And then one day, enlightenment dawned. It'll happen to others too. You'll see.

KAKKAYYA: And will they sit patiently until then?

HARALAYYA: They'd better. We'll see to it that they do.

BASAVANNA: Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this—this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of the *varnashrama dharma*. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads.

MADHUVARASA: So be it. Like Lord Shiva himself, we shall drink that venom and hold it blocked in our throats!

BASAVANNA (*angry*): This is no time for pretty speeches! It's a question of life and death for these children. From tomorrow

the wrath of the bigoted will pursue them like a swarm of snakes, to strike as they pause to put up a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then? Elementary prudence demands that—

HARALAYYA: So you don't approve of this alliance! I knew it, Kalyani. So what if it's the saintly Basavanna or the revered elder Kakkayya? Let a cobbler rub shoulders with a Brahmin and the *sharanas* will be the first to object.

BASAVANNA: Some day this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of varnashrama, will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. As a *bhakta*. As a *sharana*. That is inevitable. But we have a long way to go. You know the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of *sanatana* religion.

MADHUVARASA: Then let me say this: I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement.

KAKKAYYA (*horrified*): Madhuvarasa!

BASAVANNA: No one has a right to sacrifice anyone—not even himself.

HARALAYYA (*to Madhuvarasa*): The word 'sacrifice' strikes terror in me. Too long have my people sacrificed our women to the greed of the upper castes, our sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth. No more sacrifices, please.

(*Long silence.*)

KAKKAYYA: What does Sheela say?

HARALAYYA (*surprised*): What can he say? He'll do as told.

KALYANI: He's still wet behind the ears. What does he know?

KAKKAYYA: But *he* has to face the ordeal.

(*He turns to Sheelavanta.*)

So, Sheela, what do you say? Is this alliance acceptable to you? (*Sheelavanta looks at his parents, perplexed.*)

Don't look at them. Look at me—

SHEELAVANTA: I—I—

GANGAMBIKA (*to Kalavati*): You and your friends should go out and play in the garden. We'll send for you.

(*Kalavati and friends run out.*)

BASAVANNA: Yes, Sheelavanta?

SHEELAVANTA: I don't want the marriage.

HARALAYYA: Are you in your sense, you—

KAKKAYYA (*silences everyone*): Why? Don't you like Kalavati?

SHEELAVANTA: *Ayyo*, Shiva-Shiva! It isn't at all like that. She is—like a flower, I swear. Poor thing.

KAKKAYYA: Then why?

SHEELAVANTA: I have told my parents...

KAKKAYYA: Tell us too. Why are you afraid?

SHEELAVANTA (*tearful*): I don't want to hurt her. Don't want to ruin her life. They'll tease her tomorrow, call her a 'cobbler's priestess'.

KAKKAYYA: Who will?

SHEELAVANTA: The children. In our own neighbourhood.

KAKKAYYA: *Sharana* children?

SHEELAVANTA: Yes, sir. Besides—I'm not willing to give up my father's calling. What's wrong with stitching footwear?

BASAVANNA: Is anyone asking you to give up your ancestral calling, Sheelavanta?

SHEELAVANTA (*scared*): No, sir, no one. But—Kalavati can't stand the smell of leather. I've seen her. Whenever she passes a cobbler's shop she holds her nose. Will she spend her whole life like that?

LALITA (*bursts out*): I have been silent all along. I can't be any longer. Sheela is a gem. You won't find another boy like him in all the Brahmin quarters! But what he says is true.

BASAVANNA: Yes?

LALITA: Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffalos tomorrow? Or tan leather?

(There is a sudden chill in the air.)

KALYANI (*tense*): Lalitakka, we are cobblers. Not skinners or tanners.

HARALAYYA (*explains*): The *holeyas* skin the carcass. The *madigas* and the *dohas* tan the hide. Only then does it come to us.

MADHUVARASA: Please, I beg of you, don't take umbrage. All this is rather unfamiliar territory to us. All these details. I'm afraid she doesn't know what she's saying. (*To Lalita*) Can't you hold your tongue?

LALITA: It's my child's life! She gets a splitting headache if she so much as smells burning camphor. She is so...so...tender. (*She bursts into tears.*)

Each time she returns from the cobbler's street, she throws up and takes to bed.

MADHUVARASA (*thundering*): Woman, I said hold your tongue. You are insulting a *sharana's* calling...

HARALAYYA: No, Madhuvarasa, it doesn't upset me. My wife and I became *sharanas*, gave up meat and alcohol and our ancient gods. Now when our children ask us: 'Why then are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather?' what can I answer? If my son decides to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks?

LALITA: I'm sorry, Haralayya. May I tell them—about your mother?

MADHUVARASA: His mother? What about his mother? I've never seen her—

LALITA: Every full moon night, Goddess Dyamavva of the Banyan Tree speaks. Through his mother.

MADHUVARASA (*scandalized*): How do you know that?

LALITA (*defiantly*): Because I am a devotee of the goddess. I know Basavanna forbids it as blind superstition, but I am!

HARALAYYA: We became *sharanas*. But Mother refused to do so. She wept and cried that she could not forsake our family gods. So we parted. I haven't seen her since. She hasn't looked at us.

LALITA: The other day, at the full-moon fair, she prophesied—

KALYANI (*tense*): We don't believe in all that. I don't. Nor does my husband.

BASAVANNA: What was the prophecy?

LALITA: Rivers of blood will flow if the marriage takes place, she said, human limbs will rot in the streets. This is not any stranger—this is Sheela's own grandmother speaking!

MADHUVARASA (*incensed*): First you go and attend those demonic rituals in secret. Then you have the gall to make an exhibition of yourself. If you don't keep quiet, I'll give you a thrashing.

GANGAMBIKA: Shame on you, Madhuvanna. Women and cattle, they are all the same to you, aren't they?

LALITA (*bitterly*): What is a daemonic ritual and what isn't? Don't call me a termagant for railing against my own husband, Gangakka. But ten years ago he found a Pashupata Guru. For months he immersed himself in ash, shouted loudly and danced. And the family had to put up with it. Then one day he discovered the Buddha. Wanted to give away all our worldly possessions to a monastery, until I threatened to jump into a well. And now, forgive me, he is a *sharana*. And that's all that counts. The others aren't worthy of a second thought—

MADHUVARASA (*distressed*): But I have done it all in good faith, Lalita. Grant me at least my good faith!

LALITA: Such faith! Our initiation as *sharanas* was not even

complete when he saw Sheelavanta and decided he was right for our daughter. But if Sheela had been a Brahmin boy, he wouldn't even have sniffed at him.

HARALAYYA: You are honest, sister—frighteningly honest. So I must tell you. When your husband proposed this alliance to me, my first thought was: 'I wasn't even allowed to dream of upper-caste girls. Now this one falls right into my son's lap!'

GANGAMBIKA: A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn't she? Just one more challenge to your manhood!

(A group of sharanas enters. They all greet each other. 'Sharan', 'Sharan', etc. Much embracing and loud exchange of congratulations.)

SHARANA ONE: The whole city is abuzz with your news.

KAKKAYYA: Oh! So the news has spread, has it?

SHARANA TWO: What do you mean? Every *sharana* home is wearing a festive air already. You've done it!

SHARANA THREE: The Brahmins are in a state of uproar. All credit to you!

SHARANA FOUR: Bravo! Excellent!

(As the rest of the scene progresses, the hall fills up. Small groups of men and women come in, all excited, congratulating each other and joining in the debate.)

SHARANA THREE: Just a small question, Basavanna, if you don't mind.

SHARANA TWO: You see, we heard the news and were thrilled. We knew the two families had come here to touch your feet. So we waited for them in Goolappa's shop. *(Pause.)* And they didn't come back!

SHARANA ONE: Evidently there's been a great deal of discussion.

SHARANA THREE: I wish you'd sent for us too.

KAKKAYYA: It wasn't really a meeting. They sought our blessings—

SHARANA FOUR: Precisely. That's what we heard. And—(*Pause.*)—
apparently Basavanna wouldn't bless them?

HARALAYYA: Who told you that?

MADHUVARASA: No, no, that's unfair.

SHARANA FOUR: Unfair? I'm only asking a question.

HARALAYYA: Of course, he blessed them.

BASAVANNA: But I hesitated. I was—tardy.

(*Surprise all around.*)

MADHUVARASA: Anyway, all that's over and done with.

SHARANA THREE: What's done with? Why should a blessing be a
problem?

BASAVANNA: I'll tell you. My immediate response was one of joy.
Didn't know whether to laugh or cry. All that we'd prayed for,
all that we had sought, it was there in an instant by God's
grace. And yet my heart trembled.

KAKKAYYA: I too was afraid.

SHARANA ONE: Is that why you said there should be an enquiry?

BASAVANNA: Not an enquiry. (*Smiles.*) Just a bit of thinking.

SHARANA TWO: And what did you think?

SHARANA ONE: What are you afraid of, Basavanna?

BASAVANNA: We are not ready for the kind of revolution this
wedding is. We haven't worked long enough or hard enough!

SHARANA THREE: So how many more generations have to roll by
before a cobbler marries a Brahmin?

SHARANA FIVE: Do we mean generations? Or heads?

SHARANA FOUR (*incredulous*): You mean this marriage won't take
place?

SHARANA SIX (*excited*): All these years you have been teaching us
that caste and creed are phantoms. And now that people here
are willing to act on your precepts, you want to turn tail?
What will the world say?

SHARANA THREE: We *sharanas* will become the laughing stock of the world!

BASAVANNA: What the world thinks is immaterial. It is a question of living, breathing human beings. A question of *that* boy's life, *that* girl's safety. What matters is what *we* consider right.

SHARANA FIVE: You're a saint, a mystic, a seer. From your heights this world must look as insignificant as grass. But I have to face the orthodox tomorrow. I have to bear their gibes—

SHARANA TWO: Shall I suggest something? Let the entire congregation of *sharanas* meet tomorrow. Let's thrash the problem out.

SHARANA FOUR: That's right. There aren't enough of us here today. So tomorrow we—

BASAVANNA: No!

(*The sharanas are startled by his vehemence.*)

SHARANA TWO: Why not?

SHARANA ONE: You don't want to hear what the rest of us have to say? Our own brethren—

BASAVANNA: An alliance is a matter to be settled by those involved in it. Our opinion was asked. We offered it. The rest is up to the families of Haralayya and Madhuvarasa. It would be unpardonable if other pressures are brought to bear upon them.

FEMALE SHARANA: All right then. Let Haralayya answer a small doubt. Naturally he jumped at the prospect of a fair Brahmin daughter-in-law. Would he be as keen on a girl from a caste lower than his?

(*A group of boys comes running in. There's excitement. 'The King?' 'Oh, my God!' 'This is serious', etc. Everyone hurriedly stands up. Kallappa strides in, casts a cool, professional look around. Bijjala follows.*

The sharanas bow. Bijjala acknowledges the greetings.)

BASAVANNA: My house is honoured by the visit. And yet Your Majesty had only to send word and—

BIJJALA: You are not an officer of the court any more. And I wasn't sure my invitation would register in the delirium of communal ecstasy.

(The sharanas titter obediently.)

I want to talk to you.

BASAVANNA: We are all *sharanas* here. We have no secrets from each other.

BIJJALA: You, men of God, are truly fortunate. We kings, however, belong to the secular world. *(Pointedly.)* We are not so fortunate.

SHARANAS *(taking the hint)*: It's time for the evening prayers. It's almost sun-down...

(They disperse. Basavanna excuses himself to the King and accompanies the sharanas to the door. Gangambika, seeing that the King is alone, walks across to him.)

GANGAMBIKA: I hope the Queen is well?

BIJJALA: What can one say? The various treatments go on. She seems to improve for a while. Then we are back again.

(Lalita, avoiding her husband, rushes to Basavanna at the door.)

LALITA *(pleading)*: So what have you decided, Basavanna? I have nothing against Sheelavanta. But—his profession—can't he—can he change it?

(Madhuvarasa and Haralayya join them.)

HARALAYYA: I know I only have to stop this wedding and many people will heave a sigh of relief. You, also Lalitakka, Kakkayya—

LALITA: No, it's not that—

MADHUVARASA: God forbid!

HARALAYYA: But, Basavanna, you gave us hope. You told us it was possible to escape from the coils of caste. We have been

snarled up in them too long. Now I am ready to face the consequences—

BASAVANNA: Promise me one thing.

HARALAYYA: Yes?

BASAVANNA: The moment the wedding is over, send the young couple away. Somewhere far away.

MADHUVARASA: But—our daughter isn't a woman yet. To send her with her husband now—

BASAVANNA: If possible, Lalitakka, you too go with them. Excuse me. The King waits...

HARALAYYA (*dubious*): All right.

(*The hall has emptied. Basavanna returns to the King, who chats with Gangambika.*)

GANGAMBIKA: Let me fetch a drink for you, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA: Nothing now, thank you.

GANGAMBIKA: This is Your Majesty's first visit to our house. You must accept a little refreshment.

(*She goes in.*)

BIJJALA (*looking around*): You know how it's in the palace. Ears—ears everywhere. And often eyes along with them. I hope you are less exposed.

BASAVANNA: Our doors, sir, are wide open.

BIJJALA: Good. Well then. I was on my way home from the court when who should confront me but a horde of howling Brahmins. It is true that normally a Brahmin does not wail or beat his breast while mourning. But let me tell you, when he sets his mind to it, no other caste can match him in the art!

BASAVANNA: What were they mourning, sir?

BIJJALA (*ignoring him*): I was tempted to rush here direct, to check if you hadn't gone off your head. But then came the next bit

of news. Basavanna had refused to bless the couple, so the alliance was off. Reassuring, I thought, but one can never be certain of these *sharanas*. Let me go and confirm for myself. That's why I'm here.

BASAVANNA: Your Majesty, a *sharana* called Madhuvarasa has offered his daughter in marriage to the son of another *sharana* called Haralayya. I saw no reason to interfere. And I didn't.

BIJJALA: Of course, you didn't. How could you? After all these years of condemning the caste system, you could hardly oppose an inter-caste marriage now. That's perfectly understandable. You just held your hand back. The blessing was not completed. The wedding was called off. Correct?

BASAVANNA: I am not in charge of this wedding, sir.

BIJJALA (*a little rough*): I only hope the wedding's off. That's all I have come to hear.

BASAVANNA: It's not off as far as I know.

(*Bijjala turns on him.*)

BIJJALA (*softly*): This isn't you. Surely you aren't such a dimwit? So I can only presume that after fifteen years of being led by you, your disciples are now refusing to do your bidding.

BASAVANNA: I have no disciples, sir. No one is obliged to take my advice.

BIJJALA: Well then, I shall have to do what you evidently can't do. I shall forbid the match.

BASAVANNA (*in horror*): Sir, but that—

BIJJALA: You know perfectly well the higher castes will not take this lying down. The wedding *pandal* will turn into a slaughterhouse. The streets of Kalyan will reek of human entrails.

BASAVANNA: But who is being punished for whose crime? Are the birds to be penalized because snakes resent their ability to fly?

BIJJALA: This cursed wedding shall not take place! Do you understand? This is an order. I am not willing to discuss the matter any further.

BASAVANNA: In that event, Your Majesty, I shall go to the palace, right now, sit in the grounds there and keep on sitting till such time as the prohibition is withdrawn.

BIJJALA: Sit away! And why go alone? Take your whole congregation with you for company. You think I give a damn?

BASAVANNA (*gently*): I shall not ask anyone to come with me, sir. But they may, on their own, decide to do so.

BIJJALA: What do you mean by that?

(*Stares at Basavanna. Then—*)

Of course, that's exactly what will happen, won't it? The entire herd of *sharanas* will follow you. A simple thing like the Treasury brought tens of thousands of them out. Won't the palace bring out a hundred thousand? You are a sly fox, I admit it. A hundred and ninety-six thousand *sharanas*! They only have to lay down their implements. And market after market in the city will close down. Streets will fall empty. Trade will collapse, the economy will suffer a set-back. The question then is: will my citizens accept such losses on account of an absurd wedding? Will any jack-ass of a king agree to place himself willingly in such a mess? And would even the biggest dunderhead in the kingdom have failed to anticipate these possibilities after serving for sixteen years as the King's Treasurer?

(*Shouting.*)

But let me warn you, Basavanna, if you think I have ascended the throne merely to sit back and scratch my arse, you are in for a surprise. After sixteen years, how little you know me! You and those *sharanas* of yours! Just because the city of Kalyan has fallen into your hands, you think you can twist my arms behind my back and push me around with impunity? I am Bijjala! Know that and be on your guard. If

you insist on driving me to the limits of patience, I shall stamp you all out like a cushionful of bed-bugs!

(While he rants, Gangambika comes out with a pitcher of cool drink and three cups. Bijjala has seen her but ignored her entirely. She calmly starts filling the cups. Then, when he stops for breath.)

GANGAMBIKA (to Basavanna): Shall I bring the medicine?

BASAVANNA: Eh?

GANGAMBIKA: The medicine?

BASAVANNA: What medicine?

GANGAMBIKA: For your ears. If His Majesty needs to shout even in this small house, perhaps your ears need attention.

(Basavanna laughs. Bijjala doesn't, but glares at her balefully. Then in a hoarse whisper.)

BIJJALA: Basavanna, I can take on the whole lot of you *sharanas* single-handed. But I swear, your women confound me!

GANGAMBIKA *(laughing as she places a cup in front of him)*: Here, sir.

(Also places cups in front of Kallappa and Basavanna, and goes out. Bijjala shouts after her.)

BIJJALA: And listen, sister. Wherever I go, before I even sip a drop, I pour a little down Kallappa's throat to check if he won't go into convulsions and die like a sick dog. But, today, in your house, I go first—

GANGAMBIKA: Let me fetch you some more then.

(She exits. Bijjala tosses the drink down his throat and turns to Basavanna.)

BIJJALA: If you and those Brahmins are bent on self-destruction, go ahead. I wish you luck. I shall take my army away and entertain myself with a little warfare. When you are done, I shall return home to count your corpses.

BASAVANNA: Sir, until this day we have accepted Kalyan as our mother city. But if the *sharanas* are not to expect basic

security in this land, I beg you to tell us so. We shan't bother you any further. We shall move on.

BIJJALA: Where?

BASAVANNA: Lord Shiva led us here. He'll take us to some other place. This is not a threat, Your Majesty. I speak from my heart.

BIJJALA: And you really believe your herd of a hundred and ninety-six thousand will give up home and shelter and follow you again into the wilderness?

BASAVANNA: That's for each one to decide for himself. Nevertheless, perhaps we *sharanas* have been stagnant too long—turned flaccid by the comforts of Kalyan. Perhaps we should take this as a sign and move!

(*A long pause.*)

BIJJALA: So be it. Have your wedding. I won't come in the way. Because I know I can't. You have trussed me up so I can't squirm an inch. But, Basavanna, once again you have brought home to me what I have always known: that you are the most selfish person I've ever met. Nothing matters to you—not friendship, not loyalty, not love—nothing except your society of *sharanas*. So our ways part here. I can only suggest that from now on you *sharanas* maintain your distance from me. You know how unpleasant I can be. No need to add anything more. (*Shouts.*) Good-bye, sister. Come, Kallappa!

(*He marches out. Kallappa follows him. A long silence. Jagadeva, Mallibomma, Gundanna, Kalayya, etc. enter, greet Basavanna.*)

BASAVANNA: Oh, Jagganna, Mallibomma, come. Sit down.

JAGADEVA: So, the news has already reached His Majesty's ears—

BASAVANNA: A king is expected to know what's happening in his realm.

JAGADEVA: And I suppose he refuses to let us go ahead with the wedding.

BASAVANNA: That's what he said initially—

JAGADEVA: What he says does not matter.

MALLIBOMMA: We are here. We'll see what he can do.

JAGADEVA: We'll manage everything. We've worked it all out.

MALLIBOMMA: Why don't you give Basavanna the gist of our plan?

JAGADEVA (*eagerly*): The society of *sharanas* is expanding. Rapidly. And the number of our enemies is increasing too. They won't stay put. They're bound to cook up some mischief. It's essential we anticipate their moves—

BASAVANNA: Jagganna, what's all this for?

JAGADEVA: Listen to me. We *sharanas* have several orders of minstrels spreading our message already. They wander from place to place, go door to door carrying out their vows. Now here's the plan. Each one of them can gather information by listening carefully. They can establish contact with the tribals, the shepherds, the cowherds—

BASAVANNA: His Majesty has given his consent to the wedding. (*There is stunned silence.*)

MALLI—JAGADEVA (*unbelieving*): He has?

BASAVANNA: Yes.

JAGADEVA: But can you trust him? The chances are he'll stab us in the back.

BASAVANNA: There's no reason to expect that. (*Pause.*)

JAGADEVA: You don't trust us. But you trust him.

BASAVANNA: Listen. If your're so keen to help with the wedding, why don't you do something very practical? Go and offer your services to the parents of the bride. They need all the help they can get!

JAGADEVA: Are you making fun of us?

BASAVANNA: No, Jagganna, the little problems of daily life—the ineffable demands, the pinpricks—they are the challenges a *sharana* must learn to attend to.

JAGADEVA: Then tell me. What does that vision of Allama mean?

Why the filth and the pus and the horrors with all the beautiful things?

BASAVANNA: I don't know. Things like that cannot be explained. As we go on living, we have to unravel the meaning for ourselves, strand by strand.

JAGADEVA (*looks at Mallibomma, smiles mysteriously*): So be it. Sharan.

BASAVANNA: Sharan.

JAGADEVA (*to Mallibomma as they go out*): Perhaps a lucky few live long enough to solve riddles—
(*They exit. During the above scene Gangambika has come to the door, and watched the goings-on silently.*)

BASAVANNA (*to himself*): Father, don't make me hear all day
 'Whose man, whose man, whose man in this?'
Let me hear:
 'This man is mine, is mine, this man is mine'.
O Lord of the Meeting Rivers, make me feel
I am a son of the house.

(*Pause.*)

GANGAMBIKA: It's late. Come in now.

BASAVANNA: All right.

(*He gets up, when a group of well-dressed merchants appears at the main door.*)

MAN: Basavanna!

(*For a minute Basavanna cannot quite place the visitors. He is too dazed, fatigued. It's dark. He cannot clearly see the man's face.*)

BASAVANNA (*slowly*): Yes?

MAN: I'm sorry we're late. It's me—Kukke Shetty.

BASAVANNA: Of course! Of course! How could I forget? Please, come in. Come in. Sit down. I've been waiting for you.
(*He looks at Gangambika, gives an apologetic smile. Then turns to the visitors.*)

What seems to be the problem?

Scene Six

A house in the Courtesans' Quarter. Damodara Bhatta enters hurriedly and bangs on the main door.

DAMODARA: Indrani...Indrani...

(A woman opens the door. He rushes in.)

Where is the Yuvaraj?

WOMAN: He is with Indrani...inside.

DAMODARA: Call him out, instantly. Tell him it's Damodara Bhatta...

WOMAN (*giggles*): You don't need to introduce yourself. But I told you...he's inside. I don't think he'll like being pulled out.

DAMODARA (*starts banging on the inner door*): Indrani...Indrani...

INDRANI (*comes out*): Who's it? What's this? The Yuvaraj is resting. Didn't she inform you, sir?

DAMODARA (*to the woman*): Bring a large pitcher of water.

(Ignoring Indrani's protests, Damodara Bhatta goes in, drags an inebriated Sovideva out and props him up on a chair. The woman brings a pitcher of water. Damodara Bhatta pours the water on Sovideva's head.)

INDRANI: One would think a demon had got into you—

DAMODARA: And one would be quite right.

(He slaps Sovideva repeatedly on his cheeks.)

SOVIDEVA (*waking up, groggily*): What...is it?

DAMODARA (*to Indrani*): Wipe him dry—dress him up properly.
(*The two women attend to Sovideva while Damodara addresses him.*)

Is the Yuvaraj feeling any brighter or shall I order another pitcher of cold water? Now, sir, listen to me carefully. A cobbler's son is supposed to marry a Brahmin girl today...

SOVIDEVA (*snarls*): I know. So what?

DAMODARA: The whole city is like tinder—ready to ignite into flames. The citizens have vowed to stop this unnatural alliance at any cost. A hundred mercenaries arrived from Sonnalige this morning, they say. A band of fighters from Tulunadu is getting ready in Kannamma's rest house—

INDRANI: Such flexing of muscles to scare those poor *sharanas*? Isn't it a bit excessive?

DAMODARA: Our information is that the *sharanas* too are spoiling for a fight. Houses have turned into armouries. It is impossible to predict which way the wind will blow. We can only dress up and wait.

INDRANI (*laughs*): Like an ageing courtesan?

(*In the distance wedding music begins to play. They all watch. The wedding procession, with Sheelavanta and Kalavati as the bridal pair, winds down the streets of Kalyan. The sharanas are tense, almost afraid, but ready to face any consequence. Most citizens watch the procession from their roof-tops.*)

SOVIDEVA: The impudent scum! They could have had a quiet wedding in some village. Instead they have to flaunt it here—in the capital.

INDRANI: Honestly, it's beyond me why this little wedding should send the world into hysterics!

DAMODARA (*gently, sadly*): Indrani, the Rig Veda tells us that the four varnas flowed out of the Primordial Man: the Brahmin from the head, the Shudra from the feet. So what we have

here in this wedding is the desecration of the body of that Purusha. How horrifying! What's worse, the person behind this crime is not an insolent Shudra or a rebellious untouchable—but a Brahmin, endowed with youth, erudition, eloquence and intelligence! What perversity drives him to this sacrilege—this profanity?

INDRANI: But the *sharanas* have done so much for the down-trodden and the destitute. For women like us—

DAMODARA (*incensed*): Nature is iniquitous. Struggle, conflict, violence—that's nature for you. But civilization has been made possible because our Vedic heritage controls and directs that self-destructive energy. How large-hearted is our dharma! To each person it says you don't have to be anyone but yourself. One's caste is like one's home—meant for one's self and one's family. It is shaped to one's needs, one's comforts, one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic of inequality.

Basavanna, on the other hand, cannot bear difference. He wants uniformity—and one that will fit his prejudices! He loves work, so to be idle is sinful. He abhors violence, so you can't eat meat. He believes in a formless, single God. So idolatry is damned.

For him the Brahmin

is like the jackal
who eats the vomit-nut,
gets dizzy,
and thinks all creation
is whirling:
why talk of these twice born
who caste-mark their bodies with mud?
If the owl blinded by day

thinks it's nightfall
 does the world plunge into night,
 you crazy fool?

He mocks the Shudras:

The pot is a god. The winnowing
 fan is a god. The stone in the
 street is a god. The comb is a
 god. The bowstring is also a god.
 Gods, gods, there are so many
 there's no place left
 for a foot.

He cannot grasp the elementary fact that a hierarchy which
 accommodates difference is more humane than an equality
 which enforces conformity.

INDRANI (*laughs*): You condemn the *sharanas*. But their poetry
 seems to dance on your tongue.

DAMODARA (*abashed*): To my ever-lasting shame, that's my one
 weakness, my indulgence in my tongue. Sanskrit is a language
 engraved on diamond, unchanging, austere. Eternal truths
 can be captured in its immutability. Kannada, our mother
 tongue, on the other hand, is pure flux. It changes from
 mouth to mouth, from caste to caste, from today to
 tomorrow. It is geared to the needs of squabbling couples,
 wheedling beggars, prostitutes spreading their saris out. It
 can only speak in inconstant moods. Its sensuality is addictive
 and the *sharanas* use it to pimp for their vulgarities.

SOVIDEVA (*wakes up*): So where is the massacre, priest? Where is
 the blood-letting?

DAMODARA: True enough. The wedding is over. And not a dog has
 barked. How can one explain it? (*Pause.*) Unless the *sharanas*
 were given protection—

SOVIDEVA: By whom?

DAMODARA: Protection on this scale—who else has the power to

guarantee it but the King? The baffling question is—why is His Majesty tempting fate?

(A knock on the door. Damodara Bhatta quickly pushes Sovideva inside, and signals to Indrani who opens the door. Manchanna Kramita enters, accompanied by some courtiers, tradesmen, soldiers, citizens, etc. A long pause.

Damodara Bhatta smiles. Then starts proclaiming the titles.)

DAMODARA: Yuvarājendra Kālanjara-Purādhīshwara Suvarṇa-Vrīṣhabha-dhwaja Someshwara Rājendra Bho parāk! Bho parāk!

(At a signal from him, Sovideva enters and stands before them. They all bow to him.)

Scene Seven

Front yard of the palace. It is dawn. Kallappa sits, dozing in a corner of the yard. Sovideva's voice is heard, calling him.

SOVIDEVA (*from outside*): Kallappa—Kallappa—
(*Kallappa sits up, alert and listens.*)

KALLAPPA: Is that you, young Master?

SOVIDEVA (*from outside*): Come here.
(*Kallappa is unwilling to move from his post. He looks around, half baffled, half irritated. Damodara Bhatta enters.*)

DAMODARA: Can't you hear the young Master calling you?

KALLAPPA: What is it?

DAMODARA: How should I know? I must say you would make a proper Feudal Lord. To question the Yuvaraj without even stirring from your seat. Go. I'll keep an eye on things here.
(*Kallappa looks at the door of Bijjalla's room on the first floor and moves out most unwillingly. As he steps out of the yard, he is attacked by half a dozen armed men who knock him down unconscious and drag him out.*

Damodara Bhatta signals. Several of the armed men enter the yard and spread out quietly behind the various corners of the palace. Only a young boy, Mariappa, remains with Damodara Bhatta. At a signal from Damodara Bhatta, the boy calls out in a voice shaking with fear.)

MARIAPPA: Bankanna—

(No response. Damodara signals to Mariappa to call again.)

Bankanna—

(Bankanna, more or less the same age as Mariappa, appears.)

BANKANNA: Yes?

(Mariappa is sweating. So Bankanna asks testily.)

What is it? And what are you doing here?

DAMODARA: Has His Majesty completed his bath?

BANKANNA: Yes. He's doing his *pooja*. *(Pointing to Mariappa.)* But what's that to him?

(A soldier swoops upon Bankanna, gags him, lifts him up and takes him away.)

DAMODARA *(explaining to Mariappa while keeping an eye on Bijjala's pooja room)*: Mariappa, this Bankanna accompanies the King on his way to the fields in the morning. Carries the pot of water to wash His Majesty's behind. It's a time ideally suited to fill the King's ears. The King has constipation and, as his bowels lighten, he responds benignly to every suggestion. So this whipper-snapper has virtually ruled the King these last three years. Now on, you are the King's pot-bearer, you understand? Whatever the King says, the answer is: 'I don't know, sir.' Control your tongue, keep your ears open and you'll go far.

(The effect aimed at during the above exchange is of a casual conversation going on in the immense palace yard—a normal everyday event. But the boy is stiff with fear and Damodara Bhatta's eyes are riveted to Bijjala's door. Damodara signals and a man enters carrying a silver salver, with clothes piled on it. At last Bijjala's voice is heard. Damodara pushes Mariappa away.)

BIJJALA'S VOICE: Rudrappa, where are my robes?

(A man rushes up the staircase and goes in. The following conversation is heard from inside.)

BIJJALA: Who are you? And where is Rudrappa?

MAN: Rudrappa is absent today, Master...

BIJJALA: What's happening? Has my entire retinue fled the city like a pack of refugees? This one hasn't come! That one's absent!
(*A sudden roar. The man rolls down the stairs as though tossed out physically. A semi-dressed Bijjala follows him out.*)

BIJJALA: You country bumpkin, who took you on? I ask for the court robes and you leave the crown out? Your parents be—!
(*Calls out.*) Rukmayya!

DAMODARA (*steps forward*): Rukmayya hasn't reported on duty today, sir.

BIJJALA: He hasn't? Blast it! Has the black plague carried away the whole city? And who are you? Ah! the priest in the Queen's Chambers, aren't you? I see you running around Sovi. But this is too early for him—

DAMODARA: A supplication, Your Majesty.

BIJJALA: Here? At this time of the day? What is it?

DAMODARA: From Raya Murari Sovideva Rajendra—

BIJJALA (*baffled*): Who? You mean our Sovi? Since when has he started sporting these ridiculous titles?
(*Suddenly he realizes what he is saying.*)

Kallappa! Where is our Kallappa? (*Calls out.*) Kallappa—

DAMODARA: Kallappa is indisposed, sir.

(*The message is clear. Bijjala rushes into his room. Bellows from inside.*)

BIJJALA: Treachery! Bloody treachery! Help...
(*He rushes out.*)

My sword! Which bastard dared touch my sword?

RAMBHAVATI (*rushes out*): What is it now?

(*She sees Damodara Bhatta.*)

What is it, sir?

(*Bijjala rushes down into the yard, runs to the main door, pushes it. It is locked from outside. He bangs on the door. Then looks through the window.*)

BIJJALA: We are surrounded by the infantry! Treason—

RAMBHAVATI: Please calm yourself. What's happened? I don't understand anything.

BIJJALA: What more can happen? It's all over. It's damnation. Your son has slit my throat. He's trapped me here...

RAMBHAVATI (*collapses*): No. It can't be true. Eeravva—Eeravva—

DAMODARA (*rushes to her*): Please, Your Majesty. There is no cause for panic. (*Orders.*) Bring Eeravva here.

BIJJALA (*bangs his head against the wall*): I was blind, Rambha. Blind! Fool! Fool! I was on the watch against the worms outside—while rearing a snake inside the house. Imbecile! (*Eeravva comes in. She rushes to the Queen. She knows what is happening and is weeping uncontrollably. She and Bijjala help Rambha up.*)

Sovideva enters wearing the crown. He is surrounded by a few courtiers, but mainly soldiers. He shakes like a leaf.

RAMBHAVATI: What's going on, son? Say it's not your doing—

DAMODARA: Eeravva, the Queen shouldn't have been allowed to strain herself in the first place. Lead her in.

RAMBHAVATI: Aren't you ashamed to wear that thing in your father's presence? Sovi, if it's true that I have nursed you on my breasts, take off that crown. Give it to your father.

(*He doesn't move.*)

Thoo, you, you blackguard! If you don't take it off, my curse be on your head—

DAMODARA (*sternly*): Eeravva, didn't you hear me?

(*Rambhavati turns on Damodara in fury, when Bijjala restrains her.*)

BIJJALA: Go in, Rambha. The man speaks sense. They have won this throw. Nothing to be gained by making a scene now. Go in. Go.

(*Rambhavati is led in. Bijjala walks to Sovideva.*)

So! Perhaps you do have something between your legs after all—

(Suddenly Sovideva kicks Bijjala, who, taken unawares, rolls to the ground. A chorus of surprise from those present. Damodara Bhatta rushes to the King's aid.)

BIJJALA: Don't you dare touch me!

(He gets up, smiling.)

Who taught you that one? Kallappa?

(The smile on his face disappears.)

Where is Kallappa? Where is he?

(No reply.)

What have you done with him? You have killed him, haven't you?

(Tears well up in his eyes.)

How could you bring yourselves to do that, you bloody murderers? He was a babe—an innocent babe. You won't find another one like him in this Kaliyuga. How could you harm him?

(He wipes his tears. Those watching are aghast to see Bijjala cry. But he makes no attempt to hide his grief.)

You kill Kallappa but spare my life. Don't I deserve the consideration you have shown him?

DAMODARA: Sir, a throne is ringed by circles rippling out into circles; the feudatories, the flatterers, the astrologers, the courtesans, the wrestlers, the spies—Your Majesty knows. And they all survive. But a man like Kallappa disrupts the design. He lacked imagination and could not be corrupted. He was dangerous.

BIJJALA: You stretch your tongue too far, priest. Watch out lest you trip over it.

DAMODARA: Forgive us, Your Majesty. We mean no treason. We have eaten the salt of the Kalachuryas and have pledged our loyalty to the dynasty. The Empire is already ringing with proclamations—stone inscriptions are being erected. His

Majesty has decided to retire voluntarily and crown with his own hands his youngest son, Yuvaraj—

BIJJALA: Ha! Will anyone believe I would place this cadaver on the throne while four other sons are alive and kicking? Won't the whole world drown in giggles?

(Sovideva steps out angrily. But this time Bijjala is ready, which deters him. Sovideva stands nonplussed, looking a little foolish.)

DAMODARA *(gently)*: If you please, sir—

(Damodara Bhatta gestures to the door. Sovideva walks out, relieved.)

BIJJALA: This game is yours. I concede that. But be under no illusion that this is the last round. If you poison me, the army in Kalyan will rise in revolt. My other sons will rush down full force. On the other hand, how long are you going to keep me alive?

DAMODARA: Each comment of His Majesty's is worthy of the *Artha Shastra*. Which only adds to our puzzlement.

BIJJALA: Yes?

DAMODARA: This marriage arranged by the *sharanas* was no trifling matter. On the one hand stands the Vedic Dharma, which has branched out in strength over the centuries and now shades the whole of Aryavarta. On the other, there is the *sharana* movement—a pestilence—but of a virulence not seen since the days of the Buddha. These two face each other in implacable hostility. The battle is without quarter. And if Your Majesty had not intervened, the *sharanas* would have met their fate on the day of that infamous wedding. But Your Majesty staunched the wrath of the people and invited disaster on his own head. Why? Why?

BIJJALA: Will you understand if I explain?

DAMODARA: I am a Brahmin, sir. It's my duty to understand.

BIJJALA: I fear this one may not be within your grasp.

(Pause.)

A man wandering in the desert, his throat parched, will graze on a patch of green, the size of one's palm, for its moisture. It's the same when one wanders in a godless world. The smallest—the most imperceptible—sign will do.

DAMODARA: Sign, sir?

BIJJALA (*has difficulty in using the word*): Yes...of a miracle.

DAMODARA: What miracle, sir?

BIJJALA: A Brahmin girl chooses to marry an untouchable and two hundred thousand people come out in support of it! That is the only miracle Basavanna has ever performed. But it is a miracle. Would you have stopped it?

DAMODARA: That's no miracle, sir. It's a crime against Nature—

BIJJALA (*quietly*): I knew that was beyond your reach. You need to have thirsted for a miracle to recognize one when you see it. (*Turns and calls.*) Rambha! Rambhavati!

(*He walks out.*)

Scene Eight

Basavanna's house. A conference of sharanas is going on. The atmosphere is highly charged.

BASAVANNA: The wedding of Sheelavanta-Kalavati could have turned into an unpleasant event. It didn't. For which we must give credit to the King—

(People protest. There is an uproar.)

HARALAYYA *(raises his hand)*: Let Basavanna finish—

BASAVANNA *(more firmly)*: There could have been a blood bath. Alternately, the King could have forbidden the whole affair—driven us out of this city—

SHARANA ONE: Why must you glorify the King, Basavanna? Why should he have forbidden the wedding? We were not breaking any law.

SHARANA THREE: It is no trivial matter to earn the enmity of two hundred thousand hard-working, law-abiding citizens.

SHARANA TWO: Suppose the King had said 'no'. So what? Would we have taken it lying down? We don't want to pick fights. But no one is going to push us around—

BASAVANNA: Fortunately nothing of that sort happened. But all of you know the most recent news. They say the King is being held prisoner. That's why I sent for you.

SHARANA FOUR: What would you have us do? We'll do as you say.

BASAVANNA: We should all go and gather in front of the palace—

WOMAN SHARANA: And demand to see the King. We should all sit down there and not move until the King comes out and talks to us as a free man.

BASAVANNA: It will work only if all of us go there and stand united.

SHARANA THREE: But why? It's a family squabble. A routine political event.

BASAVANNA: The King has risked his whole future for our sake. It would be rank betrayal not to stand by him now.

(*Commotion.*)

SHARANA FOUR: Betrayal is a big word. But not one to which our monarch is a stranger. Let's not forget that the palace he's now locked in once belonged to his trusting Masters.

SHARANA TWO: I'm sorry. But I can't understand you, Basavanna. Didn't you say that Bijjala himself told you he wanted nothing more to do with you—or us?

BASAVANNA: Yes.

SHARANA TWO: That he further added, 'If you *sharanas* don't stay away from me, you'll regret it—'

BASAVANNA: Something like that, yes.

SHARANA TWO: Then why are we forcing ourselves upon him?

BASAVANNA: Words spoken in anger. Whatever they were, we must stand by him—because he has nobody else but us.

MADHUVARASA: The world is awe-struck at the wedding of Sheela and Kalavati. We *sharanas* have at last shown our mettle, our indomitable spirit. And after all that, you want to lay the credit at the King's feet? I can't believe it!

SHARANA THREE: Dynasties come and go. The Chalukya is gone. The Kalachurya rules today. This one will also be gone tomorrow. But we *sharanas* have built a community which stands beyond political twists and turns. We have built our

own, grounded in our own metaphysics, shaped by our practice. And it is enough that we attend to its welfare. We know you're a friend of Bijjala's. You should do as your conscience tells you. We shan't object to that. But surely, this is the moment to make the four quarters realize that the *sharanas* do not need to sit and sway in the shadow of the throne, along with you?

SHARANA FIVE: Basavanna, I don't know what's got into us these days. But something has, that's for certain. Some of us are afraid. Others lazy. Others busy rationalizing their indolence. If you want us to move—and move together—there are only two alternatives: command us to do so—

BASAVANNA: Ours is a spiritual brotherhood, a community of experience. To tell any *sharana* what to do would be to insult him.

SHARANA FIVE: Then declare that there has been a miracle, that you saw Lord Shiva in your dreams. And the whole lot will leap up and follow your lead. There's no other way.

BASAVANNA: There is. Let each *sharana* listen to his inner self and follow its dictates.

What use
is knowledge within
as long as there's no action without?
If there's no body
would there be a shelter
for the breath of life?
Can one see one's face
if there's no mirror?

And the world out there—that is the only mirror we have.
What use is *bhakti* if it only hides its face?

(*Murmurs of anger, dissent.*)

SHARANA FOUR: Are you calling us escapists?

KAKKAYYA: It's past midnight. We have talked enough. Tell us what

you plan to do, and each one of us will decide for himself what he should do.

BASAVANNA: Tomorrow, at dawn, after my prayers, I shall leave for the palace.

KAKKAYYA: So be it. Let's disperse now.

(The sharanas disperse, fiercely arguing. Basavanna and Gangambika see them off. Basavanna comes back. Long pause.)

BASAVANNA: I call out to you, Father.

I cry out to you, Father.

Will you not reply?

Yet I keep on calling to you.

Lord of the meeting rivers,

Why this silence?

(A child is heard crying inside. Basavanna goes in, brings the child out and sits playing with it. Gangambika comes and sits. Silence.)

BASAVANNA: This is the blossom of our vitals, a gift from the Lord. And yet one has no time to pick him up.

GANGAMBIKA: It's as though we have been so carried away by the excitement of building a house that we have forgotten what we came here for—to buy a few basic groceries.

(He looks up at her, smiling.)

BASAVANNA: Just what I was thinking, Ganga. And in the cacophony of the crowd, we have lost the Lord's voice. One needs to go back again to where there is silence—where one can again become itinerant.

GANGAMBIKA: What then about tomorrow?

BASAVANNA: Whether the others come with me or not, Ganga, this is my last night in this house.

(Tears well up in her eyes.)

GANGAMBIKA: Perhaps—that's best.

BASAVANNA: And once a person turns his back on his own house, does he owe the palace more? Let's hope tomorrow the King

will receive his due from the *sharanas*. After that, it'll be the formless space beyond the palace. Suddenly nothingness has begun to beckon me.

He who can turn
space into form
he alone is a *sharana*.
He who can turn form into space,
he alone can experience the *linga*.
If these two became one,
would there be a way
into you, O Lord
of the meeting rivers?

Scene Nine

Night. Jagadeva, Mallibomma, Kalayya, etc., surrounded by weapons of various sorts, are performing a private ritual.

JAGADEVA: Now we mingle our blood.

(He cuts his forearm. The others follow suit. They mix blood, wound to wound.)

So we are brothers now. Our blood flows together. *Om Namah Shivaya!*

(They repeat the chant.)

Our elders continue to debate in Basavanna's house. Enough sound and fury there to bring the roof-beams down. That's all the old fogies are good for. So it's left to us to exterminate the vermin, the enemies of Lord Shiva. Is that clear? Good. Now let's have your reports. One by one. Malli, you first.

MALLIBOMMA: For five gold coins the palace guard Rachappa is ready to show us the secret passages—

JAGADEVA: What passages?

MALLIBOMMA: —that lead into the palace.

OTHERS *(excited)*: Really? Are you sure? That's wonderful.

(Jagadeva silences the excited gathering with a wave of his hand.)

JAGADEVA: We don't need him. I could lead you to them myself.
(Exclamations of surprise.)

MALLIBOMMA: You? How do you know them?

JAGADEVA: I was a regular visitor to the palace as a child, remember? With my father. And we used to play hide-and-seek in those passages. Even Sovi was there—

MALLIBOMMA: But I don't understand! Those passages were meant for a quick get-away in the event of an enemy attack. They should be secret. You played games there?

JAGADEVA: The royal family had no need for the passages. They took to their heels at the very mention of the enemy—through the back door!

(Laughter. Only Kalayya doesn't laugh.)

KALAYYA: So all these days you knew about these passages and didn't let on.

JAGADEVA: I'm telling you now. Look, I'll lead you in, isn't that enough?

KALAYYA: And all along, while we were arguing and shouting and tying ourselves into knots about how to get inside the palace, you just sat there—smiling smugly—feeling superior, the solution already in your hands, didn't you? You Brahmins, you are all the same. You're only interested in having the laugh on others.

JAGADEVA: Don't you dare mention my caste, Kalayya—

MALLIBOMMA: Hey, stop it! Don't let's start squabbling now!
(Gundanna comes in,)

GUNDANNA: Jagganna, your wife is here to see you.

JAGADEVA: I can't see her. Tell her to go away. She knows I have sworn not to look upon a woman's face till we have achieved our goal—

GUNDANNA: This is the fourth time she's come since yesterday.

JAGADEVA: So what? I am not coming out. Tell her to go away!

GUNDANNA: I can't, I'm sorry. I can't even bear to look at her. She says your mother has taken to the mat and won't say a word.

The neighbours treat them like pariahs. Poor child! She comes, sits out there like a ghost, goes away, comes back again. All she wants is a word with you. My heart bleeds for her—

JAGADEVA: Then go and bleed somewhere else. She has to attend to her mother-in-law. She'll go back soon enough. We're not playing games here. We are here to fight for our faith and I have taken a vow of celibacy. Can't she grasp a simple thing like that? Can't any one? And why are you all staring at me—as though I have done something wrong? As though I were a criminal—a—a—

(He chokes, goes and sits in a corner, holding his head. The others look away.)

Scene Ten

Same as Scene Two. Rambhavati is bed-ridden. Eeravva is doing a perfunctory pooja in the adjacent sanctum. Bijjala paces up and down muttering to himself. In a corner, near the window, sits Mariappa staring vacantly out.

RAMBHAVATI: How long are you going to pace about like that? It's a wonder you haven't worn out the soles of your feet—

BIJJALA: You go to sleep.

RAMBHAVATI: What's the use of walking up and down? Will it bring our son here? Will it fetch Basavanna?

BIJJALA (*snarls*): Basavanna? What do you mean Basavanna? Why bring him into this?

RAMBHAVATI: You can't conjure him up by just—

BIJJALA: What are you talking about? Have you gone off your head? Why should he come here? I told him to stay away—not to meddle in my affairs. Why should he come? There's nothing between us now. I wasn't even thinking of him.

RAMBHAVATI: Don't lie. At least, not to me. I have shared twenty-five years with you, and I know.

BIJJALA: Woman, will you shut up? or should I...

(*Pause.*)

All right. All right! So let's suppose you're right. Let's suppose I was thinking of Basavanna. Why shouldn't I? I supported their movement. They know that. They could have stood by me. All they had to do was to get together and demand my release and my son would have come crawling to me. But no! Basavanna won't come, because I have told him not to. Those *sharanas* are obstinate—

RAMBHAVATI: Just stop pacing about. Come and sit by me.

BIJJALA: I deserve this. No point in blaming others—

(He sits beside Rambhavati, tense and restless. Commotion outside. Servants of the palace are seen running. Mariappa addresses one of them.)

MARIAPPA: What's it? What's happened?

WOMAN: They say Basavanna is on his way here—with lots of *sharanas*.

BIJJALA: Basavanna! He's coming? Nonsense! That's not possible. *(Jumps up.)* Didn't I tell you he'll come? How many *sharanas* are there with him? Ask her—

MARIAPPA: How many *sharanas*—

(But the woman is gone. Others rush past the window.)

BIJJALA: Since he would have started from his home, he will be approaching the palace from the east. That means they should be visible from that skylight in the sanctum.

(He rushes into the sanctum.)

Eeravva, out you go! Quick!

RAMBHAVATI: What's all this? Let her at least complete the *pooja*—

BIJJALA: Later. Later. Out now. Out!

(He almost pushes Eeravva out.)

Now, Mariappa, come in. Climb up to that skylight—

(Mariappa is unwilling to step into the sanctum.)

Don't dawdle outside, ass. I order you to step into the god's room. I permit you—anyway, nobody will know!

(Rambhavati clicks her tongue disapprovingly. Mariappa steps in

gingerly. Bijjala tries to help him climb up to the skylight. But he keeps slipping.)

BIJJALA (*frustrated*): Where's the ladder? Ask for one—No, wait. Climb on to my shoulders. Here.

MARIAPPA (*scared*): I can't, Master—I can't!

BIJJALA: You dare say no to me, you son of a whore? I am Bijjala and I'm not dead yet. If you make any more fuss, I'll just wring your neck. So get up—

(*He bends. The boy sits on his shoulder.*)

That's not high enough. Stand up. Go on! I won't drop you.

(*Laughs.*) I am your sovereign after all—I bear the weight of the earth on my shoulders. I won't drop you, I promise.

(*Mariappa stands on Bijjala's shoulders with the support of the wall.*)

Basavanna is here, Rambha. I'll show that son of yours—

RAMBHAVATI: He's been bad. But don't be hard on him—

BIJJALA: For a start, I have to return that kick of his! Other matters can follow in due course—

(*To Mariappa*)

What are you gawping at? Can you see anything?

MARIAPPA: Yes, Master. But they are far away—

BIJJALA: Just tell me what you see. How many?

MARIAPPA: Many, Master, so many!

BIJJALA (*roaring*): So many! So many! How many, you dolt? And where are they?

MARIAPPA: All around the temple of Ravana-Siddheswara... It's saffron... saffron...

BIJJALA: The temple of Ravana-Siddheswara? Good, continue. Beyond that is the street of washermen—by the river. And next to that is the carpenters' street. And on this side is the old excise post. You see all that?

MARIAPPA: Yes, sir.

BIJJALA: Then the streets should all be bursting with the *sharanas*—an ocean of saffron. Even a mere fifty thousand will choke that area up—

MARIAPPA: No, Master.

BIJJALA (*enraged*): What do you mean 'No, Master'?

MARIAPPA: The terraces of houses are packed with people—ordinary people—watching. But the *sharanas*—they are many—they are around the temple of Ravana-Siddheswara and then in the street of washermen. Not in the carpenters' street—

BIJJALA: Then they must be spilling over on this side, toward the old excise post—

MARIAPPA: No, sir. No one there yet.

BIJJALA: Have you lost your eyes? Look again!

(*The door opens and Damodara Bhatta steps in, smiling gently.*)

DAMODARA: Mariappa, you low-born cur, don't you know you are not to step into the sanctum? You dare pollute the royal *pooja* room? Come out instantly or else—

(*Mariappa jumps down in fright and rushes out of the sanctum.*)

BIJJALA (*trying to hide his discomfiture*): I asked him in.

DAMODARA: If Your Majesty had but commanded, I would have had the door unlocked. This way, sir. The upper terrace provides a better view of the city.

RAMBHAVATI (*unable to hold herself back*): Has he come?

DAMODARA: Yes, Your Majesty. He is on his way.

BIJJALA: It's only because he's seen Basavanna that this leech has come twitching to us—

(*Bijjala rushes out. The palace retinue which has already collected on the terrace bow to Bijjala as he rushes to the edge of the terrace and leans out eagerly. The smile disappears from his face. He stands dazed, unbelieving.*

Damodara Bhatta comes behind him.)

DAMODARA: Yes, sir. And there he is! We too were at a loss about how to meet this eventuality. The Yuvaraj couldn't sleep a wink all night. But now our accountant has carefully enumerated the *sharanas* accompanying Basavanna—there are precisely seven hundred and seventy!

(Basavanna arrives in the yard in front of the palace, followed by his sharanas. Bijjala and Basavanna stare at each other in silence. The audience too is transfixed. A long pause.)

BIJJALA: So you have come? Good. Good. Come. But...it's damned awkward...meeting like this.

BASAVANNA: I wanted to come. So I have. Those who wanted to come with me, they are here.

BIJJALA: I hadn't asked you to come. You hadn't said you would. But you are here. *(Pause.)* You didn't desert me.

BASAVANNA: How are you, sir?

BIJJALA: What can go wrong with me? A buffalo fatted for the Goddess Mariamma.

BASAVANNA: And Her Majesty?

BIJJALA: She's coughing again. It's...this sudden change of weather. *(Pause.)*

Well, I had better go in. She isn't too well. *(Pause.)* You'd better go too. Not much point our hanging on here. *(Pause.)* Go, Basavanna.

BASAVANNA *(nods)*: I shall, sir. When we shall see each other again, I don't know. So pardon me for preaching. But let's not try and bend God's generosity to our desires. Let His will be our life. Even if He tortures us, defeats us, our triumph will be in that He has attended to us.

BIJJALA *(irritable)*: There you go again! I never know what you mean. Can't you put it more simply?

BASAVANNA *(smiles)*: Let me try, sir. *(Pause.)* Trust in Him.

BIJJALA *(shakes his head)*: That's hard.

BASAVANNA: It is possible. If only you would believe—
(Long pause. Suddenly—)

BIJJALA: Do you remember? Your verse—
 He who runs is not a warrior.
 He who begs is not a devotee.
 A warrior shouldn't run.
 A devotee shouldn't beg.
 I'll not run, I'll not beg,
 O Lord of the meeting rivers.

Did I get it right?

(Basavanna nods. Long pause.)

BASAVANNA: Believe in Him. I too shall go now to Kappadi of the
 meeting rivers in search of him. May Shiva bless you. *Sharan.*
*(Bijjala nods. Basavanna and companions go away. Bijjala returns
 to Rambhavati's room, locks the door from inside and bursts into
 a mixture of sobs and laughter.)*

BIJJALA: Basavanna is here, Rambha. I shall be King again and you
 the Queen. A hundred and fifty thousand *sharanas* are on
 their way—not all of them here yet, of course. But they'll be
 here soon. Our son is realizing his folly. In no time at all he'll
 surrender...

(He sits down by her side.)

Don't you worry about anything now. Everything is going to
 be all right again—

*(She doesn't reply. He closes his eyes and leans back against the wall.
 In the far distance, the song sung by Basavanna and his sharanas
 is heard.)*

Scene Eleven

The palace. Sovideva with Manchanna Kramita and Damodara Bhatta.

DAMODARA (*bubbling with excitement*): The *sharanas* lie inert, lost, adrift in a void of their own creation. Excellent! Now we must act—

SOVIDEVA: What do we do?

DAMODARA: Arrest those responsible for the wedding. Expel the leaders of—

MANCHANNA (*gently*): What will that achieve? Basavanna is gone. But their organization continues. Money continues to flow into their coffers—

SOVIDEVA: I know. But how is that?

MANCHANNA: It's simple, sir. That inter-caste wedding shook every citizen of Kalyan. For him it meant an era in which any untouchable could ask for his daughter's hand in marriage! A nightmare! So he supported us against your father. Yet he needs the *sharanas* for his profits. It's a bond of greed—of mercantile calculation. And that has to be severed.

SOVIDEVA: So what do you advise?

MANCHANNA (*smiles*): I'm almost tempted to say, 'Let's do nothing!' The *sharanas* have lost their drive and in course of

time are bound to revert to caste for sheer survival. Unfortunately Basavanna is alive and we can take nothing for granted. It is imperative that we strike—immediately.

SOVIDEVA: How do we do that?

MANCHANNA: Sir, King Mihirakula of Kashmir took care of the Buddhist menace by decimating sixteen hundred *viharas*. Our Pandya neighbour impaled eight thousand Jain scoundrels along the highway. So why are we being so circumspect?

DAMODARA: The coronation is round the corner. It's essential that the new king is seen as capable of forgiveness, generosity—

MANCHANNA: And what's a coronation, pray? The gross body is cleansed of its lowly birth and made worthy of receiving Vedic mantras and the Brahmin's salutations. The King partakes of the divine. Who dare judge the King? We are there to interpret the sacred texts. The King is there to implement our advice. That's enough.

SOVIDEVA: Bravo! That's grand! You are right. I am the King and I can now make them pay for defying me at the Treasury!

DAMODARA: Please, Your Majesty—

SOVIDEVA (*excited*): I shall strike terror in their hearts, I shall wreak havoc.

MANCHANNA: And then pay a brief visit to your father-in-law, sir? His support may come in handy—

SOVIDEVA: Yes. And see our Queen again! She is our Queen, after all, frigid bitch though she is. (*To Damodara Bhatta*) You'll accompany us?

DAMODARA: Someone is needed in the capital, sir. I suggest I stay behind.

MANCHANNA: Whenever King Bijjala went out on his campaigns, he left the city to my care.

(*To Damodara Bhatta*)

In fact, His Majesty will need someone to keep him company in his father-in-law's house and attend to the daily rituals. *(Damodara Bhatta reacts in anger but is silenced by Manchanna Kramita's unctuous smile.)*

SOVIDEVA: Let's go then!

(They all go out. Drums are heard in the distance and provide the bridge to the next scene.)

Scene Twelve

Jagadeva, Mallibomma, Kalayya practising the martial arts. Gundanna comes rushing in and rolls on the ground in agony.

GUNDANNA: *Ayyo...Ayyo...Kala! Malli! I can't bear it. I can't...Mother!*

OTHERS: What's it, Gundanna? What's happened? What are you screaming about?

GUNDANNA: What can I say? Mother...I'll die. I can't bear it! Haralayya—Madhuvarasa—

(He bangs his head on the floor.)

MALLIBOMMA: Behave yourself, Gundanna. Take hold of yourself. What's happened to Haralayya?

GUNDANNA: It's harrowing! A while ago—the King's soldiers arrested Haralayya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there—And then—then—as the city watched—they plucked their eyes out—

(A reaction of horror from those present.)

Plucked out their eyes with iron rods—bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets—tied to elephants' legs—*Ayyo!* How can I tell you?—Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones—They died screaming!

JAGADEVA: And no one intervened? What about the *sharanas*?

GUNDANNA: They all watched, shut inside their houses. I can't stop shivering. It was horrible.

KALAYYA: Shiva! Shiva!

GUNDANNA: Now—they are impaling their bodies at the city gate—

JAGADEVA: *Thoo! Thoo! Thoo!* Our manhood be spat upon. We are not just cowards but cowards ten times over. Come on, let's tie anklets and dance like eunuchs—

KALAYYA: I told you we must act before—

JAGADEVA: You did? Always the 'I-told-you-so' Kalayya, aren't you? But suggest something, and immediately a thousand excuses—

KALAYYA: Watch it, Jagga. I won't take any more nonsense from you—

JAGADEVA: What'll you do?

MALLIBOMMA: Jagganna, Kalayya, stop it! Gundanna, what about the women of the house?

JAGADEVA: I know Kalavati's mother has gone away with the couple.

GUNDANNA: Sheela's mother saw her husband's body—a grotesque bundle of rags—and ran down the street, screaming. It froze one's blood. No one knows where she is. Perhaps a lake or a well—

JAGADEVA: We can't sit here like old women. Come on. Let's attack the palace. Sovi won't expect us to act so soon. He doesn't know I know the secret route. We'll trap him, cut the bastard into pieces.

MALLIBOMMA: But is it safe to go out armed in broad daylight?

GUNDANNA: The streets are deserted. The city is dead—like a cemetery!

JAGADEVA: Come on!

(They rush out.)

Scene Thirteen

The palace. Jagadeva and others rush in along with Rachappa, naked swords in their hands.

RACHAPPA: Jagganna, you've been made fools of! There's no one in the palace. They've all run away. Sovideva—Damodara Bhatta—

MALLIBOMMA: Then why didn't you let us know? It was your job—

RACHAPPA: I was waiting for you outside. I didn't know you knew the secret passages and could get into the palace without me. Besides, I sent word with Mudda—

KALAYYA: He's probably rushed straight to some whore!

JAGADEVA: We'll be the laughing stock of the world. For all our slogans of revolution, we've plunged straight into a heap of shit.

MALLIBOMMA: It's too late to worry about that now. It's dangerous to stay on here. Let's go—

JAGADEVA: And what do we do out there? Wear bangles in public?

MALLIBOMMA: No point hanging on here. He says the palace is empty—

RACHAPPA: Except for that lunatic.

KALAYYA: What lunatic?

RACHAPPA: The old King—

MALLIBOMMA: The old King?

JAGADEVA: You mean—Bijjala?

RACHAPPA: They say he's gone mad after the Queen died. He refuses to leave the palace. Refuses to step out of the Queen's chambers—

KALAYYA: Any guards there?

RACHAPPA: They too ran away—naturally.

JAGADEVA: Take us to him. Quick.

(They rush out.)

Scene Fourteen

Rambhavati's chamber. The same as in Scene Two. Mariappa dozes in a corner. Bijjala is sprawled in a dark corner of the sanctum. Jagadeva and others rush in. Mariappa sees them, and rushes out.

BIJJALA (*from inside*): Who's that?

JAGADEVA (*comes to the door of the sanctum*): Victory to Your Majesty.

BIJJALA: Who is that talking about my majesty?

JAGADEVA: We have come to see you, sir—

BIJJALA: Come in.

(Jagadeva, sword in hand, is about to step into the sanctum. He beckons others to follow him. But Mallibomma stops him.)

MALLIBOMMA (*shakes his head, and whispers, pointing to the sword*): You can't take that in.

JAGADEVA (*to Bijjala*): We have travelled a long distance, sir. Our feet are caked with mud. We don't want to dirty the temple.

BIJJALA (*laughs*): This god hasn't seen any worship for many days now. The floor hasn't even been swept.

JAGADEVA: But, sir—

BIJJALA: It's cool in here. I'm not stirring out. Say your piece from there or go away.

JAGADEVA (*suddenly*): We have come from Kappadi, sir.

BIJJALA (*walking up*): Kappadi?

JAGADEVA: —of the meeting rivers. From Basavanna.

BIJJALA: Why didn't you say so? Wait. What does he say?

(He gets up. Mallibomma looks at Jagadeva, uncomprehending. Jagadeva dismisses him with a wave of the hand, signals to the others to get ready and stands poised to strike.

Bijjala steps out of the sanctum.)

BIJJALA: What does he say?

JAGADEVA: Strike, Rachappa. Kalayya—Now!

(He strikes Bijjala with his sword. The others too attack. Bijjala wounded, taken by surprise, reels back. Then the warrior in him comes awake. He pushes them back and rushes into the sanctum and stands ready to fend off further attacks.

Mallibomma watches, stunned, uncomprehending.)

JAGADEVA: Come, Malli! Come on, Kalayya!

(He tries to pursue Bijjala into the sanctum but Mallibomma blocks his way.)

MALLIBOMMA: No, Jaggana. Nobody sheds blood in there!

(Jagadeva ignores him, and tries to side-step him, but Mallibomma is adamant.)

Have you forgotten our vow? No one desecrates the Lord's house while I am around—

JAGADEVA: So what do you want me to do?

MALLIBOMMA: Leave the swords out here.

JAGADEVA (*helpless, puts his sword down*): Come on! Let's drag him out.

MALLIBOMMA: But why? He's no better than a patched-up piece of leather. What's the point of all this?

JAGADEVA: He's our only chance, don't you see? If we go out empty-handed, we'll go down in history as incompetent

clowns. Not just our enemies but our own people will laugh at us.

MALLIBOMMA: You want to kill him for that?

JAGADEVA: Don't talk too much, Malli. It's to me that Basavanna has passed on the vision of Allama. Me! No one else. He's left it to me to interpret it. You know that. Now do as I say: kill him and the meaning will take care of itself.

(All four put their swords aside and go in. Bijjala, bleeding, is waiting for them. They grapple with him, try to pull him out but he is like a bull elephant, rooted to the earth, unyielding. Suddenly he shakes himself free and runs to the linga and embraces it. They pounce upon him and try to wrench him free. But to no avail. Bijjala gives a loud laugh.)

BIJJALA: This, boys, is known as Bijjala's Grip! Study it! Move back now. Back.

(They let go and move back.)

Everyone asks the same question: Miracle? What miracle? But look here now. Basavanna couldn't make me bend before the Lord. My wife couldn't. But you young whelps have made me cling to Him. Something must be wrong with me. Whatever I reach for—wherever I crawl—I bump into miracles. Huh! All right. Let's have it. Where are you from? My son hasn't sent you—that's certain. He has more seasoned assassins. You can barely wield a knife. I could have whacked you all down like rats. But I'm tired now. Who are you? Where have you come from?

MALLIBOMMA: We are *sharanas*, sir.

BIJJALA: I see. And it's true Basavanna sent you?

JAGADEVA: Yes, sir.

MALLIBOMMA: No, sir. We came on our own.

BIJJALA: Just like that? To kill me? Go ahead. Kill me. I won't even ask why. I am sick of asking. You'll lighten my burden. But there is a condition—

MALLIBOMMA: Sir—

BIJJALA: I have a message for Basavanna. Will you deliver it to him?
If you promise, I'll step out. On my own. If not, I'll stick to this *linga*: I'll be Markandeya and you play the messengers of Death—

JAGADEVA: You have our word, sir.

BIJJALA: If you fail, may the curse of Basavanna be upon your heads.

(He gets up. He is weakening fast. He leans on the shoulders of Mallibomma, who leads him out.)

BIJJALA: Tell Basavanna... Say! What'll you say?...Damn! I had it all clear and lucid. All these days I sat there and thrashed it out with him in detail. Things we really should have talked about when we had the time but didn't—And now, I dry up. Oh, yes! Tell Basavanna we talked of many things in our time, but we never touched upon what matters. And that is—Blast! It was on the tip of my tongue and I've lost it. Wait!—

JAGADEVA (*impatient*): Are you done, sir?

(Bijjala looks at him in surprise. He lets go of Mallibomma and moves to Jagadeva. Leans on his shoulder.)

BIJJALA: What's it, lad? Why are you so upset with me?

(Jagadeva stabs him. As Bijjala collapses, he grabs Jagadeva.)

Why, Sovi? Why—why this anger?

JAGADEVA: I am not Sovi. I am not your son.

BIJJALA (*trying to embrace him*): Sovi, son—

JAGADEVA: Let go of me! I told you—I'm not your son!

(Jagadeva pushes Bijjala, who rolls to the floor. Then he leans against the wall and retches. Others watch.)

MALLIBOMMA: He's dead now. Are you happy?

JAGADEVA: Go away!

MALLIBOMMA: And you?

JAGADEVA: Go. I am not coming with you.

(All except Jagadeva leave. He stares at Bijjala's body, in a sort of delirium.)

So this is your temple, Basavanna? These legs the pillars. This body the shrine. This head the golden cupola. And yet how easily does the moving freeze into immobility! A stab—a blow—and the river freezes. The blood clots. The body goes stiff. Look how this house of Lord Shiva shakes—rolls and pitches—and all it needs is a sprinkle of blood. And a stab—

(As he goes into the sanctum, he sees the idol of the bull, Nandi, at the door, and addresses it.)

You are watching, Basavanna? Good. I'm not afraid of death like my father. I am not afraid. Even of sacrilege. Watch. If you are Basavanna, I am Jagganna—the Solitary Saint.

(Sits in front of the linga and plunges the dagger into himself.)

Scene Fifteen

Kappadi. Basavanna with Mallibomma and Kalayya.

KALAYYA (*in tears*): The King stepped out only because he heard
your name—

(*Mallibomma pats him on his back, calming him, while also suggesting that he's spoken enough.*)

BASAVANNA: Go now. May Shiva be with you. *Sharan.*

(*Kalayya and Mallibomma go away.*)

Whose name? And whose face? Whose wound and whose blood? This carcass is mine. And I am also the King's slayer. So this is the last of Allama's tableaux. The festivities are over, the streets deserted. The night has departed and the world is silent. Lord of the Meeting Rivers, absorb this inner shrine into the fine tip of your flame. Until all becomes light. Light within light. The great dawn of light.

Scene Sixteen

A messenger comes running.

MESSENGER 1: Sir! Sir!

(Sovideva enters with a few bodyguards.)

MESSENGER 1: Sir, Kalyan burns. People rush through its streets howling and screaming. No one to look after them, console them, protect them. Sir, you must save Kalyan—

(He rushes out.)

MESSENGER 2 *(enters)*: The royal guards have gone on a rampage and started looting the city. Temples are sacked, trading houses torched. The city reels under gruesome tales of rape, murder and rioting. Sir, you must rush to Kalyan. *(Exits.)*

SOVIDEVA: Oh God! Why didn't anyone warn me this might happen? Why has everyone turned against me?

DAMODARA *(enters)*: We should never have left Kalyan. I told you, sir, but it isn't too late yet. Let's build a new city from these ashes. A new—

SOVIDEVA: You! You are responsible for all this! I trusted you—

DAMODARA: Sir—

SOVIDEVA: Shut him up!

(A guard strikes Damodara Bhatta with his sword. Damodara Bhatta collapses, blinking in surprise and dies.)

For heaven's sake, I only said shut him up! Why is everybody against me? What shall I do now? The *sharanas* too are out to destroy me—that tribe of snakes! Annihilate them! Crush their progeny!

MESSENGER 3 (*enters*): News from Kappadi Sangama! Basavanna is no more. They say he merged with the elements. Nothing else is known!

MESSENGER 3 (*enters*): Sir, the *sharanas* flee Kalyan. They spread out in all eight directions. One lot has plunged into the fever-ridden jungles of Uluvi. Another heads for Andhra—

SOVIDEVA: Pursue them. Don't let them escape. Men, women, children—cut them all down. Set the hounds after them. Search each wood, each bush. Burn the houses that give them shelter. Burn their books. Yes, the books! Tear them into shreds and consign them to the wells. Their voices shall be stilled for ever—

(*Drums. Screams of women and children are heard, along with the noise of fighting.*)

With our realm in such dire straights, my brothers are marching on us. The villains! The traitors! It proves they had a hand in killing my dear father, my revered father, King Bijjala, founder of the glorious Kalachurya dynasty. Destroy them.

It is time to be wakeful, to be on guard.

The King is father to his people and the people shall love him and obey him like his offspring. No tongue shall wag against the King or his family or his retinue or his officers.

From this moment all *sharanas*, foreigners, and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the King. For the King is God incarnate!

(*Fire erupts in the background. Screams fill the skies. Manchanna*

Kramita and three other Brahmins enter, seat Sovideva on a throne, hold the 'urn of thousand holes' on his head. Water jets out in a thousand streams and cascades on Sovideva's head.

He continues to talk through all this.

They sing Vedic chants.

The eulogies begin and drown everything else.)

HERALDS: *Mahārājādhirāja Kālanjara-purādhishwara Go-Brāhmana-Pratipālaka Varnāshrama-dharma-Rakshaka Dushta-shāsana Suvarna-Vrishabhadhwaja Damaru-turya-nirghoshana Kalachuryavamsha-Kamala-Bhāskara Triambaka-pāda-padmamadhupa Parama-māheswara pratāpa-lankeshwara Giridurga-malla Ripu-kari-sandoha—simha Nisshanka-malla Bhujabalachakravarti Someshvara-Rājendra Bho parāk—Bho parāk!*

(Sovideva continues to gesticulate violently. The fire continues to blaze in the background.)

THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

***The Fire and the Rain* was first presented at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore in November 1999. The principal cast was as follows:**

ANIL MENON	King
DARIUS SUNAWALA	Courtier
JAGAN DEVRAJ	Priest One/Vishwarupa
VIVEK RAO	Priest Two/Nittilai's brother
VIKRAM SHARMA	Priest Three
ASHOK MANDANNA	Paravasu
ROHIT MALKANI	Actor-Manager
VIVEK SHAH	Arvasu
PUJA CHODHA	Nittilai
JAGDISH RAJA	Andhaka
VEENA SAJNANI	Vishakha
ARORUP ACHARYA	Yavakri
PRAKASH BELAWADI	Raibhya
SANDEEP P. S.	Brahma Rakshasa
JAVINDER SINGH	Nittilai's husband
ARJUN SAJNANI	Indra
Directed by	ARJUN SAJNANI
Production Design by	JAYOO NACHIKET
Choreography by	DAKSHA SETH
Music by	DEVISSARO

Prologue

It has not rained adequately for nearly ten years. Drought grips the land. A seven-year long fire sacrifice (yajña) is being held to propitiate Indra, the god of rains.

Fire burns at the centre of step-like brick altars. There are several such altars, at all of which priests are offering oblations to the fire, while singing the prescribed hymns in unison.

The priests are all dressed in long flowing seamless pieces of cloth, and wear sacred threads. The king, who is the host, is similarly dressed but has his head covered.

Paravasu is the conducting priest (adhvaryu). He will be called the Chief Priest, since he is the most important of them all. It is his responsibility to see that there are no errors, either of omission or of commission, in the performance of the sacrifice. He is about twenty-eight.

It is an impressive panorama.

The Brahma Rakshasa, a Brahmin soul trapped in the limbo between death and rebirth, is moving around at the sacrificial precincts, though no human eye can see him.

The afternoon session is over. The priests begin to disperse.

A Courtier enters with the Actor-Manager. The latter is made to stand at a distance from the fire sacrifice since as an actor he is considered low-born. The Courtier rushes into the protected enclosure of the fire sacrifice and talks to the King. The priests surround them. There is heated discussion.

KING (*explodes*): No, impossible! It's not possible.

PRIEST ONE: But where is the troupe?

COURTIER: At the city gates. Waiting.

PRIEST TWO: Let them come, Your Majesty. Please—

KING: I am not stopping them. They can come, by all means. But
I won't have that boy—

PRIEST THREE: It's three years since we saw a play.

PRIEST FOUR: And there was a time when we had four plays a
month!

PRIEST THREE: These endless philosophical discussions, meta-
physical speculations, debates. Every day! Surely, a sacrifice
doesn't have to be so dreary.

PRIEST TWO: We need a play to freshen our minds.

PRIEST ONE: Fortunately this troupe is here—

PRIEST FOUR: Do let them perform, Your Majesty.

KING: But why do they insist on him? He is not even an actor by
birth—

COURTIER: The Manager says all his actors have fled to other
lands. He needs an actor. And this one, he says, is good—

KING: But the Chief Priest won't agree.

PRIEST ONE: Why don't we ask him?

(*Calls out.*)

Sir—

PARAVASU (*entering*): Did someone call me?

KING (*to the Courtier*): You tell him.

COURTIER: Well, sir...it's like this. There's a troupe of actors at
the city gates. They are keen to stage a play in honour of the
fire sacrifice.

PARAVASU: I thought the famine had decimated all the troupes.

COURTIER: That's precisely it. This one has come specially for us—
against all odds.

(Points to the Actor-Manager.)

That's the Manager of the troupe. He has come with a specific
plea. He'll make his submission from a distance.

(Paravasu nods. The Courtier shouts to the Actor-Manager.)

You may shout out whatever you have to say, but please face
away from the sacrificial enclosure so you don't pollute it.

*(The Actor-Manager stands facing away from the sacrificial
enclosure and declaims theatrically.)*

ACTOR-MANAGER: Sirs, as is well known to you, Brahma, the
Lord of All Creation extracted the requisite elements from
the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veda and
thus gave birth to the art of Drama. He handed it over to
his son, Lord Indra, the God of the Skies. Lord Indra, in
turn, passed on the art to Bharata, a human being, for the
gods cannot indulge in pretence. So if Indra is to be pleased
and bring to an end this long drought which ravages our land
a fire sacrifice is not enough. A play has to be performed
along with it. If we offer him entertainment in addition to
the oblations, the god may grant us the rains we're praying
for.

(Long pause.)

PARAVASU: Surely you don't need me to decide on this?

COURTIER *(hesitating)*: The problem is...there aren't enough
actors to stage a play. They want to bring a new actor with
them. *(Pause.)* Your brother.

PARAVASU *(quietly)*: Arvasu!

COURTIER *(hurriedly)*: I told the Actor-Manager, 'Anyone but him!
He's forbidden to step in here!' But the Manager says there's
no play without him. Not enough of a cast!

KING: They are twisting our arms. They know the priests are
desperate for some entertainment.

(A long pause. Paravasu is silent. The priests anxiously wait for his reaction.)

COURTIER: The Manager says that he has a special message from your brother for you. He will repeat it if permitted to do so. Your brother has taught him what to say. The exact words. *(Paravasu nods.)*

KING *(anxious)*: Is that all right with you? I mean—everyone will hear.

PARAVASU: And why shouldn't they?

COURTIER *(shouts to the Actor-Manager)*: If you have anything to add, you may do so.

ACTOR-MANAGER: A message from a brother. Dear elder brother, you once said to me: 'The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lost their caste because of their profession. A curse plunged them into disrepute and disgrace. If one values one's high birth, one should not touch this profession.' And I accepted this. But today I am a criminal. I have killed my father, a noble Brahmin. I already stand tarnished. I may now become an actor. This follows from your own words. So please do not bar the way now.

(A long pause. Everyone looks eagerly at Paravasu.)

KING: The fire sacrifice is nearing completion. We have conducted it without a blemish for nearly seven years. And you have guided us. Let's just complete it. Let it rain. Once it rains, we can have as many plays as we like. As a sacrifice approaches completion, demons gather in the shadows. The danger of disruption increases. You said so yourself. To permit a condemned criminal in the vicinity of our sacrificial fires, to risk—at this stage—

PARAVASU: Perhaps the sacrifice needs danger.

KING: But you drove him away yourself. You called him a demon.

PARAVASU: Perhaps you can't keep demons away from the sacrifice.

It's a bond we can't break. Let's have the play. We shall all watch.

(The Courtier bows, runs to the Actor-Manager, who nods enthusiastically. They depart. The priests disperse discussing the play.

The troupe comes on stage: It consists of only three men, the Actor-Manager, his brother, who is limping, and Arvasu, Paravasu's brother, aged about eighteen. They all carry bundles of costumes. Arvasu is also carrying a mask. A couple of women provide music, with a few wind instruments and a drum.

The King, Paravasu and the other priests sit in front. Behind them gathers the general populace.

The Actor-Manager starts singing the benedictory verse. The stage darkens, leaving Arvasu in a pool of light.)

ARVASU: He's agreed, Nittilai! He'll be there to watch the play! But where are you? Why aren't you here? Nittilai! Nittilai! I am going to act on stage! I hope you are watching. Please, please, watch. The play is about to begin. Yes, after all these years, it's going to happen. But you know, and brother knows, and I know that this isn't the real thing. This is a fiction, borrowed from the myths. The real play began somewhere else. A month ago. A month?... Was it really that recent? It seems ages and ages of darkness ago. You and I were going to get married. Begin a new life. And I had to meet the elders of your tribe.

(Nittilai, a girl of fourteen, comes and stands next to Arvasu. Though they are obviously fond of each other, they do not touch, except when specified.)

Act One

NITTILAI: Oh! Don't go on about it! I told you! There's nothing to worry about. The elders will gather under the big banyan tree and ask a few questions. You answer them...

ARVASU: I couldn't sleep a wink last night. Woke up in a cold sweat every time I thought of your elders...

NITTILAI: You are a fuss-pot. You've known them for years. And after all, every young man about to get married goes through it. Just declare—

ARVASU: Yes, I know. I know: Just stand there and say: 'I want to take her as my wife. I am potent. I can satisfy all her needs...'

NITTILAI (*shyly*): Yes, more or less that!

ARVASU: And in public!

NITTILAI: Of course. What's the point of saying it to yourself?
(*Laughs.*)

Don't worry. It's nothing...

ARVASU: Nothing, yes. For the young men of your tribe! But I am a Brahmin. To say all that in plain, loud words to a smirking, nudging, surging multitude. No hymns to drown out one's voice. No smoke to hide behind. It's dreadful. I hope there won't be too many people there—

NITTILAI: The whole village will be there.

(Arvasu groans.)

And some from the neighbouring villages.

ARVASU: Are the elders brutal?

NITTILAI: Of course not. But the young men could be—

ARVASU: What young men?

NITTILAI: Your friends. My brothers. Others attending the council.
They have a field day usually.

ARVASU: I am not coming!

NITTILAI: Let no evil spirit hear you. Don't be silly, Arvasu. Father has told the young men not to get carried away. He likes you. In any case, there are very few men left because of the famine. The women will be there of course. In hordes. It's not often that they get a Brahmin groom—

ARVASU: To chew upon, you mean? Your women can be more lewd than your men.

NITTILAI: It's their prerogative. Come on now, you keep bragging about how, given a chance, you could stun thousands with your wit and eloquence.

ARVASU: I was talking as an actor. But this is real—me as myself.

NITTILAI: Yes.

(Pause.)

And have you faced your own people? Told them yet?

(No reply.)

You haven't, have you? Do you feel ashamed?

ARVASU: Ashamed? Let me show you—here!

(Grabs her hand and pulls her near.)

NITTILAI *(scandalized)*: Let go of me! Let me go! What'll everyone say?

ARVASU: Why? Don't I have my rights—?

NITTILAI: Not until we're married. Until then the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be. That's our custom—

ARVASU: Mother of mine! I'm about to jettison my caste, my people, my whole heritage for you. Can't you forget a minor custom for my sake?

NITTILAI: It's a nice custom. Sensible. Worth observing.

ARVASU: All these days I couldn't touch you because Brahmins don't touch other castes. Now you can't touch me because among hunters, girls don't touch their betrothed. Are you sure someone won't think of something else once we're married? *(She stops him and points. They are at some distance from the hermitage of Yavakri's father. A blind man, called Andhaka, who is a Sudra by caste, is sitting by the gate. Arvasu nods, signals to her to watch. Then proceeds toward the hermitage, moving zig-zag, trying to camouflage his walk.)*

ANDHAKA: Who's that? Arvasu?

(Nittilai doubles up with laughter. Arvasu jumps up and down in mock frustration, but is actually quite annoyed with himself.)

ARVASU: Curse your ears! Curse your ears!

NITTILAI *(to Andhaka)*: He was trying to walk so you wouldn't guess who it was.

ANDHAKA: They all try that. But I can always tell. Just as you can recognize a man by his face—I can recognize him by the sound of his steps—

ARVASU: I'll fool you yet, old man!

ANDHAKA: I wish you luck. But in the meantime you two have cheered my heart, children. Made my ears happy...

NITTILAI: You mean you already know?

ARVASU: We thought we'd surprise you.

NITTILAI: You never move out of here. Yet you hear of everything...

ANDHAKA: You two are brave. It's one thing to frolic together as children. But you're not children any longer. You're old enough to know that the world can be cruel and ruthless.

NITTILAI: Even now he hasn't told his family.

ANDHAKA: Fair enough! 'You must always extract the honey without ruffling the bees.'

ARVASU: I keep telling her, no one cares! The one advantage of this famine—

NITTILAI: Don't say that! That's not nice—

ARVASU: I know. Nevertheless. The famine has sent my relatives fleeing to the city. The last thing they want is to send a daughter back to this cursed land. So they couldn't care less whom I marry—

ANDHAKA (*not unkindly*): Besides—you're not known to be bright. You are not in demand. That's an advantage.

(*Arvasu makes a wry face. Nittilai giggles silently.*)

ARVASU: Actually, I did have some moments of panic. But then the other day as I sat thinking—

(*For Andhaka's benefit*)

'trying hard' to think, if you like—it suddenly occurred to me how stupid I was being. I'll never be learned like father or uncle. I shan't ever conduct the royal sacrifice like Parvasu or perform penance like cousin Yavakri. All I want is to dance and sing and act. And be with Nittilai. It doesn't matter a flake of cowdung to my father whether I'm alive or dead. My sister-in-law lives wrapped up in a world of her own. That leaves only my brother—

ANDHAKA: A hard man...who will not be crossed...

ARVASU: Hard? Never to me. To me he's been a mother, father, brother, nurse, teacher—everything rolled into one. He taught me to win at marbles and play tunes on reeds. I owe everything to him—

ANDHAKA: And what if he forbids you now?

ARVASU: I'll tell him: 'I can't give up Nittilai. She is my life. I can't live without her—I would rather be an outcaste—'

ANDHAKA: Beautiful! Beautiful! Such moving words.
(*Nittilai laughs happily.*)

But Paravasu is not one to be easily moved, I warn you.

ARVASU: You'll see. The only reason I haven't told him yet is that the sacrifice is about to end. And he is the Chief Priest. It's important that he is not disturbed—
(*Nittilai nods in agreement.*)

ANDHAKA: But surely he'll hear about your meeting with her tribal elders this afternoon?

ARVASU: How was I to know her father would call this Council so suddenly? He never asked me.

NITTILAI: So Father's to blame? Do you know why Father called the elders in such haste? He always says: 'These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them.'

ARVASU: All right! Now I'll wed you so you can—

NITTILAI (*screams*): Shut up!
(*They all laugh.*)

ANDHAKA: Your cousin Yavakri will be so happy—

ARVASU: Is he in?

ANDHAKA: No. In fact he said he was heading in the direction of your hermitage.

ARVASU: We are on our way there too. He's sent word asking me to meet him there.

NITTILAI: It would have been so convenient if you could have finished talking to him here. We could have gone directly to our village—

ANDHAKA: Yavakri gets no peace here. It's this endless stream of visitors. Morning to night. Ceaseless. Learned men, ascetics, pundits, all dying to find out how he talked to the god... What Lord Indra said... the details of his austerities... what hymns he chanted...

ARVASU (*to Nittilai*): You see? It's no small matter. Don't joke about it...

ANDHAKA: She joked about it? What did she say?

(*Nittilai glares at Arvasu as though to say, 'There! You've done it!' Andhaka is getting more and more agitated.*)

Speak up, child. You joked about what?

NITTILAI: I only said I didn't know why Yavakri had to spend ten years in the jungle—

ANDHAKA: He was seeking God so he could ask for Universal Knowledge! And gods don't yield to men so easily. He had to mortify himself, practise austerities, fast, meditate, pray.

NITTILAI: I know but—

ANDHAKA: Ten years of rigorous penance. And still Lord Indra would not oblige. Finally, Yavakri stood in the middle of a circle of fire and started offering his limbs to the fire—first his fingers, then his eyes, then his entrails, his tongue, and at last, his heart—that's when the god appeared to him, restored him limbs, and granted him the boon.

NITTILAI (*simply, with no offence meant*): Did he tell you all this, Grandfather?

ARVASU: Don't be silly. A man of his stature wouldn't talk about himself—

NITTILAI: Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle—miles away from the nearest prying eye?

ANDHAKA: Every Brahmin on the face of this earth wants to gain spiritual powers. But few succeed. In my lifetime I have known only two who did. Your uncle and your father, Arvasu. But they got their knowledge from human gurus. By diligent study. Yavakri has gone beyond even them. He received his knowledge from the gods, direct! Your uncle was sure he would fail. How he tried to dissuade the boy from taking on

this ordeal. But I said to him, 'Master, let him go to the jungle. You don't know your son. I do. I brought him up on this lap of mine. He will succeed in anything he tries, you mark my words!' If my Master had listened to me, he would be alive today. But he died of a broken heart.

(*Pause.*)

I waited. Right here. For ten years. I took care of this hermitage for the day when my Yavakri would return home. And now he has come back. In triumph. The whole world is at his feet.

NITTILAI: But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything?

ARVASU: Oh God! She's got into one of her argumentative moods! (*Walks off a little distance. Stands concentrating.*)

NITTILAI (*continuing*): You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity at such and such a time on such and such a day. And then there, right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You *know* it's there. Not mere hearsay—

ANDHAKA: Take care, child. The gods that their priests seek are far mightier than yours. Don't talk of the two in the same breath.

NITTILAI: My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers? You should see the region around our village. Parched. Every morning, women with babes on their hips, shrunken children, shrivelled old men and women gather in front of my father's house—for the gruel he distributes. No young people. They have all disappeared! And

Father says all the land needs is a couple of heavy downpours.
That'll revive the earth. Not too much to ask of a god, is it?

ANDHAKA (*half agreeing*): But they say that such powers shouldn't be used to solve day-to-day problems. They are meant to lead one to—to—inner knowledge.

NITTILAI: What's that?

ANDHAKA: I don't know. That's what Yavakri's father used to say.

NITTILAI: Then what's the use of all these powers?

ANDHAKA: Ask Yavakri, when you meet him. He won't mind. In fact, he'll like it. He's a gentle soul.

NITTILAI: Actually, I want to ask Yavakri *two* questions. Can he make it rain? And then, can he tell when he is going to die?...Just two. What is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children and if you can't predict your moment of death.

ARVASU (*from far*): Now, guess what animal this is!

NITTILAI: He can't think of anything else!

(*But closes her eyes and listens.*)

All right.

(*Arvasu charges, pretending to be a wild animal.*)

ANDHAKA (*listens*): A wild horse...No! A boar? I know. A bison!

NITTILAI: Yes. A bison. That was good.

ARVASU (*ecstatic*): Triumph! They say one shouldn't imitate! One should embody the essence. Only the essence! It means I have captured the essence of a bison—

NITTILAI: You don't need to try. You were born with it.

ARVASU: That's why the hunters love me!

(*They all laugh.*)

NITTILAI: Let's go.

ANDHAKA: Wait, child. I know you're restless to reach your village.
But Yavakri wants you to meet him when the sun's overhead,
doesn't he?

ARVASU: 'Exactly.'...I don't know why. But his message said 'exactly'. Neither earlier. Nor later. Exactly when the sun's overhead...

ANDHAKA: So you've time. Stay and chat. Listening to you makes me feel happy.

ARVASU: The question is how do you capture the essence of the gods in your footsteps, since a god's feet never touch the earth?
(The stage darkens.)

Lights come up in another part of the stage, representing the hermitage of Raibhya, father of Arvasu. Vishakha, aged about twenty-six, is filling water in a metal urn. She has scooped out water from holes dug in the wet sand and collected it in the pot. She must have been an attractive person once, but now looks sullen and haggard. She looks around furtively. There's no one around. She picks up the pot, puts it on her waist and starts for home. Yavakri is standing right in the middle of her path. She stops but avoids looking at him. A long pause.)

VISHAKHA *(without looking at him)*: Please...

YAVAKRI: At last, a word! After waiting for four days—I practically had to wrench it out of you by blocking your path.
(As he moves aside and sits down on a rock, she takes a few steps towards her house.)

Stay, Vishakha—Please. There's no one there in your house. Your father-in-law has gone out. Your brother-in-law is never home. What's the hurry?

VISHAKHA: My father-in-law will be back tomorrow. Speak to him then.

YAVAKRI: It's not the need to speak to him that brings me here.

VISHAKHA: I can't stay here chatting with a stranger.

YAVAKRI: A stranger!

(Laughs.)

That's good.

VISHAKHA: I am a married woman.

YAVAKRI: I know you are. The first piece of news to greet me on my return was that you had married Paravasu. And I was shattered. But it was silly of me not to have expected it. Ten years is a long time. Ten years of silence is longer still. Can't we just talk?

(Pause.)

Ten years ago I swore to you that I would not look at another woman. I kept my word.

VISHAKHA: That's over and done with now.

YAVAKRI: Don't think I regret it. No, not for a moment. But doesn't that give me some right to say: 'Please put the pot down for a few minutes and talk to me?'

(Vishakha makes a move to go.)

Vishakha, after ten years in solitude, I am hungry for words.

(Startled, Vishakha looks up at him for the first time.)

VISHAKHA: They say that pleased with your rigorous penance, Lord Indra has granted you Universal Knowledge. I don't feel equal to the task of—

YAVAKRI: Universal Knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now. But do you know it was in order to win some such grandiose prize that I went into the jungle? You put it so simply in that one sentence. So beautifully. You go into the jungle. You perform austerities in the name of some god. You stand in a circle of fire. The pressure of your austerities forces the god to grant you your wish. And you get 'Universal knowledge'. Victory!

(Pause.)

It wasn't at all like that, you know.

VISHAKHA *(gently)*: Why?

YAVAKRI: For a start, life in the jungle is sheer hell. Flies, giant ants, beetles, pests, leeches attacking at the suspicion of moisture, vipers lurking in bowls of dust. The relentless heat. Not demons but mosquitoes to torture you—

VISHAKHA: Perhaps that's how the gods test one.

YAVAKRI: One would expect the appearance of a god to be a shattering experience. Concrete. Indubitable. Almost physical. But though I think Indra came to me several times, I was never certain. The first time he appeared he said, 'No, Yavakri, you can't master knowledge through austerities. It must come with experience. Knowledge is time. It is space. You must move through these dimensions.' I said, 'No, I must have it. Grant me all knowledge.' He laughed and said: 'You are being silly.' That's it! Common dialogue. Not very profound. And when the god disappeared, nothing was left behind to prove he had ever been there. I looked around. The same old black scorpion. The same horned chameleon. The shower of bird-shit around me. So was it all a hallucination caused by something I'd eaten that morning? Or was it fever working on my brain? So I go on. Another year. Or perhaps two. Then the god comes again. 'Why are you being so stubborn?' He chides. 'You can't cross a full stream on a bridge of sand.' I insist that my demands are met—another trite exchange of words—

VISHAKHA: But you did win in the end?

YAVAKRI: Yes, one day I decided I had won. So I have come back. I have no clear recollection how I arrived at that conclusion.

(Laughs.)

Some knowledge, but probably little wisdom. I know now what *can't* be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn't it? But I mustn't complain. I think I have some mystical powers I hadn't before. Mastered a few secret arts. Got a few *mantras* at my finger-tips. You'll see for yourself soon—

VISHAKHA: Me? No, thank you.

YAVAKRI: The strangest thing however is that I've discovered a corner within me—left untouched by those ten years! Undisturbed by all that self-lashing! So if you feel insulted by

what I am going to tell you, go away. I won't see you again. In that case, let these be the last words I speak to you.

(Pause.)

The day I decided my penance was over I fell down in a dead faint. I don't know how long I was in that state. It was terrible exhaustion, the pain of sheer relief. And when I opened my eyes, do you know the first thing that I thought of? Ten years ago I had come to your house to bid you goodbye. And you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood there stunned. The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and had split open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of the jack-fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment.

VISHAKHA: I can't believe it! The whole world may be singing your praises. But you haven't grown up! These ten years have not made any difference to your teenage fantasies. That's all gone, Yavakri. Indra may be immortal. But... my breasts hang loose now.

(Laughs.)

YAVAKRI: Why are you laughing?

VISHAKHA: I have been trembling at the sight of you these last three days. Now, I only feel sorry.

YAVAKRI: Good. I told you you could go home if you were angry. But you are not angry. My tale only makes you feel sorry for me. So you can stay?

VISHAKHA: The moment I heard you say you were hungry for words, I knew it was too late to go. I couldn't walk out on you after that. I had lost the initiative—missed the moment of decision. Because I know that hunger well, Yavakri. That's why I should have gone back without saying a word to you.

YAVAKRI: Don't go, Vishakha!

VISHAKHA: Have I gone? I am still here. You are a fool, Yavakri.
And you talk like one.

(Yavakri goes to her. There's a pause. She looks at him steadily, smiling. He embraces her. She pushes him away, puts the pot down on the ground.)

YAVAKRI: You want to hit me? Go ahead—

VISHAKHA: It's not you I am worried about. It's the water. I have dug it out like precious gold... You are hungry for words. And so am I. So let's talk. Sit down.

YAVAKRI: You and Indra. That's right. The presiding deities of my life. It's because of you two that I have avoided women altogether until now. Conserved my seed like you conserve your water. Now as I sit in front of you, I want to betray Indra—he left me ignorant...

VISHAKHA: They say Indra has a thousand 'eyes'—or whatever.
(Laughs.)

He could have opened at least one for you
(Yavakri tries to kiss her.)

YAVAKRI: Shush now.

VISHAKHA: What do you mean 'Shush'? What you have done is to rekindle my need to talk. I thought it was dead and gone. Gently! Don't rush. Oh, Yavakri! The pleasure of calling someone a fool. Of the desire welling up inside one to protect him. I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil. And words are like water—precious. I was afraid to bathe. Now I want to drown. Listen to me. You went away. I was married off—

YAVAKRI: Your father must have felt relieved that I went away. Parvasu was a better match. I was only his miserable cousin.

VISHAKHA: Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Parvasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter. The night of the

wedding, my husband said to me: 'I know you didn't want to marry me. But don't worry. I'll make you happy for a year.' And he did. Exactly for one year. He plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn't know existed. It was heaven—here and now—at the tip of all my senses. Then on the first day of the second year of our marriage, he said: 'Enough of that. We now start on our search.' And then—it wasn't that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked. Only the sense pervaded the air. You're still lost in the fragrance of the jack-fruit, Yavakri. I have known what it is to grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one's innards. Then one day he received the invitation from the King. To be the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice. And he left. The site of the fire sacrifice is only a couple of hours away from here. But in all these seven years he hasn't come back. I know he can't. But I look forward to having him home once the seven years are over. Alone, I have become dry like tinder. Ready to burst into flames at a breath. To burn things around me down at the slightest chance—

YAVAKRI (*looks up*): Soon the sun will be overhead.

VISHAKHA: My husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you—you think a woman is only a pair of half-formed breasts.

YAVAKRI: Enough now.

VISHAKHA: I'll give you the knowledge Indra couldn't give you. My body—it's light with speech now.

(*They go behind a dry champak tree on the bank. Long pause. Nittilai and Arvasu enter.*)

NITTILAI: He's going to settle down here now, isn't he? So why can't you see him tomorrow? Surely a day isn't going to make a difference. If we are late, the elders will be angry with us and...

ARVASU: Let's give him five minutes. That's all, Nittilai. Please. You know there's always been a lot of bitterness between us cousins. Verging on hatred. Now he's made the gesture of asking me to meet him. Let me reciprocate. I'll touch his feet. Ask for his blessings. Then we go on.

NITTILAI: All right. But there's no one here. I hope he doesn't make us wait.

(Goes toward the stream. Stops. Suddenly she is transformed, from an innocent young girl into a consummate huntress. Silently, she beckons Arvasu. He goes near her. She points to something in the dry bed of the river. It is Vishakha's pot.)

ARVASU *(in a low voice)*: Our water pot! What's it doing here? Has sister-in-law forgotten to take it back?

NITTILAI: No one leaves a full pot of water behind.

ARVASU: That's true.

(Scared.)

They say a panther has strayed into these parts. If he was thirsty and—

NITTILAI *(inspects the river bed)*: No. Tracks of the barking deer. A couple of porcupines. A family of mongooses. No sign of a panther—or anything that big—not within the last three days.

ARVASU *(picks up a stick)*: Shall I go in and see?

NITTILAI *(smiles at the sight of the stick)*: No need. It's all here. Those footprints are obviously your sister-in-law's. She didn't drop the pot. She set it down, carefully. So as not to spill the water. And then—

(She freezes. Stares at the ground. Looks in the direction in which Vishakha and Yavakri have gone.)

NITTILAI: Is your brother back?

ARVASU: Paravasu? Of course not. He can't leave the sacrifice—

NITTILAI (*gets up*): Come, Arvasu. Let's go.

ARVASU: Where?

NITTILAI: Let's go. Please. To my village.

ARVASU: And leave sister-in-law to her fate?—

NITTILAI: Listen to me. Nothing's happened to her.

ARVASU: I can't do that! I must know—I'll be back in a minute—
(*He goes behind the champak tree into the bushes. Suddenly exclamations, etc. Arvasu rushes out, followed by Vishakha. Her clothes are torn. Her back is covered with mud. She runs to the hermitage without even glancing at Nittilai. Arvasu stares uncomprehending. Then he sees the pot. Lifts it to his shoulder.*)

I'd better take it home. I'll be back—

(*She nods. At this moment Yavakri steps out. He picks up a small metal pot with a snout and a handle—called a kamandalu—which he has hidden behind a tree. He looks at the two, calmly walks to Arvasu, tips the pot on his shoulder to fill his kamandalu. Arvasu watches helplessly.*)

NITTILAI (*angry*): Some people put the treacherous viper to shame.

YAVAKRI (*turns to her*): Aren't you the whelp who was asking my old servant if I knew my moment of death?

NITTILAI (*taken aback*): How did you know that?

YAVAKRI (*ignoring her question*): I don't know when I'll die. But
I promise you this—you'll be dead within the month.
(*Nittilai recoils, shocked.*)

NITTILAI: Oh—I—I'm going home—

ARVASU: Nittilai—wait—I'll follow you—

(*But she disappears. He, with the pot on his shoulder, stands unable to follow.*)

YAVAKRI (*calmly*): And you, Arvasu, you'll find me under the banyan tree, next to the black cliff.

(*Exits. Arvasu, confused, walks to his father's hermitage.*

Vishakha has gone to the hermitage ahead of Arvasu. She is about to enter the house when her father-in-law, Raibhya, steps out. He is thin and emaciated, but physically active. Vishakha is horrified to see him. He scowls at her.)

RAIBHYA: Where were you all this while?

VISHAKHA: I—I'd gone—to fetch water.

(*She has no pot with her.*)

RAIBHYA: Really?

(*Arvasu comes in with the pot of water and is startled to see Raibhya.*)

ARVASU: Father! I didn't know you were returning home today—

RAIBHYA: I didn't either. But perhaps I should give the two of you more such surprises.

(*Arvasu puts the pot down in a corner and retreats.*)

RAIBHYA: Wait!

(*To Vishakha*)

You go to fetch water. And your brother-in-law carries it back for you. Strange! What is happening here? Why are you so filthy? You look like a buffalo that's been rolling in mud.

VISHAKHA: I suddenly felt faint. And fell down.

RAIBHYA: And he turned up, just at that moment to help you! Isn't that convenient! And you two have been taking a long time for just that—what were you up to?

ARVASU (*hurriedly*): Nittilai was there too—

RAIBHYA: Who?

ARVASU: Nittilai. The hunter girl.

RAIBHYA: A savage! Was there anybody else?

(*Arvasu, taken unawares by the question, looks at Vishakha. Raibhya notices the look.*)

RAIBHYA: So there was someone else there, wasn't there? Who was it?

ARVASU (*finds it hard to lie*): No one, Father. Nittilai and I went there—

RAIBHYA (*pointing to Vishakha*): Was she alone? Or was there anybody else with her?

ARVASU: No, there was no one else. She was feeling faint—and fell down—so I helped her. I must go—

RAIBHYA: You want to run away, do you? All right. Go. But where will she go?

(*To Vishakha*)

Tell me who was there. Tell me.

(*He grabs her by her hair and starts beating her. Kicks her. Arvasu can't bear to see it. He rushes to her help. Holds Raibhya back.*)

ARVASU: Stop it, Father. Please. Go away, Sister-in-law. Go—please—

RAIBHYA: Where can she go? I want the truth and I'll kill her if necessary. Let me go! I know how to handle her—

(*Struggles to get out of Arvasu's hold.*)

VISHAKHA: Let him go, Arvasu.

(*Calmly*)

Yes, there was somebody else there. Yavakri! And he had come to see me. Alone.

(*Long pause. They stare at each other.*)

RAIBHYA: You whore—you roving whore! I could reduce you to ashes—turn you into a fistful of dust—with a simple curse. But let that husband of yours handle you. Parvasu, Chief Priest of the sacrifice! Let him clean up his own shit! Yavakri—So this is what ten years of austerities amount to! So be it. So Yavakri, now it's between you and me. Where's that pot of water? Bring it here—

VISHAKHA: No. Please! Don't do anything to him. It's my fault.

Please, don't harm Yavakri. I'm willing to face the consequences—punish me. Not him. Please.

RAIBHYA: Bring the water!

(Raibhya sits cross-legged and sinks into deep meditation. Vishakha and Arvasu watch him horrified, fascinated. Raibhya opens his eyes. Suddenly, he is calm. There is no trace of anger in him.)

VISHAKHA: Vishakha, go and tell your lover I accept his challenge.

I shall invoke the *kritya* and send a Brahma Rakshasa, a demon soul, after him. Let Yavakri save himself. He need only go and hide in his father's hermitage. I loved my brother and will not desecrate his altar. Let Yavakri cower in there like a dog. If he steps out, he will be dead. Tell him this, too—that if he can manage to stay alive for another twenty-four hours, I, Raibhya, shall accept defeat and enter fire.

(Sinks back into meditation.)

VISHAKHA *(wakes up)*: Arvasu, we must warn Yavakri. Instantly. Go to your uncle's hermitage.

ARVASU: But Yavakri said he would be under the banyan tree near the black cliff—

VISHAKHA: I'll run there. It's nearby. You go to the hermitage in case he's there—

ARVASU: But—but—

VISHAKHA: Run, please. I've never asked anything of you till now. Just this once. Go. Run.

(They run in opposite directions. Raibhya opens his eyes, pulls out a strand of hair from his head and throws it to the ground. The Brahma Rakshasa appears. He is thin, almost naked and holds a trident. He runs in the direction of Yavakri as the lights fade out. Andhaka, the blind man, is sitting at the gate of Yavakri's hermitage. He hears footsteps.)

ANDHAKA: Ah, Arvasu!

(Arvasu arrives.)

Haven't you gone to the meeting—

ARVASU: I'm on my way. But has Yavakri come here?

ANDHAKA: Not since you and Nittilai left.

ARVASU: If he comes, tell him to stay inside the hermitage. Not to step out. Don't let him even peep out. His life's in danger.

ANDHAKA: What? How?

ARVASU: You don't move from here either. Wait for him—you must warn him.

ANDHAKA: I will—but—

ARVASU: I have to go—Nittilai's waiting.

ANDHAKA: Listen, boy—

(Arvasu runs away. Andhaka sits down, all ears.)

Vishakha arrives at the banyan tree next to the black cliff. Yavakri is murmuring incantations, sitting cross-legged, with his kamandalu in front of him. Vishakha runs in, panting, sweating profusely and heaves a sigh of relief when she sees Yavakri. He briefly looks at her, nods encouragingly and carries on meditating.)

VISHAKHA: You mustn't stay here, Yavakri. Go to your father's hermitage. Immediately. Please!

(No reply.)

My father-in-law has found out everything—and he is bent on destroying you.

(Pause.)

Yavakri, he is calling up the *kritya*—

YAVAKRI: He is? I am flattered. To invoke the *kritya* spell is to engage one's full powers. That he should choose this instrument of death for me, it's certainly an honour.

VISHAKHA: Go to your place, Yavakri. Father-in-law said you would be safe there. Please. Hurry.

YAVAKRI: Don't be afraid, Vishakha, I was expecting something like this. You see this water...I have consecrated it.

(He points to the water in the kamandalu.)

A drop of this water. And the Brahma Rakshasa will become numb. Powerless. Uncle's entire threat will turn into a farce. You needn't have bothered—but now that you're here, stay and see for yourself.

VISHAKHA: But you don't need any of this. You only have to be in your father's hermitage—the Brahma Rakshasa can't touch you *there*! Once you are safe, I'll happily watch that living corpse burn—

YAVAKRI: Oh Vishakha! It's so wonderful to have you here. Because *you* used to console me—don't you remember—when we were young? I cried at the humiliations piled on my father. He was one of the most learned men in the land. Probably the most brilliant mind. But he was scorned while this unscrupulous brother of his grabbed all the honours.

VISHAKHA: Why are you bringing up all those grievances now, Yavakri? It's hardly the time—

YAVAKRI: Grievances! You don't even flatter me with the word 'hatred'. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that I hate your husband's family. My father deserved to be invited as the Chief Priest of the sacrifice. But that too went to Paravasu, your husband. Even in the midst of my austerities I wept when I heard the news. For I knew Father would refuse to take offence. I knew he would go and congratulate Paravasu on the honour, embrace and bless him—

VISHAKHA: Yes, he did that.

YAVAKRI (*enraged*): Why? I despised him for it. *He* was one of the reasons I fled to the jungle.

VISHAKHA: Do we have to talk about it now? The past is gone.

YAVAKRI: The past *isn't* gone. It's here inside me. The time has come to show the world what my father's son is capable of. This is my moment.

VISHAKHA: But today your name's on every tongue in the land and they pronounce it with awe. Why do you need to—

YAVAKRI: The others don't matter, except as witnesses.

(Looks out.)

Where is that demon? Why is he late?

(To Vishakha.)

One night in the jungle, Indra came to me and said: 'You are ready now to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity.' And I shouted back: 'No, that's not the knowledge I want. That's not knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive!'

VISHAKHA: If anything happens to you, I'll never forgive myself. Go, go to your home altar. Please.

YAVAKRI *(incensed)*: Don't you understand anything? You want me to run away after issuing my challenge?

VISHAKHA: Challenge?

YAVAKRI: Do you think all this happened accidentally? You think I would leave anything to chance? How do you think Arvasu happened to arrive at the river-bank at the right moment? Who called your father-in-law back?

VISHAKHA *(scared)*: Enough, Yavakri. Don't say anything more. I don't want to know. It's my fault. I shouldn't have yielded to you—I—

YAVAKRI: It was fortunate that you yielded. If you hadn't I would have had to take you by force.

(Vishakha stares at him in horror.)

This is the moment toward which my entire life has rushed headlong. I will not let anything stand in its way. Your father-in-law will die, Vishakha. Let's see what your husband does then. Will he continue to hide like a bandicoot in his ritual world? Or will he commit sacrilege by stepping out to face me? Look, I am trembling. I am drenched in sweat. Because everything has worked out just right.

VISHAKHA (*under her breath*): Oh, my God!...Yavakri!

YAVAKRI: Try to understand. They would have turned their backsides on me with contempt if I'd let them—as they did with Father! There was only one way to force them to confront me. Catch Parvasu by his scrotum. Squeeze it so that he couldn't even squirm—

(*She is numbly staring at him.*)

I love you, Vishakha. I have not looked at another woman in my whole life. But that you happened to marry Parvasu is not my fault!

(*Pause. Yavakri paces restlessly, waiting for the Brahma Rakshasa.*)

VISHAKHA (*quietly*): I was so happy this morning. You were so good. So warm. I wanted to envelope you in everything I could give. It was more as a mother that I offered my breasts to you—

(*He is pacing restlessly, looking eagerly in the direction of Raibhya's hermitage. Quietly, she goes to the kamandalu and picks it up.*)

Why is life so contrary, Yavakri? One thinks one has stepped on to a bit of solid ground—a little haven—and the earth gives way—

YAVAKRI: Where's that shadow puppet?

(*Slowly, calmly, Vishakha starts pouring the water out. He looks at her and for a moment cannot comprehend what she is doing. He suddenly screams.*)

Oh God! What are you doing? The water—the sanctified water! My life! What are you doing?

(*He grabs the kamandalu from her hand. It's empty. He starts banging it on the ground.*)

Water, please! Just a drop. Oh gods! Only a drop... You devil.

I trusted you... A drop of water.

(*Suddenly a very strange wail is heard from the distance, unearthly, terrifying and evil. Vishakha is frightened.*)

VISHAKHA: Yavakri, hurry. Go to your father's hermitage.

YAVAKRI: A drop—only a drop.

VISHAKHA (*pushing him*): Go! Run!

YAVAKRI: I'm not here to run away—I've triumphed over Indra, the Lord of Gods. Who are you to order me around?

VISHAKHA: Go!

(*She pushes him. Suddenly Yavakri wakes up and starts to run.*)

Don't stop till you reach your father's house.

(*Yavakri runs. Vishakha stares after him, then heaves a sigh and turns. The Brahma Rakshasa has entered and is standing behind her. She sees him, gasps, and falls down in a faint. The Brahma Rakshasa runs after Yavakri. Yavakri stops now and then, desperately digs for water, then not finding any, runs on.*)

He comes to the hermitage, which is still being guarded by Andhaka. As Yavakri comes running and is about to step into the hermitage, Andhaka jumps up and grabs him. Doesn't let him move.)

ANDHAKA: Who's that? Who—

YAVAKRI: Let me go! Let me—

(*The Brahma Rakshasa comes and spears him. Yavakri collapses in Andhaka's arms. The demon pulls out the trident and goes away.*)

ANDHAKA: Who—Yavakri—? Yavakri—Son.

(*He lowers Yavakri's body to the ground. Shakes him furiously as though to wake him up. Arvasu comes running, stands frozen with horror.*)

Yavakri! Child! What happened to you? I didn't recognize your steps—Why, why couldn't I recognize your steps?

(*It gets dark on stage.*)

Act Two

Evening. The village square. Nittilai's brother and a couple of his friends are waiting under a tree. They talk in low tones. The brother looks up and sees Arvasu in the distance.

BROTHER: He's come!

FRIENDS: Oh God! Now?—

(They fall silent as Arvasu comes running. He is sweating, panting. They do not greet him. He tries to regain his breath. Looks around.)

ARVASU: Hello! Isn't the Council of the Elders meeting here?
(The brother nods.)

Then where—where is everybody?

BROTHER: Everyone's gone home.

ARVASU: Home? Oh God! But—but—the Elders—

BROTHER: The Elders waited for you all day. You did not come.

ARVASU: I know. I'm sorry. But I couldn't help it. What happened was—

BROTHER: It doesn't matter.

ARVASU: It does. It does. Please. I would like to explain to the Elders and apologize.

BROTHER: It's no—

ARVASU *(suppressing the mounting panic)*: You judge for yourself.

I was on my way here when I saw Yavakri running. He was scared. I knew his life was in danger. I ran after him. When I got to his hermitage, he was lying there. Dead.

BROTHER: Dead?

ARVASU: Blood was still spurting from his back. Andhaka was there too—but had gone stone-deaf. He couldn't hear anything I said to him. Blind. Stunned. How could I leave the dead body with him there and come away?

(The brother listens intently.)

The blood was fresh. It was gushing out. And wild animals had already started appearing in the bushes. Hyenas. Wolves. Ready to tear into Yavakri—into the old man, too. I had to cremate the body on the spot... What would you have done?

BROTHER *(guarded)*: You were perfectly right.

ARVASU: I knew you would understand. I know the Elders will too. I—

BROTHER: The Elders have all gone home.

ARVASU: I'll go to each one's house and explain. I'll touch their feet. I'll ask their forgiveness. Perhaps the Elders can meet again tomorrow—

BROTHER: Meet again? To do what?

ARVASU: To bless me and Nittilai!

BROTHER: Arvasu, since you failed to attend the Council meeting, the Elders decreed that Nittilai will marry another boy—of our own tribe.

(Arvasu stares, stunned.)

ARVASU: What? Oh, no! No! No! No! That can't be—

BROTHER: That'll have to be, Arvasu. It's the decision of the Elders.

ARVASU: But it's not sunset yet! Nittilai said the Council would go on till sundown—I'm here well before then—

BROTHER: I agree. I'm afraid my father was a little hasty. But he was tired of waiting. He felt angry, humiliated. 'This daughter of mine has made me a laughing stock in the eyes of the world,' he said, 'I'm willing to marry her off to anyone who'll take her.' Fortunately, it was a nice young man, one of our relatives, who stepped forward. Nittilai will be happy. Console yourself with that thought.

ARVASU: No, no, you're making fun of me. I know you are—tell me you're making—

BROTHER: Nothing can be changed now. If only you'd come half an hour earlier.

ARVASU: Half an hour! Half an hour! Don't say that. Please, can I see the young man? I'll explain to him. Plead with him. I'll debase myself in front of him. Please, let me meet your father and the Elders. I'll go right now—I'll explain—It can't be—

BROTHER: Go home, Arvasu.

ARVASU: I'll offer chunks of my flesh to your gods as a penance—

BROTHER: It's no use.

ARVASU (*shouts*): But I want my Nittilai—I—

(*In one quick movement, the brother knocks him down and plants his foot on his chest.*)

BROTHER: You've caused enough trouble, Brahmin. Nittilai is to be married in the next couple of days. People are already sniggering about the two of you. Don't shame her further by shouting her name in public.

ARVASU: Can I—can I talk to her?

BROTHER (*withdrawing*): No, you can't. Not till the wedding's over.

ARVASU: And after that?

BROTHER: That's up to her and her husband.

ARVASU: Please, tell me. How's she taken it?

BROTHER: It's been a terrible day for her. She is exhausted. Even now she is crying her heart out. You'll only make it worse for her by hanging around here. Go away.

ARVASU (*starts to go, turns*): But listen. It's not my fault.
(*The brother grabs him by the scruff of his neck.*)

BROTHER: Go!

(*Arvasu stumbles home. Raibhya is still awake in the hermitage. Arvasu throws himself down in a corner of the veranda. Footsteps. Paravasus enters in the dark. He is covered in a black rug. He carries a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back.*)

RAIBHYA: Who's that? Who's that coming in the dead of the night?

PARAVASU: It's me, Father. Paravasus.

RAIBHYA (*taken aback*): Paravasus?
(*Runs out of the house to make sure.*)

Paravasus? It's not possible!

PARAVASU (*gently*): Your blessings be on my head, Father.
(*Prostrates himself in front of Raibhya.*)

RAIBHYA (*horrified*): You? Here? What are you doing here? There's still a month left to go before the sacrifice ends. You are—you can't—you have broken the rules! You are *deliberately defying* the gods!

PARAVASU: I felt like coming home.

RAIBHYA: Felt? And just walked out? With the ritual bracelet on? As though the sacrifice were a market place?... Or have they thrown you out? Your wife's reputation must have reached there by now—

(*By now Arvasu and Vishakha have got up and are listening from a distance.*)

PARAVASU (*gently*): Of course, they've heard the news. But they haven't chased me out.

RAIBHYA: So this is your usual insolence. Wilful transgression of the rules—

PARAVASU: If I am back there before dawn, no one need know.

RAIBHYA (*explodes*): No one need know? The Chief Priest of the royal sacrifice sneaks out at night, crawls home, his face covered like a leper, and you think the gods won't know? They won't retaliate? How could I have fathered two such imbeciles? I told the King, 'Mark my words, my son defecates wherever he goes. And he will defecate in your sacrifice—'

PARAVASU: The King often says he would have preferred you to be the Chief Priest. But it was a seven-year rite. They thought... a younger man safer.

RAIBHYA: I see. So you measured my life-span, did you—you and your King? Tested the strength of my life-line? Well, the sacrifice is almost over and I'm still here. Still here. Alive and kicking. Tell the King I shall outlive my sons. I shall live long enough to feed their dead souls. Tell him the swarm of dogs sniffing around my daughter-in-law's bottom keeps me in good shape.

PARAVASU: I thought with your permission I would have a word with my wife.

RAIBHYA: You disgust me. You and that bitch of yours. I am going out—

PARAVASU: At this time of night, Father? Isn't it dangerous in the jungle?

(*Calls*)

Arvasu—

ARVASU: Yes—

(*Steps out.*)

RAIBHYA: If you want to be alone with your wife, send that fool somewhere else. I don't need him. It's not the wild beasts one has to watch out for—it's the human beings—

(*Paravasu bows to his father. Raibhya walks off. Paravasu turns to Arvasu.*)

PARAVASU: How are you?

ARVASU: I'm all right.

PARAVASU (*pause*): Your eyes are blood-shot. I'm sorry if I've disturbed your sleep.

ARVASU: No, no.

PARAVASU: With your love of theatre, I should have thought you would be quite used to late nights.

ARVASU: There haven't been any plays for ages...what with this famine.

(*Paravasus senses something is wrong but doesn't say anything. Arvasu is confused and tries to hide his confusion.*)

I tell everyone—let brother's sacrifice conclude. It will rain.
The players will come back.

PARAVASU (*smiles*): And then you'll be able to act on stage again.

ARVASU: Me? I never act. I haven't done so since you asked me not to—

PARAVASU: I told you not to act?

ARVASU: Don't you remember? Long ago—before you left for the sacrifice—I was dancing with the hunters and you said: 'Bharata's sons lost caste because of the stage.' I haven't acted on stage since then.

PARAVASU: Arvasu! How silly of you to have taken me at my word.
You shouldn't have obeyed me!

ARVASU: I couldn't *disobey* you—

PARAVASU: Then you should have asked me again!

ARVASU: Again? How would that have helped?

PARAVASU: You asked a question. It evoked an answer. Suppose, you repeated the same question—precisely—in the same words. You would get the same answer. You ask again. Would that have helped? Yes, certainly. Each time the question and the answer were repeated, a new nuance would have arisen.

Do you know, you could repeat a question and an answer without altering a syllable, endlessly, and create a whole new universe of meanings, more acceptable to you.

(Arvasu looks at Paravasu, uncomprehending. Then.)

ARVASU: I'll be on the tamarind hill. Call me if you need me.

(Arvasu runs away. Paravasu puts away his bow and arrows. Vishakha brings a pot of water and silently places it near Paravasu, who washes his hands and feet in total silence. He sits down. Long pause.)

VISHAKHA *(in a low voice)*: How are you, Husband?

(No reply.)

Only occasional bits of news about you. When someone from here goes to the city and attends the sacrifice—

(No response.)

Are you well? Or do you still drive yourself to the point of illness—like a demon?

(No reply.)

I was sure you wouldn't come home even if I were on my deathbed.

(No reply.)

But my fornication was reason enough, wasn't it?

(No reply.)

Whatever you heard about Yavakri and me... was no rumour.

(No reply.)

Yavakri and you. How much you resemble each other. You both go away when you feel like it. Come back without an explanation. As though Indra is explanation enough! He isn't. Not for me. Why did you go away like that?

PARAVASU: One can practise austerities like your fool, Yavakri, to coerce the gods to bend to one's will. Stand in a circle of fire. Torture oneself. So many techniques, all equally crass, to make the gods appear. And when they give in, what do you do? Extend the begging bowl: 'Give us rains. Cattle. Sons. Wealth.' As though one defined human beings by their

begging—I despise it. I went because the fire sacrifice is a formal rite. Structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me. And if anything goes wrong, there's nothing the gods can do about it. It has to be set right by a man. By me. That's why when the moment comes I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal. For that, it is essential that one shed all human weakness. Be alone. Absolutely on one's own to face that moment. Become a diamond. Unscratchable.

VISHAKHA: And become immortal?

PARAVASU: At least for that moment, yes.

VISHAKHA: And for that you must break all the rules?

PARAVASU: To say 'all' is to make a rule.

(He gets up.)

VISHAKHA: Will you come home once the fire sacrifice is over?
(No answer.)

I suppose that would be too human. But what's wrong with being human? What's wrong with being happy, as we were before you got Indra into you?

(No answer.)

I shouldn't ask. I should be silent. And you, in any case, will be silent. My silence again followed by yours. Silences endlessly repeated. Perhaps they too will describe a whole universe. But I am sick of silence.

(No answer.)

All right. Then do me a favour before you go back. Please.
(She takes his bow and arrow, puts them in his hands with the arrow pointing to herself. Then lies down on her back in front of him.)

I'll lay myself open to you as a devoted wife.

PARAVASU: You want me to kill you?

VISHAKHA: At last, a question from you.

(Pause.)

We're three of us here. Your brother's never home. That leaves me and your father.

(Pause.)

Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He's been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him.

(Pause.)

On the one hand, there's his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there's lust. It consumes him. An old man's curdled lust. And there's no one else here to take his rage out on but me.

(Pause.)

At least Yavakri was warm, gentle. For a few minutes, he made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice. And he paid for it with his life.

(Raibhya's steps are heard in the distance, as he returns.)

Here it comes. The crab! Scuttling back to make sure I don't defile the Chief Priest as I did Yavakri. Grant me this favour, please. Kill me. For all your experiments you haven't yet tried the ultimate. Human sacrifice! You could now.

PARAVASU: You're right. I must.

(Pause.)

You are still my guru.

(He aims his arrow at her. A long silence as they wait. Then a low cough is heard from Raibhya. Instantly Paravasus moves the arrow around so that it points in the direction of Raibhya, and shoots. Raibhya collapses without a sound. Vishakha gasps. Pause.)

VISHAKHA: Now you'll never know if I told you a lie.

(Pause.)

PARAVASU: You didn't need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther.

(Pause.)

VISHAKHA: What's worrying you then?

(No answer.)

Something is, isn't it? I knew it the moment I saw you this evening. And it wasn't just your father. Something else you've come looking for.

(No answer.)

Yavakri would have poured out his woes. But you'd rather let the poison burn your insides than speak out.

(Takes his hand in her hand.)

Look at your hand. It's so tense. Your sinews are twisted like ropes—ready to snap. Tell me. What's bothering you?

PARAVASU *(looks in the direction of Raibhya)*: We must attend to the old man.

VISHAKHA: He's had a long life. Why should he be in a hurry now?
(They look at each other. The stage darkens on them. We see Arvasu on the tamarind hill talking to himself.)

ARVASU: Thorns! The wind has thorns now. The light too is nettled. Words—even your name, Nittilai—has fangs that rip the skin off my mind and make it bleed. How can I punish myself enough? Half an hour! Half an hour! But I stopped to bathe on my way to your village—to dig for water so I could wash myself before coming to you. I knew it was getting late, but I had just cremated a dead body. I couldn't bear the thought of touching you with those unclean hands. An untouchable wouldn't have cared. An outcaste wouldn't have cared. But my cursed caste wouldn't let me go... To think you would have been mine. Half an hour!

PARAVASU'S VOICE: Arvasu—Arvasu—

(Arvasu gets up. Runs to the hermitage. He sees Paravasu and Vishakha bending over something near a thicket.)

PARAVASU: Arvasu—here!

(Plucks the arrow from Raibhya's body.)

ARVASU: Where are you?

PARAVASU: Here, near the neem tree.

ARVASU: What are you doing there?

(He goes and finds Paravasu and Vishakha kneeling over Raibhya's body.)

What is it? What's happened? Is that Father? What happened to him? Oh God! Blood! Blood—what's happened? Oh my God—I can't—

PARAVASU: In the dark, I—I mistook him for a wild animal—

ARVASU *(almost hysterical)*: Is he all right? We must do something.

He may still be alive. There. His eyelids—they're moving. Let's move him to—

PARAVASU: Take hold of yourself, Arvasu. He is dead—

(Arvasu starts crying. Paravasu slaps him.)

Stop it. Don't be a child. There's no time to howl and wail now. I have to get back before I'm missed.

(Arvasu and Vishakha react.)

If anyone gets wind of what's happened here, the fire sacrifice is ruined. Do you follow me?

ARVASU: But—after all this—do you mean to go back? To the sacrifice?

PARAVASU: Yes, the sacrifice must go on. You know that. And only I can ensure that—

ARVASU: But the blood—on your hands—

PARAVASU: Yes, that has to be washed. We must atone for Father's death. I know I should perform the rites of penitence. But I have to return. Immediately. So there's only one person who can do that. You. As his son, it's your prerogative and your duty.

(Vishakha and Arvasu react in horror.)

Cremate the body right now. And then concentrate on the penitential rites.

ARVASU: But, Brother—

PARAVASU: But? What do you mean 'but'? Can't you see what is at stake? You must do it.

(He starts to leave.)

VISHAKHA: Say 'No', Arvasu.

ARVASU: Sister-in-law—

VISHAKHA: Refuse. He killed his father. Let him atone for it. Don't get involved in it.

ARVASU: But then—what about the sacrifice?

VISHAKHA: Let it go to ruin. Does it matter? There has been enough bloodshed already. Enough tears. Live your own life.

PARAVASU *(as though she hasn't spoken)*: Don't rush through the rites. Perform them with care. Every detail has to be right.

ARVASU *(lost)*: Bless me, Brother.

(Paravasu blesses him by placing his right palm on his head and walks away. Vishakha stares dumbly after him and then walks mechanically back into the hermitage. Arvasu starts piling wood for the funeral pyre.

Paravasu walks back through the jungle when a figure jumps out of the shadows and stands in his path. Paravasu and the Brahma Rakshasa stare at each other for a brief moment.)

PARAVASU: Ah! Not the Brahma Rakshasa himself! What a pleasure.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: How did you recognize me?

PARAVASU: I was expecting you. Where else could you possibly go?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Help me. Please.

PARAVASU: Don't ask me. I don't help anyone.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Please, don't say that. I beg of you. You are my only hope.

PARAVASU: Hope of what?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I admire you. You aren't scared of me. You are tough. Your father gave me a new birth. We two are brothers.

PARAVASU: I don't need any more brothers.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You have no choice. Look, when I lived my 'human life', I—how shall I put it—I was bad. I'll spare you the details. But the result was that after my death I was not reborn, as any ordinary mortal would do. I became a Brahma Rakshasa. A soul locked in nothingness like a foetus stitched up inside its mother's sac. You can't imagine the horror of that existence. Nothing to look forward to: no birth, no death; nothingness stretching endlessly. Your father plucked me out and put me back in time, in order to kill Yavakri. I didn't want to, but I obeyed. And as a result, now I have something new. Hope. Of release—from this state—

PARAVASU: You should have asked Father—

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I would have. But you killed him before he'd recovered from his ordeal. *You* killed him. Now you have taken on his inheritance. Not that I mind. You may be more capable of getting me what I want—

PARAVASU: What do you want?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Free me from this pain. Liberate me. I want to fade away. To become nothing—

PARAVASU (*laughs*): Yavakri asked for 'all knowledge' in a begging bowl. You ask for the final release. Moksha! The demands seem to be escalating! I am not interested in your final release. I am not even interested in *my* final release.

(*Mocking.*)

'Liberate' you! How's one supposed to do that?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I wish I knew. I can only beg. Ask the gods when you face them.

PARAVASU: I will ask them for nothing.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You talk of immortality. Look, I have been immortal! And I long for death. Release me. You owe it to me.

PARAVASU: I don't owe anyone anything. Don't pester me. You'll get nothing.

(They have reached the sacrificial site.)

I must go in. Remember the sacrificial enclosures are protected against all unnatural spirits.

(Goes in. The Brahma Rakshasa watches him.)

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: It's not so easy to get rid of a brother—
Brother!

(Disappears.)

Arvasu completes the funeral rites. Comes home. Calls out to his sister-in-law. No reply. He goes in. The hermitage is empty. In a corner he sees the water pot, covered with cobwebs. He walks out of the house.

Arvasu comes to the sacrificial area. The fire sacrifice is going on. He enters the enclosure and goes and sits among the Brahmins watching the rituals. Paravasu, initially engrossed in his work, notices him and suddenly freezes. His face turns pale. Words fail him. His unexpected silence draws everyone's attention. The hymns come to a stop. They all stare, uncomprehending, at Paravasu first and then at Arvasu. Arvasu is baffled and embarrassed.)

PARAVASU: You!

(Points to Arvasu, who gets up, puzzled, scared.)

ARVASU: Me?

PARAVASU: Yes, you! Who are you?

ARVASU: Me? I—

PARAVASU: Yes, Tell us.

ARVASU: I'm Arvasu, son of Raibhya.

PARAVASU: And where have you come from?

ARVASU: My father died. I've just completed his obsequies—and the expiation.

PARAVASU: Why the expiation? Tell us. Why?

ARVASU: He was killed—

(Consternation in the assembly. Paravasu silences the crowds.)

PARAVASU: At whose hands?

(Long pause.)

ARVASU: At the hands of his son.

(The gathering breaks out into commotion.)

PARAVASU: Patricide—patricide! What is he doing in these sanctified precincts? Throw him out—out! Out! Demon!

ARVASU: But—but—

(Three or four Brahmins pounce on Arvasu and drag him out. Dazed, Arvasu lets himself be dragged and pushed out of the sacrificial enclosure. Suddenly, he starts shouting.)

ARVASU: But why, Brother, why? ... Why?

(A couple of soldiers get hold of him and drag him away as he keeps shouting.)

Why? Why? Tell me why—please.

(Paravasu looks at the assembly of priests and watchers.)

PARAVASU: As the sacrifice approaches its completion, the demons come out. Rakshasas. Their sole aim is to disrupt the sacrifice.

We must be on our guard.

(At a sign from him, the rites begin again. The stage darkens.)

Act Three

Night. The outskirts of the city. The stage is filled with bodies of people sleeping. Nittilai sleeps next to Arvasu.

Arvasu wakes up. Sits up. Looks around, and as though frightened by the night, begins to crawl across the sleeping bodies. Nittilai stretches her hand out in her sleep to make sure Arvasu is next to her. He is not there. She sits up with a start, looks around, sees him and goes to him.

NITTILAI: Arvasu—

(Arvasu gasps and turns to her.)

Where are you going?

(He stares.)

It's me, Nittilai—

(She feels his forehead.)

The fever has gone down. Thank God!

(Feels his clothes.)

You are soaking wet.

ARVASU (*unbelieving*): Nittilai! You—?

It can't be—it isn't—

NITTILAI (*laughing*): Yes, it is.

(Suddenly Arvasu laughs happily like a child.)

ARVASU: Nittilai! Nittilai! Am I dreaming? Or are you really here?

You won't disappear again, will you? Nittilai! Where have you

come from, Nittilai! You *are* Nittilai, aren't you? Don't melt away. Please. Nittilai—stay, now that you're here.

(Grabs her hand.)

I'll hold on to Nittilai now. I won't let Nittilai go.

NITTILAI: Ssh! You'll wake them up!

ARVASU *(laughing)*: How did you come here?

NITTILAI: We can't talk in this place. Let's go there.

(Helps him up. He is light-headed and almost falls down again. She supports him. She also carries a bundle of fruit with her. They move a little distance away.)

Be careful! You're still light-headed.

ARVASU *(laughing)*: Light-headed. Light-footed. I'm flying—I'm floating—I'm flowing down a torrent of wind—I feel happy. You are here! It's beautiful.

(Tries to stand by himself. Reels. Clings to her. They both laugh.)

NITTILAI: Wait! Don't be a child. Here. Let me tie your *dhoti* properly.

(Unselfconsciously, she reties his dhoti, as though he were a child. Then leads him along.)

Sit down here.

(She rekindles a dying fire as they talk.)

ARVASU: Where are we?

NITTILAI: Outside the city gates.

ARVASU: And these people?

NITTILAI: Mostly starving villagers. They are here for the end of the fire sacrifice. They are waiting for the concluding feast.

ARVASU: The fire sacrifice. Yes, I remember.

(He looks at her attentively.)

You look so lovely. All those patterns on your hands and face. You're like a bride.

(Suddenly.)

But—didn't you go home to sleep last night?

NITTILAI (*puts a fruit in his hand*): Here. Eat this. I don't know when you had a proper meal last.

ARVASU: How is it that you're here, Nittilai?

NITTILAI: I've run away.

ARVASU: From your husband?

NITTILAI: From my husband. From my family. From everything.
(*Pause.*)

ARVASU: Oh!

(*Pause.*)

Why? Didn't you like him? Did he beat you?

NITTILAI: I liked him. Very much. He's always smiling. I might have been happy with him.

(*Pause.*)

If any other girl had done what I have done, I'd be the first to thrash her in the village square. But when I heard what'd happened to you—

ARVASU: What?

NITTILAI: We heard terrible stories.

ARVASU (*remembering*): Yes, yes.

NITTILAI: I almost died when I heard they'd beaten you up. I got up and...ran all the way here.

ARVASU (*pause*): And how did you find me—

NITTILAI: It didn't take much searching. Every stray pup here knows about you.

(*Long pause.*)

ARVASU: I went back to meet Paravasu.

(*Excited.*)

That night. I had to know why. What had I done? I thought he might tell me if I went to him secretly. So I went back at night. But he never came out—

NITTILAI: Arvasu, it's all right. All that's done with—

ARVASU: Soldiers pounced on me. Kicked me. Dragged me to some cemetery. Tore my sacred thread. I kept calling out to him. 'Why, Brother, why?' They beat me.

NITTILAI: There now—don't excite yourself. Lie down.

ARVASU: Did he think I was married to you? Did he think I had become a low-caste actor? No, no. I remember. He clearly said 'Out! Out! Demon... Away with you!'

NITTILAI: Quiet now. Come, sleep for a while. It's still dark.
(*She makes him lie down with his head on her lap.*)

ARVASU: I had such nightmares. And whenever I woke up I saw these bodies. Lying about, inert in the dark. I thought I was in the land of the dead. But I didn't see *you*. I wish I had.
(*Stares at her.*)

I worshipped my brother. And he betrayed me. I let you down and you risk everything for my sake.

NITTILAI (*simply*): I like you.
(*Gives him another fruit.*)

Here, I hid these for you. There are three children in the actor's family. Poor things! They're eternally famished—

ARVASU: Actors?

NITTILAI: Yes, it was they who saved your life.

ARVASU (*suddenly*): Nittilai, how long is it since you left home?

NITTILAI: Three days.

ARVASU (*excited*): Three days! Three days, she says calmly! And you've been moving around in this city for three days! Are you crazed?

NITTILAI (*lightly*): I was only waiting for you to gain some strength.

ARVASU (*angry*): Woman, have you no brains? You only think of others! I know your people. Hunters. Once they decide on vengeance... We must leave immediately.

NITTILAI: Let's. If your legs have gained as much strength as your voice, we should be able to cover a fair distance today!

(Suddenly they both burst out laughing. Then in a serious voice.)

Arvasu, when I say we should go together—I don't mean we have to live together—like lovers or like husband and wife. I have been vicious enough to my husband. I don't want to disgrace him further. Let's be together—like brother and sister. You marry any girl you like. Only please, Arvasu—spare a corner for me.

ARVASU: I won't marry. Ever. It's enough that you are there with me.

NITTILAI *(gets up)*: Take a little rest. I'll see you soon.

ARVASU: Where are you going?

NITTILAI: Let me arrange for something to eat on the way. Some meat. Fruit. The actor's family wants to go with us. Those poor starving babies—

ARVASU *(gently)*: Nittilai—

(Nittilai stops.)

While you're away I think I'll make another attempt.

NITTILAI: Attempt?

ARVASU: To see my brother.

NITTILAI: How will you do that? Will he let you come anywhere near him?

ARVASU: No, he won't. But how can I go away without knowing why he acted as he did? I have to find out—I must—

NITTILAI: Will he tell you?

ARVASU: I don't think so.

(Pause.)

No—he won't.

NITTILAI: And suppose he did tell you? What will that do for you? Haven't you suffered enough?

ARVASU: If he can't justify his act—I'll—I'll push his face in it.
I'll make him pay—I'll revenge myself on him—

NITTILAI: Arvasu!

ARVASU: I can't help it. I want to make them all pay. Yavakri. Father. Parvasu. It's a conspiracy, don't you see, it's all planned—because I wanted to marry you. Because I was ready to reject my caste, my birth. Can't you see it? I wanted to strike out on my own. So, first a corpse curls itself round my ankles. Yavakri. Then it's Father. Bodies drenched in blood. Like rats that pour out during the plague and die vomiting blood.

NITTILAI: Arvasu—

ARVASU: Listen. It's clear to me. Yavakri is dead. Father is dead—and Parvasu is alive. So he must know. He must be behind it all—my brother knew I would marry you even if he forbade it. So he—and his wife—and all those priests—yes, they planted those corpses in my way.

NITTILAI: You are talking nonsense.

ARVASU: You don't understand. You hunters—you only know minor spells and witchcrafts—spirits slithering in shallow caves or dangling on trees. But Yavakri and Father and Brother can bring out the terrors from the womb of the earth and play with them. They can set this foul nature against you. Can't you see the design in it all? Corpses pursuing me—evil, like a stink emanating from that sacrifice—

NITTILAI: Suppose you are right. What are you going to do about it?

ARVASU: I don't know. I don't know anything. Don't confuse me with questions. But if such an evil man continues as the Chief Priest of the sacrifice, it'll rain blood at the end—

NITTILAI: Leave that to the gods, Arvasu. Look at your family. Yavakri avenges his father's shame by attacking your sister-in-law. Your father avenges her by killing Yavakri. Your

brother kills your father. And now you in your turn want vengeance—where will it all end?

ARVASU: So what do I do? Sit in a corner with my hands crossed, like an eunuch?

NITTILAI: Do that, Better that than become the man you hate.

ARVASU: Become? What's there left for me to become? I am an unregenerate sinner in the eyes of the world, a killer.

NITTILAI: Then kick that world aside, Arvasu. Your hands are clean. Even I have wounded—betrayed—my husband. You have remained good. Stay that way. We don't need this world. We can find our own.

(He doesn't answer. A long tense pause. Nittilai gets up.)

All right, let's go.

ARVASU: Go? Where?

NITTILAI: Let's go and face your brother. I don't want you to feel I'm depriving you.

ARVASU *(calms down)*: You are right. He won't let me get anywhere near him. I knew that from the beginning, didn't I? So what was I making such a fuss about? Do you think I'm going mad?

NITTILAI: You've been through so much, I'm surprised you're not worse.

(The Actor-Manager comes.)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Ahha! So the patient is better today?

NITTILAI: Yes, thank you.

(To Arvasu)

He saved your life, Arvasu.

ARVASU: Thank you—

ACTOR-MANAGER: Hardly 'saved'. Our old man died. We went to bury him. And there you were in the burial grounds—stretched out stiff. Except that you weren't cold. You were

burning hot. The bamboos we'd taken him out on served to carry you back. And you almost burned through them.

NITTILAI: I'm sorry your old man had to go. But it's lucky for us he chose that day. How's your brother?

ACTOR-MANAGER: His foot's much better, thank you. He can hobble about. Your magic touch again!

NITTILAI (*pleased*): Good. I'll get him some fresh herbs.

ACTOR-MANAGER (*pointing to Arvasu*): Now that he's well, do we start today?

NITTILAI: Within the next couple of hours. Let me go and arrange provisions for the trip.

(*Nittilai goes.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: What an extraordinary girl!

ARVASU (*distracted*): Hm.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Lucky for you that she's here. Don't you ever forget that.

ARVASU (*startled*): Why...why should I?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Listen, son. We actors are always on the move. Never stationary. And often along the way we see a scene. A bit of life. Only a tiny bit as we pass by. But enough to give us a sense of the rest of the story.

ARVASU: What do you mean?

ACTOR-MANAGER: I don't know what you are to her. Not that I want to know. Any fool can see you two belong to different worlds. Anything's possible in these troubled times. So I won't comment. But your name's on every tongue in this town and they are mostly trying to spit it out. I didn't save your life. She did. I only found you. You were lucky that she turned up soon after and it's she who's been nursing you. Mopping up your vomit, wiping your bottom. Like a baby. I'm grateful to her because my babies were starving when she came and now they get a bite to eat every day. Where she gets

the food from I don't know—but she knows the woods. We would have moved out of this town the day the old man died, except that we've become dependent on her. For food. For nursing. For laughter. We're just waiting to leave with her but she won't budge till you're better.

(Pause.)

Something about you worries me. She's a good girl. Don't hurt her.

ARVASU (*quietly*): I won't hurt her.

(While this scene is going on, in the background, Nittilai's brother and husband enter, make a fire and sit near it, silent and immobile. Nittilai enters, sees them, freezes and flees in panic. They haven't seen her. Long pause. The Actor-Manager hums a song.)

ARVASU: You said you'd gone to bury your old man when you found me? You bury your dead? Not cremate them?

ACTOR-MANAGER: No, we are actors. We have been actors since the Lord of Creation entrusted the job to my ancestors. The earth gave us the body. When we are done, we hand over the job to our children and hand back the body to the earth.

ARVASU: But the body will rot in the earth, surely...

ACTOR-MANAGER: What were we in our mother's womb? Floating bits of flesh? Squiggly worms? To burn is to destroy. Neither the earth gets it. Nor the wind. Well, to each his beliefs! My ancestors were actors and—

ARVASU: Then why are you leaving town?

ACTOR-MANAGER: We came here to perform a play for the sacrifice, but this town hasn't been good for us. The old man died. My brother's foot got infected—

ARVASU (*excited*): How can you give up so easily? Surely you have a duty to your art.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Couldn't agree more. But a body needs to be fed before it can act. In fact, even the gods, who are bodiless,

need to be fed before they will act. Hence all these oblations. But there are no oblations without a performance, and there's no performance without actors. I don't have enough actors, it's as simple as that.

ARVASU (*shyly*): May I—may I—ask you something?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Go ahead.

ARVASU: You don't mind?

ACTOR-MANAGER: What is it?

ARVASU: Will you watch me?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Watch you?

ARVASU: I like dancing. If I dance now—will you tell me if I am any good?

ACTOR-MANAGER: You?

ARVASU: I realize—it sounds absurd—

ACTOR-MANAGER: But you are not an actor. You are a high-caste—

ARVASU: I used to be with the hunters most of the time. Dancing. Singing. I like dancing.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Well, some other time. We'll be travelling together, after all. I have other worries at the moment...

(But Arvasu has started dancing. Initially the Actor-Manager is only half interested. But slowly as Arvasu dances, his eyes light up. He keeps the beat.)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Not bad—not bad at all.

(He too stands up and starts dancing. Slowly first, then faster. He leads. Arvasu follows. The Actor-Manager occasionally tries to trick Arvasu with a complicated step. But Arvasu accepts the challenge.)

Where did you learn all that?

(Arvasu, increasingly confident, laughs and taps his own skull in reply. He dances faster.)

Enough. Enough now. Don't tire yourself. You've just got up from the sick-bed. Sit down.

(They both sit.)

ARVASU: So—I'm not too bad then?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Bad? You're excellent. And that's what makes my stomach burn. It's just my cursed luck—

ARVASU: Why?

ACTOR-MANAGER: The fire sacrifice will be completed in the next few days. That's long enough for you to pick up a few bits of dialogue and half a dozen steps. We could have a show ready to celebrate the completion—but my evil stars have made sure that the one actor I could use can't go anywhere near the sacrificial precincts.

ARVASU: Actually, I don't think that would be a problem.

ACTOR-MANAGER: What do you mean?

ARVASU: I don't think Brother will stop me from acting. The problem is—I won't act—I can't.

ACTOR-MANAGER: But why not?

ARVASU: Nittilai and I must go away today.

ACTOR-MANAGER: We could all leave together—later—

ARVASU: No, we must leave—today.

ACTOR-MANAGER (*disappointed*): Oh!

(*Hopefully.*)

Perhaps we can have a show in some other town—on the way?

ARVASU: Perhaps.

(*Pause.*)

In a land far, far away!

(*Pause.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Let me warn you. I never give up.

(*Nittilai comes rushing in. She is frightened.*)

NITTILAI: Arvasu, Arvasu—

ARVASU: Nittilai!

ACTOR-MANAGER: What's happened?

NITTILAI: I was on my way—and I saw them. They were sitting round a fire... They didn't see me—in the dark—

ARVASU: Who?

NITTILAI: My brother. And husband.

ARVASU: Oh my God!

ACTOR-MANAGER: Ah!

NITTILAI: I just turned round and ran back—

ARVASU (*excited*): We must leave then—immediately. Before it dawns, we must get out of the city—

NITTILAI (*desperate*): No, no, we can't. Not now. Don't you see? It's too late—

ARVASU: Too late? Why?

NITTILAI: They don't know I'm here. That's why it's taken them three days to get here. They must have been searching among friends and relatives—

ARVASU: So?

NITTILAI: But everyone knows you're here. In this city. If you disappear now, they'll instantly realize we're together. Then they'll chase us—

ARVASU: So what do we do?

NITTILAI: I don't know!

ACTOR-MANAGER: Is this why you have been acting so mysterious, girl? Why didn't you tell me? I'm a wizard at disguise. With a little bit of make-up, I would have changed your entire appearance. Made you as good as invisible—

ARVASU (*exasperated*): They are hunters. They don't need to see a quarry. They can smell it out. And once they are on the track, they'll run it to the ground.

NITTILAI: One thing's certain. Arvasu. You'll have to stay on in the city—be visible! Only that will throw them off the scent.

ACTOR-MANAGER: But won't they harm him?

ARVASU: No, I am an outsider.

(Bitterly)

Everywhere.

NITTILAI: They're after me.

ARVASU: So what will you do?

NITTILAI: I'll disappear. Go and hide in the jungle.

ARVASU *(enraged)*: Hide? What do you mean hide? Are we playing games here? You there. Me here. No, I won't let you go.

NITTILAI *(flying into a temper)*: Do you think I want to die? You think I want to be hunted down by my brother and my husband? If they had come separately, it might have meant anything. But they're here—together! And they sat there by the fire—still. Alert. Listening. We never talk when we are on a hunt. We only listen. And my husband wasn't smiling. He looked—so sad. That scares me, Arvasu. I'm still young. I don't want to die.

(She starts weeping.)

ARVASU: Don't cry. Please. It'll soon be light. And if you have to go you must. But what am I to do?

NITTILAI *(angry)*: Why do you keep asking me? Why don't you decide? Don't push everything on to my shoulders—

ARVASU *(quietly)*: I only meant—staying here in the city won't be easy—being spat upon, sneered at—

NITTILAI: Is that all you can think of when—

ACTOR-MANAGER: Act in my show.

ARVASU *(annoyed)*: Please, don't try to be funny—

ACTOR-MANAGER: I'm quite serious. If you are going to be here till the sacrifice is over, you might as well take part in my play.

ARVASU: Listen now—

NITTILAI: What's that?

ACTOR-MANAGER: A moment ago he danced. He dances like a

celestial being. With him I could stage a show in honour of the festival. But he won't agree—

NITTILAI: Parvasu will never let him—

ARVASU (*defiant*): Parvasu himself has ostracized me. I'm an outcaste now. He can't stop me from acting...but how can I sing and dance while you're in mortal danger?

NITTILAI: I'll be safe enough. The jungle's like a home to me.

ACTOR-MANAGER: I am a selfish man. If this performance takes place, I'll be rich. We'll all be rich. My children will sleep on a full stomach for another two months. But that's not all. Think of yourself. If Arvasu has to be 'visible', what better than rehearsing in the open, getting ready for a stage performance with the whole town in attendance?

(*Pause. He waits for his words to sink in.*)

NITTILAI: Are you sure he'll be able to carry it off? He's never faced an audience before.

ACTOR-MANAGER: I am a professional, Sister. Do you think I would knowingly risk a failure? I even have a play ready. We'd just decided on it when the old man died. A perfect choice for this fire sacrifice. *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. A play about the struggle between Lord Indra and the demon Vritra.

(*She laughs.*)

NITTILAI: Then Arvasu will want to play the demon.

(*To Arvasu*)

Aren't I right?

(*To the Actor-Manager*)

He loves all that ghoulish make-up, the roaring and thumping, the acrobatics.

ARVASU: I never know whether you're going to laugh or cry.

ACTOR-MANAGER: He'll have to play Vritra. I, needless to say, will play the main role, Indra. The actor playing Vritra basically needs to dance. And my brother is in no state to dance. And

the few speeches that are there won't be a problem to a Brahmin.

ARVASU: I am not a Brahmin—

ACTOR-MANAGER: Quite! Quite! But you won't need to be taught basic pronunciation.

(Pause.)

Think about it. I'll go and get the costumes for Vritra. If you're willing, we might as well start rehearsals right away.

(Exits.)

ARVASU: What shall I do, Nittilai?

NITTILAI: I don't know. What do you want to do?

ARVASU: What he said made good sense. But—

NITTILAI: You've always wanted to act. As long as I can remember.

What will you do otherwise? Brood over Parvasu? Whip yourself into a frenzy of anxiety over me?

ARVASU: I'm afraid.

NITTILAI: What's there to fear?

ARVASU: It's the nightmare I told you about. I am dying of thirst.

But there's no water. Then I peer into a huge well. There's water there, but it has my reflection in it. I stare at it. And the reflection snarls: 'Why are you staring, wretch? Go away.' So I say: 'You exist because I stare. You wouldn't be there if I went away.' It says: 'You think so, do you, you swollen-headed doll of flesh? I'll show you.' And the reflection leaps out of the water. Gouges my eyes out. Chews up my face in its jaws. I scream, but I have no face... It keeps on returning, that nightmare, so that now I'm not at all sure it's me standing here and not my reflection, all ready to attack—

NITTILAI: How long are you going to turn your face away from it then? Face it. Face your brother as you wanted to.

(He looks at her in surprise.)

Not in hate, Arvasu. In the play. Show him how good you are.
I'm sure the play will wash off the fear—the anger—
(*He nods.*)

ARVASU: All right.

NITTILAI: I'd better go. It's almost dawn.

ARVASU: Nittilai—

NITTILAI: What is it?

ARVASU: Isn't there any way you could watch the play that day?
It would give me so much courage—

NITTILAI: I wish I could! But it's too dangerous. Come here after
the play is over. At night. There'll be enormous crowds. We'll
meet at this point—and fade away—

(*She stands reluctant to go.*)

I'm glad you're not playing Indra. I don't like that god of
yours.

ARVASU: Why?

NITTILAI: He is immortal. When someone doesn't die, can't die,
what can he know about anything? He can't change himself.
He can't—can't *create* anything. I like Vritra because even
when he's triumphant he chooses death. I always wonder—
if flowers didn't know they were to fade and die, would they
ever blossom?

(*Gets up.*)

I must leave.

ARVASU: Nittilai, I wish you could hide here—in the city
somewhere.

NITTILAI: No. It's better that even you don't know where I am.
(*Moves to go.*)

ARVASU: Don't I—

NITTILAI: Concentrate on your rehearsals. Learn. I am sure you'll
be marvellous. I'm sure your dancing will bring the rains—
Goodbye—

ARVASU: Nittilai—

(She smiles and disappears. He stares dumbly after her. The Actor-Manager who's been waiting at a distance enters with the costumes and the mask of Vritra.)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Here. This is the mask of Vritra the demon.

Now surrender to the mask. Surrender and pour life into it. But remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over. It'll begin to dictate terms to you and you must never let that happen. Prostrate yourself before it. Pray to it. Enter it. Then control it.

(Arvasu opens the bundle of clothes and dresses, almost in a trance. The stage darkens. Nittilai's brother and husband melt away in the darkness. The audience, including Paravasu and the King, occupy their places and watch.)

The Epilogue

Slowly, Arvasu puts on the mask. There is a roar of drums and then a sudden silence. Arvasu gives a wild roar and jumps up. He dances violently. The audience responds with enthusiasm. The play is on. The Actor-Manager dressed up as Indra enters from one side. The Actor playing Vishwarupa enters from the other.

Vishwarupa and Vritra rush to each other, embrace.

VISHWARUPA: Dear Brother Vritra—

VRITRA: Dear Brother Vishwarupa—

(Since Vishwarupa is limping, Vritra dances, holding Vishwarupa's hands, emphasizing their affection for each other. The audience reacts with pleasure. Indra watches from a distance, then talks to the audience.)

INDRA: ...After all, I am Indra, the King of the Gods. Should I then not be Supreme in the three worlds? Should not Brahma, the Father of All Creation, who gave me birth, have ensured that I stood unrivalled in all these domains? But alas! He fell in love with a mortal and produced a son by human womb, whom he crowned the King of Men. Vishwarupa! Everyone admires Vishwarupa. Everyone sings his praises. His wisdom and gentleness and mastery of the lores inspires a love which makes me feel like the eclipsed moon. It threatens my sovereignty of the worlds. But how can I destroy him?

For my father mated with a woman from the nether world and created a third son, a demon, Vritra. He made him the King of the Nether World and told him: 'Vritra, protect your brother Vishwarupa, the King of Men, if necessary with your own life. For Indra is bound to try and harm him!'

And the two are inseparable. I sent, as you saw, the most enchanting of my celestial beauties to lure Vishwarupa to a lonely place. But he will not leave that infernal demon behind. How can I separate them? How can I isolate Vishwarupa?

(He reflects.)

Aha! I have it. I shall organize a fire sacrifice in honour of our father, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation...

(He adds with a wink.)

whom incidentally I have already destroyed. I shall invite all the gods and men to this sacrifice.

(Goes round the stage and comes to Vishwarupa.)

Vishwarupa, my dear brother—

VISHWARUPA: I bow to you, Brother Indra—

INDRA: Vishwarupa, I am conducting a fire sacrifice in our father's memory. All the gods and the best of men have been invited. You must come too—

VISHWARUPA: Indeed, I shall. You are my elder brother. I don't need an invitation to attend a sacrifice conducted by you, I would have come on my own the moment I heard the news.

INDRA: Your love for me is beyond description. Come, enter this sacrificial enclosure.

(Vishwarupa tries to enter, followed by Vritra.)

No, Vishwarupa. You are most welcome, but Vritra, who is accompanying you, may not enter the sacrificial precincts.

VISHWARUPA: And why is that?

INDRA: Because he is demon, a Rakshasa.

VISHWARUPA: But, Brother, he is our father's son. Hence he is our

brother and like our father, a Brahmin. Surely you will not forbid him entry?

INDRA: His mother was a demoness and demon blood flows in his veins. A demon may not be permitted near the altar lest he is tempted to desecrate it. The rules are more ancient than us. We cannot tamper with them.

VISHWARUPA: So be it.

(To Vritra)

Dear Vritra, you have heard what Indra has to say. So please, you wait here outside the enclosure while I go in.

VRITRA: Brother, my father gave me life so I could protect you. Let me come in with you. This Indra is treacherous.

VISHWARUPA: But, Vritra, you know that I have extracted from him a promise not to hurt me.

VRITRA: They say gods should never be trusted.

(Laughter from the audience.)

Indeed, it's said that when the gods speak to us, the meaning they attach to each word is quite different from the meaning we humans attach to it. Thus *their* side of their speech often denies what *our* side of their speech promises.

(Applause.)

Even their silences have double meanings. Hence the saying, that the thirty-three gods occupying the heavens make for sixty-six silences.

(Laughter.)

At least.

(Thunderous applause and laughter.)

VISHWARUPA: But, dear Vritra, one must obey one's brother. So let me go.

VRITRA: Brother, I love you. But you'll not listen to me. So be it. I'll wait for you here outside.

(Vritra stamps in exasperation, goes and strikes a worried pose. The audience loves it. Applause. Vishwarupa goes round the stage to indicate that he is covering a long distance.)

ARVASU (*aside*): Nittilai, I hadn't known it would be like this. I can feel the audience reaching out to me—their warmth coming in wave after wave, lapping against me. I'm good! Yet suddenly I don't care for this sea of smiling faces. I want yours. Where are you? Are you safe? My heart trembles to think of you.

(*Vishwarupa finishes the round and arrives at Indra's fire sacrifice.*)

VISHWARUPA: Brother Indra, now I enter your sacrificial pavilion.

INDRA (*laughs*): Come, come. I shall welcome you properly. Come and sit by the altar and offer oblations to the gods.

(*Vishwarupa mimes sitting down and pouring oblations in the fire. Indra laughing silently, moves behind him, takes up his thunderbolt, takes aim and plunges it into Vishwarupa's back. Vishwarupa screams. Paravasus, who has been watching impassively until now, jumps to his feet. The Brahma Rakshasa appears next to him. The rest of the people on stage freeze.*)

PARAVASU: No. No. Wrong! That's wrong!

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: What's wrong?

PARAVASU: They understand nothing, the fools. Indra didn't mean to kill him—

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Then what happened?

PARAVASU: He was panic-stricken.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Why?

PARAVASU: He saw a face by the altar. Whose face was it? The face of my dead father? Or of my brother, who is a simpleton, yet knows everything? Or was it my own face? Cold fear tore through him. He stood paralysed. When he came to, he heard a voice asking: 'Who are you?' His own voice. There was no choice now but to go on, to strike. But to think that the fear had lain coiled inside him and he wasn't even aware—

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I see. Well, then. I must go.

PARAVASU (*startled*): Go? Where?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I had better look elsewhere for help. You've enough problems of your own, Brother.

PARAVASU: I'll help you. I can.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Goodbye.

PARAVASU: Trust me. I'll help you—

(The Brahma Rakshasa disappears. Paravasus shouts.)

Come back—come back, Demon!

(The stage, frozen till then, leaps to life. The audience, startled by Paravasus's shout, looks at him. Arvasu reacts to his brother's voice. Vishwarupa screams continuing his earlier scream. Rolls back. Indra strikes again.)

VISHWARUPA: You, Brother? Why? I trusted you—

VRITRA: Whose voice is that? Familiar words!

(Indra gives a villainous laugh.)

VISHWARUPA: Brother, why this treachery?

VRITRA: Why, Brother? Why, why, why? Brother, why? Why? Indra's laughter—And why are the vultures, sparrows, kites and eagles reeling in such frenzy over the sacrificial sanctum? Why are they ripping the skies with their shrill screams? Why is a wave of blood breaking out of the sacrificial enclosure like a flock of fear-crazed jungle fowl?

(He mimes entering the enclosure. Vishwarupa is dying.)

Another treachery! Another filthy death! How long will this go on? How long will these rats crawl around my feet vomiting blood? I must put an end to this conspiracy—wait, Indra—

(Attacks Indra with a ferocity which takes the Actor-Manager by surprise. They fight. The Actor-Manager is agile and well trained. But Vritra's violence shakes him. He runs. Vritra chases him.)

You can elude me, Indra. But you can't escape me. Even if you fly like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers I'll find you. I'll destroy you. I'll raze your befouled sacrifice to the ground.

(He pounces on a guard standing nearby and grabs a torch from his hand and rushes toward the real sacrificial enclosure.)

I'll burn down the sacrifice—

ACTOR-MANAGER: No, no! Not *that*—stop him! Stop him, for God's sake—

(Two or three guards try to stop Arvasu but he is uncontrollable. He swings his torch about and in a swift move, pulls out a dagger from a guard's belt. The guards, half scared, step back.)

ARVASU: I am a Brahmin. If you try to stop me, I'll kill myself. And the sin of killing a Brahmin will be on your heads. I am a Rakshasa! And I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me—
(He rushes into the sacrificial pavilion. The guards rush in after him. There is commotion.)

ACTOR-MANAGER: It's the mask—it's the mask come alive. Restrain him—or there'll be chaos.

KING: Stop him! Stop him!

GUARD *(rushes out of the sacrificial enclosure)*: But he is not human, Sir. His feet don't touch the ground. He flies in the smoke like a Rakshasa—he disappears in the flames—
(Suddenly the weak and hungry villagers watching the scene from the crowds get up and start rushing into the burning pavilion. There is a stampede.)

BRAHMINS: It's the tribals—the savages—they're desecrating the sacrifice—Oh God! This is madness. The doomsday—they are eating and drinking the food kept for the gods. They're levelling the sacrifice to the ground—

KING: Chief Priest! Sir! What shall we do?

(Paravasu has been watching the chaos, without so much as moving a muscle. He gets up and without a word calmly walks into the blazing enclosure.

Nittilai comes running.)

NITTILAI: Arvasu!

(She rushes into the burning structure. The crowds mill around. The

structure, made of dry bamboo and wood bursts into flames. Nittilai comes out, supporting Arvasu. She takes off his mask, throws it away.)

NITTILAI: It's all right. Don't worry now—

ARVASU: I don't know what came over me, Nittilai.

NITTILAI: It's all over. Thank God, you aren't hurt—

ARVASU: I lost, Nittilai. And Paravasu won. He went and sat there in front of the altar, unafraid and carried on with the sacrifice. I couldn't destroy him...

NITTILAI: You didn't mean to, Arvasu.

ARVASU: He went up in flames while I stood watching, untouched.

NITTILAI: It doesn't matter! Let's just go away from all this.

ARVASU: Yes, let us. Don't let go of me—please—

NITTILAI: Of course, I won't, silly boy. Come.

(Suddenly Nittilai's brother and husband step out of the crowd and bar their way. She screams.)

ARVASU: No! Listen—listen to me—

NITTILAI: Please, Brother—Husband—please, don't—

(The brother knocks Arvasu down and pins him to the ground. The husband pulls out a knife, grabs Nittilai by her hair and slashes her throat in one swift motion. He then lets her drop. The two go away. Arvasu gets up, rushes to her, takes her in his arms. She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal. The commotion dies away as Arvasu stares numbly at Nittilai.)

ARVASU (softly): Serves you right! Who asked you to meddle with this world? You plunge in—like a lamp into a hurricane. What do you expect? No one'll weep for you, Nittilai. Not even me. I'll sing no lullaby of grief for you. But I'll come with you. Where nothing matters, not your goodness, nor my stupidity, nor this world's evil. Where the fire will have reduced everything to ashes.

(He lifts up her corpse, puts it on his shoulder and goes into the

sacrificial pavilion which is still burning. The crowds watch in silence. He goes and stands inside the burning structure. The fire slowly dies out.

Melodious music. The sunlight becomes soft and gentle. The entire atmosphere gets an ethereal hue. The voice of Indra is heard from the skies.)

INDRA: Arvasu, Son, do not grieve. We are pleased with you. Ask for any boon and it shall be granted.

ARVASU (*baffled*): Who's that? Who's that?

INDRA: I am Indra, the Lord of Gods. Know that all the gods are pleased with you.

ARVASU: Indra? But what do I have to do with Indra? I didn't seek Indra, or any other god. Yavakri did. Paravasu did. I seek only Death. Why are you here?

INDRA (*laughs*): You question the gods? Other mortals would be happy to receive—

ARVASU: But—what have I done to deserve this visit?

INDRA: We loved the way you challenged Indra and then pursued him...in the play. But it could also be because of Paravasu's sacrifice or Nittilai's humanity. You humans are free to construe the acts of gods as you wish. The point is we are here and you can ask for anything you want—

CROWDS: Rain! Arvasu, ask for the rains! Water—

ARVASU (*slowly*): Lord Indra, I want Nittilai back. Alive. That's all I want in my life. Grant me that. Nittilai—my gentle Nittilai—I killed her. I want her back—

CROWDS: Water, Arvasu, ask for the rains!

INDRA: It's no great matter to bring Nittilai back to life. But once the wheel of Time starts rolling back, there's no saying where it'll stop. Along with Nittilai, others too may return to life—your brother Paravasu, your father, even Yavakri—

ARVASU: Yes, let them. Let them.

(Strange music fills the air. The souls of Nittilai, Paravasu, Raibhya, Yavakri, Andhaka as well as a host of other dead people enter the stage silently and come close to Arvasu. He looks at them and calls out.)

ARVASU (*happily*): Nittilai! Nittilai! Brother! Father—and who are all the others, Lord?

INDRA: Those who died all over the earth at the same time as your family. If the wheel of Time rolls back they come back to life too—

ARVASU: Yes. Yes. Let the world be as it was—

INDRA: But then, won't the entire tragedy repeat itself, Arvasu? How will it help anyone to go through all that suffering again?

ARVASU: No, it won't. Lord, I have been a benighted creature all my life. My blindness contributed to that tragedy—fuelled it on. But after all that I have been through, I'm wiser. I can now stop the tragedy from repeating itself. I can provide the missing sense to our lives—

INDRA: Are you sure?

ARVASU: Yes, I am.

INDRA: Well then—

(As this moment a shout is heard from afar. It is the voice of the Brahma Rakshasa.)

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Arvasu—

ARVASU: Who's that?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: It's me. The Brahma Rakshasa. Your father invoked me. He ordered me to kill Yavakri and I did. I have done my duty and now I wander lost, and in torment. Help me, Arvasu.

ARVASU: What do you want?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I want release—release from this bondage. Your father gave me this life. We are brothers. So you must complete what your father couldn't—I want to melt away—

I want peace—eternal peace—I beg of you—intercede on my behalf with the gods—

ARVASU: Lord Indra, you heard that. Could you—

INDRA: Arvasu, the wheel of Time must roll back if Nittilai is to return to life. It must roll forward for the Brahma Rakshasa to be released. You can't have it both ways. Choose—

ARVASU (*helplessly to the Brahma Rakshasa*): You see, there's nothing I can do.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You can, Arvasu. You can. Don't abandon me.

INDRA: There's another consideration, Arvasu. Not even the gods can guarantee a soul the ultimate release. That is a law beyond us. I may grant his release from birth and death because you ask for it. But there is every chance it may not work. In that case, his situation will remain unchanged and you'll lose Nittilai.

ARVASU: You heard that, Brahma Rakshasa. So forgive me—
(*The souls draw closer to Arvasu, their eyes pleading with him.*)

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I don't forgive. I can't. But you are a human being. You are capable of mercy. You can understand pain and suffering as the gods can't—

ARVASU: I don't want to listen to you. Go away! Go away!

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: And when Nittilai comes back what will you tell her? Will you tell her that because of her a soul writhes in pain—

ARVASU: Shut up! She is not at fault—

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Nittilai came to help you because she cared for you. She would have cared for me. Wept at the thought of my endless life in death. If you bring her back, you'll have destroyed what made her such a beautiful person—

ARVASU: That's not true.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Remember, Arvasu. If Nittilai lives again, she'll live a life as tormented as mine—tormented by the

knowledge that her resurrection condemned me beyond salvation. And every moment of her life, she'll hear my screams. What you are asking for is not a boon. You are asking Indra to condemn Nittilai to a hell-hole much worse than the one I'm in. Think, Arvasu, you're wiser now—

(Arvasu is silent. The souls make a strange moaning noise.)

INDRA: Arvasu, have you decided?

ARVASU: Lord Indra—

INDRA: Yes—

ARVASU: Grant this Brahma Rakshasa his release. Let him go.

INDRA: You're sure you want that?

ARVASU: Nittilai would have wanted it so.

INDRA: Well then, so be it!

(The Brahma Rakshasa cries out in triumph. A long pause. The crowd of souls gives a long, mournful sigh of disappointment and begins to withdraw. Nittilai's soul too goes away with them.)

ARVASU: Nittilai!

(Sits down and clutches Nittilai's corpse. The Brahma Rakshasa waits impatiently but nothing happens. He looks around baffled, scared. The world seems to stand still.

The crowds begin to whisper.)

CROWDS: What's that?—You smell that?—Yes. Yes. The smell of wet earth. Of fresh rains. It's raining. Somewhere. Nearby. The air is blossoming with the fragrance of earth. It's raining—It's raining—Rain! The rain!

(Wind blows. Lightening. Thunder. People shout 'Rain! It's raining!' Suddenly the Brahma Rakshasa roars with laughter and melts away. Only his laughter can be heard for a few moments, reverberating, mixed with the rolling thunder. It pours. People dance with joy. They roll in the mud. Arvasu sits clutching Nittilai's body.)

ARVASU: It's raining, Nittilai! It's raining!

THE DREAMS OF TIPU SULTAN

NOTE

Those who wish to stage the play should kindly resist the temptation of using masks, special lighting or costumes for the dream scenes. It is essential for the total impact of the play that the dreams are staged absolutely realistically, and that the scenes follow each other in rapid succession. As this rapidity can be best achieved by quick shifts of location on stage and of lighting, exits and entrances of characters have not always been indicated in the text in the traditional fashion.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan was first presented by the Madras Players at the YMCA Amphitheatre, Chennai, on 17 February 2000. The principal cast was as follows:

TONY PICKFORD	Colin Mackenzie
HARSHA SUBRAMANIAM	Hussain Ali Kirmani
RAVI KATARI	Mark Wilks
P. VENKAT	Zafer
JASPER UTLEY	Arthur Wellesley
VIKRAM GOPALAKRISHNAN	Nadeem Khan
ASIM SHARMA	Tipu Sultan
T. T. SRINATH	Poornaiya
RUPA BOSE	Female Idols
MALA GOVIAS	
P. VENKAT	Old Men
BRIAN PAPALLI	
GAUTHAM ADITHYA	Mir Sadiq
PAUL MATHEW	Ghulam Ali Khan
EJJI UMAMAHESH	Osman Khan
P. VENKAT	
SIDDHARTH CHOUDHRY	Fath Haidar
SUKRIT CHOUDHRY	Muizuddin
MADHULICA SUNDARAM	Abdul Khaliq
ANURADHA ANANTH	Young Man

JIM HODGETTS

ARYAMA SUNDARAM

SRIYA CHARI

SUMIKA MUKERJI

RANJAN DE

JAGAN R.

VENKY NAIK

ARUN MANI

TONY PICKFORD

JIM HODGETTS

Directed by

Sets and lights by

Charles Malet

Nana Phadnavis

Ruqayya Banu

Hasina

Lord Cornwallis

Qamaruddin

Haidar Ali

Hari Pant

Lord Mornington
(Richard Wellesley)

William Kirkpatrick

N. S. YAMUNA

M. NATESH

Act One

1803. The house of the historian, Mir Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani, in the city of Mysore. Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the Oriental scholar, is taking off his shoes, as though he has just arrived. He looks around at the notes, books, and manuscripts littering the floor. Kirmani enters with a jug of water and a tumbler, and places them next to Mackenzie.

MACKENZIE: How's the work progressing?

KIRMANI: Not at all well.

MACKENZIE: Why not?

KIRMANI: It's not easy. It hurts.

MACKENZIE: That's what you keep saying, Janaab Kirmani. But come now—after all these years—

KIRMANI: There's no healing. True, the blood and the tears dried up a long time ago. But the wound remains fresh.

MACKENZIE: That's understandable. I mean, you *were* close to him. But you are also a historian. You need to develop a certain objectivity—

KIRMANI: Yes, that's what you keep telling me, Mackenzie Sahib. Objectivity. Dispassionate distance. Is that even possible?

MACKENZIE: Essential, I'd say. A must.

KIRMANI: Then perhaps you should dismiss me. You pay me to write history while I malingers and mope...

MACKENZIE: I didn't mean that. In any case, you know you are irreplaceable, you old rascal! One can't buy genuine court historians in the bazaar.

KIRMANI: Perhaps you think malingering is a courtier's disease?

MACKENZIE: No, I don't. I think you're far too obsessed with his death.

KIRMANI: Not his death. The way he was destroyed.

MACKENZIE: Surely you're being melodramatic now. Every bit of evidence we've gathered proves he asked for it.

KIRMANI: Yes. For you, he's made up of bits of evidence, bits of argument that prove that your side was right. And that's what I don't understand. You have your version of history, all worked out. Why do you want my side? Why do you care?

MACKENZIE: I am interested in the other side. You could say that's how we Europeans are brought up...to be interested in the other side as well. That I suppose is our strength.

KIRMANI: I find a lifetime insufficient to understand my own. Besides I spent my life serving him and his father. And now I work for you, his enemies. What does that make me? A traitor? Am I trustworthy any more? Doesn't that worry you? It worries me.

MACKENZIE: Our loyalty is to history, Kirmaniji. Keep emotion out. Stick to the facts.

KIRMANI: You mean, memories. But that's where the real betrayal lies. Do you know I was just trying to remember what he looked like on that last day and I just couldn't.

MACKENZIE: That's another thing you have avoided writing about. His last day.

KIRMANI: I remember it vividly. But the crucial detail still eludes me. He was staying in the caravanserai on the northern

ramparts. He'd been there for a couple of days, with the soldiers, watching the English noose tighten. It was sweltering hot. We had been praying for a downpour, for then the moats would have been flooded and the English attack delayed. But the clouds had hung ominously, inert, neutral. We were half-way through our lunch, our sweat streaming into our plates, when the skies exploded. The English had launched their assault. The Sultan washed his fingers and got up. He buckled on his sword belt, took out an envelope from his pocket, sealed it and gave it to me: 'Keep it till I come back,' he said. At that moment, news came that Syed Gaffar had been killed by a cannonball. He mumbled a prayer and left. I remember thinking, I'll never forget that expression on his face. But I have. For the life of me, I can't remember his face at that moment. It's such...such betrayal!

MACKENZIE: And then?

KIRMANI: I forgot all about the letter. Naturally, with all that followed. Next day, I found it in my pocket. Reluctantly, I broke open the seal. Inside was a paper on which he had recorded the dream he had had the previous night. His last dream. With that my history ends. Yours begins. (*Pause.*)

MACKENZIE: I saw him first in the flickering light of a torch. Still warm. We thought he was alive, buried deep under a pile of corpses. Near the water gate of the fort. The night of the fourth of May, 1799.

(*Ramparts of the Seringapatam—or Srirangapatna—fort. Midnight. There has been savage fighting and the ground is thick with the bodies of the dead and the dying. British soldiers are searching through the piles of bodies for Tipu's corpse. Tipu's servants, brought in to help identify his body, squat around, dozing.*)

SOLDIER 1: Is that him?

SOLDIER 2: Could be. No way one can be certain.

CAPT. WILKS: Corpulent, with big twirly moustaches, round face...

SOLDIER 2: Yes, sir. We know that by heart now. But the description seems to fit most of these bastards.

WILKS: Ask that black there.

SOLDIER 3: Look, sir, I'm sure we're wasting our time. I'm sure the bird's flown. He would be stupid not to—

WILKS (*ignores him*): Ask him.

SOLDIER 2: Is there any point, sir? These swine have already identified a dozen corpses as the Sultan's—they're making fools of us.

WILKS: Ask the one huddled in the right corner of the group. We haven't tried him.

SOLDIER 2: *Arre suno—Tum naheen—Han! Tum!* (You there! Not you—Yes, you!)

ZAFER: *Jee Huzoor.*

SOLDIER 2: *Yehan aao.* (Come here.)

ZAFER: *Jee.*

SOLDIER 2: *Naam kya hai?* (Name?)

ZAFER: *Zafer.*

SOLDIER 2: *Yeh murdah. Kya yeh tumhare Sultan ka hai?* (This corpse. Is it your Sultan's?)

ZAFER: *Dikhai naheen de rahaa... Andhera.* (Can't see... It's dark.)

SOLDIER 2: He says he can't see in the dark.

WILKS: True enough. Why haven't the torches arrived? Halloo—Ricketts—

VOICE (*distant*): *Sah!*

WILKS: Where are the torches? We can't see a damn thing here.

VOICE: On their way I suppose, *sah*—

WILKS: You suppose, do you? Thanks. Send your torch here.

VOICE: A moment, *sah*. We may have something here.

WILKS: So may we. So send it here. On the double.

SOLDIER 3: It's bloody ridiculous. We fight and kill these devils through the day. Then sift their rotting bodies through the night. Like scavengers.

SOLDIER 1: A dozen teams scavenging and three torches between them.

VOICE: More torches and flares coming, sah. And it's Colonel Wellesley, sah.

WELLESLEY (*from a distance*): Hello! Captain Wilks—

WILKS: Here, sir.

WELLESLEY (*from a distance*): Where are you, Mark?

WILKS: Near the water gate, sir. Could you bring some torches and flares with you, sir?

(*Colonel Arthur Wellesley enters with a group of soldiers carrying torches. The torches are distributed.*)

WELLESLEY: This surely is what hell is like!

WILKS: It's Tipu's men, sir. They wouldn't yield. It was carnage.

SOLDIER 1: It's hot as hell too.

WILKS: We've had it if it rains now.

WELLESLEY: Even without the rains, it should not take long before they begin to stink. And the city must be getting restive. They'll want their dead. Let's hope we find him soon. Apparently he was last seen around here.

SOLDIER 3: If I may say so, sir, if the bastard's really lying dead somewhere here, we should let him rot in the sun—feed him to the dogs!

WELLESLEY: I understand how you feel. But we can't leave any corpse unturned, you understand.

WILKS (*laughs*): Of course not, sir.

WELLESLEY: We've got to decide whether Tipu is dead or in hiding or has run away before we can take the next step. Colonel Mackenzie should be here soon with the Manager of the Fort. But we must carry on in the meantime.

WILKS: Would you like to see some fun, sir?

(*Pointing to Zafer*)

Ask him, Jones.

SOLDIER 2: *Aao, dekho. Inko pehchante ho?* (Come and look. Do you recognize him?)

(*Holds a torch to a dead body. Zafer looks and begins to wail.*)

ZAFER: *Han! Han! Yehee hain hamare padshah! Yehi hain—Allah! Ab kya hoga?*

SOLDIER 2 (*resigned*): He says, yes. It's the Sultan.

WILKS: While the others sit on their haunches and watch calmly from a distance?

SOLDIER 3: Why don't we kick the bastards? They aren't even trying to fool us!

WELLESLEY: Can't blame them.

WILKS: All right. Pile that body along with the others.

SOLDIER 3: I'll take any bet Tipu's run away, his tail between his legs.

SOLDIER 2 (*laughs*): We'll take bets when we're done with the city. You'll have something to bet with then.

SOLDIER 3: I can barely wait to lay my hands on it. I was a prisoner here. I've seen the city. Plated with gold, it is.

WILKS: Stop counting your chickens and get on with the bloody job.

VOICE (*distant*): Halloo—Is Colonel Wellesley there?

WELLESLEY (*shouts back*): Here! Near the water gate. Is that you, Colin?

MACKENZIE (*entering along with Nadeem Khan*): This is Qilledar Nadeem Khan, Manager of the Fort. Colonel Wellesley.

WELLESLEY: Delighted to meet you, sir. I wish the circumstances were more pleasant.

NADEEM: It's God's will.

WELLESLEY: We'd be grateful for your assistance.

NADEEM: It's my duty to the Sultan. I saw him last here, fighting like a man possessed.

WELLESLEY: Is it likely that Tipu Sultan might have escaped?

NADEEM: That wouldn't be like him. Besides, all the gates of the fort were closed.

(Pause.)

I had seen to that.

(Neither Wellesley nor Mackenzie react.)

If you'll permit me—

(He starts looking for Tipu's body.)

WELLESLEY: What news of the palace, Colin? All well, I presume.

MACKENZIE: They surrendered all right. There was no resistance. The princes took their time coming out; they were shaking with fright. General Baird became a little impatient—

WELLESLEY: Let me guess the rest.

MACKENZIE: Nothing serious. He cooled down soon enough.

WELLESLEY: Hm! Any trace of the Sultan?

MACKENZIE: He's not in the palace. They say he left two days ago. Has been camping out with the soldiers, somewhere on the ramparts.

NADEEM: Sahib—*Yeh hain*—Raja Khan—

SOLDIER 2 (*excited*): Nadeem Khan's found Raja Khan, the Sultan's personal assistant.

(They run.)

MACKENZIE: That means Tipu's body must be somewhere around? Where, Qilledar Sahib? There? Move these bodies. The lot. Look sharp.

SOLDIER 2: *Jaldi—Jaldi*—(Quick! Quick!)

NADEEM: *Thehro! Yeh hain*—(Stop. That's him!)

MACKENZIE: I think we've found him. Careful. That one with the gold buckle on his belt. Lift him out.

WILKS (*shouts*): We have found him. Bring all the torches here.

VOICES (*distant*): You have?—That's bloody marvellous—They've found him—Where?

(*Commotion. Soldiers come running and crowd around the body.*)

WELLESLEY: Steady now. Form a circle and hold your torches close to him. Is that Tipu Sultan, Qilledar Sahib?

NADEEM (*broken voice*): *Jee han.*

WELLESLEY: So that's the Tiger of Mysore.

SOLDIER 2: He's warm.

WELLESLEY: Is he alive?

(*Feels Tipu's temperature.*)

MACKENZIE: Is he?

WELLESLEY: He is warm, but that wound on his temple. Couldn't have survived that.

(*A chorus of voices, mainly female, is heard wailing in the far distance. They listen.*)

WELLESLEY (*listening*): But what's that?

MACKENZIE: That's from the palace—The harem—

WELLESLEY: The ladies of the palace mourning!

MACKENZIE: But how could they have known so soon? The palace is a mile away.

WILKS: Some secret signal.

WELLESLEY: In this dark?

MACKENZIE: It's eerie.

WELLESLEY: If we were looking for confirmation, I suppose that's it—

(*The wailing gets louder and spreads. The entire city is soon wailing.*)

SOLDIER 3 (*eagerly*): Is the city ours then, sir?

WELLESLEY: I suppose I can't stop you.

(*The soldiers rush out, hurrahing, eager to plunder the city.*)

The only thing more melancholy than losing a battle is winning it. Mark—

WILKS: Yes, sir.

WELLESLEY: Get the body moved to the palace. And keep watch.

WILKS: Yes, sir.

(*They move away discussing the details.*)

SOLDIER 1: Excuse me, sir.

MACKENZIE: Yes?

SOLDIER 1: May I borrow your penknife, sir? I lost mine in the action.

MACKENZIE: Penknife? Certainly. Here.

SOLDIER 1: Thank you, sir. Before the body is taken away, I mean.

I'd promised my friend Dr Cruso of our Establishment a present—

(*Chops off one of Tipu's moustaches.*)

MACKENZIE (*shouts*): What are you doing, man? What in the name of the Devil are you doing? Stop that lunatic—

(*Exclamations of horror, not too loud, in Urdu and Kannada. 'Arre—Roko—Ayyo! Ayyo! Yeh kya kiya?'*)

SOLDIER 1: The tiger's own whiskers. A prize booty.

MACKENZIE: Arrest that damned fool!

(*The sounds of wailing grow louder and merge with the shouts and screams of the city being pillaged. The sound track is entirely taken over by the latter. We are back in Kirmani's house.*)

KIRMANI: So the Tiger of Mysore had at last been hunted down.

And the first salutation he received from the hunters was to have his whiskers chopped off.

MACKENZIE: That act of vandalism will not be forgotten.

KIRMANI: How could it be? It was a perfect prelude to a night of unprecedented rapacity.

MACKENZIE: I had never seen British soldiers go berserk like that!

KIRMANI: Every house looted. Every available woman raped. Soldiers throwing away precious jewellery because they could not carry any more.

MACKENZIE: Wellesley had to hang three soldiers before the pillage died down. Dreadful! Well, I'd better get back to my Sanskrit. The *Arthasastra*. The Science of Governance. A cynical piece of writing, if there ever was one. Get over your despondency, old man, and get on with your writing.

KIRMANI: I'll try. But I don't know what to write.

MACKENZIE: For the hundredth time, Kirmaniji, I wish you would write about Tipu's embassy to Mauritius—the Malarctic adventure. It proved to be his undoing and yet we don't have enough details.

KIRMANI: It never happened.

MACKENZIE: There! I can't understand it! It wasn't half as bad as the other things he did. Like trying to befriend Napoleon. Governor Malarctic is insignificant, an eminently forgettable Frenchman, if he hadn't caused Tipu's downfall. Yet you keep denying the whole thing. Why?

KIRMANI: Colonel Sahib, what you call the Malarctic Deal never happened.

MACKENZIE (*resigned*): If you insist. But Lord Mornington had absolute proof of Tipu's mischief.

KIRMANI: Perhaps His Lordship was dreaming.

MACKENZIE: I beg your pardon, Kirmaniji. Are you accusing the Governor General of India of lying?

KIRMANI: How could I, Colonel Sahib? I am employed by the Honourable John Company. But dreaming is not dishonourable. My master, Tipu Sultan, dreamt.

MACKENZIE: I know. And kept a record! By the way, what happened to his last dream?

KIRMANI: The night he was buried, a thunderstorm burst over Seringapatam.

MACKENZIE: Ah, yes! I remember. A deluge of extraordinary violence—two of our men were killed—

KIRMANI: Doors and windows in the city had already been torn down by the British soldiers. Most houses were roofless. And now, through the night, the rain lashed with a fury that made the soldiers' rampage seem like child's play. It destroyed all my papers. Wiped away every word written in ink. Within a night, all my recorded facts became memory.

MACKENZIE: Pity!

KIRMANI: Nature did with *that* dream what Munshi Habibullah should have done with the rest.

MACKENZIE: What do you mean?

KIRMANI: Munshi Habibullah was a fool. He should have destroyed the diary, when he found it.

MACKENZIE: There was no harm in it.

KIRMANI: It was a diary in which my master had recorded his dreams. He had kept it concealed from his closest confidants. I didn't know of its existence. None of us did. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the words written on its first page, in the Sultan's own hand.

(Suddenly Tipu's voice is heard. But only Kirmani reacts to it.)

TIPU'S VOICE: In this register are recorded the dreams I've had and am having.

KIRMANI: The Sultan had hidden the diary under his pillow and there it had lain after his death...until that idiot Munshi stumbled on it. It was sacred, personal.

MACKENZIE: I'm afraid we merely saw it as an odd little book. A pleasantly inconsequential conversation piece. *(Ironic.)* An

ideal gift for the Chairman of the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company.

KIRMANI (*almost to himself*): There were blank pages in the diary. What dreams Tipu meant to record there and why he didn't will never be known.

MACKENZIE: Blank pages in a secret record of dreams—that's Tipu for you.

KIRMANI: Evidently, Colonel Colin Mackenzie Sahib, he recorded the dreams that spoke to him.

(*Pause.*)

And some probably didn't.

MACKENZIE (*laughs*): Janaab Hussain Ali Kirmani Sahib. I am interested in the people who spoke to him and the ones he spoke to. You keep the dreams to yourself.

KIRMANI (*smiling*): I will too.

(*From now on, Kirmani and Mackenzie act as choric characters, commenting on the action, as indicated. The stage darkens. Tipu enters, accompanied by Poornaiya.*)

TIPU: On the 3rd day of the month of Thamari, the last night of the month of Ramzan followed next morning by Idd in the year of Dalw 1213 from the birth of the Prophet, I was returning with my army from Farrukhi near Salamabad when I had the following dream. I had been on an elephant shikar and on my way back was walking with Poornaiya, the Finance Minister, when we saw a big temple. It was in a dilapidated state, and I said: 'Poornaiya, look at that structure. It looks quite mysterious.'

POORNAIYA: Yes, Your Majesty. It does indeed.

TIPU: Let's go in and have a look.

(*Lights come on to show a strange building with several human images.*)

Poornaiya, what idols are these? Are they some gods you recognize?

POORNAIYA: No, Your Majesty. I don't think they are gods.

TIPU: They don't seem to belong to any religion I know.

POORNAIYA: They are strange. I have never seen such figures before.

TIPU: Look, Poornaiya—look—their eyes! They are moving. These stone images are moving their eyes!

POORNAIYA: Let's go back, sir. This darkness has a malevolence about it. We'd better get out—

TIPU: No, let's go on. Let's inspect them more closely.

POORNAIYA: Be careful, sir. Those two. They are getting up. Look out!

(Two women in the last row stand up. They are wearing nine-yard saris. One of them pulls her sari up between her knees.)

TIPU: Who are you? Are you human or are you some spirits?

WOMAN: Your Majesty, we are living women. The rest of us, these men here, are merely images. We have been here for many centuries now, praying to God and seeking our salvation.

TIPU: Good. I'm sorry then we've disturbed you. Do you need any help?

WOMAN: None at all except for total isolation.

TIPU: So be it. Ladies, keep yourselves occupied with thoughts of God. Come, Poornaiya. Let's go. We'll have the temple repaired, the walls rebuilt so that these seekers after God are not disturbed.

POORNAIYA: As Your Majesty wishes.

(They walk out of the temple when two old men, with long beards, in flowing silk gowns, approach them. Beside them are two elephants and several footmen carrying spears and guns.)

OLD MAN: Greetings to Your Majesty.

TIPU: Greetings! Who are you? You seem to have come from a long distance.

OLD MAN: We are the envoys of the Emperor of China.

TIPU: Please enter and take a seat in the Diwan-i-Aam. What is the object of your visit?

OLD MAN: We wish nothing but the promotion of greater friendship. The Emperor of China sends you a white elephant and these horses as a token of his friendship and affection for you.

TIPU: The elephants and horses are indeed beautiful. I am deeply touched. I am also eager to know how you capture and train elephants in China. Besides, I know from Hadrat Nizami's book, *Sikandar-namah*, that the Emperor of China had sent a present of a white elephant, a horse, and a female slave to the Great Alexander.

OLD MAN: Yes indeed. The Emperor has never sent a white elephant to anyone except the Great Alexander and now to Your Presence.

(Tipu addresses the audience while the others on stage are enveloped in darkness.)

TIPU: In the meantime morning dawned and I rose. My interpretation of the dream is that God Almighty and our Prophet will make me another Alexander...

(He moves to the Diwan-i-khas and holds a conference with Mir Sadiq and Poornaiya.)

...and the many faiths in my Kingdom will depend upon me for protection and succour.

POORNAIYA: As indeed they do.

TIPU: Have another kebab, Mir Sadiq.

MIR SADIQ: No, thank you, Your Majesty. The kebabs are delicious, which I have already proved by my enormous appetite.

TIPU: Poornaiya, another apple?

POORNAIYA: Your Majesty is most generous. But I must decline.

TIPU: From Kashmir, as you know. A rare delicacy in south India. You shouldn't refuse—

POORNAIYA: Its texture is so exquisite and the colouring so delicate that it is a supreme pleasure just to look at it.

TIPU: Like a woman's...

(*Pause.*)

...cheeks?

(*Laughter.*)

So where were we? Ah, yes! To the list drawn up for our delegation, add silkworms and eggs from the island of Jezeriah Diraz near Muscat—

MIR SADIQ: But the ones we got from China are doing very well, sir. Do we need—

TIPU: Of course we need others. These may be better. I'm told they are better suited to our climatic conditions. Five or six men who know the proper mode of rearing the worms will need to be brought along with them. All right, what next?

MIR SADIQ: The letter from Raja Ramchander.

TIPU: Oh, that one! He is an ass.

MIR SADIQ: Your Majesty, I think he has a point. He says the idea of shops and warehouses owned by the Government is scaring the traders off. They are actually moving to customers who are poorer—

TIPU (*impatient*): Oh, will none of you ever learn? If profits are only seven pagodas while the expenses on clerks and accountants come to ten, how can anyone survive in business? How long will these traders be able to carry their bullion to other places? Don't you worry! They'll come back to us—crawling.

POORNAIYA: What the Honourable Mir Sadiq means, I think, is that it's not the economics that scares the traders. It's the idea of dealing with the Government, particularly the idea of the Government turning into a trading agency.

TIPU (*exploding*): Then they'd better like it. And both of you too! We need glass. We need guns. We need cannons. Shall we keep

buying them from abroad? Even for that we need money. And shall we be content with the pittance we get by taxing our businessmen when we have ivory and sandalwood freely available? Can an individual trader deal in sandalwood? For centuries we begged and borrowed silk from the Chinese. And everyone predicted disaster when I got a few eggs from China. And now we have a flourishing industry of our own. Shall we sit back like the stupid Nizam and the Marathas who continue as though the English never existed—indeed, as though the Europeans never existed? Any other mail?

MIR SADIQ: None of importance.

TIPU: Good. Have the Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan and others arrived?

MIR SADIQ: They wait in the audience chamber.

TIPU: That's the Noble Ghulam Ali for you. Always on time—like a European. Send them in. And where are my sons?

MIR SADIQ: Their Persian teacher must be here.

TIPU: Would you please send for them? The teacher can wait. I want my sons to be present when I talk to the delegation. It's time they started learning about the world.

(Mir Sadiq signals to a servant who departs to fetch the children. Ghulam Ali Khan and Osman Khan enter.)

OSMAN KHAN: May the Lord protect Your Majesty.

TIPU: Welcome, welcome, Honourable Osman Khan, Ghulam Ali Khan. I hope your families are well.

GHULAM ALI KHAN: God's mercy and your diligence look after them.

(Fath Haidar, aged around ten, Muizuddin and Abdul Khaliq, just short of six, enter and bow to those present.)

TIPU: Ah, Fath Haidar, Muizuddin, Abdul Khaliq! Come and sit down and listen carefully. Pay attention to everything. You know these noblemen.

PRINCES: Yes, Father. We bow to you, Uncles.

OSMAN KHAN: May God's grace be on you.

TIPU: Let me come to the point without further ado. We wish to send a delegation to France. You know Monsieur Pierre Monneron, from Pondicherry. Through his good offices we have arranged with the French Governor General of Mauritius for a visit by a royal delegation of Mysore to France. The Governor General has agreed to talk to the King of France and arrange an audience. Gentlemen, I want you to go on that delegation. Honourable Osman Khan, you'll lead it.

OSMAN KHAN: This is indeed an honour—

GHULAM ALI KHAN: We shall be the envy of the world.

TIPU: Actually, how I wish I could go with you. I envy you!

OSMAN KHAN: Your Majesty would certainly have proved a better leader of the delegation than I and the King of France would have been happier to deal with a quicker intelligence.

TIPU: Go on, go on. Make fun of me. What else am I here for? But they say in the sea off Mauritius, you can actually see the seven colours of the rainbow. Then Paris, Versailles! You are going on a fairy-tale voyage. I envy you. But unlike you, I am not a free man.

(Laughter. Roar of tigers is heard in the background.)

TIPU: Why are the tigers restless? Have they been fed?

SERVANT: Yes, Your Majesty. It's that Bahadur Khan—he's noisy.

TIPU: He is growing up. He needs more food than the others. Tell that to the zoo-keeper.

SERVANT: Yes, Your Majesty.

(The children suppress their laughter.)

TIPU: What's funny?

(The children fall suddenly silent.)

What's so funny?

FATH: The tigers become restless this time every day. And every day you give the same instruction.

(Laughter. Tipu playfully growls at his children. Then turns to the delegation.)

Your main objective is to explain to the King of France the situation in India. Particularly the state of the French here.

OSMAN KHAN: Yes, Your Majesty.

TIPU: I'll give you a letter for King Louis the XVI. But a letter is no substitute for direct persuasion. You must convince the King that if the French don't wake up, the English will gobble up the whole of India. The French here have become listless. The King must prod them, kick them if necessary into activity. Louis and I could sign a Treaty of Perpetual Alliance. Then if ten thousand French soldiers could march under me—under me, make that clear, no separate treaties with the British or the other Indian princes, I give the orders—if the King could give me that little, we could change the face of India. Do you understand?

GHULAM ALI KHAN: We do, Your Majesty.

TIPU: When you return, bring with you, not just the ten thousand soldiers, but French craftsmen who could make guns, cannons, pistols.

OSMAN KHAN: Yes, Your Majesty.

TIPU: You know that the delegation we sent to Istanbul last year to His Holiness the Caliph of All Islamic Nations proved a sensational success. Turkey, Arabia, Iran—they are all clamouring for our products.

MIR SADIQ: The Imam of Muscat has fallen in love with the sandalwood and spices of our land and permitted us to build a factory for our products there.

TIPU: So that's what you've got to look for—opportunities for business! It'll benefit them and of course us. Soldiers, yes, but trade, industry, money. I've made a provisional list of

professionals we'll need. Poornaiya, read out the list so they can think about it.

POORNAIYA: A doctor, a surgeon, a smelter, a carpenter, a weaver, a blacksmith, a locksmith, a cutter...

MUIZ: And a watch-maker, Father.

TIPU: It's there, son. It's there.

POORNAIYA: A dyer. A watch-maker.

FATH: And a gardener, Father?

TIPU (*delighted*): You see, I have geniuses for sons. And they know what I've in mind. Do you think I would have forgotten a gardener?

POORNAIYA: I have not included a gardener, Your Majesty. We have many of our own.

TIPU: No, no, no. We must have someone from there. We need new ideas. Two gardeners. From the garden of Versailles. They'll work in our Lal Bagh.

FATH: They should bring new varieties of trees, flowers and bushes.

OSMAN: We shall endeavour to bring every item of interest we come across, Your Highness.

TIPU: You must, you must indeed. That's what makes Europe so wonderful—it's full of new ideas—inventions—all kinds of machines—bursting with energy. Why don't we in our country think like them? I've just read about something called a ther-mo-meter. You must bring me one.

GHULAM ALI KHAN: I beg your pardon, sir?

TIPU: Ther-mo-meter! It is quicksilver in a glass tube. When placed in the hands of a sick man, the quicksilver rises to a certain number of degrees and indicates the height of his disorder. That helps the *hakim* decide on the treatment.

POORNAIYA: Pardon me, sir. But can such a thing be possible?

TIPU: Ah! Poornaiya, the sceptic! He believes his ancestors knew everything that could possibly be known and that there's nothing new left to discover.

POORNAIYA: I look forward to seeing this wonderful instrument, Your Majesty.

TIPU: Which means, my dear princes, that he doesn't believe my word. Well, I'm told there's a whole book on that subject. We should get it translated into Persian.

MIR SADIQ: It'll be done the moment I receive a copy.

TIPU: But no self-indulgence. No slacking. This is not a picnic. Please bear that in mind. I'm told the city of Paris enchants people like a woman, and they forget themselves in its embrace. Whenever you feel lazy or despondent, think of the John Company—how they came to this country, poor, cringing, and what they have become in a mere fifty years. They threaten us today. It's all because of their passion for trade.

OSMAN KHAN: We shall do our best, Your Majesty.

TIPU: Good then. Start preparing for your journey. The Chief Astrologer of Chennapatna has chosen four days within the next three months on which the stars are propitious. We've sent the dates to Pondicherry and the French will let us know on which of those days a ship of theirs is scheduled to sail for Mauritius.

GHULAM ALI KHAN: This is like a dream come true, Your Majesty.

OSMAN KHAN: We can barely wait for that day.

TIPU: Be with your families till then. Be affectionate to your children, loving to your wives. You'll not see them for a couple of years.

(Laughter.)

May God be with you.

OSMAN KHAN: With your permission, Your Majesty.

(The delegation withdraws.)

TIPU: So what do you think of that, Sons?

FATH: What a marvellous idea, Father! We'll stun the world!
Father—

TIPU: Yes?

FATH: Can't I join the delegation?

TIPU: And what about your studies here?

FATH: I'll learn on the way. Uncles will teach me. Besides you always say grandfather couldn't even read and write and yet—

TIPU: And was therefore foul-mouthed. You have to prepare for a different world. Go now. Your teacher must be waiting.

MUIZ: How long will it take the French troops to come, Father?
Can I march with them into battle?

TIPU: Let's hope they don't take that long.

(Laughter.)

Off you go!

(The children bow and go out.)

POORNAIYA: If they come at all, Your Majesty. Forgive me for saying so but the English and the French have signed a treaty in Versailles, by which neither is allowed to enter into the local affairs in India.

TIPU *(thoughtful)*: You may be right. But I keep hoping. After all, the French and the English are neighbours—they can't be friends for ever. They are bound to start quarrelling. We can't live from moment to moment, without a plan of action, Poornaiya, although the Nizam has proved that even that can be done.

MIR SADIQ: But the recent reports from Madras suggest that the English may be in a friendlier mood now.

TIPU: They have puppets in Madras. We need to keep our ears tuned to Calcutta. That's the Capital, after all.

POORNAIYA: The new Governor General, one gathers, has been

specially instructed by the Board of Control not to get into trouble with us.

TIPU: Ah! Pitt's India Act! The 'Leave-India-alone' Act! Do you believe a word of it? Do you think if the English wanted peace they would have appointed Lord Cornwallis as the Governor General?

POORNAIYA: We're told he is a wise, upright man—

TIPU: And a defeated General! Poornaiya, you are a Brahmin. You ride a horse and lead a battalion, but you think like a pedant. You do not understand a soldier. This man Cornwallis—he led the English armies in the Americas and he lost the war! To a farmer called Washington! And his Government sends him to India—

POORNAIYA: Let's pray that he understands Peace, Your Majesty.

TIPU: He understands nothing but the ignominy of defeat, of surrender. Can't you imagine the whispers, the sly smiles, the nudges that must have greeted the Lord in London? Even if no slights were intended, he would have imagined them. He must, if he is a soldier! Can't you see him tossing and turning in bed, thinking only of refurbishing his honour? And he knows—and I know—that to get the stain off his reputation he needs to vanquish one man in India—only one—Tipu Sultan!

(Pause.)

His appointment is as sure a pointer as the conjunction of Saturn and Mars in the third sector of Aries. We'll soon have the shadow of the English falling across our doorstep.

(The stage darkens. Tipu turns to the audience.)

TIPU: On the sixth day of the Khusrawi month in the year of Busd, as I was preparing for a night attack on the Maratha armies of Hari Pant Phadke at Shahnur near Devgiri, I had a dream.

(A young man, turbaned like a Maratha, enters.)

A handsome young man, fair-skinned and light-eyed, approached me and I said: 'Who are you, young man? Why don't you speak?'

YOUNG MAN (*female voice*): You are very handsome, Your Majesty.

TIPU: Thank you. Come. Come and sit by me.

YOUNG MAN: But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

TIPU: Well, it's always nice to be reminded. When one spends as much time on horseback as I do, there's no time to look into mirrors.

YOUNG MAN: But surely your *begums* tell you. Specially Ruqayya Banu, your favourite queen—

TIPU: Beware! You're being impertinent.

YOUNG MAN: It's my intense admiration for you that makes me so bold—

TIPU: Look, I'm not given to entering into such conversation with just anyone.

YOUNG MAN: But I'm not just anyone.

TIPU: Then who are you?

YOUNG MAN: Doesn't anything strike you as unusual about me?

TIPU: Oh! Several things. You're delicate looking. And you have a woman's voice.

(*The young man bows in front of Tipu.*)

YOUNG MAN: Will the Sarkar-e-Khudadad kindly take off my turban?

(*Tipu takes off the turban and a cascade of long hair comes tumbling down on the shoulders of the youth. He then stands with his back to the audience, facing Tipu.*)

YOUNG MAN: Will you unbutton my blouse, Your Majesty?

(*Pause.*)

You're blushing. You have gone red. I didn't realize Your Majesty is such a shy man. Let me do that for you, sir... Here!

(*Unbuttons the blouse. Tipu reacts.*)

TIPU: You are a woman! Why are you in this disguise?

YOUNG MAN: I didn't know whether you would admit a strange woman into your presence.

TIPU (*angry*): You've tricked me. You've inveigled the Padshah into giving you audience, into talking to you. Get out of here! Out! (*The young visitor runs out. Tipu turns to the audience.*)

After consulting my closest advisers, I interpret this dream in the following fashion. May it please God, though these Marathas are dressed in male attire, they will in fact prove to be women.

(*The Maratha court in Pune. Nana Phadnavis, the Maratha statesman, with Charles Malet, representative of Lord Cornwallis.*)

MALET: Nana Sahib, Our Governor-General-in-Council, Lord Cornwallis, would like to reassure the Maratha court at Pune that we have no intention of entering into confrontation with any of the Indian princes. Our Board of Control in London has advised our Governor General explicitly to adopt a pacific and defensive system since we, the Honourable East India Company, are completely satisfied with the possessions we already have.

NANA: That's good news! But then tell me, Malet Sahib, why are you here?

MALET: We wish to assure the Maratha rulers that we are good friends who can be relied upon in moments of crisis.

NANA: Ah! That raises two questions. First, is there a crisis?

MALET: That's for our friends to decide for themselves. The Company recognizes, sir, your right to assess your own political situation. Article XVI of the Treaty of Versailles states—at the insistence of the English, I might add—that neither the French nor the English shall get involved in what we would consider differences of opinion between Indian princes.

NANA: Very kind of you. That leads us to the second question. Are we your friends?

MALET: Surely the great Nana Sahib is jesting. Need the question be asked?

NANA: Who *are* your friends?

MALET: Apart from your honourable court at Pune, sir, there's the Scindia, the other Maratha Chiefs, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Nawabs of Carnatic and Oudh, the Rajahs of Travancore and Cochin.

NANA: A dreary lot. I can't stand Shinde or the Nizam and I mean to give them a good hiding soon. The others are beneath contempt.

MALET: In view of what I've already said we have nothing to say on that.

NANA: I see Tipu Sultan Khan Sahib of Mysore is conspicuously missing from your list.

MALET: As you know, Nana Sahib, we are having a little trouble with him.

NANA: I see. So signing a Treaty of Perpetual Peace with someone does not constitute a gesture of friendship for the English.

MALET: Oh, but it does. And I'm sorry if I gave the impression that it does not.

NANA: You signed a treaty of friendship with Tipu Sultan Khan Sahib not so long ago at Mangalore.

MALET: The Treaty of Mangalore was forced on us.

NANA (*warming up*): Treaties are always forced upon the losing side, Malet Saheb. I'm sorry, but your 'friends' are a bunch of nincompoops. Tipu is worth a hundred of the Nizam, who is nothing but a whining little limpet. I must accuse you English of duplicity—

MALET: Surely not, sir—

NANA: We Marathas too have signed a Treaty of Perpetual Peace with Tipu Sultan and we have more regard for our word than the English seem to have for theirs. I would prefer to deal with the *vakils* of Tipu Sultan who are waiting outside the door this minute. They at least do not take me for a brainless weather vane.

MALET: I urge you, sir, there's no cause for that feeling. The moment he arrived in India, Lord Cornwallis assured our Board of Control that we neither wish to indulge in a breach of the Treaty of Mangalore nor contravene the solemn injunction in Pitt's India Act—

NANA: Mis-sterr Malet, your mind swarms with documents. Please do not try to confuse me with conflicting quotations. I am a Brahmin. I am an expert at it.

MALET: May we then stick to facts, Your Honour?

NANA: That's better. Yes, the facts.

MALET: Of which there's only one that matters to us. Tipu has attacked the Rajah of Travancore, who as I said before, is one of our friends.

NANA: The Raja of Tiruvidankoor is a mischievous little rat who would have kept a respectful distance from Tipu Sultan had he not been certain that Cornwallis would support his antics.

MALET: We cannot watch while our friends are harassed.

NANA: Then you go ahead and fight Tipu Sultan. I have nothing against him.

MALET: Except for the vast Maratha territories which his father grabbed unjustly and which Tipu still retains.

(*Pause.*)

May we point out that when Tipu made his peace with the Marathas, he returned all his recent acquisitions but not his father's? While the bravery of the Marathas is known the world over, so, sir, is Tipu's. If the Marathas ever face Tipu

alone, it's likely to be a stalemate again. If you'll permit a rash observation, sir, it's unlikely that you will subdue him enough to make him surrender those territories. I'm sorry but that's a fact which I'm sure the wise Nana Sahib will not deny.

NANA: Nor will Nana Sahib deny the infinite cunning of your stratagem. The world will see instantly that even the Marathas needed the help of the English?

MALET: Sir, Lord Cornwallis is aware that such a misapprehension may be created and is most anxious to prevent it. He therefore suggests that the Marathas, the Nizam and the Honourable Company declare war on Tipu independently of each other. There will be no open collaboration. We shall attack from three different directions—separately.

(Pause.)

The Marathas have been robbed. The Nizam has been robbed. The Rajah of Travancore has been attacked. To be honest, sir, we, the English, do not like his repeated attempts to join hands with the villainous French, though of course they are our friends after the recent treaty. The Governor General hopes that the Maratha Chief will use this opportunity to obtain reparation and recover the territories seized unjustly by Tipu Sultan's father, Haider Ali, and will join us in punishing a man who we believe is the enemy of all mankind.

(Pause.)

NANA (*thoughtful*): Uh hum!

(*The inner chamber of Tipu's palace. Tipu is sitting alone, next to Queen Ruqayya Banu's bed, watching, with an affectionate smile, the rumpus going on. Off-stage, we hear the almost life-like growls of a mechanical tiger and the equally life-like screams of a human doll. It all sounds real at the start. But soon peals of laughter from the children dispel any sense of real violence.*)

RUQAYYA BANU (*laughing off-stage*): What will they think of next!

MUIZ (*off-stage*): Shall I play it again?

RUQAYYA (*off-stage*): Enough now, Muizuddin. It's a dreadful toy.

MUIZ (*off-stage*): Just once, please.

TIPU: Let them. Why are you stopping them?

(More growls and screams again along with the screams of relish from the princes. Ruqayya Banu enters and reclines on the bed. She is obviously not too well. Abdul Khaliq comes and sits, almost clinging to her. Muizuddin and Fath Haidar continue off-stage.)

MUIZ: It's so real...terrifying!

FATH: I wish there was a little blood! That would have made it even more frightening.

RUQAYYA: Be quiet, Fath Haidar. Come here, both of you. The toy is violent enough as it is. I don't like it. Why do you bring such awful things for our children?

TIPU: At their age I had to deal with real blood and gore. You've brought them up to be too soft!

ABDUL KHALIQ: Mother, you've been laughing at it too.

TIPU: And how!

RUQAYYA: That's what I don't like. I wouldn't care to be present when a man is being mauled by a tiger. So why should I enjoy it when a toy tiger tears up a man? It's unnatural.

(Fath Haidar and Muizuddin come in, excited.)

FATH: But, Mother, the mechanism—it's so ingenious—so life-like—

TIPU: The French are just superb at that kind of thing.

FATH: Father, can't our craftsmen produce something like this?

TIPU: Actually I asked the toy-makers of Chennapatna before ordering it from the French. And do you know what they said? 'Oh sir, our ancient tradition is dedicated to things beautiful. Let the foreigners handle these cruel toys!'

(Ruqayya Banu laughs along with Tipu.)

Imagine their gall! I built that wretched village into a centre

for glassware, musical instruments, and toys. And they give me a lecture on the morality of aesthetics.

RUQAYYA: Good for them. Truly, I wish there were more like them around you.

MUIZ: Father, that man being attacked by the tiger...he's an Englishman, isn't he?

TIPU: Yes, he is.

MUIZ: Is that because the French don't like the English?

TIPU: Yes, and I don't like them either.

RUQAYYA: And they don't like you.

TIPU: Fair enough. (*To the children*) But let me tell you, I've had two teachers in my life. My father, who taught me war, and the English, who taught me trade. They taught me that the era of the camel is over, that it is now the age of the sailing ship. And they dislike me for being so adept a pupil.

RUQAYYA: Why are they after you now?

TIPU: No idea. I actually asked the English Governor in Madras to send a delegation to Seringapatam so we could sort our differences out. But he declined. It would reduce them in the eyes of the other Indian princes!

RUQAYYA: You can hardly expect them to love a man who plays with a toy like that—

TIPU: The English have better reasons than that. I have refused to have their Resident at my court.

MUIZ: Can I play it again?

RUQAYYA: No, you can't. I want to lie down. I feel tired.

TIPU: Do, yes. Hasina, give her another pillow. Good. Fath Haidar, have the tiger removed to the Diwan-i-Aam, before your mother shoots it down.

FATH (*laughs*): Yes, Father.

(*Exits.*)

TIPU: Abdul Khaliq, can't you sit up like a prince? Your mother's trying to rest. You don't have to crawl into her bed every time—

RUQAYYA: Let him be. He's my baby.

TIPU: And he's remained one. Look at Muizuddin. He isn't cuddling up to you all the time. And he's younger.

RUQAYYA: Enough, please. You spend so little time with them. And then you are forever reprimanding them. Sit down, please. Relax. Be their father, not their Sarkar-e-Khudabad. Why do you drive yourself like this? Please, slow down a bit—

TIPU: This land is *ours* and it's rich, overflowing with goods the world hungers for, and we let foreigners come in and rob us of our wealth! Today the Indian princes are all comatose, wrapped in their opium dreams. But some day they'll wake up and throw out the Europeans. So the only way the Europeans can ensure their profits for all time to come is by becoming rulers themselves. You see? It's them or us. Now you rest. The hakims say you must take care of yourself and not get excited over trifles. There are enough people to look after palace chores...

RUQAYYA: They don't bother me. You know what worries me—
You!

TIPU: I'll give the English and the Nizam a drubbing they'll remember till the end of time.

RUQAYYA: You're worried about the Marathas.

TIPU: Yes, I am. Only Mahadji Shinde understands the English. The Marathas of Pune are coy, flirtatious, unreliable. But I need their help, so I've made peace with them. So long as they keep out of this conflict—and I have returned the territories I had conquered from them—I've nothing to worry about.

HASINA (*enters*): May the Lord protect Your Majesty. The Honourable Mir Sadiq is here with our *vakils* from Pune.

TIPU (*aghast*): We talk of the Marathas and our *vakils* from Pune

arrive! That doesn't portend well. May God's will be done.
Take care of yourself, Ruqayya.

(Exits.)

MUIZ: I'm going with Father.

(Exits.)

HASINA: Madam, the whole palace is in turmoil—

RUQAYYA: What's it, Hasina?

HASINA: Our *vakils* have been driven out of Pune. The English have succeeded in their manipulation. The Marathas too have declared war on us.

ABDUL: Why, Mother—is it bad for *vakils* to come back?

RUQAYYA: Don't talk, child. I can barely breathe. May it please God it is not the disaster I fear it is.

(Ruqayya gasps. Hasina anxiously calls out.)

HASINA: Madam—Madam—

ABDUL: What's happened to Mother?

HASINA: Please wait here, Your Highness. I'll fetch the *hakim*. Please look after her.

(Runs out. Kirmani and Mackenzie.)

MACKENZIE: In 1790, Lord Cornwallis invaded Mysore. The Nizam and the Marathas launched parallel attacks. A see-saw war stretched over two years, with no end in sight. Cornwallis reached the foot of the fort of Seringapatam, saw the futility of trying to capture it and retreated disheartened. At one point in the campaign, he wrote to his friend, the Bishop of Lichfield:

CORNWALLIS *(entering)*: My spirits are almost worn out and if I cannot soon overcome Tipu, I think the plagues and mortifications of this most difficult war will overcome me. *(Exits.)*

KIRMANI: But on their return journey, the English forces ran into the Marathas with their abundant supplies. The two joined forces and attacked Seringapatam. Tipu Sultan was forced to sue for peace.

Act Two

23 February 1792. The square in front of the big mosque in Seringapatam, packed with senior citizens, generals, and courtiers. A buzz of anxiety and suppressed excitement, which subsides when Poornaiya stands up to speak.

POORNAIYA: Noblemen of the court, the Sarkar-e-Ahmadi has asked me to offer you his most contrite apologies for keeping you waiting. But the senior *hakim* is here with his advisers attending to the Queen. The Sultan will be here with you as soon as the hakims finish their examination.

A NOBLEMAN: Honourable Poornaiya, may we know the state of the Queen's health?

POORNAIYA: The Sultan wishes me to tell you that even the *hakims* do not know what the ailment is. The Queen, as you know, has been ill for a while now and has a fever that refuses to come under control.

NOBLEMAN 2: Could it be that the perils facing our state have affected her?

POORNAIYA: Almost certainly. The Queen loves us all like her children. She is also concerned about the Sultan's health. He is under enormous pressure as you know.

MIR SADIQ (*announces*): His Majesty!

CROWD: God save the King! God grant the Queen a long life!

TIPU: *Inshallah!* (God willing.)

CROWD: *Inshallah!*

(*A long pause.*)

TIPU: I crave your pardon for this delay. You are all noblemen, officers, generals, pillars on whom this kingdom of God rests. You know why I have invited you all here. The enemies hold our city in a python's embrace. The Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan has just returned from France. He knows how to deal with foreigners. I therefore sent him to negotiate with the enemy. It proved to be a most propitious choice. We have three enemies—the English, the Marathas, and the Nizam. But only the English spoke. The other two nodded in respectful silence.

(*Reactions from the crowd.*)

The Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan has returned with the terms of peace. I want your advice on how I should proceed next. We are gathered in front of our chief mosque. I place this Quran Shareef in front of you. With the Holy Book as my witness, I ask you to speak what your heart feels. Honourable Poornaiya, will you please read out the terms dictated by Lord Cornwallis?

POORNAIYA: There are four conditions in the main. One: all English prisoners taken by His Majesty as well as his father of hallowed memory, Haidar Ali, to be released, unconditionally.

TIPU: Let's hear the Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan on that.

GHULAM: Discussions of this condition were accompanied by much vituperation by the English. They said that we had ill-treated our English prisoners of war. We pointed out that we had treated them as we treat our own prisoners—despite much provocation. And then we pointed out that the English who had surrendered to us were at least alive as prisoners of war while our men who surrendered to the enemy—where were they? What happened to them? There was no answer.

(Angry muttering from the crowd.)

TIPU: Go on, Honourable Poornaiya.

POORNAIYA: Two: cession of half our domain, adjacent to the territories of the English, the Marathas, and the Nizam.

(Angry reaction from the crowd.)

CITIZEN 1: Why should we accept these humiliating terms, Your Majesty? Let's go on with the war—

CITIZEN 2: We'll fight to the last man rather than—

(Tipu silences them by raising his hand.)

TIPU: Qilledar Nadeem Khan, you are in charge of our fort. What do you say?

NADEEM *(after a slight hesitation)*: If it was a question of facing only the English, we could take the initiative instantly. We could scatter them now as we did a few months ago. But the Marathas are supporting them.

MIR SADIQ: And the Nizam's troops joined them a week ago.

TIPU: We are blocked by our own people. I wrote to the Nizam: 'The benefits of unity and harmony among the followers of Islam are known to you. How can we increase the splendour of our Faith? I shall do as you guide me.'

(Pause.)

But we have been snubbed by the lack of even an acknowledgement of our letter. What is the state of the army's morale, Honourable Qamaruddin?

QAMARUDDIN: For two years we have fought and fought well. The soldiers are now tired. For weeks, they've been sleeping on their feet. I do not know how long they can hold out.

TIPU: Do you agree with that, Qilledar Sahib?

NADEEM: Yes, Your Majesty.

TIPU: So we have no alternative but to sue for peace?

(Pause.)

God's will be done. Please, do not expend your energies on these matters. Territories come and go. We fight, we gain, we lose. Proceed.

POORNAIYA: An indemnity of six crores.

GHULAM: At this point the English asked us to produce our revenue receipts. Our Chief Peshkar produced them. The English said they doubted the figures...

(Reaction from the crowd.)

TIPU: Silence, please! Let the Noble Ghulam Ali Khan complete his report.

GHULAM: We pointed out that if their own allies, the Marathas or the Nizam, had been asked for similar accounts, no such accounts would be forthcoming.

(Pause.)

For they have no such system.

(Laughter from the audience.)

TIPU: The pity of it is that the representatives of the Nizam and the Marathas were sitting there—swallowing all these jibes without a murmur.

(Pause.)

Proceed, Poornaiya.

(Silence.)

Poornaiya...

(Pause.)

Please!

POORNAIYA *(overcome)*: I cannot, Your Majesty. I beg to be excused...

TIPU: All right then. I'll read it out myself. Hand me the paper.

(Reads.) The last condition: two hostages to be handed over to the English to be kept with them until the terms of the treaty are duly fulfilled.

(Pause.)

Two of my sons.

(Uproar. Angry protests.)

CITIZEN 1: This is outrageous—

CITIZEN 2: If our soldiers hear of this, they'll rise to a man and fall on the English.

CITIZEN 3: Please, please, Your Majesty, do not accept this humiliation. We would rather die—

CITIZEN 4: This is barbaric.

TIPU: Noblemen, please, silence! I beg of you. Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan, recount to our noblemen what Lord Cornwallis said.

GHULAM: The English Lord in all kindness assured us that having only one son himself, he experienced the affection of a parent in more than an ordinary degree; but even his own child could not be received by him with greater tenderness than ours.

(Pause.)

TIPU: Instead of demanding two particular sons, he would accept any two of our sons. Whom can I send? Fath Haidar? Yes, he is the eldest. Old enough to be sent. Though he is dear to me, I would send him. But the English are a very proper nation. They will not accept him, for his mother was not my legal consort.

(Reaction.)

So that leaves—Abdul Khaliq, who is eight and Muizuddin, only a few months younger.

(Reactions of horror, anger, revulsion. Then slow silence.)

The other children are still at their nurses' breasts. Should I send my two little boys as hostages?

(Shouts of 'No', 'Please don't accept—')

Shall I then accept the destruction of our city?

(Pause.)

That's the choice before us.

(Long silence.)

This is the new language that has come into our land: English.

This is the culture of that language: English. Boys of seven and eight as hostages of war.

CITIZEN: How can the city wish to remain safe while the lives of our princes are in danger?

TIPU: Danger? Yes. But what danger? Did you not hear what Lord Cornwallis says? The English will not harm our children. They'll not poison them or kill them, for there's no financial profit in it. What will the John Company gain in gold and silver and land by harming my sons? They'll not harm my children.

(Pause. He is overcome.)

The danger is: they'll teach my children their language, English. The language in which it is possible to think of children as hostages. All I can try to do is agree to their conditions and conclude the treaty in a hurry—before my children have learnt to think in those terms.

(Pause.)

So we accept their demands. Honourable Mir Sadiq, bring the seal. We shall affix our signature. There! Now my dear noblemen, my...

(His voice cracks. A long pause. To Mir Sadiq)

Will you please thank the noblemen for coming here and tell them that the meeting is adjourned? Suddenly I seem to have lost my voice.

MIR SADIQ *(in tears)*: His Majesty wishes the noblemen to retire—
(The crowd departs, also in tears. When Mir Sadiq, Poornaiya, Nadeem Khan, Ghulam Ali Khan, and Qamaruddin get up to take leave, Tipu gestures to them to sit down. They sit. There is a very long silence.)

POORNAIYA: Your Majesty, how will the Queen take the news in her present condition? Will her health be able to bear the shock?

TIPU: God has been angry with us, Poornaiya. But He has not let

us down entirely. I was late for this meeting because—I had to bid goodbye to Begum Ruqayya Banu. She left us this morning.

POORNAIYA: God save us!

(Exclamations of shock and distress from the others.)

TIPU: I waited till she breathed her last. I am lucky. She died without knowing I had bartered her sons for my kingdom.

MIR SADIQ: But—Your Majesty—

TIPU: And I gave strict orders that there was to be no wailing or weeping till this meeting with the noblemen was over. I didn't want tears to blind the judgement of my advisers.

(Wailing is heard in the background.)

The dead are happy. They go. And I've seen too many dead to care about death anymore. It's my sons I have to worry about now. Poornaiya, send for the Chief Astrologer of the Chennapatna temple. Ask him to study the stars and set the most auspicious moment for the departure of my sons. Ghulam Ali Khan, will you accompany your nephews? I don't want my babies to feel their family abandoned them totally—although that's what it amounts to finally.

GHULAM ALI: I shall go with them, Your Majesty. I shall spend every moment with them until they are reunited with you.

TIPU *(getting excited)*: Mir Sadiq, tell the British—tell them my sons must be received properly. With full honours. They are princes. There are to be no lapses. Not the smallest—*(Almost angry)* I shall not tolerate it.

MIR SADIQ: Of course, Your Majesty.

TIPU: And we'll send them out as heroes, symbols of the glory of their land. In full splendour. A splendour that'll put the foreigners to shame—and cover up my own sense of shame.

(The inner chamber of the palace. Ghulam Ali Khan enters.)

GHULAM ALI: Hasina—Hasina—

HASINA (*enters*): Sir—

GHULAM ALI: Hasina, call the princes Abdul Khaliq and Muizuddin here. Tell them I want to talk to them. Only them, mind you, no one else.

HASINA: Yes, sir.

(*Exits.*)

GHULAM (*murmuring to himself*): I pray to you, God, give me strength to face this moment. Make me strong.

(*Muizuddin, Abdul Khaliq, and Fath Haidar enter with Hasina.*)

CHILDREN (*in a subdued voice*): Our salutations, Uncle.

GHULAM: Oh, Fath Haidar! Er—

HASINA: Sir, what could I do? I said you only wanted to meet—

GHULAM: All right. All right. Leave us now.

(*Hasina withdraws. Pause.*)

Children, there are times when God tests us—to see how strong we are—whether we truly believe in His Will. This is such a time.

ABDUL KHALIQ (*embraces him*): I want to go to Mother—I want Mother—please—

GHULAM: Listen, princes. God has called your mother away. We must not cry about that. We must not question His Will. You have borne that test like princes. There's another test ahead of us now and I want you to face it equally bravely.

FATH: Yes, Uncle.

(*Ghulam Ali pointedly addresses his remarks to the two younger children which is difficult to do without snubbing Fath Haidar.*)

GHULAM: The English have suggested that the two of you visit them and stay with them—as guests. For how long we don't know, but it won't be for too long. Of course, I'll be there with you all the time.

FATH: I am ready, Uncle. And I don't need anyone with me. I'm old enough to go on my own.

(*Pause.*)

GHULAM: I'm sorry, Fath Haidar. The English want only... heirs to the throne.

FATH: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I offered myself.

GHULAM: No, no, no. Don't take it to heart, son. Your father loves you. We all love you. You, Muizuddin, Abdul Khaliq, you're all the same to us. But this is politics.

FATH: I understand, Uncle. I'm sorry I spoke out of turn.

GHULAM (*helpless*): I'm afraid it has to be Muizuddin and Abdul Khaliq. (*To them*) You see how Fath Haidar volunteered without hesitation? Are you willing to come with me, children?

MUIZ: I'm scared, Uncle. But I will go with you.

GHULAM: That's a good boy. And you, Abdul Khaliq?

(*No answer.*)

I'm sure you are ready too.

ABDUL (*tearful*): I don't want to go, Uncle... I'm frightened...

FATH: He's been listening to all kinds of stupid rumours.

GHULAM: There's nothing to be afraid of. And I'll be there.

ABDUL: I don't want to go.

GHULAM: Look...

ABDUL (*whimpering*): Please, don't make me—Please—

GHULAM: Now, now, Abdul. You are eight years old. A man already! You saw that Fath Haidar volunteered instantly. So did Muizuddin and he's younger than you.

ABDUL: I want Mother—

FATH (*viciously*): Cry-baby. Always a cry-baby!

GHULAM: Please, Fath Haidar, let's be calm...

ABDUL: I want Mother. She wouldn't have let me go—She wouldn't have sent me—

GHULAM: Abdul Khaliq, God has left us no choice. He has taken your mother to his bosom. And you have to go to the English for a few months only. Now, your father will be here any moment. He is already shattered—by everything, but more at the thought of losing you. You have to give him courage. Will you?

HASINA (*enters*): Sir, the Master is here.

GHULAM (*almost panic-stricken*): I told you God is testing us. The test doesn't begin when you face the English. They are our sworn enemies. I'm sure you'll know how to face them. The test is now! Let's see how you pass it.

(*Tipu enters, in a daze.*)

Greetings, Your Majesty.

(*Pause.*)

Your Majesty, I've talked to the princes. They await your orders.

(*Long silence. Tipu stands staring.*)

Your Majesty—

(*Silence. Gently,*)

Prince Muizuddin—

MUIZ: Father, I'm ready to go to the English.

(*Pause.*)

ABDUL: I am too, Father.

TIPU: Oh God!

(*Music. Cheering. Celebrations. A salute of guns. Diwan-i-Aam. Tipu with Kirmani, Poornaiya and Mir Sadiq.*)

TIPU: Then? Then what happened?

KIRMANI: The procession led by camel *harakāras* and standard bearers—followed by a hundred lancers with spears inlaid with silver—entered the English camp. Then came the princes on caparisoned elephants.

TIPU: How beautiful they looked, the two angels! In white muslin

robes and pearls and turbans. Ruqayya Banu, you were too much of a queen to stay behind to witness my shame. Still I wish you were here. You would have been proud of them—as the whole city was.

KIRMANI: They were followed by the escort guard of the infantry and cavalry—

TIPU (*impatient*): I know. I know. Janaab Kirmani, I saw all that from the ramparts. Tell me what happened in the English camp.

KIRMANI: The English seemed stunned by our magnificence. The princes were received with a twenty-one-gun salute.

TIPU: Yes, yes, we heard that. That was good. That was proper—

KIRMANI: A battalion of Bengal Sepoys formed a guard of honour as the princes moved down the English lines. Arms were presented, drums were beaten.

TIPU: Excellent! Excellent!

KIRMANI: Lord Cornwallis and his officers received the princes at the entrance of his tent. He took each prince by hand and sat them down on the right and left of his chair—

TIPU: And my children—were they scared? Did they appear nervous?

KIRMANI: No, Your Majesty, not a whit.

TIPU: What about Abdul Khaliq? He was always a little unsure of himself.

KIRMANI: Your Majesty, the dignity of their bearing and their self-possession drew praise from every Englishman. Then the Honourable Ghulam Ali Khan said to Lord Cornwallis: 'These children were this morning the sons of the Sultan, my master. Their situation is now changed and they must look up to Your Lordship as their Father.'

TIPU: Oh God! God! Why didn't I die before I heard these words?

Ruqayya Banu, why didn't you take me with you? How did I come to this?

KIRMANI: Lord Cornwallis assured our Ambassador that the children would not feel the loss of a father's care—

TIPU: He must have known these words would reach me and pull out my entrails—

KIRMANI: —and that his protection was fully extended to them. The princes smiled at that. There was applause. The princes presented Lord Cornwallis with the Persian sword. He inspected it and praised its craftsmanship. And then he gave each prince a gold watch.

TIPU: And what did my children do with the watches?

KIRMANI: They hardly looked at them. They passed them on to the attendants with barely a glance.

TIPU: That's it! That's it! They're well brought up, my sons.

KIRMANI: Then the *attar* of roses and betel leaves were distributed and the princes returned to their tents of fine chintz. And Your Majesty must listen to this. As soon as they were inside the tent—

(Laughs.)

TIPU: Yes? Why do you laugh?

KIRMANI: As soon as they were inside the tent, the princes asked for the watches and started busily examining their mechanisms.

(General laughter.)

TIPU: They're my sons, after all! My darling princes! Nadeem Khan, fire a salute to the English from the fort tomorrow morning. Let them know we appreciate the way they have received my sons. And Poornaiya, send the English a crore and a half as the first instalment of our payment.

POORNAIYA: Yes, Your Majesty.

TIPU: And Mir Sadiq, send word to the Marathas. I want to visit their camp and see their Commander-in-Chief, Hari Pant Phadke, before they depart.

MIR SADIQ: Is that wise, Your Majesty?

TIPU: Please do as I say. Now goodbye, gentlemen. Thank you. I must retire.

ALL: May God protect the Sultan.

(They withdraw. Tipu moves to his bed chamber. Sees the mattress spread out on the bed.)

TIPU: Chamberlain—

CHAMBERLAIN: Your Majesty—

TIPU: Remove the bed from my bed chamber. While my sons are in foreign hands, I shall sleep on the bare stone floor.

(Tipu undresses, sits on the stone floor. He takes out a string of beads and starts reciting a Sufi Zikr—incantation—to himself. He begins to sway as in a trance. He sways more and more violently as the lights darken. A voice calls out to him softly in the dark.)

VOICE: Tipu—Tipu—

TIPU: Who's that? Is that you, Father?

HAIDAR: Yes, it's me. Haidar.

(Lights come on slowly to reveal a spectral landscape. Tipu looks around frantically.)

TIPU: Where are you, Father?

HAIDAR: Here, under this tree.

TIPU: Under this—? Father, why are you lying there? What's happened to you?

HAIDAR: I'm maimed, Tipu. I have no limbs.

TIPU: But you never lost any limb.

HAIDAR: You have maimed me, Tipu. You have cut off my limbs and handed them over to the enemy.

TIPU (*low*): Yes, Father. I've done that. Have you come to punish me?

HAIDAR: What punishment would be adequate, do you think?

TIPU: I don't know, Father. You remember, once I messed up your campaign and you gave me a lashing, almost skinned me

alive. My body still bears those welts—such scars that I'm ashamed to undress in front of anyone. This crime is much worse than that.

HAIDAR: I can't do that now. I have no arms.

TIPU: Shall I lash myself for you?

(He starts whipping himself.)

HAIDAR: No melodrama, I pray you. No hysterics. Please. You've gone soft. You spend too much time with your account books.

TIPU: You spent your life on horseback—making conquests. I have to consolidate your gains. That can't be done on horseback. The English are stronger now.

HAIDAR: And whose fault is it?

TIPU: I hate them—and they return the compliment.

HAIDAR: Then why did you let Cornwallis escape? *(No answer.)*

When he was retreating from Seringapatam in shame and desperation, your Amirs and Khans begged you to attack. You stood on the ramparts and did nothing.

TIPU: I was paralysed.

HAIDAR: You let Cornwallis go.

TIPU: You would have made mincemeat of him, I know. But I vacillated.

HAIDAR: You're scared of them.

TIPU: No, I'm not. If I were scared, I would have ordered a slaughter. But, Father, often, suddenly, I see myself in them—I see these white skins swarming all over the land and I wonder what makes them so relentless? Desperate? Most of them are no older than Fath Haidar. What drives these young lads to such distant lands through fever, dysentery, alcohol so—often to death—wave after wave? They don't give up. Nor would I. Sometimes I feel more confident of them than my own people. What makes them so unsparing towards themselves? Is it only money?

HAIDAR: You're beginning to think like a trader.

TIPU (*angry*): No, if it was only for money, they would betray each other. But there's never any treachery against their own kind, no back-stabbing. They believe in the destiny of their race. Why can't we?

(*Pause.*)

When our fort was besieged by Cornwallis, I knew several of my officers had already started secret negotiations with him. I even knew who they were. My trusted officers. Yet I couldn't expose them without bringing the whole edifice down. I had to keep saying they were the true pillars of my kingdom, that I depended on their loyalty to me and my family—and hope for the best. Hope that when the moment came, they wouldn't stab me in the back. But the English fight for something called England. What is it? It's not a religion that sustains them, nor a land that feeds them. They wouldn't be here if it did. It's just a dream, for which they are willing to kill and die. Children of England! They have conquered our land, plundered its riches. And now they've started taking away our children. Mine—

(*Haidar laughs.*)

I will not let them. Father, I'll restore your limbs. Father, where are you? Father—Father—Come back—

(*Darkness swallows them up. When lights come on we are in the Maratha camp. Hari Pant Phadke is waiting for Tipu Sultan.*)

HARI PANT: Welcome, Tipu Sultan Khan Saheb. Welcome to the Maratha camp. This is a most pleasant surprise—

TIPU: It's a custom in our land to bid goodbye to guests personally before they leave.

HARI PANT: Even when the guest was unwelcome?

TIPU: I did not make you unwelcome. We met last seven years ago and we parted as friends. We swore there would be everlasting

peace between us. I still do not know what changed the situation. But I mustn't be impolite to my guest. I hope your family is well.

HARI PANT: Yes, thank you. And yours?

(*An embarrassed pause as Hari Pant realizes his faux pas.*)

I want to assure you, Khan Sahib, that we Marathas were not party to that deal—about taking your children hostage. We are extremely disturbed by it.

TIPU: You were 'not party'. What does that mean, Hari Pant? You disagreed with it?

HARI PANT: Yes, we did.

TIPU: And you were overruled?

HARI PANT: The Nizam stood by the English. We Marathas were outvoted.

TIPU: Hari Pant, the English were fleeing in despair—I had driven them back—when you came to their aid at Melukote. Without your enormous bazaar of supplies, half their army would have been wiped out, and the other half stumbling towards Madras by now. You are the true victors of this war. Yet you let the English dictate the terms!

HARI PANT: The English are our allies. After all, you have the French working for you. You have sought French friendship.

TIPU: Friendship, yes! Working for me! Not dictating to me. You have seen the new demands made by the English? I've just received them.

HARI PANT (*evasive*): I've had no occasion to doubt the integrity of the English. Cornwallis deals firmly but fairly.

TIPU: I am to cede half my kingdom adjacent to your territories—

HARI PANT: I know that. That was part of the initial agreement between us.

TIPU: And you know what part of my lands they are demanding? The province of Kodagu.

(*Pause.*)

You're silent. To which possession of the English is Kodagu adjacent? Will you tell Cornwallis that this wasn't the geography you had in mind when you discussed the terms of the treaty? You won't. For this is a convenient geography of his own invention, and you go along.

HARI PANT: Cornwallis has been honest with us. That's what counts. We have a third share of our joint conquests—

TIPU (*hoots with laughter*): You have what? Hari Pant, how can you say that without blushing? The share that you've been given is what my father had won from you Marathas forty years ago. What you've got is only a restitution of your earlier possessions. And in return you have given the English new territories: Salem, Dindigul, the Malabar coast with its coconuts and pepper and its magnificent ports. You are back where you were while the English now have the entire coastline of India. And remember, they are a sea-faring power. Mine is a landlocked kingdom, so I thirst for the sea, for today the sea is the key to power, to prosperity. You have the whole of the western coast. And instead of keeping the English out, you've permitted the shark into your waters and are trying to swim along with it.

HARI PANT: We only want what's ours—

TIPU: And how long will it remain yours? Where's the Raja of Tiruvidankoor in whose honour the English mounted this campaign? Thrown on the dung heap.

HARI PANT (*lamely*): He is no concern of ours.

TIPU: I would have torn this treaty and flung it in your faces and died in the breach sooner than consent to the cession of Kodagu. But they have my children! My sons! I asked for time to consider these preposterous terms and you know what their response has been? Instead of returning my children and continuing the battle, they have taken away their Mysore escort—and imprisoned my sons! Made them prisoners of war! How

does that strike you, brave leader of the Marathas? Prisoners of war, aged seven and eight! So I'll capitulate—I'll give them what they want. Goodbye, Hari Pant. You are a wise man. And I hope you have given thought to why, when the English could have decimated me, they have left me with my kingdom.

HARI PANT: Khan Saheb, we insisted that your status was not to be touched—

TIPU: Rubbish. Cornwallis has saved me because without me in south India, you Marathas would become too powerful. You are being carefully contained. No, don't reply. And please don't come out of the tent to see me off. I shall find my way. This is still my land. Only one word of caution, Hari Pant. Make sure it's not your children next time.

(Walks out.)

(Mackenzie and Kirmani.)

MACKENZIE: The defeat of Tipu was a personal triumph for Lord Cornwallis. The stigma of York Town was washed off. The Crown conferred on him the title of 'Marquis'. In a fit of absent-mindedness, the Parliament forgot all about Pitt's India Act.

KIRMANI: It was two years before Tipu's sons were restored to him. When they were reunited, the boys laid their heads on their father's feet and he, leaning forward, touched them on their necks. No words were spoken.

MACKENZIE: Lord Cornwallis was succeeded by Sir John Shore as the Governor General. Seven years of peace ensued. And then came Richard Wellesley, Second Earl of Mornington—an ambitious young man of thirty-eight.

(1798. Calcutta. Richard Wellesley, Earl of Mornington, the Governor General of India, with his younger brother Arthur Wellesley, a junior colonel in the Indian army and Colonel William Kirkpatrick.)

MORNINGTON: Before my departure for India, the Board of Control made it clear to me that the East India Company was

not to acquire any more territory in India. The Prime Minister, Mr Pitt, was emphatic on that score.

KIRK: Yes, Your Lordship.

MORNINGTON: I've been on the Board myself for the last four years and have had time to reflect on what would be the best course of action for us to take.

KIRK: Yes, Your Lordship.

MORNINGTON: It seems to me self-evident that we have to liquidate Tipu.

(Kirkpatrick looks up startled, then turns to gauge Arthur Wellesley's reaction. Arthur is impassive.)

KIRK: But, Your Lordship, Sir John—

MORNINGTON: My saintly predecessor was an evangelical Christian. If you kicked him on his right buttock, he would probably turn his left. He didn't know how to take offence.

WELLESLEY *(laughs)*: I gather he preferred Jortin's Sermons to official dispatches.

MORNINGTON: He should have taken offence when Tipu sent a delegation to Napoleon inviting him to invade India. This flirtation with our enemy should not have been tolerated.

KIRK: But now, after the Battle of Nile, that's surely not a cause for concern.

MORNINGTON: In fact, Tipu should have been got rid of after the last Mysore war by Cornwallis. But he didn't. And since then Tipu has grown in power and prestige, which is more than can be said of our dear effete allies. We must hold Cornwallis guilty of grave lapse of judgement and Sir John of deliberate connivance. It's my duty as the new Governor General of India to set things right.

KIRK: Do you think Tipu will want to create trouble, Your Lordship? Madras doesn't think so.

MORNINGTON: Tipu is building a trading empire on the European

model and succeeding eminently. We have driven the French and Dutch out of India, contained the Portuguese. Is there any reason why we should tolerate an upstart native? The longer the peace, the stronger will Tipu become.

KIRK: But, Your Lordship, Madras is opposed to any move against Tipu—

MORNINGTON: Kirkpatrick, I will not allow a bunch of incompetent hacks, cowering in fear, to arrogate to themselves the power of governing the empire committed to my care. I'll not let them thwart me. Make that absolutely clear to Madras.

KIRK: Yes, Your Lordship.

MORNINGTON: Good. Now let's start at the beginning and ponder the opening move. Has Tipu had anything to do with the French recently?

(Pause. Kirkpatrick doesn't know what to say.)

No dealings with Pondicherry? Chandernagore?

WELLESLEY: What about Mauritius? More romantic, I'd say. Strategically located. The right scale.

MORNINGTON: Anything there?

KIRK: We have information that some forty Frenchmen from Mauritius came to Mysore last year in search of employment—

MORNINGTON: They did? Excellent. So Tipu sends a secret mission to the French Governor of Mauritius. What's his name?

KIRK *(Scottish pronunciation)*: Malarctic, sir.

MORNINGTON: Quite! *(French pronunciation.)* Malarctic—asking for a dispatch of ten thousand French and twenty thousand African troops. And Malarctic puts up a proclamation asking for volunteers—

KIRK *(guarded)*: Not if the mission were secret, surely?
(Wellesley smiles.)

MORNINGTON: No need for subtlety. Let's take the shortest route.

One of our newspapers in Calcutta gets hold of a copy and publishes it—

KIRK: I shall contact a local editor, Your Lordship—

WELLESLEY: Is that necessary? I'm sure the Board of Control will accept Richard's word for it.

(Kirkpatrick is suitably snubbed.)

MORNINGTON: Of course, we shan't believe the report initially. We want Tipu's friendship. It gives us time to prepare.

KIRK: But won't Tipu deny such an allegation, Your Lordship?
(Long silence.)

I'm sorry, but protocol would seem to demand we give him an opportunity to recant or make amends or at least explain himself.

MORNINGTON: Tipu has had peaceful relations with us for the last seven years, which means he will not expect us to declare war. He is not in a state of preparedness. In fact, he's quite likely to be absorbed in silkworms and sandalwood forests. Shall we then give him adequate warning, William, and face a long-drawn-out, costly war?

WELLESLEY: We know the speed with which he can mobilize.

KIRK *(cowed)*: I understand.

MORNINGTON: I shall of course write to Tipu seeking an explanation. But General Harris will despatch the letter only after he and General Stuart have entered the Mysore territory. Tell the Nizam and the Marathas we shall expect their presence, though it scarcely matters either way. As for our Governor in Madras, he gets confused by long messages. So keep our instructions to him brief: Tipu must go.

KIRK: Yes, Your Lordship.

(Pause.)

Would that be all?

MORNINGTON: Yes, thank you.

(Kirkpatrick leaves.)

WELLESLEY: I'm rearing to leave for Seringapatam.

MORNINGTON: You should indeed.

(Pause.)

Baird is keen to lead the assault against Tipu. He has been a prisoner of Tipu's and is eager to avenge himself.

WELLESLEY: I know.

MORNINGTON: I told him it wasn't done to take things so personally. But well, you know Baird. The Scotch temper. And then, perhaps it's just as well. He'll lead the assault. You will command the reserve—

WELLESLEY *(jumping up)*: Oh, no, Richard, for goodness' sake. Not the reserve.

MORNINGTON: I know you are keen to prove yourself on the battlefield, but I don't need soldiers at the moment. I have an entire army at my command to throw against Tipu. I want you alive...to take command of Seringapatam after the battle.

WELLESLEY *(horrified)*: You can't be serious.

MORNINGTON: You know I'm never not serious. I shall need someone there whom I can trust.

WELLESLEY: But, Richard, the Governor General of India appointing ~~his~~ his own brother—

MORNINGTON: And a junior colonel at that! Quite right! Nothing's more reprehensible than nepotism that's half-hearted.

WELLESLEY: Listen, I'd rather—

MORNINGTON: I know what you'd rather. Look, Cornwallis still lumbers across our landscape, a senile rhinoceros, all decked up in finery. This man, who lost us our American colonies, can still 'lumber' because he defeated Tipu!

(Pause.)

I shall destroy Tipu. I shall decimate Seringapatam, within six months. If that's not merit, I don't know what public service is. Surely, it would entitle me to the same rank as Cornwallis. Arthur, the eyes of the world will be focussed on Seringapatam and I want my brother there—at the centre. The Commandant of the Fortress! After that, it's up to you.

WELLESLEY (*lamely*): But, Richard, the scandal—

MORNINGTON: Would you rather...crawl up?

(*Diwan-i-Aam. Tipu with Mir Sadiq, Poornaiya, Qamaruddin and Nadeem Khan.*)

TIPU: And now they have asked for four of my sons as hostages. And half my kingdom again—half of the half they left me last time.
(*Pause.*)

By the time the next Governor General takes over, I'll be left with half a street and none of my sons.

(*Pause.*)

Shall I accept?

(*Pause.*)

And don't say, Poornaiya, that you had warned me. I knew the English wouldn't like my extending my hand to the French. So what? Shall I spend the rest of my life looking with anxiety at the English for smiles of approval or frowns of displeasure? Today I am the only one in India who won't bow and scrape before them. So they want to crush me. I'm told England is buzzing with stories of what a monster I am and how I need to be chastised.

(*Pause.*)

Shall I allow myself to be chastised?

(*Pause.*)

The English make impossible conditions. They expect me to reject them. I could throw their whole strategy into confusion by accepting these terms. Shall I be subtle and accept?

MIR SADIQ: No, Your Majesty, we'll fight the English to the bitter end.

POORNAIYA: When your father picked me up, I was a mere clerk in a small god-forsaken town. I am what I am today because of the kindness of your family. No, Your Majesty, we will not yield. We'll fight the English to the last drop of our blood.

TIPU: What do you say, Nadeem Khan?

NADEEM: They have tricked us by declaring war at the last minute. But Seringapatam is impregnable. While I am in charge of the fort, Your Majesty may rest assured the English have no hope of winning.

TIPU: Thank you. Thank you all. That's what I wanted to hear. That's why I haven't called a general meeting like I did last time. I only wanted to know what you all felt. You know I am entirely dependent on your loyalty to me and my family.

MIR SADIQ: Who do we have but you, Sarkar?

TIPU: Your word is enough for me. If you will all stand behind me as one—

QAMARUDDIN AND POORNAIYA: We will, sir, we will.

TIPU (*laughing*): Then the future is ours.

VOICES: *Inshallah!* (God willing.)

POORNAIYA: Your Majesty, the Seer of the Monastery at Sringeri has conveyed his support to you.

TIPU: We are indeed fortunate.

POORNAIYA: Remembering that you gave them shelter when the Marathas sacked the monastery, the Swami has assured you of Goddess Sharada's blessings.

TIPU: We are protected by such blessings.

(*Long silence. No one knows what to say. To a servant*)

Incidentally, why is Bahadur Khan quiet today? Is he all right?

SERVANT: Yes, Sarkar. And resting.

TIPU (*fidgety*): Not even a growl?

(*Gets up.*)

Well then. Let's get ready. The meeting is adjourned.

(*They exit. The stage darkens.*)

KIRMANI: The English surrounded the fort of Seringapatam. On
4th May 1799, dawn broke on its ramparts.

(*Tipu's bedroom. Knocking on the door. Tipu enters tying his sword belt.*)

TIPU: Who is it?

FATH (*from outside*): Good morning, Father, it's me, Fath Haidar.
Are you ready?

(*Tipu opens the door and lets his son in.*)

TIPU (*laughs*): Well, you are in a hurry, aren't you?

FATH: Of course I am. Qamaruddin, the Commander-in-Chief has
sent word that our forces are assembled and rearing to attack.

TIPU: Good. Good! You know, Fath Haidar, I was a year younger
than you when I first rode into battle with my father?

FATH: I was ready a long time ago.

TIPU: I know, I know, it's hard to accept that one's children grow
up. You'll see for yourself.

POORNAIYA (*entering*): May God bring victory to Your Majesty.

TIPU: Good morning, Poornaiya. What news?

POORNAIYA: I have just been to see the Chief Astrologer of the
Ranganatha Temple—

TIPU: And?

POORNAIYA: He says the stars have never been more propitious.
Victory will be ours. The nine planets have been placated
and offerings made to the guardians of the eight directions.

TIPU: Thank you, friend. One must pacify the stars. But when you
and Mir Sadiq are around, I have little to fear. We must first
check on our new French cannons.

POORNAIYA: I just ran into the officer in charge of the battery. He says the cannons are accurate and have an extraordinary range. We'll blow the British attack to smithereens.

MIR SADIQ (*enters, excited*): Your Majesty, Your Majesty, incredible news. I'm so excited I don't know where to start. The heavens are smiling on us.

TIPU: The Lord be praised! What is it, Mir Sadiq?

MIR SADIQ: The Nizam has sent this despatch—I'll read it out—

TIPU: Just tell me in a few words. We have no time to waste.

MIR SADIQ: The Nizam says he has at last seen his folly in backing the English. He's seen through their game. If Your Majesty loses, the next target will be the Nizam.

TIPU: Of course, I've been trying to drum that into that moron for the last sixteen years. Still, it's good he's woken up—

MIR SADIQ: The Marathas too have decided to throw in their lot with us.

TIPU: You're sure I am not dreaming all this!

MIR SADIQ: Here's the Qilledar, Nadeem Khan. What news, Nadeem Khan?

NADEEM: News only of God's smile, Your Majesty. Hari Pant Phadke is here, awaiting your audience. Shall I admit him?

QAMARUDDIN (*entering*): Your Majesty—

TIPU (*angry*): Yes, Commander-in-Chief? But you should not be here. You should—

QAMARUDDIN: Sir, I've just seen with my eyes a sight even my grandchildren will narrate with pride!

TIPU: What is it? Get to the point!

QAMARUDDIN: The English are withdrawing. They're in total disarray. Total confusion rules the ranks of the foreigners. I saw English generals squabbling like women in the market—
(*Cheers from those present.*)

HUBBUB: Congratulations, sir. God be praised! We have done it.

FATH: Let's attack them, Father. Let's not allow the English to get away this time—

TIPU: You speak like your grandfather. He was always one for aggressive tactics.

FATH: So shall we fall on them?

TIPU: Not today. Today we celebrate. We pray and thank God. With the Marathas and the Nizam on our side, we can chase the English into the sea any day.

(Laughter.)

Thank you, all. Together we have driven the English back—

POORNAIYA: We did nothing, sir. It's the way Your Majesty led all of us. The vision of the future you gave us.

ABDUL KHALIQ (*entering*): Father, Mother says the rose bush sent to you by the King of Pegu has blossomed. She says you must come and see it.

TIPU: Muizuddin, Fath Haidar, Abdul Khaliq, call the entire zenana out. Invite them to the ramparts to see the white plague depart. Let's all watch a new era dawn. Then we'll go to the garden and see the Pegu roses bloom.

ALL: Long live the Sultan! Allah be praised! Victory to the Sultan! *(Cheers. They all depart. Music builds up to a crescendo and suddenly stops. A long silence.)*

KIRMANI: That was Tipu's last dream.

That afternoon he was killed in battle.

Mir Sadiq's conduct of the war was so openly treacherous that his own troops lynched him. Nadeem Khan, the Qilledar, had ordered a pay parade for his troops at the very moment of British assault, thus taking them away from the battlefield. Poornaiya slipped with alacrity into the post of Prime Minister under the new regime. Qamaruddin was by his side. The battle of Seringapatam was lost before it had begun.

(Roar of tigers in the background followed by gunfire and then silence.)

MACKENZIE: The tigers of the palace were shot dead while the mechanical tiger was shipped off to London.

(Richard Wellesley enters, followed by Arthur.)

Richard Wellesley, Earl of Mornington, Governor General of the British possessions in the East Indies said in a letter to the Board of Directors of the Honourable East India company:

MORNINGTON: While the dreadful fate of the fallen ruler could not be contemplated without pain and regret, it should show the Indian princes the danger of inviting foreign invasion—against the British power.

MACKENZIE: Arthur Wellesley, the Commandant of Seringapatam, was launched on a spectacular career which culminated in his becoming the Duke of Wellington, the Conqueror of Napoleon, Prime Minister of England.

(Richard congratulates Arthur. They exit entirely pleased with themselves.)

Tipu Sultan's sons were moved out of Seringapatam and ended up in Calcutta, where they could be kept under surveillance.

(Pause.)

Within twenty years, the British had annexed the Maratha empire.

KIRMANI: It was not Tipu's dreams but his predictions that came true.

(Pause.)

Postscript. When India became independent in 1947, the families of maharajas who had bowed and scraped before the British masters were granted sumptuous privy purses by the Government of India while the descendants of Tipu Sultan were left to rot in the slums of Calcutta.



TWO MONOLOGUES
Flowers/Broken Images

***Broken Images* was first presented in Kannada as *Odakalu Bimba* by Theatre Ranga Shankara, Bangalore on Tuesday, 22 March 2005, with:**

ARUNDHATI NAG

Manjula

***Broken Images* was first presented in English, as *A Heap of Broken Images* by Ranga Shankara on Friday, 25 March 2005, with:**

ARUNDHATI RAJA

Manjula

Directed by

GIRISH KARNAD

Sets by

ARUN SAGAR

Lighting Design by

PRADEEP BELAWADI

Production Control by

JAGDISH MALNAD

Coordination by

GAYATHRI KRISHNA

Flowers

In a few moments from now, Scorpio will start creeping into the water from the south-eastern corner of the temple tank. There is a hollow there in the third step under the water, large enough to hold an unhusked coconut. And I know that on this day of the year at this precise moment—and I can tell the precise moment because Scorpio is stretched out in the eastern sky in all his magnificent glory with the lowest point of his curving tail just about to take off from the horizon—at this precise moment his reflection will enter the water at the exact point under which the hollow lies. As though he were swimming out of that cavity. And looking up at the constellation from this top step of the tank, even with my back to the temple, I could tell you what star is perched on the brass tip of its pinnacle. For I know every nook and cranny in these grounds. I know where every star will be as the skies revolve through the year.

This temple, this tank, these rough, grey boulders towering over them, the flowering shrubs and trees, the birds that come and go through the seasons—they are my world, a private universe from which I have never for a moment wanted to step out.

I am the priest here. I have lived here all my life and discouraged all friendly attentions from the world outside. And in the isolation of this place, I spend most of my time with the *linga*—talking to it, singing to it, even discussing recent political developments and

most of all, decorating it with flowers. The *linga* is not ornately carved like some in the neighbourhood. It is essentially a plain phallic stump with a smooth crown and a rough-hewn vulva for the base. Endless ablutions of milk and ghee and oil through the centuries have managed to give it a slippery surface. So making the flowers stay on it is not easy and I have often lost track of the hours devising new ways of covering it with flowers. 'The *linga* is my step-wife,' grumbles my wife.

But she is also proud of the fact that my obsession has brought me recognition. The Chieftain of this region, who lives in the fort up on that hill, is an energetic young man. He is deeply devout and is a great admirer of my floral efforts.

Every day, at sunset, the canon goes off on the ramparts, announcing that the Chieftain has set off from home for the temple. That gives me a full hour to get ready for the pooja. My wife attends to the basic ritual requirements such as jawsticks and camphor and the placement of wicks in different silver plates for the *aarati*. I have a dip in the tank, and in the wet *dhoti*, sit down in the sanctum surrounded by baskets of flowers. Everything else then recedes into hazy, scarcely-felt distance and for an hour there is only the *linga* and me. And a conversation conducted through flowers—*malligai*, *sevanti*, *chendu hoovu*, *sampigai* and *kanakambara*.

By the time the Chieftain arrives with his entourage I am ready. He has a keen eye for beauty, the young Chieftain. If I have managed to lay out the flowers in a particularly innovative pattern, he nods his head in appreciation, turns to his retinue which, needless to add, obediently spouts various standard phrases in agreement. The *pooja* over, he accepts a single flower as God's *prasada*, presses it to his eyes, sticks it behind his right ear and rides home. He is not given to saying much.

They leave. I hear the clatter of hoofs fading up the rocky road. Then I carefully pick the flowers from the *linga*, tie them in a bundle in my thin muslin shoulder-cloth and make my way to

Chandravati's house. Chandravati is a courtesan, the only breach in the invisible defences I have built around my private domain.

She came into my life during the Shivaratri celebrations, which go on for a week. During this period, the Chieftain comes down for the *pooja* in the morning and once he leaves, there are the usual throngs of devotees, milling at the door of the temple to offer coconuts to the *linga*. I crack every one of the coconuts myself and return the halves as *prasada*, with a petal or two and sandal paste in it. I have never used assistants for distributing them, although my wife keeps nagging me to employ one. It is an exhausting task, it prolongs the day and yet I insist on handling every coconut myself. I love doing it for the *linga*, but I am not unaware that people shake their heads in admiration at my passion for the Lord and physical stamina.

The inhabitants of the courtesans' quarters are the last to be admitted, so I knew she was one of them. I was too tired to look at faces and desperate to finish the day. I mechanically took the coconut she offered, broke it, placed the *prasada* inside and turned to hand it back. She was bending, holding the *pallu* of her sari spread out in front of her. The upper half of her bosom was uncovered and as I dropped the shells in her sari, I saw the mole. On her right breast, just near the cleft. I looked up at her. There must have been something unusual in my movement, for she looked up too and caught my eyes. For a moment we stared at each other and then she turned away.

I wanted her. I had never lusted for a woman before and so felt emasculated by this sudden weakness. Yet I could not control the fire raging in my loins. During the rest of that week, I started the day impatient for a glimpse of hers.

Courtesans are noticed and talked about. So I discovered without seeming too curious that her name was Chandravati. She had just moved into a nearby town. She was believed to be wealthy—I knew the house she had rented. It was one of the most spacious there. She is a courtesan, I kept saying to myself, she is

a courtesan and so perhaps not beyond reach. But I was a poor priest and had nothing to offer her.

I soon learnt to search her out in the crowds and gulp in quick glimpses of her, feeling my insides cramp every time I caught sight of her. She was of average height. She was always in the company of a much older woman, who I was told lived with her. She was always laughing, her bright teeth set off by her dusky skin.

Every day there was a quick meeting of our eyes. But she never once stayed long enough for me to register her features. So each day, as she received the *prasada*, I noticed the mole and as she looked up, hurriedly made note of a fresh aspect of her face—the brilliant eyes which she quickly averted, the straight nose ending in a slight upward tilt, the lips which like thick petals rimmed her smile with dark sensuousness. Then at night I put them together as in a jig-saw puzzle.

She did not come on the sixth morning, nor on the seventh, and I was in agony. When the festivities on the last day were over and the temple precincts deserted, I went to the *linga* and pleaded, 'I am stupid. I am mad. I don't know why I am doing this. But help me, please. Or at least forgive me.' Then I cracked a coconut, tied the halves in my shoulder cloth and left for her house.

It was dark, but it took no effort to be at her door. I knocked. After a pause, the old woman opened the door. She recognized me, and said in a tone of astonishment, 'Sir! What an honour!'

'You and your mistress haven't been coming to the temple. Is she not well?'

The old woman put a corner of her sari to her mouth and giggled behind it. And I knew I had made a fool of myself.

'Woman, I have brought you the *prasada*,' I said. To include her mistress in that offer would have been to repeat my imbecility.

She took the coconut shells. 'Wait, sir, please,' she said and disappeared into the interior of the house. My idiocy, the inauspiciousness of the encounter and the ridicule I would face if anyone saw me standing on the doorstep of the house were

crowding in on me when she reappeared. 'My mistress would like to talk to you,' she said, 'Please, come this way.' And led me through the cavernous house.

She was sitting in a corner of the backyard, on a mat spread out on the floor, her figure shadowed rather than lit by a tiny oil lamp. The light struck a glint off a silver water pot placed next to her, demarcating the boundary beyond which she could not be approached in her menstrual seclusion.

'Thank you for the *prasada*,' her voice declared by its clear timber that it had been trained for singing. 'I am sorry I cannot welcome you personally today. I would never have dared to invite you here. But since you have been kind enough to grace my house, may I ask a favour?'

I did not reply. The only women I had known well were my mother and wife. And I was too frightened of what I might get into if I attempted a reply here.

She paused and then proceeded, 'I had heard of your great skill in flower decoration. I have seen it now for myself and am overwhelmed. I can't step into the inner sanctum and you cannot be seen in my company in public. So would you kindly spare an evening for me, just one evening, come here and show me how you do it?'

I was silent. It surprised me that she should take my silence for acquiescence.

For she went on, 'I will be released from this corner in another day. Would it be brazen of me to expect you the evening after tomorrow?'

I said, 'I'll be here,' because anything else would have been needlessly discourteous and left.

Two feverish days later I was at her door again with the bundle of flowers taken from the *linga*. This time the door opened as though someone was waiting behind it and it was the old woman. Chandravati stood in the hall, half concealed by a pillar. Despite the shadow cast on her by the pillar, I could see that her hair was

loose and tumbled in large quantities across her face and shoulders. She clutched her sari close to her body as though she was feeling cold.

‘Please, come in, sir,’ said she, ‘This time at least I can ask you to sit down.’ The old woman pointed to the mat on the floor. I sat down, opened the bundle and spread the flowers in front of her. Chandra shoved the fingers of her right hand into her lush hair to push them back from her forehead and with a quick shake of her head settled them on the nape of her neck. She moved nearer to the flowers. And I could see that she had carefully made herself up with kohl in the eyes, and sandal paste and turmeric on her cheeks. The flame of the oil lamp lit a sparkle on her lips which ran like quicksilver as she spoke.

‘They are beautiful,’ she said. ‘I can see your expertise begins with the choice of flowers. Could you please describe the whole process of the *pooja* to me? I want to know every detail.’

‘First you bathe the *linga*. Cleaning and preparing the god for the decoration.’

She listened intently to my narration and when I had finished, she said, ‘Do you mind displaying for my sake some of your skill?’ I looked around to decide how or where I could begin when she said, ‘I have just bathed. This evening. A head bath. Do I need to bathe again?’

‘No,’ I said, unsure of what she meant but trying to make out that I was at least sure of what I meant, ‘that is not necessary.’

‘We can begin then?’ Casually, she put aside the sari she had wrapped herself in and sat down in front of me.

I had never seen a woman completely naked. At home, we all bathed in the open, in the corner formed by the neem and the banyan trees in our backyard, so my wife covered herself with a sari even when she bathed. On the days I wanted her, I would give her a look she had come to recognize and late at night when everyone was fast asleep, she would crawl up to my room for a furtive scuffle in bed which demanded the minimum of

uncovering. There were our two children and my old parents in the house and you never knew who might call out for help. The problem, however, was more basic. My wife would have died of shame than be seen naked, even by herself.

I was trying to come to terms with the bronze vision in front of me. My heart was palpitating so wildly that it threatened to burst my eardrums and my hands so trembled that I couldn't even pick up the garlands. I prayed to God not to let me make a fool of myself. I was supposed to show her how I decorated the *linga*. But I could be playful with the *linga*, while here the natural smell of her body which seeped through the perfumes she had used and the continual touching and smoothing of her naked skin which the job required, demanded that I keep a firm control over myself. Fortunately, Chandravati herself was so calm and immobile that any amorous advances were out of the question. She watched with immense concentration as I selected different lengths of garlands and pondered which limb of hers each should go to. Often, her sculptured sinuousness virtually dictated the design. The strings of *malligai* buds seemed to need no help from me as they ran across her bosom to pass under the armpits and crossed themselves into a loose knot between her shoulder-blades. They then plunged down to the small of her back, flowed along her waist to the front, to the gentle mound below her navel and down her thighs. But I had to use all my ingenuity in devising a filigree that could stay snug against the curvature of her hips. Once or twice when the string dug into her I saw her flinch in pain. But then she smiled, asking me to proceed.

Her breasts were firm and tight. I chose the white *parijata* with their orange stem to loop around her breasts so that they set off her large dark nipples. I merely had to push the ends into the cleft and they held. Then I placed a hibiscus into the opening not so much to secure the loops as to provide a contrast in shape and colour to the *parijata*. But it did not work, so I took it out to replace it with a curling flame of the forest.

'Why did you change it?'

Her only question.

'It obscured the mole on your bosom,' I said.

She laughed.

'The beauty of a design lies in the detail,' I added, flattered by the adulation in her laughter and immediately felt foolish. She noticed that too but a trifle carefully, did not let on.

And even as a whole new world of patterns was opening up to me, thoughts of the *linga* kept passing through my mind. I pitied it, felt exasperated at its unimaginative contours. Why did its shape have to be so bland and unindented that one had to balance garlands precariously on it and improvise superfluous knots to hide some ungainly strings? Why didn't the Lord offer a form which inflamed invention like Chandra did?

Nothing more was said as I went on decking her up. The old woman kept moving in and out of the room which irritated me at first. But Chandra with a wave of her hand suggested I ignore her. It was only when the woman tried to help me with the flowers that I turned on her with such fury that she reared and Chandra laughed out. Thereafter the old woman confined herself to standing by the door, chuckling appreciatively.

When I had finished, Chandravati asked for the large mirror. She looked at herself from different angles, her eyes narrowing as she picked out the details, widening in admiration.

As she silently handed the mirror back to the old woman, I stammered: 'What—do you think?'

Chandra picked a *shevanti* flower and deftly wove it in the sacred thread on my shoulder.

The old woman went out, leaving the door ajar.

This then became the daily routine, never exactly repeatable, and therefore nerve-racking and exhilarating in its unpredictability. 'I have given up putting flowers in my hair,' she laughed. 'You have given me a sense of inferiority.' I had to undress her—she would not help me. Sometimes the knot of her breast-cloth was

tied into such a mischievous knot that I threatened to cut it with a knife but she said that was not playing the game, and at other times the cloth fell off without warning at my merest touch, leaving me staring breathlessly at her bare bosom. When I finished decorating her, I would lay her down and kiss the mole. With a sudden movement she came alive.

I would return home quite late, ravenous. Chandravati had given up teasing me about consuming her body but not the food in her house. I would have a dip in the tank and head home. My wife was awake. She never ate before me. As soon as she heard me splashing in the tank, she would start heating up the food. While I ate, she stood rigid by the door, lanky and small-breasted, concerned but still. She never once asked me about Chandravati. I knew she would not.

It had taken only a couple of days for the news to spread through the surrounding villages. I knew the main reaction would be of amazement that a beautiful and obviously wealthy courtesan should take up with such an impecunious lover. Eyebrows would be raised at my good fortune or virility. All this mattered little to me. But I was distressed at the pain I was causing my wife. I loved her. I knew I had made her a target of vicious gossip. I sensed her anger, her humiliation and felt ashamed of myself. Conversation in the house was reduced to fragments and we stopped even looking at each other. But there was nothing I could do.

My wife had caught on to the new element in my daily *pooja*. I looked for a wider variety of flowers now, chose them with greater care and experimented with floral motifs on the *linga* which would be distinct from those I would devise later on Chandra. The garlands were the same, inevitably, but God was not to be a preliminary model for what I would do with her body. Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Chandra.

I tried to explain this to Chandra. I thought she would be

flattered, amused. Instead, she flew into a tantrum. 'Why can't you concentrate on me? I am too gross for you, aren't I? I am not stupid, you know. I can see your mind is somewhere else. Why don't you just stay back, trying things out on that stone *linga*?' And sulked most of the evening. Later she made up, pouting 'I worship you, I can't get angry with you.' But I never brought up the subject again. I felt she had forced me to curtain off an important corner of my soul from her. There was no one with whom I could share the excitement of this new development.

Or so I thought till twelve days ago. That was *tritiya*, the third day after the full moon.

That evening, as every day, my wife and I waited for the cannon to sound so we could start preparing for the *pooja*. But the usual hour passed and there was no cannon. I sent my wife home. 'Better go and feed the children,' I said. 'After all, you can come back as soon as you hear the cannon.' She nodded and left. I sat here, right here, on the top step of the temple tank and waited. After a while the prolonged inactivity and the increasing apprehension began to play upon my nerves. It was unlike the Chieftain to be so late. I had to do something. So I went to the inner sanctum and started to tie the garlands on the *linga*. I felt better. It brought back the warm security of being in the company of an old friend. I was talking to the *linga*, wondering what could be detaining the Chieftain, when my wife arrived. Without a word she attended to the details of the *pooja*. We finished what we had to do. But there was still no movement from the fort. I returned to my watch, worried that by now Chandravati would be anxious, leaning against her front door exactly as my wife was doing in the temple courtyard at the moment.

The three of us, frozen in the act of waiting, waiting for the Chieftain to move, waiting for the cannon to be fired so life could move on. More hours passed. I got tired of sitting. It would have been considerate of him to send a message, but who was to teach etiquette to the royalty?

I went back to the sanctum. My wife was stretched out in front of the main door, fast asleep. I stood there and watched her. She lay there like a wet rag, mouth half open, all excitement for life drained out of her, exhaustion oozing from every limb. I couldn't remember how long it had been since I had seen her sleeping. She looked so much in need of the rest that I didn't have the heart to wake her up, so I came back to continue my vigil on this step.

Another hour. It was nearly midnight. It was unthinkable that the Chieftain would come at this late hour. I went back to the temple. I lightly stepped across the recumbent figure of my wife which woke her up. She sat up clutching her *pallu* to her chest and looked around trying to make sense of the place she found herself in.

'Let's finish the *pooja*.' I said. 'He won't come. I am sure some crisis is keeping him home. And we can't leave our lord waiting for ever.'

She nodded, wearily.

I performed the *pooja*. I was boiling within myself and said to God that I hoped He didn't mind my rather perfunctory rites that evening. After all, the *linga* was Shiva and He was used to austerities.

The formality was over. I put a flower in my wife's outstretched palm. As she straightened to tuck it in the knot of her hair, she looked directly into my eyes. And held the look. My wife and I were there, just the two of us, alone, as we could never be at home. At a time and in a place where nobody could possibly surprise us. And for once, her infinite self-control had slipped and she was baring her desire as brazenly as though she had let her *pallu* drop from her bosom to expose her blouse and let it hang unretrieved. At any other time, just giving quarter to the thought of sex while in the temple would have horrified her, but at this moment she was inviting the shame of it. I could feel my insides reaching out for her and was taken aback that I had forgotten that

I could want her. The *linga* sat there looking at us and I snarled silently at it, 'Isn't it funny? I am going to defile your sanctum and it has to be with my lawful wife, for Chandravati would never be allowed to step in here.'

It would have been the simplest of things, to turn to my wife and take her by the hand. But I felt a constriction inside me, paralysing my movement. Confused, I turned to the *linga* and picked up a garland. Why did I do that? Was it because I had lost the habit of making love without bringing flowers into it?

The gesture proved fatal. The desire faded, the glow went out of her eyes. Bleakness seeped back into her voice as she mumbled: 'Don't go in the dark. Snakes, poisonous insects. Why don't you stay home?'

The whining tone insinuated that she already knew my answer and that infuriated me.

'Go home. I'll be back later. And don't wait up. I am not hungry.'

I turned my back to her and started picking the flowers off the *linga*. She stood, immobile, staring at her toenails. I picked up the bundle and left.

There was no sign of any movement in Chandravati's house, but a faint light spilled out from under the front door. I knocked. I had to knock twice again before there was a rustle of clothes and the old woman's voice asked who was knocking.

'It's me,' I said and the door creaked open. The old woman was there and beside her stood Chandra, her hair rumped, her sari dishevelled, smiling apologetically.

'I am sorry I woke you up,' I said, irritated. 'I'll go back.' And turned to go. To my eternal regret I didn't. For even at that moment I could have salvaged my fate.

But Chandravati grabbed my arm. 'I'm sorry I fell asleep. But you can see I haven't retired,' she laughed. 'I am still in my best sari.' Then almost plaintively she added, 'I was waiting. You are so late. You can't blame me for falling asleep.'

Suddenly I thought of my poor wife's bleary eyes and melted. I stepped into the house.

'My lord and master failed to turn up,' I growled.

'I'm glad mine didn't do the same thing,' she retorted and laughed one of those laughs against which I had no defence.

We did not make love that night. I wanted Chandravati to go to sleep quietly next to me but she wanted the flowers. 'You have come all the way at this time of the night—through all those snakes and poisonous vermin—I must know what flowers you have brought me today and what you mean to do with them and me,' she insisted. 'So long as you don't mind if I nod off.' And kept struggling to stay awake as I decked her body up. Soon, I sat leaning against the wall, and she was reclining on my shoulder, dozing off, then opening her eyes to smile an apology and then floating away again. As I kissed the marigold I had woven in her tresses and held her breasts cupped in my palms ('You must support them, otherwise they begin to hurt from their weight,' she had said), I watched the mole, poised on the inward plunge of her right breast, peering precariously into the darkness of her cleft. I was longing to kiss it, but didn't dare move for fear of disturbing her. Finally when she had fallen into drugged sleep, I laid her back gently on the carpet, still moaning in defiance and resisting sleep like a child. I bent down and kissed the mole.

The tranquility of the night was shattered by the canon. It was barely more than a distant thud and it didn't even raise a ripple in her sleep. But I had spent years training my ears to catch its faintest reverberation and responded to its peremptory summons instantly. I sprang into action. Frantic, I started pulling out the flowers from her hair and piling them on my shoulder cloth. She sat up, groggy and dazed, yelping in pain as I snatched at the flowers. 'He is coming,' I said without wasting any time on looking at her. 'I must rush.' Every moment was precious. I rapidly calculated in my mind that I would have half an hour to set things right once I reached the temple and hoped my wife had

not slept through the cannon shot. As I turned back to push the main door shut, I saw Chandravati, naked and on all fours, staring out stupefied, shivering.

My wife was already standing at the gate of the temple enclosure.

‘Have you got the things ready?’ I shouted as I rushed past her. She didn’t know what things I meant.

‘Get ready for the *pooja*, woman. Quick. He’ll be arriving any moment.’

‘But flowers?’

As I hurriedly opened the bundle and started decorating the *linga*, there was a sharp intake of breath. I felt buffeted by the revulsion I could sense welling up inside her. We had already performed a *pooja* with these flowers. They were now the leavings, polluted discards. What further use they had been put to in Chandravati’s house she didn’t need to try too hard to imagine. To place them on the *linga* again was desecration.

She didn’t say anything. Just stood staring, and it annoyed me that she should think I needed that rebuke. I turned on her and said, ‘Get on with it. He’ll be here any moment.’

When the Chieftain arrived, the inner sanctum was as fresh and welcoming as it would have been at sunset. The flowers were a trifle faded, but that was to be expected at this hour of the night. The Chieftain was accompanied by only the closest of the courtiers, who all looked exhausted. But he did not. He smiled, apologized for being late and explained that envoys from a neighbouring kingdom were visiting and had to be looked after. He complimented me and my wife on how beautiful the *linga* looked.

Relieved, I performed the *pooja*. When it was over, I held out the plate of flowers so he could pick his choice as *prasada*. Then, as I turned to the courtier next to him, I heard the Chieftain say, ‘I didn’t know God had long hair.’

The tired drone of the courtiers sloped off into silence and a chill invaded the sanctum.

In the flickering light of the hanging lamps inside the sanctum, against the long, dancing shadows it was throwing on the walls, the strand of hair was not visible. There was his right hand dramatically stretched out, the thumb and the forefinger in a pinch, the other fingers stiff and pointing, as in a dance gesture. And then nearly a foot below the fingers, a marigold dangled in the air.

He looked at me and I didn't dare look away.

Yet at that moment I was not frightened by his cold anger as much as anguished that I was subjecting my wife's scraggy knot of hair to public derision. She knew that everyone there knew that the strand by which the illicit flower was swinging in the air was not hers. Could not be hers.

'I did not know God had long hair,' he repeated.

I gave the only reply possible under the circumstances.

'If we believe that God has long hair,' I said, 'He will have long hair.'

There was a pause and then he said, 'Prove it.'

'I will,' I said, 'Would your majesty allow me grace till the next new moon?'

'Done,' he replied, 'I shall be back at the cowdust hour on that day.' He then placed the flower back in the plate and left. I noticed that he hadn't thrown it back contemptuously to exhibit his annoyance at my insolent response. He had put it back, almost respectfully, as though the judge in him was willing to give me half a chance.

That was twelve days ago. What happened thereafter is quickly told. As soon as the Chieftain left, I dispatched my wife home and asked her not to disturb me until I sent for her. I forbade anyone, including her, from stepping into the temple precincts. Then I locked up the door of the sanctum and sat down, cross-legged, in front of it and prayed.

I don't know whether prayer is the right word. I had known the *linga* since my birth. My association with it was the longest

and the closest in my life. As a child I had peed on it, and then in remorse wept on it. Even as an adult, I had poured out my woes to it, bragged about how my success with flowers had turned this place into the ruler's favourite shrine. Now I pleaded with it to save my face. Just that. I had disgraced myself and trembled at the thought of facing the world in that state. I didn't know what God could do. I had created a situation which was now beyond even His tinkering. But there was nothing else for me to do except surrender to Him. For twelve days, I cleansed my existence of everything, every name or person, except the *linga*.

This morning, the onlookers started collecting even before it dawned. By the time the Chieftain arrived in the evening, there were such crowds that even he couldn't get in and the guards had to use their sticks to make way for him. I was in a stupor, from hunger, from lack of sleep and from a complete sense of desolation. I dully wondered why they had all come. What did they expect to see? My public humiliation? What did the Chieftain hope to see? Why had he joined the charade? Indeed, what had I hoped to achieve by asking for a grace period?

I led him into the vestibule. Then I shut my eyes in one final prayer and pushed the door of the inner sanctum open. There was a pause and then the Chieftain gasped. I opened my eyes. The lights had not been lit and the sanctum was in darkness, but not such darkness that one could not see the long and thick hair that came cascading from the *linga*, hiding it completely. He stared. I stared. He looked at me for some explanation. I had none. I was as stunned as he was. He ordered the lamps to be lit and asked for torches. But he didn't need them. Now that the sanctum door was open, waves and waves of jet black hair came billowing out, their tips gently eddying and swirling in the evening breeze.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion, blanketed in thick hot mists.

I heard someone say, 'They could be glued.' and the Chieftain respond, falteringly, 'Should we test?' One of his Brahmin

courtiers moved in, twisted a tuft of hair round his finger and tugged. He put all his strength into it and suddenly the tuft came out in his hand. He brought the tuft to the Chieftain who inspected it closely and touched its roots. There was blood on his fingers. The Brahmin ran back to the *linga*, felt for the spot from where he had plucked the hair and collapsed, crying hysterically, 'It's bleeding. It's bleeding. I have wounded God.'

I did not faint. But I can barely remember what followed: the Chieftain falling to my feet and begging forgiveness, the crowds surging forward to seek my blessings until my wife suddenly took charge and had me brought home. No one, not even the Chieftain, questioned her authority. I fell into deep sleep and woke up refreshed. It was almost midnight, my usual hour for the evening meal. She served me food and supervised the proceedings, as usual, leaning on the door.

The only thing she said was: 'She is gone. She and her old woman left town the very next day.'

But it was clear Chandravati's disappearance would make no difference to my wife. The courtesan was gone and had been replaced by Lord Shiva. I was among the chosen of the Lord and she could not possibly think of herself as a wife now, only as a slave and guardian, all shades of the marital bond expunged in favour of her devotion to me, her good fortune in having me for her husband.

The food gave me strength and here I am back on the temple tank. On my way, I peeped into the sanctum. The hair is gone but the wound is still fresh where the Brahmin had pulled out the tuft. On top of the hills, I can see the torches of soldiers, stationed to guard the approaches to the temple. I am the state saint now, to be prized, protected and shown off to visiting envoys.

And I have a quarrel to pick with God.

Why has God done this to me? I had only asked Him to give me the courage to live in disgrace, for I knew I had tainted myself.

The Chieftain was right to question me, to humiliate me publicly if he so decided. I am guilty of gross dereliction, of sacrilege. Guilty of cruelty to the two women I loved. Why then should God cast His vote on my behalf? Because I loved Him? Has God the right to mock justice in favour of love for Him? Or does He have a different logic? If He does, it's not fair that He should expect me to abide by it, not demanding to know what that logic is. Such Grace is condescension even it comes from God. Why am I worthy of this burden He has placed on my shoulders? I refuse to bear it. God must understand I simply cannot live on His terms.

Scorpio has crawled out of the recess in the third step under water. His reflection is floating towards me. The hollow is empty. As a boy, I used to shove my head into the hollow to test how long I could hold my breath. I shall do so again now, but not to test my lungs. I shall seek in the narrow confines of that hollow the answers that God has denied me.

Broken Images

...for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter,...

T. S. ELIOT
The Waste Land

The interior of a television studio. A big plasma screen hangs on one side, big enough for a close-up on it to be seen clearly by the audience. On the other side of the stage, a chair and a typically 'telly' table—strong, wide, semi-circular. At the back of the stage are several television sets, with screens of varying sizes.

A small red bulb glows above the table, high enough not to appear on the television screen.

Manjula Nayak walks in. She is in her mid-thirties/forties, and has a confident stride. She is wearing a lapel mike. It is immediately evident that she is at home in broadcasting studios. She looks around.

MANJULA: Nice, very nice. Neat!

(She goes and sits on the chair. Adjusts the earpiece.)

But where is the camera?

(Listens to the reply.)

Ah! I see. New technology. Isn't it scary? The rate of obsolescence? *(Listens.)* Of course I have. In London. And in Toronto. But when you think of Indian television studios, you

always imagine them cluttered. Lots of men and woman scurrying about, shouting orders. Elephantine lights. Headphones. Cameras. You know what I mean. But here...I mean, it's all so spartan...I know. But a bit lonely too. Like a sound studio... All right. All right... No camera. I just look ahead and speak to an invisible audience in front of me... Direct. Fine. Fine...I can hear you. Clearly. Voice test?... 'Testing, Testing, One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Hello, Hello!' Shall I tap on the mike?

(Laughs.)

My speech will last exactly ten minutes. I have timed it... No, I won't read. 'Look ahead and speak!' Good... But that may take a little longer. A couple of minutes...if I don't fumble too much.

(Giggles.)

The yellow light?... Okay, okay, ready, fine!

(She mouths 'Ten' to 'Zero' silently, emphasizing each count with her forefinger. At the stroke of ten, the light turns yellow. The Announcer appears on the big plasma screen. The other screens remain blank till the last few minutes of the play.)

ANNOUNCER: Good evening. This is a proud evening for the Shree-TV channel. For tonight we bring to you Ms Manjula Nayak. Many of you will know her as a renowned Kannada short-story writer. Until a year ago, she was a lecturer in English in Bangalore. But she had been writing in Kannada. Not unusual, as you know. It's amazing how many of our Kannada writers are lecturers in English: From the earliest days. B. M. Shree, Gokak, Adiga.

Even modern ones. Lankesh, Shantinath, Anantha Murthy. And of course there is A. K. Ramanujan, who was equally at home in both languages. But last year Mrs Nayak stunned the world—yes, I mean, *the world*—by writing a novel. Her first novel. In English! *The River Has No Memories*. The advance she received from her British publishers made headlines, here

and in the West. And then the novel turned out to be a bestseller all over the world. Our heartiest congratulations to Mrs Nayak.

This evening we broadcast a Kannada telefilm based on this remarkable novel. The film will begin in exactly ten minutes. And we have with us in the studio Ms Nayak herself, who has graciously agreed to address our viewers about her work. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome the Literary Phenomenon of the Decade, Mrs Manjula Nayak.

(Applause on the sound track. The light turns green. The Announcer disappears and Manjula's image appears in his place. She speaks.)

MANJULA: *Namaskara*. I am Manjula Nayak. I must mention that officially I am Mrs Manjula Murty, but my creative self continues to be Manjula Nayak. There are some areas in which we must not let marriage intrude too much.

(Laughter.)

Talking about one's work is a very difficult task. So let me find an easy way out. Let me just take up two questions I constantly come across. They seem to bother everyone—here, abroad. I'll answer them to the best of my ability within the short time at my disposal and shut up. Actually, that's what a writer should do, shouldn't she?—Write and shut up!

(Laughs.)

The first question—you have probably guessed it already. After having written in Kannada all your life, why did you choose—suddenly—to write in English? Do you see yourself as a Kannada writer or an English writer? What audience do you write for? And variations on that theme.

Actually, let me confess. If I had foreseen how many people I would upset by writing in English—I really would not have committed that folly.

Intellectuals whom I respected, writers who were gurus to me, friends who I thought would pat me on my back and share my delight—they are all suddenly breathing fire. How dare I write in English and betray Kannada!

(Laughs.)

Betray! The answer is simple; if there was betrayal, it was not a matter of conscious choice. I wrote the novel in English because it burst out in English. It surprised even me. I couldn't understand why it was all coming out in English. But it did. That's all. There is no other explanation.

What baffles me—actually, let me confess, hurts me—is why our intellectuals can't grasp this simple fact! I have been accused of writing for foreign readers. Accused! As though I had committed a crime. A writer seeks audiences where she or he can find them! My British publishers said to me: 'We like your book because it's so Indian. We receive any number of manuscripts from India but they are all written with the western reader in view. Your novel has the genuine Indian feel!'

(Laughs.)

But who listens here? A pundit for instance has stated that no Indian writer can express herself—or himself—honestly in English. 'For Indian writers, English is a medium of dishonesty.' Of course, one could also ask how many Kannada writers are honest in what they write—in Kannada. But if you did that, you would be immediately condemned as a traitor. You can't win!

Recently the President of the Central Sahitya Akademi—the National Academy of the Letters—who shall remain nameless) declared that Indians who write in English do so in order to make money. That by writing in English they confess their complicity in the global consumer market economy. He of course spoke in English. Speaking in English, as you know, gives you the authority to make oracular pronouncements on Indian literatures and languages. But my response to the charge that I write in English for money would be: Why not? Isn't that a good enough reason? Would you like to see what royalties I earned when I wrote in Kannada?

(Pause.)

Yet the accusation hides—or perhaps reveals—a grim anxiety. As is clear from the dictum of the President of the Akademi, what is at issue is not Creativity but Money. What hits everyone in the eye is the money a writer in English can earn. The advance I received for my novel—the advance only, mind you—helped me resign my job and concentrate on writing. Of course it is a cause for jealousy. Having struggled in Kannada, I can understand that. A Kannada proverb says: 'A response is good. But a meaningful response is better.' Meaningful: *Arthapoorna*. The Kannada word for Meaning is *Artha*—which also means money! And of course, fame, publicity, glamour...power.

(Laughs.)

Let me leave it at that.

The second question everyone asks is about the book itself: thank God! How could you—you seem so strong and active—I was a long jump athlete in college, though of course no Anju Bobby George—how could you so vividly recreate the inner life of a person confined to bed all her life? How can a healthy, outdoor woman be so empathetic to the emotional world of a disabled person? Well, it is sad, but I owe that to my younger sister, Malini.

She was physically challenged. Suffered from what is technically called, meningocele—the upper part of her body was perfectly normal; below the waist, the nervous system was damaged. Completely dysfunctional. A series of operations, which started soon after her birth, reduced her existence to misery—she spent her entire life confined to the wheel-chair.

Six years ago my parents died. She came to stay with us in our house in Jayanagar, and I nursed her. During the last few months it was quite clear she didn't have much time left. I am childless and she became my child! Truly, the book is about her. I have dedicated it to her memory. She died last year—just a few months before the book came out. I have tried to

relive what I learnt about her emotional life as I nursed her—tended to her—watched helplessly as she floated into death. I miss her. I miss my beautiful, gentle sister.

(Her eyes moisten.)

She is the only character in the novel drawn from life. The other characters and the plot are entirely fictional. Invented.

(Pause.)

I must here acknowledge the support I received from one person while I wrote the novel—my husband, Pramod Murty. I was working full time as a lecturer then. College chores. And home was full of her memories. And there was I, suddenly writing in English. Floundering. Sinking. I was utterly clueless. There were moments when I broke down, when I felt I couldn't go on. But he was always there at my side, encouraging me, prodding me on. Without him, I would never have completed the novel. Thank you, Pramod.

(The overhead light turns yellow.)

Well, that's it. I have committed the cardinal sin of writing in English.

(Laughs.)

There is no *prayashchitta* for it, no absolution. But fortunately the film you are about to see is in Kannada. That makes me very happy. After all, the family I have written about is Kannada. I am a Kannada writer myself, born to the language and civilization, and proud of it. The Kannada reality I conceived in English has been translated back into Kannada—to perfection—by the Director. I couldn't have done it better. My thanks to the cast and the crew and of course, Shree-TV. Well, enjoy the telefilm.

Good Night. *Namaskara.*

(The light turns red. She leans back in her chair. Pause. Then into the lapel mike.)

I hope that was okay? I didn't fumble too much, did I?

(Listens.)

Thank you, Raza. The pleasure's all mine. See you outside?
(The red light switches off. She smiles contentedly.)

Whew! That'll get them. Good. I have taken enough shit from them.

(Laughs and gets up. Manjula's image on the screen should have given way to the film, but hasn't. Instead, the Image continues as before, watching her calmly. She is of course unaware of it. She makes a move to the door.)

IMAGE: Where are you going?

(Startled, Manjula stops and looks around. Touches her earpiece to check if the sound came from there and moves on.)

You can't go yet. —Manjula!

(Manjula looks around baffled and sees that her image continues on the screen. She does a double take.

From now on, throughout the play, Manjula and her image react to each other exactly as though they were both live characters.)

MANJULA: Oh God! Am I still on?

(Confused, she rushes back to the chair and stops.)

IMAGE: You are not. The camera is off.

MANJULA: Is it? ... Then...how?

IMAGE: You are standing up. If the camera were on, I would be standing up too. I'm not.

MANJULA: Is this some kind of a trick?

(Into her lapel mike.)

Hello! Hello! Can you hear me? How come I'm still on the screen? Raza, hello...

(Taps her mike. No response.)

Is there a technical hitch?

IMAGE: No hitch.

MANJULA *(to the Image)*: But how... Who are you... How... Has the tape got stuck?

(Calls out into the mike.)

Raza, Raza. Help! Help!

IMAGE: What are you screaming for? What are you afraid of? It's only me.

MANJULA: Who are you?

IMAGE: Me? You.

MANJULA (*to herself*): This is absurd.

IMAGE: Quite.

(A long pause while Manjula refuses to acknowledge the presence of the Image. Then she slowly looks up. The Image smiles.)

IMAGE: A good speech, I must say. My compliments. An excellent performance. The viewers loved it. All two million of them.

MANJULA: But the film? Hasn't it started?

IMAGE: Aw, screw the film... It's awful anyway.

MANJULA: I told them it won't work. A telefilm needs lots of movement. Different locations. Pace. Action. Drama. 'A good novel does not necessarily make a good film,' I argued. But they were persistent. Sponsors were easy to find. (*Pause.*) They paid well.

IMAGE: Your performance now...this introduction...it will be the best thing this evening. You'll be all over the papers. You have managed to upset a lot of people.

MANJULA: Thanks. I meant to.

(Pause.)

IMAGE: If one had to comment...in the extreme case that one had to...that bit about your sister Malini...the tears...that could have been played down.

MANJULA: I wasn't pretending. I loved her.

(Pause.)

I love her. Still. I don't think I have ever been as close to anyone else.

IMAGE: It was a close bond?

MANJULA: The novel doesn't really do her justice. She was attractive—more attractive than me. Intelligent—more intelligent than me. And vivacious, which I never was. I accepted that. She radiated life from the wheelchair to which she was confined. I have always been reconciled to being the second best.

IMAGE: Her illness was unfortunate. But because of it, she got the best of everything.

MANJULA (*defensive*): She never asked for anything. Soon after her birth, the moment the gravity of her situation was realized, my parents moved to Bangalore. Took a house in the Koramangala Extension. She became the...the (*searches for a phrase and then settles for*)...the apple of their eye. When she was old enough to go to school, a teacher came home to teach her English and Mathematics. Everything else, she read up for herself. History, Philosophy, Anatomy. She was hungry—hungry for life. Gobbled it all up.

IMAGE: And you?

MANJULA: I have often wondered whether I would have been as bright if I'd received all that love and attention.

IMAGE: No, you wouldn't. Let's face it.

MANJULA (*defensively*): I did write a bestseller.

IMAGE: That's true.

MANJULA: But you are right. I wouldn't. They left me with grandparents in Dharwad. An affectionate couple. They fussed over me. But no substitute for parents. When vacations approached I could barely wait to get to Bangalore. And once I finished college, I found a job in Bangalore and came and lived with them. Those were the happiest days of my life! Halcyon! But then I met Pramod. We got married and settled down in Jayanagar. Father helped with the house but he left most of his money in her name—for her care. She was always the focus. Naturally.

IMAGE: But when your parents died, why didn't you move into the Koramangala house? Such a nice, big house. The garden. The sense of space.

MANJULA: The Jayanagar house was my house. I was used to it. My college was in Jayanagar. We had selected a house which was within walking distance. Koramangala would have meant a long haul every morning.

And then such a huge house! Not easy to look after. I would have had to stay home all day like Mother. Give up my job probably.

No, as I said, she was one of the most sensitive people I have known. She realized moving to Koramangala would turn my life upside down. She insisted that we sell the Koramangala house. I was reluctant but she wouldn't listen. She wanted no sacrifices on her account, no compromises. And she adjusted beautifully to the smaller house.

(Pause.)

Actually I couldn't take Koramangala! Non-Kannadigas, most of them. And of course all those empty houses bought as investments by Non-Resident Indians. I fancied myself a Kannada writer in those days. Wanted to breathe the language. Live in the heart of Kannada culture.

IMAGE: Now that you are a success in English, have you bought a big bungalow in Koramangala?

MANJULA: Aw, shut up!

IMAGE: Was Malini at home with Kannada?

MANJULA: Of course, it is our mother-tongue. But she rarely used it. Her Kannada was limited to the cook and the maid.

IMAGE: So Kannada was the one area that became yours?

MANJULA: You could say that. I tried to occupy it and make it mine.

(Laughs.)

Actually, I have never said it publicly, but if you argue that

a novel written in English cannot express truth about India because we do not express ourselves in English—

(Takes a breath. Laughs.)

God, what a sentence! But if you believe that, then let me say I could not have written about my sister in Kannada. She breathed, laughed, dreamt in English. Her friends spoke only English. Having her in my house for six years helped improve my English.

(Pause.)

IMAGE: So when are you going to write your next novel? Will it also be in English?

MANJULA: I think I have already answered that question. Why need I write another novel? Surely one is more than enough?

IMAGE: Critically and financially. But then what are you going to do? You have resigned your job. You are rich—

MANJULA: Well-to-do.

IMAGE: Well-to-do. You have no sister to look after. An empty house. Nothing you can use.

MANJULA: Are you trying to make me feel guilty? Are you implying I 'used' her? It was my life as well you know. I am in the book too, though I would never admit to it publicly. Most readers find the girl's 'first cousin' quite unattractive.

IMAGE: Eek! That odious character! Is that you?

MANJULA: Well! There you are!

IMAGE: A triumph of objective self-analysis, shall we say?

MANJULA: If you must. But I am not that wicked really. It was a narrative necessity to have a negative character. A matter of technique. The sympathetic heroine. A villain as a counter-point. You see?

IMAGE: But Pramod must be pleased by your treatment of his character. He comes across as not very good-looking or striking...

MANJULA: But not bad-looking, either. Good enough for me.

IMAGE: ...but an intelligent, warm and lovable person. Fun-loving. Fond of practical jokes. Noble and simple. Almost simple-minded.

MANJULA: You can say that again! You know, we met soon after I moved to Bangalore. He felt attracted to me. Didn't know how to convey it. So do you know what he did? I had a friend called Lucy. A close friend. He wrote a letter to her about me. And wrote me a letter about Lucy. Then he mailed her letter in an envelope addressed to me and vice versa. So I received this letter addressed to Lucy—moaning and groaning about how I tortured him. And I didn't even know he was interested in me. And of course Lucy received the other letter. He thought he was being absolutely clever—original. We went and confronted him. Lucy tore *her* letter to shreds and flung the pieces on him and stormed off. Melodramatically. I felt sorry for him and said, 'Idiot, every fifteen-year old tries that trick, convinced it's never been done before.' He blushed to the roots of his hair.

IMAGE: But you got married. So the ruse worked.

MANJULA: No ruse. He had made such a fool of himself, he did the only thing he could to save his self-respect. He married me. I didn't mind.

IMAGE: Mind? You would never have got another man of his calibre.

MANJULA: I suppose so.

IMAGE: And what happened to Lucy?

MANJULA: She stopped talking to me.

(They both laugh.)

Women found him attractive.

IMAGE: Malini too?

MANJULA: Of course. She was a woman, after all.

IMAGE: They were close to each other?

MANJULA: Very.

IMAGE: And you didn't mind?

MANJULA: Mind? Thank God for it. You see, he is in software development. Works from home. She was confined to her chair. Can you imagine what would have happened if they hadn't got on? He is basically a two-woman man. Likes to have one on either side. I used to call him Tirupati Thimmappa.

IMAGE: He must be proud of you. That flattering portrayal of him in the novel. The moving acknowledgment in your speech today...

MANJULA: I doubt if he will even hear of my speech. Ever. He is in the US.

IMAGE: Oh! When did he go?

MANJULA: Last year. He lives in Los Angeles now. He is in demand as a software wizard.

IMAGE: Last year! So has he even read the novel?

MANJULA: The launching of the novel was a major media event in the US. After all, you must remember it had already proved a super hit in Britain. They invited me to New York for the release. There was much fanfare. He sent me an email of congratulations. From Los Angeles. Apologized that he couldn't get leave to attend.

IMAGE: And you didn't go to LA?

MANJULA: He didn't even hint at it.

IMAGE: I'm sorry. But the chronology is beginning to confuse me. When did he decide to go to the States? Was it after Malini's death?

MANJULA: Yes.

IMAGE: Immediately after?

MANJULA: No. But soon after.

IMAGE: How long after?

MANJULA (*explodes*): Who are you, for God's sake? What gives you the right to interrogate me like this—about my private life? Either you are me in which case you know everything. Or you are an electronic image, externally prying. In which case, you can just...just...f...switch off.

(*The Image smiles. Suddenly Manjula becomes calm.*)

All right. Let me explain. The offer from the American Software Company had been hanging fire for a while. Even when Malini was alive. In fact, she became quite agitated when he received the offer—although of course she was also happy. I knew he too was dragging his feet because of her. We knew she was dying. Then she died. Then, I wrote the novel and sent it to a literary agent in Britain. Within a couple of weeks we received an email from the agent accepting the novel for publication. Mentioning the advance. That did it. Everything fell apart.

IMAGE: Really? What happened?

MANJULA: I suppose it was to be expected. Until that moment I was essentially dependent on him—emotionally, financially. He was the quiet bread winner. Also the more successful partner—the pillar of the family. Then suddenly, the rave response, the enormous advance. I had achieved a status he did not care for.

IMAGE: So?

MANJULA: His behaviour took an odd turn. I was of course inundated with invitations to public functions, cultural events, literary conferences and so on. He had never attended these events before. He didn't now. That was fine. But one day Lucy called. You know—my friend Lucy—of the mixed-up letters? I knew she was still unmarried—living by herself. She hadn't talked to me since that episode. She rang. Pramod had begun to invite her out in the evenings. To dinner in expensive restaurants.

IMAGE: Were they having an affair?

MANJULA: No, no, no. He would never even make a pass. I knew that. In fact, I wish he had had a full-scale affair with her—with anyone, in fact. That might have eased the tension in the house. But he just isn't the roaming type. Too much a creature of habit.

IMAGE: So they only talked? What about? Did he complain against you?

MANJULA: Lucy said he never so much as mentioned me.

IMAGE: Then?

MANJULA: He told her jokes.

IMAGE: He did what?

MANJULA: He cracked jokes. Of course he talked of other things, but everything was honed to delivering the jokes he had carefully selected, polished, tabulated and fitted into the larger narrative.

IMAGE: Not smutty jokes then?

MANJULA (*exasperated*): No, no, no. That's just not like him. Jokes about his work. About Information Technology. About Bill Gates and Wipro and Infosys. Cyberjokes. And she said he was hilarious. Had her in stitches. She enjoyed the evenings enormously.

It was his inexhaustible gaiety that worried her. Did he tell me jokes too? she wanted to know. I said no, he may have in the early days of marriage, but not any more. So she said: 'If it doesn't worry you, it doesn't worry me. If you don't mind, I would like to continue the evenings. So please don't question him.' That was the last I heard from her.

(*Pause.*)

Then he opened a new office for himself away from home.

(*Pause.*)

I had resigned my job, you see. We were both home all the time. People dropped in to see me now. That disturbed him, or he couldn't stand them. He made remarks about the woodworks

they must have crawled out of, which began to annoy me. His complaints multiplied. The maid didn't clean his office properly. Or she was too thorough and he couldn't find anything he needed. The quality of food at home was deteriorating. Then one day he wondered if we could reemploy the nurse.

IMAGE: The nurse?

MANJULA: Yes, the nurse who had attended on Malini. 'Can she just come and go once a day?' he asked. I was taken aback. 'Why?' I asked, 'Malini is dead and neither of us is ill.' He stared at his toes, went out of the room without replying. I don't know if he had the nurse visit him in his new office!

IMAGE: He obviously missed Malini.

MANJULA: Hm...

IMAGE: So the collapse of your marriage may have nothing to do with your literary success. It was her.

MANJULA: There was something insidious in the way she had taken over my home.

IMAGE: You can't blame her. You almost willed it.

MANJULA: How do you mean?

IMAGE: You let her take over your home. You were out all day. You didn't have much time for the house or them.

MANJULA: I was a working woman, you know. I wasn't out gallivanting.

IMAGE: You made yourself more and more...or rather less and less a part of the home scene. The cook came and went? (*Manjula nods.*)

The maid came and went? The nurse similarly?

So Malini and Pramod were together—virtually all day. And she was pretty.

MANJULA: Very, with a soft skin, almost translucent. Never exposed to sun or wind.

Most people in her situation would have grown fat—

obese. Developed diabetes. I'm told many kill the boredom of confinement by gorging and so put on weight. She didn't. She was never bored. She remained alert and supple and glowed.

IMAGE: A young shapely body? Small but firm breasts. When you bathed or changed her, you must have compared her physique with your own?

MANJULA: Funnily, whenever I sponged her, it was she who looked away.

IMAGE: Perhaps she couldn't bear the look in your eyes?
(Pause.)

MANJULA: Was I jealous? Of course not. She was paralysed below the waist. There was no possibility of any physical intimacy.

IMAGE: Intimacy can mean anything two people agree to.
(Pause.)

MANJULA: All right. It bothered me. Shall we say it was that irritation that produced this novel? What went on between them? Even if it was only words, what words?
(Pause.)

I tried various experiments. If I turned the key in the main door noisily enough before going in—sure enough I would find him at his table, studious, a picture of concentration. She would be deep into her book or her laptop, but never so absorbed that she couldn't give me that warm, welcoming smile. If I surprised them by entering silently, animated conversation would suddenly come to a stop—a guilty pause—before she picked the exact note effortlessly and continued, involving me too in their talk. It was always her. He was no good at subterfuge.

IMAGE: But what were they talking about? After all, six years! They couldn't have been declaring love all that time.

MANJULA: One day I returned home early. A furious battle was raging. I eavesdropped. They were squabbling like a married couple. It was about ethics. He was arguing that any system

of ethics demanded a single universal principle applicable to everyone. A command that bound every human being without exception. She was horrified by this. Different human situations called for different principles on which to act. Ethical demands are ethical because they are conflicting, she said. She found a universal principal inhuman.

They were screaming their heads off. He said Hinduism knew no real ethics. She called Immanuel Kant a fascist. But it all seemed impersonal. Abstruse. Innocuous. So I stepped in. They saw me, a sudden look of guilty horror as though I had caught them making love. Silence. Then she picks up again. She asks my opinion. What did I think?

I couldn't try the experiment too often of course. They knew my timings. There were occasions when I felt, 'This isn't my home. I am an intruder here: someone external to the soul of this house—along with the cook, the maid and the nurse.'

IMAGE: Did Pramod come to your bed willingly?

MANJULA: Almost too willingly. After all, he was not paralysed. (*Suddenly.*)

But the film must be halfway by now. What about the commercial break? I was told advertisers were queuing up. We can't be kept locked in here for ever.

IMAGE (*quietly*): You were talking about your bed.

MANJULA: There were moments when I wondered if he was fantasizing about having Malini instead of me in bed with him.

IMAGE: And she no doubt lay listening, beyond earshot. Imagining the two of you together.

MANJULA: It was painful... There seemed to be no end in sight.

No resolution. Critics have commented on the sensually charged atmosphere of the novel. The despair—

(*Pause.*)

IMAGE: You found the perfect 'Objective Correlative' for it.

MANJULA: It sold the book.

IMAGE: But you have to keep protesting that the plot was not taken from life?

(*Manjula shrugs.*)

By the way, did Malini know you were writing a book about her?

MANJULA: How could she? I hadn't even thought of it when she was alive. Have a heart! I was a working woman. English literature. At home, there was Malini. Completely dependant. And a quintessentially Indian husband—caring, but useless. Where was the time? Besides you need distance. 'Emotion recollected', etc.

IMAGE: But once you found Tranquility you must have written at a tremendous pace.

MANJULA: It poured out. It was one way of making up for her absence.

IMAGE: She died. Within a couple of weeks of her death you mailed the typescript to your literary agent. 350 printed pages worth of material within two weeks.

MANJULA: I worked my fingers to the bone.

IMAGE: A gigantic task, worthy of the Guinness Book of World Records. Do you know the publishers of the Guinness Book say they receive the largest number of applications from India? We are a nation that aspires to being the world-record-holder in world-record-holding.

MANJULA (*flares up*): What are you burbling? Are you being willfully obtuse? Or plain stupid? And nasty. All those hints. Jibes. Innuendos.

IMAGE: But one hundred and fifty thousand words in two weeks? Ten thousand words a day! It wasn't inspiration. It was a cataract—of words. A deluge not matched since Noah's Ark!

MANJULA (*explodes*): All right! I didn't write the novel. She did. She wrote it. Every word of it.

IMAGE: Dear me!

MANJULA: Once her health began to collapse, about eighteen months before the end, she began hammering away at the laptop. I knew she was writing something. But I had no time for it. After her death, I found the typescript in her drawer. I read it.

(Pause.)

I was decimated.

IMAGE: It was brilliant. A masterpiece. You knew that as a writer you could never dream of such heights. The passion. The clarity. The insights. The total control. A work of genius.

MANJULA: Absolutely. I looked up a Directory of Literary Agents in the British Council and mailed the typescript to them. I didn't know if they would even respond. Then it happened.

IMAGE: What?

MANJULA: I tried to explain to Pramod. But he would have none of it. He was unforgiving.

IMAGE: About stealing the book?

MANJULA: I did *not* steal it. Malini liked to sign herself M. Nayak. My letter accompanying the manuscript was signed Manjula Nayak. The agent obviously thought we were the same person. His reply arrived at Pramod's email address. We shared a computer, you see. Why does a Kannada writer need a computer anyway? He printed off a copy of the reply and left it for me—on the kitchen table.

As I read the email, I could sense him watching me. From his corner. I decided to face him.

'How can you accuse me of plagiarism?' I wanted to demand. 'Are you implying I knowingly stole my sister's novel?'

I knew he would deny any such insinuation. I was rearing to pitch into him—wring the truth out of him.

'Why don't you say what is on your mind?' I wanted to go on. 'You know it was a genuine mistake. The Agent is an Englishman, unfamiliar with Indian names.'

Instead, I heard myself asking, 'Why did you leave the email message on the kitchen table?' He looked nonplussed. And it wasn't what I had meant to ask. But I had to plunge on. 'You know I have a study of my own—a desk at which I work.' 'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said, picked up the message from the kitchen table, took it into my study and plonked it down on my writing desk, 'Here. The message.' That was it. He pretended he didn't know what I was getting at. But he did know. You could see it in his anger. He had never been so angry before—not with me.

The subject was never mentioned again.

IMAGE: Then?

MANJULA: We lived entombed in silence. The last real communication between us—the last moment of privacy—was when he'd asked whether we could call the nurse back. I had replied with a flippant why, but as we looked at each other—for a moment only—the room had suddenly filled with the reek of her incontinence, her phlegm and sweat, her perfumes, medicines and disinfectants. This was weeks after she had died! Before long, the press got wind of the deal and invaded our home. The enormous advance. The rave previews. The literary tours. It was all too late...

IMAGE (*gently*): Let's just go back a bit. The plot is a little too neat, don't you agree?

(*Manjula stares dourly.*)

All that spiel about the Literary Agent confusing Malini with Manjula. Such melodrama! Sounds like one of your Kannada short stories.

(*A very long pause.*)

MANJULA: After her death, I looked for her papers. I could not find them in her room. I dashed to Pramod's office. Rifled through his papers. There it was, the typescript. Not even a floppy which you might miss or not recognize. She had printed off the entire novel and arranged the pages, carefully. It lay

there, hidden away in his drawer. Or at least he thought so. He is no good at concealment. He did not even know I had filched the typescript until the agent's email arrived... I read the typescript.

IMAGE: You were decimated. It was brilliant, a masterpiece, etc.

MANJULA: It was venomous. I was camouflaged as the first cousin, and not sister. But it was me all right and the portrayal was rancorous. I was a shallow woman, a pretentious mediocrity, a gushy, conniving and devious relative who had taken her in for her inheritance. But there were no adjectives. Just facts. The events were from life. They were accurately described. The conversations were recorded verbatim. I couldn't deny them.

IMAGE: Perhaps that's why Pramod had hidden the script.

MANJULA: Or perhaps they had shared it together? Laughed and exchanged notes? Perhaps he was not simple at all—she had brought out an aspect of him I never suspected? She could not have imagined her work would find the light of day. So it was either meant to be read by me—or to be shared between them.

She despised me. Perhaps they both did. Perhaps she had turned him against me.

At that moment I knew—that I hated the cripple. I had always hated her. I was only waiting for her to die.

IMAGE: And she had recognized the truth all along.

MANJULA: And she was right! Once again! It was maddening.
(Pause.)

For six years, from her wheelchair, she had watched me, stalked me in every move. Then she had pinned me down in coruscating prose.

(Pause.)

From beyond the funeral pyre, my sister was challenging me to burn the script. If I succumbed, I would stand condemned in my own eyes for destroying a masterpiece.

IMAGE: And if you published it, everyone would see who 'the first cousin' was. You would become the laughing stock. Worse still, you would go down in history as a footnote in the life of a brilliant author. Dangling by an insignificant asterix. Malini had nicely crucified you.

MANJULA: I had to do something she could not have possibly anticipated. I had to solve all problems at one stroke. I had to survive.

(Pause.)

And this time I had one advantage. She was dead and I was not.

(Pause.)

I published the novel in my name. I won!

(The Image claps. Manjula takes a bow. Smiling.)

Shall we go then?

(Makes a move to the door. Suddenly the Image stops clapping.)

IMAGE: Wait a bit. Perhaps...she did win in the end?

MANJULA: How do you mean?

IMAGE: If she meant to prove to you that you were a fraud, she certainly succeeded.

MANJULA: You—you—I'll show you.

(She rushes to the screen and looks for the cable connecting it.)

IMAGE: What are you doing?

MANJULA: I've had enough of you. I want to unplug you. I want to wipe you out.

(She goes behind the screen looking for the connections, so that the Image seems to become the upper part of her body. Suddenly, Manjula's body, gesticulating in sync with the words of the Image, almost becomes an extension of the Image. The Image intones the following speech.)

IMAGE: I am Malini Nayak, the English novelist. Manjula Nayak, the Kannada short-story writer, was decimated the moment she read my novel. She thus obliterated all differences of ink

and blood and language between us and at one full stroke morphed into me.

(If there is a revolving stage available, it begins to revolve taking Manjula-cum-the-Image with it, as the television sets at the back come alive one after another. Every screen shows a different Image of Manjula, silent but gesticulating.)

Of course, I shall continue with the name of Manjula Nayak. As Manjula Nayak, I have been invited as Visiting Professor to seven prestigious American Universities. I use that nomenclature for my passport, my bank accounts, property and financial investments. However I am in truth Malini, my genius of a sister who loved my husband and knew Kannada and wrote in English.

(Suddenly all the screens start speaking loudly, some in Kannada, the others in English. The cacophony is deafening. The revolving stage moves Manjula out into the dark. Then one by one, the sets switch off, leaving the studio, dark and empty.)

APPENDIX 1

Note on *The Fire and the Rain**

The myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) occurs in Chapters 135–8 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. I have met Sanskrit scholars who were unaware of the existence of the myth: it is easy to lose track of a short narrative like this in the tangled undergrowth that covers the floor of that epic.

I first came across the story of Yavakri and Paravasva, while still in college, in C. Rajagopalachari's abridgment of the Mahabharata.¹ That Rajaji, confronted with the stupendous task of abridging the world's longest epic to about four hundred pages, should not have discarded this seemingly peripheral tale is a tribute to his sensitivity and judgement.

It was fortunate for me that Rajaji did not do so, for the moment I read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty-seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of a manageable shape.

What literally forced my hand was a commission, in 1993, from the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, USA, to write a play for them. In October 1994, a workshop was organized in Minneapolis in which I worked with professional American actors at making the script stageworthy. My

* Taken from Preface, *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

¹ C. Rajagopalachari: *Mahabharata*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1951.

grateful thanks are therefore due to Garland Wright, Artistic Director of the Theater (who also directed my play, *Nāga-Mandala*²), Madeline Puzo, who supervised the entire enterprise and Sumitra Mukherjee, who started it all by introducing my work to them. Barbara Field, with her sensitivity to nuances of another culture, commitment to theatre and pragmatic good sense proved an excellent dramaturge at the workshop and has continued to be a close and valued friend. The actors could not have been more understanding and co-operative in helping me reshape the text, but I should like to mention Amy Kane who brought such sympathy and understanding to the character of Nittilai.

While writing the play, I tried the patience of innumerable pundits, friends and scholars. I should particularly like to acknowledge my debt to Vidyalkara Professor S. K. Ramachandra Rao who analysed the story for me word by word; my guru, Mahamahopadhyaya Professor K. T. Pandurangi, to whom I turned again and again for guidance; Professor Ramachandra Gandhi who read the manuscript and criticized it and finally Shri Arunacharya Katti of Dharwad, a practising *purohit*, who explained to me what a *yajña* feels like from the 'inside' to a practitioner. My thanks are also due to Professor Sheldon Pollock of the University of Chicago, Professor Heidrun Brückner of Tübingen University and Shri Suresh Awasthi, former secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, for drawing my attention to some important publications on *yajña* and '*natya*'.

About the Play

The following notes are appended at the suggestion of the Publisher.

The Translation

The Fire and the Rain is a translation of my Kannada play, *Agni Mattu Malé*. English is the language of my adulthood: inevitably the translation is only an approximation to the original. But there is also another kind of loss.

Agni is the Sanskrit word for fire. And being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotations of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word for fire (*benki*) does not

² Oxford University Press, 1970.

possess. *Agni* is what burns in sacrificial altars, acts as a witness at weddings and is lit at cremations. It is also the name of the god of fire. Conversely, when a match is struck, a gas-burner is lit or when a house goes up in flames, you see *benki*.

Malé is a Kannada word. It means rain, pure and simple. It has none of the aura of romance, mystery and grandeur that surrounds Sanskrit words for rain when used in Kannada.

Mattu means 'and'. It is usually left out in spoken Kannada.

Thus the phrase, *Agni Mattu Malé*, in addition to counterpointing two physical elements normally seen as antagonistic, also sets up several other oppositions: between an Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and a Dravidian (Kannada) language, between the pan-Indic and the regional points of view, between the classical *marga* and the less exalted *desi* traditions, between the elevated and the mundane, and even perhaps between (here one needs to tread cautiously) the sacred and the secular.

Nothing of this can come through in English—a despair not confined to the title.

So bearing in mind Robert Frost's maxim that poetry is what gets left out in a translation, we proceed.

The Myth of Yavakri

There were two sages, Bharadwaja and Raibhya, who were good friends. Raibhya was a learned man who lived with his two sons while Bharadwaja concentrated on his ascetic practices. Yavakri, Bharadwaja's son, nursed a grievance against the world for he felt his father did not receive the respect and recognition which was his due.

He therefore went off to the forest and did *tapasya* (penance) so that he could obtain the knowledge of the Vedas from the gods directly. The rigours of his ascetic practice were such that Indra, the lord of gods, appeared to him, but only to persuade him that there were no such short cuts to knowledge. Knowledge has to be obtained by studying at the feet of a guru. But Yavakri was so adamant that Indra ultimately relented and let him have his wish.

Bharadwaja, being a wise man, was anxious lest the triumph turn his son's head and cautioned Yavakri against delusions of omnipotence. But his fears unfortunately proved well-founded. For one of the first things

Yavakri did was to corner Raibhya's daughter-in-law in a lonely spot and molest her.

Yavakri's misdemeanour incensed Raibhya. He invoked the *kritya* spirit. He tore a hair from his head and made an oblation of it to the fire. From it sprang a woman who looked exactly like his daughter-in-law. From another hair he similarly brought forth a *rakshasa* (demon). Then he sent the two to kill Yavakri.

The spirit in the form of the daughter-in-law approached Yavakri seductively and stole the urn which contained the water that made him invulnerable to danger. The *rakshasa* then chased him with a trident.

Yavakri ran toward a lake in search of water, but the lake dried up. Every spot with a bit of water in it went dry at his approach. Finally Yavakri tried to enter his father's hermitage. But a blind man of the Sudra caste, who was guarding the gate, barred Yavakri's entry. At that moment the *rakshasa* killed Yavakri.

When Bharadwaja learnt from the Sudra how his son had died, he was naturally distressed. Although he knew his son was to blame for all that had happened, he cursed Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son. And then shocked at his own folly in cursing a friend, he entered fire and immolated himself.

Raibhya's two sons, Paravasus and Aravasu (spelt Arvasu in the play) were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night when Paravasus was visiting his home, he mistook the black deerskin which his father was wearing for a wild animal and unintentionally killed him.

When he realized what he had done, he cremated his father and returned to the sacrificial enclosure. There he said to his brother Aravasu: 'Since you are not capable of performing the sacrifice alone, go and perform the penitential rites prescribed for Brahminicide. I'll carry on with the sacrifice.'

Aravasu did his brother's bidding. But when he returned to the sacrifice, Paravasus turned to the king and said: 'This man is a Brahmin-killer. He should not be allowed to enter the sacrificial enclosures.'

The king promptly ordered his servants to throw Aravasu out, although the latter kept protesting loudly that he was innocent.

Aravasu retired to the jungle and prayed to the Sun God. When the gods appeared, he asked them to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaja and

Raibhya back to life and make Paravasu forget his evil act. The gods granted him the boon. When Yavakri came back to life, the gods reprimanded him on his folly and asked him to pursue knowledge in the right manner.

The *Yajña*: Fire Sacrifice

In Vedic thought, as in the Iranian tradition, there was a conception of the world as due not to a chance encounter of elements but as governed by an objective order, inherent in the nature of things, of which the gods are only the guardians... The sacrifice (*yajña*) is performed on behalf of an individual householder, technically called the sacrificer, accompanied by his wife, but all the ritual acts are performed by priests, varying in number from one to sixteen and ultimately seventeen officiants in the full... sacrifice... A special area is consecrated for each performance of a ritual and the sacrificer undergoes a consecration setting him apart from the profane world. In essence, the sacrifice can be regarded as a periodic ritual by which the universe is recreated, with the sacrificer like his prototype Prajapati incorporating the universe.

Indeed, the construction of the altar is conceived as a creation of the world from the basic elements of earth and water. In this cyclical process the gifts to the priests in attendance... came to be seen as the fee paid for the performance of the ritual... Originally, as indeed in the myth of the cosmic sacrifice of *purusha* (RV 10.90), the sacrifice was a sacrifice of the sacrificer himself and then successively of increasingly remote substitutes [like the horse, the ox, the sheep and then the goat and finally the rice-cake.]³

The expenses of a fire sacrifice are met by a king or a wealthy man (known only as the *dikshita* or *yajamana*) who arranges for one in order to obtain certain benefits: sons, cattle, wealth or even to postpone old age, avoid death, or 'shine in glory like the Adityas'.

There are four Chief Priests, each associated with a Veda and specializing in a particular branch of the ritual, helped by the other

³ J. L. Brockington: *The Sacred Thread: A Short History of Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 34–5.

priests. The conduct of the participants is regulated by stringent rules. They cannot go outside the sacrificial precincts. They cannot indulge in sexual dalliance. They cannot speak to 'lower-caste' people, etc.

There is one aspect of the idea of divinity in this period to which we should call particular attention, viz. its intimate association with what is described as *rita*. *Rita* which etymologically stands for 'course', originally meant 'cosmic order', the maintenance of which...is the purpose of all the gods; and later it also came to mean 'right', so the gods were conceived as preserving the world not merely from physical disorder but also from moral chaos...

This [initially] simple form of worship became more and more complicated and gave rise, in course of time, to elaborate sacrifices as also to a special class of professional priests who alone, it was believed, could officiate at them.

More noteworthy...was the change that came over the spirit with which offerings were made to the gods... What prompted the performance of sacrifices was no longer the thought of prevailing upon the gods to bestow some favour or to ward off some danger; it was rather to compel or coerce them to do what the sacrificer wanted to be done. This change of spirit is explained by many among modern scholars as importing of the magical element into Vedic religion and...as a sign of the transfer of power from the gods to the priests. [But it 'would seem more correct to see the power as] transferred from the gods not to the priests but directly to the Veda itself!

It is this sacrificial correctness that constitutes the third meaning of *rita*... Ritualistic punctilio thus comes to be placed on the same level as natural law and moral rectitude.⁴

Yajña and Entertainment

The duration of a fire sacrifice varied and some stretched over years. The Mahabharata opens with a sacrifice that was to go on for twelve years.

⁴ M. Hiriyanna: *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, George Allen & Unwin, 1949, pp. 12, 16, 17.

The daily activity of a sacrifice is cyclical. And there are intervals between the ritual actions when the priests are free and can devote their time to other activities, not directly connected with the sacrifice.

Story-telling was an activity that often occupied the intervals between the actions of the rite. The whole of the Mahabharata, for instance, was narrated during such intervals between rites. The space could also be devoted to the performance of plays. In the last chapter of the *Natyashastra*, King Nahusha expresses his intention to arrange for dramatic performances at *yajñas*.

A Kannada reviewer of *The Fire and the Rain* based his entire analysis on the assumption that in the play, the *yajña* represented the sacred while the dramatic performance represented its secular counterpoint. This is not just simplistic. It is wrong. The *Natyashastra* lists ten forms of theatre and some may have been secular. But no truly secular performance would be permitted as entertainment at a fire sacrifice.

Indra

Indra is the king of gods, the lord of rains and the wielder of the thunderbolt.

Indra was clearly the most popular deity among the poets of the Rigveda..., for almost a quarter of all the hymns are addressed to him. He is the dominant deity of the middle region, the region between the Earth and Heaven... A few [of the hymns] make him the son of Tvastri, the Great Father and Creator of all creatures... His chief characteristic, accorded unstinted praise, is his powers, both on the human plane as the god of battle...and mythologically as the thunder god who conquers the demons of drought and darkness, thus liberating the waters or winning the light.

The most basic myth connected with Indra concerns his battle with the serpent Vritra, who is obstructing the waters and the sky...⁵

Indra and Vritra

The slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra is one of the archetypal myths of India. We find it in the Rigveda: it appears again, needless to say with

⁵ Brockington, 1992, pp. 10–11.

variations, in the Mahabharata nearly a thousand years later. In the Rigveda, Vritra, 'the shoulderless one' (a serpent) swallows rivers and hides the waters inside him. Indra, by killing him, releases the waters and 'like lowing cows, the rivers flow out'. The importance of this deed to Vedic culture is borne out by the epithet, 'Vritrahan' or the slayer of Vritra, by which Indra is repeatedly hailed. Yet a passing reference in the myth to how Indra, frightened, fled 'like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers' suggests that even the Rigvedic version probably had elements not entirely complimentary to Indra.⁶

The exact nature of [the] liberation of the waters has given rise to much speculation. In the nineteenth century it was interpreted as bringing down rain... But the Vritra myth is now generally accepted as a creation myth with Vritra symbolizing chaos...⁷

By the time we come to the version recorded in the Mahabharata, Indra has lost his central position in the Hindu pantheon. The sectarian gods, Vishnu and Shiva, now hold sway. In the later version of the myth, Indra is anxious that Vishwarupa (also called Trishiras, the three-headed one), son of Tvastri, may dislodge him from his throne. He therefore destroys Vishwarupa treacherously. Tvastri then gives birth to another son, Vritra, by a female demon, and tells him: 'Kill Indra'. Indra, unable to overcome the new enemy, again has to resort to ignominious trickery to survive. Having killed Vritra, he suffers from the guilt of Brahminicide.

The myth can be seen as expressing a deep anxiety which informs the whole of Indian mythology, the fear of brother destroying brother. This fear branches out fully and nakedly in the Mahabharata, where the bonding of brothers within the Pandava and the Kuru clans is as close as the enmity between the cousins is ruthless and unrelenting. In the Ramayana, the fraternal bonding in the Raghu family—Rama and his brothers—expresses another facet of the same anxiety, with the betrayals of Sugriva and Vibhishana (interestingly in the cause of the ethically correct side) marking the counterpoint.

The tale of Aravasu and Paravasu fascinated me as an unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide and it seemed logical too that

⁶ Wendy O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, Penguin, 1975, pp. 74–86.

⁷ Brockington, 1992, p. 11.

Yavakri should be their cousin, though the Mahabharata does not explicitly say so. I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the Indra–Vritra legend in my plot, but years later, while re-reading the original version, I was astonished to find that right at the beginning of the tale of Yavakri, Lomasha mentions that the whole story took place on the banks of a river in which Indra had bathed to cleanse himself of the sin of killing Vritra! One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self-reflexivity. A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with.

Yajña and Theatre

The fire sacrifice was a rite of such central importance in the Vedic society and so completely dominated the mode of thinking that it became the central metaphor, used to underline the importance of any activity. Thus the *yajña* metaphor has been employed while talking of academic study, love-making, the epics, marriage, indeed of life itself. One need hardly mention then that it is also a favourite metaphor for theatre. Kalidasa talks of theatre as the 'desirable fire sacrifice of the eyes' (*Kantam kratum chakshusham*).

The parallel is striking in so far as both activities involve human performances, precise gestures, speech, and a carefully worked out action leading to a predetermined dénouement. But an additional characteristic common to both is the perennial possibility of disruption. The disruption may come from outside, either from a human agency (unruly audiences, mischief-mongers, intruders, those unable to understand what is happening, demons) or from a more general calamity (rain, storm, political upheavals). Or the source of disruption could be within: the performers may forget their lines, mispronounce words, or quite simply may not have prepared themselves properly for their roles.

To guard against the first two hazards, the *yajña* is performed inside a sacrificial enclosure, the play inside a theatre building. The third possibility is guarded against by the vigilance of the Chief Priest, the director, the *guru*.

The parallels are so close that many scholars⁸ have argued that the steps by which the narrative of the Birth of Drama proceeds in the first chapter of the *Natyashastra* actually mirror the progression in similar myths about the *yajña*:

Performance → disruption by demons → building of a protective enclosure → discussion → second performance inside the enclosure.

One of the principle differences between the two activities lay in the fact that drama was open to and became the prerogative of castes and communities excluded from the *yajña*. Abhinavagupta, a tenth-century critic, author of the only extant pre-modern commentary on the *Natyashastra*, brings home to us both this identity and difference when he explains that in the Prologue of a Sanskrit play the Sutradhara (Stage Manager) is addressed as 'Aryaputra' (a scion of an Arya family), although the actor is a Sudra by birth, because he is the host of the great sacrifice of the Natya Veda (*natyavedamahasattradikshita*).

The Birth of Drama

The first chapter of Bharata's *Natyashastra* gives us the myth of the origin of drama. The chapter itself has been attributed to 500 BC though the other chapters of the book may be of later date.

It was a time when the moral fibre of the society had weakened, irrational passions held sway and people had surrendered themselves to their baser instincts. Knowledge of the Vedas (which presumably could have saved the situation) being restricted to the upper strata of the society, a medium was required that entertained and could restore the health of the society by reaching out to all the people, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy. On being implored by Indra and the other gods to provide such an instrument, Brahma, the Father of the Universe, took the text from the Rigveda, the art of performance from the *Yajurveda*, the song from the *Samaveda* and *rasa* (aesthetic experience) from the *Atharvaveda* and created a fifth Veda called the *Natyaveda*.

But Indra realized that the gods were unable (or unfit) to deal with this new form and passed it on to a human preceptor, Bharata. And

⁸ M. Christopher Byrsky, *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre*, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974, pp. 41–51; 76–90.

Bharata, with the help of his hundred sons and some nymphs specially created by Brahma for the purpose, staged the first play.

The play was performed on the occasion of the Banner Festival, held to celebrate Indra's victory in a battle over the demons. The theme of the play was the victory of the gods over the demons, the event which the festival was meant to celebrate. This did not please the demons who were present. They took umbrage and using supernatural powers, 'paralysed the speech, movement as well as the memory of the actors'. (Notice that the demons do not attack the actors physically but rather render the training they had received for performance ineffective.)

Indra, engaged by the mischief of the demons, laid into the demons with his thunderbolt, killing many. (Notice again that thus Indra, the god, re-enacts what Indra, in Bharata's play, was enacting in imitation of what Indra, the god, initially had done in battle.) But the demons persisted in their obstructive tactics.

At this point Bharata again approached Brahma, whose immediate reaction was to suggest that a theatre building should be built within which the performance could proceed uninterrupted. He placed the various gods at the vulnerable points of the building to ensure security. And then he addressed the demons on the nature of drama: 'In it (*natya*) there is no exclusive representation of you or the gods', he said, 'for the drama is a re-enactment of the state of the Three Worlds.'⁹ Drama serves varied functions—providing for instruction, entertainment, enlightenment, happiness, peace and moral upliftment. It teaches one one's duty and relieves one's sorrow. There is no maxim, no learning, no art or craft that is not found in drama. For it is the joys and sorrows of human nature expressed through gestures and other techniques.

Then Brahma instructed Bharata to consecrate the stage for the next performance.

Drama and the *Purusharthas*

The *Purusharthas* are the four ethical goals of human existence: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Very roughly, *dharma* relates to the spiritual

⁹ M. M. Ghosh (tr.), *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950 and 1961, p. 14. The word used by Dr Ghosh is 'representation'. But I prefer 're-enactment' as a translation of *anukēertanam*.

sphere, *artha* to the realm of political and economic power, and *kama* to that of sexual or aesthetic gratification. In these cases, what a person understands as his or her *Purushartha* could vary according to his or her background, stage of and station in life, sex etc., as well as the nature of the crisis he or she is facing. The fourth goal, *moksha*, is release from the cycle of births and deaths and hence final liberation from human bondage. This is the supreme goal, the achievement of which relates the human being to the Absolute. The concept therefore belongs to a realm beyond where the first three are relevant. Thus the harmony of the first three may be seen as a means to realizing the fourth.

The Nature of Drama

The opening chapter of the *Natyashastra*, as we saw, ends with Brahma telling Bharata to get ready for the next performance. It does not tell us whether this performance was any more successful, or at least less troublesome, than the first one. But that is the curious aspect of the myth. Here is the most ancient, most revered text on drama telling us about what was in fact the very first dramatic performance in history. The performance was the result of a collaboration between men and gods, working on a combination of the most appropriate elements drawn from the Vedas. The result should have been a resounding success, unmatched in the history of Time.

Instead, we are told the show was a disaster.

The last chapter of the *Natyashastra*—admittedly a later addition—tells us of another performance, again staged by the sons of Bharata. This time it is the Brahmins who are offended and they curse the actors to be outcastes. The Brahmanic tradition which handed down the *Natyashastra* does not concede that these irate Brahmins may have been as wrong in their understanding of drama as the demons were in chapter one. But it is significant that the *Natyashastra* is sandwiched between two performances, neither of which could be described as a success.

There is an implicit statement here about the nature of drama itself, which modern scholars have refused to look at: possibly, it embarrasses them. The point being made is that drama is a precarious, potentially disruptive, event. The possibility of being misunderstood is built into it because of its social character. Before it can be made to yield *rasa* or

pleasure, all the parties need to undergo rigorous and disciplined training. One has to train oneself to 'recognize' the form for what it is and appreciate its finer points.

Let me now quote a tale by one of the great storytellers of our time as summarized by another storyteller, Umberto Eco, concerning drama.

According to Jorge Luis Borges, Abulgualid Mohammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Mohammahd Ibn Rushd, better known as Averroes, was thinking—something like one thousand years ago, more or less—about a difficult question concerning Aristotle's *Poetics*. As you probably know, Averroes was a specialist on Aristotle, mainly on the *Poetics*. As a matter of fact, Western civilization had lost this book and had rediscovered it only through the mediation of Arab philosophers. Averroes did not know about theatre. Because of the Muslim taboo on representation, he had never seen a theatrical performance. At least, Borges, in his short story, *The Quest of Averroes*, imagines our philosopher wondering about two incomprehensible words he had found in Aristotle, namely 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. A nice problem, since Aristotle's *Poetics* is nothing else but a complex definition of those two words, or at least of the first of them.

[One day] Averroes is disturbed by some noise coming from downstairs. On the patio a group of boys are playing. One of them says, 'I am the Muezzin', and climbs on the shoulders of another one, who is pretending to be a minaret. Others are representing the crowd of believers. Averroes only glances at this scene and comes back to his book, trying to understand what the hell 'comedy' means.

In [another] episode, Averroes and the Koranist Farach are talking with the merchant Albucasim, who has just come back from remote countries. Albucasim is telling a strange story about something he has seen in Sin Kalan (Canton): a wooden house with a great salon full of balconies and chairs, crowded with people looking towards a platform where fifteen or twenty persons, wearing painted masks, are riding on horseback, but without horses, are fencing, but without swords, are dying, but are not dead. They were not crazy, explains Albucasim they were 'representing' or 'performing' a story. Averroes does not understand, and Albucasim tries to explain it: 'Imagine', he says, 'that someone *shows* a story instead of telling it.' 'Did they speak?'

asks Farach. 'Yes, they did', answers Albucasim. And Farach remarks, 'In such a case they did not need so many persons. Only one teller can tell everything, even if it is very complex.' Averroes approves. At the end of the story, Averroes decides to interpret the words 'tragedy' and 'comedy' as belonging to encomiastic discourse.

Averroes touched twice upon the experience of theatre, skimming over it without understanding it. Too bad, since he did have a good theoretical framework ready to define it.¹⁰

Conclusion

Thirty-seven years is a long time to live with a myth for company. It inevitably grows and changes with one. Somewhere along the line I became aware that the shape of the myth I was dealing with had uncanny parallels with that of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

The plot naturally fell into three parts, like a trilogy, each part with its own central action and lead character. The first two parts opened with the protagonist returning home after a prolonged absence while the third part culminated, not in some dramatic event, but in a debate on human frailty and divine grace: Then there was the presence in both of a supernatural agency bent on avenging a crime.

These are of course only external similarities but the shape of a myth cannot be isolated from its meaning, and once I saw the parallel, I was irresistibly drawn to delve deeper into the *Oresteia* and then the rest of Aeschylus. A deeper appreciation of that joyous genius has been one of the major benefits I have personally derived from writing *The Fire and the Rain*.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco: 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance'. (Source unknown to author).

APPENDIX 2

Note on *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan**

In 1996, the BBC commissioned me to write a radio play to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of Indian Independence. The plot obviously had to deal with some aspect of Indo-British relations and I immediately thought of Tipu Sultan, one of the most politically perceptive and tragic figures in modern Indian history. It was the late A. K. Ramanujan who drew my attention to the secret record of his dreams maintained by this warrior.

Tipu has always fascinated playwrights. *Tipu Saib or British Valour in India* was put on at Covent Garden, London, as early as 1791 and was followed by a series of spectaculars. In Karnataka, Tipu has continued to inspire folk ballads and I have, in my lifetime, seen three Kannada stage versions of his life, two of them by itinerant troupes of rural actors.

The radio play was broadcast by the BBC on 15 August 1997 and was directed by Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts with Saeed Jaffrey playing Tipu Sultan. Karnataka Nataka Rangayana, the state repertory, staged the Kannada version in the precincts of Daria Daulat, Tipu's summer palace in Srirangapatna, to commemorate his 200th death anniversary in May 1997. It was directed by C. Basavalingaiah, with Hulugappa Kattimani in the lead role.

The present text has been entirely rewritten for the stage.

* Taken from Preface, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Bali: The Sacrifice: Two Plays* by Girish Karnad, Oxford University Press, 2004.

APPENDIX 3

Note on *Flowers*

Flowers is based on a folk-tale from the Chitradurga region in Karnataka. My grateful thanks to the Late Ta. Ra. Subbanna, Kannada novelist, who drew my attention to it thirty-five years ago.

Plays by Girish Karnad in English

<i>Tughlaq</i>	1972
<i>Hayavadana</i>	1975
<i>Nāga-Mandala</i> (Play with a Cobra)	1990
<i>Talé-Daṇḍa</i>	1993
<i>The Fire and the Rain</i>	1998
<i>The Dreams of Tipu Sultan</i>	2004
<i>Bali: The Sacrifice</i>	2004
<i>Two Monologues</i>	2005
<i>Flowers</i>	
<i>Broken Images</i>	

Translation

<i>Evam Indrajit</i> by Badal Sircar	1974
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Dates refer to the year of publication. All the plays have been published by Oxford University Press, except *Talé-Daṇḍa*, which was initially published by Ravi Dayal, Publisher.



'Karnad is India's best living playwright.... His journey from *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain* holds a mirror to the very evolution of Indian theatre during nearly four decades. The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly "Indian" theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns.'

—K. Chandrasekhar, *The Hindu*

'[*The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*] is a tight, inventive play, an example of how history can be made to yield drama as well as contemporary relevance.'

—Sudhanva Deshpande, *The Book Review*

'*Tipu* brings alive the king, rescues him from colonial perceptions, and refracts his story through the perspective of independent India. ...Karnad shows us yet again why he is hailed as a genius when it comes to plays.'

—*Hindustan Times*

'A triumph of technology and timing, [*Broken Images*] progresses towards a tight and stirring finish as Manjula seems to morph into the Image which then morphs into Malini as "differences of ink and blood and language" are obliterated in a babel of voices and a jumble of television images.'

—Mukund Padmanabhan, *The Hindu*

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