

Novel

THE ROYAL SAGE

RAJARSHI

Rabindranath Tagore



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CHAPTER 1

The stone steps of the Bhuvaneshwari temple led directly into the waters of the Gomati river. One summer morning, Maharaja Govinda Manikya of Tripura had come there to bathe, accompanied by his younger brother, Nakshatra Ray.

Just then, a little girl arrived at the steps, her younger brother in tow. Tugging at the King's garments, she asked, "Who are you?"

The King smiled gently and replied, "Little mother, I am your child."

The girl said, "Won't you pluck some flowers for my *puja*?"

"Alright, let's go," said the King.

His attendants grew restless. "Maharaj, why must you go?" they protested. "We will fetch them for you."

The King replied, "No, she has asked me; I shall pluck them for her myself."

The King gazed down at the little girl's face. It bore a striking resemblance to the pure, unblemished dawn of that day. As she walked through the temple's flower garden holding the King's hand, a pristine fragrance seemed to radiate from her bright, lovely face, much like the white *bel* blossoms surrounding them, wafting through the morning grove. The little brother toddled along, clinging to his sister's clothes. He only knew his sister; he did not quite warm up to the King.

The King asked the girl, "What is your name, little one?"

"Hashi," she replied.

The King then asked the boy, "And what is your name?"

The boy stared at his sister's face with wide, round eyes and gave no answer.

Hashi patted him and coaxed, "Tell him, brother, 'My name is Tata.'"

Parting his tiny lips ever so slightly, the boy echoed his sister with utmost solemnity, "My name is Tata." Saying this, he clutched his sister's clothes even tighter.

Hashi explained to the King, "You see, he's just a little boy, so everyone calls him Tata."

Turning to her little brother, she commanded, "Alright, let me hear you say *mandir* [temple]."

Looking at his sister's face, the boy said, "*Ladanda*."

Hashi burst into laughter. "Tata can't say *mandir*, he says *ladanda*! — Alright, try saying *karai* [cooking pot]."

The boy replied with a serious face, "*Balai*."

Hashi giggled again, "Our Tata can't say *karai*, he says *balai*!" With that, she grabbed Tata and smothered him in a flurry of kisses.

Tata could find no earthly reason for his sister's sudden outburst of laughter and affection; he merely stood there, looking on with large, bewildered eyes. It could not be denied that Tata's pronunciation of *mandir* and *karai* was entirely flawed. Yet, at Tata's age, Hashi herself never called a temple *ladanda*—she used to call it *palu*. And whether she called *karai balai*, one cannot say, but she certainly called *kori* [cowrie shells] *ghoyi*. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that she found Tata's peculiar pronunciations so incredibly amusing.

She went on to recount various tales about Tata to the King. Once, an old man had walked by wrapped in a blanket, and Tata had called him a bear—such was his foolishness! Another time, mistaking the custard apples on a tree for birds, Tata had clapped his chubby little hands together, trying to shoo them away. Through numerous such examples, the elder sister thoroughly proved just how much more childish Tata was compared to her. Tata listened to these testimonies of his intellect with complete composure; from what little he could understand, he found no cause for offense.

Thus, the morning's flower gathering came to an end. As the King filled the little girl's *anchal* with flowers, he felt as though his own morning worship was complete. Witnessing the tender affection between these two innocent souls, and fulfilling the pure-hearted desire of this child by gathering flowers for her, felt to him like the truest offering to the divine.

Translation Notes:

- **"Little mother, I am your child":** In the original text, the King addresses the girl as "মা" (*Ma* / Mother). In Bengali culture, addressing a young girl as

"Mother" is a deeply affectionate and respectful endearment, recognizing the divine feminine (or goddess) within her. Translating it as "Little mother" preserves this beautiful cultural paradox and the King's humility.

- **Hashi's Name:** *Hashi* literally translates to "Smile" or "Laughter," which perfectly mirrors her joyful, bubbly disposition throughout the excerpt.
- **Baby Talk:** The nonsense words (*ladanda, palu, balai, ghoyi*) were transliterated directly to maintain the phonetic humor of childhood mispronunciations.
- **Anchal:** I kept the word *anchal* (the loose, flowing end of a sari or dress used here as a makeshift basket/pouch) to retain the distinctly South Asian visual imagery of the scene, as a direct English equivalent like "hem" or "apron" breaks the poetic immersion.

CHAPTER 2

From the very next day, the sunrise alone no longer signaled the break of dawn for the King; his morning truly began only when he laid eyes on the two little siblings. He would not step into the water without first gathering flowers for them. The brother and sister would sit on the stone steps and watch him bathe. On days they did not appear, his daily rituals and prayers felt somehow incomplete.

Hashi and Tata were orphans. They had no one in the world but a paternal uncle, Kedareshwar. These two children were his only joy and the sole treasure of his life.

A year drifted by. Tata had finally learned to say *mandir*, though he still called *karai balai*. He was a quiet child. Sitting on the banks of the Gomati beneath the *nagkeshar* tree, legs stretched out, his sister would spin all sorts of tales for him, and he would listen in wide-eyed wonder. Her stories made little sense, but what he grasped of them was a secret known only to him. Under the shade of that tree, in the golden sunlight and the gentle, unfettered breeze, who could say what thoughts and images blossomed in the little boy's tiny heart? Tata never played with other children; he simply followed his sister everywhere, clinging to her like a shadow.

It was the month of Ashadh, the heart of the monsoon. Heavy clouds had been gathering since daybreak. The rain had not yet broken, but a relentless downpour felt imminent. A cool wind blew, carrying the damp chill of rain from distant lands. The dark, brooding sky cast a heavy shadow over the waters of the Gomati and the dense forests lining her banks. The previous night had been *amavasya*—the new moon—and the grand worship of Goddess Bhuvaneshwari had taken place.

At the usual hour, the King arrived for his bath, holding Hashi and Tata by the hand. A crimson trail of blood snaked its way down the white stone steps, dissolving into the river. It was the blood of the one hundred and one buffaloes sacrificed the night before.

Seeing the trail of blood, Hashi shrank back in sudden dismay and asked, "What is this stain, father?"

The King replied gently, "It is a stain of blood, little mother."

"Why is there so much blood?" she cried.

The little girl asked, "Why so much blood?" with such agonizing anguish that the question began to echo endlessly within the King's own heart: *Why so much blood?* A sudden shudder ran through him. For years, he had witnessed this river of blood flow annually, yet hearing the question from a child's lips, his mind was consumed by it: *Why so much blood?* He forgot to give her an answer. As he absentmindedly went through his ablutions, the question continued to haunt him.

Hashi dipped her *anchal* into the water and, sitting on the steps, began gently scrubbing away the crimson trail. Seeing her, Tata eagerly joined in, using his two tiny hands to do the same. Hashi's *anchal* soon turned heavy and red with blood. By the time the King finished his bath, the brother and sister had completely washed away the stain.

Later that day, after returning home, Hashi fell ill with a fever. Tata sat beside her, using two small fingers to pry open his sister's closed eyelids, calling out from time to time, "Didi!" Startled, his sister would briefly awaken, pull him close and ask, "What is it, Tata?" before her eyes fluttered shut again. For a long time, Tata sat in silence, staring intently at her face, saying nothing. Finally, he slowly wrapped his arms around her neck, brought his face close to hers, and whispered, "Didi, won't you get up?"

Hashi jolted awake, pulled Tata tightly to her chest, and said, "Why won't I get up, my treasure!" But the poor girl had no strength left to rise.

Tata's little heart was suddenly swallowed by a deep gloom. All his hopes for a day filled with play and joy faded entirely. The sky outside was pitch black; the relentless drumming of rain on the thatched roof filled the silence. In the courtyard, the tamarind tree stood drenched, and the roads were devoid of travelers. Kedareshwar arrived with a *vaidya*. The physician felt her pulse, observed her condition, and looked grim.

The following morning, when the King arrived for his bath, he noticed the two siblings were not waiting for him at the temple. He assumed the torrential monsoon rains had kept them away. After finishing his bath and water oblations, he boarded his palanquin and ordered the bearers to take him to Kedareshwar's hut. The attendants were astounded, but none dared question a royal command.

When the King's palanquin arrived at the courtyard, it caused an immense uproar in the humble hut. In the ensuing commotion, everyone temporarily forgot about the sick child. Everyone except Tata. He didn't move an inch. Sitting quietly beside his unconscious sister, with a corner of her clothing stuffed into his mouth, he simply stared.

Seeing the King enter the room, Tata asked, "What happened?"

The anxious King gave no reply. Shaking his little head, Tata asked again, "Is Didi hurt?"

His uncle Kedareshwar, somewhat annoyed, replied, "Yes, she is hurt."

Instantly, Tata leaned over his sister, tried to lift her face, wrapped his arms around her neck and asked, "Didi, where are you hurt?" His intention was clear: he would blow on the spot, rub it gently with his hands, and make all of his sister's pain go away. But when she gave no answer, he could bear it no longer. His little lips began to quiver and swell, and he burst into tears of wounded pride. He had been sitting there since yesterday, yet she hadn't said a single word! What had he done to deserve such neglect? Mortified by Tata's outburst in front of the King, Kedareshwar frantically grabbed the boy by the arm and dragged him into another room. Still, his sister said nothing.

The royal physician arrived and expressed grave doubts about her recovery. The King returned in the evening to check on Hashi. By then, the girl was delirious. She kept muttering, "Mother, why is there so much blood!"

The King whispered, "Little mother, I will stop this river of blood."

The delirious girl said, "Come, brother Tata, let the two of us wipe this blood away."

The King replied gently, "Come, mother, let me wipe it too."

Shortly after dusk, Hashi opened her eyes one last time. She looked around the room, as if searching for someone. By then, Tata had cried himself to sleep in the other room. Not finding the one she sought, Hashi closed her eyes again. She never opened them. At midnight, Hashi passed away in the King's arms.

When they carried Hashi out of the hut forever, Tata was lost in a deep, oblivious sleep. Had he known, perhaps he too would have trailed after his sister, following her into the unknown like a little shadow.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Didi:** The affectionate and respectful term for an older sister in Bengali. I kept it untranslated during dialogue as it carries a specific emotional warmth that "sister" lacks in English.
- **Amavasya:** The new moon night in the lunar calendar, which holds deep astrological and religious significance in Hinduism, particularly for the worship of divine mother figures or powerful goddesses (like Bhuvaneshwari here), often accompanied by animal sacrifices historically.
- **Vaidya:** An Ayurvedic doctor or traditional physician.
- **"Is Didi hurt?":** In the original text, Tata mispronounces the Bengali word for "hurt" (*legechhe* as *negechhe*). I translated this in a straightforward, childlike manner to maintain the innocence of the moment without resorting to exaggerated "baby talk" in English, which might disrupt the deeply tragic tone of the scene.

CHAPTER 3

The King's royal court was in session. The priest of the Bhuvaneshwari Goddess temple had come to seek an audience with the King on official matters.

The priest's name was Raghupati. In this land, the head priest is known as the *Chontai*. Fourteen days after the worship of Goddess Bhuvaneshwari, late at night, a special *puja* is held for the Fourteen Deities. During this ritual, for one day and two nights, no one is permitted to step out of their homes—not even the King. If the King were to venture out, he would have to pay a fine to the *Chontai*. Legend has it that on the night of this *puja*, human sacrifice is performed in the temple. The animals that are sacrificed first during this festival are customarily provided as an offering from the royal household. The *Chontai* had come before the King to collect these sacrificial beasts. Only twelve days remained until the *puja*.

The King announced, "From this year onward, there shall be no more animal sacrifices in the temple."

The entire court was stunned into silence. Even the hair on the head of the King's brother, Nakshatra Ray, stood on end.

Raghupati, the *Chontai*, exclaimed, "What nightmare am I witnessing!"

The King replied, "No, *Thakur*, it is until now that we were dreaming; today, we have finally awakened. The Mother appeared to me in the form of a little girl. She told me that, as a compassionate mother, she can no longer bear to see the blood of her earthly creatures."

Raghupati countered, "Then how has the Mother been drinking the blood of creatures for all these years?"

The King said, "She has not. Whenever you shed blood, she would turn her face away."

Raghupati said, "Maharaj, there is no doubt you understand matters of the state well, but you know absolutely nothing about worship. If the Goddess were displeased in any way, I would have been the first to know."

Nodding his head with an air of immense wisdom, Nakshatra Ray chimed in, "Yes, that is exactly right. If the Goddess were displeased, the revered priest would have been the first to know."

The King said, "He whose heart has hardened to stone can no longer hear the voice of the Goddess."

Nakshatra Ray glanced at the priest's face—his expression implying that a retort to this statement was necessary. Raghupati flared up like a raging fire and declared, "Maharaj, you speak like a wicked heretic."

Like a faint echo, Nakshatra Ray repeated, "Yes, you speak like a heretic."

Staring directly into the face of the enraged priest, Govinda Manikya said, "Priest, you are wasting your time sitting here in the royal court. The temple's duties are being neglected; return to your post. And on your way, proclaim it throughout the land: any person in my kingdom who offers a living creature as a sacrifice to the deities shall be punished with banishment."

Trembling with fury, Raghupati stood up, touched his sacred thread, and cursed, "Then may you be damned to ruin!"

With gasps of shock, the courtiers surged forward from all sides to apprehend the priest. The King raised a hand, silently forbidding them, and everyone stepped back. Raghupati continued, "You are a King; if you wish, you can strip your subjects of everything they own, but do you think you can strip the Mother of her rightful sacrifices? Indeed! What power do you have! Let us see how you disrupt the worship as long as I, Raghupati, remain the Mother's servant."

The Prime Minister was acutely aware of the King's temperament. He knew the King could not be easily swayed from his resolve. Slowly, and with trepidation, he said, "Maharaj, your heavenly ancestors have always offered regular sacrifices to the Goddess. Never, not even for a single day, has there been an exception."

The Minister paused.

The King remained silent. The Minister continued, "Today, after all this time, if you disrupt this ancient tradition established by your forefathers, they will be deeply displeased in heaven."

The Maharaja fell into deep thought. Nakshatra Ray sagely added, "Yes, they will be deeply displeased in heaven."

The Minister spoke again, "Maharaj, do one thing. In place of the thousand sacrifices that usually take place, decree that only one hundred be offered."

The courtiers sat astounded, as if struck by lightning, while Govinda Manikya sat and pondered. The furious priest, losing his patience, prepared to storm out of the assembly.

Just at that moment, somehow evading the guards, a little boy walked into the court, bare-chested and barefoot. Standing in the middle of the grand royal assembly, he looked up at the King with wide, round eyes and asked, "Where is Didi?"

The vast royal court suddenly fell completely silent. In that long, cavernous hall, only the voice of a little boy echoed: "*Where is Didi?*"

The King immediately stepped down from his throne, picked the boy up in his arms, and declared to the Minister in a resolute voice, "From this day forth, there shall be no sacrifices in my kingdom. Do not utter another word on this."

The Minister bowed, "As you command."

Tata asked the King again, "Where is Didi?"

The King replied, "She is with the Mother."

Tata placed a finger on his lips and remained quiet for a long time; it seemed to him that he had finally been given an address. From that day on, the King kept Tata with him. The uncle, Kedareshwar, was given quarters within the royal estate.

The courtiers began to murmur amongst themselves, "This is turning into a *Moger Mulluk*. We know that the Buddhist *Maghs* do not shed blood, but is that rule now going to be forced upon our Hindu land as well?"

Nakshatra Ray fully agreed with their sentiment and echoed, "Yes, is that rule now going to be forced upon our Hindu land as well?"

Everyone thought: what greater sign of downfall could there be! What difference was left between a Hindu and a *Magh*!

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Chontai:** A historical term specific to the royal priesthood of Tripura. Raghupati's title elevates his authority in the region over an ordinary priest.
- **Thakur:** While it can mean "Lord" or refer to a deity, here the King uses it as a highly respectful form of address for a Brahmin priest.
- **Poita (Sacred Thread):** Raghupati touches his *poita* (the sacred thread worn by Brahmin men across their chest) before cursing the King. In Hindu tradition, taking an oath or delivering a curse while holding the sacred thread invokes the full spiritual weight and ancestral power of the Brahmin's lineage.
- **Moger Mulluk:** Literally translating to "Kingdom of the Maghs (Arakanese)," this is a famous Bengali idiom for a lawless land, an anarchy, or a place where traditional rules are overturned. Historically, Arakanese pirates (*Maghs*) were feared for their lawless raids in Bengal. Here, the courtiers use the idiom with a double meaning: complaining that the kingdom is becoming lawless by breaking ancient Hindu traditions, while also pointing out the irony that the *Maghs* (being Buddhist) practice non-violence and do not shed animal blood—which the Hindu courtiers view as an alien, inferior practice being forced upon them.

CHAPTER 4

Jaisingha, the servant of the Bhuvaneshwari Goddess temple, was by caste a Rajput, a *Kshatriya*. His father, Suchet Singh, had been an old retainer of the Tripura royal household. When his father died, Jaisingha was merely a boy. Taking pity on the orphan, the King appointed him to serve the temple. There, Jaisingha was raised and educated by the head priest, Raghupati.

Having grown up within the temple precincts since childhood, Jaisingha loved it like his own home; he was intimately acquainted with every stone and every step of its stairs. Motherless, he viewed the idol of Goddess Bhuvaneshwari as his own mother. He would sit before the deity and converse with her, never feeling lonely.

He had other companions, too. He had nurtured many of the trees in the temple garden with his own hands, raising them as if they were his children. Every day around him, his trees grew taller, vines lovingly entwined their branches, flowers blossomed, and shadows lengthened. The arbor brimmed with the youthful pride of lush green creepers and thick clusters of leaves. But hardly anyone knew of the deep affections and tender workings of Jaisingha's heart; to the outside world, he was famous only for his immense physical strength and courage.

Having finished his temple duties, Jaisingha sat at the door of his hut. Before him lay the temple grove. Afternoon had faded into evening. Heavy clouds had gathered, bringing the rain. Jaisingha's trees were bathing in the early monsoon showers; the dancing raindrops sparked a festive celebration across every leaf. Hundreds of muddy, babbling rivulets of rainwater snaked their way down to merge with the Gomati river. Jaisingha sat in silent bliss, gazing at his beloved garden. The soothing darkness of the clouds all around, the deep shadows of the forest, the verdant beauty of the thick foliage, the chorus of frogs, the ceaseless patter of the rain—witnessing this grand, stormy spectacle of the new monsoon in his garden filled his soul with immense peace.

Suddenly, soaked to the bone, Raghupati arrived. Jaisingha hurriedly stood up and brought him dry clothes and water to wash his feet.

Annoyed, Raghupati snapped, "Who asked you to bring clothes?" Saying this, he snatched the garments and threw them into the room.

Jaisingha stepped forward with the foot-washing water. In a deeply irritated tone, Raghupati said, "Leave it, leave it. Put your water away," and with his foot, he kicked the water pot aside.

Unable to understand the cause of such sudden hostility, Jaisingha was taken aback. He went to pick up the clothes from the floor to put them away properly, but Raghupati snapped again, "Leave it, I said! You don't need to touch those clothes." The priest went inside, changed his clothes himself, took water, and washed his own feet.

Jaisingha asked softly, "Master, have I committed some offense?"

Raghupati replied sharply, "Who is saying you have committed an offense?"

Deeply hurt, Jaisingha sat back down in silence.

Raghupati paced restlessly across the veranda of the hut. Thus, the night deepened, and the rain continued to fall relentlessly. Finally, Raghupati placed a gentle hand on Jaisingha's back and said softly, "Child, go to sleep. It is late."

Moved by Raghupati's affectionate tone, Jaisingha replied, "Master, please go to rest first, then I shall go."

"I will be a while," Raghupati sighed. "Listen, son, I was harsh with you today. Do not take it to heart. My mind was deeply troubled. I will explain everything in the morning. For now, go and sleep."

"As you command," Jaisingha said, and went to bed. Raghupati, however, paced through the entire night.

In the morning, Jaisingha bowed to his *guru* and stood before him.

Raghupati said, "Jaisingha, the Mother's sacrifices have been stopped."

Astonished, Jaisingha exclaimed, "What are you saying, Master!"

"It is the King's decree."

"Which King?"

Raghupati, thoroughly annoyed, shot back, "How many kings do we have around here? Maharaja Govinda Manikya has decreed that no living creature can be sacrificed in the temple."

"Human sacrifice?" Jaisingha asked.

"Ugh, what a nuisance! I am saying *animal* sacrifice, and you hear human sacrifice."

"No living creature at all?"

"No."

"Maharaja Govinda Manikya has ordered this?"

"Yes, man! How many times must I say the same thing!"

Jaisingha remained silent for a long time, only muttering to himself, "Maharaja Govinda Manikya!"

Since childhood, Jaisingha had revered Govinda Manikya as a god. Just as a child feels a natural, almost magnetic attraction toward the full moon in the night sky, so too did Jaisingha feel toward the King. Merely looking upon Govinda Manikya's serene, noble face, Jaisingha felt he could gladly lay down his life for him.

Raghupati broke his reverie. "Something must be done to counteract this."

"Certainly," Jaisingha agreed eagerly. "I shall go to the Maharaja and plead with him—"

"That effort is futile," Raghupati cut him off.

"Then what must be done?"

Raghupati thought for a moment. "I will tell you tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, go to Prince Nakshatra Ray and request him to meet me in secret."

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Rajput & Kshatriya:** Jaisingha is identified by his martial lineage (*Rajput*) and his caste (*Kshatriya*, the warrior/protector caste in the traditional Hindu

varna system). This historical and social context explains his legendary physical strength, courage, and intense loyalty.

- **Guru/Master:** Jaisingha addresses Raghupati as *Prabhu* (Master/Lord) and later treats him as his *guru* (spiritual teacher/guide). Raghupati addresses him as *Vatsa* and *Putra* (Child/Son), highlighting their complex father-son and master-disciple dynamic.
- **Jib-boli vs. Noro-boli:** In the Bengali dialogue, Jaisingha mishears *jib-boli* (sacrifice of living creatures/animals) as *noro-boli* (human sacrifice). This foreshadows the dark rumors mentioned in Chapter 3 about secret human sacrifices taking place in the temple.

CHAPTER 5

In the morning, Nakshatra Ray arrived, bowed to Raghupati, and asked, "Thakur, what are your commands?"

Raghupati replied, "The Mother has a command for you. Come, bow to the Mother first."

Both of them entered the temple. Jaisingha followed along with them. Nakshatra Ray prostrated himself fully before the idol of Goddess Bhuvaneshwari.

Raghupati turned to Nakshatra Ray and declared, "Prince, you shall be King."

"I will be King?" Nakshatra Ray said. "There is no telling what Thakur-mashai might say!" With that, Nakshatra Ray burst into loud, incredulous laughter.

Raghupati said, "I am telling you, you shall be King."

Nakshatra Ray repeated, "You are saying I will be King?" and kept staring at the priest's face.

Raghupati asked, "Am I telling a lie?"

"Are you telling a lie? How could that be?" Nakshatra Ray stammered. "Look, Thakur-mashai, last night I had a dream about a frog. Now, tell me, what happens if one dreams of a frog?"

Suppressing a smile, Raghupati asked, "What kind of frog, tell me? Did it have a mark on its head?"

Nakshatra Ray said proudly, "Of course it had a mark on its head. How could it not have a mark!"

Raghupati said, "Indeed! Then it is certain you will receive the *rajtika*."

Nakshatra Ray's eyes widened. "Then I will receive the *rajtika*! You are saying I will receive the *rajtika*? And what if I don't?"

Raghupati frowned. "Will my words fail? What are you saying!"

"No, no, I am not saying that," Nakshatra Ray quickly backpedaled. "You are saying I will receive the *rajtika*, but just suppose I don't. Does it not happen sometimes by sheer chance that—"

"No, no, there will be no exception to this," Raghupati cut him off firmly.

"There will be no exception. You are saying there will be no exception," Nakshatra Ray muttered, pacified. "Look, Thakur-mashai, if I become King, I will make you my prime minister."

Raghupati sneered, "I kick at the position of a minister."

Nakshatra Ray said generously, "Alright then, I will make Jaisingha the minister."

"We will discuss that later," Raghupati said impatiently. "Listen first to what you must do before becoming King. The Mother desires to see royal blood; I received this command in a dream."

Nakshatra Ray nodded agreeably. "The Mother desires to see royal blood, you received this command in a dream. That is all well and good."

Raghupati lowered his voice. "You must bring the blood of Govinda Manikya."

Nakshatra Ray stood there, his mouth hanging half-open. Suddenly, this did not sound quite so "well and good."

Raghupati asked sharply, "What is it? Has a sudden surge of brotherly affection awakened within you?"

Nakshatra Ray let out a hollow, wooden laugh. "Ha, ha, brotherly affection! Thakur-mashai spoke well indeed—brotherly affection!" He acted as if there could be no funnier, no more laughable concept in the world. Brotherly affection! What a shameful thing! But the All-Knowing Divine knew that true brotherly affection was indeed stirring inside Nakshatra Ray's heart; it was not something he could merely laugh away.

Raghupati demanded, "Then tell me, what will you do?"

"Tell me what I should do," Nakshatra Ray replied subserviently.

Raghupati said slowly, "Listen carefully. You must bring the blood of Govinda Manikya for the Mother to see."

Nakshatra Ray repeated the words blankly, like a chanted mantra, "I must bring the blood of Govinda Manikya for the Mother to see."

Raghupati threw up his hands in utter disgust. "Ugh! Nothing will be accomplished by you."

"Why won't it be?" Nakshatra Ray protested. "Whatever you say will be done. You are ordering me, are you not?"

"Yes, I am ordering you."

"What are you ordering?"

Thoroughly annoyed, Raghupati said, "It is the Mother's wish to behold royal blood. You shall fulfill her wish by bringing her the blood of Govinda Manikya; this is my command."

Nakshatra Ray said, "I will go today and assign Fateh Khan to do this job."

"No, no," Raghupati warned. "Do not breathe a single word of this to anyone else. I will only assign Jaisingha to assist you. Come tomorrow morning, and I will tell you exactly how this task is to be accomplished."

Nakshatra Ray was immensely relieved to finally escape Raghupati's grasp. He hurried out of the temple as swiftly as his legs could carry him.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Sashtanga Pranipat:** Translated as "prostrated himself fully," this refers to a specific, highly reverent form of Hindu bowing where eight parts of the body (hands, chest, forehead, knees, etc.) touch the ground in complete submission.
- **Thakur-mashai:** A respectful address for a Brahmin priest. Nakshatra Ray uses this constantly, highlighting his deference and slight intimidation when speaking to Raghupati.

- **Rajtika:** The royal mark or vermilion point placed on the forehead during a coronation ceremony, signifying kingship. Raghupati cleverly twists Nakshatra's silly dream about a spotted frog into a divine prophecy of a royal coronation.
- **Antaryami (The All-Knowing Divine):** Used in the text as *Antarjami*, it literally translates to "The Knower of the Heart" or the inner witness. It highlights the stark contrast between Nakshatra's outward bravado (pretending he doesn't care about his brother) and his inward hesitation and genuine familial love.
- **Dialogue Style:** Nakshatra Ray's dialogue is deliberately translated to sound repetitive and slightly vacuous. In the original Bengali, Tagore masterfully uses this repetition to paint Nakshatra Ray as a weak-willed, easily manipulated figure who simply parrots Raghupati's words.

CHAPTER 6

As soon as Nakshatra Ray left, Jaisingha said, "Gurudev, I have never heard such terrible words. In front of the Mother, in the Mother's name, you proposed fratricide—a brother murdering his own brother—and I had to stand there and listen to it!"

Raghupati replied coldly, "What other way is there, tell me."

Jaisingha cried, "Way! What way!"

"I see you have become just like Nakshatra Ray," Raghupati sneered. "What have you been listening to all this time?"

"What I heard is not fit to be heard. Merely listening to it is a sin."

"What do you understand of sin and virtue?" Raghupati scoffed.

"Having been educated by you all these years, do I understand absolutely nothing of sin and virtue?" Jaisingha retorted.

"Listen, child, let me teach you another lesson," Raghupati said. "There is no such thing as sin or virtue. Who is a father, who is a brother, who is anyone to anyone else? If killing is a sin, then all killing is equal. But who says killing is a sin? Slaughter and death happen every single day. Someone is killed by a falling stone, someone is swept away in a flood, someone dies in a plague, and someone is killed by the thrust of a man's knife. Think of how many ants we crush beneath our feet every day—are we really that much greater than them? The life and death of these insignificant creatures is nothing but a cosmic game, nothing but the *maya* of the Supreme Power. Millions and billions of beings are sacrificed every day before Mahamaya, the dark embodiment of Time and Death. From all corners of the world, rivers of blood flow into her great skull-bowl. Suppose I simply add one more drop to that endless stream. She would have eventually claimed her sacrifice anyway; I am merely acting as an instrument in the middle."

Jaisingha turned toward the idol and cried out in anguish, "Is this why everyone calls you Mother, O Mother? Are you truly so heartless, made of cold stone? Demoness, have you stuck out that lolling tongue just to squeeze the blood out of

the entire world and gorge your belly? Are love, compassion, beauty, and righteousness all false, and is your endless thirst for blood the only truth? Just to fill your belly, man will put a knife to man's throat, a brother will murder his brother, fathers and sons will slaughter each other. Cruel Goddess, if this is truly your will, then why don't the clouds rain blood? Why doesn't the merciful river carry a crimson tide to empty into an ocean of blood? No, no, Mother, reveal yourself and declare—this teaching is a lie, these scriptures are a lie! I cannot bear to hear my Mother called not a Mother, but a demoness thirsting for the blood of her own children!"

Tears began to stream down Jaisingha's face. He stood there, stunned by his own outburst. Never before had such blasphemous thoughts crossed his mind. Had Raghupati not come to teach him this new, terrifying doctrine, these words would never have awakened within him.

Raghupati smiled faintly. "In that case, the entire practice of animal sacrifice must be abolished completely."

Jaisingha had witnessed animal sacrifices every day since his earliest childhood. Therefore, the idea that sacrifices in the temple could or should ever be stopped simply did not register in his mind. In fact, the very thought struck a painful blow to his core beliefs.

Thus, in reply to Raghupati, Jaisingha hastily reasoned, "That is a different matter entirely. That holds a different meaning. There is no sin in that. But does that mean a brother should murder his brother? Does that mean Maharaja Govinda Manikya—Master, I fall at your feet and beg you, do not deceive me. Did the Mother truly say in a dream that she will not be satisfied without royal blood?"

Raghupati remained silent for a moment before saying, "If it is not the truth, am I lying? Do you doubt me?"

Jaisingha reached down to touch the dust of Raghupati's feet and said, "May my faith in my Gurudev never waver. But Nakshatra Ray was also born into the royal lineage."

"The dreams of the gods are mere hints," Raghupati explained. "Not every word is spoken clearly; much must be inferred. It is plain to see that the Goddess is deeply displeased with Govinda Manikya, and there is ample cause for her wrath."

Therefore, when the Goddess demanded royal blood, it must be understood that she meant Govinda Manikya's blood."

"If that is true, then I myself will bring the royal blood," Jaisingha declared. "I will not let Nakshatra Ray be tainted by sin."

"There is no sin in carrying out the Mother's command," Raghupati assured him.

"Then there must be virtue in it, Master. I shall be the one to earn that virtue."

Raghupati sighed. "Then let me speak the brutal truth, my child. I have raised you from infancy with more care than a son, loving you more than my own life. I cannot bear to lose you. If Nakshatra Ray slays Govinda Manikya and becomes King, no one will dare say a word against him. But if *you* raise a hand against the King, I will never get you back."

Jaisingha's voice trembled. "Out of love for me—Father, I am worthless—but out of love for me, you shall not harm even an ant. If you entangle yourself in a grievous sin out of your affection for me, I will not be able to enjoy that affection for long. The consequence of such tainted love can never be good."

"Alright, alright, we will discuss that later," Raghupati said hastily. "We will figure something out when Nakshatra Ray arrives tomorrow."

But in his heart, Jaisingha took a solemn vow: *"I myself will bring the royal blood. I will not allow fratricide to occur in the name of the Mother and in the name of my Gurudev."*

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Gurudev:** A highly respectful and reverent term for a spiritual teacher or guide. Jaisingha's relationship with Raghupati is deeply rooted in this master-disciple dynamic, making it incredibly difficult for him to question Raghupati's authority.
- **Maya & Mahamaya:** *Maya* refers to the cosmic illusion that binds human beings to the cycle of life and death, blinding them to ultimate spiritual truths. Raghupati uses this philosophical concept to justify murder, arguing

that all life is just a fleeting illusion anyway. He invokes the Goddess as *Mahamaya* (The Great Illusion) in her *Kalarupini* form (The embodiment of Time, Destruction, and Death, often associated with Kali), painting her as a terrifying cosmic force that inevitably consumes all life.

- **Taking the dust of the feet:** Touching the feet of an elder or a guru and metaphorically bringing the dust to one's own head or chest is a profound gesture of surrender, respect, and seeking blessings in Indian culture. Jaisingha does this to apologize for momentarily doubting his Guru.

CHAPTER 7

Jaisingha could not sleep the entire night. The words he had exchanged with his Guru began to sprout tangled branches in his mind. More often than not, the beginnings of things are within our grasp, while their ends are not. The same holds true for our thoughts. Ideas began to surge in Jaisingha's mind with an unstoppable momentum, relentlessly striking at the very roots of his lifelong beliefs. Jaisingha felt utterly tormented, consumed by anguish.

But these nightmarish thoughts refused to cease. The Goddess whom Jaisingha had known as a Mother all his life—why did the Gurudev strip away her motherhood today? Why did he define her as a heartless cosmic force? What could possibly satisfy or displease a mere, unfeeling force? Where were its eyes, its ears? A force rolls on like a colossal chariot, grinding the world beneath its thousands of wheels with a deafening roar. Who clings to it and moves forward, who falls beneath it and is crushed to dust, who climbs atop it to celebrate, and who cries out in agony below—what does the force know of them? Is there no Charioteer at the reins? Is it truly my life's vow to quench the thirst of this cruel, death-like force by draining the blood of the earth's innocent, helpless, timid creatures? Why? The force does its own work well enough—it commands famines, floods, earthquakes, plagues, raging fires, and the deep-seated malice within cruel human hearts. What need does it have for someone as insignificant as me?

The dawn that broke the next day was breathtakingly beautiful. The rain had passed. The eastern sky was swept clean of clouds. The sunlight felt as though it had been washed cool and soothing by the monsoon showers. All ten directions sparkled with raindrops and golden rays. A pristine, radiant joy blossomed across the sky, the meadows, the forests, and the river currents, unfurling like a magnificent white lotus. Kites drifted across the azure sky, while a flock of white cranes took flight beneath the arch of a rainbow. Squirrels darted playfully from tree to tree. A few timid rabbits cautiously peeked out from the thickets, only to dart back into hiding. Young goats scaled the steep, rugged rocks to nibble on fresh grass. The cows had scattered joyously across the pastures. A cowherd broke into song. Carrying water pitchers on their hips, village mothers stepped out of their homes with children clinging to their *anchals*. An old man gathered flowers for his morning prayers. A large crowd had gathered at the river for their baths, their lively chatter blending seamlessly with the ceaseless, babbling music of the river. Gazing

out at this vibrant, joyful earth on a sweet Ashadh morning, Jaisingha let out a heavy sigh and stepped into the temple.

Looking up at the idol, Jaisingha folded his hands and pleaded, "Why, Mother, why are you so displeased today? Such a dark scowl just because you were denied the blood of your creatures for a single day! Look into our hearts—do you see any lack of devotion there? Is the love of a devotee's heart not enough to satisfy you; do you truly crave the blood of the innocent? Tell me the truth, Mother—is it your intent to wipe the virtuous Govinda Manikya from the face of the earth and establish the reign of a demon in his place? Do you absolutely demand royal blood? If I do not hear the answer from your own lips, I will never allow the King to be murdered; I will stand in the way. Tell me—yes or no."

Suddenly, a voice echoed through the desolate temple: "Yes."

Startled, Jaisingha spun around but saw no one. It felt as though a shadow had flickered past him. Upon hearing the voice, his first thought was that it sounded exactly like his Guru. But soon, he convinced himself that it was entirely possible the Mother had chosen to command him using his Guru's voice. A shiver of profound awe ran through his body, his hairs standing on end. He prostrated himself completely before the idol, rose, and walked out of the temple, fully armed.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Ten Directions (*Dash Dik*):** In Hindu cosmology, space is conceptually divided into ten directions: the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, West), the four intercardinal directions (Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest), plus the zenith (Up) and the nadir (Down). Translating it as "all ten directions" preserves this specific cosmological imagery of the light illuminating the entirety of existence.
- **Chariot and the Charioteer:** Jaisingha's philosophical metaphor questions whether the universe is just a blind, mechanical force (the crushing chariot wheels) or if there is a conscious, guiding divine presence (the Charioteer) steering it.
- **Kalas-kaksha / Anchal:** The imagery of women carrying earthen pitchers (*kalas*) resting on their hips (*kaksha*) while their children trail behind holding the loose end of their saris (*anchal*) is a quintessential, deeply nostalgic

tableau of rural Bengal. It contrasts the innocent, life-sustaining reality of the outside world with the dark, blood-thirsty rituals inside the temple.

CHAPTER 8

The bank on the southern side of the Gomati river was incredibly steep. Over time, torrential monsoon downpours and rushing rivulets had carved this elevated land into a labyrinth of gullies and hollows. A short distance away, a crescent formation of towering *sal* and *gamar* trees encircled this fiercely fractured terrain, though the rugged central patch remained entirely barren of large timber. Only a few stunted *sal* trees grew atop scattered mounds, warped and blackened by their struggle to survive. A hundred meandering, twisting little streams, barely a foot or two wide, wove through the scattered rocks, branching out and converging again before emptying into the river. It was an intensely solitary place—the sky here was unobstructed by a forest canopy. From this vantage point, one could see far across the Gomati river to the vibrant, multicolored crop fields on the opposite shore.

Every morning, King Govinda Manikya would come here to walk, entirely unaccompanied by any guard or attendant. Fishermen who came to the Gomati to cast their nets would sometimes spot him from afar; their noble King seated as still as a *yogi*, his eyes closed in meditation. Whether the radiance upon his face was the soft light of the dawn or the brilliant glow of his own soul, they could never quite tell. Nowadays, due to the heavy monsoons, he could not visit every day, but on mornings when the rain relented, he would bring little Tata along.

It no longer feels right to call him Tata. The only one whose lips made that name sound so sweet is no longer here. To the reader, the word "Tata" means nothing. But when Hashi, full of morning mischief, would hide behind a *sal* tree and call out "Tata!" in her sharp, melodious voice, and the magpie robins from tree to tree would burst into answering song, and the distant woods would send back the echo—then the word "Tata" would fill the entire forest with profound meaning. Then, that simple name would fly like a bird from the tender nest of a little girl's heart straight up to heaven. Then, that one honeyed, affectionate word would steal the music from all the birds of the morning, blending the joyous beauty of the dawn with the joyous love of a little girl. Now, that girl is gone; the boy remains, but "Tata" is no more. This little boy now belongs to the thousand people and thousand affairs of this world, but "Tata" belonged exclusively to her.

Maharaja Govinda Manikya now called the boy Dhruva, and so shall we.

The Maharaja used to come to the banks of the Gomati alone; now he brought Dhruva with him. In the boy's pure, innocent face, the King saw a reflection of the divine realm. When the King entered the worldly vortex at midday, he was surrounded by old, wise ministers offering him counsel. But at the break of dawn, it was a child who led him out of the worldly sphere. Before the quiet gaze of those large, unblinking eyes, the thousands of twisted complexities of worldly life simply shrank away. Holding the child's hand, the Maharaja stepped onto a vast, open, and noble royal path that stretched straight into the infinite heart of the universe. From there, one could behold the grand assembly of the cosmos beneath the canopy of the boundless, azure sky; from there, one could catch faint echoes of the celestial music from all the seven higher worlds. On that straightforward path, everything seemed clear, simple, and beautiful. It filled one with the courage to simply keep moving forward, as all fierce anxieties, sorrows, and unrest faded away. Lost in his love for a child in the secluded forest by the river on a clear morning, the Maharaja found the pathway to an endless ocean of love.

Govinda Manikya sat Dhruva on his lap and was telling him the ancient tale of Prince Dhruva. It wasn't that the boy understood much of it, but the King simply loved to hear the story of Dhruva repeated back to him in the child's sweet, broken, lisping voice.

Listening to the story, Dhruva said, "I will go to the forest."

"Why will you go to the forest?" the King asked.

"I will go to see *Hoi* [Hari/God]."

The King smiled, "We have already come to the forest, we have come to see Hari."

"Where is *Hoi*?" Dhruva asked.

"He is right here."

Dhruva asked, "Where is Didi?" He stood up and looked behind him. He felt as though Didi was about to sneak up from behind and playfully cover his eyes, just as she used to do. Finding no one, he lowered his head, then looked up again and asked, "Where is Didi?"

The King gently replied, "Hari has called your sister away to stay with Him."

"Where is *Hoi*?" Dhruva asked again.

"Call out to Him, my child. Recite that verse I taught you."

Swaying side to side, Dhruva began to recite:

"Hari, I call out to you—a little boy, all alone,
Running blindly through the dark, terrifying woods.
In the dense, pitch-black shadows, blinded by my tears,
I cannot find my way, O Lord.

My heart trembles, 'What do I do, what do I do?'
When will this dark night of doom finally end?
Dying of fear, I cry out, 'Hari, Hari!'
For I have no one in this world but you.

My tears shall not fall in vain,
For everyone says you love your devotees so.
Making that singular hope my strength,
I cling to this life, O Lord.

Jumbling up the *Rs*, *Ls*, *Ds*, and *Dhs*, swallowing half the words and softly lisping the rest, Dhruva swayed and chanted the verse in a voice sweeter than nectar. Hearing it, the King's soul plunged into an ocean of joy, the morning became twice as beautiful, and the river, the forest, the trees, and the vines all seemed to smile. Against the backdrop of the golden, sun-drenched blue sky, he envisioned an incomparably beautiful, smiling face. Just as Dhruva sat securely on his lap, the King felt as though someone else had gathered him up in their grand, protective embrace. He suddenly saw himself, everyone around him, and the entire moving and unmoving universe resting safely in someone's lap. His joy and love radiated in all ten directions like sunlight, filling the heavens.

Just then, fully armed, Jaisingha suddenly emerged from the gully path and stood before the King. The King extended both his arms toward him and said warmly, "Come, Jaisingha, come." By mingling his soul with a child's, the King had become a child himself; his royal formality had completely vanished.

Jaisingha bowed to the ground before the King and said, "Maharaj, I have a submission."

"Speak," the King said gently.

"The Mother is displeased with you."

"Why? What have I done to earn her displeasure?"

"Maharaj, by stopping the sacrifices, you have disrupted the Goddess's worship."

"Why, Jaisingha, why this lust for violence?" the King cried out. "Do you think you can appease a Mother by shedding the blood of her own children in her lap!"

Jaisingha slowly sat down at the King's feet. Dhruva started playing with the hilt of Jaisingha's sword.

Jaisingha said softly, "What is the true meaning, Maharaj? After all, the scriptures clearly sanction animal sacrifice."

"Who actually follows the true intent of the scriptures?" the King countered. "Everyone interprets the scriptures according to their own base instincts. When men smear their bodies with the muddy blood of the sacrificed beasts before the Goddess and dance in the courtyard with terrifying screams and savage glee, are they worshipping the Mother? No! They are worshipping the bloodthirsty demon of violence lurking within their own hearts! Sacrificing a life to appease violence is not what the scriptures decree; *sacrificing violence itself* is the true decree of the scriptures."

Jaisingha remained silent for a long time. Since the previous night, similar thoughts had been violently churning within his own mind.

Finally, he said, "I have heard it from the Mother's own lips—there can be no doubt about this anymore. She herself declared that she wants the Maharaj's blood." Jaisingha then recounted the events that had unfolded in the temple that morning.

The King smiled knowingly. "That was not the Mother's command; that was Raghupati's command. It was Raghupati who answered you from the shadows."

Hearing these words from the King, Jaisingha flinched as if struck. A fleeting, lightning-fast suspicion of this very fact had indeed crossed his mind, only to vanish instantly. The King's words struck directly at that buried doubt.

Deeply tormented, Jaisingha cried out, "No, Maharaj, do not endlessly drag me from one doubt to another—do not push me off the shore into a churning sea! Your words are only deepening the darkness around me. Let whatever faith and devotion I had remain—I do not want this fog in its place! Whether it is the Mother's command or the Guru's command, to me, it is one and the same—and I shall carry it out."

With a sudden, violent movement, he sprang up and drew his sword—the blade flashed like lightning in the bright morning sun.

Seeing the drawn sword, Dhruva let out a piercing wail. Throwing his two little arms around the King, the boy clung to him, shielding him with all his might. The King, ignoring Jaisingha entirely, simply pulled Dhruva tightly to his chest.

Jaisingha threw his sword far away. Gently stroking Dhruva's back, he whispered, "Have no fear, child, have no fear. I am leaving. Stay in that grand sanctuary, rest upon that vast chest—no one will ever tear you away."

Bowing deeply to the King, Jaisingha turned to leave.

Suddenly, struck by a thought, he turned back and said, "I must warn the Maharaj: your brother Nakshatra Ray has plotted your assassination. Be on your guard on the 29th of Ashadh, the night of the Fourteen Deities' worship."

The King smiled softly. "Nakshatra could never kill me; he loves me."

Jaisingha took his leave.

Looking down at Dhruva with deep reverence, the King whispered, "Today, you saved the earth from bloodshed. This is exactly why your sister left you behind." Gently, he wiped the tears from Dhruva's cheeks.

With a serious, tear-stained face, Dhruva asked again, "Where is Didi?"

Just then, thick clouds rolled in, swallowing the sun, and a dark shadow fell across the river. The distant edge of the forest turned black as night. Recognizing the signs of an impending downpour, the King returned to the palace.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Tale of Prince Dhruva:** A famous story from Hindu mythology. Dhruva was a young prince who, seeking his father's affection and his rightful place, went into the forest to perform intense penance to Lord Vishnu (Hari). Touched by the boy's unshakeable devotion, Vishnu elevated him to the heavens, turning him into the eternal North Star (Dhruvatara), a symbol of steadfastness and divine protection. The King changing Tata's name to Dhruva is highly symbolic; the boy becomes the King's moral anchor and guiding star.
- **"Jumbling up the Rs, Ls, Ds..."** Dhruva's lisp (*Hoi* instead of *Hari*) makes his recitation incredibly sweet but also linguistically highlights his total, uncorrupted innocence, contrasting sharply with the "grown-up" violence of the temple. The poem has been translated to maintain a rhythmic, prayer-like flow in English.
- **"Sacrificing violence itself is the true decree":** This line is the central philosophical thesis of the entire novel *Rajarshi*. Tagore uses the King as a mouthpiece to argue against the literal, bloody interpretations of religious scriptures, advocating instead for a spiritual interpretation where one sacrifices their inner animalistic instincts (anger, greed, violence) to the divine.

CHAPTER 9

The temple was not far. But Jaisingha took a long detour, walking slowly along the desolate riverbank toward the temple. A multitude of thoughts surged in his mind. At one point, he sank down beneath a tree on the riverbank. Covering his face with both hands, he agonized, "I have already acted, yet my doubt does not fade. From today, who will dispel my doubts! From today, who will explain to me what is good and what is evil! Standing at the crossroads of a billion worldly paths, whom shall I ask which is the true way! I stand blind and alone in the middle of a vast wasteland; today, my walking stick has been snapped in two."

When Jaisingha finally rose, the rain had begun to fall. Soaked in the showers, he walked toward the temple. He noticed a large, clamorous crowd walking together in a pack, coming from the direction of the temple.

An old man was grumbling, "I know this has been the custom since the time of our fathers and grandfathers! Has the King's wisdom suddenly surpassed them all?"

A young man complained, "I don't even feel like coming to the temple anymore. The festive pomp of the *puja* is completely gone."

Someone else muttered, "This has turned into the rule of a Nawab." The underlying sentiment of this remark was that such hesitation regarding animal sacrifice could only ever arise in the mind of a Muslim; for it to arise in the mind of a Hindu King was utterly shocking.

The women were wailing, "No good will come to this kingdom."

One man declared, "The head priest himself said that the Mother revealed in a dream that this land will be wiped out by a plague within three months."

Haru chimed in, "Just look at this—Modho suffered from an illness for a year and a half and survived all along, but the very moment the sacrifices were stopped, he dropped dead."

Khanto wept, "Exactly! Take my nephew. Who knew he would die? A fever for three days. The moment he swallowed the *kabiraj's* pill, his eyes rolled back." Overcome

with grief for her nephew and terrified by the kingdom's impending doom, Khanto broke down sobbing.

Tinkori said, "The other day, the marketplace at Madhurhati caught fire; not a single thatched roof was left standing."

Chintamani, a farmer, said to a fellow farmer, "What's the use of so much talk? Just look, rice has never been this cheap in any other year. Who knows what terrible fate awaits us farmers this year."

Whatever loss anyone had suffered, whether *before* or *after* the cessation of the sacrifices, was unanimously attributed to that single royal decree. Everyone agreed that it would be best to pack up and abandon this country. And while this firm consensus never changed, everyone simply continued living in the country anyway.

Jaisingha was lost in his own torment. Paying absolutely no attention to the crowd, he arrived at the temple. He saw Raghupati sitting outside, having finished the morning worship.

Walking swiftly up to him, Jaisingha asked in an anguished yet unyielding voice, "Gurudev, this morning, when I asked the Mother a question to receive her command, why did *you* answer it?"

Raghupati hesitated for a fraction of a second and said, "The Mother proclaims her commands through me; she does not speak anything with her own lips."

Jaisingha demanded, "Then why did you not step forward and say it to my face? Why did you hide in the shadows and deceive me?"

Furious, Raghupati snapped, "Silence! What do you understand of why I do what I do? Do not babble whatever comes to your mouth. You will simply obey what I command; do not ask any questions."

Jaisingha fell silent. His doubts only multiplied; they did not diminish. After a while, he confessed, "This morning, I vowed to the Mother that if she did not command me with her own voice, I would never allow the King's assassination to occur—I would thwart it. When I became certain that the Mother had not spoken, I had to reveal Nakshatra Ray's plot to the Maharaja. I warned him."

Raghupati sat in stunned silence for a moment. Suppressing a violently surging wave of wrath, he commanded in a voice of steel, "Enter the temple."

Both of them entered the inner sanctum.

Raghupati pointed at the idol and ordered, "Touch the Mother's feet and swear an oath. Say: *By the 29th of Ashadh, I will bring royal blood and offer it at these feet.*"

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **"Rule of a Nawab":** Nawabs were the Muslim rulers and nobility of Bengal and other parts of India. Since Islam mandates *halal* practices and generally does not involve the type of ritualistic blood sacrifice offered to Hindu deities (like Kali or Bhuvaneshwari), the Hindu villagers view the King's ban on temple sacrifice as an alien, non-Hindu concept being forced upon them, likening it to Islamic rule.
- **Kabiraj:** An Ayurvedic or traditional village physician who prepares medicines using herbs and roots.
- **Social Commentary:** Tagore uses the crowd's dialogue as brilliant, dry satire. The villagers comically blame every single unrelated misfortune—from a sick man inevitably dying, to accidental fires, to even a *surplus* of rice driving market prices down—on the King's decision to stop animal cruelty. This highlights mass superstition and the human tendency to scapegoat religious deviations for natural tragedies.

CHAPTER 10

Returning home, the Maharaja completed his regular administrative duties. The morning sunlight was soon swallowed by gathering clouds, plunging the day back into a dim gloom. The Maharaja was deeply distressed. Nakshatra Ray usually attended the royal court every day, but today he was conspicuously absent. The King sent for him, but Nakshatra sent back an excuse, claiming he was unwell.

The King personally went to Nakshatra Ray's chambers. Nakshatra could not lift his head to meet his brother's eyes. He picked up a sheet of written parchment and pretended to be intensely busy with some work.

"Nakshatra, are you ill?" the King asked.

Flipping the paper back and forth, Nakshatra stared at the ring on his finger and stammered, "Ill? No, not exactly ill... I just had a little work. I mean, yes, yes, I was feeling unwell... rather like being ill, actually."

Nakshatra Ray became visibly agitated, while Govinda Manikya gazed at his brother's face with a look of profound sorrow. The King thought to himself, *"Alas, even the tender nest of familial love has been invaded by malice. Like a snake, it wants to stay hidden; it dares not show its face. Do we not have enough savage beasts in our forests that man must now fear his fellow man? Can a brother no longer sit beside his own brother without fear? Have greed and malice grown so monstrous in this world that love and affection can find no place? This is my own brother. We live under the same roof, sit on the same seat, speak to one another with smiles—yet even he sits beside me sharpening a knife in his mind."*

To Govinda Manikya, the entire world suddenly felt like a dark jungle crawling with predatory beasts. In the thick darkness, all he could see were the flashing of fangs and the glint of claws. Letting out a heavy sigh, the Maharaja thought, *"By merely existing in this loveless, cutthroat kingdom, I am only stoking the fires of greed, malice, and envy in the hearts of my own kin, my own brothers. The relatives I love more than life itself sit around my throne, secretly twisting their faces in disgust, grinding their teeth, waiting like ferocious chained hounds for the moment they can spring upon me from all sides. Rather than being torn apart by their sharp claws, it would be better to simply quench their thirst for blood and walk away from here."*

The beautiful, loving vision Govinda Manikya had witnessed in the morning sky had completely vanished.

Standing up, the Maharaja ordered in a solemn voice, "Nakshatra, this afternoon, the two of us shall go for a walk in the secluded forest by the Gomati."

Against the King's grave command, Nakshatra could not utter a word in protest, but his mind began to race with suspicion and dread. He felt as though the Maharaja, sitting in silence all this time, had been peering directly into his mind—and that the dark, writhing, worm-like thoughts crawling in the black pits of his brain had suddenly been dragged out, squirming under the blinding light of his brother's gaze. Trembling with fear, Nakshatra Ray stole a glance at the King's face—but saw only a deep, melancholic peace. There was not a trace of anger. Only a profound grief over the hardened cruelty of the human heart reigned there.

The afternoon wore on. The sky remained overcast. Taking Nakshatra Ray with him, the Maharaja set out on foot toward the forest. Evening was still a ways off, but the dark storm clouds made it look like dusk. The crows were returning to the woods, cawing incessantly, though a couple of kites still swam through the sky.

When the two brothers stepped into the secluded forest, a chill ran down Nakshatra Ray's spine. Ancient, massive trees stood clustered together like sentinels—they spoke no words, but stood incredibly still, as if straining to hear even the faint rustle of a passing insect. They seemed to stare unblinkingly down at their own shadows and the thick darkness gathered at their roots. Navigating through the tangled mystery of the forest, Nakshatra Ray felt as though his legs were turning to lead; the menacing scowl of the deep silence all around made his heart pound against his ribs. Extreme suspicion and terror gripped him. Silent as a terrible doom, the King was leading him deep into the hidden bowels of the earth in the fading light, and Nakshatra had no idea where they were going. He was certain his plot had been discovered, and that the King had brought him into this dense jungle to deliver a severe punishment. Nakshatra Ray would have run for his life if he could, but it felt as if his hands and feet had been bound, and an invisible force was dragging him forward. There was no escape.

In the heart of the forest, there was a somewhat open clearing. A natural hollow lay there, filled to the brim with monsoon water like a small pond. Pausing at the edge of the water, the King suddenly turned around and said, "Stop!"

Nakshatra Ray froze, startled. It felt as though, at the King's command, the very river of time had stopped flowing. It seemed as though every tree in the forest instantly leaned forward to listen. The earth below and the sky above seemed to hold their breath, staring in stunned silence. The clamor of the crows had died away; not a single sound stirred in the woods. Only that one word, "Stop!", seemed to echo deeply for a long time. That single command felt like an electric current racing from tree to tree, from branch to branch; every leaf in the forest seemed to vibrate with the sheer power of it. Nakshatra Ray stood rooted to the spot, as still as the trees themselves.

The King fixed a piercing, unwavering, sorrowful gaze upon Nakshatra Ray's face, and in a calm, incredibly grave voice, asked slowly, "Nakshatra, do you wish to kill me?"

Nakshatra stood paralyzed as if struck by lightning, unable to even attempt an answer.

"Why do you want to kill me, brother?" the King asked. "Out of greed for the kingdom? Do you think being a King simply means a golden throne, a diamond crown, and a royal parasol? Do you have any idea how heavy this crown, this parasol, this royal scepter truly is? I have hidden the anxieties of hundreds of thousands of people beneath this diamond crown. If you want this kingdom, then embrace the sorrow of a thousand people as your own sorrow; accept the dangers of a thousand people as your own danger; bear the poverty of a thousand people as your own burden upon your shoulders. He who does this is the true King, whether he lives in a leaf-hut or a grand palace. He who can consider all people his own—all people naturally belong to him. He who alleviates the suffering of the world is the true King of the world. He who sucks the blood and wealth of the earth is nothing but a bandit—the tears of a thousand unfortunates rain down upon his head day and night, and no royal parasol can ever protect him from that downpour of curses. Hidden within his lavish royal feasts is the raging hunger of hundreds of starving men; he smelts the poverty of orphans to forge the golden ornaments he wears; woven into his sprawling royal robes are the soiled, torn rags of hundreds shivering in the cold. You cannot gain a kingdom by murdering a King, brother; you must conquer the world with love to truly become a King."

Govinda Manikya fell silent. A profound stillness blanketed the forest. Nakshatra Ray stood with his head bowed, uttering no word.

The Maharaja drew his sword from its scabbard. Holding it out before Nakshatra Ray, he said, "Brother, there is no one here. No witnesses, no onlookers. If a brother wishes to plunge a knife into his brother's chest, then this is the place, and this is the time. No one here will stop you, no one here will condemn you. The exact same blood flows in your veins and mine—the blood of the same father, the same grandfather. If you wish to spill that blood, do it here. But do not do it where people live. Because wherever a single drop of this blood falls, the sacred bond of brotherhood across the land will invisibly weaken and shatter. Who knows where the consequences of sin truly end? Where a single seed of sin falls, who can foresee how a thousand poisonous trees will secretly sprout from it in the blink of an eye, or how a beautiful, thriving human society will slowly degenerate into a savage jungle? Therefore, do not shed a brother's blood within the loving nests of towns and villages, where brothers still embrace one another with perfect trust and absolute love. That is why I brought you to the forest today."

With these words, the King placed the sword in Nakshatra Ray's hand.

The sword slipped from Nakshatra Ray's grasp and clattered to the ground. Burying his face in his hands, Nakshatra burst into tears. "Dada," he choked out, "I am not guilty... this thought never even crossed my mind..."

The King embraced him tightly and said, "I know that. Could you ever truly strike me? Other people have fed you wicked counsel."

"It is Raghupati," Nakshatra Ray wept. "He alone is constantly feeding me these instructions."

"Stay far away from Raghupati," the King advised gently.

"Tell me where I should go. I do not want to stay here. I want to run away from here—far away from Raghupati."

"You shall stay right here with me," the King assured him. "You do not need to go anywhere else. Let us see what Raghupati can do to you!"

Nakshatra Ray gripped the King's hand tightly, as if terrified that Raghupati might suddenly appear and drag him away into the dark.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Dada:** The affectionate Bengali term for an elder brother. In his moment of absolute vulnerability and guilt, Nakshatra drops his royal formality and reverts to calling the King by this intimate familial title, proving the King's assertion that Nakshatra actually does love him deep down.
- **The Duties of a King (Rajdharma):** The King's monologue here is a powerful exposition on *Rajdharma* (the righteous duty of a ruler). It sharply contrasts the material greed of power (crowns, thrones) with the immense spiritual and moral burden of leadership, emphasizing empathy and self-sacrifice over domination.

CHAPTER 11

As Nakshatra Ray held the King's hand and walked back home through the forest, a faint light still lingered in the sky—but beneath the forest canopy, it had grown incredibly dark. It was as if a flood of darkness had rushed in, with only the crowns of the trees staying afloat above it. Soon, they too would drown; then, filled to the brim with darkness, the earth and sky would merge into one.

Instead of taking the path to the palace, the King headed toward the temple.

Having completed the evening *arati* at the temple, Raghupati and Jaisingha sat inside their hut with a single oil lamp lit. Both were sitting in silence, lost in their own thoughts. In the dim glow of the lamp, only the dark shadows on their faces could be seen. Seeing Raghupati, Nakshatra Ray could not lift his face; standing safely in the King's shadow, he kept his eyes fixed on the ground. The King pulled his brother closer to his side, held his hand firmly, and cast a steady, unflinching gaze at Raghupati's face.

Raghupati shot a piercing, sidelong glance at Nakshatra Ray.

Finally, the King offered his respectful greetings to Raghupati, and Nakshatra Ray followed suit. Acknowledging their bow, Raghupati asked in a grave voice, "Victory be unto you—is all well in the kingdom?"

The King paused for a moment and replied, "Thakur, give us your blessing so that no misfortune befalls the kingdom. May all the Mother's children in this land live together in goodwill and love. In this kingdom, let no one snatch a brother away from his brother; where there is love, let no one establish malice. I have come precisely because I fear for the kingdom's well-being. The friction of sinful intentions can ignite a raging forest fire—extinguish it, shower the waters of peace, and cool the earth."

Raghupati replied coldly, "When the fire of the Gods' wrath is ignited, who can extinguish it! For the sins of one offender, a thousand innocents are burned in that blaze."

"That is exactly my fear, that is why I tremble," the King said. "Why is it that some people understand this yet refuse to comprehend! Do you not know that in this

kingdom, the laws of the divine are being violated in the very name of the divine? That is why I have come here this evening, dreading disaster—do not plant the tree of sin here and summon the thunderbolt of the Gods upon my prosperous, happy kingdom. I leave you with these words; to speak these very words is why I came today."

With that, the Maharaja fixed his penetrating gaze upon Raghupati's face. The King's deep, resolute voice vibrated inside the hut like a pent-up storm. Raghupati gave no reply; he merely began to trace his fingers over his sacred thread. Offering a final bow, the King took Nakshatra Ray's hand and stepped out. Jaisingha followed them out immediately.

Inside the room, only a single lamp, Raghupati, and Raghupati's towering shadow remained.

By then, the light in the sky had completely died out. The stars were drowned in the clouds. The night was brimming with darkness. In that pitch-black void, the eastern wind carried the fragrance of *kadam* flowers from somewhere unseen, and the rustling murmur of the forest could be heard. Engrossed in thought, the King was walking down the familiar path when suddenly he heard someone call from behind, "Maharaj."

The King turned around and asked, "Who are you?"

A familiar voice replied, "I am your lowly servant, I am Jaisingha. Maharaj, you are my guru, my master. I have no one else but you. Just as you are leading your younger brother by the hand through the darkness, hold my hand too, take me with you; I have fallen into a terrifying darkness. What is good for me and what is bad, I know nothing at all anymore. One moment I sway to the left, the next I veer to the right; I have no helmsman to steer me."

Tears began to fall in the dark, unseen by anyone, but Jaisingha's voice, wet and trembling with emotion, reached the King's ears. The still, silent darkness seemed to tremble like an ocean restless with the wind.

The King took Jaisingha by the hand and said gently, "Come, come with me to the palace."

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Arati:** The Hindu ritual of worship involving the lighting and waving of oil lamps before a deity, usually performed at dawn and dusk.
- **Poita (Sacred Thread):** Raghupati touching his sacred thread during the King's warning is a subtle gesture of Brahminical defiance. It symbolizes him grounding himself in his caste-given religious authority, silently rejecting the King's secular/moral authority.
- **Kadam Flowers:** The *Neolamarckia cadamba* tree blooms during the Indian monsoons (Ashadh). Its distinct, sweet fragrance in the dark perfectly captures the sensory atmosphere of a wet, monsoon night in Bengal.
- **Karnadhar (Helmsman):** Jaisingha says, "I have no helmsman (*karnadhar*) to steer me." In Bengali spiritual and poetic traditions, God or a Guru is often referred to as the *Karnadhar*—the captain who steers the devotee's boat across the treacherous ocean of life (*Bhavasagar*). Jaisingha's use of this word signifies that he is abandoning Raghupati and accepting the King as his new spiritual captain.

CHAPTER 12

The next day, when Jaisingha returned to the temple, the hour of worship had already passed. Raghupati sat entirely alone, his face cast in gloom. Never before had such a breach of routine occurred.

Upon arriving, Jaisingha did not go to his Guru; instead, he retreated into his garden. He sat among his beloved trees and plants. They trembled and swayed all around him, setting the shadows dancing. Surrounding him were layers of blossom-studded foliage, tier upon tier of vibrant green, forming a tender, shadowy canopy of affection—a sweet invitation, a loving embrace from nature. Here, everything waits patiently; they ask no questions, they do not disrupt one's thoughts; they only look when looked upon, they only speak when spoken to. Within this silent sanctuary of healing, deep inside nature's inner chambers, Jaisingha sat and pondered. He turned the King's words of counsel over and over in his mind.

Just then, Raghupati approached slowly and placed a hand on his back. Jaisingha started in surprise. Raghupati sat down beside him. Gazing into Jaisingha's face, he asked in a trembling voice, "Child, why do I see you like this? What have I done to you that you are slowly pulling away from me?"

Jaisingha tried to speak, but Raghupati cut him off, continuing, "Have you ever, even for a moment, seen my affection waver? Have I committed some offense against you, Jaisingha? If I have, then even as your Guru, as a father to you, I beg your forgiveness—pardon me."

Jaisingha recoiled as if struck by lightning; clutching his Guru's feet, he burst into tears. "Father," he wept, "I know nothing, I understand nothing, I cannot even see where I am going."

Taking Jaisingha by the hand, Raghupati said, "Child, since your infancy, I have raised you with the tender love of a mother, and taught you the scriptures with the care of a father. Placing my absolute trust in you, I have made you a partner in all my counsels, like a true friend. Who is tearing you away from my side today? Who is severing this lifelong bond of love and affection? Who has dared to interfere with the God-given right I have over you? Tell me, my child, tell me the name of that great sinner."

"Master," Jaisingha replied, "no one has torn me away from you—you yourself have pushed me away. I was safe inside a home, and you suddenly threw me out onto the street. You said to me, who is a father, who is a mother, who is a brother! You declared that there are no bonds in this world, no sacred rights of love and affection. The one I always knew as a loving Mother—you redefined her as a mere Force. Wherever malice strikes, wherever blood is shed, wherever brothers feud, wherever two men go to war—there this thirsty Force stands, holding her skull-bowl, lusting for blood! From the safe lap of a Mother, into what terrifying land of demons have you exiled me!"

Raghupati sat stunned for a long time. Finally, letting out a heavy sigh, he said, "Then you are free. You are released from your bonds. I withdraw all my rights over you. If that is what makes you happy, then so be it." Saying this, he made to rise.

Jaisingha threw himself at Raghupati's feet and cried, "No, no, no, Master! Even if you abandon me, I cannot abandon you. I shall stay—I shall remain right here at your feet. Do whatever you wish. I have no path other than yours."

Raghupati then gathered Jaisingha into a tight embrace, his tears flowing down to fall upon Jaisingha's shoulder.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Mother vs. Force (Shakti):** This chapter highlights the core theological and psychological conflict breaking Jaisingha's heart. He grew up worshipping the Goddess in her maternal, nurturing aspect (*Ma*). Raghupati, however, recently introduced him to the Tantric/Shakta philosophy of the Goddess as *Shakti*—the primal, impersonal, and often destructive cosmic force that feeds on life and death. Jaisingha feels this philosophy strips the universe of love and morality, turning his beloved deity into a "demoness."
- **Kharpar (Skull-bowl):** Jaisingha references the *kharpar*, a bowl made from a human skull, traditionally depicted in the hands of fierce goddesses like Kali or Chamunda to catch the blood of demons. It is a terrifying visual contrast to the peaceful, green garden he sought refuge in.
- **Emotional Manipulation:** The dynamic between Guru and disciple here is steeped in traditional Indian values of absolute surrender and devotion (*Guru-shishya parampara*). Raghupati masterfully weaponizes Jaisingha's devotion and guilt by offering a dramatic apology and a faux-release from his

vows, which inevitably forces the deeply loyal Jaisingha to submit completely.

CHAPTER 13

A large crowd had gathered at the temple. A great clamor had arisen. Raghupati demanded in a harsh voice, "What have you come to do?"

Many voices cried out together, "We have come to have a *darshan* of the Goddess."

Raghupati shouted, "Where is the Goddess? The Goddess has left this kingdom. Were you able to keep her here? She has gone."

A massive uproar broke out, and various voices could be heard from all sides. "What are you saying, Thakur!" "What offense have we committed, Thakur?" "Will the Mother not be appeased by any means?"

"Because my nephew was sick, I haven't come to offer *puja* for a few days," one man muttered. (He firmly believed that the Goddess, unable to bear his personal neglect, was abandoning the country.)

"I had intended to offer my two goats to the Goddess, but couldn't come because the distance was too great." (Another was agonizing over the thought that his delay in offering two goats had brought such a calamity upon the entire kingdom.)

"It is true that Gobardhan did not offer to the Mother what he had promised, but the Mother too has punished him accordingly. His spleen has swollen as large as a *dhak* drum, and he has been bedridden for six months!" (Let Gobardhan and his massive spleen go to hell, let the Mother stay in the land—this is what he prayed internally. Soon, everyone around him began to fervently wish for the rapid growth of the wretched Gobardhan's spleen.)

There was a tall, broad-shouldered man in the crowd; he scolded everyone into silence and, with folded hands, asked Raghupati, "Thakur, why did the Mother leave? What was our offense?"

Raghupati said, "You cannot shed even a single drop of blood for the Mother. This is the extent of your devotion."

Everyone fell silent. Finally, murmurs arose. In hushed tones, some began to say, "It is the King's prohibition; what can we do!"

Jaisingha sat as still as a stone statue. The words "*The Mother's prohibition!*" sprang to the tip of his tongue with the force of lightning, but he restrained himself and did not utter a single word.

Raghupati yelled sharply, "Who is the King! Is the Mother's throne beneath the King's throne! Then stay with your King in this motherless land. Let us see who protects you."

A low murmuring sound rippled through the crowd. Everyone began speaking with caution.

Raghupati stood up and declared, "By elevating the King above all, you have insulted your Mother and driven her out of the kingdom. Do not think you will live in peace. In three years' time, there will not be a trace of your homesteads left in this great kingdom—there will be no one left in your lineage to even light a lamp."

The murmuring of the crowd began to swell like the roar of the ocean. The crowd was also growing larger. The tall man, folding his hands, pleaded with Raghupati, "If the children have committed an offense, let the Mother punish them. But for a Mother to completely abandon her children—how can this ever happen! Master, tell us what we must do to bring the Mother back."

Raghupati replied, "When this King of yours is driven out of this kingdom, only then will the Mother set foot in this land again."

Hearing this, the murmuring of the crowd abruptly stopped. Suddenly, a profound silence fell over all directions. Eventually, they began to look at each other's faces; no one dared to speak a word.

In a voice as deep as thunder, Raghupati said, "Then you shall see! Come, come with me. You have come from afar with great hopes to catch a glimpse of the Goddess—come, step into the temple."

Everyone fearfully gathered in the temple courtyard. The temple doors were closed. Raghupati slowly pushed them open.

For a moment, no one could utter a word. The face of the idol could not be seen; the back of the idol was turned toward the onlookers. The Mother had turned her face away.

Suddenly, a wail of lamentation rose from the crowd: "Turn back just once, Mother! What crime have we committed!" From all sides, the cry went up: "Where is the Mother, where is the Mother!" But because the idol was made of stone, she did not turn around. Many fainted. Children, understanding nothing, burst into tears. Old men began to weep like motherless infants, "Ma, O Ma!" The women's veils slipped, their *anchals* fell to the ground, and they began beating their chests. Young men cried out in trembling, high-pitched voices, "Mother, we will bring you back—we will not let you go."

A madman broke into song— *"My Mother is a daughter of stone, She doesn't even look at her own children."*

Standing at the doors of the temple, the entire kingdom seemed to wail "Ma", "Ma"—but the idol did not turn. The midday sun grew scorching hot, yet the lamentations of the fasting crowd in the courtyard did not cease.

Then Jaisingha approached on trembling legs and asked Raghupati, "Master, am I not allowed to speak even a single word?"

Raghupati replied, "No, not a single word."

Jaisingha asked, "Is there no reason for doubt?"

Raghupati said firmly, "No."

Jaisingha, clenching his fists tightly, asked, "Am I to believe everything?"

Scorching Jaisingha with a piercing glare, Raghupati said, "Yes."

Jaisingha clutched his chest and cried, "My heart is tearing apart!"

He dashed out through the crowd and fled.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Darshan:** The auspicious act of seeing and being seen by a deity in a Hindu temple.

- **Dhak Drum & Spleen:** A *dhak* is a huge traditional Bengali drum. In historical Bengal, chronic malaria and kala-azar often caused severe swelling of the spleen. Tagore uses dark, ironic humor here to highlight the absurdity of the villagers' superstitions—they are willing to sacrifice Gobardhan to his massive spleen if it means saving the rest of the kingdom from the Goddess's wrath.
- **"No one to light a lamp":** A deeply evocative Bengali idiom (*Bongshe bati dibar keho thakibe na*). Lighting an evening lamp in the home is a daily ritual of life and continuation. To have no one left to light a lamp means the absolute, devastating extinction of a family's entire bloodline.
- **Daughter of Stone:** Goddess Durga/Parvati is mythologically the daughter of the Himalayas (the mountain king). Thus, she is literally a "daughter of stone," but here the madman's song uses it as a double entendre: she is physically a stone idol that has been turned around, and she is acting cold, unyielding, and "stony-hearted" toward her children.

CHAPTER 14

The next day was the 29th of Ashadh. Tonight was the worship of the Fourteen Deities.

This morning, as the sun rose behind the palm grove, there were no clouds in the eastern sky. When Jaisingha went and sat in the joyous forest flooded with golden rays, all his old memories began to surface. Amidst this forest, upon the stone steps of this stone temple, in the shade of that grand banyan tree on the banks of the Gomati, by the edge of that shadow-ringed pond—his childhood came rushing back to him like a sweet dream. The beautiful sights that had once affectionately surrounded his childhood were smiling today, calling out to him again, but his heart whispered, "I have set out on my journey, I have taken my leave, I shall not return."

The sunlight fell upon the white stone temple, casting the quivering shadow of a *bakul* branch on its left wall. As a child, this stone temple had felt alive to him, and he had found companionship in these steps when he played alone upon them; today, in the morning sunlight, the temple seemed just as alive, and he looked at its steps through the eyes of his childhood. Inside the temple, the Mother once again felt like a Mother to him today. But his heart swelled with wounded pride, and tears overflowed from his eyes.

Seeing Raghupati approach, Jaisingha wiped away his tears. He bowed to his Guru and stood up.

Raghupati said, "Today is the day of the *pūja*. Do you remember the oath you swore while touching the Mother's feet?"

Jaisingha replied, "I do."

"You will fulfill that oath, won't you?"

"Yes."

"See to it, child. Act carefully," Raghupati warned. "There is a risk of danger. It is to protect you that I have incited the subjects against the King."

Jaisingha remained silent, staring at Raghupati's face, offering no reply. Raghupati placed a hand on his head and said, "With my blessing, you will be able to accomplish your task without any hindrance, and fulfill the Mother's command."

Saying this, he walked away.

In the afternoon, the King sat in a room, playing with Dhruva. At Dhruva's command, he would take off his crown, and then put it back on. Seeing the Maharaja in this helpless state, Dhruva was rolling with laughter.

The King smiled faintly and said, "I am practicing. Just as I wore this crown so easily at His command, I want to be able to take it off just as easily when He commands. Wearing a crown is hard, but giving it up is even harder."

A sudden realization dawned upon Dhruva. Staring at the King's face for a moment with a finger in his mouth, he declared, "You are the *aja*."

Even after completely uprooting the letter 'R' from the word *Raja* [King], Dhruva felt no remorse whatsoever. Calling the King an *aja* right to his face, he found total self-satisfaction.

Unable to tolerate Dhruva's audacity, the King retorted, "No, *you* are the *aja*."

Dhruva insisted, "You are the *aja*."

There was no end to this debate. Neither side had any evidence; the argument ran purely on stubborn willpower. Finally, the King took off his own crown and plopped it onto Dhruva's head. At that, Dhruva was left utterly speechless; it was a total defeat. Half of Dhruva's face vanished beneath the oversized crown.

Swaying his large, crown-heavy head, Dhruva commanded the crownless King, "Tell me a story."

The King asked, "What story should I tell?"

"Tell Didi's story," Dhruva said.

To Dhruva, every story was "Didi's story." He firmly believed that other than the stories his sister used to tell, there were no other stories in the world.

The King then launched into a grand mythological tale. He began, "There was once an *aja* named Hiranyakashipu."

Hearing the word *aja*, Dhruva piped up, "I am the *aja*." Emboldened by the huge, loose crown on his head, he completely dismissed Hiranyakashipu's royal authority.

Like a sycophantic courtier, Govinda Manikya tried to appease the crowned child, saying, "You are an *aja*, and he was an *aja* too."

Dhruva expressed his clear disapproval of this arrangement, declaring, "No, I am the *aja*."

Finally, when the Maharaja compromised, "Hiranyakashipu wasn't an *aja*, he was an *Akkash*," Dhruva found no reason to object.

Just then, Nakshatra Ray entered the room. He said, "I heard the Maharaja summoned me for some state business. I await your command."

The King replied, "Wait just a moment, let me finish this story." He then concluded the entire tale.

"The *Akkash* is naughty," Dhruva offered as his concise review of the story.

Seeing the crown on Dhruva's head did not sit well with Nakshatra Ray. When Dhruva noticed Nakshatra Ray staring at him, he solemnly informed him, "I am the *aja*."

Nakshatra scolded, "Fie, you mustn't say such things." He reached out to snatch the crown off Dhruva's head and hand it back to the King.

Sensing the imminent theft of his crown, Dhruva let out a scream worthy of true kings. Govinda Manikya rescued him from this impending danger and stopped Nakshatra.

Finally, Govinda Manikya addressed Nakshatra Ray, "I have heard that Raghupati Thakur is using dishonest means to incite discontent among the subjects. You shall go out into the city yourself, investigate this matter, and report back to me on the truth of it."

Nakshatra Ray bowed, "As you command," and left. However, the sight of the crown on Dhruva's head continued to bother him immensely.

A guard arrived and announced, "Jaisingha, the servant of the head priest, stands at the door, seeking an audience."

The King granted him permission to enter.

Bowing to the Maharaja with folded hands, Jaisingha said, "Maharaj, I am leaving for a land very far away. You are my King, my Guru; I have come to seek your blessing."

The King asked, "Where will you go, Jaisingha?"

Jaisingha replied, "I do not know, Maharaj. No one can say where it is."

Seeing the King about to speak, Jaisingha quickly added, "Do not forbid me, Maharaj. If you forbid me, my journey will be ill-fated. Bless me, so that all the doubts that plagued me here may be dispelled there. May the clouds of this land clear away in that one. May I find a kingdom ruled by a King like you, so that I may find peace."

The King asked, "When are you leaving?"

"This evening. There is not much time left, Maharaj. I must take my leave now."

Saying this, he bowed and took the dust of the King's feet; two drops of tears fell upon the King's feet.

As Jaisingha stood up and turned to leave, Dhruva slowly walked up, tugged at his clothes, and said, "Don't go."

Jaisingha turned back with a sad smile. Picking Dhruva up in his arms and kissing him, he said, "With whom would I stay, little one? Who do I have left?"

Dhruva proclaimed, "I am the *aja*."

Jaisingha said softly, "You are the King of kings; it is you who holds everyone captive."

Setting Dhruva down, Jaisingha walked out of the room. The Maharaja sat with a grave expression, lost in deep thought for a long time.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Aja:** Dhruva's childlike lisp causes him to drop the 'R' in the Bengali word *Raja* (King), turning it into *Aja*. The humorous banter hinges on this mispronunciation.
- **Akkash:** A mispronunciation of *Rakshas* (Demon). The King was telling the mythological story of the demon king Hiranyakashipu, but to appease Dhruva, he demoted the demon from a King (*Aja*) to just a monster (*Akkash*).
- **Taking the dust of the feet:** Jaisingha performs this act of deep reverence one final time. His dialogue heavily foreshadows his decision to commit suicide—the only way he can bring "royal blood" (his own) to the Goddess to fulfill his oath to his Guru without assassinating the King.

CHAPTER 15

It was the *chaturdashi tithi*, the fourteenth night of the lunar cycle. Clouds had gathered, yet the moon had risen too. The sky was mottled with patches of light and stretches of deep darkness. Sometimes the moon emerged; sometimes it hid. The forests along the Gomati river, gazing up at the moon, occasionally let out a long sigh that pierced the depths of their profound darkness.

Tonight, stepping out onto the streets was strictly forbidden. Who would venture out into the night anyway? But because of the royal decree, the desolation of the streets felt even more oppressive. The townspeople had all extinguished their lamps and bolted their doors securely. Not a single guard patrolled the streets. Even thieves dared not step out tonight. Those who were supposed to carry corpses to the cremation grounds kept the bodies at home, waiting for the safety of dawn. Parents with dying children did not venture out to fetch the physician. The beggar who usually slept beneath a tree by the roadside had sought shelter in a householder's cowshed.

That night, jackals and stray dogs roamed the city streets; a leopard or two peeked around the doors of silent houses. Among men, only one soul was outside his home tonight—there was no other human about. He sat by the river, sharpening a knife against a stone, lost in a distant reverie. The knife was already sharp enough, but it seemed he was sharpening his thoughts alongside the blade; hence, the grinding never ceased. With every stroke against the stone, the sharp blade hissed, growing hot with a lust for violence. In the dark, the dark river flowed on. The hours of the dark night drifted over the earth. A current of dark, heavy clouds floated across the sky.

Finally, when the rain began to fall in torrents, Jaisingha jolted back to his senses. Sheathing the hot blade, he stood up. The hour of worship was drawing near. He remembered his oath. He could not delay for another moment.

The temple was ablaze tonight with the light of a thousand lamps. In the midst of the fourteen deities stood Kali, her tongue unfurled, thirsting for human blood. Having dismissed the temple servants, Raghupati sat entirely alone before the idols of the fourteen deities. Before him lay a long, heavy *khadga*. The naked, gleaming blade of the sacrificial sword caught the lamplight, waiting still as a thunderbolt for the Goddess's command.

The worship was to be held at midnight. The hour was close at hand. Raghupati waited for Jaisingha in a state of extreme agitation. Suddenly, a gale-force wind blew in, and torrential rain began to batter the earth. The thousand lamp flames in the temple shuddered violently in the wind; lightning danced upon the naked sword. The shadows of the fourteen deities and Raghupati seemed to spring to life, dancing wildly upon the temple walls to the rhythm of the flickering flames. A human skull, caught in the gusting wind, rolled erratically across the floor. Two bats flew in, fluttering about the room like dry, dead leaves—their frantic shadows darting across the walls.

Midnight struck. First near, then far in the distance, jackals began to howl. The stormy wind joined their chorus, wailing in a mournful, hollow dirge. The hour of worship had arrived. Overcome by a dreadful premonition, Raghupati grew desperately restless.

Just then, like a living embodiment of the storm, the rain, and the lightning, Jaisingha burst from the midnight darkness into the glare of the temple. His body was cloaked in a long shawl; streams of rainwater poured down his entire frame, his chest heaved with heavy breaths, and sparks of fire burned in his pupils.

Raghupati grabbed him, pulled his mouth close to Jaisingha's ear, and hissed, "Have you brought the royal blood?"

Tearing his arm free, Jaisingha cried out in a booming voice, "I have! I have brought the royal blood. Stand aside, let me offer it to the Goddess."

The temple shook with the sheer force of his voice.

Standing before the idol of Kali, he began to speak: "Is it true, Mother, that you truly crave the blood of your children! Will your thirst not be quenched without royal blood? From the day I was born, I have known you only as my Mother; I have served only you, I have looked to no one else, my life had no other purpose. I am a Rajput; I am a Kshatriya. My great-grandfather was a King; my mother's lineage still rules a kingdom today. Here, then—take the blood of your child! Take your royal blood, take it!"

The shawl slipped from his shoulders. He drew the knife from his waistband—it flashed like lightning—and in the blink of an eye, he plunged the blade deep into

his own heart. The sharp tongue of death pierced his chest. He collapsed at the feet of the idol; the stone Goddess remained unmoved.

Raghupati let out a blood-curdling scream. He tried to lift Jaisingha, but could not. He collapsed over the lifeless body. Blood flowed, spilling over the white marble of the temple floor. Gradually, the lamps flickered out, one by one. In the pitch-black darkness, the sound of a single living being's breathing could be heard throughout the entire night. In the third quarter of the night, the storm ceased, and a profound silence draped over the world. In the fourth quarter, moonlight pierced through a gap in the clouds and poured into the temple. The pale lunar glow fell upon Jaisingha's bloodless face; standing at the head of the dead boy, the fourteen deities stood watching.

In the morning, when the birds began to sing in the forest, Raghupati left the corpse and walked away.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Chaturdashi Tithi:** The fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight. This specific night, just before the new moon (*Amavasya*), is considered highly auspicious for Tantric rituals and the worship of dark, fierce Goddesses like Kali, often historically associated with secretive or blood-based rites.
- **Khadga:** A heavy, curved sacrificial sword used in Hindu rituals, specifically designed to decapitate a sacrificial animal (like a goat or buffalo) in a single, clean strike.
- **Royal Blood:** Jaisingha fulfills the exact wording of his oath to his Guru without breaking his moral oath to the King. By revealing his aristocratic Rajput/Kshatriya lineage right before his death, he proves that his own blood satisfies the "royal blood" condition demanded by the priest.
- **"The stone Goddess remained unmoved":** Tagore's poignant final critique of idol worship and ritualistic violence. Despite the ultimate sacrifice of her most devoted child, the idol remains just a piece of cold, unfeeling stone.

CHAPTER 16

As ordered by the King, Nakshatra Ray set out in the morning himself to investigate the cause of the subjects' discontent. He was worried about how he would enter the temple. Whenever he came face to face with Raghupati, he would become so flustered that he completely lost control of his senses. He had absolutely no desire to encounter the head priest. Therefore, he decided he would avoid Raghupati's gaze and secretly slip into Jaisingha's room to get a detailed account of the situation directly from him.

Nakshatra Ray slowly stepped into Jaisingha's quarters. The moment he crossed the threshold, he felt as though he would be saved if he could just turn back. He saw Jaisingha's books, his clothes, and his belongings scattered all over the room; and right in the middle of it all sat Raghupati. Jaisingha was nowhere to be seen. Raghupati's bloodshot eyes burned like hot coals, and his hair hung in wild disarray. The moment he spotted Nakshatra Ray, he lunged, grabbed his arm with an iron grip, and forcefully dragged him down to sit on the floor. Nakshatra Ray's soul nearly fled his body in terror. Searing Nakshatra Ray to his very core with his coal-like eyes, Raghupati demanded like a madman, "Where is the blood?"

A wave of blood rushed to Nakshatra Ray's heart; his voice completely failed him.

Raghupati shouted, "Where is your oath? Where is the blood?"

Nakshatra Ray fidgeted with his hands and feet, shifted nervously to the left, and began blindly tugging at the hem of his clothes. Sweat poured down his face as he stammered with a dry mouth, "Thakur—"

Raghupati sneered, "This time, the Mother herself has raised the sword. This time, rivers of blood will flow in all directions—this time, not a single drop of blood will be left in your lineage! *Then* I shall see Nakshatra Ray's 'brotherly affection'."

"'Brotherly affection!' Ha! Ha! Ha! Thakur—" Nakshatra Ray tried to force a laugh, but the sound died in his parched throat.

Raghupati declared, "I do not want Govinda Manikya's blood. I want the one Govinda Manikya loves more than his own life. I want to take his blood and smear it all over Govinda Manikya's body—his chest will turn crimson, and that bloodstain

will never be washed away! Look here—look at this!" Saying this, he threw off his *uttariya*. His bare torso was smeared with blood; dark patches of clotted gore stained his chest.

Nakshatra Ray shuddered. His hands and legs began to tremble uncontrollably. Gripping Nakshatra Ray's arm with a vice-like hold, Raghupati demanded, "Who is it? Who does Govinda Manikya love more than his own life? Whose absence would turn the world into a graveyard in Govinda Manikya's eyes and strip his life of all its purpose? Whose face does he remember the moment he wakes up, whose memory does he take to bed at night, who occupies the entire nest of his heart? Who is it? Is it you?"

Just as a tiger stares unblinkingly at a trembling fawn before the final pounce, Raghupati stared at Nakshatra. Nakshatra Ray hastily blurted out, "No, it is not me." But try as he might, he could not break free from Raghupati's grip.

Raghupati ordered, "Then tell me, who is it!"

Nakshatra Ray surrendered the truth: "It is Dhruva."

"Who is Dhruva?" Raghupati asked.

"He is a little boy—" Nakshatra Ray began.

Raghupati interrupted, "I know, I know of him. The King has no children of his own, so he is raising him like a son. I don't know how much people love their own flesh and blood, but I know they love their adopted children more than life itself. The King values his happiness more than all his wealth. He finds more joy seeing a crown on that boy's head than on his own."

Astonished, Nakshatra Ray exclaimed, "That is exactly right!"

"Of course it's right!" Raghupati snapped. "Do you think I don't know how much the King loves him? Do you think I cannot see it? *That* is exactly the one I want."

Nakshatra Ray stared at Raghupati, his mouth hanging half-open. He muttered to himself, "That is exactly the one I want."

Raghupati ordered, "He must be brought to me—today. I want him tonight."

Like an echo, Nakshatra Ray repeated, "Tonight."

Staring intently into Nakshatra Ray's face for a moment, Raghupati lowered his voice and said, "Do you realize this child is your enemy? You were born into the royal lineage—do you not see that some unknown, base-born child has come to snatch the crown from your head? Can you not see with your own two eyes that the throne which was waiting for you has now been reserved for him!"

These thoughts were not new to Nakshatra Ray. He had harbored similar suspicions himself. Puffed up with pride, he said, "You don't need to tell me that, Thakur! Do you think I can't see that for myself!"

"Then what are you waiting for?" Raghupati pushed. "Bring him to me. Let me clear the obstacle to your throne. Only a few more hours to endure somehow, and then... when will you bring him?"

"Tonight—when it gets dark," Nakshatra Ray replied.

Touching his sacred thread, Raghupati delivered a dark vow: "If you fail to bring him, the curse of a Brahmin will fall upon you. The very mouth with which you utter this oath and fail to keep it—before three nights pass, vultures will tear the flesh from that mouth and feast upon it."

Hearing this, Nakshatra Ray flinched and quickly rubbed a hand over his mouth—the mere thought of a vulture's beak tearing into his soft flesh felt utterly unbearable. Bowing hastily to Raghupati, he hurried away. Stepping out of that suffocating room and back into the light, the breeze, and the bustling noise of the crowd, Nakshatra Ray felt as though he had been given a new lease on life.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Uttariya:** A traditional draped upper garment or shawl worn by men in the Indian subcontinent. Raghupati removes it to reveal the horrifying physical evidence of Jaisingha's suicide from the previous chapter.
- **Psychological Manipulation:** Notice how Nakshatra Ray is easily manipulated. He enters terrified, but Raghupati brilliantly pivots from terrifying him with bloody threats to validating his secret royal jealousy

regarding Dhruva (referencing the crown incident from Chapter 14). Nakshatra's dialogue shifts from stuttering fear to arrogant agreement.

- **Vulture's Curse:** A deeply visceral and terrifying curse in Hindu culture, as having one's body scavenged by animals (instead of receiving proper cremation rites) is considered a horrific, polluting fate that traps the soul. Nakshatra's comical gesture of feeling his own mouth highlights his profound cowardice.

CHAPTER 17

That evening, the moment he saw Nakshatra Ray, Dhruva came running, calling out, "Kaka!" Throwing his two little arms around Nakshatra's neck, the boy pressed his cheek against his and whispered softly, "Kaka."

"Fie, don't say that," Nakshatra scolded gently. "I am not your Kaka."

Dhruva had always called him Kaka all this time. Hearing himself suddenly forbidden to do so, he was utterly baffled. He sat in silence for a moment with a serious face, then looked up at Nakshatra with wide, round eyes and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am not your Kaka," Nakshatra repeated.

Hearing this, Dhruva suddenly found the whole thing incredibly funny—he had never heard such a preposterous thing in his life! He laughed and said, "You are Kaka." The more Nakshatra forbade him, the more the boy insisted, "You are Kaka," his laughter growing louder with each repetition. He began to playfully tease Nakshatra Ray by repeatedly calling him Kaka.

Nakshatra asked, "Dhruva, do you want to go see your Didi?"

Dhruva immediately let go of Nakshatra's neck, stood up, and asked, "Where is Didi?"

"With the Mother," Nakshatra replied.

"Where is the Mother?" Dhruva asked.

"The Mother is in a certain place. I can take you there."

Clapping his hands, Dhruva asked eagerly, "When will you take me, Kaka?"

"Right now," Nakshatra promised.

Shrieking with joy, Dhruva threw his arms tightly around Nakshatra's neck. Nakshatra picked him up, covered him with a shawl, and slipped out through a secret door.

Tonight, too, stepping out onto the streets was forbidden. Because of this, there were no guards on the roads, and no travelers. A full moon shone in the sky.

Arriving at the temple, Nakshatra Ray prepared to hand Dhruva over to Raghupati. But the moment Dhruva saw Raghupati, he clung to Nakshatra Ray with all his might, refusing to let go. Raghupati forcibly tore the boy away.

"Kaka!" Dhruva wailed, bursting into tears.

Tears welled up in Nakshatra Ray's eyes as well—but he felt deeply ashamed to show such weakness of heart in front of Raghupati. He pretended to be made of stone! Crying bitterly, Dhruva then began to call out, "Didi! Didi!" But Didi did not come.

Raghupati let out a thunderous bark. Terrified, Dhruva's crying stopped instantly, leaving him only with violent, gasping, silent sobs that seemed to tear his little chest apart. The fourteen deities stood and watched.

At midnight, Govinda Manikya was awakened from a dream by the sound of weeping. Suddenly, he heard an anguished voice calling out from beneath his window, "Maharaj! Maharaj!"

The King quickly got up and went to the window. In the moonlight, he saw Dhruva's uncle, Kedareshwar. "What is the matter?" the King asked.

"Maharaj, where is my Dhruva?" Kedareshwar cried.

"Why, is he not in his bed?"

"No." Kedareshwar continued, "When I couldn't find Dhruva since the afternoon, I asked Prince Nakshatra Ray's servant. He told me Dhruva was with the Prince in his private chambers. Hearing this, I felt assured. But as the night deepened, my fears grew. I made inquiries and discovered that Prince Nakshatra Ray is not in the palace. I tried repeatedly to seek an audience with you, Maharaj, but the guards refused to listen to me—that is why I had to call you from beneath your window and disturb your sleep. Please forgive my offense."

A sudden realization struck the King's mind like a bolt of lightning. He summoned four guards and ordered, "Arm yourselves and follow me."

One of the guards protested, "Maharaj, stepping out onto the streets tonight is forbidden."

"I am commanding it," the King declared.

Kedareshwar prepared to accompany them, but the King ordered him to go back. Through the desolate streets, bathed in moonlight, the King marched toward the temple.

When the temple doors were suddenly flung open, Nakshatra and Raghupati were seen drinking wine, with the sacrificial sword resting before them. There was little light; only a single lamp was burning. Where was Dhruva? Dhruva had fallen asleep at the feet of the Kali idol. The tear-streaks on his cheeks had dried, his little lips were slightly parted, and his face held no fear, no worry—it was as if he were not lying on a bed of cold stone, but resting safely in his sister's lap. It was as if his sister had kissed him and wiped his tears away.

The wine had loosened Nakshatra's tongue, but Raghupati sat completely still, waiting for the auspicious moment of the sacrifice—paying no heed whatsoever to Nakshatra's drunken babble.

Nakshatra was boasting, "Thakur, you are secretly afraid. You think I am afraid too. There is nothing to fear, Thakur! Fear of what? Fear of whom? I will protect you. Do you think I am afraid of the King? I am not afraid of Shah Shuja, I am not afraid of Shah Jahan! Thakur, why didn't you say so—I would have dragged the King himself here, and we could have satisfied the Goddess properly! What little blood does this tiny boy even have."

Just then, a long shadow suddenly fell upon the temple wall. Nakshatra Ray turned around and saw the King. In a flash, his drunkenness vanished completely. He turned paler than his own shadow.

Swiftly gathering the sleeping Dhruva into his arms, Govinda Manikya ordered the guards, "Arrest these two."

The four guards seized the arms of Raghupati and Nakshatra Ray. Clutching Dhruva tightly to his chest, the King walked back to the palace through the desolate, moonlit streets.

Raghupati and Nakshatra Ray spent that night in the dungeon.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kaka:** The Bengali term for a paternal uncle. Dhruva innocently addressing his would-be murderer as his uncle makes the betrayal even more heartbreaking.
- **Shah Shuja & Shah Jahan:** Historical context. Shah Jahan was the immensely powerful Mughal Emperor in Delhi at the time (builder of the Taj Mahal), and his son Shah Shuja was the Mughal governor of Bengal. The Kingdom of Tripura maintained a tense, tributary relationship with the Mughal Empire. Nakshatra's drunken boast that he fears neither the Mughal Governor nor the Emperor highlights his pathetic, false bravado.

CHAPTER 18

The next day was the trial. The courthouse was swarming with people. The King sat upon the judgment seat, with courtiers seated all around him. Before him stood the two prisoners. Neither wore chains on their hands; they were merely surrounded by armed guards. Raghupati stood as still as a stone statue, while Nakshatra Ray's head was bowed in shame.

Having established Raghupati's guilt, the King asked him, "What do you have to say?"

Raghupati replied, "You have no right to judge me."

"Then who shall judge you?" the King asked.

"I am a Brahmin, a servant of the divine. The Gods shall judge me," Raghupati declared.

The King replied, "To dispense punishment for sin and reward for virtue, the divine has thousands of deputies in this world. We are but one of them. I do not wish to debate that matter with you—I am asking you, did you or did you not abduct a child last evening with the intent of sacrificing him?"

"Yes," Raghupati said.

"Do you confess to this crime?" the King asked.

"Crime! What crime!" Raghupati sneered. "I was carrying out the Mother's command, doing the Mother's work. You are the one who obstructed it—you have committed a crime. I declare you guilty before the Mother; she shall be your judge."

Ignoring his outburst, the King declared in a measured tone, "The law of my kingdom is this: any person who offers or attempts to offer a living creature as a sacrifice to the deities shall be punished with banishment. I pronounce that very sentence upon you. You are banished for eight years. The guards will escort you beyond the borders of my kingdom."

The guards stepped forward to lead Raghupati out of the courtroom. Raghupati commanded them, "Stand still." Turning to the King, he said, "Your judgment is

complete. Now I shall judge you; pay heed. During the two nights of the Fourteen Deities' worship, anyone who steps out onto the streets shall be punished by the head priest. This is the law of our temple. According to that ancient law, you are liable for punishment by me."

The King replied calmly, "I am prepared to accept your punishment."

The courtiers chimed in, "For such an offense, only a monetary fine can be levied."

The priest declared, "I fine you two hundred thousand gold coins. It must be paid immediately."

The King thought for a moment and then said, "So be it." Summoning the royal treasurer, he ordered the immediate payment of two hundred thousand coins. The guards then led Raghupati out of the hall.

Once Raghupati was gone, the King turned to his brother and asked in a firm voice, "Nakshatra Ray, do you confess to your crime or not?"

Nakshatra Ray wept, "Maharaj, I am guilty. Please forgive me." With that, he rushed forward and clung tightly to the King's feet.

The Maharaja was deeply moved; for a moment, words failed him. Finally, regaining his composure, he said gently, "Nakshatra Ray, get up and listen to me. Who am I to forgive? I am bound by my own laws. Just as the prisoner is bound, so too is the judge. How can it be that for the exact same crime, I punish one man and pardon another? You tell me, how should I judge?"

The courtiers cried out, "Maharaj, Nakshatra Ray is your brother; please pardon your brother."

The King declared in a resolute voice, "All of you, remain silent. As long as I sit upon this throne, I am no one's brother, no one's friend."

The courtiers fell silent. The entire court was completely still. In a grave voice, the King continued, "You have all heard—the law of my kingdom is that any person who offers or attempts to offer a living creature as a sacrifice shall be punished with banishment. Last evening, Nakshatra Ray conspired with the priest and abducted a

child with the intent of sacrificing him. As this crime has been proven beyond doubt, I sentence him to eight years of banishment."

As the guards stepped forward to take Nakshatra Ray away, the King descended from his throne, embraced his brother tightly, and choked out, "My child, this is not just your punishment; it is my punishment as well. I know not what terrible sin I committed in a past life to deserve this. For as long as you remain far from your loved ones, may the divine be with you, may He bless and protect you."

The news spread through the kingdom in the blink of an eye. Wails of lamentation rose from the inner chambers of the palace. The King retreated to his private quarters and locked the door. Folding his hands, he prayed, "Lord, if I ever commit a sin, do not forgive me. Show me not the slightest mercy. Give me the punishment my sins deserve. A man can bear the punishment for his sins, but he cannot bear the crushing weight of unmerited forgiveness, O Lord!"

The King's love for Nakshatra Ray swelled doubly in his heart. The face of Nakshatra as a young, innocent boy came flooding back to him. The games he played, the words he spoke, the things he did—all began to surface in his memory, one by one. Day after day, night after night, the image of little Nakshatra Ray rose before his eyes, set against sunlit skies and star-studded nights. Tears streamed endlessly down the King's face.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **"So be it" (*Tathastu*):** In the original text, the King uses the Sanskrit word *Tathastu* to accept the fine. It is a highly formal, dignified term usually uttered by deities granting a boon. Its use here shows the King's absolute, unwavering submission to the rule of law, regardless of who invokes it.
- **"I am no one's brother":** The King's tragic dilemma perfectly embodies the concept of *Rajdharma* (the righteous duty of a King), which dictates that a true ruler must be completely impartial, stripping away all personal attachments and familial biases when dispensing justice from the throne.
- **"The weight of unmerited forgiveness":** Govinda Manikya's philosophical prayer highlights his deep moral integrity. He realizes that sparing his brother would have been a corrupt act of nepotism, and the guilt of that "unmerited

forgiveness" would have been a heavier spiritual burden to bear than the pain of sending his brother into exile.

CHAPTER 19

When the guards asked the banished Raghupati, "Thakur, which way will you go?" Raghupati replied, "I will go west."

After nine days of traveling westward, the prisoner and his guards reached the outskirts of the city of Dhaka. The guards then left Raghupati there and returned to the capital.

Raghupati said to himself, "In the Kali Yuga, a Brahmin's curse bears no fruit; let us see what a Brahmin's intellect can achieve. Let us see what kind of King Govinda Manikya truly is, and what kind of head priest I am."

Hidden away in a temple corner at the edge of Tripura, news of the Mughal Empire rarely reached him. For this reason, upon arriving in Dhaka, Raghupati grew curious to learn about Mughal politics and the state of the empire.

It was the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. At the time, his third son, Aurangzeb, was engaged in the invasion of Bijapur in the Deccan. His second son, Shuja, was the governor of Bengal, with his capital at Rajmahal. The youngest son, Prince Murad, was the governor of Gujarat. The eldest, Crown Prince Dara, resided in the capital city of Delhi. The Emperor was sixty-seven years old. As his health was failing, the heavy burden of the empire had fallen upon Dara.

Raghupati resided in Dhaka for a while, learned the Urdu language, and finally set out for Rajmahal.

By the time he reached Rajmahal, a massive upheaval had erupted across India. News had spread that Shah Jahan lay on his deathbed. The moment this news arrived, Shuja mobilized his army and began marching rapidly toward Delhi. All four of the Emperor's sons were scrambling to snatch the crown right off the dying Shah Jahan's head.

The Brahmin immediately abandoned the lawless, chaotic city of Rajmahal and set out in pursuit of Shuja. He dismissed his attendants, bearers, and companions. The two hundred thousand coins he had brought with him, he buried in a desolate wasteland near Rajmahal, leaving a hidden marker above the spot. He took only a very small amount of money with him. Tracing the grim path of burnt-out huts,

abandoned villages, and trampled crop fields, Raghupati marched relentlessly forward.

Raghupati assumed the guise of a *sannyasi*. But despite the garb of a holy ascetic, finding hospitality was nearly impossible. For along the path the soldiers had marched like a swarm of locusts, only famine reigned on either side. The troops had harvested unripe crops to feed their horses and elephants. Not a single grain was left in the farmers' granaries. All around lay the chaotic ruins of pillage. Most of the people had fled their villages. The rare few who could still be seen by chance had no smiles on their faces. They were as skittish and alert as startled deer. They trusted no one, showed mercy to no one. Beside the desolate roads, under the trees, two or four men could be seen sitting with thick wooden staffs; they waited all day, hunting for vulnerable travelers to ambush.

Like a shower of meteors trailing a comet, bandits followed in the wake of the soldiers, plundering whatever meager scraps were left. Sometimes, just like jackals and stray dogs fighting over a carcass, bloody skirmishes would break out between the army contingents and the bandit gangs. Cruelty had become a mere sport for the soldiers. Plunging a sword into the belly of an innocent passerby, or slicing off a piece of a man's skull along with his turban, was considered nothing more than a casual joke. Seeing the villagers cower in terror brought them immense amusement. After stripping a village bare, they found joy in torturing the inhabitants. They would tie two respectable Brahmins back-to-back by their *tikis* and force snuff up their noses. They would mount a single man atop two horses and whip the beasts; as the horses bolted in opposite directions, the man would crash to the ground, shattering his limbs. Every day they invented twisted new games like this. They burned down villages for no reason at all, laughing and claiming they were lighting fireworks in honor of the Emperor.

Hundreds of such scars of atrocities marked the army's path. Where could Raghupati possibly find hospitality here? He survived on meager rations some days, and starved on others. One dark night, exhausted, he lay down to sleep in a ruined, abandoned hut; waking up the next morning, he realized he had spent the entire night using a decapitated corpse as a pillow. One afternoon, famished, Raghupati entered a hut and saw a man slumped over a broken chest—perhaps mourning his looted wealth. Stepping closer, Raghupati nudged him, and the man simply rolled over and collapsed. He was nothing but a corpse; his life had departed long ago.

One night, Raghupati was sleeping in a hut. The night was not yet over; dawn was still a while away. Suddenly, the door slowly creaked open. Along with the pale autumn moonlight, several shadows slipped into the room. Whispering voices could be heard. Raghupati jolted awake and sat up.

The moment he moved, a few female voices gasped in terror, "Oh Mother!"

A man stepped forward and demanded, "Who is there?"

Raghupati replied, "I am a Brahmin, a traveler. Who are you?"

"This is our house. We had fled our home. We only returned after hearing that the Mughal army had moved on."

Raghupati asked, "Which way did the Mughal army go?"

They answered, "Toward Vijaygarh. By now, they must have entered the Vijaygarh forest."

Without another word, Raghupati immediately set out on his journey.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kali Yuga (*Koli*):** In Hindu cosmology, the Kali Yuga is the final and darkest of the four world ages, characterized by moral decline, the loss of spiritual power, and widespread hypocrisy. Raghupati cynically reflects that since divine power (a Brahmin's curse) no longer works in this corrupt age, he must rely on his own cunning political intellect instead.
- **Sannyasi:** A Hindu ascetic or monk who has renounced worldly life.
- **Tiki:** The traditional tuft of hair left on the back of a shaven head by orthodox Hindu men, especially Brahmins. The soldiers tying the Brahmins together by their sacred hair is a deliberate act of profound cultural and religious humiliation.
- **Historical Context:** Tagore brilliantly grounds his fictional narrative within the very real and brutal Mughal war of succession (1657–1658). Shah Jahan's illness triggered a massive, continent-spanning civil war among his sons (Dara Shikoh, Shah Shuja, Aurangzeb, and Murad Baksh). Shuja marched

from Bengal toward Delhi, leaving a trail of devastation—which perfectly mirrors Raghupati's own descent into a broader, darker world of political violence, far removed from the isolated temple politics of Tripura.

CHAPTER 20

The vast forest of Vijaygarh was a well-known den for *thugees*. Along the path cutting through the woods lay countless human skeletons, unmarked save for the wild forest flowers blooming over them. The forest was thick with banyan, *babla*, and neem trees, along with hundreds of varieties of creepers and shrubs. Here and there, natural hollows or pond-like depressions could be seen, their waters turned entirely green from the endless decay of fallen leaves. Narrow, winding trails slithered left and right, disappearing like snakes into the dark jungle. Flocks of langurs populated the branches above. Hundreds of aerial roots and monkey tails dangled from the sprawling boughs of the banyans. In the courtyard of a ruined temple, a *shiuli* tree was completely smothered under a carpet of white blossoms and the grinning teeth of monkeys. In the evening, the deafening squawking of parrots swarming the large, leafy trees seemed to tear through the deep gloom of the forest.

Today, an army of nearly twenty thousand men had entered this massive forest. This dense, circular woods—a chaotic tangle of branches, vines, leaves, grass, and shrubs—now felt like a single, colossal nest for twenty thousand sharp-beaked, sharp-clawed human falcons. Seeing the massive gathering of troops, countless crows circled the sky in flocks, cawing incessantly, not daring to land on the branches below. The commander had strictly forbidden any loud noise. Having marched all day, the soldiers arrived in the forest at dusk. They gathered dry wood, tied up their bundles, and spoke only in hushed whispers. Their collective murmuring made the entire forest hum and vibrate, drowning out the evening call of the crickets. Horses tethered to tree trunks occasionally pawed the ground with their hooves and let out shrill neighs, startling the entire forest. Shah Shuja's tent was pitched in a clearing near the ruined temple, while everyone else was camped out under the trees for the night.

Having walked relentlessly all day, Raghupati finally entered the forest after nightfall. Most of the soldiers were sound asleep, while a small contingent stood guard in silence. Here and there, campfires burned—it looked as though the darkness had managed, with great effort, to pry open a few heavy, bloodshot eyes. As soon as Raghupati set foot in the forest, he could almost hear the collective breathing of the twenty thousand soldiers. The thousands of trees seemed to spread their branches, standing guard. Just as a dark owl sits with its wings spread

over its newborn chicks, the immense, sprawling night outside the forest seemed to press down, spreading its wings silently over the deeper, denser night within the forest. One night slept inside the woods with its face buried; another night stayed awake outside, raising its head.

That night, Raghupati slept at the edge of the forest.

In the morning, he woke up with a jolt after being poked a couple of times. He saw a few turbaned, heavily bearded Turani soldiers shouting something at him in a foreign tongue. Based on their tone, he correctly deduced they were insults. He promptly fired back, broadcasting their status as his brothers-in-law in Bengali. They began to drag him away roughly.

"Do you think this is a joke?" Raghupati protested, though there was absolutely no sign of joking in their behavior. They dragged him ruthlessly through the forest.

Expressing his extreme displeasure, he complained, "Why are you dragging me? I'll walk on my own. Why else do you think I traveled all this way?"

The soldiers laughed and began mocking his Bengali words. Gradually, a large crowd of troops gathered around him, and a massive commotion ensued. There was no end to their torment. One soldier grabbed a squirrel by its tail and dropped it onto Raghupati's shaven head—just to see if it would mistake his bald pate for a fruit and try to eat it.

Another soldier walked alongside him, bending a thick, flexible cane right in front of Raghupati's nose; if he were to let it snap back, the majestic prominence of Raghupati's nose would likely be wiped off his face forever. The forest echoed with the soldiers' laughter. They were supposed to go to battle that afternoon, so this morning, tormenting Raghupati became their grand entertainment. Once they had their fill of the game, they dragged the Brahmin to Shuja's tent.

Seeing Shuja, Raghupati did not offer a *salaam*. He had never bowed his head to anyone other than the Gods and those of his own caste. He stood tall, raised a hand, and declared, "Victory to the Shahenshah."

Shuja sat with his courtiers, holding a cup of wine. In a lazy, heavily slurred voice, dripping with sheer indifference, he mumbled, "What is it, what's the matter?"

A soldier reported, "Janab, an enemy spy was sneaking around to gather intel on our forces. We caught him and brought him before the master."

"Fine, fine," Shuja muttered dismissively. "The poor fellow just came to have a look. Show him around properly, let him see everything, and then let him go. He'll have stories to tell when he gets back home."

In broken Hindustani, Raghupati said, "I seek employment in the service of the Sarkar."

Waving a hand lazily, Shuja gestured for him to be quickly taken away. He muttered, "It's hot." The servant fanning him immediately began fanning twice as fast.

News had arrived that Prince Dara had sent his son Sulaiman, under the command of Raja Jai Singh, to halt Shuja's advance. Their massive army was approaching fast. Because of this, Shuja was desperate to capture the fort of Vijaygarh and mass his troops there. He had sent an envoy to Vikram Singh, the lord of Vijaygarh, demanding the surrender of the fort and the imperial revenue.

Vikram Singh had sent the envoy back with this message: "I only recognize the Lord of Delhi, Shah Jahan, and the Lord of the Universe, Lord Shiva. Who is Shuja? I do not know him."

In his drunken slur, Shuja grumbled, "Very insolent! Now we'll have to fight unnecessarily. What a massive nuisance!"

Raghupati heard all of this. The moment he escaped the soldiers' grasp, he headed straight toward Vijaygarh.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Thugees:** A historical network of secret fraternities/gangs in India who specialized in the ambush, strangulation, and robbery of travelers. The Vijaygarh forest being a *thug* den establishes it as a deeply dangerous, lawless place.
- **Turani Soldiers:** Mercenaries or soldiers of Central Asian (Turkic/Uzbek) descent who served in the Mughal army. Raghupati and the soldiers speaking

mutually unintelligible languages (Bengali vs. Turkic/Persian) highlights the vast, multicultural expanse of the Mughal war machine.

- **"Brothers-in-law" (Shyalok-shombondho):** Raghupati insults the soldiers back in Bengali by calling them *shala* (wife's brother). In South Asian culture, this is a common, deeply offensive slur implying that the speaker has slept with the listener's sister.
- **Shahenshah & Sarkar:** Raghupati refuses to perform the Islamic *salaam* (a deep bow/salute), sticking to his Brahminical pride. However, he strategically flatters Shuja by calling him *Shahenshah* (Emperor/King of Kings) and seeking a job from the *Sarkar* (Government), proving he is willing to compromise his pride for political gain.

CHAPTER 21

Vijaygarh stood atop a hill. The forest of Vijaygarh ended near the fortress. Emerging from the woods, Raghupati suddenly saw the tall stone fort standing as if leaning against the vast blue sky. Just as the forest was concealed within its thousand tangled trees, the fort was tightly enclosed within its own stone walls. The forest was cautious; the fort was alert. The forest crouched like a tiger, tucking its tail, ready to pounce; the fort stood like a lion, puffing its mane and arching its neck. The forest kept its ear to the ground, listening; the fort raised its head to the sky, watching.

As soon as Raghupati emerged from the forest, the soldiers on the fort walls grew alarmed. Horns blared. It was as if the fort had suddenly let out a lion's roar, bared its fangs, and scowled. Raghupati raised his hand, showed his sacred thread, and signaled to them. The soldiers stood guard warily. When Raghupati approached the fort walls, the soldiers shouted, "Who are you?"

Raghupati replied, "I am a Brahmin, a guest."

The lord of the fort, Vikram Singh, was a deeply devout man. He was dedicated to the service of the Gods, Brahmins, and guests. For a man wearing a sacred thread, no further introduction was needed to enter the fort. But today, on a day of battle, the soldiers were unsure of what to do.

Raghupati called out, "If you do not give me shelter, I shall die at the hands of the Muslims."

When these words reached Vikram Singh's ears, he granted permission to give the Brahmin refuge inside the fort. A ladder was lowered from the wall, and Raghupati entered the fortress.

Inside, everyone was busy anticipating the battle. The elderly *Khuro-saheb* personally took charge of welcoming the Brahmin. His real name was Khadga Singh, but some called him Khuro-saheb, and others called him Subadar-saheb—though no one could find any earthly reason why. He had no nephews in this world, nor brothers, nor any right or remote possibility of ever becoming an uncle. And the number of his nephews was certainly no greater than the number of *subas* [provinces] he governed. Yet, to this day, no one had raised any objection or doubt

regarding his titles. For those who are uncles without nephews, and subadars without provinces, there is no fear of losing their positions due to the fleeting nature of the world or the fickleness of the Goddess of Fortune.

Khuro-saheb approached and said, "Bravo! Now *this* is what a true Brahmin looks like." Saying this, he bowed reverently. Raghupati possessed a radiant, flame-like presence that instantly mesmerized onlookers, much like moths drawn to a fire.

Saddened by the current deplorable state of the world, Khuro-saheb lamented, "Thakur, how many such Brahmins can one find these days?"

Raghupati replied, "Very few."

Khuro-saheb said, "In the old days, Brahmins had fire in their words; now, all that fire has taken refuge in their bellies."

Raghupati asked, "Is even *that* fire the same as before?"

Khuro-saheb shook his head. "True. Just imagine if Sage Agastya had to eat a meal proportionate to the amount he drank, and you will understand."

Raghupati added, "There are other examples."

Khuro-saheb nodded eagerly. "Yes, indeed. We hear of Sage Jahnu's great thirst, but nowhere are tales of his hunger written down. However, one can make a guess. Merely popping a *haritaki* plum does not mean they ate less; if we only had a count of how many *haritakis* they chewed every day, we might have had a clearer picture."

Remembering the true greatness of Brahmins, Raghupati said gravely, "No, Saheb, they did not pay much attention to food."

Khuro-saheb bit his tongue. "Ram Ram! What are you saying, Thakur? There is distinct proof that their digestive fires were incredibly fierce. Just look—over time, all other fires have died out, even the sacrificial fires of the *homa* no longer burn, but—"

Slightly offended, Raghupati argued, "How can the sacrificial fire burn? Where is the *ghee* left in the country? The heretics are smuggling all the cows away; where

can one find holy offerings now? If the sacrificial fire does not burn, how long can the divine radiance of the Brahmins last?"

Saying this, Raghupati acutely felt his own hidden, burning power.

Khuro-saheb agreed, "You are absolutely right, Thakur. These days, cows are dying and being reincarnated in the human realm; but one cannot expect any *ghee* from them. There is a complete lack of brains. Where is the Thakur arriving from?"

Raghupati replied, "From the royal palace of Tripura."

Khuro-saheb's knowledge of the geography or history of India outside Vijaygarh was extremely meager. He did not even believe there was anything worth knowing in India besides Vijaygarh. Relying entirely on guesswork, he said, "Ah, the King of Tripura is a very great King."

Raghupati fully endorsed this statement.

Khuro-saheb asked, "What is the Thakur's occupation?"

Raghupati replied, "I am the royal priest of Tripura."

Khuro-saheb closed his eyes, nodded sagely, and sighed, "Ah!" His reverence for Raghupati increased immensely. "What brings you here?"

Raghupati replied, "To visit the holy places."

Boom! A loud blast echoed. The enemy had attacked the fort. Khuro-saheb smiled, winked, and said casually, "It's nothing, they are just throwing pebbles."

Khuro-saheb's faith in Vijaygarh was firmer than the very stones of the fort. Whenever a foreign traveler entered the fort, Khuro-saheb would monopolize him and firmly implant the greatness of Vijaygarh in his mind. Raghupati had come from the royal court of Tripura—such a guest was rare. Khuro-saheb was in high spirits and began discussing the ancient history of Vijaygarh with his guest. He declared that the cosmic egg of Brahma and the fort of Vijaygarh were created at roughly the same time, and that there could be no doubt that Maharaja Vikram Singh's ancestors had been ruling this fort since the time of Manu. What boons Lord Shiva had bestowed upon this fort, and how the thousand-armed King Kartavirya Arjuna

had once been imprisoned here, were also enthusiastically made known to Raghupati.

By evening, news arrived that the enemy had been unable to inflict any damage on the fort. They had set up cannons, but the cannonballs fell short of the walls. Khuro-saheb smiled and looked at Raghupati. The implication was clear: what better proof could there be of Shiva's infallible boon upon the fort? Perhaps Nandi himself had come and caught the cannonballs in mid-air, so that Ganapati and Kartikeya could play marbles with them in Kailash.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Khuro-saheb:** *Khuro* is an old Bengali word for a paternal uncle, and *saheb* is a title of respect. Khadga Singh's comical nicknames (Uncle-saheb and Governor-saheb) despite having no nephews or provinces highlight his endearing, self-important, yet harmless nature, providing comic relief amidst the grim war.
- **"Fire in their bellies":** A humorous philosophical debate about *Jatharanal* (digestive fire). In Hindu mythology, great sages possessed immense power (like Sage Agastya, who drank the entire ocean, or Sage Jahnu, who drank the river Ganges). Khuro-saheb playfully argues that while modern Brahmins have lost their spiritual fire, they have certainly retained the legendary, bottomless appetites of their ancestors.
- **Haritaki:** A type of myrobalan plum traditionally used in Ayurvedic medicine to aid digestion after a heavy meal.
- **Cows reincarnating as humans:** Khuro-saheb uses a brilliant, dry insult here. He agrees with Raghupati that there are no cows left to produce *ghee* for rituals, but jokes that the cows haven't disappeared—they have just been reborn as the incredibly stupid human beings walking around today.
- **Nandi, Ganapati & Kartikeya:** Lord Shiva's divine family residing on Mount Kailash. Nandi is Shiva's bull mount, while Ganapati (Ganesha) and Kartikeya are his sons. Khuro-saheb's blind faith leads him to imagine divine intervention stopping the Mughal cannonballs.

CHAPTER 22

Raghupati's sole objective was to bring Shah Shuja under his influence by any means. When he heard that Shuja was preparing to attack the fort, he thought he would infiltrate the fortress under the guise of a friend and somehow assist Shuja's assault from the inside. But the Brahmin knew absolutely nothing about the ways of war, and could not think of a single way he might actually help Shuja.

The next day, the battle resumed. The enemy forces blew up a portion of the fort wall with gunpowder, but due to a relentless barrage of gunfire from the defenders, they could not breach the fortress. The ruined section of the wall was rebuilt in the blink of an eye. Today, cannonballs and bullets occasionally landed inside the fort, killing and wounding two or four soldiers at a time.

"Thakur, there is nothing to fear, this is merely a game," Khuro-saheb assured him, taking Raghupati on a walking tour all around the fort. He meticulously showed him every intricate detail—where the armory was, where the storehouses lay, the hospital for the wounded, the prison, the royal court—pointing out everything and repeatedly glancing at Raghupati's face for his reaction.

Raghupati remarked, "A magnificent establishment. The fortress of Tripura cannot even compare to it. But Saheb, for secret escapes, the fort of Tripura possesses a wondrous underground tunnel; I see nothing of the sort here."

Khuro-saheb was about to say something, but suddenly caught himself and said, "No, there is nothing of the sort in this fort."

Feigning absolute astonishment, Raghupati exclaimed, "Such a massive fort, and not a single secret tunnel? How can that be!"

Slightly flustered, Khuro-saheb mumbled, "Doesn't have one? How could that be? Of course it must have one, perhaps we are just not aware of it."

Raghupati chuckled and said, "Then it is as good as not having one at all. If even you do not know about it, then who else would?"

Khuro-saheb grew incredibly grave and remained silent for a while. Then, suddenly murmuring "*Hari, O Ram Ram,*" he snapped his fingers and let out a yawn. Stroking

his face, mustache, and beard a couple of times, he abruptly blurted out, "Thakur, you are a man dedicated to prayer and worship; there is no harm in telling you. There are actually two secret passages to enter and exit the fort, but it is strictly forbidden to show them to any outsider."

In a slightly doubtful tone, Raghupati said, "Indeed! I suppose so."

Khuro-saheb realized it was his own fault; saying "no" one moment and "yes" the next would naturally make anyone suspicious. But the thought that Vijaygarh might fall short of Tripura's fort in any aspect in the eyes of a foreigner was utterly unbearable to Khuro-saheb.

He rationalized, "Thakur, I suppose your Tripura is very far away, and since you are a Brahmin whose sole duty is serving the Gods, there is no chance of the secret being exposed by you."

Raghupati waved him off, "What is the need, Saheb? If you are doubtful, let us just drop the matter. I am the son of a Brahmin, what use do I have for the secrets of a fort?"

Khuro-saheb bit his tongue and protested, "Ah, Ram Ram! Why would I doubt you? Come, let me show you just once."

Meanwhile, absolute chaos suddenly erupted among Shuja's troops outside the fort. Shuja's camp was pitched in the forest; the armies of Sulaiman and Raja Jai Singh had launched a surprise attack, captured Shuja, and stealthily descended upon the forces besieging the fort. Without putting up a fight, Shuja's army broke rank and fled, abandoning twenty cannons behind them.

Massive celebrations broke out inside the fortress. As soon as Sulaiman's envoy reached Vikram Singh, the lord of the fort threw open the gates and stepped forward personally to welcome Sulaiman and Raja Jai Singh. The fort quickly filled with the soldiers, horses, and elephants of the Emperor of Delhi. Banners fluttered in the wind, conch shells and martial drums sounded triumphantly, and beneath Khuro-saheb's white mustache, a radiant, white smile blossomed in full glory.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **"Hari, O Ram Ram" and snapping fingers:** When Khuro-saheb yawns, he snaps his fingers and invokes the names of deities (Hari and Ram). In traditional Indian culture, it is believed that yawning leaves the body vulnerable to evil spirits or bad omens, so one snaps their fingers or utters a holy name to ward them off. It is also used here to show Khuro-saheb breaking his own tension before spilling a military secret.
- **Son of a Brahmin:** Raghupati refers to himself as *Brahmaner chhele* (son of a Brahmin) to emphasize his supposedly harmless, non-military, and spiritual nature, successfully manipulating the naive Khuro-saheb into dropping his guard and revealing the fort's vulnerabilities.
- **Sulaiman & Raja Jai Singh:** These are historical figures. Sulaiman Shikoh was the eldest son of Crown Prince Dara Shikoh, and Mirza Raja Jai Singh was a highly respected senior general of the Mughal Empire. They were sent by Dara Shikoh (on behalf of Emperor Shah Jahan) to defeat Shah Shuja during the war of succession.

CHAPTER 23

What a day of joy it was for Khuro-saheb! Today, the Rajput soldiers of the Emperor of Delhi were guests at Vijaygarh. The immensely powerful Shah Shuja was now a prisoner of Vijaygarh. Not since the thousand-armed Kartavirya Arjuna had such a prisoner been captured here. Sighing at the memory of Kartavirya Arjuna's imprisonment, Khuro-saheb said to the Rajput Suchet Singh, "Just imagine the sheer preparation required to forge chains for a thousand arms! Ever since the dawn of the Kali Yuga, the pomp and grandeur have completely diminished. Nowadays, be it a King's son or an Emperor's son, you cannot find anyone in the market with more than two arms. There is no joy in binding them."

Suchet Singh chuckled, looked at his own arms, and said, "These two hands are more than enough."

Khuro-saheb thought for a moment and said, "True, true. In the old days, there was far more work to be done. Today, work has dwindled so much that one can hardly justify even having two hands. If we had any more hands, we'd just have to use them to twirl our mustaches."

Today, Khuro-saheb's attire was utterly flawless. He had parted his grey beard down the middle from his chin and looped the two halves over his ears. He had twisted his thick mustache, curling it almost up to his ear canals. A turban sat jauntily tilted on his head, and a curved sword hung at his waist. The tips of his embroidered slippers curled upward like horns. Today, Khuro-saheb strutted with such a gait, it seemed as if the very glory of Vijaygarh was rippling through his entire body. The joyous thought that the greatness of Vijaygarh would finally be proven before these true connoisseurs had left him without sleep or appetite.

He spent almost the entire day giving Suchet Singh a grand tour of the fort. Wherever Suchet Singh failed to express any wonder, Khuro-saheb would personally exclaim, "Bravo, bravo!" trying to inject his own enthusiasm into the heart of the Rajput warrior. He exerted a particular amount of effort trying to impress upon him the architectural brilliance of the fort's masonry. But just as the fort walls remained entirely unmoved, so too did Suchet Singh—not a single trace of emotion crossed his face. Khuro-saheb dragged him around in circles, bringing him to the left of the wall, then to the right, then up high, then down below—

repeatedly exclaiming, "What praise it deserves!" Yet, he simply could not conquer the fortress of Suchet Singh's heart.

Finally, exhausted by evening, Suchet Singh blurted out, "I have seen the fort of Bharatpur; no other fort catches my eye anymore."

Khuro-saheb never quarreled with anyone. Looking deeply dejected, he murmured, "Of course, of course. You can certainly say that."

With a sigh, he abandoned the discussion of the fort. He brought up the topic of Vikram Singh's ancestor, Durga Singh. He narrated, "Durga Singh had three sons. The youngest, Chitra Singh, had an astonishing habit. Every morning, he would boil and eat roughly half a seer of chickpeas in milk. And his physique reflected it perfectly! Well, sir, this Bharatpur fort you speak of must certainly be a very grand fort indeed—but I don't recall seeing any mention of it in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*."

Suchet Singh laughed and said, "That hasn't hindered its operations in the slightest."

Khuro-saheb forced a wooden laugh. "Ha ha ha! True, true, true! But you know, the fort of Tripura is no small thing either, though compared to Vijaygarh—"

"In what country is this Tripura anyway?" Suchet Singh asked.

"Oh, it's a massive country. Let's not get into all that—the royal priest from there is a guest in our fort right now. You shall hear everything directly from his own lips."

But the Brahmin could not be found anywhere today. Khuro-saheb's heart ached for him. He thought to himself, "*That Brahmin is far better than these rustic Rajputs.*" He began to praise Raghupati to the heavens before Suchet Singh, and even made sure to reveal exactly what Raghupati thought of Vijaygarh.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kartavirya Arjuna & The Kali Yuga:** The legendary king with a thousand arms who supposedly imprisoned the demon king Ravana in Vijaygarh. Khuro-saheb wistfully complains that the current dark age (Kali Yuga) is so boring

because people only have two arms now, taking the fun out of putting them in chains.

- **"These two hands are more than enough":** Suchet Singh (Jaisingha's Rajput father) delivers this dry, macho retort. This is a brilliant character moment—Suchet Singh's stoic, martial pride contrasts hilariously with Khuro-saheb's eccentric, gossipy nature.
- **Mustache and Beard Styling:** Khuro-saheb parting his beard and looping it over his ears is a comical, old-fashioned military grooming style.
- **Brahmavaivarta Purana:** Khuro-saheb tries to one-up the Bharatpur fort by pointing out that while it might be impressive, it isn't ancient enough to be mentioned in the sacred Hindu texts (Puras) like Vijaygarh is.
- **Half a Seer:** A traditional Indian unit of mass/volume. Half a seer is roughly 460 grams. Chitra Singh eating nearly half a kilo of boiled chickpeas every morning is mentioned to highlight his legendary Rajput strength and appetite.

CHAPTER 24

Suchet Singh did not have to make much effort to escape Khuro-saheb's clutches. It was decided that the Emperor's army, along with the prisoner, would depart the following morning, and the soldiers immediately busied themselves with preparations for the journey.

In his prison cell, Shah Shuja was extremely disgruntled and muttered to himself, "What insolence! It hasn't even crossed their minds to fetch my hookah from the camp."

At the base of the Vijaygarh hill lay a deep moat. By the edge of this moat stood the lightning-scorched trunk of a peepal tree. At the dead of night, Raghupati dove into the water near this stump and vanished.

The secret passage leading into the fort had its entrance hidden deep beneath the waters of this moat. Once someone swam into this passage and reached the other end, a forceful push from below would lift a trapdoor stone; however, this stone could not be lifted from above by any means. Consequently, those trapped inside the fort could not use this route to escape.

On a bed inside the prison cell, Shuja was sound asleep. Apart from the bed, the room was entirely bare. A single lamp burned faintly. Suddenly, a gaping hole appeared in the floor. Slowly lifting his head, Raghupati emerged from the depths of the earth. He was drenched from head to toe. Water dripped steadily from his soaked clothes. Raghupati gently touched Shuja.

Startled, Shuja sat up, rubbed his eyes for a moment, and then complained in a sleep-heavy voice, "What a nuisance! Will they not even let me sleep at night? I am utterly appalled by your behavior."

Raghupati whispered, "Shahzada, please rise. I am that Brahmin. Remember me now, and remember me in the future."

The next morning, the Emperor's army was ready to march. Raja Jai Singh personally entered the prison cell to wake Shuja from his sleep. He found that Shuja had not yet risen from his bed. Approaching closer and touching the figure, he

realized it was not Shuja, but merely a pile of his discarded clothes. Shuja was gone. In the middle of the floor lay a dark tunnel opening, its covering stone pushed aside.

The news of the prisoner's escape spread through the fort like wildfire. Men were dispatched in all directions to search for him. Raja Vikram Singh bowed his head in profound shame. A council was immediately convened to investigate how the prisoner had managed to escape.

Where had all of Khuro-saheb's proud, joyful swagger gone! He ran around like a madman, frantically searching for Raghupati, asking everyone, "Where is the Brahmin? Where is the Brahmin?" The Brahmin was nowhere to be found.

Taking off his turban, Khuro-saheb sat down, clutching his head in despair. Suchet Singh sat beside him and said, "Khuro-saheb, what an astonishing affair! Is this the work of ghosts?"

Shaking his head mournfully, Khuro-saheb replied, "No, Suchet Singh, this is not the work of ghosts. This is the work of an utter, foolish old man, and another treacherous fiend."

Surprised, Suchet Singh said, "If you know who they are, why don't you arrest them?"

Khuro-saheb replied, "One of them has fled. The other, I am arresting right now and taking him to the royal court."

Saying this, he put his turban back on, adjusted his court attire, and stood up.

In the royal court, the guards were being interrogated. Khuro-saheb entered the hall with his head bowed. Unbuckling his sword, he laid it at Vikram Singh's feet and said, "Order my arrest. I am the culprit."

Astonished, the King asked, "Khuro-saheb, what is the meaning of this!"

Khuro-saheb replied, "That Brahmin! This is entirely the work of that Bengali Brahmin."

Raja Jai Singh asked, "Who are you?"

Khuro-saheb answered, "I am the old Khuro-saheb of Vijaygarh."

"What have you done?" Jai Singh demanded.

Khuro-saheb confessed, "I have committed an act of treason by revealing the secrets of Vijaygarh. Trusting him like an utter fool, I told the Bengali Brahmin about the secret tunnel—"

Vikram Singh suddenly flared up in anger and shouted, "Khadga Singh!"

Khuro-saheb flinched—he had almost forgotten his real name was Khadga Singh.

Vikram Singh demanded, "Khadga Singh, have you reverted to childhood in your old age!"

Khuro-saheb stood silently with his head bowed.

Vikram Singh continued, "Khuro-saheb, you did this! Because of you, Vijaygarh has suffered this humiliation today!"

Khuro-saheb stood in silence, his hands trembling violently. With a shaking hand, he touched his forehead and muttered to himself, "Fate!"

"The enemy of the Emperor of Delhi escaped from my fort!" Vikram Singh raged. "Do you realize you have made me a criminal in the eyes of the Emperor!"

Khuro-saheb pleaded, "I alone am the criminal. The Emperor will not believe that the Maharaja is guilty."

Disgusted, Vikram Singh retorted, "Who are you? Does the Emperor of Delhi keep track of you? You are my man. To him, it will look exactly as if I myself untied the prisoner's bonds with my own hands."

Khuro-saheb had no answer. He could no longer hold back his tears.

Vikram Singh asked coldly, "What punishment shall I give you?"

"Whatever the Maharaja wishes."

"You are an old man, what harsher punishment can I give you?" Vikram Singh said. "Banishment is sufficient for you."

Khuro-saheb threw himself at Vikram Singh's feet, clutching them desperately. "Banishment from Vijaygarh! No, Maharaj! I am an old man, I lost my mind. Let me die in Vijaygarh. Order my execution. But do not drive me out of Vijaygarh in my old age like a stray dog."

Raja Jai Singh interceded, "Maharaj, at my request, please pardon his offense. I will inform the Emperor of the exact circumstances."

Khuro-saheb was pardoned.

As he walked out of the court, Khuro-saheb stumbled and collapsed. From that day on, Khuro-saheb was rarely seen. He never left his room again. It was as if his spine had been permanently broken.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Hookah/Albola:** Shuja is complaining about missing his *albola*—a large, luxurious smoking pipe used by the Mughal nobility. His frivolous complaint while being held a prisoner of war highlights the decadent, out-of-touch nature of the Mughal princes.
- **Shahzada:** The Persian/Urdu title for a prince. Raghupati uses this to address Shuja respectfully.
- **"Is this the work of ghosts?":** Suchet Singh genuinely thinks something supernatural occurred because he has no idea about the secret tunnel. Khuro-saheb's grim confession that the "foolish old man" is himself is deeply tragic.
- **"Khadga Singh!":** The fort commander using Khuro-saheb's real, formal name signifies the absolute destruction of his jovial, avuncular identity. He is no longer the beloved "Uncle" of the fort; he is a traitor facing the wrath of his king.
- **"Fate!":** Khuro-saheb touching his forehead and muttering "Fate" refers to the Hindu belief that one's destiny (both good and bad) is written invisibly on one's forehead by the Gods. He is lamenting his terrible luck and foolishness.

CHAPTER 25

Gujurpara was a tiny village on the banks of the Brahmaputra. It had a small *zamindar* named Pitambar Ray, and very few inhabitants. Sitting in his old *Chandimandap*, Pitambar called himself a King. His subjects called him King too. His royal majesty reigned supreme within this small village enclosed by mango and *piyal* groves. His fame echoed through the village arbors and faded away right at the village borders. The fierce might of the world's great emperors never breached this shady little nest. There was, however, a massive palace on the riverbank built by the Kings of Tripura for holy bathing rituals; but no king had come to bathe there for a long time, so only vague rumors about the King of Tripura circulated among the villagers.

One day in the month of Bhadra, news arrived in the village that a Prince of Tripura was coming to live in the old palace by the river. A few days later, a large number of turbaned men arrived and set about restoring the palace with great pomp. About a week after that, accompanied by elephants, horses, and a grand retinue, Prince Nakshatra Ray himself arrived in Gujurpara. Seeing the sheer pageantry, the villagers were left speechless. Up until now, Pitambar had seemed like a very great King to them, but today, no one felt that way anymore. Seeing Nakshatra Ray, everyone unanimously agreed, "Ah, yes, this is exactly what a true Prince looks like."

In this way, Pitambar—along with his brick mansion and his *Chandimandap*—was completely eclipsed. But there was no end to his joy. He perceived Nakshatra Ray as such a grand King that he was perfectly happy to lay down his own petty royal majesty at the Prince's feet. Whenever Nakshatra Ray occasionally rode out on his elephant, Pitambar would call out to his subjects, "Have you seen the King? Look there, look at the King!" Pitambar visited Nakshatra Ray every day, bringing gifts of fish, vegetables, and other delicacies. Seeing Nakshatra Ray's handsome, youthful face, Pitambar's heart would swell with affection. Nakshatra Ray became the true King of the village, and Pitambar happily joined the ranks of his subjects.

The *nahabat* played three times a day, elephants and horses marched through the village streets, the flash of drawn swords gleamed at the palace gates, and a bustling market sprang up. Pitambar and his subjects were thrilled. Becoming the King of this exile, Nakshatra Ray forgot all his sorrows. Here, there was absolutely

no burden of kingship, yet all the pleasures of royalty were fully available. He was completely independent here; he never had such absolute power in his own homeland. Moreover, the dark shadow of Raghupati was nowhere to be seen. In high spirits, Nakshatra Ray plunged into a life of luxury. Dancers and courtesans were brought in from the city of Dhaka, and Nakshatra Ray never tired of the endless music, singing, and dancing.

Nakshatra Ray adopted all the royal customs of Tripura. He named one of his servants 'Prime Minister,' another 'Commander-in-Chief,' and Pitambar became known as the 'Dewan-ji'. A proper royal court was held regularly. Nakshatra Ray dispensed justice with great pomp. Nakur came and complained, "Mathur called me a dog." A formal trial was held. After gathering various pieces of evidence, Mathur was found guilty, and Nakshatra Ray, from his judgment seat, solemnly decreed his punishment: Nakur was to twist Mathur's ears twice.

Time passed blissfully in this manner. Somedays, if there was no real work at hand, the Prime Minister would be summoned to invent some bizarre new entertainment. The Minister would gather the courtiers and frantically set about devising a new game; there would be endless, deep deliberations and planning. One day, a full-scale military assault was launched on Pitambar's *Chandimandap*, and the "loot"—fish from his pond, green coconuts, and spinach from his garden—was brought back to the palace with great fanfare and beating drums. Through such playful games, Pitambar's affection for Nakshatra Ray only deepened.

Today was the wedding of a kitten at the palace. Nakshatra Ray had a baby female cat, and she was to be married to the tomcat belonging to the Mandal family. Churomani the matchmaker had received three hundred rupees and a shawl for arranging the match. The *gaye-holud* and all the other pre-wedding rituals had already been completed. The wedding was to take place today at an auspicious hour in the evening. For the past few days, no one in the royal household had a moment's rest.

By evening, the streets were illuminated, and the *nahabat* began to play. Dressed in rich brocade, riding in a palanquin from the Mandal household, the groom set out, meowing most pitifully. The youngest boy of the Mandal family walked alongside as his best man, holding the cat's leash. Amidst the blowing of conch shells and *ulu* sounds, the groom arrived at the assembly.

The local priest's name was Kenaram, but Nakshatra Ray had renamed him Raghupati. Nakshatra Ray was terrified of the real Raghupati, so he found great pleasure in playing with this fake Raghupati. He would even casually torment him for fun, and the poor Kenaram endured it all in silence. But today, due to a tragic stroke of fate, Kenaram was absent from the assembly—his young son was dying of a severe fever.

Nakshatra Ray demanded impatiently, "Where is Raghupati?"

A servant replied, "There is illness at his home."

Nakshatra Ray bellowed twice as loud, "Call him here!"

A man was dispatched. In the meantime, singing and dancing commenced before the weeping cat.

"Sing the Sahana raga," Nakshatra Ray ordered. The Sahana song began.

A little while later, a servant entered and announced, "Raghupati has arrived."

"Bring him in," Nakshatra Ray snapped angrily.

The priest immediately entered the room. The moment Nakshatra Ray saw the priest, his angry scowl vanished, replaced by a complete and utter transformation. His face turned deathly pale, and sweat broke out on his forehead. The Sahana song, the *sarangi*, and the *mridangam* abruptly stopped. Only the cat's pathetic meowing echoed twice as loud in the sudden, dead silence of the room.

It was indeed Raghupati. There was no doubt about it. He was tall, gaunt, and burning with a fierce intensity; his eyes blazed like those of a starving dog. Planting his two dust-covered feet firmly upon the luxurious brocade carpets, he raised his head and stood tall.

He spoke: "Nakshatra Ray!"

Nakshatra Ray sat in stunned silence.

Raghupati said, "You called for Raghupati. I have come."

Nakshatra Ray stammered in a barely audible whisper, "Thakur... Thakur!"

"Get up and come here," Raghupati commanded.

Nakshatra Ray slowly rose from the assembly and followed him out. The cat's wedding, the Sahana raga, and the *sarangi* music were completely abandoned.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Zamindar & Chandimandap:** A *zamindar* is a hereditary aristocratic landlord. The *Chandimandap* is an open pavilion or hall in the courtyard of a wealthy Bengali household, traditionally used for religious worship (like Durga Puja) and as an informal court or gathering place for the village.
- **Nahabat:** A traditional instrumental ensemble (usually featuring *shehnais* and kettledrums) played from a balcony above a palace gate during festivals, weddings, or to mark the time of day.
- **Gaye-holud:** The traditional Bengali pre-wedding ceremony where turmeric paste is applied to the bride and groom. Nakshatra Ray forcing an entire village to hold a lavish, traditional Hindu wedding for a *cat*—complete with matchmakers, dowries, and musical processions—is a brilliant piece of satire highlighting the sheer decadence, boredom, and absurdity of his luxurious exile.
- **Ulu Sound (*Uludhvani*):** A high-pitched, warbling sound made by Bengali women during auspicious occasions and weddings.
- **Sahana Raga:** A classical Indian musical raga traditionally sung at night, often associated with weddings, romance, and joy. Its sudden halt creates a masterful tonal shift from comedy to terror.

CHAPTER 26

Raghupati demanded, "What on earth was going on here?"

Nakshatra Ray scratched his head and said, "There was a dance happening."

His face twisting in disgust, Raghupati sneered, "Shame! Shame!"

Nakshatra stood there like a guilty child.

Raghupati declared, "We must leave from here tomorrow. Make preparations."

"Where are we going?" Nakshatra Ray asked.

"We will discuss that later. For now, just pack up and come with me."

"But I am quite fine here," Nakshatra protested.

"Quite fine!" Raghupati scoffed. "You were born into the royal lineage, all your ancestors have ruled kingdoms. And here you are, sitting like a jackal-king in this jungle village, telling me you are 'quite fine'!"

With his sharp words and piercing glares, Raghupati thoroughly proved that Nakshatra Ray was, in fact, not fine at all. Under the searing heat of Raghupati's gaze, Nakshatra too began to feel that way. He muttered defensively, "Well, I was just saying I'm fine... But what else can I do? Is there any other way?"

"There are plenty of ways—there is no shortage of ways," Raghupati assured him.

"I will show you the way; you just come with me."

"Let me just ask the Dewan-ji once," Nakshatra requested.

"No."

"All my belongings—"

"None of it is needed."

"My servants and retinue—"

"Not necessary."

"I don't have enough cash on hand right now," Nakshatra argued.

"I do," Raghupati snapped. "No more excuses or objections. Go to sleep now. We must depart early tomorrow morning."

Saying this, Raghupati turned and walked away without waiting for a reply.

Nakshatra Ray woke up early the next morning. The court musicians were singing sweet melodies in the *Lalit* raga. Nakshatra stepped out into the outer chamber and looked through the window. The sun was rising on the eastern bank; the first streaks of dawn had appeared. Between the thick flow of trees on both banks, past the doors of tiny, slumbering villages, the Brahmaputra river carried its massive volume of water, flowing on unhindered. From the palace window, a small hut on the riverbank could be seen. A girl was sweeping the courtyard—a man exchanged a few words with her, tied a cloth around his head, hoisted a bundle at the end of a long bamboo staff, and set out carefree for some unknown destination. Magpie-robins and *shyamas* were whistling, while an oriole sat singing amidst the thick foliage of a large jackfruit tree. Standing at the window and gazing outside, a deep sigh escaped from the depths of Nakshatra Ray's heart.

Just then, Raghupati approached from behind and touched him. Nakshatra Ray jumped in surprise. In a soft, grave voice, Raghupati announced, "Everything is ready for the journey."

Folding his hands in a deeply pitiful gesture, Nakshatra Ray pleaded, "Thakur, please forgive me, Thakur—I don't want to go anywhere. I am quite fine here."

Without a single word, Raghupati kept his fiery gaze fixed squarely on Nakshatra Ray's face.

Lowering his eyes, Nakshatra asked, "Where do we have to go?"

"That cannot be discussed right now," Raghupati replied.

"I will not be able to plot any conspiracy against my brother," Nakshatra protested.

Flaring up, Raghupati mocked, "And what great favor has your brother done for you, pray tell!"

Turning his face away and scratching aimlessly at the window sill, Nakshatra said, "I know he loves me."

With a harsh, dry laugh, Raghupati sneered, "Hari, Hari, what love! Is that why your loving brother banished you from the kingdom on a false pretext, just so he could safely anoint Dhruva as the crown prince? Perhaps he feared that the heavy burden of the kingdom might crush his delicate, beloved brother! Do you really think, you fool, that you will ever easily set foot in that kingdom again?"

Nakshatra Ray quickly defended himself, "Do you think I don't understand such a simple thing! I understand everything—but tell me, Thakur, what can I do? What is the way out?"

"That is exactly the way out we are discussing! That is exactly why I have come. If you wish, come with me; if not, sit in this bamboo grove and meditate upon your 'well-wishing' brother. I am leaving."

With that, Raghupati made as if to leave.

Nakshatra Ray hurriedly went after him and said, "I will go too, Thakur, but if the Dewan-ji wishes to come, is there any objection to taking him with us?"

"No one else shall go with me but you," Raghupati declared flatly.

Nakshatra Ray's feet refused to move away from the house. Leaving all these joyful games, leaving the Dewan-ji, where would he have to go alone with Raghupati? Yet, it felt as though Raghupati was dragging him along by the hair. Besides, a kind of fear-laced curiosity was also brewing in Nakshatra Ray's mind. There was a terrible attraction to it all.

The boat was ready. Upon reaching the riverbank, Nakshatra Ray saw Pitambar coming for his bath with a *gamcha* draped over his shoulder.

Seeing Nakshatra, Pitambar's face broke into a wide smile, and he greeted him, "Victory to the Maharaja! I heard that some inauspicious, wicked Brahmin turned up out of nowhere yesterday and disrupted the holy wedding."

Nakshatra Ray began to panic.

Raghupati stated in a gravelly voice, "I am that wicked Brahmin."

Pitambar burst out laughing and said, "Well then, it wasn't a very good idea to describe you right to your face. Had I known, whose son would dare do such a thing? Don't mind it, Thakur, people say all sorts of things behind one's back. The very people who call me King to my face, call me 'Pitu' behind my back! As long as they don't say anything to my face, that's fine with me. Do you know what the real issue is? Your face looks so terribly gloomy and displeased; when people see a face like that, they naturally spread rumors. Maharaja, what brings you to the riverbank so early?"

In a somewhat mournful tone, Nakshatra Ray replied, "I am leaving, Dewan-ji."

"Leaving? Where? To No-para, to the Mandals' house?" Pitambar asked.

"No, Dewan-ji, not to the Mandals' house. Very far."

"Very far? Are you going hunting in Paikghata then?"

Nakshatra Ray simply looked at Raghupati's face and shook his head sadly.

Raghupati interjected, "The day wears on. Let us board the boat."

Looking suspiciously and angrily at the Brahmin's face, Pitambar demanded, "Who are you, Thakur? Have you come here to give orders to our Maharaja!"

Flustered, Nakshatra quickly pulled Pitambar aside and whispered, "He is our Guru-thakur."

Pitambar scoffed, "So what if he's the Guru-thakur? Let him stay in our *Chandimandap*, we'll allocate him his daily rice and bananas, he'll be treated with respect—what business does he have with the Maharaja?"

Raghupati said coldly, "Time is being wasted in vain. I am leaving."

"As you command," Pitambar retorted. "What's the point of delaying? Sir, kindly make yourself scarce. I am taking the Maharaja back to the palace."

Looking back and forth between Raghupati's face and Pitambar's face, Nakshatra Ray said softly, "No, Dewan-ji, I will go."

"Then I will go too," Pitambar insisted. "Take your retinue with you. Travel like a King. If the King goes, won't his Dewan-ji go with him?"

Nakshatra Ray simply looked helplessly at Raghupati.

Raghupati declared, "No one else shall go."

Becoming furious, Pitambar snapped, "Look here, Thakur, you—"

Nakshatra Ray hurriedly interrupted him, "Dewan-ji, I must go, it is getting late."

His face falling, Pitambar took Nakshatra's hand and said, "Look, son, I call you King, but I love you like a child—I have no children of my own. I have no authority over you. You are leaving, and I cannot force you to stay. But I have just one request: wherever you go, you must return before I die. I want to hand over my entire kingdom to you with my own hands. This is my only wish."

Nakshatra Ray and Raghupati boarded the boat. The boat sailed southward. Forgetting his bath, Pitambar walked absentmindedly back home with the *gamcha* on his shoulder.

Gujurpara was left empty—all its joy and festivities had come to an end. Only the daily, eternal festival of nature remained—the morning songs of the birds, the rustling of the leaves, and the ceaseless applause of the river waves.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Lalit Raga:** A morning raga in Indian classical music known for its sweet, melancholic, and deeply evocative mood, perfectly setting the tone for Nakshatra's wistful final morning in his exile kingdom.
- **Gamcha:** A traditional, thin, coarse cotton towel often woven with check patterns, widely used in rural Bengal for bathing.
- **"Pitu":** A diminutive, slightly disrespectful nickname derived from Pitambar.
- **"Rice and bananas" (Chal-kala):** The traditional, basic staple offerings given to a village priest for performing daily rituals. Pitambar using this phrase is deeply insulting to Raghupati; he is essentially treating the immensely

powerful, aristocratic royal priest of Tripura like a low-level, common village priest whose only job is to sit in a pavilion and accept cheap alms.

CHAPTER 27

It was a long journey. Sometimes crossing rivers, sometimes trekking through dense forests, sometimes across shadeless plains—sometimes on a boat, sometimes on foot, sometimes riding a pony—through scorching sun and pouring rain, through chaotic, noisy days and the silent darkness of night—Nakshatra Ray traveled on relentlessly. They passed through countless lands, witnessing diverse landscapes and a myriad of people. Yet, beside Nakshatra Ray—thin as a shadow, yet blazing like the sun—that one man, Raghupati, clung to him without pause. Raghupati by day, Raghupati by night, Raghupati reigned even in his dreams.

Travelers came and went along the roads, boys played in the dust by the wayside, hundreds traded in the bustling markets, old men rolled dice in the villages, women drew water at the *ghats*, boatmen sailed by singing their songs—but beside Nakshatra Ray, the gaunt figure of Raghupati remained ever awake. All around them, the vivid, varied drama of life played on—but cutting right through the heart of this magnificent theater, Nakshatra Ray's dark fate dragged him forward. To him, the populated world was a desolate wasteland; human society was nothing but an empty desert.

Exhausted, Nakshatra Ray asked the shadow beside him, "How much further must we go?"

The shadow replied, "Very far."

"Where are we going?" There was no answer. Nakshatra Ray let out a heavy sigh and walked on.

Whenever he spotted a neat, secluded, leaf-thatched hut nestled among the trees, he would think, "If only I lived in that hut." At twilight, when the cowherd walked through the fields and village paths with a staff on his shoulder, kicking up dust as he brought his cows and calves home, Nakshatra Ray would think, "If only I could go with him, to return home in the evening and rest." Under the blazing midday sun, a farmer ploughed his fields; seeing him, Nakshatra Ray thought, "Ah, how happy he is!"

The sheer hardship of the road had left Nakshatra Ray pale, emaciated, and haggard. He pleaded, "Thakur, I will not survive this."

Raghupati replied coldly, "Who will let you die now?"

It felt to Nakshatra Ray as though without Raghupati's permission, he wouldn't even have the luxury of dying. Once, an unknown woman had seen Nakshatra Ray on the road and lamented, "Alas, whose child is this! Who has dragged him out onto the streets!" Hearing her, Nakshatra Ray's heart melted, and tears sprang to his eyes; he wished he could call that woman 'Mother' and follow her to her home.

Yet, the more Nakshatra Ray suffered at Raghupati's hands, the more subservient he became to him. His entire existence began to be steered by the mere gesture of Raghupati's fingers.

As they traveled on, the abundance of rivers gradually faded. The earth grew firm; the soil turned red and gravelly, human settlements grew sparse, and the lush vegetation thinned out. Leaving behind the land of coconut groves, the two travelers entered the land of palmyra palms. Now and then, massive embankments and dried riverbeds appeared, while in the distance, hills loomed like low-hanging clouds.

Gradually, Shah Shuja's capital, Rajmahal, drew near.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Ghats:** The broad flights of steps leading down to a river or water body, central to daily social life in rural India for bathing, drawing water, and religious rites.
- **"Thin as a shadow, yet blazing like the sun":** Tagore's poetic paradox brilliantly captures Raghupati's psychological hold over Nakshatra Ray. He is physically a thin, gaunt shadow, but his domineering presence is as blinding and inescapable as the midday sun.
- **Geographical Shift:** The narrative elegantly describes the shift in the physical landscape as they travel westward from Bengal towards Bihar/Jharkhand (towards Rajmahal). The lush, river-laced, coconut-growing delta of Bengal gives way to the drier, firmer, red laterite soil (*Rarh* region) characterized by palmyra palms (*tal-bon*) and distant hills.
- **Psychological breakdown:** Nakshatra Ray's envy of the simple lives of a cowherd, a farmer, and a hut-dweller highlights his complete breakdown. The pampered prince who once found joy in playing "King" in his luxurious

exile has now been reduced to craving the absolute bare minimum of human comfort and freedom.

CHAPTER 28

Finally, they arrived at the capital. Following his defeat and escape, Shuja was now engaged in frantic efforts to raise a new army. But there was very little wealth left in the royal treasury. The subjects were already crushed under heavy taxation. In the meantime, news arrived that Aurangzeb had defeated and killed Dara and ascended the throne of Delhi. Shuja was deeply unnerved by this news. Since he had neither soldiers nor supplies ready, he decided to buy time by deceitfully sending an envoy to Aurangzeb.

He sent a message stating that the light of his eyes, the joy of his heart, his most beloved brother Aurangzeb had successfully claimed the throne, and this news had breathed life back into Shuja's dead body—and now, if the new Emperor would only confirm Shuja's position as the Governor of Bengal, his joy would be complete.

Aurangzeb received the envoy with immense respect. He expressed deep curiosity regarding Shuja's physical and mental well-being, as well as the welfare of his family, and replied, "Since Emperor Shah Jahan himself appointed Shuja to govern Bengal, there is absolutely no need for a second letter of confirmation."

It was during this time that Raghupati arrived at Shuja's court.

Shuja welcomed his savior with gratitude and respect. He asked, "What is the news?"

Raghupati replied, "I have a submission for the Emperor."

Shuja thought to himself, *A submission about what? If he doesn't ask for a pile of money, I'll consider myself saved.*

Raghupati began, "My prayer is that—"

Shuja interrupted, "Brahmin, I shall certainly fulfill your prayer. But wait a few days. Right now, there isn't much wealth in the royal treasury."

Raghupati replied, "Shahenshah, I do not ask for silver, gold, or any other such metal. Right now, I seek only sharpened steel. Hear my grievance; I demand justice."

Shuja sighed, "A massive nuisance! This is not the time for me to hold trials. Brahmin, you have come at a very bad time."

Raghupati retorted, "Shahzada, everyone has their good times and bad times. You are an Emperor, you have yours; and I am a poor Brahmin, I have mine. If you only sit to dispense justice when the time is right for *you*, where does that leave the time for *me*?"

Giving up, Shuja said, "What a massive headache! It is better to just hear your grievance than to argue with you. Speak."

Raghupati said, "The King of Tripura, Govinda Manikya, has banished his younger brother, Nakshatra Ray, without any crime—"

Annoyed, Shuja snapped, "Brahmin, why are you wasting my time with someone else's grievance? This is not the time to adjudicate all this."

Raghupati replied smoothly, "The plaintiff is present in the capital."

Shuja deflected, "When he appears in person and raises his grievance with his own lips, then it shall be considered."

"When shall I bring him here?" Raghupati pressed.

Shuja muttered, "This Brahmin will just not let go. Fine, bring him in a week."

"If the Emperor commands it, I will bring him tomorrow," Raghupati offered.

Irritated, Shuja conceded, "Fine, bring him tomorrow."

At least he was free for the day. Raghupati took his leave.

Back at their lodgings, Nakshatra Ray said, "We will go to the Nawab, but what shall we take as a *nazar*?"

"You need not worry about that," Raghupati assured him.

For the *nazar*, Raghupati presented one hundred and fifty thousand silver coins.

The next morning, Raghupati arrived at Shuja's court with a trembling Nakshatra Ray. When one hundred and fifty thousand coins were placed at the Nawab's feet, his expression did not look displeased in the slightest. Nakshatra Ray's grievance was very easily grasped by him. He asked, "Tell me now, what is your intention?"

Raghupati declared, "Order the banishment of Govinda Manikya, and decree that Nakshatra Ray be made King in his place."

Although Shuja himself felt not the slightest hesitation in usurping a brother's throne, somehow, in this instance, a certain reluctance arose in his mind. But fulfilling Raghupati's demand seemed the easiest way out for now—otherwise, he feared, the Brahmin would endlessly pester him. Furthermore, it didn't seem right to raise too many objections over a *nazar* of a hundred and fifty thousand coins. He agreed, "Very well. I will give you a *farman* decreeing Govinda Manikya's banishment and Nakshatra Ray's ascension to the throne. Take it and go."

Raghupati pushed further, "The Emperor must also provide a contingent of soldiers to accompany us."

Shuja refused firmly, "No, no, no—that cannot be done. I cannot afford to engage in warfare right now."

Raghupati countered smoothly, "I am leaving behind an additional thirty-six thousand coins to cover the expenses of the war. And as soon as Nakshatra Ray becomes the King of Tripura, I will send one year's revenue through the hands of your commander."

This proposal struck Shuja as incredibly reasonable, and his ministers agreed with him. Taking a contingent of Mughal soldiers with them, Raghupati and Nakshatra Ray set out for Tripura.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Dara and Aurangzeb:** Historical context continues. While Shuja was fighting Dara's forces (as seen in the previous chapters), his other brother Aurangzeb successfully defeated Dara, executed him, imprisoned their father Shah Jahan, and seized the Mughal throne. This leaves Shuja terrified and desperate.

- **Nazar:** A customary gift or tribute (usually gold or silver coins) offered to a monarch or superior as a mark of respect and subservience, especially when seeking an audience or a favor. The staggering amount Raghupati offers is the two hundred thousand coins he had previously buried near Rajmahal (minus the thirty-six thousand he later gives for the troops). The irony is that this was the very money Govinda Manikya paid Raghupati as a fine in Chapter 18—Raghupati is literally using the King's own money to buy an army to overthrow him.
- **Farman (Perwana-patra):** A royal decree or edict issued by a sovereign.

CHAPTER 29

Two years have passed since the beginning of this tale. Dhruva was a two-year-old boy then. Now he is four. He has learned to speak a great deal more. He now considers himself a very important person; although he cannot articulate everything clearly, he speaks with immense conviction. He frequently offers the King grand temptations and consolations, like, "I will give you a doll." But if the King displays any signs of naughtiness, Dhruva terrifies him by threatening, "I will lock you in the room!" In this way, the King is currently under strict discipline—he hardly dares to do anything that goes against Dhruva's wishes.

In the meantime, Dhruva unexpectedly found a companion. She was a neighbor's daughter, about six months younger than him. Within ten minutes, a lifelong bond was forged between the two. At one point, there was a slight possibility of a misunderstanding. Dhruva had a large *batasa* candy in his hand. In the flush of first love, Dhruva carefully broke off a tiny crumb with two little fingers, popped it directly into his companion's mouth, and nodding with supreme grace, commanded, "You eat."

The little girl, delighted by the sweet, demanded, "I will eat more."

Dhruva was somewhat dismayed by this. Such an excessive demand upon his friendship did not seem quite reasonable. With his characteristic gravity and pride, he shook his head, widened his eyes, and declared, "Fie—mustn't eat anymore, you'll get thick (sick), father will beat you." Saying this, without further delay, he shoved the entire remaining *batasa* into his own mouth and finished it off.

Suddenly, the muscles in the little girl's face began to shift—her lips quivered, her eyebrows shot up, and all the classic symptoms of an impending crying spell manifested.

Dhruva could not bear anyone's tears; he quickly offered in a tone of profound consolation, "I will give you tomorrow."

As soon as the King arrived, Dhruva played the wise elder, pointed at his new companion, and warned, "Don't say anything to her, she will cry. Fie, mustn't hit, fie!"

It was true that the King had harbored no such malicious intentions, yet Dhruva deemed it absolutely necessary to proactively warn him. Since the King did not, in fact, hit the little girl, Dhruva clearly saw that his advice had been effective.

Then, adopting a patronizing tone, Dhruva attempted to assure the little girl with great solemnity that there was no danger whatsoever.

But even that proved entirely unnecessary. For the little girl fearlessly approached the King on her own, and with immense curiosity and greed, began turning and examining the jeweled bracelets on his wrist.

Having thus established peace and love in the world solely through his own care and effort, Dhruva happily leaned forward, offering his chubby, round, soft, pure face—like a blooming jasmine flower—to the King as a reward for his good behavior. The King kissed him.

Then Dhruva lifted his companion's face and, in a tone halfway between a command and a request, told the King, "Kiss her too."

The King did not dare disobey Dhruva's order. The little girl then, without waiting for the slightest invitation, nonchalantly climbed up and sat right in the King's lap as if she did it every day.

Up until this point, there had been no sign of unrest or disorder in the world. But the moment his own throne was encroached upon, Dhruva's universal love began to totter. A strong urge arose to establish his sole and exclusive right over the King's lap. His face fell heavily, he tugged at the girl a couple of times, and even began to feel that, under certain circumstances, hitting a little girl might not be so wrong after all.

To settle the matter, the King pulled Dhruva onto the other half of his lap. But this did not resolve Dhruva's objection; he began preparing a fresh assault to conquer the remaining half of the territory. Just then, the new royal priest, Thakur Bilwan, entered the room.

The King set both children down and bowed to him. He told Dhruva, "Bow to the Thakur."

Dhruva did not see the necessity of this; he stood rebelliously with a finger in his mouth. The little girl, however, taking her cue from the King, spontaneously bowed to the priest.

Pulling Dhruva close, Thakur Bilwan asked, "Where did you find this companion?"

Dhruva thought for a moment and replied, "I will ride a *tok-tok*." (*Tok-tok* meant a horse).

The priest laughed, "Bravo! What perfect harmony between the question and the answer!"

Dhruva's eyes suddenly fell upon the little girl. Expressing his opinion and intentions regarding her most concisely, he announced, "She is naughty, I will beat her."

Saying this, he threw his tiny fist into the air!

The King said gravely, "Fie, Dhruva!"

Just as a lamp is blown out by a single puff of air, Dhruva's face instantly darkened. At first, he rubbed his eyes furiously with his two fists to hold back the tears; eventually, his tiny, swelling heart could no longer contain it, and he burst out crying.

Thakur Bilwan immediately began to shake him, toss him up into the air, and put him back down, completely disorienting the boy. In a loud, rapid-fire voice, the priest chanted:

"Listen, listen Dhruva, listen, let me recite a *shloka* for you— *Kalaha katakatang katha kathinya kathyang Katana kitana kitang kutanlang khattamattang!* Meaning, if a boy cries, you have to stuff him inside a *Kalaha katakatang*, give him a good dose of *katha kathinya kathyang*, and then take a bunch of *katana kitana kitang* and subject him to a *kutanlang khattamattang* for three whole days!"

The priest rattled off this absolute gibberish without pausing for breath. Dhruva's crying completely vanished before it even fully started. At first, baffled and stunned by the noise, he stared up at Thakur Bilwan's face with teary eyes. Then, seeing the priest's wildly animating hands and face, he found it incredibly amusing.

Thrilled, he demanded, "Say it again!"

The priest rattled it off once more. Laughing hysterically, Dhruva cried, "Say it again!"

The King kissed Dhruva's tear-stained cheeks and his smiling lips again and again. Soon, the King, the royal priest, and the two children were completely lost in play.

Thakur Bilwan remarked to the King, "Maharaj, you are quite well off with these children. Spending day and night with fiercely intelligent people ruins one's own intellect. If a knife is sharpened constantly, it eventually grows so thin that it disappears entirely. All that's left is a thick, useless handle."

The King smiled and replied, "I suppose, then, that I haven't shown any signs of a sharp intellect yet."

"No," Bilwan agreed. "One sign of a sharp intellect is that it makes simple things complicated. If the world didn't have so many 'intelligent' people, the work of the world would be much easier. In trying to create all sorts of conveniences, they only create all sorts of inconveniences. With too much intellect, a man cannot figure out what to do with it."

The King observed, "Five fingers work perfectly well. Unfortunately, if someone is given seven fingers, they inevitably feel the urge to invent extra work for themselves."

The King called Dhruva. Dhruva, having made peace with his companion again, was busy playing. Hearing the King's call, he immediately dropped his game and ran over. Sitting the boy in front of him, the King said, "Dhruva, sing that new song for the Thakur."

Dhruva looked at the priest's face with a look of firm reluctance.

The King offered a bribe, "I'll let you ride the *tok-tok*."

In his sweet, lisping voice, Dhruva began to sing:

Because six men try to show me the way together,

I lose my way at every step.

Under various guises, various sages speak,
So I sway in doubt.
My only wish was to go to you,
To hear your words and dispel my delusions,
But everyone squabbles right in my ear,
A hundred voices of a hundred people.
When, with an aching heart, I beg for you,
They all crowd around and block the way,
So I remain stuck with the dust of the earth—
I never receive the dust of your feet.
My mind splits into a hundred pieces and runs in a hundred directions,
Starting a war with itself,
Who will I manage, what a terrible bind—
I am just one, but they are many.
Make me one by binding me in your love,
Show me one unbroken path,
I am dying of tears, lost in this maze—
Lift me up to your feet.

Hearing this profound poem sung in Dhruva's lisping, childlike voice, Thakur Bilwan was deeply moved. He blessed him, "May you live a long life."

Picking Dhruva up, the priest pleaded earnestly, "Sing it for me one more time."

Dhruva expressed a very firm, silent refusal. Covering his eyes, the priest threatened, "Then I will cry."

Slightly moved, Dhruva compromised, "I will sing tomorrow. Fie, mustn't cry. You go to your house now. Father will beat you."

Bilwan laughed, "A very sweet dismissal."

Taking leave of the King, the royal priest stepped out onto the street. Two travelers were walking by. One was saying to the other, "I spent three days breaking my head at his door, couldn't squeeze a single penny out of him. If he steps out onto the street today, I'm going to break *his* head, let's see what happens then."

From behind them, Bilwan interjected, "That won't yield any results either. As you can see, my friend, there is nothing inside the head anyway, except for wicked thoughts. It is better to break your own head instead; at least you won't have to answer to anyone for it."

Startled and embarrassed, the two travelers hurriedly bowed to the Thakur. Bilwan said gently, "My friends, the words you were speaking are not good."

"Yes, Thakur," they agreed sheepishly. "We won't say such things again."

On the road, the local boys surrounded the priest. He told them, "Come to my place this afternoon, I'll tell you stories today." Overjoyed, the boys began to jump and shout.

On certain afternoons, Thakur Bilwan would gather the children of the kingdom and tell them the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and mythological tales in simple language. Occasionally, he would try to slip in a dry moral lesson or two, making them as engaging as possible, but the moment he noticed yawns becoming contagious among the boys, he would let them loose in the temple gardens. There were countless fruit trees there. Howling at the top of their lungs, the boys would rampage through the branches like a troop of monkeys, and Bilwan would sit back and enjoy the show.

No one knew which country Bilwan was from. He was a Brahmin, but he had discarded his sacred thread. He had stopped animal sacrifices and other such rites, and worshipped the Goddess through a new kind of ritual. Initially, the people expressed doubts and objections, but now everyone had grown accustomed to it. Above all, everyone was captivated by Bilwan's words. He visited every home, spoke with everyone, inquired after their well-being, and whatever medicine he prescribed for the sick worked wonders. In times of trouble and danger, everyone acted according to his advice. If he stepped in as a mediator to settle a dispute or resolve an issue, no one ever spoke a word against his ruling.

CHAPTER 30

An unprecedented event occurred in Tripura this year. Suddenly, swarms of rats from the north descended upon the fields of Tripura in waves. They destroyed all the crops; they even devoured most of the grain stored in the farmers' homes—a great wail of despair rose across the kingdom. Before their very eyes, famine set in. People began to survive by gathering fruits and roots from the forest. There was no shortage of forests, and they contained a variety of edible plants. Meat obtained from hunting began to be sold at exorbitant prices in the markets. People started hunting and eating wild buffaloes, deer, rabbits, porcupines, squirrels, boars, and giant land tortoises—if they caught an elephant, they ate the elephant too—they even began eating pythons. There was no shortage of edible birds in the woods. Honeycombs and honey could be found in the hollows of trees. In certain places, they would dam the river water and throw in intoxicating creepers; the fish would become paralyzed and float to the surface, and the people would catch them to eat, drying and storing the rest. Though they managed to keep starvation at bay somehow, utter chaos ensued. Thefts and robberies began in various places; the subjects showed signs of rebellion.

They began to say, "These disasters have started happening because of the Mother's curse, ever since her sacrifices were stopped."

Thakur Bilwan laughed the matter off. He joked, "There has been a falling out between the brothers in Kailash, Kartikeya and Ganesha. Ganesha's rats have come to complain against Kartikeya's peacock to the Goddess Tripureshwari of Tripura."

The subjects did not take this entirely as a joke. They saw that, just as Thakur Bilwan had implied, the tide of rats vanished just as rapidly as they had arrived after destroying all the crops—within three days, not a trace of them remained. No one harbored any doubts about Thakur Bilwan's profound wisdom anymore. Songs were composed about the brotherly feud in Kailash; women, children, and beggars began to sing them, and the songs spread through the streets and markets.

But the resentment toward the King did not fully subside. Upon Thakur Bilwan's advice, Govinda Manikya waived one year's taxes for the famine-struck subjects. This had some effect. Yet, many still fled to the mountainous regions of Chattagram to escape the Mother's curse. Even the King's own mind was clouded with doubt.

He summoned Bilwan and said, "Thakur, the subjects suffer for the sins of the King. Did I commit a sin by stopping the Mother's sacrifices? Is this the punishment for that?"

Bilwan completely brushed the thought aside. He asked, "When thousands of human sacrifices were offered to the Mother, did you lose more subjects then, or now in this famine?"

The King remained silent, but the doubts in his mind were not entirely dispelled. His subjects were displeased with him, they were casting suspicions upon him—this wounded his heart and bred self-doubt. With a heavy sigh, he said, "I cannot understand anything."

Bilwan said, "What is the need to understand so much? I may not understand why a bunch of rats came and ate the crops. But as long as I clearly understand this much: 'I will do no wrong, I will work for the welfare of all,' that is enough. After that, the Creator will do His work; He will not come down to give us an account of His actions."

The King said, "Thakur, you go from door to door, working tirelessly; the little good you do for the world becomes your very reward, and in that joy, all your doubts melt away. I just sit on a throne day and night with a crown on my head, carrying the weight of endless worries on my shoulders. When I see your work, I envy you."

Bilwan replied, "Maharaj, I am but a part of you. If you were not sitting on that throne, would I be able to do this work? Together, you and I make a complete whole."

Saying this, Bilwan took his leave. The King sat with the crown on his head, lost in thought. He said to himself, "I have plenty of work to do, yet I do none of it. I am complacent just sitting with my worries. That is exactly why I cannot win the trust of my subjects. I am not fit to rule a kingdom."

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kailash, Kartikeya, and Ganesha:** According to Hindu mythology, Mount Kailash is the heavenly abode of Lord Shiva and Goddess Durga/Parvati. Kartikeya (the god of war) and Ganesha (the god of beginnings) are their sons. Kartikeya's divine mount is a peacock, while

Ganesha's is a rat/mouse. Since peacocks naturally hunt small rodents, Bilwan inventively jokes that Ganesha's rats have fled down to Tripura to complain to the Goddess (Tripureshwari) about the peacock's bullying.

- **Chattagram (Chittagong):** A hilly, forested region south of Tripura (now in modern-day Bangladesh) where villagers fled, believing they could escape the Goddess's localized wrath over the banned sacrifices.
- **The King's Dilemma:** Govinda Manikya's internal conflict highlights a core philosophical theme in Tagore's work: the tension between passive, intellectual morality (the King's worry on the throne) and active, grassroots service to humanity (Bilwan's practical social work).

CHAPTER 31

Heading the Mughal troops, Nakshatra Ray was resting in a small village called Tetul. In the morning, Raghupati approached and said, "We must depart, Maharaj; prepare yourself."

Suddenly, the word *Maharaj* from Raghupati's lips sounded incredibly sweet. Nakshatra Ray was overjoyed. In his imagination, he began to hear the entire world addressing him as *Maharaj*. In his mind's eye, he mounted the high throne of Tripura and illuminated the court with his presence. In a burst of joy, he declared, "Thakur, you shall never be let go! You must remain in the court. Tell me what it is you desire."

In his mind, Nakshatra Ray effortlessly granted Raghupati a massive *jagir* estate right then and there.

"I desire nothing," Raghupati replied.

"What are you saying! That won't do, Thakur," Nakshatra protested. "You must take something. I grant you the *pargana* of Kailasahar—have the deeds drawn up."

"All that can be seen to later," Raghupati said.

"Why later? I will give it right now. The entire Kailasahar *pargana* is yours; I will not take a single penny in taxes from it." Saying this, Nakshatra Ray lifted his head and sat up remarkably straight.

Raghupati replied softly, "I would be happy if I could just get three cubits of land to die on. I ask for nothing more." Saying this, he walked away.

He had remembered Jaisingha. Had Jaisingha been alive, he would have accepted some reward—but without Jaisingha, the entire kingdom of Tripura felt like nothing more than a mound of dirt to him.

Raghupati was now trying to intoxicate Nakshatra Ray with the pride of kingship. He feared that after all these preparations, everything might fail; that the weak-willed Nakshatra Ray might go to Tripura and surrender to the King without a fight. But once the intoxicating lust for power took root in a weak heart, there was

nothing left to worry about. Raghupati no longer displayed any contempt toward Nakshatra Ray; he showed him respect at every turn. He sought his verbal commands for every matter. The Mughal soldiers called him "Maharaja-saheb" and hurried to attention the moment they saw him. Just as a field of crops bends entirely when the wind blows, rows upon rows of Mughal soldiers would bow in unison and salute whenever Nakshatra Ray stood before them. The commander greeted him with deep reverence. Surrounded by the gleam of hundreds of drawn swords, riding upon a giant elephant in a gold-plated *howdah* bearing the royal insignia, he marched forward to the sound of triumphant music, while flag-bearers marched alongside carrying the royal banners.

Wherever he passed, the villagers abandoned their homes and fled in terror of the army. Seeing their sheer panic filled Nakshatra Ray's heart with pride. He felt, "*I am marching on a grand conquest of the world.*" Minor landlords came to offer him various tributes and bowed before him—they felt to him like defeated kings; he was reminded of the world-conquering Pandavas of the Mahabharata.

One day, the soldiers came, saluted him, and said, "Maharaja-saheb!"

Nakshatra Ray sat up straight.

"We have come to give our lives for the Maharaja—we care nothing for our lives. But it has always been our custom to plunder the villages along our path when we march to war—no scripture forbids this."

Nodding his head, Nakshatra Ray agreed, "True, true."

The soldiers complained, "The Brahmin-thakur has forbidden us from looting. We are marching to give our lives, yet we are not allowed to loot even a little bit. This is a grave injustice."

Nodding his head again, Nakshatra Ray agreed, "True, true."

"If the Maharaja gives the order, we will disregard the Brahmin-thakur's words and go looting."

With immense arrogance, Nakshatra Ray declared, "Who is the Brahmin-thakur! What does the Brahmin-thakur know! I command you to go and plunder." Saying this, he glanced around nervously and was relieved not to see Raghupati anywhere.

But having defied Raghupati so effortlessly, he felt an immense surge of joy in his heart. The intoxication of power began to course through his veins like wine. He began to look at the world with new eyes. It was as if he were riding an imaginary hot-air balloon, and the world below had shrunk to the size of a low-hanging cloud. Occasionally, he even began to feel that Raghupati was insignificant. Suddenly, he forced himself into a towering rage against Govinda Manikya. He kept repeating in his mind, "Banishing me! Summoning me to trial like a common subject! Now we shall see who banishes whom. This time, the entire population of Tripura will witness the might of Nakshatra Ray!"

Nakshatra Ray grew heavily puffed up with pride.

Raghupati had a deep distaste for the senseless oppression and plundering of innocent villagers. He had tried hard to prevent it. But upon receiving Nakshatra Ray's orders, the soldiers ignored him.

He approached Nakshatra Ray and asked, "Why this cruelty toward helpless villagers!"

Nakshatra Ray dismissed him, "Thakur, you don't understand these things well. It is not good to discourage soldiers by forbidding them to loot during times of war."

Hearing Nakshatra Ray speak this way, Raghupati was somewhat surprised. Seeing his sudden assumption of superiority, he chuckled inwardly. He warned, "If you let them loot now, it will be impossible to control them later. They will plunder all of Tripura."

Nakshatra Ray retorted, "What harm is there in that? That is exactly what I want. Let Tripura learn once and for all what happens when Nakshatra Ray is banished. Thakur, you don't understand anything about these matters—you have never fought a war."

Raghupati found this highly amusing to himself. He walked away without replying. He actually wanted Nakshatra Ray to act less like a mere puppet and more like a somewhat resilient man.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Jagir & Pargana:** A *jagir* is a feudal land grant given by a monarch, and a *pargana* is a revenue district. Nakshatra Ray playing the generous Emperor and casually handing away massive chunks of his (not yet conquered) kingdom is both funny and pathetic.
- **Three Cubits of Land (Tin haath jomi):** A poignant moment for Raghupati. The traditional Hindu measurement for a grave or cremation pyre is roughly three cubits (about 4.5 feet, the length from the elbow to the fingertips times three). Raghupati's brutal ambition has hollowed out; without Jaisingha, he only wants enough land to die on.
- **Howdah:** An ornate seat or carriage positioned on the back of an elephant.
- **Pandavas:** The heroes of the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, who embarked on a *Digvijaya* (conquest of all directions/the world). Nakshatra comparing his march of mercenaries to the epic heroes is a sign of his deep delusion.

CHAPTER 32

When the rat infestation began in Tripura, it was the month of Shravan. At that time, only the corn had fully grown, and the paddy fields on the hilly slopes had just begun to ripen. Three months passed somehow—but when the time came to harvest the paddy in the lowlands during the month of Agrahayan, a wave of joy swept across the country. Farmers—women and children, young and old alike—all descended upon the fields with sickles in hand. Shouting "*Hoiiyya, hoiiyya!*" they called out to one another in rhythm. The fields and village paths echoed with the harvest songs of the Jumia women. The discontent toward the King vanished entirely, and peace was restored in the kingdom.

It was exactly at this time that news arrived: Nakshatra Ray, with the intent to attack the kingdom, had reached the borders of Tripura with a massive army and had already begun severe looting and oppression. At this news, the entire kingdom was struck with terror.

This news pierced the King's heart like a knife. It continued to twist inside him all day long. Again and again, the agonizing thought struck him anew: *Nakshatra Ray is coming to attack me*. A hundred times, he saw Nakshatra Ray's simple, innocent face before his affectionate eyes, and simultaneously came the realization that this very same Nakshatra Ray had gathered an army and was marching toward him, sword in hand. At times, a desperate wish arose in his heart—to stand entirely alone on a vast battlefield before Nakshatra Ray, without a single soldier by his side, and bare his chest to simultaneously receive the swords of his brother's thousand soldiers straight into his heart.

He pulled Dhruva close and asked, "Dhruva, could you too fight with me for this crown?" Saying this, he threw the crown to the floor; a large pearl snapped off and rolled away.

Dhruva eagerly reached out his hand and said, "I will take it."

The King placed the crown on Dhruva's head, pulled the boy into his lap, and said, "Here, take it—I do not wish to fight with anyone." Saying this, he hugged Dhruva fiercely, overwhelmed with emotion.

For the rest of the day, the King kept arguing with himself, reasoning, "This is merely the punishment for my own sins." Otherwise, a brother would never attack a brother. Thinking this, he found a sliver of consolation. He convinced himself that this was the decree of God. The command had come down from the court of the Lord of the Universe; the insignificant Nakshatra Ray could not possibly violate that divine will merely through the promptings of his own human heart. Thinking this, his wounded affection found some measure of peace. He was willing to shoulder all the sin himself—if only it meant the burden of Nakshatra Ray's guilt could somehow be lessened.

Bilwan arrived and asked, "Maharaj, is this the time to sit staring at the sky, lost in thought?"

The King replied, "Thakur, all this is the result of my own sins."

Somewhat annoyed, Bilwan retorted, "Maharaj, hearing such talk tests my patience. Who said that suffering is only the result of sin? It can be the result of virtue, too. Think of how many profoundly righteous souls have spent their entire lives in sorrow."

The King remained silent.

Bilwan pressed, "What sin did the Maharaja commit that resulted in this invasion?"

"I banished my own brother," the King replied.

"You did not banish a brother," Bilwan corrected him. "You banished a criminal."

The King argued, "Even if he is a criminal, there is still a grave sin in banishing a brother. One cannot escape its consequences. Even though the Kauravas were wicked, the Pandavas, after killing them, could not enjoy the pleasures of their kingdom with a peaceful heart. They had to perform a grand *yajna* to atone for it. The Pandavas took the physical kingdom from the Kauravas, but the Kauravas, by dying, stole the kingdom of peace right back from the Pandavas. I have banished Nakshatra, and now Nakshatra is coming to banish me."

Bilwan countered, "The Pandavas did not fight the Kauravas just to punish them for their sins; they fought to gain the kingdom for themselves. But you, Maharaj, carried out your *dharma* by punishing a crime, completely ignoring your own

personal happiness and sorrow. I see absolutely no sin in this. However, if you insist, I have not the slightest objection to prescribing a method of atonement. I am a Brahmin present right here; satisfying me will be atonement enough."

The King smiled faintly and remained silent.

Bilwan urged, "Be that as it may, make preparations for war now. Do not delay any longer."

The King declared softly, "I will not fight."

"That simply cannot be," Bilwan said. "You sit here and think. I will go and try to gather the army in the meantime. Everyone has gone to the *jhum* fields right now; it will be difficult to find enough soldiers."

Saying this, Bilwan left without waiting for a reply.

Suddenly, a thought crossed Dhruva's mind; he walked up to the King, looked up at his face, and asked, "Where is Kaka?"

Dhruva used to call Nakshatra Ray 'Kaka'.

The King replied softly, "Kaka is coming, Dhruva."

His eyelashes grew faintly moist.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Shravan & Agrahayan:** Months in the Bengali calendar. *Shravan* falls during the peak monsoon season (July-August), while *Agrahayan* marks the late autumn/early winter (November-December) when the main rice harvest occurs.
- **Jumia & Jhum:** *Jhum* is the traditional slash-and-burn agriculture practiced by the indigenous tribes of the hilly regions in Tripura and Northeast India. The *Jumia* women are the tribal women working in these fields. The harvest season is a time of immense communal joy and singing.
- **Kauravas and Pandavas:** Govinda Manikya uses a brilliant metaphor from the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The Pandavas fought a righteous war to reclaim their stolen kingdom from their wicked cousins, the Kauravas.

However, after slaughtering their own kin, the Pandavas were so traumatized by grief and guilt that their victory felt entirely hollow. The King fears the exact same spiritual defeat; even if he wins a war against his brother, the sheer act of fighting his own flesh and blood will destroy his soul.

- **"Kaka is coming"**: Dhruva's innocent question is the ultimate emotional gut-punch for the King. Dhruva still remembers Nakshatra Ray as the loving uncle who used to play with him (ignoring the fact that Nakshatra tried to sacrifice him). The tragic irony of Kaka "coming" not to visit, but to wage war, brings the King to tears.

CHAPTER 33

Thakur Bilwan had a vast amount of work on his hands. He sent swift envoys bearing various gifts to the mountainous regions of Chattagram. There, he requested the military aid of the Kuki village chiefs. Hearing the word 'war', they danced with joy. All the *Lals* (chiefs) of the Kukis sent *das* tied in red cloth from village to village through messengers as a formal declaration of war. Before long, a tide of Kuki warriors poured from the peaks of Chattagram onto the peaks of Tripura. It was nearly impossible to keep them restrained by any rules.

Bilwan himself went from village to village in Tripura, handpicking brave young men from the *jhum* fields and gathering them into the ranks of the army. Thakur Bilwan did not consider it wise to advance and attack the Mughal army directly on the plains. He decided that once the enemy crossed the flatlands and reached the relatively treacherous mountain paths, he would ambush and startle them with sudden attacks from the forests, hills, and various hidden, inaccessible spots. He even dammed the waters of the Gomati River with massive boulders—if utter defeat seemed imminent, the dam could be breached to wash away the Mughal troops in a massive flood.

Meanwhile, plundering the countryside as he went, Nakshatra Ray reached the mountainous regions of Tripura. By then, the *jhum* harvest was over. All the Jumias stood ready for battle, armed with their heavy blades, bows, and arrows. The Kuki bands could no longer be held back; they were like a waterfall roaring, ready to burst its banks.

Govinda Manikya declared, "I will not fight."

Thakur Bilwan replied, "That is absolutely out of the question."

The King argued, "I am unfit to rule, and all the signs of it are manifesting. That is why the subjects have no faith in me, that is why the famine began, and that is why this war has come. These are all God's commands for me to renounce the kingdom."

Bilwan countered, "This is by no means God's command. God has entrusted you with the burden of this kingdom; as long as ruling was free of peril, you effortlessly fulfilled your easy duties. But the moment the burden of the kingdom has grown

heavy, you want to throw it away and be free, fooling yourself into peace by calling it God's command."

These words struck Govinda Manikya deeply. He sat in silence for a while. Finally, in a deeply anguished voice, he pleaded, "Just imagine, Thakur, that I have been defeated, and Nakshatra has killed me to become King."

Bilwan replied, "If that truly happens, I will not mourn for the Maharaja. But if the Maharaja abandons his duty and flees, only then will there be cause for our mourning."

Slightly agitated, the King cried, "I must shed the blood of my own brother!"

Bilwan replied, "In the face of duty, there is no brother or friend. Remember the advice Lord Krishna gave to Arjuna during the battle of Kurukshetra."

The King asked, "Thakur, are you telling me I must take this sword in my own hand and strike Nakshatra Ray?"

"Yes," Bilwan replied.

Suddenly, Dhruva walked in and said gravely, "Fie, mustn't say such things."

Dhruva had been playing nearby. Hearing the heated voices of the two men, it suddenly occurred to him that they must surely be up to some mischief; therefore, it was necessary to come and discipline them a little before things got out of hand. Considering all this, he had suddenly appeared, shaken his head, and announced, "Fie, mustn't say such things."

The royal priest found this immensely amusing. He burst out laughing, picked Dhruva up, and began showering him with kisses.

But the King did not laugh. To him, it felt as though he had just heard a divine oracle from the mouth of an innocent child.

He declared in an unwavering voice, "Thakur, I have decided. I will not let this bloodshed happen. I will not fight."

Thakur Bilwan remained silent for a while. Finally, he said, "If the Maharaja is so fiercely opposed to fighting, then do one other thing. Meet with Nakshatra Ray yourself and dissuade him from war."

Govinda Manikya replied, "To this, I agree."

Bilwan said, "Then let a proposal to that effect be written and sent to Nakshatra Ray."

Ultimately, this was settled upon.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kukis, Lals & Das:** The Kukis are an indigenous tribal people residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and neighboring regions. In their traditional societal structure, the village chief was known as a *Lal*. The *da* (a heavy, curved machete) tied with a red cloth serves as a powerful cultural symbol—a physical "call to arms" sent from village to village to rally the warriors.
- **Bilwan's Tactics:** Notice the stark contrast between Raghupati and Bilwan. Raghupati relies on deceit, religious manipulation, and buying foreign mercenaries (the Mughals). Bilwan, though a priest, proves to be a brilliant guerrilla tactician, mobilizing the indigenous tribes (Kukis and Jumias), utilizing the difficult terrain, and weaponizing the river itself.
- **The Gita / Kurukshetra:** Bilwan explicitly references the *Bhagavad Gita*. When the warrior prince Arjuna was paralyzed by the thought of killing his own cousins and teachers in the Kurukshetra war, Lord Krishna counseled him that a ruler/warrior must fulfill his *Dharma* (righteous duty) with detachment, ignoring personal bonds or emotions. Bilwan is asking Govinda Manikya to emulate Arjuna.
- **Divine Oracle (*Daibabani*):** In classical Indian literature, a *daibabani* is a voice from the heavens or a prophecy. The King, torn by his moral crisis, takes Dhruva's innocent, childish scolding ("mustn't say such things" about striking with a sword) as a direct, literal sign from God to choose pacifism over duty.

CHAPTER 34

Nakshatra Ray continued to advance with his troops, facing not the slightest resistance anywhere. Whichever village in Tripura he set foot in welcomed him as their King. At every step, he relished the taste of kingship—and his hunger only grew. The vast fields, villages, mountain ranges, and rivers all around—everything began to feel like "mine." And along with this expansion of his domain, he himself felt expanded, swelling with immense grandeur. Whatever the Mughal soldiers wanted, he casually ordered them to take. He felt, *All this is mine, and they have come to my kingdom. They shall not be deprived of any pleasure.* Returning home, the Mughals would highly praise his hospitality, royal generosity, and magnanimity; they would say, "The King of Tripura is no small King." He remained constantly eager to earn fame and validation from the Mughal soldiers. If they addressed him with sweet, flattering words, he melted completely. He was constantly terrified of giving them any cause to criticize him.

Raghupati approached and said, "Maharaj, there seems to be no preparation for war on the other side."

Nakshatra Ray replied, "No, Thakur, he is terrified." Saying this, he began to laugh heartily.

Raghupati saw no particular reason to laugh, but he laughed nonetheless.

Nakshatra Ray boasted, "Nakshatra Ray has brought the Nawab's army. It is no small matter."

Raghupati said, "Let us see who sends whom into exile this time. Eh?"

Nakshatra Ray declared, "If I wish, I can sentence him to banishment, I can throw him in prison—or I can even order his execution. I haven't yet decided which one I will do." Saying this, he began to ponder deeply with an air of immense wisdom.

Raghupati said, "Do not think so much, Maharaj. There is still plenty of time. But I fear that Govinda Manikya might defeat you without even fighting."

"How could that happen?" Nakshatra Ray asked.

Raghupati replied, "Govinda Manikya will hide his troops and put on a grand display of brotherly affection. He will throw his arms around your neck and say, 'My little brother, come home, come eat milk and cream.' And the Maharaj will cry and say, 'As you command, I am coming right now. I won't delay.' Then, slipping on your *nagra* shoes, you will trot after your older brother with your head bowed, like an obedient pony. The Emperor's Mughal army will watch the spectacle, laugh, and return home."

Hearing this biting mockery from Raghupati, Nakshatra Ray felt deeply humiliated. Making a futile attempt to laugh, he said, "Does he think I am a child to be fooled so easily? That's impossible. That won't happen, Thakur. Just you wait and see."

That very day, Govinda Manikya's letter arrived. Raghupati opened it. The King had expressed deep affection and requested a meeting. Raghupati did not show the letter to Nakshatra Ray. He told the envoy, "There is no need for Govinda Manikya to take the trouble of coming so far. Maharaja Nakshatra Manikya will soon meet him personally, accompanied by an army and swords. Tell Govinda Manikya not to become too grief-stricken by the separation from his beloved brother over this short period. Had he served his full eight-year banishment, the separation would likely have been much longer."

Raghupati went to Nakshatra Ray and casually mentioned, "Govinda Manikya has written a highly affectionate letter to his banished younger brother."

Feigning utter indifference, Nakshatra Ray smiled and asked, "Is that so! What kind of letter? Let me see it." He held out his hand.

Raghupati replied, "I did not consider it necessary to show the letter to the Maharaj. I tore it up immediately. I told them that there is no answer to this other than war."

Laughing, Nakshatra Ray said, "You did well, Thakur! You said there is no answer other than war? You gave a wonderful reply."

Raghupati said, "Hearing this reply, Govinda Manikya will realize that although his brother left quite easily when banished, he is making quite a bit of noise on his way back home."

Nakshatra Ray declared, "He will realize that his little brother is not such an easy man to deal with. The idea that he can banish me whenever he pleases and call me back whenever he pleases is simply out of the question." Saying this, he burst into laughter for a second time, thoroughly delighted.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Milk and Cream (*Dudh-Sor*):** Raghupati uses this phrase mockingly. Offering warm milk and the rich skin/cream of the milk (*sor*) is a classic cultural symbol of a Bengali mother or elder pampering a young child. Raghupati is brutally insulting Nakshatra, implying that Govinda Manikya views him not as a rival king, but as a naive, easily pacified toddler.
- **Nagra Shoes:** Traditional South Asian leather footwear with curled, pointed toes.
- **Psychological Manipulation:** This chapter perfectly encapsulates Raghupati's absolute mastery over Nakshatra Ray. Raghupati knows Nakshatra is secretly longing for his brother's affection and would likely surrender if he read the letter. By pre-emptively mocking him for being a "docile pony," Raghupati successfully weaponizes Nakshatra's fragile ego to ensure the war happens.

CHAPTER 35

Hearing Nakshatra Ray's reply, Govinda Manikya was deeply wounded. Bilwan had thought that perhaps this time the Maharaja would no longer object to fighting. But Govinda Manikya said, "These can never be the words of Nakshatra Ray. That priest must have sent this message. Such words could never come from Nakshatra's mouth."

Bilwan asked, "Maharaj, what course of action have you decided upon now?"

The King replied, "If I can just meet with Nakshatra once, by any means, I can settle everything."

"And if you do not get to meet him?" Bilwan pressed.

"Then I will surrender the kingdom and leave."

Bilwan sighed, "Very well, I will make an attempt."

Nakshatra Ray's camp was situated atop a hill, amidst dense jungle. There were bamboo groves, cane thickets, and patches of tall reeds. The ground was smothered in various vines and shrubs. The soldiers had climbed to the peak following the trails left by wild elephants. It was late afternoon. The sun was dipping towards the western edge of the hills, while darkness had already begun to gather in the east. The blending shadows of twilight and the forest trees brought an early evening to the woods. As the winter evening approached, a mist-like vapor rose from the ground. The silent forest came alive with the chirping of crickets.

When Bilwan reached the camp, the sun had fully set, but a golden streak lingered in the western sky. The dense forest in the western valley below, tinted with the golden glow, looked like a vast, silent, green ocean. The soldiers were to march at dawn the next day. Raghupati had gone out with a contingent of soldiers and the commander to scout the route, and had not yet returned. Although it was strictly forbidden for anyone to approach Nakshatra Ray without Raghupati's knowledge, no one stopped Bilwan, dressed as a *sannyasi*.

Bilwan approached Nakshatra Ray and said, "Maharaja Govinda Manikya has written this letter remembering you." He handed the letter to Nakshatra Ray.

Nakshatra Ray took the letter with trembling hands. He felt ashamed and frightened to open it. As long as Raghupati stood as a shield between him and Govinda Manikya, Nakshatra Ray felt quite secure. He did not want to face Govinda Manikya in any way. Seeing Govinda Manikya's envoy standing directly in front of him made Nakshatra shrink back, and he felt slightly annoyed. He wished Raghupati were present to keep this envoy away. After much hesitation, he opened the letter.

There was not a single word of reproach in it. Govinda Manikya had not said a single thing to shame him. He did not express the slightest grievance against his brother. He did not even mention the fact that Nakshatra Ray had come with an army to attack him. The tone of the letter was exactly the same as the affection they had shared in the past. Yet, a profound tenderness and sorrow lay hidden within every line of the letter—and because it was not explicitly stated, it struck Nakshatra Ray's heart all the more deeply.

As he read the letter, his expression gradually began to change. The stone encasing his heart visibly cracked. The letter fluttered in his trembling hands. He held the letter to his head for a long time. The brotherly blessing contained within it seemed to wash over his parched heart like a cool mountain spring. For a long time, he sat perfectly still, staring unblinking toward the far western horizon, at the lush green forest blushing with the colors of dusk. All around him, the silent evening lay awake like a bottomless, soundless, tranquil sea.

Gradually, tears welled up in his eyes, and soon began to fall rapidly. Suddenly, overwhelmed by shame and remorse, Nakshatra Ray covered his face with both hands.

Weeping, he cried out, "I do not want this kingdom. Dada, forgive all my offenses and give me a place at your feet. Keep me with you, do not drive me away."

Bilwan did not say a word—he sat silently with a softened heart, watching him. Finally, when Nakshatra Ray had calmed down, Bilwan said, "Yuvaraj, Govinda Manikya is waiting, looking down the path for you. Do not delay any longer."

Nakshatra Ray asked, "Will he forgive me?"

"He harbors no anger whatsoever toward the Yuvaraj," Bilwan assured him. "It will be difficult to travel if the night grows too dark. Take a horse quickly. The Maharaja's men are waiting at the foot of the hill."

Nakshatra Ray said, "Let me flee secretly; there is no need to inform the soldiers. And there is no need to delay even a moment longer. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

"Agreed," Bilwan said.

Under the pretext of going to worship the Shiva lingam at the Trimura Hill with the *sannyasi*, Nakshatra Ray set out on horseback with Bilwan. When his attendants tried to accompany him, he stopped them.

They had barely set out when they heard the thundering of hooves and the clamor of soldiers. Nakshatra Ray shrank in terror. Before their eyes, Raghupati returned with his troops.

Surprised, Raghupati asked, "Maharaj, where are you going?"

Nakshatra Ray could not utter a single word in reply. Seeing Nakshatra Ray speechless, Bilwan answered, "The Maharaj is going to meet with Govinda Manikya."

Raghupati scanned Bilwan from head to toe, frowned once, and then, regaining his composure, said smoothly, "We cannot possibly bid farewell to our Maharaja at such an odd hour today. There is no reason to rush. Setting out tomorrow morning will be perfectly fine. What do you say, Maharaj?"

In a weak voice, Nakshatra Ray mumbled, "I will go tomorrow morning; it is already too late tonight."

Disappointed, Bilwan spent that night in the camp. The next morning, he tried to approach Nakshatra Ray, but the soldiers stopped him. He saw guards posted everywhere; there was no gap in the security. Finally, he went to Raghupati and said, "It is time to depart. Inform the Yuvaraj."

Raghupati replied, "The Maharaj has decided not to go."

"I wish to meet with him just once," Bilwan insisted.

"He has said that there will be no meeting," Raghupati stated flatly.

"I need an answer to Maharaja Govinda Manikya's letter," Bilwan demanded.

"An answer to that letter has already been given once before."

"I want to hear the answer from his own mouth."

"There is no way to do that," Raghupati said.

Bilwan realized it was a futile effort; merely a waste of time and words. As he turned to leave, he said to Raghupati, "Brahmin, what terrible destruction have you set out to achieve! This is not the work of a Brahmin."

CHAPTER 36

Upon returning, Bilwan saw that the King had already dismissed the Kukis. They had started causing disturbances within the kingdom. He had virtually disbanded the army as well. There were hardly any preparations for war. Bilwan returned and reported the entire situation at the enemy camp to the King.

The King said, "Then, Thakur, I shall take my leave. I leave the kingdom and its wealth for Nakshatra."

Bilwan protested, "Leaving these helpless subjects at the mercy of another, you will simply run away—knowing this, I cannot bid you a happy farewell, Maharaj! Can one ever imagine a mother finding peace after dumping the burden of her child upon a stepmother?"

The King replied, "Thakur, your words pierce straight into my heart. But this time, you must forgive me; do not say anything more to me. Do not try to sway my mind. You know, Thakur, I had made a silent vow never to shed blood again; I cannot break that vow."

"Then what will the Maharaja do now?" Bilwan asked.

"Let me tell you everything," the King said. "I will take Dhruva with me and go into the forest. Thakur, my life has remained profoundly incomplete. I have achieved nothing of what I set out to do—and the portion of life that has already passed, I can never get back to mold anew. I feel, Thakur, as if fate has shot us like arrows from a bow; if we deviate even slightly from the target early on, no amount of effort can ever bring us back on course. Having swerved off the path at the beginning of my life, I can no longer find the target at its end. Whatever I wish for no longer happens. When I should have woken up to save myself, I did not wake; I only gained consciousness as I was drowning. Just as a drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood in the sea, I am clinging to the child Dhruva. By pouring my soul into Dhruva, I shall attain rebirth within him. I will mold Dhruva, raise him as a true human being from the very beginning. Bit by bit, I shall grow alongside Dhruva. I will complete my human birth. Thakur, I am not even a proper human being; what will I do being a King!"

The King uttered these last words with intense emotion. Hearing them, Dhruva rubbed his head against the King's knee and declared, "I am a King!"

Laughing, Bilwan picked Dhruva up. He looked at the boy's face for a long time and finally said to the King, "Can a man ever be built in a forest? You can only cultivate a plant in the forest. A human being is built only within human society."

"I will not become a complete forest-dwelling ascetic," the King clarified. "I will merely stay somewhat removed from human society, but I will not sever all ties with it. It is only for a few days."

Meanwhile, Nakshatra Ray and his army drew close to the capital. The subjects' wealth and crops began to be plundered. The subjects did nothing but curse Govinda Manikya. They said, "All of this is happening solely because of the King's sins."

The King asked for an audience with Raghupati. When Raghupati arrived, the King asked him, "Why are you still inflicting suffering upon the subjects? I am handing over the kingdom to Nakshatra Ray and leaving. Dismiss your Mughal soldiers."

"As you command," Raghupati replied. "Once you have taken your leave, I will dismiss the Mughal soldiers—it is not my wish either to see Tripura plundered."

That very day, the King made preparations to leave the kingdom. He discarded his royal robes and donned the saffron garments of a renouncer. He wrote a long letter of blessing to Nakshatra Ray, reminding him of all the duties of a King.

Finally, the King took Dhruva in his lap and asked, "Dhruva, my child, will you come to the forest with me?"

Instantly throwing his arms around the King's neck, Dhruva said, "I will go."

Just then, it suddenly occurred to the King that if he were to take Dhruva with him, he would need the consent of Dhruva's uncle, Kedareshwar. Summoning him, the King said, "Kedareshwar, if I have your consent, I wish to take Dhruva with me."

Dhruva stayed with the King day and night, and had very little connection with his uncle; perhaps this was why it had never occurred to the King that Kedareshwar might raise any objections to Dhruva leaving.

Hearing the King's request, Kedareshwar said, "I cannot allow that, Maharaj."

The King was jolted back to reality. It felt as though a thunderbolt had suddenly struck his head. He remained silent for a while and then said, "Kedareshwar, you come with us too."

"No, Maharaj," Kedareshwar replied. "I cannot go to the forest."

Pleadingly, the King said, "I will not go to the forest; I will live in human society, with wealth and attendants."

Kedareshwar replied, "I cannot leave my country."

The King said nothing more, only letting out a deep sigh. All his hopes were extinguished. In the blink of an eye, the face of the entire world seemed to change. Dhruva was playing on his own—the King stared at him for a long time, yet it was as if he could not see him. Dhruva tugged at the edge of his clothes and said, "Play."

The King's entire heart melted and rose to his eyes as tears; with great difficulty, he fought them back. Turning his face away, he said with a broken heart, "Then Dhruva stays. I will go alone."

In that instant, the long, barren, desert-like path of his remaining life seemed to flash like lightning before his very eyes.

Interrupting Dhruva's game, Kedareshwar told him, "Come, come with me." Saying this, he pulled the boy by the arm.

In a tearful voice, Dhruva cried out, "No!"

Startled, the King turned to look at him. Dhruva ran over, threw his arms around the King, and quickly buried his face between his knees.

The King scooped Dhruva up and held him tightly to his chest. His vast heart felt as though it would burst; he kept it from breaking by pressing the little boy against it. Holding Dhruva in his arms like that, he began pacing the length of the long room. Resting his head on the King's shoulder, Dhruva lay perfectly still.

Finally, the time came to depart. Dhruva had fallen asleep in the King's arms. Slowly and gently placing the sleeping Dhruva into Kedareshwar's hands, the King set out on his journey.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Saffron Garments (*Geruya Boson*):** The traditional orange/saffron-colored clothing worn by Hindu ascetics and monks, symbolizing renunciation of the material world and the ego (the color of fire, representing the burning away of worldly desires).
- **The King's Metaphor:** Govinda Manikya's poignant reflection on his life as a misfired arrow perfectly encapsulates his tragic character arc. He realizes that a life rooted in flawed foundations (like ascending to a throne built on blood and sacrifice) can never be course-corrected, no matter how pure his intentions. He hopes to vicariously achieve the perfect human life through Dhruva, a hope that is devastatingly snatched away by Kedareshwar's perfectly legal, but deeply cruel, refusal.
- **Kedareshwar's Refusal:** It is vital to remember that Dhruva is not the King's biological son, but the orphaned nephew of Kedareshwar (and the boy who was almost offered as a human sacrifice). By denying the King his only source of salvation and purpose, Kedareshwar effectively completes the King's absolute isolation.

CHAPTER 37

Nakshatra Manikya entered the capital through the eastern gate with his army, while Govinda Manikya departed toward the western gate with a little money and a handful of followers. The people of the city welcomed Nakshatra Ray with the playing of flutes, the beating of *dhaks* and *dhols*, the blowing of conch shells, and joyous *ulu* sounds.

Along the path where Govinda Manikya rode on horseback, no one deemed it necessary to show him the slightest respect. Women from the huts on both sides loudly hurled curses at him, making sure he heard them; their tongues had been sharpened by hunger and the cries of their starving children. The very same old woman who, just the day before yesterday during the height of the famine, had received food at the palace gates and whom the King himself had consoled, now raised her frail hand and cursed him. Taking their cue from their mothers, children ran after the King, shouting and mocking him.

Without glancing left or right, the King rode slowly forward, his eyes fixed straight ahead. A Jumia was returning from the fields; seeing the King, he bowed reverently. The King's heart melted. With a voice choked with affection, he bid the man farewell. On behalf of all his subject-children, this single Jumia alone gave him a respectful, sorrowful farewell at the end of his reign. Seeing the pack of children shouting behind the King, the Jumia grew furious and chased them away. The King forbade him from doing so.

Finally, the King arrived at the part of the road where Kedareshwar's hut stood. He turned and looked to his right. It was a winter morning. The sun's rays had just begun to pierce through the fog. Looking at the hut, the King remembered a morning in the month of Ashadh from the previous year. Back then, there were heavy clouds and pouring rain. The little girl Hashi lay unconscious on the edge of the bed, fading away like the slender crescent moon of the second lunar day. Little Tata, unable to comprehend anything, sometimes put the edge of his sister's sari in his mouth and stared at her face, and sometimes gently patted her face with his chubby, round little hands. Today's dew-drenched, bright morning of Agrahayan lay concealed within that cloudy, dark morning of Ashadh. Did the King realize that the very same destiny that was driving him from his home today—stripped of his

kingdom and humiliated—had been sitting and waiting for him at the door of this tiny hut on that dark Ashadh morning! It was here that he had first encountered it.

Lost in thought, the King stood completely still in front of the hut for a while. Except for his followers, there was no one else on the road at the time. The boys had fled after being chased by the Jumia, but as soon as the farmer moved away, they reappeared. Roused from his reverie by their shouts, the King sighed and slowly rode on.

Suddenly, amidst the shouting of the boys, a sweet, familiar voice reached his ears. He saw little Dhruva running toward him on his tiny legs, arms raised, laughing brightly. Kedareshwar had gone ahead to pay his respects to the new King; only Dhruva and an old maidservant were left in the hut. Govinda Manikya stopped his horse and dismounted. Dhruva ran up, giggling, and threw himself upon him. Dhruva tugged at his clothes, buried his face between his knees, and after his initial burst of joy subsided, he looked up gravely and told the King, "I will ride the *tok-tok*."

The King lifted him onto the horse. Sitting on the horse, Dhruva threw his arms around the King's neck and pressed his soft cheek against the King's cheek. In his own little mind, Dhruva sensed that something had changed within the King. Just as people try various things to wake someone from a deep sleep, Dhruva pulled at him, hugged him, and kissed him, trying his hardest to somehow bring back his old demeanor. Finally, unsuccessful, he sat quietly with a couple of fingers in his mouth. Understanding Dhruva's feelings, the King kissed him again and again.

Finally, he said, "Dhruva, I must go now."

Looking at the King's face, Dhruva said, "I will go."

The King said, "Where will you go? You stay here with your Kaka."

Dhruva insisted, "No, I will go."

Just then, the old maidservant emerged from the hut, muttering and scolding. She grabbed Dhruva's arm and pulled him roughly, saying, "Come along."

Terrified, Dhruva immediately clung to the King with all his might, burying his face in the King's chest. Agonized, the King thought, *One could rip the very veins from one's chest, but how can one tear away the embrace of these two little arms!*

But he had to tear it away. Gently prying Dhruva's hands apart, he forcefully handed the boy over to the maidservant. Dhruva burst into desperate tears; raising his arms, he cried, "Baba, I will go."

Without looking back, the King quickly mounted his horse and galloped away. For as long as he rode, he could hear Dhruva's anguished wails; Dhruva just kept his arms raised and cried, "Baba, I will go." Finally, tears began to stream from the King's tranquil eyes. He could no longer see the road ahead. The sunlight and the entire world seemed to blur behind a veil of mist. The horse galloped wherever it wished.

At one point along the road, a band of Mughal soldiers approached, laughed at the King, and even began throwing harsh insults at his followers. One of the King's courtiers was riding alongside; seeing this, he rushed to the King.

He said, "Maharaj, this humiliation is unbearable! Seeing the Maharaj in these humble clothes has emboldened them. Take this sword, take this turban. Wait just a moment, Maharaj; I will bring my men and teach these barbarians a lesson."

The King replied, "No, Nayan Ray, I have no need for a sword or a turban. What can they possibly do to me? I can endure far worse humiliations than this now. I no longer wish to exact respect from the people of this world by raising a drawn sword. Just as ordinary people endure honor and dishonor, happiness and sorrow, through good times and bad, I too shall endure them, looking only to the face of God. Friends turn into enemies, dependents become ungrateful, subordinates grow insolent—there was a time when this might have been unbearable to me, but now, it is through enduring this very pain that I find joy in my heart. I have known Him who is my true Friend. Go, Nayan Ray, go back. Welcome Nakshatra with honor; respect him just as you respected me. All of you must work together to keep Nakshatra on the righteous path and protect the welfare of the subjects—this is my parting prayer to you. See to it that, even by mistake, you never mention my words or compare him to me in a way that insults him in the slightest. And with that, I bid you farewell."

Saying this, the King embraced his courtier and moved on. The courtier bowed to him, wiped his tears, and turned back.

When he reached the high banks of the Gomati River, Thakur Bilwan emerged from the forest, stood before him with folded hands, and said, "May victory be yours."

The King dismounted from his horse and bowed to him.

Bilwan said, "I have come to bid you farewell."

The King said, "Thakur, stay with Nakshatra and give him good counsel. Work for the welfare of the kingdom."

Bilwan replied, "No. Where you are not King, I am useless. I can do no more work here."

The King asked, "Where will you go then, Thakur? Have mercy on me; if I have you with me, my weak heart finds strength."

Bilwan said, "I am going to search for wherever my work lies. Know this: whether I am near or far, my love for you will never be broken. But what would I do going into the forest with you?"

The King said softly, "Then, I take my leave."

Saying this, he bowed for a second time. Bilwan walked away in one direction, and the King walked away in another.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Nakshatra Manikya:** Note that the narrative now refers to Nakshatra Ray as *Nakshatra Manikya*. "Manikya" is the royal title of the Tripura dynasty. The moment he passes the gates, he officially becomes the King, while Govinda Manikya departs merely as an ascetic.
- **Dhaks, Dhols, and Ulu Sounds:** A *dhak* and a *dhol* are traditional double-sided barrel drums from Bengal. The *uludhvani* (ulu sound) is a high-pitched ululation made by Bengali women to mark auspicious occasions and welcome royalty/deities.

- **Ashadh & Agrahayan:** The King's flashback brings the story full circle. In the month of Ashadh (monsoon season, Chapter 1/2), he met the dying girl Hashi and her brother Tata outside this very hut. The blood on the temple steps and Hashi's tragic death triggered his ban on animal sacrifices, which directly led to the rebellion, Raghupati's revenge, Nakshatra's exile, and ultimately, his own downfall today (in the winter month of Agrahayan). He realizes his fate was sealed the day he stepped in front of Kedareshwar's hut.
- **Baba:** Meaning "Father." Even though the King is not Dhruva's biological father, Dhruva's desperate cries of "Baba, I will go" make the separation utterly devastating.

CHAPTER 38

Assuming the name Chhatra Manikya, Nakshatra Ray ascended the throne with tremendous pomp. There was not much wealth left in the royal treasury. He had to squeeze the subjects for everything they had just to pay off the promised sum and dismiss the Mughal army. Chhatra Manikya began to rule amidst severe famine and poverty. Cries and curses rained down from all directions.

The seat Govinda Manikya used to sit on, the bed he used to sleep on, the people who were his dear companions—they all seemed to silently reproach Chhatra Manikya day and night. It gradually became unbearable to him. He began to wipe away every trace of Govinda Manikya from his sight. He destroyed the things his brother used and banished his favorite followers. He could no longer tolerate even a hint of Govinda Manikya's name. Whenever Govinda Manikya was mentioned, he felt as though everyone was making a pointed dig at him. He constantly felt that the people were not respecting him enough as a King; consequently, he would suddenly fly into mindless rages, keeping his courtiers in a constant state of frantic panic.

He understood nothing of statecraft; but if anyone came to offer advice, he would flare up and yell, "Do you think I don't understand that! Do you take me for a fool!"

He felt that everyone secretly despised him, viewing him as a usurper with no right to the throne. To counter this, he forced himself to become an excessively aggressive King; he began to act with sheer tyranny, asserting his absolute dominance everywhere. Merely to prove that he held the power of life and death in his hands, he spared those who deserved to be punished, and executed those who deserved to live. The subjects were starving to death, but there was no end to his grand festivities day and night—constant dancing, singing, music, and feasting. Never before had a King sat on this throne, spread his royal plumage so wide, and danced such a bizarre, terrifying dance.

The subjects began to express their discontent everywhere. Chhatra Manikya was infuriated; he considered this a sheer disrespect to the King. He responded by multiplying the causes of their discontent tenfold, violently suppressing them, terrifying them, and forcing everyone to shut their mouths. The entire kingdom fell as silent as the dead of night.

There was nothing surprising in the fact that the once-docile Nakshatra Ray had suddenly adopted this behavior upon becoming Chhatra Manikya. Very often, when weak-hearted men gain absolute power, they become just as ferocious and tyrannical.

Raghupati's work was done. It was not as though the thirst for revenge had remained equally ablaze in his heart until the very end. The emotion of vengeance had gradually faded, and seeing the task he had undertaken through to the end had become his sole obsession. Navigating through various obstacles and devoting himself day and night to achieving a single goal had brought him a sort of intoxicating pleasure. But now, the goal was achieved. There was no joy left anywhere in the world.

Raghupati returned to his temple and found not a single soul there. Although he knew full well that Jaisingha was gone, entering the temple made him realize it anew—Jaisingha was truly gone. At times, it felt as though he was still there, only to be followed by the crushing realization that he was not. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew a door open; Raghupati startled and turned to look, but Jaisingha did not appear. It occurred to him that Jaisingha might be in the room he used to live in—but for a long time, he could not bring himself to enter it, terrified of finding the room empty.

Finally, in the dim light of twilight, as the forest shadows melted into deeper darkness, Raghupati slowly entered Jaisingha's room. The empty, desolate room was as silent as a tomb. In one corner sat a wooden chest, and beside it lay a pair of Jaisingha's wooden sandals, covered in dust. On the wall was an image of Goddess Kali, drawn by Jaisingha's own hand. In the eastern corner stood a metal lamp on a metal stand; no one had lit it since last year. It was now draped in cobwebs. The adjacent wall bore the black soot marks of its flame. Besides these few things, the room was entirely empty.

Raghupati let out a deep, heavy sigh. The sigh echoed loudly in the empty room. Soon, nothing could be seen in the darkness. A gecko on the wall occasionally made its clicking sound. Through the open door, the chill winter wind crept into the room. Raghupati sat down on the chest and began to tremble.

He spent a month in this desolate temple, but the days refused to pass this way. He had to abandon his priesthood. He went to the royal court. He began to interfere

in the administration of the kingdom. He saw that injustice, oppression, and chaos were ruling the kingdom under the name of Chhatra Manikya. He tried to restore order. He went to advise Chhatra Manikya.

Chhatra Manikya flared up and snapped, "Thakur, what do you know about ruling a kingdom? You don't understand these matters at all."

Raghupati was stunned by the King's arrogance. He realized this was no longer Nakshatra Ray. Constant friction began to spark between Raghupati and the King. Chhatra Manikya believed that Raghupati was constantly thinking, *I am the one who made you King*. For this reason, the very sight of Raghupati became unbearable to him.

Finally, one day, he said bluntly, "Thakur, go do your work at the temple. There is no need for you here in the royal court."

Raghupati shot a blazing, piercing glare at Chhatra Manikya. Slightly embarrassed, Chhatra Manikya turned his face away and walked off.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Chhatra Manikya:** Nakshatra Ray officially takes this regnal title. Like his older brother (Govinda Manikya), the title "Manikya" establishes him as the sovereign ruler of the Manikya dynasty of Tripura.
- **The Royal Plumage:** Tagore uses a striking metaphor, comparing Chhatra Manikya to a peacock spreading its *pekhom* (tail feathers) in a terrifying, grotesque dance of power.
- **The Hollow Victory:** This chapter powerfully concludes Raghupati's political arc. He engineered a coup, overthrew a righteous king, and placed his puppet on the throne. But the victory is entirely hollow. His puppet has turned into an uncontrollable monster, and the temple—his original domain—is haunted by the unbearable absence of his beloved disciple, Jaisingha. The irony is total: Raghupati fought Govinda Manikya to protect the Goddess's temple, but in winning the political war, he lost everything that gave his religious life meaning.

CHAPTER 39

The very day Nakshatra Ray entered the city, Kedareshwar went to meet him, but despite his best efforts, he failed to catch the King's eye. The soldiers and guards shoved him, chased him, pushed him around, and thoroughly harassed him. Ultimately, he had to flee for his life. During Govinda Manikya's reign, he had lived in the palace, immensely satisfied with the royal luxuries, and had shared a special bond with Crown Prince Nakshatra Ray. Having been banished from the palace for some time now, simply surviving had become a struggle for him. When he lived under the King's shadow, everyone had treated him with fearful respect, but now, no one gave him the time of day. Previously, if anyone needed a favor in the royal court, they would come begging at his feet; now, when he walked down the street, no one even had a moment to spare him a word. On top of all this, he was now suffering from extreme poverty. In such a situation, regaining entry into the palace would be highly advantageous for him.

One day, gathering some gifts, he found an opportunity and went to meet Chhatra Manikya in the open royal court. Displaying profound satisfaction, he approached the King with an incredibly tame, obsequious smile.

The moment the King saw him, he flared up. He demanded, "What is that smile for! Do you think this is a joke! Have you come here to play some trick on me!"

Instantly, the mace-bearers, guards, sentries, ministers, and courtiers all began to shout at him. Immediately, the curtain fell over Kedareshwar's gleaming row of teeth.

Chhatra Manikya ordered, "Whatever you have to say, say it quickly and leave."

Kedareshwar completely forgot what he was going to say. The little speech he had so painstakingly crafted in his head shattered into pieces inside his stomach.

Finally, when the King threatened, "If you have nothing to say, then leave," Kedareshwar felt it was absolutely necessary to blurt out *something* right away. Instantly injecting a heavy dose of pathetic sorrow into his eyes, face, and voice, he pleaded, "Maharaj, have you forgotten Dhruva?"

Chhatra Manikya became absolutely livid. The foolish Kedareshwar, understanding nothing, continued, "He is crying his eyes out for the Maharaja, calling 'Kaka, Kaka'."

Chhatra Manikya roared, "I see your arrogance knows no bounds! Your nephew calls me 'Kaka'? This is what you have taught him!"

Folding his hands in extreme distress, Kedareshwar begged, "Maharaj—"

Chhatra Manikya ordered, "Guards! Throw this man and that boy out of the kingdom!"

Suddenly, so many guards grabbed him by the shoulders that Kedareshwar was flung outside like an arrow. The guards snatched the basket of gifts from his hands and divided it among themselves.

Taking Dhruva with him, Kedareshwar abandoned Tripura.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Kaka (Uncle):** Chhatra Manikya's furious reaction stems from his crippling insecurity as a usurper. He is desperately trying to erase any memory of his past as a loving uncle/subordinate prince. A commoner's child addressing the King as "Kaka" (paternal uncle) is seen as an intolerable insult to his newfound, absolute royal majesty.
- **The Tragic Irony for Dhruva:** In Chapter 36, Kedareshwar cruelly refused to let Govinda Manikya take Dhruva with him into exile, hoping to use the boy to win back favor and wealth from Nakshatra Ray. Now, Kedareshwar's greed backfires spectacularly, resulting in both of them being banished. The tragedy is that Dhruva was torn from a father who loved him, only to end up banished anyway with a greedy uncle who views him purely as a pawn.

CHAPTER 40

Raghupati returned to the temple once again. He arrived to find that no loving heart was waiting for him with clothes and provisions. The stone temple stood there; within it, there was not the slightest trace of a heart. He went and sat on the white steps by the Gomati river. To the left of the steps, the *shephalika* tree planted by Jaisingha's own hands was in full bloom with countless flowers. Seeing these flowers, Jaisingha's handsome face, his pure heart, his simple life, and his effortlessly pure, noble spirit vividly came to his mind. Strong and fierce as a lion, yet tender as a fawn, Jaisingha fully manifested in Raghupati's heart, taking over his entire being.

Previously, he had considered himself much greater than Jaisingha; now, Jaisingha felt far greater than himself. Remembering Jaisingha's pure devotion toward him, a deep devotion for Jaisingha awakened within his own soul, and a profound self-disgust was born. Remembering all the unjust rebukes he had subjected Jaisingha to, his heart broke. He said to himself, "I had no right to scold Jaisingha. If I could just meet him for one moment, I would confess my baseness and beg his forgiveness."

Everything Jaisingha had ever said and done came rushing back to him. Jaisingha's entire life seemed to reside within him in its entirety. Losing himself in the contemplation of such a noble character, he forgot all his conflicts and malice. The heavy burden of the worldly affairs around him grew light and ceased to torment him. The fact that Nakshatra Manikya, whom he himself had made King, had insulted him today evoked no anger in him whatsoever. Viewing all these worldly honors and insults as utterly trivial, a faint smile escaped his lips. He merely wished to do something—some great work—that would truly satisfy Jaisingha's spirit.

Yet, he could see no work anywhere around him; only an empty void howling in all directions. This desolate temple seemed to crush him, as if choking off his breath. He wanted to soothe his heartache by performing some monumental task, but staring at the silent, lifeless, secluded temple, his heart grew restless like a caged bird. He stood up and began pacing agitatedly through the forest. A profound disgust arose within him toward the lazy, unconscious, useless, inert idols inside the temple. With his heart surging with such intense emotion, spending eternity as

the inactive companion of these heavy, lifeless stone figures felt utterly despicable to him.

When the second watch of the night arrived, Raghupati struck his flint and lit a lamp. Lamp in hand, he entered the temple of the Fourteen Gods. He saw that the fourteen gods were standing exactly as they had before. Just as they had stood like mindless, heartless blocks of stone amidst the stream of blood before the dead body of a devotee on that dark night of Ashadh last year, they stood exactly the same way today.

Raghupati cried out in a loud, agonizing voice, "A lie! It is all a lie! Alas, my child Jaisingha, to whom did you offer the blood of your priceless heart! There are no gods here, there are no gods! The demon Raghupati drank that blood."

Saying this, Raghupati dragged the idol of Kali off her pedestal. Standing at the temple doors, he hurled it away with all his might. In the darkness, the stone idol went clattering and rolling down the stone steps until it plunged into the waters of the Gomati. The demoness of ignorance, who had assumed a form of stone and drunk blood all this time, vanished today among the thousands of stones in the bed of the Gomati; but she did not so easily relinquish her seat in the hardened hearts of men.

Raghupati extinguished his lamp, stepped out onto the road, and left the capital that very night.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Shephalika (Night-flowering Jasmine):** A flower known for blooming at night and falling to the ground by morning, often symbolizing fleeting beauty, purity, and sorrow in Bengali literature. Its blooming triggers Raghupati's profound realization of Jaisingha's pure nature.
- **The Second Watch of the Night:** Roughly midnight. The traditional Indian night is divided into four watches (*prahar*).
- **The Climax of Raghupati's Arc:** This is one of the most powerful and iconic scenes in the novel. Raghupati, the fiercely orthodox, manipulative, and power-hungry head priest who started a civil war to protect the Goddess's right to blood sacrifice, finally experiences a total collapse of his worldview. He realizes the horrifying truth: the stone idol never demanded blood; it was

his own ego, ignorance, and monstrous ambition—the "demon Raghupati"—that consumed Jaisingha's life. Throwing the idol into the river signifies his ultimate rejection of blind, dogmatic ritualism.

- **"The demoness of ignorance... did not so easily relinquish her seat in the hardened hearts of men":** Tagore's brilliant concluding philosophical remark. While Raghupati has physically cast away the idol, the true "demoness" is human ignorance and fanaticism, which continues to reside in the minds of men.

CHAPTER 41

Thakur Bilwan had been living in Nizamatpur in Noakhali for some time now. A terrible plague had broken out there.

Toward the end of the month of Falgun, one day the sky remained completely overcast, with occasional light showers; finally, by evening, a fierce storm erupted. Initially, strong winds blew from the east. By the second watch of the night, a violent gale started blowing from the north and northeast. Eventually, the wind died down as a torrential downpour began. It was then that the cry went out—a flood was coming!

Some scrambled onto the roofs of their huts, some ran to stand on the high banks of the ponds, while others took refuge in the branches of trees or atop temple spires. It was a pitch-dark night with unceasing rain—and the roar of the approaching flood steadily drew closer. In sheer terror, the villagers lost their minds. Then, the floodwaters arrived.

Two massive waves struck one after the other; after the second, the water level in the village stood at nearly twelve feet. When the sun rose the next morning and the waters receded, it was revealed that very few houses remained standing, and the people were gone. The corpses of humans, cows, buffaloes, goats, dogs, and jackals from other villages had washed in. The betelnut trees had snapped and washed away; only fragments of their stumps remained. Massive mango and jackfruit trees had been uprooted and lay toppled on their sides. Roofs of huts from neighboring villages had floated in and now lay scattered face-down, as if mourning the loss of their foundations. Countless clay pots and pitchers lay strewn about.

Since most of the huts had been surrounded by large trees like bamboo thickets, mango, jackfruit, and *madar*, many people had not been completely washed away but had gotten caught in the branches. Some had spent the entire night swinging desperately in the swaying bamboo thickets amidst the rushing floodwaters; some were left torn and bleeding by the thorns of the *madar* trees; some had been swept away entirely along with uprooted trees.

Once the water receded, the survivors climbed down and wandered among the dead, searching for their relatives. Most of the corpses were unrecognizable, washed in from other villages. No one cremated them. Flocks of vultures

descended and began feasting on the dead. They faced no competition from the dogs or jackals, for the dogs and jackals had all drowned too.

Twelve Pathan families lived in the village; because their homes were on much higher ground, they had suffered almost no losses. Among the remaining survivors, those whose homes still stood took shelter in them; those who had lost everything went elsewhere in search of refuge. Those who had been away returned to build new homes. Gradually, little by little, the village began to resettle.

It was during this time that a plague broke out in the village, triggered by the contamination of pond water by rotting corpses and various other causes. The plague first struck the Pathan neighborhood. No one had the time or strength to bury their dead or care for the sick. The Hindus declared that the Muslims were simply suffering the consequences of the sin of slaughtering cows. Driven by religious hostility and the fear of losing their caste, no Hindu offered them water or any kind of help.

This was the state of the village when the ascetic Bilwan arrived.

Bilwan had gathered a few disciples, but terrified of the plague, they tried to flee. Bilwan terrified them right back and stopped them from leaving. He began nursing the sick Pathans—providing them with a proper diet, clean water, and medicine, and burying their dead. The Hindus were astounded to see a Hindu ascetic engaging in such "unclean" practices.

Bilwan would say, "I am a *sannyasi*, I have no caste. My caste is humanity. When a human being is dying, what does caste matter! When a human created by God is crying out for the love of another human, what does caste matter!"

Seeing Bilwan's selfless, detached devotion to the welfare of others, the Hindus did not quite dare to express their hatred or condemn him. They could not decide whether Bilwan's actions were right or wrong. Their incomplete knowledge of the scriptures skeptically whispered "wrong", but the human being residing deep within their hearts declared "right". Regardless, Bilwan continued his work, paying no mind to the approval or disapproval of others.

The dying Pathans began to revere him as a god. To protect the young Pathan children from the plague, he took them to the Hindus. The Hindus panicked completely; no one gave them shelter. Bilwan then took refuge in a large,

abandoned, ruined temple. He housed his flock of children there. Every morning, Bilwan would go out to beg for food for his children. But who would give him alms? Where was the grain in the country? Countless people were on the verge of dying from starvation. The Muslim *zamindar* of the village lived far away. Bilwan went to him. With great difficulty, he managed to persuade him, and soon, shipments of rice began arriving from Dhaka. Bilwan nursed the sick, while his disciples distributed the rice.

Occasionally, Bilwan would sit and play with the children. The moment they saw him, they would raise a massive uproar; if one walked past the temple at dusk, it sounded as though a thousand parrots had nested inside. Bilwan owned an instrument shaped like an *esraj*; when he was utterly exhausted, he would play it and sing. The children would crowd around him—some would listen to the song, some would tug at the strings of the instrument, and others would attempt to mimic his singing with deafening screeches.

Eventually, the plague spread from the Muslim neighborhood to the Hindu neighborhood. A sort of anarchy descended upon the village—there was no end to the thefts and robberies; people plundered whatever they could get their hands on. The Muslims formed gangs and started looting. They would drag the sick out of their beds and steal everything, right down to the wooden cots, mats, and bedding. Bilwan tried with all his might to stop them. They held a deep respect for Bilwan's words and did not dare disobey him. In this way, Bilwan maintained whatever peace he could in the village.

One morning, one of Bilwan's disciples came and informed him that a stranger, accompanied by a small boy, had taken shelter under the *peepal* tree in the village; the stranger had caught the plague, and it seemed unlikely he would survive.

Bilwan arrived to find Kedareshwar lying unconscious, while Dhruva slept in the dust beside him. Kedareshwar was on the brink of death—weakened by the hardships of the journey and starvation, the disease had struck him with full force. No medicine had any effect, and he died right there beneath the tree. Seeing Dhruva, it was clear that he had cried himself to sleep from prolonged hunger. Very carefully, Bilwan scooped the boy into his arms and carried him back to his orphanage.

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **Falgun:** The 11th month of the Bengali calendar, marking the arrival of spring (mid-February to mid-March).
- **Pathans:** A term used historically in Bengal to refer to Muslims of Pashtun/Afghan descent.
- **The Sin of Cow Slaughter:** Cows are considered sacred in Hinduism. The orthodox Hindus blame the plague on the Muslims' dietary practices, using religious dogma as an excuse for their callousness.
- **Esraj:** A traditional stringed instrument played with a bow, common in Bengal.
- **Bilwan's Humanitarianism:** This chapter cements Bilwan as the moral center of the novel. While Raghupati uses religion to manipulate and destroy, and the orthodox Hindus use it to justify bigotry and inaction during a crisis, Bilwan transcends religious boundaries (caste) to practice pure, active humanitarianism, caring for the sick Muslims when their own neighbors abandon them.

CHAPTER 42

Chittagong is now under the rule of Arakan. Hearing that Govinda Manikya had arrived in Chittagong in exile, the King of Arakan sent an envoy to him with great ceremony. He sent word that if Govinda Manikya wished to reclaim his throne, the Lord of Arakan could assist him.

Govinda Manikya replied, "No, I do not want the throne."

The envoy said, "Then let the Maharaja reside as an honored guest in the royal court of Arakan for some time."

The King replied, "I will not live in the royal court. If the King of Arakan grants me a small place somewhere on the edge of Chittagong, I shall remain indebted to him."

"The Maharaja may reside wherever he pleases," the envoy assured him. "Consider this entire kingdom your own."

A few of the Arakan King's attendants stayed back to accompany Govinda Manikya. The King did not forbid them; he thought that perhaps the Lord of Arakan, harboring some suspicion, wished to keep his men near him. The Maharaja built a hut on the banks of the Mayani river. The small river with its crystal-clear water rushed rapidly over rocks big and small. On both sides stood steep black hills; brightly colored moss hung from the black stones, and birds nested in the small crevices scattered about. In certain places, the hills on both sides were so high that the sun's rays reached the river's surface only much later in the day. Massive shrubs, spreading leaves of various shapes, hung from the sides of the hills. Here and there, arms of dense jungle extended far along the two banks of the river. A tall, branchless white *garjan* tree leaned over the hill, its shadow dancing in the restless water below, while thick vines enveloped it and hung down. Amidst the dark green jungle were patches of soothing, verdant banana groves. From time to time, small springs pierced through the two banks and tumbled into the river like children, full of frantic arms, restless emotion, and babbling white laughter. The river flowed smoothly for a distance, and then, tumbling over rocky steps, frothed and cascaded downward. That ceaseless rushing sound echoed against the silent mountain walls.

Amidst this shade, cool currents, and soothing rushing sounds, Govinda Manikya began to live at the foot of the silent mountain. Opening his heart wide, he began to gather peace within it; the comforting, profound love of solitary nature poured into his heart from all directions like a thousand springs. Retreating into the cave of his own heart, he began wiping away all his petty grievances; throwing the doors wide open, he welcomed the flow of pure light and air into his soul. Who had caused him sorrow, who had given him pain—who had not returned his affection, who had taken gifts from him with one hand and offered ingratitude with the other, who had received his favor only to insult him—he forgot it all. Seeing the ceaseless activity yet ever-tranquil, carefree youthfulness of this ancient Nature seated upon her mountain throne, he too felt as though he were becoming just as ancient, just as vast, and just as tranquil. It was as if he cast his desireless affection out to the farthest reaches of the universe; casting away all cravings, he folded his hands and prayed, "O Lord, holding me in Your embrace, You have caught me as I plummeted from the peak of my prosperity and saved me on this journey. I was about to die, and I have been saved. When I was a King, I did not know my true greatness; today, I feel my greatness spread across the entire world." Finally, tears began to stream from his eyes; he said, "Lord, You have snatched away my beloved Dhruva; that pain has not yet completely left my heart. But today I understand that You did the right thing. In my selfish love for that boy, I was abandoning all my duties, throwing away my very life. You have saved me from danger. I had accepted Dhruva as the reward for all my virtues; by taking him away, You are teaching me that the only reward for virtue is virtue itself. That is why today, I feel the sacred sorrow of Dhruva's separation as a joy, as Your grace. I will not work like a servant for wages, Lord; bound by Your love, I will serve You."

Govinda Manikya observed that the streams of affection gathered by meditative Nature in solitude were sent forth into human society as rivers—the thirst of whoever drinks from it is quenched, and Nature holds no grudge against those who do not. Govinda Manikya resolved, "I too will go out and distribute this love I have gathered in solitude to human society." Saying this, he left his mountain hermitage and set out.

Relinquishing a kingdom and becoming an ascetic suddenly is not as easy in reality as it sounds in writing. Discarding royal robes to wear saffron is no small matter. In fact, abandoning a kingdom is easy, but we cannot effortlessly abandon the thousands of tiny habits we have cultivated since birth; they cling to our flesh and bone with their fierce hunger and thirst, and if not fed regularly, they begin to suck

our blood. Let no one think that during his stay in his secluded hut, Govinda Manikya merely sat motionless like a stump with an undisturbed mind. At every step, he was fighting a war against thousands of his petty habits. Whenever his heart ached for the lack of something, he rebuked it. He was starving the thousand-mouthed hunger of his mind to death. By conquering these hundreds of wants at every step, he was attaining happiness. Just as one must gallop a wild horse relentlessly to calm it down, he was galloping his restless, want-stricken heart across the desert plains of deprivation to bring it to peace. For a long time, he had not a single moment of rest.

Leaving the mountainous region, Govinda Manikya traveled south toward the sea. Having sacrificed every object of desire, he began to experience an astonishing freedom within his heart. No one could bind him anymore; no one could block his path as he moved forward. He saw Nature as immensely vast, and felt himself to be one with it. He began to see a new green hue in the trees and vines, a new golden glow in the sun, a new beauty in the face of Nature. Arriving in a village, he began to see a new beauty in every action of human beings. In the laughter and conversations, in the sitting and standing, in the comings and goings of people, he found the sweetness of an exquisite dance and song. He found joy in calling close and speaking to whomever he saw; his heart did not distance itself even from those who showed him contempt. A desire arose in him to help the weak and comfort the sorrowful everywhere. He felt, "I dedicate all my strength and all my happiness to others, for I have no personal tasks, no personal desires of my own." Sights that usually went unnoticed by anyone began to catch his eye, taking on new forms. When he saw two boys playing in the dust on the street—when he saw two brothers, a father and son, or a mother and child together—whether they were covered in dirt, poor, or ugly, he could see the infinitely deep love of the far-reaching ocean of human hearts within them. In a mother holding a child, he seemed to see the Mother of all human children, past and future. Seeing two friends together made him feel as though the entire human race was supported by the love of friendship. The very earth, which at times had seemed motherless to him before, he now saw resting in the lap of a downcast-eyed, ever-watchful Mother. Even seeing the sorrow, grief, poverty, conflict, and malice of the world no longer bred despair in him. At the sight of a single sign of goodness, his hope would pierce through a thousand evils and bloom toward the heavens. Has there not been a day in every one of our lives when such an unprecedented new love and new freedom dawned? A day when we suddenly saw this world of laughter and tears blooming like a tender newborn child in the lap of exquisite beauty, love, and

goodness—a day when no one could agitate us, no one could deprive us of any joy in the world, no one could imprison us behind any walls—a day when an exquisite flute began to play, an exquisite spring awakened, and the universe was filled with the joy of eternal youth—a day when all sorrow, poverty, and danger seemed like nothing at all. That day had arrived in the life of Govinda Manikya, his heart expanded by the joy of a new freedom.

The town of Ramu in South Chittagong was still ten *krosh* away. Shortly before dusk, as Govinda Manikya reached a small village called Alamkhal, he heard the faint cry of a boy coming from a hut on the edge of the village. Govinda Manikya's heart immediately grew restless. He instantly went to the hut and saw a young man, the owner of the hut, pacing the room with an emaciated boy in his arms. The boy was shivering violently and crying weakly from time to time. The man was pressing him to his chest, trying to put him to sleep. Seeing Govinda Manikya in the garb of an ascetic, he became flustered. In a pitiful voice, he said, "Thakur, please bless him."

Govinda Manikya took off his own blanket and wrapped it around the shivering boy. The boy only lifted his gaunt face once and looked at Govinda Manikya. There were dark circles under his eyes; it seemed as though there was nothing left in his thin face except those two eyes. Taking one look at Govinda Manikya, he moved his pale, thin lips and made a faint, inarticulate sound. Then, immediately resting his face on his father's shoulder again, he lay still. His father placed him on the ground, blanket and all, bowed to the King, and taking the dust from the King's feet, touched it to the boy's body and head.

The King picked the boy up and asked, "What is the name of the boy's father?"

The owner of the hut replied, "I am his father, my name is Yadav. God has taken all my children one by one, only this one is still left." Saying this, he let out a deep sigh.

The King told him, "I am your guest here tonight. I will not eat anything, so you need not make any arrangements for food. I will only spend the night here." And so, he stayed there that night. His attendants sought shelter at the house of a wealthy Kayastha in the village.

Gradually, evening descended. There was a pond covered in algae nearby, and mist began to rise from it. The heavy smoke from burning straw and dry leaves in the cowsheds could not rise into the sky; instead, it crawled low, blanketing the vast marshy fields ahead. Crickets began chirping harshly near the *ashsheora* hedges.

The wind was completely still; not a single leaf stirred on the trees. From the dense bamboo thicket on the other side of the pond, a bird called out "ti-ti" intermittently.

In the dim light, Govinda Manikya looked at the pale, emaciated face of the sick boy. Covering him properly with the blanket, he sat by his bedside and began telling him various stories. Evening passed, and jackals howled in the distance. Listening to the stories, the boy forgot the pain of his illness and fell asleep.

The King went to the adjacent room and lay down. He could not sleep that night. He kept thinking only of Dhruva. The King thought, "Having lost Dhruva, every boy feels like my Dhruva to me."

Sometime late in the night, he heard the boy in the next room wake up and ask his father, "Baba, what is playing?"

His father replied, "A flute is playing."

Boy: "Why is a flute playing?"

Father: "Because tomorrow is the Puja, my child!"

Boy: "Tomorrow is the Puja? Won't you give me anything for the Puja day?"

Father: "What can I give you, Baba?"

Boy: "Won't you give me a red shawl?"

Father: "Where will I get a shawl? I have nothing, my precious jewel!"

Boy: "Baba, do you really have nothing, Baba?"

Father: "I have nothing, Baba, except you."

A deep sigh from the broken-hearted father could be heard from the next room.

The boy said nothing more. He probably threw his arms around his father and fell asleep again.

Before the night was over, Govinda Manikya mounted his horse and rode toward the town of Ramu without even taking leave of his host. He did not eat, he did not rest. There was a small river on the way; he crossed it on horseback. He reached Ramu under the scorching midday sun. He did not delay there long. And just before evening, he arrived back at Yadav's hut.

He called Yadav aside. Taking a red shawl out of his bag, he handed it to Yadav and said, "Today is Puja; give this shawl to your son."

Yadav burst into tears and fell at Govinda Manikya's feet, clinging to them. He cried, "Prabhu, you brought it, you give it to him."

"No, I will not give it to him," the King said. "You give it. It will mean nothing if I give it. Do not mention my name. I will just look at the joyful smile on your son's face and leave."

Seeing the extremely gaunt, pale face of the sick boy light up with joy, the King departed.

Feeling melancholy, the King said to himself, "I cannot do any real work. I only ruled a kingdom for a few years, I learned nothing else. I do not know what to do to relieve even a fraction of the suffering of a sick little boy. All I know how to do is grieve in helpless, useless despair. If Thakur Bilwan were here, he would have done something to help them. If only I were like Thakur Bilwan."

Govinda Manikya resolved, "I will not wander aimlessly anymore; I will live among human society and learn how to work."

With the permission of the King of Arakan, he began to live in the fort of the Maghs near Rajakul, south of Ramu.

Every single child in the village flocked to Govinda Manikya at the fort. Govinda Manikya opened a large school for them. He taught them, played with them, visited their homes and lived with them, and went to see them when they were sick. The boys were not exactly angels descended from heaven, nor were they divine children; they possessed an abundant supply of both human and demonic traits. Selfishness, anger, greed, envy, and malice were fully potent within them, and on top of that, they did not always receive good instruction from their parents at home either. Because of this, the Magh fort truly became a chaotic 'Kingdom of the

Maghs'—it was as if all the forty-nine winds and sixty-four ghosts of chaos had nested together inside the fort.

With these raw materials, Govinda Manikya patiently set about building human beings. The realization of just how great a human life is, and what an object of profound, dedicated care and nurturing it must be, remained ever-awake in Govinda Manikya's heart. He saw human lives filled with endless potential blossoming all around him, and by dedicating his own efforts to achieving this, Govinda Manikya wished to sacrifice his own incomplete life. For this, he could endure all hardships and all disturbances. Only occasionally, feeling despair, would he lament, "I am unable to accomplish my work skillfully. It would have been better if Bilwan were here."

Translation & Cultural Notes:

- **The Maghs and Arakan:** During this era, the Arakanese Empire (in modern-day Rakhine State, Myanmar) controlled Chittagong. The Arakanese (often referred to as Maghs in Bengali literature) were a major naval power. "Moger Mulluk" (Kingdom of the Maghs) is a famous Bengali idiom for a state of utter lawlessness and anarchy, reflecting the historical terror the Arakanese pirates inspired in Bengal. The boys turning the fort into a chaotic "Kingdom of the Maghs" is a clever pun.
- **The Forty-Nine Winds and Sixty-Four Ghosts:** A vivid Bengali idiom meaning utter chaos, noise, and pandemonium.
- **Krosh:** A traditional Indian unit of distance, roughly equal to 2 miles (or 3.2 kilometers).
- **Govinda Manikya's Rebirth:** This beautifully philosophical chapter details Govinda Manikya's spiritual transformation. He realizes that simply abandoning the throne is not enough; one must actively conquer their inner desires and habits. Inspired by Bilwan, he rejects passive asceticism and dedicates himself to active social work (education and charity).

CHAPTER 43

This chapter is compiled from Stewart's History of Bengal.

Shah Shuja was fleeing, chased by the army of his brother, Aurangzeb. He was defeated on the battlefield near Allahabad. The enemy was mighty, and in this time of grave danger, Shuja could not even trust his own allies. Humiliated and terrified, he fled alone in disguise, like an ordinary man. Wherever he went, the dust-banners of the enemy troops and the thundering hooves of their horses followed close behind. Finally, reaching Patna, he reassumed his Nawab attire and announced his arrival to his family and subjects.

But shortly after he arrived in Patna, Aurangzeb's son, Prince Muhammad, arrived at the gates of Patna with an army. Shuja abandoned Patna and fled to Munger.

At Munger, some of his scattered forces managed to reunite with him, and he also gathered new soldiers there. Repairing the forts of Teliagarhi and Sikrigali, and building a wall on the hills by the riverbank, he established a strong defensive position.

Meanwhile, Aurangzeb sent his astute general, Mir Jumla, to assist Prince Muhammad. Prince Muhammad openly set up camp not far from the fort of Munger, while Mir Jumla marched toward Munger via a secret route. While Shuja was engaged in minor skirmishes with Prince Muhammad, he suddenly received news that Mir Jumla had arrived at Basantpur with a massive army. Panicking, Shuja immediately took his entire army, abandoned Munger, and fled to Rajmahal. His entire family was living there. The imperial army swiftly pursued him there as well.

For six days, Shuja fought desperately and prevented the enemy from advancing. But when he saw that he could not hold out any longer, on a dark, stormy night, his family crossed the river with as much wealth as possible and fled to Tanda. He immediately began repairing the fort there.

The heavy monsoon season arrived; the rivers swelled drastically, and the roads became impassable. The imperial army could advance no further.

Before this war broke out, a marriage had been entirely settled between Prince Muhammad and Shuja's daughter. But amidst the chaos of the war, both sides had forgotten the proposal.

While the war was suspended during the monsoon, and Mir Jumla had moved his camp some distance away from Rajmahal, a soldier of Shuja's came secretly from the camp at Tanda and delivered a letter into Prince Muhammad's hands. The Prince opened it and read Shuja's daughter's words: *"Prince, was this my destiny? The man I accepted as my husband in my heart, surrendering my entire soul to him, the man who exchanged rings with me and promised to take me as his own—today, that same man comes with a cruel sword in hand to take my father's life! Is this what I must witness? Prince, is this our wedding festival? Is that why there is so much pomp? Is that why our Rajmahal is stained red today? Is that why the Prince has brought iron chains from Delhi? Are these the chains of love?"*

Reading this letter, it was as if Prince Muhammad's heart was torn apart by a violent earthquake. He could not remain still for another moment. Instantly, he deemed the hopes of an empire and the Emperor's favor as utterly trivial. In the blazing fire of his youth, he abandoned all calculations of gain and loss. All his father's actions suddenly seemed profoundly unjust and cruel to him. He had previously expressed his views clearly against his father's conspiratorial and cruel policies right to his face, sometimes incurring the Emperor's wrath.

Today, he summoned a few of the highest-ranking commanders among his troops, expressed his disgust regarding the Emperor's cruelty, treachery, and tyranny, and declared, "I am going to Tanda to join my uncle. Those of you who love me, follow me."

Bowing deeply in a long *salaam*, they immediately replied, "What the Shahzada says is absolutely true; tomorrow, you will see half the army join the Shahzada at the camp in Tanda."

That very day, Muhammad crossed the river and arrived at Shuja's camp.

Festivities erupted in Tanda. Everyone completely forgot about the war. Until now, only the men had been busy; now, the women in Shuja's household had endless work on their hands as well. Shuja welcomed Muhammad with immense affection and joy. After endless bloodshed, the pull of blood relations seemed to grow even stronger. Amidst dancing, singing, and music, the marriage was solemnized.

The music and dancing had barely ended when news arrived that the imperial army was approaching.

The moment Muhammad had left for Shuja's camp, the soldiers had immediately sent word to Mir Jumla. Not a single soldier joined Muhammad; they understood that Muhammad had willingly plunged into an ocean of danger, and it would be madness to join his side there.

Shuja and Muhammad firmly believed that the majority of the imperial army would defect and join Prince Muhammad on the battlefield. With this hope, Muhammad raised his own banner and rode onto the battlefield. A large contingent of the imperial army advanced toward him. Muhammad swelled with joy. But as soon as they drew near, they opened fire on Muhammad's troops. Then, Muhammad realized the entire situation. But by then, there was no time left. His soldiers turned to flee. Shuja's eldest son was killed in the battle.

That very night, the ill-fated Shuja and his son-in-law, along with their families, boarded swift boats and fled to Dhaka. Mir Jumla did not consider it necessary to pursue Shuja to Dhaka. He set about establishing order in the conquered lands.

During his days of misery and danger, when friends were turning their backs on him one by one, Muhammad had defied death and forsaken wealth to take Shuja's side; this melted Shuja's heart. He loved Muhammad with all his life.

It was during this time that a spy carrying a letter from Aurangzeb was captured in the city of Dhaka. The letter fell into Shuja's hands. Aurangzeb had written to Muhammad: *"My dearest son Muhammad, you have neglected your duty and rebelled against your father, casting a stain upon your spotless fame. Captivated by the deceitful smile of a woman, you have forsaken your Dharma. The man upon whose shoulders the rule of the entire Mughal Empire will rest in the future, today lives as the slave of a woman! However, since Muhammad has sworn in the name of God and expressed repentance, I have forgiven him. But only when he completes the task for which he went there, will he be worthy of our favor."*

Reading this letter, Shuja was struck as if by a thunderbolt. Muhammad pleaded repeatedly, swearing that he had never expressed any repentance to his father. He insisted it was all his father's trickery. But Shuja's suspicion was not dispelled. Shuja pondered for three days. Finally, on the fourth day, he said, "My child, the bond of trust between us has loosened. Therefore, I request that you take your wife and

leave; otherwise, there will be no peace left in our minds. I have opened the doors of my royal treasury; take as much wealth and jewels as you wish as a gift from your father-in-law."

Shedding tears, Muhammad took his leave; his wife went with him.

Shuja declared, "I will fight no more. I will take a ship from the port of Chittagong and leave for Mecca." Saying this, he left Dhaka in disguise.

Translation & Historical Notes:

- **Charles Stewart's *History of Bengal* (1813):** As Tagore notes, this chapter is a direct historical recap of the tragic end of Shah Shuja, setting the stage for his arrival in Arakan (where he will cross paths with Govinda Manikya in the final chapter).
- **Prince Muhammad's Defection:** Sultan Muhammad Akbar (Aurangzeb's eldest son) did indeed defect to Shah Shuja's side due to his love for Shuja's daughter, Gulrukh Banu Begum.
- **Aurangzeb's Cunning:** The fake letter Aurangzeb sent, intentionally allowing it to fall into Shuja's hands to breed paranoia and split his enemies, is a famous historical anecdote demonstrating Aurangzeb's ruthless, Machiavellian political brilliance. It worked perfectly, destroying the alliance and dooming both Shuja and Muhammad. (Muhammad was subsequently imprisoned by Aurangzeb for the rest of his life).

CHAPTER 44

One rainy afternoon, a *fakir*, accompanied by three boys and a grown baggage-bearer, was walking along the path leading to the fort where Govinda Manikya lived. The boys looked completely exhausted. The wind was blowing fiercely, and the rain fell incessantly. The youngest boy, who couldn't have been more than fourteen, shivered in the cold and pleaded in a pitiful voice, "Father, I cannot go on." Saying this, he began to cry inconsolably.

The *fakir* said nothing; he merely sighed and pulled the boy close to his chest.

The eldest boy scolded the youngest, saying, "What is the point of crying like this on the road? Be quiet. Don't cause Father unnecessary distress."

The youngest boy then stifled his sobs and fell silent.

The middle boy asked the *fakir*, "Father, where are we going?"

The *fakir* pointed and said, "Do you see the spires of that fort? We are going there."

"Who lives there, Father?"

"I have heard that some King from somewhere has become an ascetic and lives there."

"Why did the King become an ascetic, Father?"

The *fakir* replied, "I do not know, my child. Perhaps his own blood brother chased him from one land to another with an army, like a stray village dog. Threw him out onto the streets, away from his kingdom, his happiness, and his wealth. Perhaps now, only the dark, tiny cave of poverty and the saffron robes of an ascetic are the only places left in the world for him to hide. From a brother's malice, from a brother's venomous fangs, there is no safety anywhere else."

Saying this, the *fakir* tightly pressed his lips together, suppressing the turbulent emotions in his heart.

The eldest boy asked, "Father, which country was this ascetic the King of?"

"I do not know, my child," the *fakir* replied.

"What if he does not give us shelter?"

"Then we shall sleep beneath a tree. Where else is there for us to go?"

Shortly before evening, the ascetic and the *fakir* met at the fort. Seeing each other, both men were surprised. Govinda Manikya looked closely, and the *fakir* did not seem like a true *fakir* to him. When one withdraws their heart from petty, selfish desires and sets it upon a single, vast purpose, a pure, unburning radiance illuminates their face—Govinda Manikya did not see that radiance on this *fakir's* face. The *fakir* was constantly alert, on edge. It was as though the thirsty desires of his heart were drinking fire from his two blazing eyes. His restless, violent anger, thwarted and repelled by his tightly sealed lips and clenched teeth, seemed to retreat back into the dark cavern of his heart, only to bite and devour itself.

With him were three boys. Looking at their incredibly delicate, beautiful, exhausted, and anguished bodies, and their somewhat arrogant aloofness, it seemed as though they had been carefully elevated on a pedestal of honor their entire lives, and this was the very first time their feet had touched the ground. It was as if they had never before personally known that dust touches the toes when one walks. The dusty, grimy poverty of the earth seemed to breed disgust for the world within them at every step; noticing the difference between a royal velvet carpet and the mud, they seemed to silently scold the earth with every stride. It was as if the earth had specifically rolled up its grand velvet carpet out of spite just for them. Everyone around them seemed to be committing an offense against them. If a poor man dared to approach them in his tattered clothes to beg for alms, it was nothing but sheer audacity; just as people throw scraps of food from afar lest a despised dog come too close, it seemed they too would turn their faces away and casually toss a handful of coins from a distance if they saw a hungry, dirty beggar. To their eyes, the generally humble nature and ragged destitution of the majority of the world's population seemed like one massive insult. The fact that they were not finding happiness and honor in this world was entirely the world's fault.

It was not that Govinda Manikya thought all this out so explicitly. But observing these signs, he understood that this *fakir* had not abandoned his desires to step out into the world free, healthy, and ready to serve it; rather, he had stepped out, turning his back on the world in anger, simply because his desires had not been

satisfied. The *fakir* firmly believed that whatever he desired was exactly what he was owed, and as for what the world desired of him, he would give it whenever convenient, and if he didn't, it was no great loss. Because the world had not operated exactly according to this belief, he had boycotted it and walked away.

Looking at Govinda Manikya, the *fakir* felt he looked both like a King and an ascetic. He had not expected this at all. He had thought he would either see a bloated lump of flesh wearing a giant turban, or a dirty ascetic in humble rags—meaning, an arrogant, audacious man covered in ashes and sleeping in the dust. But he saw neither. Looking at Govinda Manikya, it seemed as though he had given up everything, yet somehow, everything was still his. It was as if he had gained everything precisely because he wanted nothing—he had gained everything by giving himself away. Just as he had surrendered himself, the entire world had willingly surrendered itself at his feet. He was a King because he had no pomp, and he was an ascetic because he had drawn incredibly close to the entire world. That was why he did not need to dress up as a King, nor did he need to dress up as an ascetic.

The King served his guests with great care. They accepted his service with supreme nonchalance, as if it were their absolute right. They also informed the King exactly what items were required for their comfort.

The King affectionately asked the eldest boy, "Are you feeling very exhausted from the journey?"

Without giving a proper answer, the boy scooted closer to the *fakir*.

Looking at them, the King smiled faintly and said, "Your delicate bodies are not meant for walking on the road. Stay here in my fort; I will take good care of you."

The boys could not figure out whether they should reply to the King's words or exactly how they ought to behave with such people—they scooted even closer to the *fakir*. They seemed to think that this stranger from nowhere was about to reach out with his dirty hands and swallow them whole right then and there.

The *fakir* said gravely, "Very well, we can stay in your fort for some time." He said it as if he were doing the King a favor. He thought to himself, "*If you knew who I am, your joy at this favor would know no bounds.*"

The King could not get the three boys to warm up to him in the slightest. And the *fakir* remained entirely aloof.

The *fakir* asked Govinda Manikya, "I hear you were once a King. King of which country?"

"Tripura," Govinda Manikya replied.

Hearing this, the boys considered him extremely insignificant. They had never heard the name Tripura in their lives.

But the *fakir* grew slightly agitated. He asked again, "How did you lose your kingdom?"

Govinda Manikya remained silent for a while. Finally, he said, "The Nawab of Bengal, Shah Shuja, banished me from my kingdom."

He said nothing about Nakshatra Ray.

Hearing this, the boys all jumped in surprise and looked at the *fakir's* face. The *fakir's* face seemed to lose its color.

He suddenly blurted out, "I suppose this was your brother's doing? I suppose your brother chased you from the kingdom and turned you into an ascetic."

The King was surprised. He asked, "Where did you get so much news, Saheb?" Then he thought to himself that it was not so surprising after all; he must have heard it from someone.

The *fakir* quickly covered up, "I know nothing. I am merely guessing."

When night fell, everyone went to sleep. The *fakir* did not sleep a wink that night. He lay awake having nightmares, startling at every sound.

The next day, the *fakir* told Govinda Manikya, "Due to an urgent matter, we cannot stay here any longer. We will take our leave today."

Govinda Manikya said, "The boys are exhausted from the hardships of the road. It would be better to let them rest for some more time."

The boys were somewhat annoyed—the eldest among them looked at the *fakir* and declared, "We are not mere infants; when necessary, we can easily endure hardship."

They were not prepared to accept affection from Govinda Manikya. Govinda Manikya said nothing more.

As the *fakir* was preparing for his departure, another guest arrived at the fort. Seeing him, both the King and the *fakir* were astonished. The *fakir* did not know what to do. The King bowed to his guest. The guest was none other than Raghupati.

Accepting the King's bow, Raghupati said, "May victory be yours."

Slightly anxious, the King asked, "Are you coming from Nakshatra, Thakur? Is there any special news?"

Raghupati replied, "Nakshatra Ray is well, do not worry about him." Raising his hand toward the sky, he continued, "Jaisingha has sent me to you. He is no longer alive. I will fulfill his wish, otherwise I will find no peace. I will stay by your side, be your companion, and join you in all your work."

At first, the King could not quite understand Raghupati's demeanor. He thought for a moment that perhaps Raghupati had gone mad. The King remained silent.

Raghupati explained, "I have seen it all; there is no joy in any of it. There is no joy in malice, there is no joy in domination; the only joy is in the path you have chosen. I acted as your worst enemy, I harbored malice against you, I wanted to sacrifice you to my goddess, and today, I have come to surrender myself entirely to you."

Govinda Manikya replied, "Thakur, you have done me a great favor. My enemy was clinging to me like my own shadow; you have delivered me from his grasp."

Paying little attention to those words, Raghupati said, "Maharaj, the demoness I served for so long by shedding the blood of the world, ultimately sucked dry all the blood of my own heart. I have driven away that bloodthirsty, inert ignorance; she is no longer in the temple of the Maharaja's kingdom, she has now entered the royal court and mounted the throne."

The King said, "If she has been driven from the temple, she will gradually be driven from the human heart as well."

A familiar voice from behind said, "No, Maharaj, the human heart is the true temple; that is where the sword is sharpened and that is where hundreds of thousands of human sacrifices take place. What happens in the temple of the gods is merely a minor reenactment of it."

Startled, the King turned around and saw the smiling, serene figure of Bilwan. Bowing to him, he said in a choked voice, "What joy is mine today."

Bilwan said, "Maharaj, by conquering yourself, you have conquered everyone. That is why today, friends and foes alike have all gathered at your door."

The *fakir* stepped forward and said, "Maharaj, I am your enemy too, and I too surrender myself into your hands." Pointing at Raghupati, he continued, "This Brahmin-thakur knows me. I am Shuja, the Nawab of Bengal. I am the one who banished you without crime, and I have suffered the punishment for that sin—today, my brother's malice hunts me from street to street. I have no place left to stand in my own empire. I can no longer live in disguise. I am saved by surrendering myself entirely to you."

Then, the King and the Nawab embraced each other. The King simply said, "What immense good fortune is mine!"

Raghupati remarked, "Maharaj, there is a benefit even in being your enemy. It was only in trying to be your enemy that I was caught by you; otherwise, I would never have known you."

Bilwan smiled and said, "Just as when one is caught in a noose, struggling to break free only tightens the knot around the neck even more."

Raghupati said, "I have no more sorrow—I have found peace."

Bilwan mused, "Peace and happiness are always within us, we just cannot realize it. It is as if God has kept the nectar of immortality in a cheap clay pot; because of the pot, no one believes the nectar is inside. Only when the pot shatters from a blow do we finally taste the nectar. Alas, alas, that such a thing should be kept in such a place!"

Just then, an earth-shattering roar went up. In the blink of an eye, a massive swarm of boys, big and small, flooded into the fort. The King turned to Bilwan and said, "Look here, Thakur, my Dhruva." He pointed to the boys.

Bilwan smiled, "The one by whose grace you have received so many children has not forgotten you either. Let me bring him to you." Saying this, he went outside.

A short while later, he returned carrying Dhruva and placed him in the King's arms. Pressing him to his chest, the King called out, "Dhruva!"

Dhruva said nothing; he just lay there quietly, resting his head on the King's shoulder with a serious face. In the first moments of their reunion after so long, a kind of unspoken grievance and shyness seemed to rise within the boy's little heart. He just clung to the King and hid his face.

The King said softly, "Everything else has happened, only Nakshatra did not call me brother."

Shuja said bitterly, "Maharaj, everyone else easily acts like a brother, only one's own brother does not."

The spear of betrayal had not yet been plucked from Shuja's heart.

Translation & Context Notes:

- **The Fakir:** The *fakir* is, of course, Shah Shuja. The three boys are his sons (including the eldest, Zain-ul-Abidin). After being defeated by his brother Aurangzeb (as detailed in Chapter 43), Shuja fled to Arakan in disguise. This final chapter brings together the four major political figures of the novel: Govinda Manikya (King of Tripura), Shah Shuja (Nawab of Bengal), Raghupati (the mastermind of the rebellion), and Bilwan (the moral compass).
- **The Power of Non-Violence:** This entire chapter serves as Tagore's ultimate philosophical conclusion. Govinda Manikya wins not by raising an army, but by completely conquering his own ego. His absolute surrender and non-violence act as a "noose" (as Bilwan perfectly describes it) that inevitably captures and transforms his enemies. Raghupati and Shuja, the two most powerful, scheming men in the novel, both end up stripped of their power and seeking refuge at the feet of the ascetic King they wronged.

- **Dhruva's Return:** Bilwan bringing Dhruva back is the ultimate emotional payoff. The King sacrificed his kingdom and his son to uphold his vow of non-violence. By accepting his fate and choosing to love *all* children instead of just Dhruva, he is ultimately rewarded with Dhruva's return.
- **The Final Line:** Shuja's bitter final line is a powerful, tragic counter-note to the novel's otherwise peaceful resolution. While Govinda Manikya has found peace, Shuja is still bleeding from the trauma of Aurangzeb's betrayal, reminding the reader of the horrific, real-world consequences of absolute power and ambition.

CHAPTER 45: CONCLUSION

It must be mentioned here that the three boys were actually Shuja's three disguised daughters. Shuja had gone to the port of Chittagong intending to travel to Mecca. But unfortunately, due to the severe onset of the monsoon, he could not secure a single ship. Finally, returning in despair, he met Govinda Manikya at the fort. After staying at the fort for a few days, Shuja received news that the Emperor's troops were still searching for him. Govinda Manikya sent him to his friend, the Lord of Arakan, providing him with transport and numerous followers. Upon his departure, Shuja gifted the King a highly valuable sword.

Meanwhile, the King, Raghupati, and Bilwan worked together and seemingly breathed new life into the entire village. The King's fort became the very heart of the village.

Six years passed in this manner, and Chhatra Manikya died. Envoys arrived from Tripura to bring Govinda Manikya back to the throne.

Govinda Manikya initially said, "I will not return to the kingdom."

Bilwan replied, "That cannot be, Maharaj. When *Dharma* itself comes calling at your door, do not ignore it."

Looking at his students, the King asked, "Will my hopes of all these years remain unfulfilled, my work here unfinished?"

Bilwan said, "I will stay and do your work here."

The King argued, "If you stay here, my work there will remain incomplete."

Bilwan smiled, "No, Maharaj, you no longer need me. You can now rely entirely upon yourself. If I find the time, I will come and visit you now and then."

The King returned to his kingdom, taking Dhruva with him. Dhruva was no longer a mere little boy. Through Bilwan's grace, he had learned the Sanskrit language and devoted his mind to studying the scriptures. Raghupati once again took up the duties of the royal priest. This time, stepping into the temple, it felt as though he had regained the dead Jaisingha back to life.

Meanwhile, the treacherous Lord of Arakan murdered Shuja and married his youngest daughter.

"Govinda Manikya deeply mourned the cruelty of the Lord of Arakan toward the ill-fated Shuja. To make Shuja's name immortal, he exchanged the sword for a vast sum of money and had an exquisite mosque built in the city of Comilla. It still stands today as the Shuja Mosque.

"Through Govinda Manikya's efforts, the region of Meherkul was cultivated and populated. He granted vast tracts of land to Brahmins, recording the deeds on copper plates. Maharaja Govinda Manikya had a large lake excavated in the village of Batisa, south of Comilla. He initiated many noble deeds but could not complete them all. Harboring this regret, he departed from this mortal world in the year 1669 AD."

— *The final two paragraphs are quoted from the "History of Tripura" written by Srijut Babu Kailash Chandra Singha.*

Translation & Historical Notes:

- **The Fate of Shah Shuja:** The tragic end of Shah Shuja is historically accurate. He fled to Arakan seeking refuge, but the Arakanese King Sandathudamma betrayed him. Shuja and his sons were killed, and his daughters were taken into the Arakanese royal harem.
- **The Shuja Mosque (Shuja Masjid):** Built in 1658 (or completed later by Govinda Manikya depending on the historical source), this mosque actually exists in modern-day Comilla, Bangladesh, serving as a historical testament to the friendship between the Hindu King of Tripura and the Muslim Mughal Prince.
- **A Full Circle:** The novel ends with a sense of restored harmony. Govinda Manikya returns to the throne not out of desire, but out of *Dharma* (duty), finally a complete King. Raghupati returns to the temple, no longer a bloodthirsty fanatic, but a man who has found pure devotion (symbolized by feeling Jaisingha's living presence). Dhruva, the catalyst for the entire conflict, returns as a scholar.