

Satirical Sketches

# ARASIKER SWARGAPRPTI

Rabindranath Tagore



The late Gokulnath Datta. The Realm of Indra.

GOKULNATH. (Aside) I observe that Heaven has been made a perfectly splendid place from the standpoint of health. One cannot help but commend this. Being situated at so great an altitude, the oxygen here is remarkably pure, and since there is no night-time, the creepers of Nandana Forest never get the opportunity to release their carbonic acid gas—the air is thoroughly clean. As for dust, there is none whatsoever, so that the very seeds of disease have been utterly destroyed. But I observe such neglect of scholarly pursuits here that I begin to wonder whether news has yet reached these gentlemen's ears that disease-germs are, in fact, carried upon the dust. They seem to have settled once and for all upon a single Samaveda hymn, and beyond that, no further intellectual movement has occurred. The earth moves forward at tremendous speed, but Heaven remains exactly as it always was—conservative to the last degree.

(To Brihaspati) Well now, learned Pandit, that Samaveda chant being sung there—you all sit rapt, quite enchanted, listening away—but tell me, have you managed to gather any historical evidence as to precisely when it was first composed? What's that you say? You have no history in Heaven? Everything here is eternal? How very convenient. No need to fix the dates of your celestial youths! But surely, does not scholarship suffer considerably on that account? The utility of historical study might be divided into four principal categories—first, category A—

Are you attending to me at all?—(Aside) Drunk on music, how could his mind attend to anything else? If only, since leaving the earth, I had managed to make even one of these gentlemen listen to a single word of mine! One cannot tell from their faces whether they have heard or not: no one contradicts anything one says, and if one contradicts anyone else, one never receives so much as a reply. I hear I must spend five crore and fifteen and a half lakh years right here. Well, that settles it, then—I am done for. Nor is there even the recourse of suicide to escape this fate. I went searching for the weekly mortality register here, only to be told that death does not

exist in this place. If the two physicians named Ashvinikumar were not allotted fixed rations, the whole of Heaven, wrung dry, would not fetch a single farthing in fees. And yet what these gentlemen are actually doing here, by the reasoning of us mortals, remains utterly incomprehensible. No one is required to render any account of expenditure—everyone does exactly as he pleases. If only there were a Municipal Corporation here, with proper regulated work, I would be the very first to campaign for the abolition of those two Health Officer posts. All this nectar being distributed so freely at every gathering, day after day—is there any account of it kept anywhere? The other day I asked Shachi-thakurun quite plainly to her face: the entire storehouse of Heaven is under your charge—do you keep any record of it whatsoever, whether in a proper ledger or even rough notes—any receipts, any vouchers, any evidence at all? Shachi-thakurun, I believe, took considerable offense inwardly; since the creation of Heaven, apparently, no one has ever put such a question to her. That which belongs to the public ought to be properly accounted for—but not one of these gentlefolk seems to grasp that principle at all. Does having an inexhaustible supply justify inexhaustible waste? If I must remain here much longer, I shall not rest until I have thoroughly reformed the entire administration of Heaven from top to bottom. What is needed, I can see, first and foremost, is agitation—that thing is entirely absent from Heaven; every single deity sits about perfectly content. If only one could stir up these three hundred and thirty million gods properly, some real work might get accomplished. Looking at the population here, it struck me at once that a substantial daily or weekly newspaper could be run here quite successfully. Were I made editor, with merely two competent sub-editors, I could begin operations immediately. First, Narada would have to be employed to canvass vigorously for advertisements. Then one would need to appoint regular correspondents scattered about Vishnuloka, Brahmalo, Chandraloka, Suryaloka. Ah, if only I could see this project through, Heaven would never again look the same. Those who arrive in Heaven only after bribing all the gods along the way—if I could publish, in every issue, a brief biographical sketch of each one—what a sensation it would cause among our celestial great souls! I must once put my proposals before Indra himself.

(Approaching Indra) Look here, Mahendra, I have something to discuss with you privately—

(Noticing the celestial nymphs) Oh! I hadn't realized all these ladies were present—forgive me—I shall withdraw. Why, is that Shachi-thakurun sitting there as well! And what, pray, are all those venerable old royal sages and divine sages doing here, sitting about watching this spectacle! Look here, Mahendra, since you have never instituted a system of self-governance in Heaven, matters here are not proceeding at all well. If you would only set aside all this dancing and music for a while and come along with me, I could demonstrate to you, then and there, that not a single department here operates with any proper order whatsoever. By whose wish, in what manner, what precisely is happening—none of it can be articulated clearly. Work ought to be organized with such perfect clarity that it runs like clockwork, comprehensible at a single glance. I have brought with me an entire set of regulations, numbered systematically; if only, among your thousand eyes, you might turn even a single pair in this direction—very well then, let it rest for now—let your music and dancing continue, we shall attend to this matter afterward.

(To the sage Bharata) Now then, Master, I hear you are an expert in music—I have a question for you. Regarding the fundamental elements of music—that is, the seven notes, the three scales, the twenty-one modulations—what's that you say? You people don't recognize any of this? You know only delight, nothing more! Just as I suspected—and the more I observe, the more astonished I become. (Listening for a while) Bharata-thakur, that lady there—what is her name—Rambha? What is her surname, pray tell? You don't understand "surname"? For instance, as one might say Rambha Chatterjee, or Rambha Bhattacharya, or if she happens to be of the Kshatriya caste, Rambha Singh—do you people have nothing of that sort here at all? Ah well, very well then. Now, the song Lady Rambha just sang—you all praised it most generously—but might you kindly explain to me its raga? At one point it seemed to me distinctly in Dhaivat, then again it seemed like Komal Dhaivat, and then toward the beginning—oh, I understand now, you people simply enjoy things, but there exists no rule governing what one ought to enjoy. With us it is precisely the reverse—one may or may not enjoy something, but the rule remains fixed regardless. In your Heaven, whatever is truly necessary is entirely lacking, while whatever is dispensable exists in excessive abundance. Search through all seven

heavens, and if with great difficulty you manage to find even half a rule, a thousand exceptions to it will immediately come tumbling out. I observe this to be true in every single matter. Look there, for instance—Shadanana sits over there, and not one of his six faces can be given any coherent meaning whatsoever. Even a rank beginner in anatomy could tell you that six faces upon a single neck are utter excess. Ha ha ha ha! Did he need to assume six mouths merely to suckle at his six mothers' breasts? Ah, but that is mythology—I was speaking of physiology. Even in the myth, he needed only one mouth at a time; his stomach, after all, was never more than a single stomach. And look at this too—the very arrangement of your Heaven—you have entirely dispensed with shadows from the body—but what harm, pray, had the poor shadow ever done you? You are heavenly beings, perhaps you won't credit this, but I, from birth to death, have carried that shadow about with me—sometimes behind, sometimes before, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left—and it never cost me so much as a farthing to maintain, nor did I ever feel it the slightest burden even in the most exhausting of times. That, you have abolished—yet six faces, four arms, a thousand eyes, all of which cost a great deal and weigh a great deal, toward that you show not the slightest inclination toward economy! Such stinginess where the shadow is concerned, and such lavish open-handedness where the substance is concerned! You applaud me? So among all the gods, you at least have understood my meaning! You're not applauding me? You're applauding Lady Rambha? Oh! Very well then, do sit down—I shall go and have a word with Kartikeya.

(Seating himself beside Kartikeya) Guha, I trust you are keeping well? I have a question or two to put to you regarding your Military Department here. What system do you people follow—ah, very well, let that rest for now. Let your performance proceed first. I ask only this one thing: this drama being performed—I understand it is called "The Separation of Chitrlekha"—would you kindly explain to me its purpose? Purpose may be of two kinds: instruction in knowledge, or instruction in morality. The poet has either made clear to us, in an accessible way, some natural law, or else demonstrated plainly that good deeds bring good results and evil deeds evil ones. Consider, according to the law of evolution, how atomic particles have gradually transformed into this wondrously varied universe; or consider where the harmony lies in this eternal contradiction—that our will is, in one aspect, bound as the fruit of prior action, and in another aspect, free, as it gives

birth to future action—when poetry brings such truths vividly to light, its purpose becomes immediately apparent. Which of these is present in "The Separation of Chitrlekha"? You seem quite overcome already; if physiological law held any sway in the celestial realm, tears would even now be streaming from your twelve eyes. Well, never mind, Kartikeya—it is a great pity that though Heaven produces heaps upon heaps of poetry and drama, nothing emerges from the hands of your celestial authors that shows the slightest trace of research or reflective thought. (With a faint smile) I see that you have found "The Separation of Chitrlekha" thoroughly enjoyable—very well then, let other topics rest, and you attend to that alone.

(Approaching Indra) Look here, King of the Gods, since there exists no forum in Heaven for the exchange of opinions, one feels the lack of it most keenly. It is my wish to establish an assembly in the Parijata grove of Nandana Park, precisely where your dance-hall stands, and to call it the "Shatakratu Debating Club." It would bear your name, and Heaven would benefit enormously thereby. No, no, please excuse me—I have no such habit—I do not partake of nectar—if you will forgive my saying so, that habit of yours ought really to be abandoned. I have noticed that a certain fondness for drink has grown rather pronounced among you gods. Of course, you do not call it liquor, but there would be no great exaggeration in calling it so. On earth too, I have seen many who found considerable satisfaction in calling their liquor "wine." Surendra, that form of address you just used toward Lady Menaka—did it sound quite proper to you? I have seen such forms of address in Sanskrit poetry and drama, true enough, but if you were to make reliable inquiries, you would learn that such expressions are now considered rather objectionable. Would you like to know how we address such matters? We sometimes use maternal forms of address, sometimes call them "child," and on occasion we may even greet them as "daughter of a respectable family." Do you have no wish to apply any of these forms toward these ladies? Well, never mind that—but this much must be admitted, that the epithets you customarily employ regarding them betray no great refinement of taste. What's that you say? Heaven possesses neither good taste nor bad? As to the first, I harbor no doubt whatsoever; as to the second, I could prove its presence this very instant—but you gentlemen pay not the slightest attention to anything I say.

(Approaching Shachi) Look here, Shachi, does it not occur to you that we ought to resolve, with firm determination, to root out whatever faults have crept into celestial society? If you ladies of Heaven yourselves continue to display such laxity in these matters, the moral condition of your husbands will only grow increasingly deplorable. The scandalous reports circulating concerning them are hardly unknown to you; if assemblies were convened from time to time to discuss such matters, and if you ladies would lend your support—where are you going? Household duties calling, I suppose? (Seeing Shachi rise, all the gods rise as well, and the assembly breaks up prematurely.) What a terrible predicament I find myself in! Say something to anyone, and no one listens, no one understands. (Approaching Indra, in a plaintive voice) O Lord of the Thousand Eyes, Shatakratu—how many more years remain of my five crore, fifteen and a half lakh years?

INDRA. (In a plaintive voice) Five crore, fifteen lakh, forty-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-one years remain.

Gokulnath and all three hundred and thirty million gods heave a single, prolonged sigh, and collapse together.