

Satirical Sketches

NUTAN ABATAR

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ACT ONE

NANDAKRISHNA MUKHOPADHYAY

(Aside) You have seized Ruddur Bakshi the Brahmin's Brahmottar tank and turned it into your own back-garden pond! Very well—we shall see how you enjoy the fruits of it. I shall have people of all thirty-six castes bathing morning and evening in that very pond, or else I am no true son of a Brahmin. (To the assembled neighbours) Well now, you have all heard, I daresay, what has happened. Even now, when I recall that dream, the hair on my body stands on end. Brother, for three nights running I dreamt the selfsame dream—Mother Ganga herself, mounted upon her crocodile, came to the head of my bed and said: "O wretched Nanda, an evil counsel possessed you, and so you went and filed suit against Ruddur Bakshi over that tank. Do you know who Ruddur Bakshi is? He who was Bhagiratha in the Age of Truth has now taken birth in the house of the Bakshis. From the very day the trains began running over the Hooghly bridge, I too have come and taken up my dwelling in that tank of yours." Then it struck me—good heavens, what have I done! He who is none other than the Bhagiratha of this degenerate age, and I dragging him into court over the possession of the Ganges herself! What sin could be greater! Now I understand why the case went against us, and why every soul in the neighbourhood, having sworn upon oath in court, testified to the plainest falsehood. This is all the working of divine power. Through your very mouths uncontrollable lies came pouring forth as though the Ganges herself were gushing straight from her source at Gomukh; and I, poor blind and sinful fool that I was, failed even then to perceive the true nature of things—I remained blinded by illusion, while the lawyers made off with all my money!

[He bursts into tears. And, amid the pious lamentations of devout men and women crying out the name of Hari, he departs to behold the Bhagiratha of the Kali Yuga.]

ACT TWO

RUDRANARAYAN BAKSHI

(Aside) So that's how it is!—Ever since childhood I had, for no particular reason, a persistent notion that I was no ordinary person. Only now, after all this time, does the reason become clear. And I have noticed this too—that I had long harboured a certain covetousness toward that tank belonging to the Brahmin; again and again it struck me that unless that pond were somehow enclosed, the womenfolk would suffer great inconvenience. It never once occurred to me plainly that I am Bhagiratha, and that Mother Ganga even now has not forgotten me. Ah, the penances I performed in that former birth—how can the false lawsuits of this present birth possibly compare to them!

(To the assembled devotees, with a faint smile) Did you think I did not know it all along? But I revealed nothing to you—who could say whether you would believe it or not? In this degenerate age, no one has the slightest devotion left for gods or Brahmins. But never mind, never mind—I forgive you all your transgressions.—Who is this? The dust of my feet, you say? Very well, here you are (extending his foot). What do you wish for? Water that has washed my feet? Come, come. Fetch your vessel—here, take it—drink it down. Since dawn I have been dispensing foot-water continuously, and my head has grown quite heavy with the cold I've caught from it.—Children, come one and all, there is nothing to fear. That you failed to recognize me until now is scarcely your fault. I had resolved not to disclose the matter to you at all—to let things go on as they had always gone on—that you should continue to know me simply as Rudradur Bakshi, son of Madhav Bakshi. (A faint laugh) But once Mother Ganga herself let the secret slip, I could conceal it no longer. The matter has already spread everywhere. There is no hiding it now. Look here at what the Hindu Prakash has printed. Tinkoray, run and fetch that newspaper at once. Look here—"The Bhagiratha of the Kali Yuga, and the Bhagirathi of Fazluginj"—the fellow writes with real skill! And in that Bangatoshini magazine from day before yesterday, two long letters have appeared as well. What's that? Can't find it? Have you lost it? If

you've lost it, I shall not leave your two hands intact, mark my words! Did I not hand it to you myself that day and tell you to put it away safely in the almirah? Wretched boy! Good-for-nothing! Bastard child! Where have you gone and lost my paper! Find it! Fetch it out! Go wherever you took it from and bring it back, or I'll have you buried alive, boy!—Oh, that's right, I recall now, I tucked it away inside my dispatch-box myself. Haribhushan, be so good as to read it aloud for me—I never was in the habit of reading Bengali well.—Who is this? Moti the milkmaid, is it? Come, come, I am dispensing the dust of my feet—have you come to collect payment for the milk? Haven't you heard yet? Don't you know what dream Mother Ganga sent to Nanda Mukherjee? Girl, you have been selling me my own pond-water mixed in with the milk—do you have any idea of the sanctity of that water? Well now, you've heard it from everyone else too, haven't you? Now then, let the account stand as it is, and go take the dust of my feet and dive once into the ghat of my back-garden tank.

I'm coming this very moment. Do you think I don't know it has grown late? The rice has gone cold, has it? Well, what am I to do? People have come from great distances hoping merely for the dust of my feet—shall they all go away disappointed? Very well, I'm getting up. Tinkoray, you stay here—seat all those who come to see me, tell them I am coming presently. Mind you! See that no one goes away without receiving darshan. Tell them Bhagiratha-thakur is at his meal. Understood? I shall be there the moment I've had two mouthfuls of rice.

Radha, why do you stand there so stiff and upright! Has your neck no bend in it at all? What pride I see in you! Wretch, you haven't a shred of devotion in you. Impudent boy, do you know I could dismiss you with a kick of my shoe? Everyone else worships me, and you, boy, have grown such a great Christian that you won't even bow before me! Have you no fear of the life to come? Get out of my house.

For shame, Umesh my boy, at your age, and still you haven't learned how one ought to behave toward whom? You have surely read, in the Mahabharata, the tale of that Bhagiratha who brought the Ganges down to earth? You're mistaken—not Airavata, that was Bhagiratha. Know me as that very Bhagiratha. Understand? Will you

remember now? Bhagiratha, not Airavata. Go and have the schoolmaster read you that passage. Come here, my boy, let me place the dust of my feet upon your head.

Where is it? Where's my rice? I cannot wait any longer—people are arriving from every corner of the land. What is it, wife, why such anger? What has happened? Has there been a crowd at the back-garden pond? Has bathing, washing clothes, scouring vessels, drawing water—has all of it come to a stop? What am I to do, tell me? I myself, being Bhagiratha, cannot deny anyone access to the Ganges. If I could, then why did I perform such penance, endure such hardship, to bring the Ganges down at all? For washing your dirty laundry, was it? Indeed! When I was engaged in litigation against the Brahmin, you all sat there hoping for just such an outcome—only I myself knew the real truth, and Mother Ganga alone besides me.—What! Such insolence—you don't believe me! Do you realize I have redeemed fourteen generations of your ancestors merely by marrying you? Going to your father's house, are you? Go on then! When you come to die, I shall not let you near this Ganges of mine. Remember that. Is there rice left? None? But I told you expressly to cook extra, since people have come from far and wide hoping to receive my blessed offerings. Whatever you've cooked, even if each person gets but a single grain, it won't be enough to go round. Bring every last grain of rice from the kitchen—let everyone fetch their own portions, bring Ganges-water from the pond and moisten it before eating. What else am I to do? They've come from distant places merely upon hearing my name, hoping for prasad—I cannot possibly turn them away. What did you say? That my touch has burned your hand? What can I say, you foolish woman—go and repeat that remark once to the learned pandits of this land. They'll tell you straight to your face that sixty thousand sons of Sagara were burnt to ashes, and he who gave his life to redeem those very ashes—that he should burn your hand—no scripture anywhere supports such a notion. Curse me all you like—I am off now to my devotees.

(Coming outside) I've grown late. These people inside simply will not let me go—worshipping the dust of my feet, they've made the whole morning pass. I keep saying, enough, enough, no more needed—but do they listen! Come, come forward one by one, whoever needs to collect dust may take it and go home—now then,

Bipin, what is it? Is today the day of your court case? Well, I cannot possibly go. People keep arriving continuously for darshan. Will it go against you by default? What am I to do, tell me? Even here, things go by default whenever I'm not present. Bipin, why did you leave without bowing to me? This is exactly how one comes to ruin. Come here, prostrate yourself right here, here, take some dust. Off you go.

ACT THREE

O Mukherjee, it would have gone far better for me had Mother Ganga not come so precisely to this very back-garden pond of mine, but settled instead a mile or two further off. You, brother, got off easy enough with a mere dream—but I must suffer this unbearable affliction day and night. For one thing, the pond-water has come to smell of sour milk and molasses, and the lotus leaves are rotting and giving off a stench, the fish keep dying and floating belly-up, and on days when the south wind blows, it feels as though every window and door of hell's own furnace has been thrown wide open—the very contents of seven men's stomachs threaten to come up. My sons have done nothing but suffer from illness these past several days. Having become the Bhagiratha of the Kali Yuga, I've been reduced to penury simply from doctors' fees; the lot of them are veritable demons of death, they show not the slightest regard for devotion—even when it's Mother Ganga herself come to be treated, they collect their full visiting fee without fail. Even that I could bear, but what has truly overwhelmed me is that people have begun burning their dead along the edge of my back-garden pond, corpses brought from every corner of the country! Funeral pyres burn day and night without cease. All the settlements that once stood nearby have been abandoned; at night, when the cries of "Haribol! Haribol!" rise up and the jackals begin to howl, the very blood runs cold in one's veins. My wife has gone off to her father's house. No servant or maid will stay in this house any longer. Out of fear of ghosts, they sit chattering their teeth in broad daylight. I cannot find so much as four people willing to cook for me. At night, the sound of my own footsteps sets my heart pounding; there is not a living soul in the house; from the huts of the Ganges-pilgrims I hear, again and again, the chanting of the holy names, and my whole body prickles with dread. And what's more, I cannot even leave this place. My name, Bhagiratha, has spread to all four corners of the earth; everyone wishes to have my darshan—the other day two men came from the west whose language I couldn't even understand. The rascals showed devotion enough, true, but they made off with my plates and dishes as well. If I abandon this place, many, unable to find me, may return disappointed. Meanwhile I haven't a moment to spare for my own affairs; the rent on my leasehold estate has fallen into arrears, and I hear the zamindar means to seize it for default. My body, through irregular habits and constant illness, grows thinner by the day. The doctor warns me

that unless I leave this place, I shall not live much longer. What am I to do, brother, tell me? I was Ruddur Bakshi, and I was happy—there was no trouble at all in my life; now, having become Bhagiratha, I cannot manage to keep hold of anything—my golden palace has become nothing but a burning-ground! And now the newspapers, too, have taken against me these days; they say it's all falsehood. I went to consult a lawyer about bringing a libel suit against them; the lawyer told me that to prove I am truly Bhagiratha, I would need to summon witnesses from the Age of Truth itself, issue a summons in the name of Vyasadeva himself. Hearing this, my confidence quite failed me. Even the people of this locality have gradually begun to harbour doubts. I had come to a certain understanding with Moti the milkmaid—that I would give her foot-water in exchange for milk—but for the past two days that woman has come demanding her account settled in cash; I can see plainly enough which way the wind is blowing—that if I offer her the dust of my feet instead of money, she is likely to shake the dust of her feet at me in return! I dare not say anything more, out of sheer fright. The pond is gone already, my wife and children and daughters have all left me, the servants and maids have fled, even the neighbours have abandoned the village and settled elsewhere—whether my very name of Bhagiratha will endure is itself in doubt—can it be that Mother Ganga alone will not let go of me under any circumstances? Can my household possibly run on Mother Ganga alone? Whenever I step out into the road these days, the boys have taken to mocking me, saying that Ruddur Bakshi has achieved his final union with the Ganges! Ah, I have truly fallen into misfortune. Brother, once again you must appear to me in a dream. I beg you, and I beg Mother Ganga too—if it is any inconvenience for her to dwell beneath the Hooghly bridge, there are great lakes and pools and tanks throughout the land where she might reside quite comfortably. Given the state my pond has come to, in another day or two her very crocodile will be floating belly-up, snout and all; Bhagirathas like myself she will find in plenty, but she will never again find such a vehicle in any Brahmin or Kayastha household. No doctor holds out the slightest hope that her beloved Bhagiratha, on the banks of this new Ganges, will survive much longer either. I do feel a certain tenderness toward that name from the Age of Truth, true enough—but I have thought it over very carefully, brother, and I find I cannot let go of my attachment to this present life of the Kali Yuga either. And so I have resolved: I shall return the tank to you—but Mother Ganga herself must go and settle somewhere a little further off from here.