

PLAY

RED OLEANDERS

Rabindranath Tagore



PLAY NOTE

This play is founded upon truth. Whether the events herein occurred at any actual place is a matter historians must resolve through their own labour of evidence; readers who entrust that burden to scholars will not be the poorer for it. Suffice it to say that, according to the poet's own certainty of belief, this is entirely true.

As to what the true name of the place might be, geographers may well hold differing opinions. But all know it by its familiar name—Yakshapuri, the City of the Yakshas. Scholars tell us that in the Yakshapuri of legend stood the golden throne of Kubera, god of wealth. But this play belongs to no mythic age, nor should it be called mere allegory. In the place of which we speak, the wealth of the Yaksha lies buried beneath the earth; and since that treasure has been discovered, tunnels are being driven through the underworld to reach it—for this very reason the people have fondly named it Yakshapuri. In due course we shall be introduced to the tunnel-diggers of this place.

As for the true name of the King of Yakshapuri, no consensus among historians is to be expected. This much is known: he bears a nickname—Makararaja, the Crocodile King. In time, through the words of the characters, the reason for this name shall become clear.

In the outer wall of the royal palace there is a single latticed window. From behind the shelter of that lattice, Makararaja meets with men according to his own pleasure and in whatever measure he wishes. Why he conducts himself in so strange a manner—the characters of the play discuss this among themselves, but beyond what little they say, we know no more.

Those who are the Governors of this kingdom are capable men, and what one might call far-sighted. They are the King's innermost councillors. Through their vigilant management, no gap is left in the labour of the diggers, and Yakshapuri's prosperity advances without cease. The Headmen here were once diggers themselves; through their own merit they have risen in rank and gained titles. In devotion to duty they surpass the Governors in many respects. If the ordinances of Yakshapuri may, in the poet's language, be called the full moon, then the greater portion of its dark spots belongs chiefly to the Headmen.

Besides these there is a Holy Man, who takes the name of God upon his lips but takes his sustenance from the Governor. Through him, Yakshapuri gains no small advantage.

Sometimes, quite by chance, an unfit creature of the waters gets caught in the fishermen's nets. Such creatures serve neither to fill the belly nor the purse; more often than not they tear the net in escaping. Into this web of events a maiden named Nandini has fallen in just such a fashion. It seems this girl cannot let Makarraja remain content within the screen behind which he dwells.

At the very outset of the play, we shall meet this maiden in the outer verandah beyond the King's latticed window. It is impossible to describe with precision just what manner of window this is; only those who built it understand its workings.

Whatever we are permitted to witness of this drama's events unfolds entirely upon that outer verandah beyond the palace's latticed window. Of what transpires within, we learn but the barest fragments.

The city that shelters this dramatic action bears the name Yakshapuri. Here the labouring host is set to the task of drawing gold from beneath the earth. The King of this place dwells behind an intricate veil of concealment. That latticed screen of the palace forms the single unchanging scene of this play. Beyond that veil, all the action unfolds.

SCENE ONE

Nandini and Kishore, a boy of the tunnel-diggers

KISHORE: Nandini, Nandini, Nandini!

NANDINI: Why do you call me so insistently, Kishore? Do you think I cannot hear?

KISHORE: I know you can hear—but I love to call your name. And do you want flowers? Then let me go and fetch them.

NANDINI: Go, go, back to your work at once—don't linger.

KISHORE: All day long I do nothing but dig for lumps of gold; if I can steal a little time from that to find flowers for you, I count myself blessed.

NANDINI: Oh, Kishore, if they find out, they will punish you.

KISHORE: You said you wanted red oleanders above all else. My joy is this—that red oleanders are not easily found here. After much searching I found, behind some rubbish, a single such tree.

NANDINI: Show me where it is—I'll go myself and pick the flowers.

KISHORE: Don't say such a thing. Nandini, don't be so cruel. Let that one tree remain—it is like a single secret thought of mine. Bishu sings you songs, and they are his own songs. From now on, I shall be the one to bring you flowers—these shall be my own flowers.

NANDINI: But the brutes here punish you for it—my heart breaks to think of it.

KISHORE: In that very pain, my flowers bloom all the more truly as mine. They become the treasure of my sorrow.

NANDINI: But how am I to bear this suffering of yours?

KISHORE: What suffering? I think, again and again, that one day I shall give my life for you, Nandini.

NANDINI: You give me so much—tell me, Kishore, what shall I give you in return?

KISHORE: Only this promise—that every morning you will take flowers from my hand alone.

NANDINI: Very well, so be it. But you must be more careful.

KISHORE: No, I will not be careful, I will not! I shall bring you flowers every day, right past their very noses!

[Exit]

Enter the Professor

PROFESSOR: Nandini! Don't go—turn back.

NANDINI: What is it, Professor?

PROFESSOR: Why do you startle me so, again and again, only to walk away? If you insist on stirring my heart, you might at least stay to see what response it gives. Wait a moment—let me say a word or two.

NANDINI: What use have you for me?

PROFESSOR: If it's use you speak of, look there. Our band of diggers is cleaving the earth's very bosom, crawling up out of the tunnels like insects beneath the burden of Use. Whatever wealth we possess here in Yaksha-town is all the wealth of that dust-worm—gold. But you, my beauty, the gold that you are is not of the dust; it is of light. Who can bind that in the fetters of Use?

NANDINI: Always the same words, again and again. Why does the sight of me fill you with such wonder, Professor?

PROFESSOR: There is no wonder when light comes into a garden of flowers at dawn; but when light comes through a crack in a solid wall, that is another matter altogether. In Yaksha-town, you are that sudden light. Now tell me, what do you think of things here?

NANDINI: I watch in astonishment as this entire city buries its head beneath the earth's floor and gropes about in darkness with its hands. You dig tunnels

through the underworld and bring up, again and again, the wealth of the Yakshas. It is the dead treasure of many ages—the earth had given it burial.

PROFESSOR: We perform the very rites of the dead over that dead wealth. We wish to master its ghost. If we could bind the very fate of these lumps of gold, we would hold the world in our fist.

NANDINI: And then again, you keep your King hidden behind this strange lattice-wall—so that no one may discover he seeks out human company. I long to tear open that dark shroud of your tunnel and pour light into it; just as I long to rip apart that ugly net and set the man free.

PROFESSOR: As terrible as the power of our dead treasure's ghost, just so terrible is the majesty of our man-hungry King.

NANDINI: All this is talk you have invented.

PROFESSOR: Invented, indeed! Nakedness has no identity at all—it is in invented garments that one is called king or beggar. Come to my chamber. It gives me great joy to explain philosophy to you.

NANDINI: Just as your diggers burrow deeper and deeper into the earth, so you burrow day and night into the pages of your books. Why waste your time on me?

PROFESSOR: We are moths of solid, cramped confinement, buried in dense toil; you are the evening star in the open sky of leisure—seeing you sets our wings fluttering. Come to my chamber, let me waste a little time with you.

NANDINI: No, no, not now. I have come to see your King in his own chamber.

PROFESSOR: He dwells behind the lattice—he will not let you enter his chamber.

NANDINI: I do not accept the lattice's restraint. I have come to enter that chamber.

PROFESSOR: Do you know, Nandini, that I too dwell behind a lattice? Leaving much of humanity aside, only the scholar in me remains awake. Just as our King is terrible, so am I—a terrible scholar.

NANDINI: You're jesting with me. You seem anything but terrible. Let me ask you something—these people brought me here, why didn't they bring Ranjan along too?

PROFESSOR: It is their way to bring everything in fragments. But even so, tell me—why do you wish to bring the treasure of your heart into the midst of this dead wealth here?

NANDINI: If I bring my Ranjan here, life will leap and dance within their dead ribcages.

PROFESSOR: The Governors here have already lost their wits over Nandini alone—what would become of them if Ranjan came too?

NANDINI: They don't know how strange they truly are. If, in their very midst, Providence should suddenly burst into a great laugh, their spell might well be shattered. Ranjan is that laughter of Providence.

PROFESSOR: The laughter of the gods is sunlight—under it, ice melts, but stone does not. To move our Governors, one needs the strength of muscle.

NANDINI: My Ranjan's strength is like your Shakhinee river. Like that river, he can laugh as easily as he can break things apart. Professor, let me give you a secret piece of news for today. Today I shall meet Ranjan.

PROFESSOR: How do you know this?

NANDINI: It will happen, it will happen. The news has come.

PROFESSOR: By what path, evading the Governors' eyes, could such news arrive?

NANDINI: By the very path through which news of spring's coming arrives. It carries within it the colour of the sky, the play of the wind.

PROFESSOR: So then, on the colour of the sky and the play of the wind, flying news has come.

NANDINI: When Ranjan comes, I shall show you how that flying news landed upon the earth.

PROFESSOR: Once Ranjan's name is mentioned, Nandini's mouth cannot be stopped. Let it be—I have my own study of material philosophy to bury myself in. But I lack the courage. (Goes a little way, then returns) Nandini, let me ask you one thing—are you not afraid of Yakshapuri?

NANDINI: Why should I be afraid?

PROFESSOR: Creatures fear the sun in eclipse; they do not fear the sun in its fullness. Yakshapuri is a city seized by eclipse. The demon of the golden pit has swallowed it whole. It is not whole itself, and it will let nothing else remain whole. I tell you, do not stay here. Even if you leave, those pits will only gape wider before us; and yet I say—flee. Where the people practise dacoity, tearing Mother Earth's garment to shreds, that is no place to keep Ranjan happily.

(Goes a little way, returns) Nandini, will you let fall one flower from that bracelet of red oleanders on your right hand?

NANDINI: Why? What will you do with it?

PROFESSOR: I have thought many times that there must be some meaning in your wearing the ornament of red oleanders.

NANDINI: I myself do not know what it means.

PROFESSOR: Perhaps your destined love knows. There is a fearsome mystery in this crimson glow, not merely sweetness alone.

NANDINI: Fear—in me?

PROFESSOR: Providence has given the hand of beauty a brush of blood. I do not know what script you have come to write in that crimson colour. There was jasmine, there was mallika, there was chameli—setting all these aside, why did you choose this flower? Do you know, a person unknowingly chooses their own fate in just this way?

NANDINI: Ranjan sometimes affectionately calls me "red oleander." I do not know why, but it seems to me that the colour of Ranjan's love is crimson—that colour I have worn about my neck, upon my breast, upon my hands.

PROFESSOR: Then give me a single flower of that—only a moment's gift—let me try to understand the mystery of its colour.

NANDINI: Here, take it. Today Ranjan will come, and in that joy I give you this flower.

[Exit Professor]

Enter Gokul, a tunnel-digger

GOKUL: Turn your face once and let me look—I could not make sense of you. Who are you?

NANDINI: Beyond what you see, I am nothing at all. What need have you to understand?

GOKUL: It's not good not to understand. What task has the King brought you here to do?

NANDINI: The task of uselessness.

GOKUL: You must have some spell about you. You've cast your net over everyone. You harbinger of ruin. Those who lose themselves in that lovely face of yours will die. What is that dangling in your hair there—let me see, let me see.

NANDINI: A cluster of red oleander blossoms.

GOKUL: What does that mean?

NANDINI: It means nothing at all.

GOKUL: I don't trust you one bit. You've hatched some scheme. Before the day is out, some calamity will befall us—that's why all this finery. You terror, you dreadful thing!

NANDINI: Why do I seem so terrible to you?

GOKUL: Looking at you, it seems you are a crimson torch of fire. I go now to warn the foolish—"Beware, beware, beware."

[Exit]

NANDINI: (Knocking at the latticed door) Can you hear me?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Yes, I hear. But don't keep calling again and again—I have no time, not a moment.

NANDINI: Today my heart is filled with happiness. I want to carry that happiness into your chamber.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Why do you keep repeating this empty request? The time has not yet come. Who is that with you? Some companion of Ranjan's?

BISHU: No, my King, I am the far side of Ranjan—the side on which no light falls—I am the new-moon darkness.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: What need have you of Nandini? Nandini, who is this man to you?

NANDINI: He is my companion, he teaches me songs. Look, he has taught me this—

Song

*"I love you, I love you"—
In this tune, near and far, on water and land, the flute plays.*

VOICE FROM WITHIN: That's your companion? What if I separate him from your company this very moment—what then?

NANDINI: How strange your voice has become! Stop this. Have you no companion at all?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: My companion? Does the midday sun have a companion?

NANDINI: Well, let that pass. Mother, what is that in your hand?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: A dead frog.

NANDINI: What will you do with it?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: This frog once crept into the hollow of a stone. Sheltered there, it survived three thousand years. From it I have been learning the secret of how one endures like this; but how to truly live, it does not know. Today I no longer wanted it—I broke open its stone prison, freeing it from its endless survival. Isn't that good news?

NANDINI: From all four sides, today your stone fortress shall be broken open too. I know it—today Ranjan will be here.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Then I wish to see the two of you together.

NANDINI: Behind this lattice, you'll never see through your spectacles.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I shall watch, seated in my chamber.

NANDINI: What good will that do?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I wish to know.

NANDINI: Whenever you speak of knowing, I feel afraid.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Why?

NANDINI: It seems that whatever cannot be known through the mind, but only understood through the heart—for that, you have no true tenderness.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I dare not trust it, lest I be deceived. Go now, don't waste time. No—no, wait a moment. That cluster of red oleanders that has slipped down from your hair to your cheek—give it to me.

NANDINI: What will you do with this?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Looking at that cluster of flowers, it seems to me as though my own planet of blood-red light has taken the form of a flower and come to me. Sometimes I wish to snatch it from you and tear it apart; and then again I think—if Nandini should someday, with her own hand, place that garland upon my head, then—

NANDINI: Then what would happen?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Then perhaps I could die easily.

NANDINI: A certain man loves red oleanders—thinking of him, I have made these flowers into earrings.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Then I tell you plainly—I too am his ill-starred planet, and so is he mine.

NANDINI: Shame, shame, what are you saying! I am going.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Where will you go?

NANDINI: I shall sit beside your fortress gate.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Why?

NANDINI: When Ranjan comes by that path, he will see that I am waiting there for him.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: What if I mingle Ranjan with the dust so completely that he can never again be recognised?

NANDINI: What has come over you today? Why do you frighten me so, needlessly?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Needlessly, you say? Don't you know I am terrible?

NANDINI: What is this sudden mood! Do people love you because they fear you? In our village, Srikantha plays the demon in the folk-drama—when he comes onto the stage, the children startle and cry out, and he is overjoyed. You seem to be in that same state. Shall I tell you truly what I think? Will you be angry?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Tell me, let me hear.

NANDINI: Frightening others is the business of the men here. They have surrounded you with this net and dressed you up so strangely. Are you not ashamed to remain costumed as this bogeyman puppet?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: What are you saying, Nandini?

NANDINI: Those you have frightened all this while shall one day feel shame at having been frightened. If my Ranjan were here, he would snap his fingers in your face and die before he ever felt fear.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Your audacity is not small. Everything I have shattered these many days—I feel a wish to gather its ruins into a pile and stand you triumphant upon the summit. And then—

NANDINI: And then what?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: And then I shall break my last vessel too. As one bursts a pomegranate seed and squeezes its juice out between ten fingers, so I shall crush you between these two hands of mine—go, go now, flee at once, this instant!

NANDINI: Here I stand, unmoved. What can you do—go on. Why do you roar so horribly?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I want to show you plain proof of just how strangely cruel I am. Have you never heard cries of anguish from within my chamber?

NANDINI: I have heard. What cries were those?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I plunder the Creator's cunning. Whatever lies hidden in the very heart of the universe—I wish to seize it from Him, all those cries of severed lives. To steal fire from the tree, one must burn it. Nandini, within you too there is fire, a crimson fire. One day I shall draw it out by burning you—there is no release before that.

NANDINI: Why are you so cruel?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Either I possess, or I destroy. What I cannot have, I cannot spare. To shatter it apart is one certain way of possessing it.

NANDINI: What—why do you clench your fist and thrust out your hand like that?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Very well, I withdraw my hand. Flee, as the dove flees at the sight of the hawk's shadow.

NANDINI: Very well, I am going—I will not anger you further.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Listen, listen, come back. Nandini! Nandini!

NANDINI: What is it, tell me.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Before me, in your face, in your eyes, the play of life itself; and behind you, the flow of your dark hair like death's silent waterfall. These two hands of mine, that day, found rest in plunging into it and dying there. Never before have I imagined death's sweetness in such a way. Beneath that thick, dark cascade of hair, I long to hide my face and sleep. You do not know how weary I am.

NANDINI: Do you never sleep?

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I am afraid to sleep.

NANDINI: Let me finish singing my song for you—

*"I love you, I love you"—
In this tune, near and far, on water and land, the flute plays.
In whose breast, across the sky,
Does sorrow ring so?
Whose dark eyes, at the horizon's edge,
Float away upon a flood of tears?"*

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Enough, enough, stop—do not go on.

NANDINI:

In that same tune, on ocean shores,
The bonds are loosed,
The unfathomed weeping rises and surges.
In that same tune it echoes in the mind,
Without a cause—
The message of forgotten songs, the tender laughter of forgotten days.

Pagal-bhai—look, that dead frog has been left lying there—when did he slip away? He's afraid to hear songs!

BISHU: That ancient frog dwelling in his breast, having preserved itself from every touch of melody, wishes to die when it hears a song. That is why he fears it.—Pagli, today I see a radiance on your face—what dawn of thought has broken in your mind? Won't you tell me?

NANDINI: News has reached my heart—today, surely, Ranjan will come.

BISHU: How did this certain news arrive, and from which direction?

NANDINI: Then listen, let me tell you. Before my window, on the branch of the pomegranate tree, a blue-throated bird comes every day. As soon as evening falls, I bow to the polestar and say—if one feather from that bird's wing should fall and fly into my room, then I shall know my Ranjan is coming. This morning, waking up, I found that on the northern breeze a feather had come and settled upon my bed. Look, here it is, in the fold of my breast.

BISHU: So that is why I see it—and I also notice you've worn a mark of vermillion on your forehead today.

NANDINI: When we meet, I shall fasten this feather in his crown.

BISHU: People say the feather of the blue-throated bird carries an auspicious sign for a triumphant journey.

NANDINI: Ranjan's triumphant journey passes through my very heart.

BISHU: Pagli, now I must go to my own work.

NANDINI: No, I will not let you work today.

BISHU: Then what shall I do?

NANDINI: Sing.

BISHU: What song shall I sing?

NANDINI: The song of waiting on the road.

BISHU:

Song

*Perhaps, through ages upon ages, he has yearned for me.
Perhaps he sits there still, by the roadside, waiting for me.
Why today does it come to mind, when in some half-formed dawn,*

*I once glimpsed him from the corner of my eye?
Perhaps he sits there still, by the roadside, waiting for me!
Today that moon shall find its glory in the music of light,
The darkened face of night shall open in a sign.
On this bright night, in that light, we shall meet in a single glance—
All veils shall fall away.
Perhaps he sits there still, by the roadside, waiting for me.*

NANDINI: Pagal, when you sing, I feel only this—that so much was owed to you, yet I have given you nothing.

BISHU: That "nothing given" of yours, I shall carry with me to my grave. I will not sell my songs for the price of a little something given.—Now where will you go?

NANDINI: To the roadside, where Ranjan will come. There I'll sit and listen to your song once more.

[Both exit]

Enter the Governor and the Headman

GOVERNOR: No, Ranjan must not be allowed to come to this quarter at any cost.

HEADMAN: It was precisely to keep him far off that I took him to work in the Bajragarh tunnel.

GOVERNOR: And what came of that?

HEADMAN: It was impossible to manage. He said, "It's not my habit to work under orders!"

GOVERNOR: What harm in starting the habit now?

HEADMAN: That was attempted. The Chief Headman himself came with the constable. The man has not an ounce of fear in him. The moment a tone of authority crept into anyone's voice, he burst out laughing. When asked why, he said, "I've come to strip off the mask of solemn stupidity."

GOVERNOR: Why didn't you mix him in among the tunnel-workers?

HEADMAN: I did. I thought pressure would tame him. The opposite happened—it seemed the pressure lifted even from the diggers. He roused them, saying, "Today we shall have our digging-dance."

GOVERNOR: Digging-dance? What does that mean?

HEADMAN: Ranjan struck up a song. They said, "Where do we find a drum?" He said, "No drum needed—we have the pickaxe." To the rhythm, the pickaxes began to fall—what a frolic he made with the lumps of gold! The Chief Headman himself came and said, "What manner of working is this?" Ranjan replied, "I've loosened the rope of duty—it need not be pulled, it will move by dancing."

GOVERNOR: The man seems quite mad.

HEADMAN: Utterly mad. I said, "Take up the pickaxe." He says, "It'll work far better if you bring me a fiddle instead."

GOVERNOR: You took him to the Bajragarh tunnel—how did he end up here at Kuberagarh?

HEADMAN: I don't know, my lord! We had him bound tightly with chains. A little while later, we found he had somehow slipped out—nothing seems to hold him fast. And he keeps changing his outfit, changing his face with each word. His powers are astonishing. If he stays here a few more days, even the diggers will refuse to be bound.

GOVERNOR: What's this? Isn't that Ranjan walking down the road, singing? He's found himself a broken fiddle. Look at his audacity—not even trying to hide.

HEADMAN: So it is! When did he cut through the prison bars and get out! He knows some trick.

GOVERNOR: Go, seize him at once. He must not be allowed to meet Nandini in this quarter.

HEADMAN: His band is growing bigger by the moment—soon he'll have us all dancing too.

Enter the Junior Governor

GOVERNOR: Where are you going?

JUNIOR GOVERNOR: I go to bind Ranjan.

GOVERNOR: Why you? Where is the Second Governor?

JUNIOR GOVERNOR: Seeing him has given him such delight that he refuses to lay a hand on him. He says, "How strange we Governors have become—I can tell just by looking at his laughter."

GOVERNOR: Listen—there's no need to bind him, send him instead to the King's chamber.

JUNIOR GOVERNOR: But he refuses even to heed the King's summons.

GOVERNOR: Tell him the King has made his Nandini a serving-maid.

JUNIOR GOVERNOR: But if the King—

GOVERNOR: No need to think about that. Come, I shall go myself.

[All exit]

Enter the Professor and Puranabagish

PURANABAGISH: Tell me, what dreadful cataclysm is happening inside? What a terrible noise!

PROFESSOR: The King, I think, has grown angry with himself. So he is smashing something of his own making to pieces.

PURANABAGISH: It sounds as though great pillars are tumbling down with a crash.

PROFESSOR: At the foot of that hill of ours there was once a pool, into which the waters of the Shakhinee river flowed and gathered. One day, the mass of stone on its left side tilted and fell, and the pooled water rushed out with a mad, cackling laugh. For some days now, watching the King, it has seemed to me that a crack has appeared in the stone of his self-restraining reservoir—the depths are eroding from within.

PURANABAGISH: Bastubagish, to what place have you brought me, and to what purpose?

PROFESSOR: Everything in the world worth knowing, it wishes to seize and make its own through knowledge. My material science has nearly exhausted its store; now, from time to time, it grows angry and says, "Your knowledge is but a crowbar that breaks one wall only to reveal another wall behind it. But where is the inner chamber of the living soul?" I thought—let me distract it for a while with talk of legend—my sack has been shaken empty; let the bones of old tales now come into play. Look, who's that coming there?

PURANABAGISH: A girl, wearing paddy-coloured clothes.

PROFESSOR: She has drawn the whole living joy of the earth into every limb of her body—that is our Nandini. Here in Yaksha-town there are Governors, Headmen, diggers, scholars like me, constables, executioners, clerks—all blended smoothly together. But she is entirely out of place. Amid the market's constant clamour, she is a well-tuned lute. Some days, in the very wind of her leaving, the net of my material studies tears apart. Through the gap, my attention flies off like a wild bird startled into flight.

PURANABAGISH: You don't say! Even your seasoned old bones can suffer such a jolt?

PROFESSOR: When the pull of the heart outweighs the pull of knowledge, the urge to flee the schoolhouse cannot be restrained.

PURANABAGISH: Now tell me, where might I meet your King?

PROFESSOR: There's no way to see him—conversation happens from behind that lattice screen there.

Enter the Governor

GOVERNOR: Ah, Bastubagish, you've gone and picked out this fellow, have you! Just hearing an account of his learning has already set our King raging.

PROFESSOR: How so?

GOVERNOR: The King says there's no such thing as king or legend. Only the present moment goes on swelling and swelling.

PURANABAGISH: If there is no legend, how can anything exist at all? If there's no behind, can there be a before?

GOVERNOR: The King says the Great Time reveals the new by bringing it forth; the scholar suppresses that truth and says instead: the Great Time carries the ancient forward upon its back.

PROFESSOR: In the shadowed grove of Nandini's dense youth, the King glimpses the illusive doe of the new, again and again, flickering—but cannot catch it—and grows furious at my material philosophy instead.

Enter Nandini, running

NANDINI: Governor! Governor! What is that! Who are those?

GOVERNOR: What is it, dear Nandini? You shall wear your bouquet of white flowers when deep night falls. When darkness makes my four-fifths obscurity, then perhaps garlands of flowers will suit even me.

NANDINI: Look there—what a terrible sight! Has the gate of the realm of ghosts been thrown open? Who are those men walking with the guards? Who is coming out through the palace's side-door there?

GOVERNOR: We call them "the King's leavings."

NANDINI: What does that mean?

GOVERNOR: Its meaning you'll understand one day. Let it rest for now.

NANDINI: But what are these figures! Are they even human? Do they have flesh, bone, mind, heart—anything at all?

GOVERNOR: Perhaps not.

NANDINI: Were they ever human?

GOVERNOR: Perhaps they were.

NANDINI: Where has it all gone now?

GOVERNOR: Bastubagish, try if you can to explain it to her—I must go.

[Exit]

NANDINI: What is it—among those shadows, I see faces I recognise. There, surely, are our Anup and Upamanyu. Professor, they're from our neighbouring village. Two brothers, both tall in stature, both strong—everyone called them Tal and Tamal, the two great trees. On the fourteenth of Ashadh they used to come to race boats on our river. I could die! Who has done this to them? There—I see Shaklu; he used to win the garland every year in sword-fighting.

Anup—Shaklu—look this way, it's me, your Nandin, Nandin from Ishani quarter. He didn't even raise his head—his head has bent low, as if forever. Oh, oh, poor thing! It looks as though someone has chewed him up like sugarcane and thrown him away. He was so shy once; wherever I went to fetch water, he would sit on the sloping bank nearby, pretending to be breaking reeds to fashion arrows. What suffering I gave him with my mischief. Oh, dearest, turn your eyes toward me. Alas, the one whose blood once danced at my slightest gesture no longer answers my call. Gone—all the light of our village has gone out! Professor, the iron has corroded away—only black rust remains! How did this happen!

PROFESSOR: Nandini, the very direction toward which you gaze in ash today is the direction your sight has fallen upon. Look once at the flame—you'll see its tongue flickering.

NANDINI: I cannot understand what you're saying.

PROFESSOR: Have you seen the King? Has his form so entranced your mind, as I've been hearing?

NANDINI: It has, indeed. What a strange embodiment of power he is.

PROFESSOR: That very strangeness is what is gained; this monstrousness here is what is spent. Those small ones become ash, while that great one continues to burn as flame. This is the philosophy of becoming great.

NANDINI: That's the philosophy of a demon.

PROFESSOR: It's pointless to rage at philosophy. It is neither good nor bad. Whatever happens, happens—go against it, and you go against becoming itself.

NANDINI: If this is the path of man's becoming, then I do not want to become—I shall go with those shadows; show me the way.

PROFESSOR: When the day comes to show the way, these very ones shall show it; before that, there is no such thing as a way at all. See there, Puranabagish is slowly slipping away—thinking he might escape by fleeing. Go a little further and you'll find the encircling net begins right here, bound with stakes for many leagues around. Nandini, you're angry. Today the cluster of red oleanders on your forehead looks like the clouds of a doomsday twilight.

NANDINI: (Pushing at the lattice) Listen, listen.

PROFESSOR: Whom are you calling?

NANDINI: Your King, wrapped in the mist of that lattice.

PROFESSOR: The shutter within has fallen; he won't hear you call.

NANDINI: Bishu-pagal! Pagal-bhai!

PROFESSOR: Why do you call for him?

NANDINI: He still hasn't returned. I'm afraid.

PROFESSOR: I saw him with you just a little while ago.

NANDINI: The Governor said his call had come to identify Ranjan. I wanted to go along; he wouldn't allow it.—What was that cry of anguish?

PROFESSOR: That must be the wrestler's cry, I think.

NANDINI: Who is he?

PROFESSOR: That famous Gajju, whose brother Bhajan boldly came to wrestle with the King, and afterward not so much as a frayed thread of his loincloth was ever found. In that rage, Gajju came, striking his chest. I warned him from the start: "If you want to dig tunnels in this kingdom, come—you'll

survive a while, dying by inches. But if you want to prove your manhood, you won't survive a single moment. This is a very hard place."

NANDINI: Setting these man-trapping snares day and night—do they ever feel any peace at all?

PROFESSOR: There's nothing good in it, only necessity. Their necessity has grown so monstrous that unless the weight is laid upon millions of men, who could bear its burden? So the net keeps expanding. They must remain as they are.

NANDINI: Must remain? If, to remain human, one must die—what fault is there in that?

Enter the Wrestler

NANDINI: Ah, look, how he staggers as he comes! Wrestler, lie down here. Professor, look—see where he's been wounded.

PROFESSOR: From the outside, you'll never see the mark of that wound.

WRESTLER: Merciful God, let me have even one moment's strength in my life—even for a single day.

PROFESSOR: Why, man?

WRESTLER: Only to wring that Governor's neck.

PROFESSOR: What has the Governor done to you?

WRESTLER: He has brought all this about. I did not wish to fight. Today he goes about saying it was all my fault.

PROFESSOR: Why? What is his interest in this?

WRESTLER: Only by draining the whole world of strength can they feel secure. Merciful Hari, let me one day gouge out his eyes, let me tear out his tongue.

NANDINI: How do you feel, Wrestler?

WRESTLER: I feel as though everything inside me has become hollow. These men are demons of some kind, they know sorcery—they don't just sap your strength, they suck out your very hope to the last drop.—If somehow, by some means, once—O merciful Hari, ah, if only once—what could not happen with your grace? If I could once sink my teeth into that Governor's breast.

NANDINI: Professor, help him up, let's take him together to our lodging.

PROFESSOR: I dare not, Nandini. By the rules here, that would be a crime.

NANDINI: And letting the man die—is that not a crime?

PROFESSOR: A wrongdoing for which there is no one to give punishment may be sin, but it is not a crime. Nandini, walk entirely away from all this. When roots spread their grip and draw sustenance from beneath the earth, no flower blooms there. Flowers bloom on the upper branches, turned toward the sky. Oh red oleander, do not come to learn the secrets of our subterranean world—I shall stand watching for your swaying in the upper air.—There, the Governor. I must take my leave now. He cannot bear to see me talking with you.

NANDINI: Why is he so angry with me?

PROFESSOR: I can only guess. You've inwardly plucked at some chord in his mind; the less it harmonises, the more discordantly and shrilly it screams.

[Exit]

Enter the Governor

NANDINI: Governor!

GOVERNOR: Nandini, seeing that garland of white jasmine flowers you left in my chamber, the Holy Man's two eyes—ah, here he comes himself. Bow to him! Master, that very garland Nandini gave to me.

Enter the Holy Man

HOLY MAN: Ah, the pure gift of a pure soul—God's own white jasmine. Even falling into worldly hands, its purity remained unstained. In this I see the power of virtue and the hope of a sinner's redemption.

NANDINI: Holy Man, do something about this fellow. How much life does he have left in him anyway?

HOLY MAN: Considering everything, the exact measure of survival needed, our Governor will surely preserve him just that much. But my child, such talk from your lips is unpleasant to hear; we do not care for it.

NANDINI: Does this kingdom really have a rationed calculation for keeping people alive?

HOLY MAN: Of course it does. Earthly life is, after all, bounded. So one must divide its portions with careful reckoning. God has laid a heavy burden upon our class of people; to bear it, our share of life's essence must fall in far greater measure. It's fine if these others survive on very little, since we live in order to lighten their burden. Is that not, from their perspective, quite an easy bargain?

NANDINI: Holy Man, what manner of terrible burden has God laid upon you for their sake?

HOLY MAN: A life not bounded needs no quarrel with anyone over its portion—we Holy Men have come to show the way of just such a life. If they are content with this, then we are truly their friends.

NANDINI: Then must this man remain, half-dead like this, forever, with his bounded life?

HOLY MAN: Why should he remain so? What say you, Governor?

GOVERNOR: That's true. Why should we let him remain thus? From now on he'll have no need to move by his own strength. We shall carry him about by our own strength entirely. Gajju!

WRESTLER: Yes, my lord?

HOLY MAN: Hari, Hari—his voice has already softened quite a bit—I think we might pull him into our chorus of devotional chanting.

GOVERNOR: You'll be housed in the Headman's quarters in the H-Kh district. Go there now.

NANDINI: What is this? How will he even walk?

GOVERNOR: Look, Nandini, moving men about is our business. We know that when a man arrives somewhere and stumbles face-first, a strong push can carry him a little further still. Go, Gajju!

WRESTLER: As you command!

NANDINI: Wrestler, I too will go, to the Headman's quarters. Who else would be there to look after you?

WRESTLER: No, no, let it be—the Governor will be angry.

NANDINI: I do not fear the Governor's anger.

WRESTLER: I do fear it—I beg you, don't add to my troubles.

[Exit]

NANDINI: Governor, don't go without telling me—where have you taken my Bishu-pagal?

GOVERNOR: I, who took him? The wind carries the cloud; if you think that's a fault, ask the wind—who gave it the push?

NANDINI: What accursed country is this? You're not even human yourselves, and those you drive about aren't human either?—You're wind, they're clouds? Holy Man, you must surely know where my Bishu-pagal is.

HOLY MAN: I surely know that wherever he is, it's all for the good.

NANDINI: For whose good?

HOLY MAN: That you won't understand—ah, let go, let go, that's my prayer-beads! There they go, torn! Governor, this girl here—you—

GOVERNOR: Who knows how she's found herself a home in some crack of our rules here. Our King himself—

HOLY MAN: Oh, now my chant-string too shall tear. You've brought trouble. I'm going.

[Exit]

NANDINI: Governor, you must tell me—where have you taken Bishu-pagal?

GOVERNOR: He's been summoned to the Hall of Judgment—there's nothing more to say. Let me go, I have work to do.

WRESTLER: As you command!

NANDINI: Wrestler, I too shall go to the Headman's quarters. There's no one to look after you there.

WRESTLER: No, no, let it be—the Governor will be angry.

NANDINI: I fear no one's anger.

WRESTLER: I fear it, I beg of you—don't increase my danger.

[Exit]

NANDINI: Governor, don't leave without telling me—where have you taken Bishu-pagal?

GOVERNOR: He's been summoned to the Hall of Judgment—that's all I'll say. Let me go, I have work.

Enter Kishore

NANDINI: (Knocking at the lattice) Listen, listen, King. Where is your Hall of Judgment? I'll break this shelter of your net myself. Who's that? Kishore! Tell me, do you know where our Bishu is?

KISHORE: Yes, Nandini, you'll meet him very soon now—steady your heart. I don't know why the guard-captain took pity upon seeing my face. At my request, he agreed to bring Bishu along this way.

NANDINI: The captain of the guards? Then—

KISHORE: Yes, there he comes now.

NANDINI: What's this! Handcuffs on your wrists! Pagal-bhai, where are they taking you like this?

Enter the guards, with Bishu

BISHU: Don't fear, don't fear anything at all. Pagli, after all this time, I have finally won my freedom.

NANDINI: I don't understand what you're saying.

BISHU: When I lived in constant fear, guarding against danger step by step, I was but a slave. There is no bondage like the bondage of that freedom.

NANDINI: What fault have you committed, that they've bound you and are dragging you away?

BISHU: After all this time, today I finally spoke the truth.

NANDINI: And what fault is there in that?

BISHU: None at all.

NANDINI: Then why have they bound you like this?

BISHU: What harm has it done, even so? I have won freedom within the truth—these bonds remain as true witness to that.

NANDINI: They're dragging you along the road like a beast, and they feel no shame at all? Shame on them—they're supposed to be human too!

BISHU: There's a great beast lurking within—one whose head doesn't hang low at the humiliation of a man, but whose inner animal's tail swells and thrashes with delight.

NANDINI: Oh, Pagal-bhai, have they beaten you? What is this mark on your body?

BISHU: They've whipped me with the same whip they use on dogs. The very thread of that rope from which the whip is made is the same thread that makes the Holy Man's rosary. When he chants God's name, he forgets this fact—but God does not.

NANDINI: Let them bind me too, along with you, my brother. If I get nothing at all from this beating of yours, I shall no longer be able to eat from today onward.

KISHORE: Bishu, if I try, surely they'd take me in your place. Give me your permission for that.

BISHU: That's a mad boy's talk.

KISHORE: The punishment won't hurt me as much—I'm young, I'll bear it gladly.

NANDINI: Oh no, Kishore, don't say that.

KISHORE: Nandini, I've been shirking my work, and they've noticed. They've set watchdogs on my trail. This punishment will at least save me from the humiliation they'd otherwise inflict.

BISHU: No, Kishore, you mustn't get caught now. There's dangerous work to be done. Ranjan has come here; you must find some way to bring him out. It won't be easy.

KISHORE: Nandini, I take my leave then. If I meet Ranjan, what word shall I give him from you?

NANDINI: Nothing at all. Just give him this cluster of red oleanders—that will tell him everything.

[Exit Kishore]

BISHU: Now may your union with Ranjan take place.

NANDINI: There will be no joy for me in that union anymore. I shall never be able to forget that I sent you away empty-handed. And that boy Kishore—what did he gain from me?

BISHU: Whatever fire you've lit in his heart has brought forth all the treasure of his soul. What more is there to want? Do you remember—that blue-throated bird's feather must be placed in Ranjan's crown?

NANDINI: Here it is, in the fold of my breast.

BISHU: Pagli, do you hear that harvest song?

NANDINI: I hear it, my heart weeps.

BISHU: The field's play is finished, the field's master carries home the ripened harvest. Come, guards, no more delay—

Song

*Cut now the last of the harvest, bind it into sheaves,
Whatever is not to be gathered—let it turn to earth as earth.*

[All exit]

Enter the Physician and the Governor

PHYSICIAN: I've observed him. The King has grown vexed with himself. This is no bodily illness—it's of the mind.

GOVERNOR: What's the remedy?

PHYSICIAN: A great jolt of some kind. Either conflict with another kingdom, or stirring up unrest among his own subjects.

GOVERNOR: That is—if he can't harm anyone else, he'll harm himself.

PHYSICIAN: They're great men, playing at great games, like children. When one game bores them, if you don't provide another, they break their own toys. But be prepared, Governor—there's no time left.

GOVERNOR: I've seen the signs and made all preparations in advance. But alas, what sorrow. Our golden city had never before flourished with such splendour as at this very hour—well, go now, let me think it over.

[Exit Physician]

Enter the Headman

HEADMAN: Governor sir, you sent for me? I'm the Headman of District Nya.

GOVERNOR: You're number three-hundred-twenty-one, aren't you?

HEADMAN: My lord's memory is remarkable! You even remember an insignificant fellow like me.

GOVERNOR: My wife is arriving from home. The mail delivery to your district needs changing—quickly, get it arranged here.

HEADMAN: There's a shortage of strong men in the district to pull the cart like oxen. Even so, we'll assign some diggers to it.

GOVERNOR: You know where you must go? To the garden-house, where the Governors' feast will be.

HEADMAN: I'm going, but let me say one more thing first—lend me your ear a moment. That fellow, number six-nine-six, whom they call Bishu-pagal, the time has come to correct his madness.

GOVERNOR: Why? Does he cause trouble for you?

HEADMAN: Not in words, but in attitude, in demeanour.

GOVERNOR: No more worry about that. Understood?

HEADMAN: Is that so! Then, good. One more thing—number four-seven-eff has been mixing rather too much with six-nine-six.

GOVERNOR: I've noted that.

HEADMAN: My lord's attention is always precise. Still, one must keep watch on many fronts—one or two things might slip past. Take, for instance, our number ninety-five—related to my father-in-law's family—prepared to fashion sandals from his own ribs for the Governor's broom-bearer, showing such devotion that his own wife bows her head in shame; and yet, to this day—

GOVERNOR: His name has already been entered in the great book.

HEADMAN: Well, so much service has borne fruit at last. But the news must be given to him carefully—he has fits of epilepsy, who knows what might happen suddenly—

GOVERNOR: Very well, that shall be attended to, now go quickly.

HEADMAN: There's one more person I must mention—though he is my own brother-in-law, whose mother died and my wife raised him with her own hands, still, when it comes to the master's salt—

GOVERNOR: His matter can wait till tomorrow, run along now.

HEADMAN: There goes the Second Governor. Kindly say a word to him on my behalf. He doesn't look upon me kindly. I believe that when six-nine-six used to visit the masters' private chambers, he spoke against my name—

GOVERNOR: No, no, I've never once heard him even mention your name.

HEADMAN: That's exactly his cunning. To destroy a man of good name, one strikes without naming him at all. It's not good to slander by hint and innuendo. Our number thirty-three has that very disease. He seems to have no other work but constant visits to the masters' private quarters, at any hour. I fear what he might fabricate about someone. And yet, if you knew the news of his own household—

GOVERNOR: No time today, go quickly now.

HEADMAN: Then I take my leave. (Returning) One more thing—the eighty-eight fellow in the other quarter joined work barely thirty months ago, and before two years had passed, he'd already claimed seniority bonuses—his income today, if it's not already, will soon be a thousand or fifteen hundred a month at least. The masters' minds are pure, they're deceived by empty flattery like gods. Seeing the show of full prostration—

GOVERNOR: Very well, very well, that too tomorrow.

HEADMAN: I have compassion in my heart, I won't speak of taking away his bread; but consider whether it's wise to keep him on the payroll register at all. Our Vishnudutt knows his horoscope well. If you'd summon him—

GOVERNOR: I'll summon him this very day, go now.

HEADMAN: My lord, my third son has grown quite capable now. He came to pay his respects, walked back and forth for three days without gaining an audience, and returned very disheartened. For my lord's pleasure, my daughter-in-law's mother has prepared, with her own hands, some squash pickle—

GOVERNOR: Very well, tell him to come the day after tomorrow, he'll get his audience.

[Exit Headman]

Enter the Second Governor

SECOND GOVERNOR: I've sent off the dancing-girls and musicians toward the garden.

GOVERNOR: And how far along is Ranjan's matter—

SECOND GOVERNOR: This kind of work isn't for me. The Junior Governor took charge of it himself, by his own choice. By now surely he's—

GOVERNOR: Has the King—

SECOND GOVERNOR: The King surely doesn't understand it. Mixing him in among the ten others—but to deceive the King in this way, I don't consider it my duty.

GOVERNOR: It is precisely out of duty to the King that the King must be deceived, and even thwarted. That responsibility is mine. But now, that girl must, without delay—

SECOND GOVERNOR: No, no, don't bring this matter to me. The Headman charged with this task is competent; he fears no manner of foulness.

GOVERNOR: Does Kenaram Gosain know about Ranjan's affair?

SECOND GOVERNOR: He knows it all vaguely, but doesn't wish to know it clearly.

GOVERNOR: Why?

SECOND GOVERNOR: Lest the path to saying "I don't know" be closed off.

GOVERNOR: Let it be closed, then.

SECOND GOVERNOR: Don't you understand? We have only one face, the face of a Governor. But he has one side that is Holy Man, another side that is Governor. If the sacred chant-string frays even a little, the whole disguise falls apart. So the governance-duty must be performed unconsciously, so it doesn't clash too badly with the name-chanting.

GOVERNOR: Then let the name-chanting be abandoned entirely.

SECOND GOVERNOR: But his mind is inclined to piety on this side, whatever his blood may be otherwise. So if he can chant openly while governing covertly, he stays sound. Because he exists, our deity remains at ease, his blemish is hidden—otherwise, our appearance wouldn't look so fine.

GOVERNOR: Second Governor, I've noticed your blood too doesn't quite match the blood of governance.

SECOND GOVERNOR: If the blood dries up entirely, there'll be no more affliction—that hope still remains. But even today, I cannot bear that number three-hundred-twenty-one of yours. When you must embrace as a friend, before the assembly, one you wouldn't touch even with tongs from a distance, then no sacred bathing anywhere makes you feel clean again.—There, Nandini is coming.

GOVERNOR: Come along, Second Governor.

SECOND GOVERNOR: Why? What's there to fear?

GOVERNOR: I don't trust you; I know Nandini's spell has fallen upon your eyes.

SECOND GOVERNOR: But you don't know that in your own eyes too, mixed with the colour of duty, something of the colour of red oleander has blended in—that's exactly why the redness has grown so terrible.

GOVERNOR: Perhaps so, the mind doesn't even know itself. Come along with me.

[Both exit]

Enter Nandini

NANDINI: As I watch, this evening's vermillion clouds have turned the twilight crimson. Is that the colour of our union? It seems the vermillion of my parted hair has scattered across the whole sky. (Knocking at the lattice) Listen, listen, listen. I shall stay here day and night until you listen.

Enter the Holy Man

HOLY MAN: Whom are you pushing?

NANDINI: That python of yours, behind whose shelter a man has disappeared.

HOLY MAN: Hari, Hari, when God strikes the small, He strikes with grand words upon their small mouths. Look, Nandini, know surely that I wish good for you.

NANDINI: That won't bring me any good.

HOLY MAN: Come to my prayer-room, let me have you hear God's name.

NANDINI: What use is a mere name to me?

HOLY MAN: Your mind will find peace!

NANDINI: If peace is what I get, then curses, curses, curses upon me. I shall sit and wait right at this door.

HOLY MAN: You trust in men more than in God?

NANDINI: That flag-bearing deity of yours will never soften, not ever. But shall the man behind the lattice remain bound in the net forever? Go, go, go away. Your business is to tear out a man's very life, then call it by God's name and comfort them with it.

[Exit Holy Man]

Enter Fagunal and Chandra

FAGULAL: The one who came here with you, Bishu—where is he now? Tell me the truth.

NANDINI: He's been taken prisoner.

CHANDRA: You witch! You must have handed him over! You're their spy.

NANDINI: How can you say such a thing?

CHANDRA: Otherwise what business do you have here? You go about only bewitching everyone's mind.

FAGULAL: Everyone here suspects everyone else, yet I've trusted you all along. In my heart, I—let that be. But today something seems different.

NANDINI: Perhaps it is, perhaps it is. He fell into danger the moment he was with me. He himself said he'd be safer with you.

CHANDRA: Then why did you bring him, deceiving us, you harbinger of ruin!

NANDINI: He said he wanted freedom.

CHANDRA: Fine freedom you've given him.

NANDINI: I can't understand everything he says, Chandra. Why did he tell me freedom comes only through sinking into danger's depths. Fagual, how can I save a man who seeks freedom from the very hands of safety?

CHANDRA: I don't understand any of this. If you can't bring him back safely, you'll die for it, you'll die. I won't be fooled by that pretty face of yours.

FAGULAL: Chandra, what's the use of idle scolding? Let's gather men from the diggers' quarter. We'll smash the prison-house to pieces.

NANDINI: I'll come with you.

FAGULAL: What will you do there?

NANDINI: I'll help break it down.

CHANDRA: Oh, you've already broken plenty, you sorceress! No more of that.

Enter Gokul

GOKUL: That witch must be burned to death before anything else.

CHANDRA: Burned? That won't punish her enough. Whatever beauty she uses to destroy us all—that beauty must be taken from her. Just as one strips grass clean with a scythe, so must her beauty be stripped away.

GOKUL: That I can do. Give me a swing of the hammer—

FAGULAL: Beware! Lay a hand on her and I'll—

NANDINI: Fagulal, stop it. He's a coward, he fears me, that's why he wants to strike me. I don't fear his blows. Let him do whatever cowardly thing he can.

GOKUL: Fagulal, you still haven't come to your senses! You count the Governor as your enemy! Well, an honest enemy I respect—but that sweet-faced beauty of yours—

NANDINI: Your respect for the Governor! The kind of respect the mud on the sole of a foot has for the sole itself. Can a slave ever feel respect?

FAGULAL: Gokul, the time has come to show your manhood. But not against a young girl. Come with me.

[Exit Fagulal, Chandra, and Gokul]

Enter a group of men

NANDINI: Where are you going?

FIRST MAN: We're carrying offerings for the flag-worship.

NANDINI: Have you seen Ranjan?

THIRD MAN: I saw him once five days ago, not since. Ask them over there, perhaps they know.

NANDINI: Who are they?

THIRD MAN: They're carrying liquor for the Governors' feast.

[Exit this group]

Enter another group

NANDINI: You, red-turbaned ones, have you seen Ranjan?

FIRST MAN: That night I saw him at Shambhu Headman's house.

NANDINI: Where is he now?

SECOND MAN: There, carrying finery for the Governors' wives' feast, ask them—they hear a great deal that never reaches our ears.

[Exit this group]

Enter another group

NANDINI: Do you know where they've kept Ranjan?

FIRST MAN: Silence, silence.

NANDINI: You must know, you must tell me.

THIRD MAN: Whatever enters our ears doesn't come out our mouths, that's how we survive. Ask them there, carrying the weapons.

[Exit this group]

Enter another group

NANDINI: Wait a moment, tell me, where is Ranjan?

FIRST MAN: Listen, then. The auspicious hour has come. The King must appear for the flag-worship. Ask him. We know the beginning, not the end.

[Exit]

NANDINI: (Knocking at the lattice) The time has come, open the door.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: You've come at the wrong time again. Go now, go at once.

NANDINI: There's no time to wait, you must hear what I have to say!

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Today is the flag-worship, don't disturb my mind. It will hinder the ritual. Go, go! Go now!

NANDINI: My fear has vanished. You can't drive me away like that anymore. Even if I die, so be it—I won't move without the door being opened.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: You want Ranjan, is that it? I've told the Governor to bring him to you right away. Don't stand at the door when I go to the worship. Danger will come.

NANDINI: The gods have no shortage of time; they can wait ages upon ages for their worship. Human suffering wants human comfort—its time is short.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: I am weary, so very weary. In the flag-worship I shall regain my strength. Don't weaken me now. If you obstruct me now, you'll be crushed beneath the chariot wheel.

NANDINI: Let the wheel run right over my chest, I won't budge.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: Nandini, you've had indulgence from me, that's why you don't fear. Today you must fear.

NANDINI: I want you to frighten me too, just as you frighten everyone else. I despise your indulgence.

VOICE FROM WITHIN: You despise it? I'll crush your audacity. The time has come to reveal myself to you.

NANDINI: I wait for that very revelation—open the door. (The door opens) What's this! Who has fallen there? He looks like Ranjan!

KING: What did you say? Ranjan? Never—that's not Ranjan.

NANDINI: Yes, it is—this is my Ranjan.

KING: Why didn't he give his name? Why did he come with such insolence?

NANDINI: Wake him, Ranjan, I've come, your friend. King, why doesn't he wake?

KING: He deceived me. This one deceived me. Ruin upon ruin! My own weapon fails to obey me. Call—call the Governor, bind him and bring him here.

NANDINI: King, wake Ranjan, everyone says you know sorcery—wake him.

KING: I've learned sorcery from Death—I can't make him wake. I can only remove his waking.

NANDINI: Then put me to sleep with that same sleep. I cannot bear this. Why have you done such a terrible thing!

KING: I have been killing youth—all this time, with all my strength, I have done nothing but kill youth. The curse of murdered youth has fallen upon me.

NANDINI: Didn't he tell you my name?

KING: He spoke in such a way, I couldn't bear it. Suddenly, in every vein of mine, fire seemed to blaze up.

NANDINI: (To Ranjan) My hero, the feather of the blue-throated bird—I placed it on your crown. Your triumphant journey has begun from today. I am the vehicle of that journey.—Ah, here, in his hand, is that same cluster of my red oleanders. Then Kishore must have seen him. Where has he gone? King, where is that boy?

KING: Which boy?

NANDINI: The boy who brought this flower-cluster to Ranjan.

KING: He was a strange child. His face was young like a girl's, but his words were audacious. He came boldly to attack me.

NANDINI: And then what happened to him? Tell me, what happened? You must tell me, don't stay silent.

KING: He vanished like a bubble bursting.

NANDINI: King, now the time has come.

KING: Time for what?

NANDINI: For my battle against you, with all my strength.

KING: You, fight against me! I could kill you this very instant.

NANDINI: And after that, every single moment, my death shall kill you. I have no weapon—my weapon is death.

KING: Then come closer. Have you the courage to trust me? Come with me. Make me your companion today, Nandini!

NANDINI: Where shall we go?

KING: To fight against me, yet with your hand held in mine. Don't you understand? That battle has already begun. This is my flag—I break it myself. You—tear apart its banner. Let your hand come into my very hand and strike me, strike me, strike me completely—only then is my freedom.

A MAN FROM THE GROUP: My lord, what is this?! What madness! You've broken the flag! Our deity's flag, whose invincible spear-point has pierced one side of the earth and the other side of heaven, that most sacred flag-staff of ours! On the day of worship, what a mortal sin! Let's go, inform the Governors!

[Exit]

KING: Much yet remains to be broken. Will you not come with me too, Nandini, my lamp-flame lighting the path of destruction?

NANDINI: I shall come.

Enter Fagulal

FAGULAL: They refuse to release Bishu no matter what. Who's this—is this the King? Witch, you're plotting with him! Betrayer!

KING: What has happened to you all? What have you set out to do?

FAGULAL: To break down the prison door—even if it kills me, I won't turn back.

KING: Why would you turn back? I too am on the path of destruction. There's its first mark—my broken flag, my final testament.

FAGULAL: Nandin, I truly don't understand this. We're simple folk, have mercy, don't deceive us. You're the daughter of our own home.

NANDINI: Fagu-bhai, you've all pledged yourselves to death, you've left nothing at all left to deceive.

FAGULAL: Nandin, come with us then.

KING: So come closer. Have you the courage to trust me? Come with me. Make me your companion today, Nandini!

NANDINI: Where shall I go?

KING: To fight against me, but with your hand in mine. Don't you understand—that battle has begun. This is my flag, I break its very staff myself, you tear apart its banner. Into my very hand, let your hand come and strike me, strike me, strike me utterly—that is my liberation.

(A repeat exchange in the text, as the play here loops in dialogue between Fagulal and the King)

FAGULAL: I don't understand it well. We're plain people, be merciful, don't deceive us. You're the daughter of our very own home.

NANDINI: Fagu-bhai, you've already staked everything on death, there's nothing left for you to be deceived of.

FAGULAL: Then, Nandin, come along with us too.

NANDINI: That is exactly why I still live. Fagulal, I wanted to bring Ranjan among all of you. Look there, my hero has come, scorning death itself.

FAGULAL: Great ruin! Is that Ranjan! He lies there without a sound!

NANDINI: Not without sound. I can hear his unconquered voice even within death. Ranjan will rise again—he can never truly die.

FAGULAL: Alas, my beautiful Nandini! Was this why you waited all this time in this blind hell of ours!

NANDINI: I waited for him, hoping he would come—and he came. I shall now prepare for his coming again—he will come again.—Where's Chandra, FAGULAL?

FAGULAL: She's gone with Gokul to weep before the Governor. They trust the Governor completely.—But my lord, have we misunderstood? We came to break open your own prison house.

KING: Yes, my own prison house. You and I together must do this work. It is not your task alone.

FAGULAL: The Governors will come to stop us the moment they hear.

KING: My battle is with them.

FAGULAL: The soldiers won't obey you.

KING: I shall fight alone—will you stand with me?

FAGULAL: Can we win?

KING: I can at least die. After all this time, I've finally found meaning in dying—I am alive.

FAGULAL: King, do you hear that roar?

KING: There—I see the Governor coming with soldiers. How could this happen so quickly? He must have been prepared beforehand—only I knew nothing of it. He deceived me. He bound me with my very own strength.

FAGULAL: My own band of men hasn't arrived yet.

KING: The Governor has surely blocked their path. They won't arrive now.

NANDINI: I thought they'd bring Bishu-pagal to me. Will that never happen now?

KING: There's no way. I've never seen anyone block the roads and paths like the Governor.

FAGULAL: Then come, Nandini, let's take you somewhere safe, and whatever happens after, let it happen. If the Governor sees you, there'll be no saving you.

NANDINI: Send only me alone into safe exile? Fagulal, the Governor is kinder than all of you—he's the one who opened the path of my triumphant journey. Governor! Governor!—Look, before his spear even reached, my white jasmine garland has already trembled. That garland I shall dye in the blood of my breast, the colour of red oleander.—Governor! He has seen me. Victory to Ranjan!

[Exits swiftly]

KING: Nandini!

[Exit]

Enter the Professor

FAGULAL: Where are you running to, Professor?

PROFESSOR: Someone said the King, after all this time, has finally found the ultimate meaning of life and set out—I've abandoned my books and papers to go witness it.

FAGULAL: The King has gone, indeed, to his death—he heard Nandini's call.

PROFESSOR: His net has torn! Where's Nandini?

FAGULAL: She's gone, ahead of everyone. She can no longer be reached.

PROFESSOR: She can be reached now, this very time. She can't escape any further—I shall catch her.

[Exit]

Enter Bishu

BISHU: Fagulal, where is Nandini?

FAGULAL: How did you get here?

BISHU: Our fellow diggers have broken open the prison house. They've gone off to fight. I came looking for Nandini. Where is she?

FAGULAL: She's gone ahead of everyone else.

BISHU: Where?

FAGULAL: Into her final freedom.—Bishu, do you see who's lying there?

BISHU: Why, that's Ranjan!

FAGULAL: Do you see that streak of blood in the dust?

BISHU: I understand—that's the crimson mark of their supreme union. Now my time has come, for the great solitary journey. Perhaps he'll wish to hear a song! My Pagli! Come, brother, now let's go to the fight.

FAGULAL: Victory to Nandini!

BISHU: Victory to Nandini!

FAGULAL: And look there, her bracelet of red oleanders lies scattered in the dust. It must have slipped from her right hand at some point. Today she left her hand bare, and departed.

BISHU: I told her once, I would take nothing from her hand. This alone I had to take—her final gift.

[Exit]

Song, from afar

*Paush has called to you, come, come away,
Come, come, come.
The dust's very hem is filled today with ripened harvest,
Alas, alas, alas.*