

MEGHMALLAR

BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDOPADDHYE

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI: SOHANA MANZOOR

Prodyumna saw the man for the first time at the temple of Dasaparmita, the ten perfections, when people came to watch the snake charmers.

It was the festival of Jyestha Sankranti when all the girls of the surrounding villages had assembled at the temple. A hoard of snake charmers, singers, and tricksters were there too; florists vying for attention and selling flower jewelry to girls. A merchant from Magadha had brought expensive silk sarees, and women were swarming in front of his shop. Prodyumna had heard that a famous singer and flute player would be there during the Jyestha Sankranti festival. He had been looking for the man throughout the day, but could not find him.

Sometime before evening a snake charmer started showing outrageous feats with his snakes and a crowd of fun-loving young girls surrounded him. Soon there was a big crowd and Prodyumna also stood with them. He was not into the games, of course; instead he was examining the faces around him and wondering how in the world he would recognize the flutist. After quite a while, he noticed an elderly guy staring at him. His clothes were dowdy and shabby. Prodyumna wondered if this was the man he was looking for. He was trying to find a way through the crowd when the guy raised his hand and made signs for Prodyumna to move away from the gathering.

As they both stepped outside the man spoke up, "I am Suradasa, the singer from Avanti. Were you looking for me?"

Prodyumna was somewhat taken aback. How did he know?

But he admitted deferentially that he was indeed looking for him.

The man said, "I am not a stranger, you know. Your father and I were friends. I visited your father whenever I went to Kashi. I have seen you too as a child. You were very young then."

"Where are you staying here now?" asked Prodyumna.

"In the ruins of a temple by the river; have you seen it?"

"O yes. Didn't a hermit live there?"

"He still resides at the place. Come and see me one of these days. Where do you live?"

"I study at the bihar; have been there for the past three years. How long will you be at the temple?"

"I will tell you all. Come and see me soon."

Prodyumna took his leave after paying due respect to the elderly person.

It was not yet evening; girls were descending down the slopes of the small hill on which the temple stood. Prodyumna's eyes briefly scanned the group of girls as if searching for somebody; then he hurried forward leaving them behind. The Acharya Shilabrata was a strict principal, and was especially stern with Prodyumna as he was more fun loving and spirited than the other students. If he returned to the bihar late, Acharya would be really mad.

As he turned on the next curve, the hill on the left side disappeared revealing the turret of the temple by the river. The silhouettes of homecoming birds fluttered over it stop against the backdrop of a grey, cloudy sky. Even further the lining of a white cloud



turned vermillion reflecting the rays of the setting sun.

Suddenly, someone pulled at his garments from the rear.

Prodyumna glanced behind and the eyes of the person who had accosted him, sparkled with mirth. She was a young girl with fair complexion, clad in a blue saree that accentuated her slim figure. A freshly bought flower garland adorned her chignon.

Prodyuman gasped in surprise, "Where did you turn up from, Shunanda? I looked for you everywhere, but couldn't find you."

The girl blushed, but she replied coyly, "You were searching for me, or some snake charmer? You were staring at all those tricksters—I could clearly see that."

"No, no, Shunanda. I looked for you while getting down, and even before that. Who did you come with?"

At that point they saw a group of girls coming down that very road. Shunanda abruptly left Prodyumna to run down the path. With a crowd of unknown girls behind him Prodyumna did not deem it wise to follow Shunanda. In frustration and anger he took longer steps as he walked.

Prodyumna was so heedless that he did not notice exactly when the faint light of dusk mingled with the descending darkness, and then turned into moonlight. By the time he realized that it was late, there was a full moon in the sky and the bright light washing over the surrounding area. The trees beyond the faraway fields looked hazy. How was he expected to study at such an hour? The Acharya Purnabardhana might as well scold him for not studying the Tripitaka, but he could not help it. Was it his fault that on such nights his heart ached for the pining lovers of

the past, and his stray mind throbbed for some invisible muse around the stone balconies of the Mahakotthi Bihar?

The evening prayer bells of the Temple of Dashaparmita were still ringing, and a faint light turned on in the old temple by the river bend. The men and women returning from the festival were disappearing fast. Prodyumna also started walking faster.

As he was passing by a roadside tree, he sensed that someone was standing still behind it. And then he heard the faint sound of a musical and familiar laughter—he saw Shunanda drenched in moonlight under the tree. As soon as Prodyumna turned his gaze on her, she was bobbing her head up and down and said, "Go on—just a little further and you would have missed me completely."

Prodyumna felt very pleased to see Shunanda, but pretended to be angry. "And why would I notice you? What's the big deal in hiding behind a tree? I am really mad at you, Shunanada. I mean it."

Shunanda replied, "Is it my fault that you didn't see me earlier? Do you remember what you promised the other day? No, all you're interested in are those snake charmers and peddlers. How can you even go near them? Their attires are so grimy! I wouldn't go anywhere close."

"You are a rich man's daughter," said Prodyumna. "But what promise are you talking about?"

"What, you can't even remember?" Shunanda retorted. "Try to recall what you said the other day."

Prodyumna reflected for a few seconds and said, "Oh, about playing the flute?"

Shunanda said, "Didn't you promise? And here I've been waiting at the temple since

mid-afternoon." She pouted, "And you came so late—so go now, go away!"

Prodyumna laughed. "If you had seen me, Shunanda, why didn't you call out?"

"I was not alone, you know. Yes, I did come by myself at midday, but you weren't there then. And afterwards all the village girls appeared—how could I call you?"

Prodyumna said in a reconciliatory tone, "Okay, so I was at fault. But I was not looking at the charmers and tricksters. I was searching for a great flutist from Avanti. You know very well how much I am interested in playing flutes. I have found him at last—he is residing at a place by the river." He paused and asked, "By the way, where is your father?"

"Oh, he has gone to Kaushambi, at the behest of the King."

Prodyumna shouted in glee, "Ah ha, is that so? No wonder Shunanda is staying out so late..." Before he could finish Shunanada clamped his mouth with the palm of her hand and spoke in embarrassment, "Shh, don't you have any sense? Why are you yelling? People will be going this way soon after the evening prayer."

Prodyumna said smiling, "What if I tell your father when he returns..."

Shunanda retorted, "Oh, please! He knows I stay out late for the evening prayers."

Prodyumna clasped Shunanda's shapely right arm and said, "Okay, let me play my flute. I have it here with me, you know. I mean it, really—I bought it for you. I was only looking for him to see if I could learn more."

But when Prodyumna came to the river bank, he felt dispirited. He did play the flute, but it had no connection with his soul. He had played for Shunanda before; whenever he

came out of the bihar, he always carried the instrument. There were days when he started making music for her on lazy afternoons, and the day would wane into dusk in no time at all. But Shunanda had never seen him so unmindful before.

For whatever reason, Prodyumna just could not forget the strange looking singer Suradasa. He reminded him of those paintings on crabbed age by the artist monk Kalabit—skinny and ugly with wrinkled skin. And his clothes had an unpleasant reddish hue like the tree barks of old punthi.

The very next morning Prodyumna went to the ruins of the temple by the riverbank. The idols were long gone. There were large crevices on the walls, surely full of snakes and other creepy creatures. Nobody from the nearby villages visited the place any more. But one Ājivika hermit had taken shelter there for the past eight months. A few of his disciples often visited him, and it was because of them that the paths to the temple were somewhat clear and visible.

Prodyumna met Suradasa in the semi-dark interior of the building. Suradasa expressed utmost pleasure at seeing him and said, "Why don't we go outside and chat. It's really dark in here."

He examined Prodyumna's face carefully and said to himself, "Yes, you can do it. I am sure of it."

The initial uncomfortable feeling that Prodyumnafelt with Suradasa went away after seeing him at close quarters. He was ugly, yes, but his expressions reflected intelligence.

Suradasa said, "I thought you might come today. Your father was a talented singer. Have you learnt anything from him?"

Prodyumna felt shy. "I can play the flute a little," he said.

"Of course, you can. Your father was renowned throughout the country. Every year he was invited at Kaushambi. And yes, I heard that you are an expert in Meghmallar."

Prodyumna's reply was modest. "I am not an expert; I play the best I can. But yes, I have played Meghmallar quite a few times."

Suradasa said, "Let me hear it then."

As usual, Prodyumna had his flute with him. He always thinks of coming across Shunanda any time.

He took out his flute and started to play. His father had taught him all the major ragas, and he himself had a natural talent for music. He played beautifully. The tune reflected the eternal rasa that trickles from the wide blue sky on moonlit nights, and encompasses the greenery and flora and fauna of this world. Suradasa had not expected so much, and after Prodyumna was done, he embraced the young man. "You are the son of Indradyumna all right. I understand now that you will make it."

Young Prodyumna blushed at such high praise. After a few more words when he was about to leave, Suradasa stayed him and said, "Listen, Prodyumna, I have a secret to share with you. I had been looking for you for this very reason; so it's very good that I've finally found you. But before I tell you anything you must take an oath of not revealing the secret to anyone else."

(To be continued)

THREE POEMS

REBECCA HAQUE

Moonshine Mystery

Is there a silver moonstone for me
At the edge of the violet mystery?
Is there a tall mahogany tree for me
At the virgin forest's boundary?

Is there a magic mantra for me
In the weird whispering breeze?

My gleaming surreal silhouette
Swims across the sodden gloam.
My limpid besotted eyes
Rain blood-red lunatic dreams.

My smouldering lips kiss
Wild moonshine mead.
My toes clutch curling roots

Steeped in a glazed séance,
My magnetic rapture
Cascades,
To capture
The eerie
Penumbra,
Of elusive,
Cyclical
Samsara

* * *



HAIKU #1

Dewdrop
And sun ray.
Technicolour display.

HAIKU #2

Sightless.
Demolish darkness
With fingertip caress.

Her Last Sigh

REHNUMA SIDDIQUE

He had walked miles with a trembling heart
Navigating in a sea of snow
Trailing along like the fluttering moist breath
Under her stubborn nostrils that beaked like a vapid crow.

They had crossed the peaks together
That spread like dried stars everywhere
Engraving a coquettish maze
Under the ebony black sky.

Something invisible kept incinerating
With blind odor;
Like the strange tide of a summer breeze,
The stars winched along the darkness
Inch by inch with iridescent lights
Into the cracks of her nomadic body.

While she paved the air away
With her last sigh.

