

FOREWORD

IT WAS STEVE WEISMAN of *The New York Times* who gave me my working definition of satire when he remarked of my columns in *Sunday* that they revealed a “talent to amuse and abuse.” At bottom, satire is the outcome of thwarted hopes and frustrated ambition. I had made the leap into the dark unknown of politics when Rajiv Gandhi was Prime Minister and set, so it seemed, to remain so for the next three decades at least. Six weeks later, he was humbled at the polls and the new sun of Vishwanath Pratap Singh, the “Master of Contradictions,” rose over the horizon.

Like Bhállata, whose “Hundred Allegories” sets the stage for this volume, I too began my career as a satirist when my Avánti-varman was replaced by “a flickering firefly,” Shánkara-varman:

How the stars shine

when the horizon is invaded by darkness!

When the sun shines,

they cannot shine by their own power.

Alas, we are not told what happened to Bhállata post-Shánkara-varman. In my case, VP, truly a “flickering firefly,” was out in under a year—and my Editor, Vir Sanghvi, always maintained that with V.P. Singh’s ouster, I lost my muse. It comes back to me with Bhállata’s rueful remark on his “reward”:

He whom I would not touch with my foot

Permits me not to touch his feet!

What I, a product of Macaulay's Minute, find astonishing about this volume is its very contemporariness. Unversed in Sanskrit, I associate the language and its ethos with a dim and dead past. These satires bring to startling life a world like ours. Bhállata's sad (and self-serving) reflections on the fickleness of patronage and power belong as much to today as apparently they did to yesterday:

*What sort of purity
does the dull crystal possess?
It changes according to the hue
of the thing that is seen through it.*

He has a delightful verse about politicians seeking out a patron—and the false hopes on which the politics of patronage survives—lines to be written on the entrance to 24, Akbar Road and 10, Ashoka Road:

*Espying the large, eye-delighting flower
of the silk-cotton tree
the parrot thought: "It's fruit will be incomparable!"
It sat on it for a long time and as luck would have it
the fruit grew.
When it was ripe
there was cotton inside
And even that was blown away by the wind!*

My own favourite cautionary tale in Bhállata is straight out of "Yes, Minister" (and the politics of every party the world over):

*Oh, listeners! If you will bear with me, I will speak.
Fear one's own side, not the powerful foe!*

Ksheméndra I find far less satisfactory. True, his “Grace of Guile” begins with a straight pot-shot at the BJP in canto I, ‘Sanctimoniousness’:

*Greed is the ancient father of Sanctimoniousness,
 Maya is his mother,
 falsehood is his uterine brother,
 deformity is his wife,
 And the sneer Hum is his son.*

And some of the verses rise well above satire to lyrical poetry:

*Alas! before you, this my voice,
 which assumes the brazenness of familiarity,
 dares not become too audacious,
 as though it were a village girl in the city.*

And again:

*... and the survival of accumulated wealth
 is as uncertain as droplets of water
 on the petals of water-lilies,
 quivering in the breeze.*

But once we get beyond ‘Sanctimoniousness’ and ‘Greed,’ Ksheméndra can be hard to take, especially in his utterly priggish and piggish attitude to women. The cantos on ‘Lust’ and ‘Unfaithfulness’ are unredeemed, but he has one good verse on ‘Depravity’:

*Even though they have completely exhausted
the buds of the red day-lotus
And finished off the white lilies,
the singer-bees, still emaciated,
Yearn for the fragrant rut-fluid of elephants.*

Then, alas, the canto deteriorates into, of all things, a rant against singing and singers! Talk of Sanctimoniousness!

But Ksheméndra returns to his own in ‘Fraud.’ Lines one might address to Shining India’s Agriculture Minister as we sink from self-sufficiency to massive grain imports:

*A well-provisioned granary
is like the phases of the moon.*

And Lines to Sitaram Yechury:

*All day long
the merchant relieves his customers of their money...
But he frets to hand over three cowries
to support his household!*

And perhaps Lines by Mahatma Gandhi:

*Therefore, the art of fraud,
born from avarice,
a delusion which moves crookedly,
dwells in the hearts of the greedy.*
A man who is not greedy does not cheat.

(emphasis supplied)

After the homilies of Ksheméndra that are lacking, alas, in gentle humor or pungent self-depreciation, the reader turns with some relief to Nila-kantha and his “Mockery of

the Kali Era,” a series of satires on different groups of professionals from Academics to Doctors to Informers, passing the while through Relatives, The Avaricious and The Pious—each of whom come in for scant respect and searing comment. Of Academics, he says (and trust me this applies even more to politicians and particularly our home-bred Members of Parliament):

If you want to triumph in a meeting, do not be afraid, do not pay attention, do not listen to the opponent’s arguments—just immediately contradict them!

Of Sorcerers, says he:

Blessed indeed are mantra-sorcerers, whose livelihood benefits from both the happiness of the well-off and the misery of the wretched.

Astrologers are summed up thus:

When asked about the length of life, the astrologer predicts a long life. Those who survive will be in awe of him. Who will the dead call to account?

Doctors squirm at the point of Nila-kantha’s surgical knife:

The healthy and the terminally ill are of no interest, doctors thrive on hypochondriacs and those suffering from chronic diseases.

Bitterly, he adds:

Dishonesty and flattery are a great conjunction auguring wealth; the conjunction of honesty and erudition leads to poverty.

And a cautionary tale on Relatives, on which many of our soap opera TV serials are based:

Two wives blessed with many children and a sister without a husband: this is a conjunction called “incessant quarrel” for the house-holder.

And even if it means giving away the conclusion of this Agatha Christie cliff-hanger, here is Nila-kantha’s punch line on *kalijuga* and the Poet:

Granted the world may be under the sway of this Era, but what can Time do to us sheltered by the Slayer of Time, Shiva? The poet Nila-kantha composed this “Mockery of Kali” for the delight of the learned and the pleasure of the royal court.

As a practising satirist myself, I have often been accused—with justice—of “sacrificing Truth for the sake of an aphorism.” I plead guilty—for it is not the task of a satirist to recite the dull truth but to provoke by outrage the hidden Truth to come out from behind the veil. Today, democracy ensures a good living for the satirist. In the period when these three poets were writing, one joke found unfunny could lead to the gallows. I salute these original masters of the genre, who risked their necks so that down “the trackless centuries” (Jawaharlal Nehru) they might continue to tickle our funny bone.

The Clay Sanskrit Library and editor-translator Somadeva Vasudeva have done us all a great service by rescuing these satires from musty palmyra leaves and bringing the verses to us in the language of the 21st century—which, all

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said and done, is the living English and not, however much one might regret it, the almost dead classical Sanskrit.

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