



## BHARATHIPURA

U. R. Anantha Murthy

*Prof. U R Anantha Murthy has been acclaimed as one of the most prolific writers and thinkers of the Indian subcontinent. His contribution has been historical in the field of creative writing, particularly novels and stories. His original works have been in Kannada but have been translated into English, Russian, French, Hungarian, Hindi, Bangala, and several other languages. The films Sansakar and Diksha have been based on two of his works Sanskar and Ghotasraj respectively. He has been visiting professor to Iowa University and Tufts University of America respectively in 1975 and 1978. He was vice- chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam and the Chairman of the Sahitya Akademi. He has been conferred India's most prestigious award in the field of literature, the Jnanpith Award.*

*The extract here is taken from U. R. Anantha Murthy's novel Bharathipura. Jagannath, the protagonist, returns from England to his ancestral village home in Bharathipura. It is a temple-centred village and the reigning deity is Lord Manjunatha. He wields power through a demon-spirit called Bhutharaya, or so many of the inhabitants believe. This belief has been systematically exploited by the ruling class in the village to maintain their feudal power over the village people. Jagannath returns to this place with the hope of bringing about a new awakening among the people. He realises that to awaken them is to destroy the myth of Lord Manjunatha. Therefore he should take the untouchables into the temple. But before that he should destroy the myth of his own family-god Lord Narasimha. He asks the pariahs to touch the image of this God. The following extract describes this highly tense situation.*

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From the portico he stepped down to the courtyard and stood there. He suppressed a desire to look back. An uneasy feeling came to him of being watched from behind, by his aunt, the priest, the cook, and the cook's children. He felt his aunt's look whipping his back. He could have got rid of this suffering by looking her in the face, simply shattering her entreaty. He was frightened. To defy her thus would be a violence too much for him. The hand which gripped the casket was damp. Perhaps this

*saligram* of Lord Narasimha had never crossed the threshold of the house before. It must have stunned his aunt's whole being to see this happening now. With all the force of life in her eyes she must be drawing him back in her prayer. He did not know why he had come to a standstill. He looked up and saw before him the pariahs, dressed in white long clothes, standing like orphans at the far end of the courtyard. Their vacant eyes just looked on. They did not know of the impending blast. They did not want to know.

Slowly he began to move towards them. The red mass of the sun was sitting on the shoulder of a distant hill. The weak yellow light of retreating evening fell on the haystack. The last bus from Shimoga appeared on the curved road under the hill, raising dust. The cattle were returning to their sheds, bells jingling on their necks. At this time of the day Aunt should have been waiting for them near the shed. Kaveri crossed the courtyard, carrying a headload of firewood, her steps brisk under the weight, and her sari tucked up. These pariah folk, dressed in white shirts and clothes, must have looked funny to her. She tittered.

Jagannath thought what an absurd situation this was. For his part this *saligram* was just a pebble. Still, what an intense drama around it! He was turning the whole courtyard into a magnetic field with the pariahs in front of him and Aunt behind. How removed was his person that had concluded, by pure logical thinking, that there never was a God!

The absurdity of his action flashed in his mind. It was he who had made a *saligram* of this stone by taking it out to the pariahs to touch it. He stopped. With great effort he looked round. Aunt and the entire household were standing there. At one corner of the veranda he saw the servants. All were watching him. Aunt's tongue must have dried up or she would have certainly called him back. She was standing there like a mother staring at the dead body of her son being taken away for cremation. None had ever dared to take this thousand-year-old *saligram* out of the house. Whatever she could be thinking of it had become part of



Jagannath's own mind. He felt the presence of her eyes within him and the black stone held tightly in his hand burned like cinder.

Was he doing this for the sake of the pariahs or for his own sake? Was it to discard Brahminism? Discarding everything, was he now going to tread what Adiga would call the path of an *avadhoot*? It bewildered him to realise how at this very moment all his Marx and Russell were going up from him in vapours.

He tried to clear up his thoughts. The pariahs, who had never hoped for anything, are standing before me like impersonal ghosts. I cannot stop here for ever in a state of palpitation. The moment my resolve weakens I will be swept over and put down by Aunt's eyes. But I am going forward with the *saligram* in my hand and at the same time backing out with misgivings. Why did this action get into my head at all? The pariahs should touch the family god before they touch the village god Manjunatha. Otherwise this resolve of mine will not be solid and real, the pariahs will not give up their past and accept a new life. If I am prepared for the violence necessary for this action, I will have learnt the first lesson of the violence of change. I should therefore go ahead, believing in my own thoughts. Otherwise Aunt will triumph. It was bitter but once again he looked round. There was a ghastly desolation about the house. It had rejected him, he felt, and had reduced him to a dry useless thing flung into the courtyard.

This moment of fear and anxiety must have perplexed the pariahs who had already been feeling guilty in their new clothes. If he did not go to them and offer them the stone in his hand they would be gone. He realised that he was in a situation where something had to be done urgently. He walked quickly towards them.

The important question is, he thought, why God has invaded me like this. What I wanted to show as stone has now become a *saligram*. Why is it so? Why are the bells ringing in me? At every step I have turned this stone into a *saligram*. Like the priest of some unique ritual act. All the time trying to shout out that this is not a *saligram* but a piece of hard

stone. The eyes of the pariahs are on me; and are vacant like the eyes of cattle grazing in the field. They are not aware of a past or of any future. But those eyes at my back are compassionate and they tug at me. Shall I dodge now or shall I turn over and come to fulfillment in the minds of the pariahs?

He went and stood near them. Seeing him so close they stepped back. Jagannath opened the lid of the casket. The entire action was nonsense. If a conch blew now and a pair of cymbals clanged, it would be a fair comment on it all. But the spell of giving to the pariahs the black naked stone in his palm overwhelmed him without his knowing it. The veins of his throat swelled. He said in a deep trembling note: 'Touch This.'

He looked around. The sun was setting. Aunt and the priest were at the door, terror-stricken. Janardhana Shetty could be seen in a corner of the courtyard. The Okkaliga workers, with their sickles at their side, had huddled together in another corner. Kaveri was leaning against the parapet, wiping her face. In front of him the pariahs stood gaping like idiots. His body shook and his hair stood on end. He said again, coaxing them: 'Touch this.'

Words stuck in his throat. This stone is nothing, but I have set my heart on it and I am reaching it for you: touch it; touch the vulnerable point of my mind; this is the time of evening prayer; touch; the *nandadeepa* is burning still. Those standing behind me are pulling me back by the many bonds of obligation. What are you waiting for? What have I brought? Perhaps it is like this: This has become a *saligram* because I have offered it as stone. If you touch it, then it would be a stone for them. Thus my importunity becomes a *saligram*. Because I have given it, because you have touched it, and because they have all witnessed this event, let this stone change into a *saligram*, in this darkening nightfall. And let this *saligram* change into a stone. You, Pilla, you are not afraid of a wild boar or a tiger; so, touch it. One step further and you are already inside the temple. Centuries will alter. Touch it now. Let you learn. Touch! How easy! Touch!





His hands were sweating profusely. The pariahs moved back. All had turned him down – these pariahs and those people behind him. The evening had turned him down. He knew that the pariahs were afraid. They had seen how they caught thieves at the temple, by taking round a charmed coconut and asking the suspects to touch it. Crimson *mantrakshata* on a salver and a peeled coconut on it with its tuft turned to the front, sprinkled with *kumkum*. The coconut would have the appearance of a human face. Everyone would have to touch it. But there would always be some person who gasped for breath when the salver came near him, his veins standing out. And he would fall unconscious. The pariahs had undergone all this. The oracle of Bhutharaya must have appeared to them now in this contingency, with a bunch of areca flowers in his hands, with *kumkum* on his body, quivering all over, and pronouncing their individual punishments.

Jagannath tried to soothe them. He said in his everyday tone of a teacher: 'This is mere stone. Touch it and you will see. If you don't, you will remain foolish forever.'

He did not know what had happened to them, but found the entire group recoiling suddenly. They winced under their wry faces, afraid to stand and afraid to run away. He had desired and languished for this auspicious moment – this moment of the pariahs touching the image of God. He spoke in a voice choking with great rage: 'Yes, touch it!'

He advanced towards them. They shrank back. Some monstrous cruelty overtook the man in him. The pariahs looked like disgusting creatures crawling upon their bellies.

He bit his underlip and said in a firm low voice: 'Pilla, touch it! Yes, touch it!!'

Pilla stood blinking. Jagannath felt spent and lost. Whatever he had been teaching them all these days had gone to waste. He rattled dreadfully: 'Touch, touch, you TOUCH IT!' It was like the sound of some infuriated animal and it came tearing through him. He was sheer violence itself; he was conscious of nothing else. The pariahs found him

more menacing than Bhutharaya. The air was rent with his screams: 'Touch! Touch! Touch!' The strain was too much for the pariahs. Mechanically they came forward, just touched what Jagannath was holding out to them, and immediately withdrew.

Exhausted by violence and distress Jagannath pitched aside the *saligram*. A heaving anguish had come to a grotesque end. Aunt could be human even when she treated the pariahs as untouchables. He had lost his humanity for a moment. The pariahs had seemed to be meaningless things to him. He hung his head. He did not know when the pariahs had gone. Darkness had fallen when he came to know that he was all by himself. Disgusted with his own person he began to walk about. He asked himself: when they touched it, we lost our humanity – they and me; didn't we? And we died. Where is the flaw of it all, in me or in society? There was no answer. After a long walk he came home, feeling dazed.

(Translated from the Kannada by K. V. Tirumalesh)

## EXERCISES

### A. Let's Answer

1. Who was the reigning deity of village Bharathipura?
2. Why did Jagannath want to take the untouchables into the temple of Bharathipura village?
3. Why were the pariahs afraid of touching the *saligram*?
4. Why was touching the stone so important?
5. What did Jagannath say to the pariahs to encourage them to touch the stone?
6. How did Jagannath encourage the pariahs to touch the stone?

**B. Let's Discuss**

- a. Discrimination on the basis of caste and creed should be discouraged.
- b. Age old practices do not go easily.

**C. Let's Do**

- a. Do a project work on any three eminent social/ religious reformers of India .

