

# ness

Illustrations/Bhaskaran

when he plays the harmonium. He can whip a stammerer into an orator and a donkey into a singer. The only problem is, he is  
*lam...lam...ch...ch...ch...*

"Why don't you articulate your Sanskrit properly?" Father demanded harshly.

"Yes-Sir, yes-sir, I mean *lam...lam...ch...ch...ch...* how to utter those embarrassing words in a meeting of the elite, Sir!"

"You mean *lampat*, *charitraheen* (treacherous loafer, characterless).

What a revelation! Should you not feel shy to pretend shyness?" commented an important person.

"But, sir, what have we to do with his character! To find an Ustad with a clean character is like discovering a vegetarian vulture!"

"Shut up!" Father cut short the man who, a moment ago, had stopped with *lam...lam...ch...ch...* but suddenly grown fluent. "One's vocation is irrelevant to one's character. Do you leave your character, clean and ironed, in your wife's custody here while departing to the city?"

The important ones laughed. The Calcuttan joined them, though his laugh sounded like a whimper.

Father was not for organising any ordinary dramatic troupe. People should be entertained—but through a decent, dignified and purposeful fare. Ours was a predominantly Vaishnava area.

Krishna was the popular deity. But it was difficult to find plays on the Krishna theme in Oriya. Since everybody in our region, as well as the adjoining one of Bengal, understood Bengali and Oriya equally well, Father's advisers hit upon two Bengali musical plays requiring teenage artistes. A few evenings later it was decided to entrust the Ustadship to Harihar, the resident music teacher of my elder sister, Shanti.

Preparations were in full swing. Suitable boys were identified for the different roles. The musical

accompaniments—players of drums, bugle and clarinet—would come from miles afar. All the artistes were poor. But while under that magical thatch erected for the rehearsals, they radiated an aura that was a defiance of the grim realities lurking outside it. I realised then that one need not live only on one plane of life.

Came the first night. The large front yard of our house teemed with spectators who came trekking the sandy roads from several nearby villages.

The very first scene with Radha complaining to her friends about Krishna's unkindness hypnotised the audience. Then was heard Krishna's flute. I had to play it from the roof of our house. That was a special treat only for the first night. Later on Radha had to create the illusion of the sound through her words and her gestures—conveying the turmoil inside her heart.

The sound of the flute not only startled Radha, which was expected, but also made a thousand mystified men and women scan the darkness for its source.

Radha, then, disappeared, while Krishna's song swelled, followed by his appearance. "The first note of my flute conquers Radha's heart, while the second inspires a surging tide on the Yamuna..." So on and so forth, he sang. The two boys in the roles of Krishna and Radha, aged 14 and 13 respectively, had made a brilliant debut.

My vacation ended and

I returned to my hostel in Jamalpur, but carrying and nurturing the sweet memory of the *Yatra*, a third of which was made of songs.

By the time I was back in my village for the Dusserah holidays, the opera troupe had grown immensely popular. I was never tired of witnessing it if there was a performance near our village. The boys swore that my presence inspired them to perform better. They would also have liked me to pass a night with them, but Father would not permit that.

However, an opportunity to oblige them came unexpectedly. I was at my maternal uncle's house when, one afternoon, I saw our troupe crossing the meadow in a procession. I ran towards them and, sighting me, the boys came running towards me.

"Would you like to accompany us, Mantoo babu?" asked the affable manager, Vijay Som. He obtained the necessary permission from Grandma and I set out with them.

It was an unforgettable night. The play was presented on a triangular-shaped high ground projecting towards the sea. The silence and awe with which the villagers gathered did not disturb the roar of the sea until the preliminary notes burst from the orchestra. By the time the play was over it was the last quarter of the night. Though the hosts had arranged a bed for me, I chose to sit out the rest of the night on a cane chair in the open, dedicating my



attention to the dusky sea and the starry sky.

A queer sensation woke me. I saw a friendly dog, crouching at my feet, licking its own legs and extending the courtesy to my feet. It was an irresistible dawn. I decided to walk back and the two boys who played Radha and Krishna volunteered to give me company.

Keeping the hillock-like sand dunes to our left we walked eastward, the playful edge of the waves tickling our feet. A

beautiful dawn was breaking.

"Come on, sing," I told my companions.

"But we've been singing the whole night! Isn't it for you to tell us a story now?"

They were justified. I began a story—about the princess lying asleep in a desolate palace beyond the seven seas—waiting for the magic golden stick to wake her up...

"O my sons, do you hear?" It was an imploring voice. We looked for its

source. There, between two sand dunes sat an old woman, her cheek resting on her knees.

"You are coming from the *Yatra*; aren't you? Do you know them?" she asked.

"Know them? Look here..." the two boys drew the woman's attention to me. "Here is the owner of the troupe—we mean the owner's son!"

"How lucky I am! My son, have pity on me. I am dying to see them—my Krishna and Radha. I must take the pair home—only for a moment—wash their feet—bedeck them with flowers—feed them with banana, coconut and jaggery. You too would receive your shares. I have been waiting for hours.

My husband, bed-ridden for the past year, must behold them once. Tell

me, boys, when can I expect them?"

'Radha' was beginning to giggle. I stopped him.

"Granny, can you recognise them if they walk by you?"

"How do you say so, son? Can I ever err in recognising my Krishna

and Radha?"

"Granny, they are only boys like us. Why don't you imagine that I am Krishna?" asked 'Krishna'.

"Live long, son, but show me my Krishna, please!" her voice cracked. She wept.

We stood dumbfounded.

"Granny," I said at last, firmly, "What you have seen in the *Yatra*, in the persons of two boys like us, are the true Krishna and Radha. And you have already taken them inside yourself. They are there. What use then waiting for two human forms?"

We resumed walking. A serene calm filled my heart. My companions too were silent.

"Mantoo babu, what about the princess? By the way, we have never seen one. Are they—we have heard about them in fairytales and mythology—beautiful in any special way—far more than the girls we see?" asked one of my companions.

"Far more beautiful, indeed," I answered. What I was about to say, but did not, was "as beautiful as that old woman".

She was growing indescribably beautiful in my mind's eye, as if I had had a glimpse of the mythical Radha. She was a princess of the realm of consciousness. More than the sleeping princess of the fairytale, this princess had already received the awakening touch of the golden stick.

