

DEFEAT

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MAHALAKSHMI was as beautiful as the goddess *Lakshmi*. And if nobility were synonymous with a fat purse and local fame, her lineage was as noble as any. In spite of all these, dame Fate touched her life with her fickle fingers and muddled it so, that nobody could help calling Fate a heartless hussy.

Mahalakshmi and Rajani were both born in the same locality and on the same day. With the first faint glow of the morning sun, Mahalakshmi came into this world to touch the lady of the Red House with the magic wand of motherhood, and she looked more like a boquet of lightning flashes than a token of human love. Under the professional care of the hired nurse and the natural affection of her bejewelled mother, Mahalakshmi began to brighten up into girlhood.

The crimson flush, which the sun's farewell touches had painted on the sky, was no longer there and all nature was enveloped in darkness. In such a moment, Rajani, the fourth daughter of Hrishikesh, was born behind the Red House, in a mud cottage and upon torn rags. Rajani had for her mother one who could call her own only one pair of gold bracelets and those twenty years old. And it is needless to dwell upon the superfluity of maids and nurses that the fourth daughter of a poor man meets with in India. And if, in addition, she is not fair in complexion. I had better not discuss the situation.

Rajani began to grow up, generally on the floor of the kitchen and now and then on the lap of her widowed sister Jamini. Lying upon her bed of rags, as she performed feats in howling, her perspiring and curry-powdered mother came to her occasionally, lifted her up by the elbow and, after forcing some milk down her delicate throat, went away again to look after her cooking. In the evening neither her mother nor her sister could look after her, being too busy, and the poor mite fought against the army of Sleep Fairies which attacked her in the evening light, that she might enjoy the thrills of one affectionate

motherly embrace and hear the slumber song hummed through the lips that kissed her with such a honey touch—but oh, how rarely! Her eight year old sister Kamini came often instead to see her off to dreamland. The baby's lips would swell up and pout in disappointment and anger, she would push Kamini away with her tiny little feet and try to find solace in rolling on the floor. Kamini drew her up affectionately, pressing her baby face against her own and recited nursery rhymes celebrating the influence of an advancing bridegroom upon the mind of an angry maiden.

The bridegroom did not come at that time, but when he did come at last, people said, "If this is not astounding good luck, what is?" Mahalakshmi, who felt the scratch of diamonds as she landed on this world, who had a pageant of maids to run after her, and who rested her feet on the lap of mother earth within a period of four years for not as many hours, would not have been credited with any extra amount of good luck, had she got such a bridegroom. Nobody would have said that she had got anything more than what she deserved naturally, and fortune would not have got her due share of credit, for then it would not have been called a miracle. Perhaps that was the reason why the goddess tried to win fame with Rajani as the medium. She was, most certainly, cognisant of the ingratitude of human beings, and of the superiority of a single present deed to a battalion of past ones in stimulating universal acknowledgment of her miraculous powers.

Mahalakshmi and Rajani always wandered about the village together. People looked upon their ever united presence with the same pleasing sensation as crept into their hearts during the glorious moments of twilight, when night coyly approached day to enfold him in her sombre mystery. Mahalakshmi, who was fully conscious of her charms even at that baby stage of her life, always walked first, carrying her head at a proud angle and heralding her advent with the sonorous pleadings of her silver anklets. Rajani always followed in the

wake of her playmate From her very childhood she always felt very shy to show her dusky face by the side of her beautiful friend Every evening they made garlands of the golden "Champak" Mahalakshmi called every one to come and appreciate her art, while Rajani found her reward in the sweet smell and soft touch of her garland If Jamini (Rajani's sister) volunteered to dress her hair, Mahalakshmi said "Do it for Rajani, I look much better with my hair undone" Jamini said "It is dangerous to look so beautiful, for people would then run away with you" Mahalakshmi answered "Indeed? Haven't I got my Lathials (body-guards armed with cudgels) to thrash such people?" Jamini said "Certainly you have, but we have no Lathials, so Rajani had better dress her hair" Mahalakshmi said "Oh! don't fear, Rajani is too ugly to be stolen"

Lakshmi could never do without Rajani for a moment, but she could never resist the temptation of snubbing her at every step She knew full well that she herself was the beautiful daughter of a rich father, while Rajani was plain and poor But knowledge alone of this did not satisfy her Her pleasure in this superiority over her friend was seldom complete unless she could all the time remind her of the line which separated them Whenever she got any new dress or ornament she went with these to Rajani first of all Rajani said "They are very nice, and you are looking like a queen" But Lakshmi's cup of conceit was not full with this slender homage She wanted Rajani to own up her defeat, and herself to gloat in the joy of her victory So she said "May be I am, but have you got any silk like this? Have you ever seen such a bracelet?"

It is very hard to make a child lower its head So Rajani, instead of giving a straight answer, said "What is the use of having them now, I shall have them when I grow up"

To add a fresh dose to her pain, Lakshmi said "Can you guess the price?" Rajani, after straining her imagination to the utmost, said "Ten rupees" Lakshmi went mad with laughter and cried "Oh my! What a great fool you are! Is it possible to buy a Benaresi saree for ten rupees?" Her friend blushed and turned her head away and answered "Then I don't know, do I buy these things?" Lakshmi now swayed her head with a proud and satisfied air, and answered condescendingly "That is quite true How can you

guess their price? You are so poor" Rajani went away after this with offended dignity and Lakshmi had to hunt hard for her and, when found, to coax her in diverse strains, to restore their friendship to its normal condition

Being fully conscious of her own higher economic level, Lakshmi now and then enjoyed the pleasure of paining Rajani with presents Rajani's joy at the receipt of these could be compared to the emotion born in the heart of the houseless poor as the gods inundate them with their liquid blessings She always got the refuse articles from Lakshmi's toy-land At first she felt glad when she received such presents, but one day her elder sister whispered into her simple heart the conventionalities of giving and taking From that day she hesitated to take dolls from her friend and tried to repay her with home-made condiments But in spite of that, the idea of how little she gave in return for the splendour she received from her chum, oppressed her child's heart with shame.

But one day this relation of the conquered and the victorious underwent a miraculous change They were talking about different things The garden was suffused with a flaming current of golden moon-light and the atmosphere was saturated with the voiceless music of youthful dreams Every discussion proved the existence of some new merit in Lakshmi The question arose, Who are the beauties of the place? Rajani began to mention names, but took particular care not to name Lakshmi She said "Sushila, Gouri, Kamal, etc" Lakshmi added "Aunt Puti, Mother" She was trying to divert the flow towards herself Though Rajani all the time knew that Lakshmi was in fact one of the most beautiful, she liked to make her feel a bit uncomfortable before putting her in the list But seeing how ardently Lakshmi was trying to have herself mentioned, she intentionally said "Oh, is not Narani's aunt beautiful too?" Lakshmi said "Haven't we named all who are beautiful in our house? I don't think there's anybody else" At this Rajani said "Why, aren't you too nice-looking?" Lakshmi felt much pleased and said, "Very As nice-looking as a monkey" Rajani said "Indeed! I think, then, we are all old witches." Lakshmi was simply overflowed with satisfaction and generously said "Now let us find out if there is anyone beautiful in your house" Rajani sadly replied "There's only Mother" At this Lakshmi had convulsions of suppressed mirth, and cried out "O my!

Your mother ! Is she good looking ? Old ! Skinny ! What eyes you have got !” Rajani burst into angry tears and said “All right, I am blind, my mother is ugly, as if beauty means being fat like your mother.” She was choked with wrath and tears, and went away weeping.

Early next morning, when it was still a bit dark, Lakshmi woke up amidst her profusion of pillows and bolsters. She thought “Rajani is sure not to come to-day. What rubbish ! How on earth am I to bring her to her senses, I don’t know. A big girl like her should not be so damp in the eye.” Her analysis of Rajani’s nature was cut short rather abruptly. She heard the fine sweet voice of the same person calling her from outside “Lakshmi, little darling, are you still asleep ? Come quick, I have something to show you, hurry up, dear.” Her voice had a ring of happiness in it. The honey of that joyous voice at once sweetened Lakshmi’s heart with the same happiness. The trouble of reconciliation became unnecessary now, but that did not please Lakshmi. Rajani should be like a *vinna* to her, that she might draw forth sorrowful tunes out of her whenever she pleased and gay ripples of melody as she changed her mind. It pricked her conceit to discover that Rajani could sing like the morning lark of her own accord.

Still she got up. She found that Rajani, who always stood before her with her pale face and brightened up only at her bright touch, had come now with a proud face to give her, Lakshmi, a share of her own joy. She carried a small baby in her arms. The baby looked as glorious as a cherub. In its smile Lakshmi could find the rival of a bunch of jun-buds. Its complexion would give the moon-beams a taste of jealousy and the dimples they were probably the cups out of which the gods sipped nectar. That such a treasure was Rajani’s own, could be easily found from the glow which lightened up her generally pale countenance. She said “Lakshmi, just look at my nephew ! He is my chhot-di’s boy. Isn’t he a dear ? Have you ever seen such an angel anywhere ?”

Lakshmi could not say that they had a better child in their house. Rajani had always smiled at Lakshmi’s joy, but Lakshmi’s smile faded away at the cruel touch of her friend’s delight. Having got no answer to her questions, Rajani drove the wedge home and said “Isn’t he much more beautiful than Kamal,

Gouri, your aunt Puti, your mother and you ? Isn’t he ?”

Lakshmi could not say “yes”, but the “no” too never came out of her mouth. Rajani asked her to take the child in her arms and cuddle it for a moment, but Lakshmi was quite incapable of accepting anything from one upon whom she had always showered her boons. So she said, “No, I have sprained my arms”, and ran away.

As soon as she set her foot in her mother’s room, she began to strike her head against the bedstead. This first wound to her vanity was too much for her. She did not give expression to her emotion in roof-rending yells, as was usual with her, but large opal drops coursed down her cheek as a token of the immense grief with which she was afflicted. Her mother ran up to her and asked her the reason of this novel performance. She was half choked, but still she could manage to gurgle out “Go away, I don’t want to see your face again.”

“Why, what have I done ?”

“You are too fat, you are very ugly. What is the use of having a mother like that ?”

It was a shock to the poor rich mother. She only said “What nonsense are you talking child ?” This only stimulated Lakshmi to strike her head the harder against the bedstead and she cried “Surely, I will say so. If that wretch Rajani can say, why shan’t I ?”

After much coaxing, the origin of these heart-broken sobs and universal disgust, came to light. Why hasn’t she got such a beautiful nephew ? What Rajani has, Lakshmi must have, or let her die. But what is to be done ? A nephew is hard to manufacture. The mother brought her own child and said, “Never mind about the nephew, you have got a beautiful brother.” Lakshmi flared up “I don’t want any brothers. They are all like fat frogs. Throw them away, your gaping princes.” The prince was soon rolling on the floor and loudly proclaiming his injuries as a result of the excess of her sisterly affection. Conceit and jealousy were like two plants growing side by side in her mind. Up to this time conceit was sucking all the nourishment, so that jealousy remained weak and starved. That was possibly the reason why Lakshmi wanted to transplant jealousy to Rajani’s heart. But this was no longer necessary. After years of subjection jealousy had managed to over-

throw her rival and was now reigning victorious and supreme in Lakshmi's mind.

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The roles were reversed. The one who had come into this world with laurels, was given a petty part, while she who was humbled at every step, took the leading role in the drama of life.

She knew very well that she would never have to collect, bit by bit, her worldly possessions, and that good luck was her prisoner of war—the war she never fought. Why then should she lower herself before others? Why indeed! So Mahalakshmi never took the trouble of speaking genially to others, gave other people uncalled-for information regarding what she thought of them and still believed that the world would be only too glad to touch the hem of her saree. But she forgot that a devotee is ever anxious for a benevolent glance from the deity. Not that she refrained from showering blessings from above like a contemptuous deity, but she gave with scorn and was not blessed with the knowledge that her alms required to be clothed in true love, that they might attract true devotion to her shrine. To step down from her throne as a suppliant before people, was a condescension to which Lakshmi could not bring herself. People who were capable of accepting her scornful favours were also capable of taking her in with impure praise. But how could she aspire to get pure admiration, for she would then have to commit that middle-class crime, loving others? The girl who was born in the mud house could not tear away the bonds which kept her in touch with mother nature. She had nothing to give her fellow-beings, but she had a sweet smile and sweeter words, which charmed others, and she could love. God did not give her external riches, but He did not forget to compensate her with a beautiful soul. But this was enough to enable her to conquer many hearts.

The fame of Mahalakshmi's beauty, gorgeous as it was like that of a full-blown hibiscus, travelled far and wide on the golden chariot of her wealthy father, but though it was possible to procure ornaments befitting her glory, it was by no means as easy a job to manufacture a fit mate for her. The vision of her parents was so influenced by its dazzling environment that all else appeared black to it. Nobody was fit enough for them. Lakshmi described

her suitors to her friends and remarked "Though they haven't got a penny, they have cheek enough to astound me." Rajani said: "Don't say so, my dear, you never know what might happen."

Lakshmi turned up her nose and replied "I hope I have sufficient length of rope to hang myself with."

Sivasundar had neither cash nor land, but that did not prevent his possession of a sound physique, an intelligent and well-stocked brain, and a large heart. From every point of view he well deserved the name of Man.

His mother had invited a few girls one evening, along with whom came Lakshmi and Rajani. It was not unknown to Lakshmi how Rajani gave her beauty a set-off, so she managed to enter the house with Rajani by her side. She looked, in her diamonds and her silk dress of virgin white, as glorious as the goddess *Lakshmi* when she rose out of the ocean peeping through the petals of a white lotus in the mysterious dawn of creation. Sivasundar had lately arrived in his village after years of absence due to his education. He was, at the moment of this radiant invasion, trying to fix a creeper against the wicker-work fences of their house, when this girl figure flashed past his vision like a silver cloud with the moon shining through it. His intoxicated mind was only half conscious for a moment of the presence of Rajani, who followed Lakshmi like the dark shadow cast by a luminous orb. Rajani shrank within herself at this unexpected sight of Sivasundar. Mahalakshmi looked up and met his glance, but she saw in it only the homage due to her by right. She would have felt interested in Sivasundar, had he been failing in giving her her due, but not otherwise.

Sivasundar threw away the creeper and went to gather information about the beauty who dazzled him so.

When everybody had gone away, Sivasundar accosted his sister and asked her "I say, who were the two light and shadow girls?" The sister answered generously, "Don't talk in that silly poetic strain. I don't remember having seen any light-and-shadow girl. If you mean anybody among Sashi, Lakshmi, Rajani, etc., I may tell you about them." But when she met her mother, she calmly said "Ma, dada wants to marry Lakshmi. So try and get it arranged." The parents started negotiations and Sivasundar made no objection.

The lord of the Red House invited them and talked the matter over. The exchange value of Sivasundar was discussed at length and a bargain was struck, but the lady of the house, Lakshmi's mother, said "How will my daughter stay in a house like theirs? Ask the bridegroom to put up here in our house, or build him a decent house." This upset everything. The parents of Sivasundar found little to complain of in the second alternative, but the young man himself said "It would be impossible for a person who would have to do manual labour to live in a palace even if it were a gift from his father-in-law." This gave a new impetus to the controversy. While they were playing cards at Lakshmi's, Rajani asked Lakshmi in a whisper "I hear that you are going to marry Mani's brother. Is it true? If so, I shall be so glad, for isn't he just a splendid fellow?" Lakshmi kept up-to-date information about the matter and hence knew all about the affair. She was rather displeased with Sivasundar, but being the bride had to keep silent. Now she got this opportunity to give vent to her anger and said rather loudly "Oh, he has got neither a house nor anything. May be he is learned and handsome, but will he feed on his knowledge and beauty? Not only that, he is as vain as a cock. Do you know what he says? 'I won't accept a house from my father-in-law.' He is free to say so, but why then this hankering after a rich man's daughter? No one in our family has ever lived in a mud house, neither shall I. No, not for him."

Rajani got frightened lest some one heard what Lakshmi said, for she was speaking very loudly now. So she pressed her palms against Lakshmi's mouth and said "Hush, there will be an awful row if some one hears." Lakshmi felt that she had crossed the limits of bridely decency, but she was not willing to own up this fault. So she said "Much I care, if it is heard!"

Very soon, this dialogue gained publicity, and Sivasundar was not denied the pleasure of a detailed account. His ideal had already suffered through her connection with higgling and bargaining. At the malignant touch of this new knowledge of her sweet temperament, the romantic picture that Sivasundar had drawn of Lakshmi became discoloured and ugly. He said "I don't want a haughty princess. I would prefer a poor mate for my poor self."

Rajani's father never expected to get a son-

in-law like Sivasundar, but that was no reason why he should not welcome him with outstretched arms. While the sky remains flooded with the brilliance of the sun, who ever notices the dim presence of the stars? But when it becomes dark, the same neglected myriads adorn the sky with their diamond flicker. Sivasundar was no longer under the spell of Lakshmi's beauty, and so now he remembered the shadow—Rajani. He remembered, how he had seen her often but never desired her sight. He did not fall in love with her at first sight, but in spite of that he went to her father as a suitor to claim her as his youth's choice.

Lakshmi was not very glad when she heard of this latest development, but she was able to find some food for her conceit even in this. All her childhood Rajani had to be satisfied with the rejected toys of Lakshmi and today when she was choosing her companion for life, she was getting the same—a man whom Lakshmi had rejected. But who rejected whom? This impertinent question troubled her proud soul incessantly. Was it not an insult to Lakshmi, this eager welcome of Rajani? But one should not trouble about a person who could not get a better bride than Rajani. Lakshmi found consolation by strangling the question in this logical manner.

After the marriage was over, every one assembled in a room along with the newly married couple. Lakshmi appeared on the scene, resplendent in her profusion of jewellery, and the wretched mud house was bathed as it were in a golden current of moon-light. Everybody present, young or old, man or woman, drank deep of this spring of splendour. Sivasundar turned his eyes upon her along with others. For a moment his eyes rested there, as if petrified. Was this an embodied flame or a woman of flesh and blood? He was not sure which. Lakshmi had never before taken any interest in Sivasundar's personal appearance. But now when she played her eyes critically over Rajani's husband, she was forced to admit for the first time that he really was very handsome. Still her eyes seemed to say "How dare you desire an illustrious being like me? You have got your deserts in Rajani."

Sivasundar lowered his eyes. Lakshmi glanced all around her and discovered with satisfaction the presence of universal admiration in the eyes which were undoubtedly giving her the laurels of the day. But did Sivasundar do the same, did he offer her

his oblation as well? She was unable to discover any trace of it anywhere in Sivasundar's momentary glance, eager as she was to find it

How long is it possible to defer the marriage of a girl? Lakshmi's father had at last to choose from a long list the son of a Zamindar. His ancestry was good and he was not deficient in good looks either. Of course he could claim no educational career, but was that necessary? Moreover, he was young and there was time enough to study, if he so chose. And it was nothing uncommon in a rich man's son to race and gamble. He was therefore fixed upon as the fit match for the matchless Mahalakshmi.

Evil minds got an opportunity to indulge in comparison. Though no one dared to say anything publicly about the affairs of this wealthy house, it came to be whispered into Lakshmi's ears that, though her would-be lord had a noble pedigree, he was in no way fit to hold the candle to Sivasundar. Lakshmi could not inwardly deny the rumour its truth. She had seen the young man. But was he as handsome as Sivasundar? Where was that athletic build and the tall and straight appearance? This man looked more like a lump of butter than a human being. There was more expression in the dial of a watch than there was in his round face. Where was that keen intelligent look which Lakshmi found so admirable in Sivasundar and where the reputation of culture and high education? Her feminine instinct impressed this relentless fact upon her mind that a pink complexion and a heavy banking account are not any of the ingredients that compose a man. But this knowledge came too late. The one who was lost was lost for ever. She would have to marry, and if she refused this overfed human tabula rasa, there was no certainty that she would get one like Sivasundar.

She tried to make the best of a bad bargain, but her tears could not be kept back. She beat her forehead in front of her stone deity in a frenzied outburst of insulted pride and sorrow, and cried aloud, "O my God, why this punishment? Why didst thou show me heaven, if hell only was to be my portion?" She wept much but was married all the same. Rajani came to her marriage. Her only ornaments were a pair of slim bracelets and a necklace of golden beads. But her whole being was changed as if touched by the fabulous touch-stone. Never had Lakshmi seen

such a smile upon her sad face. It was as if the smile of triumphant love which adorned the heavenly countenance of Uma when she got Siva after years of hard penance, had, by some miraculous chance, come to illumine the mortal lips of Rajani. Lakshmi mourned her lost treasure and, somehow, she could not bring herself to look Rajani in the face.

Mahalakshmi entered her new life, but very soon she began to realise the false nature of the stage gear. What she at first took to be a real garden full of sweet-smelling flowers and bird music, turned out to be a collection of dead branches and artificial flowers sprayed over with imported perfumery. She knew for certain that her life was spoiled, and she burned with envy as she thought of the smile that proclaimed the reign of bliss in Rajani's heart. She could not forget the insult which Rajani's happiness offered to her proud soul. She became restive in her husband's palace, and, finding no solace there, very often went to spend weeks with her parents. But the sweet memories of her golden childhood afforded her no shelter from the tortures of her disappointed heart. She knew not that a "sorrow's crown of sorrow was remembering happier things." In her case, her life in her father's house became all the more painful because there she met Rajani and her glorious smile.

When she was young, jealousy was followed quickly by love and love by jealousy in her mind, but, as she grew older, the spring of love in her slowly dried up under the scorching rays of disappointment. Jealousy in her was becoming bloodthirsty and wanted to tear open the happy hearts of others. The fire that burned in her soul wanted to spread its infernal wings and embrace the rest of creation within their devastating folds. But the fire was in her own mind and could not be transferred.

When Rajani smiled and talked to her friends, Mahalakshmi invoked the god of evils and prayed "O god of destruction, I can no longer live in the light of her smile. I have never done injury to anybody. Then why should I burn in this everlasting fire? Take away that smile, god! Take away that smile!"

(3)

The smile which Lakshmi had to wear upon her face to deceive the world, became unnecessary through the intervention of

Death The husband who, though unable to do anything remarkable for her, was at least able to give her the right of painting the vermilion mark upon her forehead, took a sudden farewell and went—who knows where? Her last touches of vanity went with him She came back to the Red House and took shelter in a small room facing the garden Not as the proud queenly being she was, but as a failure in the struggle for happiness and with a bleeding heart But Fortune had another card up her mysterious sleeve to complete her victory over the circumstances that had made Lakshmi great from her birth. Rajani, who was ever her rival, now lived in a big stone house which could be seen always through apertures of Lakshmi's room

Mahalakshmi never went to that house if she could help it But the house stood rearing its proud head in the skies directly before her window, and she was forced to see it She could see, whenever she looked out of the window, Rajani, with valuable ornaments all over her homely figure, engaged in rocking the cradle of her boy or teasing the studious Sivasundar In the morning sun the young wife was seen hurrying about her household duties, in the evening twilight she was seen bowing her head to the sacred Tulsi plant There was never a cloud to darken her happy smile, the same smile which Lakshmi had seen on the day of her own marriage Lakshmi wanted to tear up her own beautiful body when she saw how Rajani decorated her plain self with ornaments What should she do with her beauty if the right to display it was denied her, along with the right to put on jewellery? When she had the right, she never exercised it, for what was mere jewellery to a girl who never got any man worth the name to adorn her Rajani's ornaments clung to her like the thousand loving thoughts and caresses of her beloved But was there ever a shadow of any such thing to be found in Lakshmi's diamonds? And to-day, even the right was gone, and cruel Fate was carrying her merciless joke to its extreme by parading the unsightly Rajani in all her good fortune before her wounded vanity

When Rajani played with her children, Mahalakshmi stamped her feet in fruitless rage "The witch! How could she thus usurp all that should be mine by right!" She wanted to strangle Rajani and take away all the children Not that she was overfond of children, but simply because they were Rajani's and not

hers But her rage reached its climax when she saw Sivasundar exchanging loving glances with Rajani "Where did he get such a store of tender glances for that thing Rajani? What was there in that ugly face to give him so much pleasure? O God, I can't stand their happiness any longer Oh injustice! That I should be the only sufferer while all others live in bliss! Oh torture! O ever-wakeful deity, do justice unto me or wherefore art thou called all-seeing and all-powerful?"

Like the full moon coming out of a dark curtain of clouds, the neglected youth of this young widow, was showing itself more and more fully through her tortured existence As she lay weeping alone on the floor day after day, she remembered the days of her childhood, the story of the Light-and-Shadow Girls as heard from her playmates, and Sivasundar, who was the ardent admirer of the Light—herself Then she was not so beautiful, nor did she then look vainly for a touch of happiness, but it was then that all, love, happiness, all, awaited her pleasure But now she has got nothing, nothing except a gloomy vacuum in her heart and a burning sense of mad jealousy The golden lamp, in which the Light shined, is broken and is useless now So the dark and ugly Shadow reigns supreme, while Light embraces oblivion Sivasundar passed her doors everyday as he went into and out of his house His garden was just by the garden of Mahalakshmi The red pathways of his garden, which meandered through the beautiful flower-beds, were every morning the scene of Sivasundar's departure to his place of business As his office brougham rolled past the gates of his house, he leaned out of the window to get a momentary glance of his wife and children who stood at a bay window facing the garden He could see the baby vainly trying to wave him a farewell with his rebellious arms going off in a wrong direction He could see the soft chubby figure endeavouring after a stable equilibrium by hanging by the loose end of his mother's saree When he could no more see them, he leaned back against the soft cushions of his carriage-seat smiling pleasantly It was this stamp of happiness upon his face that Mahalakshmi saw every day as he passed In the evening, when the sound of the approaching wheels announced the arrival of Sivasundar, his children shouted in chorus, "Ma, father is coming, come quick" And she always came quickly to lighten up his arrival with her welcome presence

These daily scenes appeared before Mahalakshmi's eyes as a weird pageant which sang into her ears a dolorous voiceless song "All these were to be yours! But would not the usurping hands that stole your rightful possessions meet ruin, utter ruin!" She cried "Hasten it God! I cannot suffer this any more"

We do not know whether any evil god really came to answer her prayers, but the gentle breeze that swayed every twig harmoniously in the happy family of Sivasundar, blew one day over the flower-beds of his life in a devastating fury. That day found nobody playing with the children in the garden, heard no ring of joyous laughter and witnessed no exchange of loving glances. No wheels crunched on the red gravel and no child came to give its father a farewell embrace with its plump soft arms. All was gloomy where erstwhile gaiety reigned. The servants ran about with a grave expression on their faces. The children fell asleep, neglected and crying.

From the early hours of the morning Mahalakshmi looked several times towards the stone house, but was astonished to find the strange gloom which pervaded it. Why this sudden drying up of the springs of eternal joy? Mahalakshmi grew restless to peer through the opaque walls of the building and discover the cause of this mysterious silence. She had become so accustomed to the soft murmuring of the gay brooklet that flowed past her retreat that the want of its accompaniment made it hard for her to prevent the sorrowful melody of her own life from becoming discordant.

Mahalakshmi made enquiries. Some one said "What has happened? That which happens to the carcanet when the captain jewel is lost. Evil has touched their happy life. The lord of the house is seriously ill and probably will not survive. Whose poisonous breath is it, that has brought this misfortune upon them?" Mahalakshmi thought, "Whose poisonous breath was it?" Whose breath was it that poisoned her own life? But that question gave her no consolation. She hurried to her friend's house after many years. Rajani came out of her room like the incarnation of sorrow and clasped her friend's arms. She said "Lakshmi, we were playmates from our very childhood. I forgot you during the happy years of life, but to-day when grim death darkens my doors, we meet again, my friend

In your youth you gave me all you had and now some mysterious instinct makes me sure that your love will not fail me in this crisis when my happiness stands facing tragedy."

Mahalakshmi could not say, "All you have, came from me, you thief!" She slowly entered the room where Sivasundar awaited the unknown mystery of death. Is this the same handsome Sivasundar whose radiance entered her heart for the first time amidst the joyous revelries of his marriage? Is this the same man whom with all her offended dignity Lakshmi never succeeded in throwing away like a rejected toy? Is this the same man, now in the clutches of cruel, relentless Death? Where is his glorious smile, the intellectual gleam of his eyes?

The Sivasundar who once looked at her with worshipful eyes lay neglected in some forgotten corner of her heart for these many years, but he suddenly came out from his seclusion into the foreground of her memory and stood shining above this pale victim of death in radiant contrast. She remembered that it was she herself who first awakened love in his heart. But rejected, he poured out his love to the last drop into the life of another, leaving Mahalakshmi, his first love, the owner of a scorched and thirsty soul. He was dying. But did she want this? Did she pray for this fate to befall her beloved? Her heart throbbed in acute agony and her soul cried out "O foolish deluded woman, what have you done? You did not want this. I feel now what it was that I prayed for. I wanted your love, my beloved, the love which was born at my sight but was lost to me for ever. But my mad jealousy struck me blind and sent me in the wrong path, my love! I desired you and not your death!" She could no longer live in the light of this new revelation of her heart's desire, and she went back home. She shed the tears of a thousand years of tragedy in one single day and prayed and suffered and writhed in agony "My God, look not so relentlessly on me! Crush me, but let him live! Let the hell fires consume me and I will not flinch, but give him back his life! Let all the evils evoked by me turn back upon me, but spare him!"

But he did not come back. He died. Years ago Mahalakshmi had breathed a prayer to appease her jealousy, and what she had wanted so much was now granted her, but like the traitress of Rome she was crushed by the weight of her reward.

This was a new defeat to her. She had thought that she would cool her burning heart in Rajani's tears, but for each single drop that fell out of Rajani's eyes, Lakshmi shed a thousand. Rajani wept because she had lost her beloved, and Mahalakshmi's life became

flooded with tears—while her mutilated soul gasped "Ah beloved, I am your murderess!"

Translated from the original Bengali by

ASHOKE CHATTOPADHYAY

THE GANAS OR REPUBLICS OF ANCIENT INDIA*

BY BENOY KUMAR SARKAR.

STUDENTS of comparative politics are generally familiar with the norm in the *Realpolitik* of monarchical India. It is well known that the rights of the people and their institutional achievements under the Hindu royalties were generically on a par with those of the nations ruled by the *grand monarch* and such "enlightened despots" as Peter, Frederick and Joseph. The political psychology that lay behind the Hindu institutions was not different in any way from that of the French under the Bourbons or of the Germans till the War of the Liberation.

But it is hardly known among scholars that the Hindu constitution grew along republican or non-monarchical lines also.¹ Let us exclude from our present consideration the patriarchal-democratic "crowned republics" of Vedic India, as well as the *vairjya* or kingless states mentioned in the *Aitareya Brihmana*,² the *koolasamghas*³ (family-soviets or communal republics) and *ganas*⁴ referred to in the *Artha-shāstra*, or the nationalities described in the *Mahābhārata* as "invincible" because of their being constituted on the principle of "equality". Archaeology is now in a position to safely declare that there were at least three periods in the early history of India during which Hindus developed the *vairjya* or *gana* polity of the Hellenic and pre-Imperial Roman type.

To begin with the latest. In the fourth century A D there were "independent" republics with full sovereignty in the Punjab, Eastern Rajputana and Malwa. The central parts of the Punjab were held by the commonwealth of Madrakas. The Yaudheyas⁵ had their territory on both banks of the Sutlej. In the second century Roodra-damana (125-150) had inflicted a defeat on them, but centuries before, they came out brilliantly in India's resistance to Alexander. The Abhirs and the Mālavas were settled between the Chambal and the Betwa. In the teeth of Samodragoopta the Indian Napoleon's *digvijaya* or "conquest of the quarters" (330-75) all these republican nations succeeded in maintaining their autonomy by doing homage and paying tribute. But they lost their sovereignty and became feudatories or protectorates of the Gupta Empire.⁷

The greatest period of Hindu republics lay, however, between the fourth and sixth centuries B C. The republican nationalities of India were thus contemporaneous with Sparta, Athens, Thebes and Rome. And their ultimate extinction through the establishment of the Maurya Empire (B C 323) synchronized with the annihilation of the Greek city states by Philip of Macedon at the battle of Cheronoea (B C 338).

Megasthenes records the Hindu tradition prevailing in his time (B C 302) that during a period of 6042 years from the time of "Dionusos to Sandrokottos"

* A chapter from the author's forthcoming *Political Institutions and Theories of the Hindus*