

UNDER THE BANYAN TREE

The village Somal, nestling away in the forest tracts of Mempi, had a population of less than three hundred. It was in every way a village to make the heart of a rural reformer sink. Its tank, a small expanse of water, right in the middle of the village, served for drinking, bathing, and washing the cattle, and it bred malaria, typhoid, and heaven knew what else. The cottages sprawled anyhow and the lanes twisted and wriggled up and down and strangled each other. The population used the highway as the refuse ground and in the backyard of every house drain water stagnated in green puddles.

Such was the village. It is likely that the people of the village were insensitive, but it is more than likely that they never noticed their surroundings because they lived in a kind of perpetual enchantment. The enchanter was Nambi the storyteller. He was a man of about sixty or seventy. Or was he eighty or one hundred and eighty? Who could say? In a place so much cut off as Somal (the nearest bus-stop was ten miles away), reckoning could hardly be in the familiar measures of time. If anyone asked Nambi what his age was, he referred to an ancient famine or an invasion or the building of a bridge and indicated how high he had stood from the ground at the time.

He was illiterate, in the sense that the written word was a mystery to him; but he could make up a story, in his head, at the rate of one a month; each story took nearly ten days to narrate.

His home was the little temple which was at the very end of the village. No one could say how he had come to regard himself as the owner of the temple. The temple was a very small structure with red-striped walls, with a stone image of the Goddess Shakti in the sanctum. The front portion of the temple was Nambi's home. For aught it mattered any place might be his home; for he was without possessions. All that he possessed was a broom with which he swept the temple; and he had also a couple of dhoties and upper cloth. He spent most of the day in the shade of the banyan which spread out its branches in front of the temple. When he felt hungry he walked into any house that caught his fancy and joined

the family at dinner. When he needed new clothes they were brought to him by the villagers. He hardly ever had to go out in search of company; for the banyan shade served as a clubhouse for the village folk. All through the day people came seeking Nambi's company and squatted under the tree. If he was in a mood for it he listened to their talk and entertained them with his own observations and anecdotes. When he was in no mood he looked at the visitors sourly and asked, 'What do you think I am? Don't blame me if you get no story at the next moon. Unless I meditate how can the Goddess give me a stray? Do you think stories float in the air?' And he moved out to the edge of the forest and squatted there, contemplating the trees.

On Friday evenings the village turned up at the temple for worship, when Nambi lit a score of mud lamps and arranged them around the threshold of the sanctuary. He decorated the image with flowers, which grew wildly in the backyard of the temple. He acted as the priest and offered to the Goddess fruits and flowers brought in by the villagers.

On the nights he had a story to tell, he lit a small lamp and placed it in a niche in the trunk of the banyan tree. Villagers as they returned home in the evening saw this, went home, and said to their wives, 'Now, now, hurry up with the dinner, the storyteller is calling us? As the moon crept up behind the hillock, men, women, and children gathered under the banyan tree. The storyteller would not appear yet. He would be sitting in the sanctum, before the Goddess, with his eyes shut, in deep meditation. He sat thus as long as he liked and when he came out, with his forehead ablaze with ash and vermilion, he took his seat on a stone platform in front of the temple. He opened the story with a question. Jerking his finger towards a vague, faraway destination, he asked, 'A thousand years ago, a stone's throw in that direction, what do you think there was? It was not the weed-covered waste it is now, for donkeys to roll in. It was not the ash-pit it is now. It was the capital of the king...' The king would be Dasaratha, Vikramaditya, Asoka, or anyone that came into the old man's head; the capital was called Kapila, Kridapura, or anything. Opening thus, the old man went on without a pause for three hours. By then brick by brick the palace of the king was raised. The old man described the dazzling durbar hall where sat a hundred vassal kings, ministers, and subjects; in another part of the palace all the musicians in the world assembled and sang; and most of the songs were sung over again by Nambi to his audience; and he described in detail the pictures and trophies that hung on the walls of the palace .. ,

It was story-building on an epic scale. The first day barely conveyed the setting of the tale, and Nambi's audience as yet had no idea who were coming into the story. As the moon slipped behind the trees of Mempi Forest, Nambi said, 'Now friends, Mother says this will do for the day? He abruptly rose, went in, lay down, and fell asleep long before the babble of the crowd ceased.

The light in the niche would again be seen two or three days later, and again and again throughout the bright half of the month. Kings and heroes, villains and fairy-like women, gods in human form, saints and assassins, jostled each other in that world which was created under the banyan tree. Nambi's voice rose and fell in an exquisite rhythm, and the moonlight and the hour completed the magic. The villagers laughed with Nambi, they wept with him, they adored the heroes, cursed the villains, groaned when the conspirator had his initial success, and they sent up to the gods a heartfelt prayer for a happy ending . . .

On the day when the story ended, the whole gathering went into the sanctum and prostrated before the Goddess . . .

By the time the next moon peeped over the hillock, Nambi was ready with another story. He never repeated the same kind of story or brought in the same set of persons, and the village folk considered Nambi a sort of miracle, quoted his words of wisdom, and lived on the whole in an exalted plane of their own, though their life in all other respects was hard and drab.

And yet it had gone on for years and years. One noon he lit the lamp in the tree. The audience came. The old man took his seat and began the story. '. . . When King Vikramaditya lived, his minister was . . .' He paused. He could not get beyond it. He made a fresh beginning. There was the king . . .' he said, repeated it, and then his words trailed off into a vague mumbling. 'What has come over me?' he asked pathetically. 'Oh, Mother, great Mother, why do I stumble and falter? I know the story. I had the whole of it a moment ago. What was it about? I can't understand what has happened? He faltered and looked so miserable that his audience said, 'Take your own time. You are perhaps tired?

'Shut up!' he cried. 'Am I tired? Wait a moment; I will tell you the story presently.' Following this there was utter silence. Eager faces looked up at him. 'Don't look at me!' he flared up. Somebody gave him a tumbler of milk. The audience waited patiently. This was a new experience. Some persons expressed their sympathy aloud. Some persons began to talk among themselves. Those who sat in the outer edge of the crowd silently slipped away. Gradually, as it neared midnight, others followed this example. Nambi sat staring at the ground, his head bowed in thought. For the first time he realized that he was old. He felt he would never more be able to control his thoughts or express them cogently. He looked up. Everyone had gone except his friend Mari, the blacksmith. 'Mari, why aren't you also gone?'

Mari apologized for the rest: 'They didn't want to tire you; so they have gone away?'

Nambi got up. 'You are right. Tomorrow I will make it up. Age, age. What is my age? It has come on suddenly? He pointed at his head and said, 'This says, "Old fool, don't think I shall be your servant anymore. You will be my servant hereafter?" It is disobedient and treacherous.

He lit the lamp in the niche next day. The crowd assembled under the banyan faithfully. Nambi had spent the whole day in meditation. He had been fervently praying to the Goddess not to desert him. He began the story. He went on for an hour without a stop. He felt greatly relieved, so much so that he interrupted his narration to remark, 'Oh, friends. The Mother is always kind. I was seized with a foolish fear . . ? and continued the story. In a few minutes he felt dried up. He struggled hard: 'And then ... and then ... what happened?' He stammered. There followed a pause lasting an hour. The audience rose without a word and went home. The old man sat on the stone brooding till the cock crew. I can't blame them for it? He muttered to himself. 'Can they sit down here and mope all night?' Two days later he gave another instalment of the story, and that, too, lasted only a few minutes. The gathering dwindled. Fewer persons began to take notice of the lamp in the niche. Even these came only out of a sense of duty. Nambi realized that there was no use in prolonging the struggle. He brought the story to a speedy and premature end.

He knew what was happening. He was harrowed by the thoughts of his failure. I should have been happier if I had dropped dead years ago, he said to himself. Mother, why have you struck me dumb . . . ? He shut himself up in the sanctum, hardly ate any food, and spent the greater part of the day sitting motionless in meditation.

The next moon peeped over the hillock, Nambi lit the lamp in the niche. The villagers as they returned home saw the lamp, but only a handful turned up at night. 'Where are the others?' the old man asked. 'Let us wait? He waited. The moon came up. His handful of audience waited patiently. And then the old man said, 'I won't tell the story today, nor tomorrow unless the whole village comes here. I insist upon it. It is a mighty story. Everyone must hear it.' Next day he went up and down the village street shouting. 'I have a most wonderful tale to tell tonight. Come one and all; don't miss it ...' This personal appeal had a great effect. At night a large crowd gathered under the banyan. They were happy that the storyteller had regained his powers. Nambi came out of the temple when everyone had settled and said: It is the Mother who gives the gifts; and it is she who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is struck dumb when she has nothing to say. But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone? Goddess be thanked ... These are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story.' He rose and went into the sanctum. His audience hardly understood what he meant. They sat there till they became weary. And then some of them got up and stepped into the sanctum. There the storyteller sat with eyes shut. 'Aren't you going to tell us a story?' they asked. He opened his eyes, looked at them, and shook his head. He indicated by gesture that he had spoken his last words.

When he felt hungry, he walked into any cottage and silently sat down for food, and walked away the moment he had eaten. Beyond this he had hardly anything to demand of his fellow beings. The rest of his life (he lived for a few more years) was one great consummate silence.

- R.K. Narayan

About the Story

‘Under the Banyan Tree’ is an interesting story about a storyteller, Nambi, who enraptures his village audience with gripping tales. The author gives a graphic picture of the village, Somal Nambi’s daily routine, and his story-telling sessions. As if by some mutual, unannounced agreement, the villagers take upon themselves to cater to Nambi’s needs for food and clothes in return for the entertaining tales. Nambi is old and eccentric but alert. The turning point in Nambi’s life comes when he fails to concoct a story and falls silent. Narayan has painted Nambi and his storytelling sessions with an undercurrent of humour. One feels desolate, however, along with the villagers, to see Nambi fall silent, losing his art of storytelling forever.

R. K. Narayan, the author of the story, is a famous Indian English novelist who became a household name after the telecast of *Malgudi Days*.

Glossary

nestling: situated in a position that is sheltered

tracts: region

sprawled: spread ungracefully

twisted : took a curved course

wiggled: twisted and turned

perpetual: everlasting, uninterrupted

enchantment: charm, delight

enchanter: a person who charms or bewitches, especially a magician

reckoning: estimation

sanctum: (here) the inner room of the temple where the idol is kept

ought: anything

sourly: unpleasantly

anecdote: story or short account of an entertaining incident

epic scale: grand scale

babble: chatter

jostle: to push roughly against others in a crowd

prostrated: lay flat on the ground, especially in submission

cogently: clearly and forcefully

mope: to sit around listlessly, with no particular purpose; sulk

dwindle: to decline, to become less

harrowed: distressed, upset

dotard: a person who is feeble-minded from old age
consummate: complete
puddles: small amount of water that has collected in one place
fathered: became less effective
flared up: grew angry
tumbler: a glass for drinking out
cogently: strongly; clearly
fervently: showing strong feelings
desert: leave
expanse: wide and open area
strangled: not clear
stagnated: stopped developing

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

1. The village Somal had a population of—
(a) less than three hundred (b) less than three thousand
(c) less than two hundred (d) less than five hundred
2. Nambi lived in a—
(a) palace (b) little temple
(c) beautiful house (d) hut
3. Mari, mentioned in the story 'Under the Banyan Tree' is a —
(a) Blacksmith (b) merchant
(c) bureaucrat (d) teacher

(B) Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words each:

1. Why does R. K. Narayan call Nambi an 'enchanter'?
2. Why does Nambi stop telling stories at the end?
3. How has Narayan portrayed village life?
4. How old is Nambi?
5. What is the frequency with which Nambi can create a story and how long does his narration last?
6. Where does Nambi live?
7. Why does Nambi say, '. . . Age, age. What is my age? It has come on suddenly'?

(C) Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. How do the villagers look upon Nambi? What is their opinion of the man?
2. Describe Nambi's daily routine and the ritual performed on Friday evenings.
3. Describe the second day of Nambi's failure to tell the story.
4. Describe Nambi's life after he stops telling stories. Do the villagers reject him?

(D) Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. How does Nambi announce that he has a tale ready? Describe the congregation of villagers and the style of Nambi's narration.
2. Draw a character sketch of Nambi.

(E) Say whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False in the bracket:

1. The story 'Under the Banyan Tree' gives a graphic description of the village Somal. []
2. Nambi is a storyteller. []
3. "What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone" is a statement spoken to the villagers by Nambi. []
4. After Nambi stops telling stories, he takes to begging. []
5. After Nambi stops telling stories, his life becomes restless. []