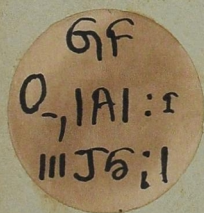


LEAVES FROM KAMBAN

Renderings into English

from

THE TAMIL RAMAVATARA BY KAMBAN



KAMBAR KAZHAGAM

MADRAS - 8.

(1955)

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Issued by

THE KAMBAR KAZHAGAM, MADRAS,

on the first day of

THE KAMBAR CONFERENCE, MADRAS,

14th November, 1955,

in the presence of

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD,

President of India.

Translations by

A. SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Principal & Professor of English,

V.O.C. College, Tuticorin.

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PREFATORY NOTE

This booklet of translations is merely the inauguration of a work that the Kambar Kazhagam, Madras, has taken up. We are proud that we start it in the distinguished presence of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President of India.

The work is so difficult that it seems almost impossible of achievement. But it has to be done. We are happy that we have been able to persuade Prof. A. Srinivasa Raghavan to undertake it. Poet, playwright and literary critic, Professor of English, and a scholar in Tamil who has devoted years to the study of Kambar, Prof. Srinivasa Raghavan, we feel, is eminently fitted for the task.

But we have just begun. Our purpose is to present in English some two thousand stanzas (8,000 lines) of Kambar's work. We hope to achieve it before the next Kambar Conference. We turn to all lovers of literature for help and guidance.

Madras,
14th November, 1955.

M. BHAKTAVATSALAM,
President, Kambar Kazhagam.

INTRODUCTION

KAMBAN

Kamban is the greatest among Tamil poets and his name is widely known among the Tamils. Yet, very little is known of his life. It is generally accepted that he was born in Therezhundur in the heart of Tamilnad and that he secured the patronage of one Sadayappa, a nobleman of the time. All the other stories current about him are only stories, the crystallisation into folklore of the reverence in which he was held by generations of Tamils. Some of these stories are beautiful, some poignant while not a few are crude, but all of them, whatever their emotional or literary quality, have no biographical value. They are just legends, nothing more. Even about the age in which Kamban lived, opinion is divided, one school of critics claiming that he belongs to the ninth and another assigning him to the twelfth century A.D.

RAMAVATARA

Kamban chose Rama's life as the theme of his epic *Ramavataara* (The Descent of Rama) and got the details of the story from Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*. But the whole story was recreated by him in Tamil and his long epic of some 42,000 lines enshrines all that is significant in Tamil tradition and culture. He is the most learned of Tamil poets and a study of his epic is 'the last reward of consummated scholarship.' He has distilled into his poem all that is great in the literature prior

him in Tamil and has exploited to the full his heritage of Vaishnava¹ thought and philosophy, the simplicity, directness and ethical leanings of the earliest Tamil poets and the mystical symbolism and lyrical intensity of the Alwars and Nayanmars.² With a remarkable knowledge of human nature, an unfailing sense of the dramatic, a keen mind reaching out towards profound truths with ease and precision, and a diction rich and multitoned, Kamban has created a spacious poem and while expressing through it the highest achievements of the Tamil people, has at the same time tried to probe and present the mystery of human life.

¹ One school of Hindu religious thought.

² Tamil mystical poets, the Alwars being Vaishnava and the Nayanmars Saiva.

LEAVES FROM KAMBAN

I

THE RIVER SARAYU

The first three cantos of the first book of Kamban's *Ramavatara* are given to a description of the river, the country and the capital city of the land of Kosala where Rama, the hero of the epic, is born.

It is Kamban's Utopia that is pictured here. As in all Utopias, the best that the poet knew in his own country is extended into an ideal in his description of Kosala.

Let us sing of the river,
The river of Kosala,
Of a land where the mind-fretting arrows of the five senses
And the trouble-pointed glance of bejewelled women
Do not stray from the straight.

White as the Lord wearing the sacred ash,
The cloud went
To the sounding pastures of the sea
And came back
Dark as the Lord,
~~He~~ who wears as his strength
Her, the sandal-covered one,
Goddess of wealth and beauty.

Like the bounteous
Who rejoice in giving away to the uttermost
All that they have,
The clouds gave.
And the waters fell
As though the sky were digging
With innumerable silver pick-axes
At the gold of the veined mountain.

And the river went reeling,
 Like one drunk,
 The honeybees swarming over it,
 As around a wine-smeared mouth,
 Breaking bounds,
 With wild energy,
 Muddled, unsteady and swift.

Covered with flowers and soft pollen,
 Honey and red gold,
 And gems, large and lustrous,
 The river ran, a gleaming rainbow.

Mountain born, merging in the sea,
 One in its origin, ultimately one,
 The river spread over the land
 In many a fork and tank and pool,
 Even as the One Truth, the Transcendent,
 Shines in various names and forms
 When great faiths speak of the Ineffable,
 Each one in its way.

Among groves scattering pollen,
 And champak woods,
 Through pools where the lotus was unfolding,
 And fragrant water ways,
 Among madhavi hedges, clumps of palm and fields,
 The life-giving river wandered,
 Like the one stream of Life
 Flowing through all creation,
 Vivifying the inert.

THE LAND OF KOSALA

It is the land sung by Valmiki,
 He who fashioned the four-folded measure
 And won the ear even of the *Devas*
 With the nectarean sweetness of his verse.
 I sing of that land, I, the dumb one.
 Truly, the wine of love hath made me giddy.

On the field-ridges, pearls ;
 And conches where the brook leaps through the dyke ;
 Silt of red gold on the bunds of the great water,
 And in the pools stirred by the buffalo
 A riot of scarlet lilies,
 Coral on the glebe, swans on paddy stretches,
 And honey, deep red, on the green sward,
 And swarm on swarm of drunken bees
 In the fragrant copse.

The murmur of the river,
 Ploughmen calling in the fields,
 The gush of the sugarcane juice from the presses,
 The swell of the conch
 Bulls leaping wild and tumultuous
 And the splash of the buffalo in the water—
 These mingled in a delightful medley
 Over the face of the tilled earth.

And there, the spirit of the farm-land
 Sat enthroned in her court.
 Lotuses were flaming torches
 Held aloft to light the stage ;
 Blue wavelets were curtains ;
 Honeybees were minstrels,
 Their voices sweeter than the *yazh* ;

Rain clouds played the soft drum ;
 The dancers were the peacocks,
 And dark-violet water-lilies
 With large and wondering eye,
 The rapt spectators.

A land of rain,
 Rain of honey, cool and tender, from the flowers,
 Of gems and gold in the wayside,
 Rain from the winds, of renovating *amrita*,
 And from tales and poems,
 Of mellow fruits for the ear.

Even as sparks of life tending upward,
 Evolving ceaselessly,
 Are born in varying environment
 To work out their karma
 In their march to the Ultimate,
 Even so,
 Everywhere in the land were found,
 Far from their place of origin,
 Fish from the sea,
 Honey from the hills,
 Curds from the pastures,
 And treacle and toddy from the tilled land.

Keener and more irresistible,
 The fair eyes of Kosala women
 Mocked at fate ;
 Their gait scorned the she-elephant,
 Their breasts, sheaves of lotus,
 And their faces, the moon at the full.

A land where bounty was unknown
 For there was no dearth ;
 Where valour was still

For there was no foe ;
 Where truth was not
 For there was no lie ;
 Where no one was a seer
 For the light of wisdom was everywhere.

THE CITY AYODHYA

He, the Refuge of Rishis
 Of great wisdom and austerity,
 Of those who through righteousness and pity
 Have weeded out the senses,
 He, the Lotus-eyed,
 Descended to the earth
 And for years innumerable ruled here.
 Is there a city then
 Even in the golden land of the gods,
 Comparable in wealth and beauty
 To Ayodhya, city invincible ?

* * * *

The king of this land of Kosala is Dasaratha. Childless for long, he performs a *Yaga* (Sacrifice) and is blessed with four sons — Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Chatrugna. Rama, according to Kamban, is Lord Vishnu descended to the earth as man to put an end to the evil race of *rakshasas*.

* * * *

II

THE SLAYING OF TATAKA

The slaying of Tataka is the first heroic exploit of Rama. Visvamitra, the sage, is taking Rama and his brother Lakshmana to his hermitage so that they might give him protection from the *rakshasas* during the sacrificial rites he intends to perform. On the way, lies the barren land in which Tataka, the evil monster, lives.

And as the far-flung dawn unfolded
Its petals of light
Over the spacious eastern slopes,
They reached a spit of burning land
Where floated all through the year
Summer's ensign,
The sun that sucked dry the marrow of the earth.
A land so utterly hot that
A look at it seared the eyes and a thought
Shrivelled the heart even of the fire god.
The sun tore at the earth ;
And within the rents, lay scattered
Gems fallen from the fiery, poison-crest
Of the king of snakes and the nether world,
Gleaming like lightning.
The deep rents gushed blood-red,
As though earth were bleeding from
A thousand gaping wounds.
Like the mind of a sage
Who has cut through the thorny wilds
Of good and evil,
And shattered the three-fold bastions,
In his march to liberation,

The land lay stark and pulseless ;
 And parched as the hearts of
 Women who sell their bodies for gold.

Bowing to the sage, Rama spoke :
 ' Hath Lord Shiva
 He who wears on his locks the swirling Ganga flood
 Burnt this region with his eye ?
 How hath this region run to waste
 Like the ill-starred land of an evil king ? '

Visvamitra answered :
 ' A brute woman,
 A monster with the strength of a thousand mammoths,
 Dark and terrible as Death,
 Her days an endless maze of slaughter,
 She is the cause '.

Visvamitra gives at length the story of this woman, *Tataka*, who though born a *Yaksha* has through her wickedness and love of evil been condemned along with her cruel sons, *Maricha* and *Suvahu*, to the low, bestial life of the *rakshasas* by *Agastya*, the sage. He concludes :

' Parted from her doughty sons
 And ever brooding in anger over the curse,
 She came here
 Her heart on fire,
 And on all the ways of this forest dark
 Shot up tongues of flame
 And it lay a howling ruin.
 And she, the spirit of this desolation,
 Wanders, a gathering together in woman's form
 Of sins unplumbed by the mind of man.

Raging as a sea
 From which twin mountains rise
 And above them two horned moons,
 A riot of waters thunderous
 Throwing out poison foam,
 Over which burns fiercely the destroying fire
 Of the last day,
 She, the cruel one, Tataka,
 Dwells here in this desert,
 Her hand, encircled with snakes,
 Shaking the trident.

Shaking his locks flower-fastened,
 Honeyed and fragrant,
 The prince, He who now had donned the bow
 In the Hand that wears the Conch,
 The prince asked :
 ' Where doth she live, this woman
 Who works this evil ? '
 And even while the sage,
 Who had imprisoned in his mind the five ones,
 Spoke ' She lives here on this ridge ',
 Tataka came,
 Moving as a dark mountain on fire.
 Her anklets clashed on the rocks ;
 Her feet bit into the wriggling earth
 And in the pits that formed
 Rushed waters from the sea ;
 The Spirit of Death, fiery one, fearless,
 Sought shelter, trembling, in the caves ;
 And as she moved,
 The firm hills, unhinged,
 Came in her wake.
 And from her rose a great cry

That shook the Heavens and space
 And the seven worlds.
 She laughed.
 And with her eyes on
 The sharp-pointed three-pronged death in her hand,
 She ground her teeth
 And opening her cavernous mouth, spoke :
 ' Here to this wild
 Over which extends my sway not to be crossed,
 You have come.
 Is it to make good the dearth here of living flesh,
 Of appetising morsel for me ?
 Or hath Fate forced you here to meet your end ? '
 Saying this, she grasped her trident
 In act to throw.
 Earth shook under her feet,
 The great hills broke to dust,
 And the flame from her eyes
 Seared the clouds.

Rama knew Viswamitra's mind
 But he did not send the sharp shaft
 That would drink Tataka's life.
 ' Yea ', he thought ' She hath started it,
 The work that threatens our lives,
 Still, she is a woman,'
 And Viswamitra, learned in the four Vedas,
 Saw all that passed in Rama's mind
 And spoke :
 ' Listen, prince.
 She who has poured into her mouth
 Countless living things,
 Blotting their trace on the earth,
 (Can sin be more heinous ?)

Dost thou think she is a woman ?
 Woman indeed !
 Long-hair plaited, guileless and innocent !
 That way lies simplicity.

Listen.

I speak, not in blind anger,
 But in the name of eternal *dharma*.
 Your cooling off is unrighteous.
 Kill this *rakshasi*, there lies your duty.'
 And the prince spoke :
 ' Master, to me the Truth !
 Thy word is sacred as the *Vedas*.
 To follow it is to me the way of *dharma*'.

Tataka felt the mind
 Of the prince of Ganga land,
 And straight she threw her flaming trident
 With fire from her cruel eye.
 In a flash,
 The prince's bow bent, the arrow flew,
 Too swift for sight,
 And the trident that the evil one had snatched
 From the hand of Death,
 Fell to pieces ;
 And this they saw.
 Tataka, dark as night,
 Poured in an instant a rain of rocks.
 And then the prince drew a shaft
 Swift and flaming as the Word
 And sent it against the monster, dark as darkness ;
 The arrow pierced her granite heart
 And sped beyond,
 Swift as wisdom poured
 By the good in unlettered ears
 Drains away, traceless.

And Tataka fell,
 As at the touch of the storm wind
 On the Day of Dissolution,
 A huge, black cloud,
 Rising loud into the sky, raining stones,
 Falls crashing to the earth
 With lightning and thunder broken.

And the blood flowed
 From the gaping mouth that the arrow had carved
 On Tataka's hard breast
 And spread, one sea of red, on the waste,
 As though the curtain of the western sky,
 Crimson with evening,
 Had, unloosened, on a sudden,
 Fallen over the earth.

With the darkness
 Came the Spirit of Death,
 Afraid of drinking the life of *rakshasas*,
 Yet, yearning for it ;
 And now for the first time, he tasted
 Warm Rakshasa blood.
 And night fell on the waste.

III

THE BIRTH OF LOVE

Entering Mithila, Rama and Lakshmana and Visvāmitra, the sage, near the palace of virgins. Rama sees Sita, foster-daughter of Janaka, king of Mithila, standing on a balcony, and falls in love with her. Sita too falls in love with Rama.

Kamban lavishes all his poetry on this episode. In his epic, Sita is won primarily through love. The breaking of Shiva's bow that earns Sita for Rama is itself conceived of by the poet as the result of this love.

What follows is a translation of just a few stanzas from this part of the epic.

Afar, they saw the gleaming walls of
Mithila. And as they neared it,
Flags waved aloft
As though that city beautiful
Were stretching forth its arms,
Saying to the prince of Ayodhya,
'Come betimes,
For through the merit we have won,
She hath come, Goddess of Wealth and Beauty,
Forsaking her faultless lotus seat,
And here she dwells.'

Crossing the moat around
The golden palace of the king,
They skirted a pool where swans were at play ;
And from a balcony near by,
There broke on Rama,
A vision of loveliness ;
Was it the sheen of gold,
The passion of flowers,

Beauty itself,
 The sweetness of honey that the bee sucks
 Or the thrill of poetry distilled in chosen words ?

It was a maid,
 And she stood, with dancing eyes invincible
 Mightier far than death-dealing spear,
 And even death.
 Lovely beyond words, she stood,
 Incarnate sweetness,
 And hill and fort, granite hard and grass
 Melted in tenderness.

Beauty old as time
 Hath lived in fair women's eyes, dark as rain,
 Hath lit their bright jewels ;
 But fugitive till now, disembodied,
 Before this maid, shapeliness sculptured,
 Beauty grew beautiful, visible.

Two pairs of eyes met and ate each other up,
 Two hearts, suddenly restless, ran into one,
 As Rama looked at the maid
 And she looked at him.

Each with a look
 Chained the other's heart and drew it on,
 Till the hero of the bow, supreme among men,
 And the maid with eyes like the sword,
 In a wondrous exchange found
 Each one's heart filled with the other.

What need was there for words ?
 Two who were one in the mystic sea, their abode,
 Had met again,

Blameless hero and waistless maid,
And mingled into one.

The maid, gold-jewelled, stood rooted,
With eyes unwinking,
Gazing on and on,
Still as a picture,
Her heart and will and goodliness
Following Rama,
As he turned and went his way with the sage.

And the sun dived into the sea
Drawing unto himself his long, bright arms,
As though he feared
The desire flaming in the heart
Of the maid, tender-gaited as the swan,
Might burn him.

Evening came, red and black,
Swinging the south wind.
Evening ?
The south was the lasso,
The fiery west, the flaming hair.
And the darkness, the hue,
It was Kāla, the spirrt of death,
To the maid whose mind in her infinite yearning
Wandered in endless maze.

IV

THE BREAKING OF THE BOW

In the court of Janaka, King of Mithila, Visvamitra gives an account of the great Ikshvahu line of kings in which Rama is born and of Rama's valour and nobility. Janaka desires to give his foster-daughter, Sita, in marriage to Rama. But a vow that he has taken stands in the way. He has solemnly decided to marry Sita only to him who can bend the great bow of Shiva. No prince has achieved that feat ; and Janaka is troubled.

Said Janaka : ' Words fail me now.
My mind is shaken with the thought
That I have lost to this strange bow.
If only this prince could string it,
Sita's penance would bear fruit
And I lifted up from a sea of grief '.
Turning to his men, he said, ' Go !
And fetch the bow, the mighty bow
That vies with the hill '.

Giant men numberless, with shoulders thick
With hair, hewn as in granite,
Came heaving the bow, panting,
And halting oft for breath. Earth was glad
That the weight had shifted on her back
Allowing her a brief respite.
At sight of the bow, the towering mountain
Of the north felt humbled and the world
Did seem too strait. The fair city of Mithila
Rose ocean-like, tumultuous,
To see its coming. The crowds were loud :
' Hath Mount Meru been bent into this bow,
Meru, the mighty peak of gold,
With which the gods did churn of old

The milky sea of Heaven ?
 Is it the Serpent God ? Or is it
 'The far-flung rainbow thrown from sky to earth ?'
 'To call this mountainous golden bulk
 A bow is cruel imposture.
 Who hath strung it yet ? E'en Brahma
 Facing the four quarters of space
 Fashioned it, surely, not with his hand,
 But with the power of long penance.'
 Then spoke another and yet another :
 'Hath ever a king been so unwise ?'
 'Peace, the bow may be strung if Fate were kind'.
 Thus as voices rose in varied wise,
 The bow was laid before the king.
 Earth's back caved in, and many a prince
 Gazed abashed in awed surmise :
 'Could any one bend it ever ?'
 And their arms dropped limp, nerveless.

Valiant, however, as a tusker was he,
 The prince from Ayodhya,
 His form aglow with power.
 Janaka's look dwelt on him.
 Then it strayed to the bow of grief
 And sadly he thought of the maid.
 Sadananda, the King's priest,
 Beloved son of Gautama,
 He saw the king's mind and thus he spoke :
 'We ploughed the land
 Marked for the place of sacrifice.
 To the proud humps of bulls, horned firm as steel
 And long, we tied the yoke
 And the plough was of jewelled gold.
 The ploughshare, of sharp diamond,

Bit the earth and we ploughed
 Again and yet again the stubborn glebe.
 And lo, at the tip of the ploughshare,
 As though the Goddess of the Earth,
 Golden as the dawn,
 Had emerged in all her glory,
 There, in a fold of the turned sod, lay
 A child.

It was Sita,
 Sita, now queen among women,
 Before whose loveliness,
 Eternal Beauty that rose from out the sea
 Along with amrita, grows pale
 And bows in homage.
 Suitors came for her hand, princes
 Brimming with strength as elephants in their prime,
 With armies, vast and many-voiced as the sea.
 Firmly we gave out the pledge :
 'He who bends Shiva's bow,
 Shiva, Lord Ascetic, clad in tiger skin,
 Mantled dark with the hide of an elephant,
 He who bends Shiva's bow
 Wins Sita's hand'.
 And all their strength
 Beat itself unavailing on this bow.
 Nor alas, were they proof
 Against the fragile bend of the sugar-cane bow
 Of Manmata, God of Love. And yearning
 For the maid with rounded jewels aflame in the ear,
 In a passion of balked desire,
 They called wildly
 And turned on us with arms.

Lean as the coffers of noble kings
 Whose rule of life

Is to give and still to give away,
 Gathering fame, the army of our king
 Waned bright, while those of the princes
 Grew huge and dark as their desire
 For the maid round whose fragrant curls
 Honeybees swarm restless and loud.
 The gods above crowned with light,
 Witnessed the king's plight,
 How sore his distress
 Battling for Shiva's bow.
 And at the succour of their shining hosts,
 The princes fled like crows at night
 Scattering before the raven.

From that day,
 No one of the charioted princes hath come back
 Nor hath any one gone near the bow.
 Our hopes sank.
 Could this prince string the bow ?
 If he could, it were well,
 The goodliness of Sita of flower-folded tresses
 Will not run to waste.'

Thus spoke Sadananda
 And Visvamitra, sage of rare penance,
 Nodded his matted locks, comprehending,
 And his eyes turned
 To Rama the lion-like in battle.
 And he in turn, the prince of flawless mould,
 His mind tracing the great ascetic's thought,
 His bounty flowing to meet the unspoken intent,
 Looked at the bow.

And straight he rose
 Like to the rich sacrificial flame

Leaping up to meet the rain of ghee
Poured as offering.

'The bow's broken', acclaimed the gods.
'May the valorous win', blessed the sages,
Valorous themselves in their victory
Over the triple foes of man.

And as Rama stood
Poised as a flame,
'The women, fair-jewelled, spoke.
Said one :

'But the long bow is heavy.
If the bashful one's auspicious hand
Is not clasped in wedlock
By the broad, brave hand of this prince,
What is left for her
But long years, dreary and dead ?'

Said another :
If the prince were to ask
For the hand of the maid,
The answer should be a joyous 'yea'.
Simple indeed is our king

And thoughtless to throw this bow
In the way of this fair youth !'
And yet another spoke :

'Is he wise Visvamitra, this heartless one ?
And is he good king Janaka, this most cruel of men ?
Alas, if this great prince fails,
'Sita is hapless.'

While thus fair anxious hearts spoke,
The prince strode towards the bow
With steps stately and proud at sight of which
The maned lion and the bull in its prime

The golden Meru and the elephant
 Stood all abashed.
 Lightly he raised the mountainous golden bulk
 That was the bow,
 As though it were a garland
 Woven of fresh flowers
 His offering to fair Sita.
 Unwinking they watched.
 Still no one knew how the bow was planted
 Firm against the foot,
 Or how the string was drawn.
 The bow was lifted, that they saw,
 They heard the crash of its breaking.

The gods rained flowers
 And the clouds a golden shower.
 The wide seas rose in loud acclaim
 Scattering gems.
 The holy men assembled
 Uttered benediction ;
 And great King Janaka,
 Warrior of the dreaded spear, cried in joy,
 ' Today whatever merit I have earned
 Hath borne fruit '.

THE KING'S BEHEST

Dasaratha arranges for Rama's coronation. Kaikeyi, one of the queens of Dasaratha, under the influence of her maid-in-waiting, a hunch-back, Mandara by name, prevails on the old king to grant her two boons : one, to recognise Bharata, her son, as king, instead of Rama, the other, to banish Rama to the jungle for fourteen years. She then sends for Rama and announces to him what she calls the king's behest.

' All this populous land, girt by the sea,
Bharata is to rule while you will go
Bearing heavy matted locks to a life
Of penance hard, wander in the dusty wild,
Bathe in the sacred pools, and when twice seven
Years have passed, come back. This is the king's will '.
Thus spoke Kaikeyi. As he heard, Rama's face,
E'er bright, grew brighter still as a lotus red
With petals just unfolded to the light.
That day, unwilling to swerve from the king's behest,
He had bent his will to bear the burden
Of the dark world's rule. Now like a bull untamed,
Forced to the yoke and on a sudden freed
By the hand of pity, he felt untethered.
And thus he spoke : ' E'en as the king's, thy word
Is law. The wealth that flows to him—my brother,
Is joy to me. Is his not also mine ?
On my head be it, thy word. Give me leave.
I go. I start today for the forest bright.'

VI

BHARATA LEAVES FOR AYODHYA

Bharata, Rama's brother, is in his uncle's palace in Kekaya. He does not know of Rama's exile and of Dasaratha's death. Message reaches him recalling him to Ayodhya.

'The envoys sped,
Incomparably swift and true,
Day and night,
Till they reached Bharata's palace.
To the men at the gate, they said,
'Tell the prince we are come'.
The word went to Bharata ;
Joyous was he and eager
And he said, 'Let them in'.
They came and bowed to him with folded palms.
Bharata spoke first : 'Is he, the crowned one,
scatheless ?'
They said, 'He is well'.
And happy was the prince as he asked them :
'Fare they, my lord Rama, and the young prince,
He who wears jewels fashioned leaflike,
In perfect weal ?'
They answered 'Yea' and Bharata raised
His hands to his head in thankfulness and worship ;
And when the prince had learnt
Lovingly and with due form
That his other kin at Ayodhya were well,
The messengers said :
'Here, our lord, is the king's epistle.
May thou, prince, whose beauty eludes the painter's art,
Be pleased to accept it'.
The prince stretched forth long, jewelled hands

And stood up reverently to receive the royal message.
 'Praise be to the King' he said,
 And lifted the epistle to his head ;
 Melting with tenderness,
 He broke open the seal
 Stamped with the king's arms on the clay
 Fastening the ends of the scroll,
 Unrolled the sandal-covered cadjan and read.
 Then turned he to the envoys with gifts of gold.
 Thrilled, his face lit with smiles,
 His heart swelling with love, measureless as the sky,
 He strewed fresh flowers on the cadjan leaves,
 For the thought of Ayodhya and meeting his noble brother
 Was a delirious passion.

The prince's word went forth :

'Let the army rise.'

There was no thought of auspicious day or hour

Leave was taken of the prince of Kekaya.

Brother Chatrugna was ready

And the royal chariot waiting,

Bharata started.

Elephants lumbered around,

Chariots grated and rumbled

As chieftains gathered for the march

Men with swords up-lifted

Ranged in a circle about their prince.

Conches were loud.

Drums swelled like the fish-lashed deep.

Flags huddled amid the crowded insignia of royalty.

On mild she-elephants rode the women

And the flash of their jewels was lightning

To the thunder of the moving host.

Horses went prancing by

Lean faced, necks arched proudly
 Sure and swift,
 As if they would vault over sea and sky,
 And the men,
 Bowmen and swordsmen learned in their lore,
 Seasoned veterans who could throw the *surikai*,
 Elephant men,
 Masters of the deadly spear
 And the lance with sinuous beak,
 And the men wild
 Who led the horned bulls
 And fierce red crested fighting cocks
 And hawks with bristling down.
 From the carts scattered over the field
 Martial instruments crashed
 Like the rain cloud.
 Near by, the paeans of the singers filled the sky,
 A stream of distilled honey
 While the soft tabors kept time
 Losing themselves and vitalising the music
 Like the principle of life animating the flesh,
 And above the voice of the lusty war drum
 And the heavy tread of armed men
 Rose the praises sung of the prince
 And the chant of vedic benediction.

VII

GUHA

Guha, the hunter chief of Sringibera, on the banks of the Ganges, has been befriended by Rama and hailed as his brother. He is a simple soul filled with an abounding love for the prince of Ayodhya. When Bharata marches to the forest with the people of Ayodhya to persuade Rama to return to the city and accept the throne, Guha sees the host from the opposite bank of the river. Mistaking Bharata's purpose, Guha grows angry.

All things animate and inanimate
Sorrowing with him,
Bharata, the peerless one,
Warrior of the golden anklet wrought as a flower,
Left behind him the tilled fields of Kosala,
Rich as the land watered by the Cauvery,
And reached the Ganges.

From the opposite bank,
Guha saw the host of sixty thousand *akronis*
And he thought :
' This army has come, surely, to war
With my lord Rama, the dark one,
Dark and beautiful as the cloud heavy with rain '.
Anger swelled fierce in his heart,
His eyes shot fire,
And his brows bent grim,
Boding ill like a comet.
He laughed, the warrior mighty as Death,
As though Bharata's host innumerable
Were but a speck of dust.
He bit his lips, tightened his sword belt,
And his shoulders swelled at the thought
That battle was nigh.

His war drum spoke and his horn,
 Sending the message of war throbbing far and near,
 And sharp rang his words :

‘ Rise, my men,

This host is but a field of scuttling mice
 And I the devouring snake ’.

The forest men answered the call
 And came crowding round to their chief
 As though all the sabre-clawed tigers of the earth
 Had heaved in one fierce tide of strength
 Draining the world nerveless.

Guha scanned his wild men and thus he spake :

‘ My purpose holds to lift

Yon army, the host of deceit,

High to the land of the gods,

And to confer on Rama, dear to me as life,

His crown for all time. To arms, my men.

They have come, the wicked, scheming ones,

Who have scrambled into kingship.

My arrows spill fire and are ready to fly

Red and true to the mark.

These men who have by subterfuge

Baulked the dark one, the lord of my life, of his rights,

If these men escape unscathed,

Will not all the world call me

Again and yet again, an ungrateful cur ?

Think they of crossing the river ? Let them if they dare.

Ganges waters are broad and deep,

And here I stand, a bowman

Who has not learnt to tremble and fall back

Before the long, elephant-fronted armies of kings.

My lord Rama called me ‘ friend ’ ;

Is that not the word of all words ?

And if now I fail him,

Will not men say :

‘ Ah, poor hunter, he did not know to die ’ ?

He, Bharata, has not counted

That Rama is his elder ;

Nor has he thought of the younger one valiant,

Standing, fierce as a tiger, on guard.

This is strange, but stranger still is it

That he minds not I am here.

Doth he imagine I am too low to merit a thought ?

I may be, but they can claim I am

After they cross my domain.

The arrows of a hunter can surely pierce

The heart of a king.

Kings indeed !

Have they no thought, these kings of the earth,

Of friend or foe, no fear of sin and infamy,

And cruelties that cause infinite pain ?

Enough of this. What care I for what they think ?

Let them march against him

Who bestowed on me the rare gift of friendship,

Precious as life,

Let them march if they stir from here

Alive and with their army whole.

Listen, my fierce men,

No boat of ours shall ply across the river.

And as for our lives,

We shall lay them down

Before ever any harm comes to our lord.

But that might never be.

This army is a trifle before your might.

But even if all the gods gather on their side,

Will not my bow bend like a dark cloud,

And my arrows rain unceasing,

And my sword flash bright
 In the thick of the men and elephants,
 Till all of them are slain
 And a riot of red entrails
 Whirls on the field of slaughter ?
 Yea, this blind host of the sons of Kaikeyi,
 The cruel one who gave on that fateful day
 The bark of trees for my bounteous lord to wear,
 Will I not rend it myself with my shafts
 So that the mangled bodies of men and beasts oozing blood
 May be drawn by the swift Ganges
 And fill the void of the wave-huddled deep ?
 Behold, there they are,
 The greedy men who have come with arms,
 To take away from him who gave them
 All the land and its wealth,
 A corner of the barren wild which is our domain.
 There the army lies, flags waving,
 Come, my men, let us hurl ourselves on it,
 And the praise is ours :
 'Lo, the forest men routed the army of the wicked
 And gave the kingdom of Kosala
 Back to the righteous.'

