

Kanha's Dream

by Raamesh Gowri Raghavan

Part I

"Sudama is coming! Sudama is coming! I just had a dream that Sudama is coming!"

Kanha jumped out of bed in excitement, and ran through the halls. Guards, palace attendants, ministers, gardeners, cleaning men and whoever else was present in the palace stood stunned. Their lord and master was running about in his sleeping clothes, yelling and bringing the roof down.

"Oh look at the walls! Look at all these stains. Oh look at the drapes. Look at all these holes. What will he think? What will Sudama think of me?"

His Chief Minister ran up to him.

"Calm down, my Lord! What is the matter? Do tell us, so we may do your noble bidding."

"Oh, shut up! Don't you know? My dearest friend Sudama is coming. Sudama, no less, Sudama is coming."

"When is he coming, My Lord?"

"Don't you know? don't you know? Why, tomorrow of course! Just look at the curtains, the doors, the dust, the windows, the grime..."

The minister stood by. Kanha, breathless, suddenly realised not everyone was in on the matter.

"Oh! Ah! Yes. Yes, of course. You won't know. Sudama, my dearest friend. From my Gurukul days. I had a dream that he is coming tomorrow. We must have everything ready for him."

"Is he the King of some distant country, My Lord? We've never heard of him before."

"King? Oh no! He is a Brahmin. A pure, noble mind. The ascetic mind that is above kings."

"Oh! I understand, My Lord."

Kanha wound down and went off for his morning prayers and bath. The Chief Minister went off to supervise the day's work, summoning the palace minions.

"Some dream His Lordship has had. Since he is excited, we must be careful. Ensure that decent arrangements are made for the reception of a Brahmin. I am so relieved it is not some king."

Another minister spoke up, "can we rely on the evidence of a dream, Sir?"

The Chief Minister smiled. "Oh, no, not at all. But how much does it take to receive a Brahmin? A few cloths, a quantity of grain and a decent room to stay in. And whatever gifts the King may see fit. That's all."

"Oh no! You're going to do nothing like that!"

That was the voice of Kanha, as he came running into the meeting. The ministers grinned embarrassedly.

"No, no, no, no, no. Like I said, he is above Kings. You must treat him like an Emperor. Even now he must be on his way wondering how Kanha will treat him. How can I treat him like humbly? No, no, no, no, no!"

And then the whole day was like that. Kanha was rushing about, ordering men around, and giving no one a moment's peace.

"Look at the grime on those curtains. Not fit for an Emperor. Pull them down. Put up fresh new ones. Not a spot."

"Oh! Look at this throne. All uneven legs. The gems are not shining. The gold looks dull. Fix it, fix it, fix it!"

"Look at the floor! There's no shine in that marble. Look there's actually dust on these tiles. What will Sudama think? Aiyo, Aiyo!"

He didn't even spare his wives.

"Oh look at your hair! You haven't washed it in yugas. Sudama will think I'm so poor I can't get you a cake of soap even. Go wash it now. And why are your jewels so dull? Where's the shine in your silk saree? Get new ones. Go, go, go!"

By late morning, everyone in the palace was all a scurry. The birds stopped singing because of the noise. And also because of Kanha.

"Shoo! shoo! Why are there only crows and mynahs in my gardens? Where are the bulbuls, parakeets and koels?"

"Oh look at all these flowers. So colourless and wilted. What have the gardeners been doing? Where are the marigolds, the shoe-flowers, the jasmines? Oh what will Sudama think? I'm such a poor, unmajestic king. And he is an Emperor!"

The gardeners were at a corner of the garden. The fabulous gardens of Dwarka, tended by the great Kanha himself. Was it these gardens, Kanha was criticising, the gardens which kings envied, from distant Anga in the east or Chola in the south? The garden which the kings of Hastinapura and Pataliputra coveted? Those very gardens to see which the emperor of Suvarnabhumi * * * had himself set sail?

But then he chanced to look at his palace roof. He grabbed his Chief Minister by the neck and turned him towards the roof.

"Oh look at that! Where is it catching the glint of the Sun God himself? Wasn't it supposed to be covered with gold and lined with silver? Have you been cheating me? Or is it all tarnished? Look at the white marble pillars. They have turned black with the dirt of years. Are they pillars or chimneys? Nothing is correct. Sudama will think I am so lazy and happy-go-lucky. Not fit to rule the kingdom at all!"

The ministers, standing behind him, were bewildered. This palace was grimy? Why, architects had come from as far as Yavana-desa#

and Parsa* * * to copy it. The kings of Vidarbha, Mithila, Gandhara% and Kuntala had given up their pride when they saw it. Even Indra in celestial Amaravati was known to be jealous of it.

But Kanha hadn't stepped into the city streets yet.

"Look at the roads, the streets. The city gates. The paving is so uneven. Sudama will go through so much pain as he rides from the gates to the palace. The gate doors are so full of rust. And Dwaraka is supposed to be lined with gold and precious gems. Never, never."

"Look at the soldier's uniforms. Look at their weapons, not burnished at all. They're standing so lopsided."

"You there, stand straight. Salute correctly. Present arms. Look at your uniforms."

"Call all of them. Tomorrow they must all be prim and proper. No crumpled dresses. Parade them, marshal them, drill them!"

The story spread through the city. A great Emperor was coming to meet their King. His glory was legendary. Apparently he lived in a country far away. Yavana-desa, Srivijaya& or even beyond. He was as illustrious as Bharata or Ramachandra of Ayodhya. Perhaps he was a Kinnara or Gandharva, a superhuman being.

Shop fronts were redecorated immediately. The best and brightest in every shop was brought out for display, the dull ones were put inside. The streets were swept immediately. House fronts were washed, and fresh rangoli designs were drawn on them. The richer citizens even commissioned a whitewashing of their homes. Even the dust-covered cattle, goats and donkeys were given a scrubbing. The reputation of Dwaraka was at stake!

Kanha's palace was obviously given a scrub down. Every window, door, pillar, flagstone and fitting was being touched up. Carpenters and jewellers were busy giving the throne a good polish. Kanha's

wives (for he had dozens of them) were taking the opportunity to be rid of their old jewels and silks and refurbishing themselves with new ones (they'd never have the opportunity again). And this was the time to rub themselves with sandal-paste and bathe in asses' milk.

Kanha was in the palace kitchen. Bins of rice, wheat, vegetables were being overturned and inspected.

"These gourds are not fresh at all. This rice is stale. Show me the spices. What will Sudama say? That Kanha serves rotten food?"

The cooks and kitchen-maids tried to hide behind the big stoves.

"Oh no, no, no, no, no. Hiding will not do at all. Go to the markets and get everything fresh again. Grind the spices afresh. Prepare every dish that you can think of. Make every sweetmeat known to mankind. Make the rice as fresh smelling as jasmine. Hurry, hurry, hurry!"

Part II

Morning arrived. The day when Sudama was going to come. Had anyone slept at all, that they would wake with excitement? No! For Kanha had let no one sleep. New curtains were bought, cut, stitched and hung on his palace walls. Every tile had been scrubbed through the night till it shone like the moon itself. The gold cover of the roof now gleamed, as if the Sun God need not rise today. The marble pillars would make the stars seize themselves with envy. And every street was agleam, as if Dwaraka were truly lined with gold!

The Sun God's chariot rose higher and higher, and even he was curious to see Dwaraka as shiny as a new Sun itself. The whole army of Dwaraka was arraigned at the city gates, in formation to receive an Emperor. But where was the Emperor's procession?

The regular stream of travellers was all one could see. Rich merchants on bullock-carts and poor ones on foot. Suplicants,

mendicants and others trying to make their fortune in Dwaraka. And among them was an impoverished Brahmin, stealing glances at a tiny packet tied to his waist. In it was a handful of puffed rice. This was to be his gift to Kanha, his school friend.

There was a big commotion at the gate, and there seemed to be a large crowd around it. Sudama paused, nervous. What was happening?

He asked a bystander.

"The King of Dwaraka himself is standing at the gate. It is said that he is waiting for a friend of his. A great Emperor!"

"Oh!" Perhaps Kanha was not going to have time for him. He turned back.

"It was not my fate to meet him."

A city guard stopped him as he was starting back for his village.

"Today no one is to turn back from Dwaraka. Go into the city. Today everyone is being fed. Go and stuff yourself like a good Brahmin after free food."

Sudama turned back. After all, he was hungry. And who knows, perhaps Kanha might catch sight of him?"

He joined a line of men who were entering the city through a side gate. And suddenly, a hand grasped his shoulder from behind.

"Do you not recognise an old friend, Sudama?"

The voice was familiar. Why would it not be? Who else but Kanha had a voice like that?

He saw the people around him moving away.

"My Emperor, the noblest among me, has come. Sudama, Sudama, Sudama, Oh Sudama! How I have waited for you!"

And as he embraced his friend, there was only one more joyous than Sudama. For who could be more joyous than Kanha?

* * *Sanskrit name for Burma.

#Yavana-desa = Greece

* * *Parsa = Persia

%Gandhara = Afghanistan

&Srivijaya = Sumatra

