



Dhundhi: The Story of a Wild Ganapati

Yogesh Master

The Background

On the one hand, there is mythology. On the other, there are allied arts and sciences, scriptures, history, archeology, anthropology. In between there is a vast grey area, the continuum, the lived truth of lives, and how it shaped the way we live. This truth within this grey area is where fiction is born. This is what sustains fiction.

This is where Yogesh Master's *Dhundhi: The Story of a Wild Ganapati* begins, as he traces the 'missing link' between mythology and anthropology.

The figure of Master's enquiry is the Ganapati, the elephant-head God of the Hindu pantheon. As scholars agree, while the figure of Ganapati, in different names, appears in the scriptures, he was never a God-head. At one point, Ganapati was considered to be an 'evil incarnate'. His name, Vighnakrit, Vighnesh, Vighnaraja, Vighneshvar, all literally mean troublemaker. In texts like Manusmriti and other Aranyakas, Ganapati is represented as a deity of the dispossessed, the Sudras, indicating that Ganapati himself had low origin. This corresponds to the popular origin myth associated with Ganesh, that he was created from the dirt collected from Parvati's body.

In the novel, Master wants to understand what prompted this ascent of Ganapati from the lower class into reluctant Brahminical recognition. Master argues that the state as the centre of power emerged from the ruins of pre-class primitive communisms. This is also the key to understand Ganapati's strange transformation.

The story begins with the arrival of the nomadic Aryas and their conflict with the local inhabitants. In the scriptures, there are stories of conflict between Ganapati and Parashuram. It was not a personal conflict, but a fight between the free-living tribes and the priestly class patronised by the bureaucracy.



Master argues that interpretation of myths is not a linear movement from one element to the next, rather it is a network, a fabric, in which the pursuit of one thread of meaning doubles back on to others as it proceeds forward, knitting the whole cloth together as it goes along. Remove one thread and a new meaning would emerge. Add another thread and there would be another meaning.

Yet, myths are the key to storytelling, and in Dhundhi, Master takes a leap of faith and makes his own myth, telling us the story of how a rebellious tribesman, a veritable troublemaker to the ruling class, came to be regarded as the custodian of goodwill and success.

The Plot

In a tale where past and present collide constantly, where Gods are mere mortals, set between the Vedic and Puranic period near modern-day Varanasi, Master narrates the story as a tale of adventure and awe, a pre-historic road trip, so to say, to find a man of such allusive stature that each character in the novel has a story to tell about him, each story appearing wildly different from others.

The listener here is Shambara, who acts as the reader's proxy. He was raised in a forest away from civilization by his mother. His mother goes away and in due time, Shambara makes friendships with two men on either side of the spectrum – a Brahmin, Yajnik, who is the spokesman of the Aryas, and Ammita, a runaway Dasa, who is a vocal advocate of the rights of the dispossessed, the Anaryas.

As the story progresses, Shambara and Yajnik embark on a journey to meet Dhundhi, who is dying. Here, we meet a host of other characters, and through them, we are told the story of Dhundhi and his rise and fall. We are also introduced to Rudra, the leader of the Rudra Gan, his feisty wife Parvati and a host of other characters, and we learn who Dhundhi was and how he came to be.



Then we meet the dying man himself and another picture emerges.

Set against the backdrop of primal forests and vibrant Iron Age cities on the banks of River Ganga, Dhundhi is a tale of man's eternal struggle for power and glory. It is a story of negotiating identities and fighting the power that be. It is a story of finding conviction within one's self, and making sense of one's existence in the universe.

Master's novel has a definite agenda. It speaks of the tribal rights against oncoming modernity, something that resonates with our times. However, as the story progresses, and as the characters begins to grow, we, the readers, become so engrossed in the story and the time that this meaning becomes secondary. What remains is a powerful tale of a man who rose to power against impossible odds, and to tragic consequences.

Dhundhi: The Story of a Wild Ganapati

Time: The period between the Vedic and the Puranic Age

Place: The Jahnuvasa forest, near Avimukta (present-day Varanasi)

Chapter One

Suvastu

Sometimes you can feel silence amidst noises, when the intensity of the cacophony around you becomes so familiar that you do not register it anymore. At least this was the case with Shambara. The myriad sounds of the forest – the mooing of the cattle, the chirping of the birds, the whistle of the wind, the roar of the tigers, the howls of the jackals and the wolves, the pecking of the cocks and the hens – did not bother Shambara in the slightest. At any given moment, he could be anywhere in the forest, and nothing could distract him.



Vasuma had taught him everything – how to collect firewood, how to conjure up fire with a pair of stones, how to make earthen pots and how to cook barley in them, how to milk the cows, and how to build walls of clay for the monsoon. He had also learnt to do business with the travellers who passed through the forest and barter with them items like salt, clothes, and other things that he could not make himself. He also knew how to dig a trench on the Ganga to feed the moat that surrounded his dwelling. Vasuma had taught him all the tricks of survival, and he had learnt well.

Outside the forest of Jahnuvasa was the great city of Avimukta. On the bank of the river, there was another town, Viratnagar. Though everyone in these two cities knew about the forest, they rarely visited it themselves, giving the mother-son duo relative freedom to lead their lives the way they wanted. Rarely did they encounter anyone except for occasional visitors, travellers, merchants, and pilgrims, all on their way to far-flung towns, taking a short-cut through the forest.

Though Shambara had met a large number of travellers from whom he would get the things he could not find in the forest or could not make himself, he had never left the forest for the thirty-two springs of his existence. And out of these, he had spent twenty-five springs all alone. As such, he may have lacked companionship, but he did not miss it.

Some of these travellers were familiar, some strangers. While those strangers would become familiar during their next visit, Vasumawas more comfortable in the company of the people she already knew. Besides the usual transactions, she shared an emotional bond with them.

When Shambara was still a child, a pilgrim had told him to address Vasuma as ‘mata’. Until then, he would call her either Vasuma or Amba. Sometimes he would call her ‘amba’—sounding like the mooing of a calf.

And when he was five, a visitor had pointed him towards Vasuma and asked, ‘Who is she?’ Shambara had remained silent. So had Vasuma. She had looked at him with a playful smile,



awaiting his response. ‘What do you call her?’ the visitor had asked again. Shambara had stood still, gazing at Vasuma.

Later, when the visitor had left, he had asked her, ‘Who are you?’

Vasuma had replied, ‘If I’m a cow, you’re my calf.’

‘So, I shall call you Amba...?’

“Yes,” she had replied, ‘You can call me anything you like.’

He had always known Vasuma by her name and he continued calling her the same. Only when he wanted to find her, would he shout, ‘Amba...’

When Shambara was nine, another visitor had had a word with him. ‘She is the one who has given birth to you, your mother,’ he had said. ‘She gave birth to you as a cow gives birth to a calf. A calf knows only how to moo. You are human. You know how to speak, and hence, you should call her “mata”.’

Shambara, however, continued to address her as either Vasuma or Amba. Only when there were visitors who commanded respect did he address her as ‘mata’. Those were rare occasions. Most of the visitors preferred to spend the night on the platform in the courtyard, rather than inside the small hut, even though Vasuma was always generous with her visitors.

She looked like an Arya woman, a fact most visitors did not fail to highlight. ‘Aren’t you an Arya?’ they would ask. She would not respond. ‘But your son does have an Arya name?’

As was her wont, Vasuma would politely ask them to mind their own business.



Most of the visitors came to barter clothes for deer horns, tiger nails, animal skin, and rare herbs. For the dwellers of the forest, clothes were a rare commodity, something available only in the cities. Therefore, both mother and son took great care of the clothes they had. When there were no visitors, they preferred to go about their chores stark naked. When they left the house for hunting or for collecting firewood and fruit, they wrapped deerskin around their waists. They hunted once in two or three days, mostly deer or rabbits. It was enough for them. Sometimes, if the kill was big enough, they skinned the animal and only took the amount of meat they needed, leaving the rest for the scavengers.

At times Vasuma would slaughter a calf, young cow or a big cow from her herd. This depended on who the visitors were and how long they were going to stay in her place. Shambara loved the succulent taste of the calf. Whenever there were visitors, he would willingly show the young cow to them. But, Vasuma decided the size of the animal according to the need.

For the family living alone in the forest, the herd of cattle was their prized possession. When the herd was small, Vasuma used to tether them around the house for the fear of losing them to wild animals. Now that the herd had grown large, she and Shambara just let them loose in the forest every morning, only to bring them home in the evening. They did not mind losing one or two animals to the wild. This was the price of survival.

Often Vasuma would accompany Shambara in their quest to find grasslands for the herd within the forest. On occasions when he would be alone, his hunting dogs would follow him. As the herd would disperse around the vicinity, he would climb atop the large monolithic stone not far from his hut and scan the horizon, keeping an eye on his cattle. He could see almost the entire forest from this vantage point. He could discern the location of the elephants from the sound of their trumpet. He often had a fair idea where the lions and the tigers were hunting from the sound of their roars. If there were travellers, he could see them coming from the southeast.



As a mother, Vasuma was as loving as she was taciturn. Undoubtedly, she had a past. Why else would a woman decide to build a hut in the middle of the forest? Yet she never told Shambara anything about her life. In fact, she never said more than what was necessary.

During his teens, whenever they were free of their chores, Shambara loved to play with his mother. He loved to hug her, hang around her, and even wrestle with her for fun. During these games, he would often squeeze her breasts. Sometimes Vasuma would get angry. Shambara would then mollify her with soothing words and resume their games. He loved those breasts dearly.

During some nights, as they lay on the cool mud floor of the house, Shambara would creep towards his mother, saying that he was afraid of the dark or that he was feeling lonely, and would embrace her. The cuddle would warm his body and he would tighten his hold by pressing his penis against her buttock or thighs. He loved the gratification he derived by pressing his body against hers. At times, Vasuma would be fast asleep, exhausted by her chores. Sometimes, she would wake up to find her son poking her. Even then, she would lie there, like a log, pretending to be fast asleep.

She, however, would scream at him during the day when he would stand before her, stark naked, displaying his erect manhood, as if it was the biggest game he had ever hunted. ‘Don’t vex me,’ Vasuma said one day. Shambara pulled a face. She then soothed him. ‘Oh, Shambara, you will find somebody in the future to play this kind of game with. I am not the right partner.’

‘Why not?’ he persisted.

‘I am your mother and you are my son.’

‘So what?’



‘There were times when people would only hunt. Those days, they did not have relations like mother and son. The mistress of the herd would choose a suitable among her own offspring to make love. Now it is inappropriate to do so.’

‘Why can’t we live like those people?’

‘Because I do not like it, Shambara,’ she said. Now, you are young and filled with desire. This is nature. However, one must not try to satisfy one’s desire by force. The mating between a man and a woman is lovemaking. In lovemaking, the partners must have consent.’

Shambara knew all about mating. He had seen animals mating. He had witnessed how Vasuma arranged the mating of a cow and an ox. He would notice dogs mating in the compound of their house and would watch them longingly, desire filling his heart.

‘Lovemaking is a pleasure when the partners accept each other,’ Vasuma continued. ‘Otherwise, it’s viciousness. I have experienced lovemaking of many kinds. Now, the whole thing disgusts me. You are still too young. When you are of the right age, you will find a suitable partner. Then you can have all the fun you want.’

He listened to her carefully and tried to contain his desire. Yet, at times, he would get a hard-on for no reason, and he would stand before Vasuma, displaying his impressive manhood. His mother would laugh and then assign him some task to divert his attention. This continued for a while, until the fateful day arrived – the day after which he would go to great lengths to hide his manhood from his mother. From that day on, he was terrified of her even as he loved her.

The sky was overcast when the warrior arrived on horseback. He had noticed smoke emanating from the hut and stopped by to ask if it would be possible to spend the night there. Vasuma was twisting a rope out of leather straps. Her breasts were uncovered. She quickly



went inside, covered herself with a veil, and came out to attend the guest. She told the stranger that he could deposit his belongings on the platform outside the house and rest.

The warrior tied his horse to a stump near the house and said, ‘You look even more beautiful without the veil.’

Ignoring the comment, Vasuma asked, ‘What do you wish to eat? Meat or barley?’

‘I can hear cows. Slay a calf for dinner,’ he said. His voice strong and authoritative.

Vasuma stared at him. She did not like the tone of authority in his voice.

‘Why are you staring at me like this? Are you a slave or a prostitute?’ he raised his eyebrows.

Vasuma said firmly, ‘I am the mistress of this household. You are here because of my generosity.’

‘You talk like an Arya woman. The pink hue of your cheeks tells me that you must be from Kamrup,’ he twisted his lips and sprawled on the platform.

Frowning, Vasuma went to the cowshed.

The traveller then opened his leather satchel and gulped down the drink he was carrying. All this time, the warrior, with his massive physique and authoritative bearing, had ignored Shambara completely. Now, he looked at Shambara, who in turn was observing him angrily, and said, ‘Come here, boy, massage my legs.’

Like a man possessed, Shambara followed and did what he was told to do. ‘Knead properly,’ the stranger barked.



As Vasuma returned to the courtyard after slaughtering the calf, she could not contain herself seeing Shambara at the feet of the Kshatriya warrior. ‘Shambara,’ she screamed. ‘You are the lord of this household, not his servant. If the guest complained of aching limbs and sought your help, you may continue. If he ordered you to massage his legs, get up at once.’

Without a word, Shambara got up and followed Vasuma into the house. She closed the door behind the raucous laughter of the stranger.

‘Shambara, why did you oblige him?’ she asked with anger in her voice.

Usually Shambara would not obey anyone else other than his mother. However, before the brute force of the stranger, he had lost all his courage.

‘You...’

Both Vasuma and Shambara turned towards the voice. The traveller was inside the house, having broken the door open with his bare hands. He was naked, with lust writ large all over his imposing physique.

Without flinching, Vasuma warned, ‘Stay away from me. Behave properly. You can’t cross your limits. I am not a prostitute.’

He was laughing. Perhaps, he was convinced that this beautiful woman, with just a boy for company, had no other option than to surrender to his brute force.

‘Shambara, get me the *sriini*,’ said Vasuma, stretching out her hand. He immediately handed her the sickle, which was hanging by a peg on the wall.

Shambara expected his mother to use the sickle as a weapon of self-defence. Vasuma had other plans. She immediately lurched forward and sliced the erect manhood of her perpetrator



in a single, swift stroke. It was so sudden and so violent that Shambara fell to the ground, shaking with terror. With his lust turned into pain, the warrior forced himself upon her. But not only was she was swift, she was also an expert in wielding the weapon she was holding. She pierced, stabbed, pricked, and bored the sickle on every part of his body.

Shambara had never seen his mother like this, and frankly, he was terrified, not because he thought that the warrior would harm his mother, but because he feared that after dealing with the man, she might just turn to him, with her terrible weapon and her cool dexterity. Her face and clothes were soaked in blood. Shambara closed his eyes. Then he heard his mother speak, in a voice that he had not heard before, ‘Don’t be afraid, son. You haven’t seen me like this, but this kind of a situation is not new to me. I know what I did.’

Shambara sobbed in silence. At this moment, he was too terrified to cry aloud.

Leaving her son alone on the floor, Vasuma built a funeral pyre behind the hut and cremated the mutilated body. She then collected the leather bag, two swords, two knives, a shield, the armour, and other belongings of the Kshatriya traveller and hid them carefully inside the hut.

Since that day, Shambara was careful not to appear naked before his mother. She too understood the fear that had crept inside her son, and to ameliorate the situation, she started to shower him with more and more affection.

Meanwhile, Vasuma tried to ride the horse of the dead warrior. In the beginning, it was difficult, as the beast was used to a different master. However, Vasuma prevailed and slowly a friendship developed between the horse and the mother–son duo. Thus, at the age of twelve, Shambara could ride the horse alone in the forest.

One day Shambara was watering the horse, when he noticed a group of travellers approaching. Besides two guards, the group comprised eight women. All of them had a pinkish complexion and they were all well-built, like Vasuma. They were giggling.



Shambara looked at them in wonder, but the women approached him with familiarity, as if they had known him from ages. ‘This must be Vasuma’s son,’ they said among themselves. Hearing their giggles, Vasuma came out of the house and seeing them, shouted, ‘Greetings...’ She rushed towards them and extended warm hugs to each one of them.

One of them asked, ‘Is this your son?’

‘Yes. Shambara is his name.’

They exclaimed in reply, “‘Oh, so you have named him after him?’”, But he is not his so, said another.

‘No,’ replied Vasuma, as she led the guests to the hut.

The guards unloaded their horses and placed the baggage outside. They took off the saddle and started brushing the horses.

In her excitement, Vasuma had forgotten to invite Shambara inside. He peeped through the small hole of a window and saw Vasuma showing the daggers and the knives of the dead Kshatriya to the visitors. Seeing his mother trusting these women immediately and completely, Shambara was sure they were old friends.

That night, the entire group camped outside around the fire, drinking somras and making merry. They spoke in a language that Shambara had not heard before. They also sang in the same language. He did not even know that his mother was fluent in this language. All of a sudden, he felt lonely. He felt as if Vasuma had gone and she had been replaced by someone else, someone unknown to him. All he could do was to sit there next to the fire and observe her as she entertained her guests.



Next day, they feasted on a healthy ox. The visiting women cooked and to Shambara's surprise, it was delicious, and tasted much better than the meat his mother prepared.

On the third day, Shambara woke up to notice that the visitors were gone. Though the women were friendly and though he liked their horses, he was relieved to see them gone. After all, they were the reason why his mother had been acting so strangely. He was worried that if they had stayed for few more days, his mother would have changed completely.

This happiness proved to be short-lived. His mother had indeed changed. That afternoon Vasuma sat him down and said, 'Those women were from my native place. I was born and brought up in Kamrup, near the Kamakhya Temple, but I lost that beautiful homeland. I met my folks after a long time and we have decided to travel back to our homeland, for a short while. Do you think you can take care of the household and the animals without me?'

Shambara was surprised, 'You will be leaving without me?'

'If you come with me, who will take care of the house, the animals?'

He started crying.

'You are a grown man now,' Vasuma consoled him. 'You can look after yourself. I still have few more days before I leave. I will teach you how to cook. I will show you the herbs and I will teach you how to prepare medicines. I will also teach you some forms of self-defence. You must learn everything. You are the master of this household. You are the *gopal*. Nobody in these surroundings has such a wealth of cows. People will try to snatch them away from you. You must be prepared. Do not trust the mean Aryas. Most importantly, do not allow a Brahmin near you. If anyone comes to you, first enquire if he is a Brahmin, Kshatriya, or a Vaishya. If he happens to be any of these, completely avoid him. If anyone happens to be a Shudra, Anarya, or Aranyak, you may welcome him.'



Vasuma then explained to Shambara how was to identify people of different *varnas* and *aranyaks*.

‘And what are we?’ Shambara asked once the lesson was over.

‘I am an Aranyak. I was a slave to the Aryas. They exploited me. Finally, I managed to escape with you and came here. I do not know what blood you are. I also do not know who your father is. However, the person who helped me escape was a Dasyu. He was a majestic personality. His name was Shambara. We were planning to escape from the Aryas to lead a quiet life in the forest when I was carrying you. Unfortunately, they killed him. If you ask me, you are neither a Dasyu nor an Aranyak, and you are definitely not an Arya, you should never be one.’

Then Vasuma gave her son the final piece of advice, ‘Stay here in the forest, take care of our cattle, and sustain your life. If any guest comes, serve him well. Our dharma is to treat guests with respect and to help those who are in trouble. But never bend your head or yield to anyone. This house and its surroundings are an ideal living place; it is Suvastu. And you are its master.’

When Shambara was still inconsolable, Vasuma gave him hope, ‘I will come back, though I cannot predict when. This is why you must never leave this place. If you do, I will be lost to you forever.’

In the next few days, Vasuma taught him everything she knew. She also extended the cowshed to accommodate the extra animals that her friends were going to leave behind. She also built a stable for the horse and strengthened the walls of the hut.

Soon her friends arrived. They brought their cows with them. They also brought other things needed for the household. All of them stayed in the house for forty days.



Then one fine morning Shambara woke up to find the house empty. The visitors had left. So had his mother. He found a pot of barley and a sword next to him. There were four horses standing outside the house.

Though he had known she would be leaving soon, he had not expected that she would leave without bidding goodbye. He ran out of the house in tears and frantically looked around for her.

‘Amba... Amba...’ he shouted. ‘Vasuma... my mother, Amba... Amba...’ he cried out. His cry merged with the moos of the cows.

- *Translated from the Kannada by Shashikumar*

About the Author

Yogesh Master is a theater and film director, actor, writer and a teacher based in Bengaluru. He has several plays and books to his credit. *Dhundhi: Aranyakanobba Ganapatiyaada Kathe* (2013) is his most popular book till date, and also the first work to get translated into English.

About the Translator

Shashikumar is a translator, researcher, editor and a publishing professional based in Mysuru. Currently, he is co-editing the book, *Critical Discourse in Kannada* as part of Routledge. Critical Discourses in South Asia series. He oversaw translations at Oxford University Press.