

## 5. The Mark of Vishnu

Khushwant Singh

① **Khushwant Singh** (1915– ), the prominent scholar, journalist and author, was born in Hadali (now in Pakistan). He was educated at Government College, Lahore and St Stephen's College, Delhi. After studying law at the Inner Temple, London, he returned to India and practised at the Lahore High Court for some time. He edited *Yojana*, *The Illustrated Weekly Of India*, *National Herald* and *Hindustan Times*. He was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1980 to 1986. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1974. Protesting against the siege of the Golden Temple in Amritsar by the Indian army, he returned the award. He was honoured with the 'Honest Man of the Year' award by Sulabh International in the year 2000, the Punjab Rattan Award in 2006 and the Padma Vibhushan Award by the Government of India in 2007.

pt. { In his novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956), he describes the trauma and suffering of thousands of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim families after the partition.

th. { *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories*, *The History of Sikhs*, *The Voice of God and Other Stories*, *A Bride for the Sahib and Other Stories*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, *Black Jasmine*, *Tragedy of Punjab*, *We Indians*, *Women and Men in My Life*, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography*, *Burial at Sea*, *Paradise and Other Stories*, *Death at My Doorstep*, *The Illustrated History of the Sikhs* are some of his important works.

th. { Extremely frank, unbiased and deeply compassionate, Khushwant Singh fights relentlessly, in all his writings, against all kinds of fanaticism, violence and injustice. Yet, interestingly, he is known for fine humour laced with wit and sarcasm.

6 In 'The Mark of Vishnu', he relates the story of a man who is a superstitious worshipper of a cobra and this, unfortunately, leads to his tragic death.

'This is for the Kala Nag,' said Gunga Ram, pouring the milk into the saucer. 'Every night I leave it outside the hole near the wall and it's gone by the morning.'

'Perhaps it is the cat,' we youngsters suggested.

'Cat!' said Gunga Ram with contempt. 'No cat goes near that hole. Kala Nag lives there. As long I give him milk, he

will not bite anyone in this house. You can all go about with bare feet and play where you like.'

We were not going to tolerate any patronage from Gunga Ram. *support given by a patron*

'You're a stupid old Brahmin,' I said. 'Don't you know snakes don't drink milk? At least, one couldn't drink a saucerful every day. The teacher told us that a snake eats only once in several days. We saw a grass snake which had just swallowed a frog. It stuck like a lump in its throat and took several days to dissolve and go down its tail. We've got dozens of them in the lab in methylated spirit. Why, last month the teacher bought one from a snake-charmer which could run both ways. It had another head with a pair of eyes at the tail. You should have seen the fun when it was put in the jar. There wasn't an empty one in the lab so the teacher put it in one which had a Russel's viper. He caught its two ends with a pair of forceps, dropped it in the jar, and quickly put the lid on. There was an absolute storm as it went round and round in the glass tearing the decayed viper into little pieces.'

Gunga Ram shut his eyes in pious horror.

'You will pay for it one day. Yes, you will.'

It was no use arguing with Gunga Ram. He, like all good Hindus, believed in the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, the creator, preserver, and destroyer. Of these he was most devoted to Vishnu. Every morning he painted a V mark on his forehead in sandalwood paste to honour the god. Although a Brahmin, he was illiterate and full of superstition. To him, all life was sacred, even if it was of a snake or scorpion or centipede. Whenever he saw one he quickly pushed it away for fear that we might kill it. He picked up wasps we knocked about with our badminton rackets and looked after their damaged wings. Sometimes he got stung. It never seemed to shake his faith. The more dangerous the animal, the more devoted Gunga Ram was to its existence. Hence the regard for snakes; above all, the cobra, who was the Kala Nag.

*Ganga Ram's devotion to God*



'We will kill your Kala Nag if we see him.'

'I won't let you. It's laid a hundred eggs and if you kill it all the eggs will become cobras and the house will be full of them. Then what will you do?'

'We'll catch them alive and send them to Bombay. They milk them there for anti-snake-bite serum. They pay two rupees for a live cobra. That makes two hundred rupees straightaway.'

'Your doctors must have udders. I never saw a snake have any. But don't you dare touch this one. It is a <sup>male snake</sup> phanniyar — it is hooded. I've seen it. It's three hands long. As for its hood!' Gunga Ram opened the palms of his hands and his head swayed from side to side. 'You should see it sunning itself on the lawn.'

That just proves what a liar you are. The <sup>lying/sitting in a warm place</sup> phanniyar is the male, so it couldn't have laid the hundred eggs. You must have laid the eggs yourself.'

The party burst into loud laughter.

'Must be Gunga Ram's eggs. We'll soon have a hundred Gunga Rams.'

Gunga Ram was <sup>squeezed with force</sup> squashed. It was the fate of a servant to be constantly squashed. But having the children of the household make fun of him was too much even for Gunga Ram. They were constantly making him look small with their new-fangled ideas. They never read their holy books. Nor even what the Mahatma said about non-violence. It was just shot-guns to kill birds and the jars of methylated spirit to drown snakes. Gunga Ram would stick to his faith in the sacredness of life. He would feed and protect snakes because snakes were the lowest of God's creatures on earth. If you could love them, instead of killing them, you proved your point. <sup>devotion to snakes</sup>

What the point was which Gunga Ram wanted to prove was not clear. He just proved it by leaving the saucerful of

milk by the snake hole every night and finding it gone in the mornings.

One day we saw Kala Nag. The monsoons had burst with all their fury and it had rained in the night. The earth which had lain dry and thirsty under the withering heat of the summer sun was crowded with life. In little pools frogs croaked. The muddy ground was covered with crawling worms, centipedes, and velvety lady-birds. Grass had begun to show and the banana leaves glistened bright and shiny green. The rain had flooded Kala Nag's hole. He sat in an open patch on the lawn. His shiny black hood glistened in the sunlight. He was big — almost six feet in length, and round and fat as my wrist.

'Looks like a King Cobra. Let's get him.'

Kala Nag did not have much of a chance. The ground was slippery and all the holes and gutters were full of water. Gunga Ram was not at home to help.

Armed with long sticks, we surrounded Kala Nag before he even scented danger. When he saw us his eyes turned as red as fire and he hissed and spat on all sides. Then like lightning Kala Nag started towards the banana trees.

The ground was too muddy and he slipped about. He had hardly gone five yards when a stick caught him in the middle and broke his back. A rain of blows reduced him to a squishy-squashy black and white jelly, splashed with blood and mud. His head was still undamaged.

'Don't damage the hood,' yelled one of us. 'We'll take Kala Nag to school.'

So we slid a stick under the cobra's stomach and lifted him on the end of the pole. We put him in a large biscuit tin and tied it up with string. We hid the tin under a bed.

At night I stayed near Gunga Ram waiting for him to get his saucer of milk. 'Aren't you going to take any milk for the Kala Nag tonight?'

'Yes,' answered Gunga Ram in a bad-tempered manner.



'You go to bed.'

He did not want any more argument on the subject.

'He won't need the milk any more.'

Gunga Ram paused.

'Why?'

'Oh, nothing. There are so many frogs about. They must taste better than your milk. You never put any sugar in it, any way.

The next morning Gunga Ram brought back the saucer with the milk still in it. He looked sullen and suspicious.

'I told you snakes like frogs better than milk.'

Whilst we changed and had breakfast Gunga Ram stayed near us. The school bus came and we climbed into it with the tin. As the bus started we held out the tin to Gunga Ram.

'Here's your Kala Nag. Safe in this box. We are going to put him in spirit.'

We left him standing speechless, staring at the departing bus.

There was great excitement in the school. We were a set of four brothers, known for our toughness. We had proved it again.

'A King Cobra.'

'Six feet long.'

'Phannyar.'

The tin was presented to the science teacher.

It was on the teacher's table, and we waited for him to open it and admire our skill. The teacher pretended to be uninterested and set us some problems to work on. With a deliberate show of being bored he fetched his forceps and a jar with a banded krait lying curled in muddy methylated spirit. He began to hum and untie the cord around the box.

As soon the cord was loosened the lid flew into the air, just missing the teacher's nose. There was Kala Nag. His eyes burnt like red-hot coals and his hood was tight and undamaged. With a loud hiss he attacked the teacher's face.

The teacher pushed himself back on the chair and fell over. He landed on the floor and stared at the cobra, paralysed with fear. The boys stood up on their desks and yelled hysterically.

Kala Nag surveyed the scene with his bloodshot eyes. His forked tongue darted in and out excited. He spat furiously and then made a bid for freedom. He fell out of the tin on to the floor with a loud plop. His back was broken in several places and he dragged himself painfully to the door. When he got to the threshold he drew himself up once again with his hood spread out to face another danger.

Outside the classroom stood Gunga Ram with a saucer and jug of milk. As soon as he saw Kala Nag come up he went down on his knees. He poured the milk into the saucer and placed it near the threshold. With hands folded in prayer he bowed his head to the ground begging for forgiveness. In desperate fury, the cobra hissed and spat and bit Gunga Ram all over the head—then with great effort dragged himself into a gutter and wriggled out of view.

Gunga Ram collapsed with his hands covering his face. He groaned in agony. The poison blinded him instantly. Within a few minutes he turned pale and blue, and foam appeared in his mouth. On his forehead were little drops of blood. These the teacher wiped with his handkerchief. Underneath was the V mark where the Kala Nag had dug his teeth.

### Glossary

Kala Nag	: black cobra
contempt	: scorn, disapproval
patronage	: 'favouring' through encouragement
methylated spirit	: poisonous alcohol used as a preservative
Russell's viper	: a poisonous snake
forceps	: an instrument for holding things
pious	: devout, expressing religious and virtuous sentiments