

THE READING STONE

A NOVEL OF SEVENTEETH-CENTURY HINDUSTAN

BY RUPERT SNELL

AN EXTRACT FROM THE BEGINNING OF

CHAPTER ONE

RUP CHAND

The flames were quick to learn what was expected of them, their long fingers fumbling briefly with kindling and sandalwood before reaching the swathed bundle that lay inside. They approached it cautiously, growing in confidence as their task became more clearly defined. Flarings within the pyre mapped places where a riverside breeze had sprinkled ghee from the priest's indifferent ladle...and within minutes my father's seventy-nine years were reduced to ashes and bones. We stood in a little crescent to one side of the pyre, dutifully observing this grim ritual. Being low in the family hierarchy, I was spared the duty of smashing the skull that grimaced from the dying pyre; this role fell to my brother Jaikishan, who wielded the bamboo pole with the composure that characterised all his dealings with the world. As if to remind us of the everydayness of these events, a second funeral party stood nearby, waiting its turn to enact an identical drama with shrouded patriarch, yawning priest, half-understood mantras, costly and hence inadequate timber, and a riverbank approved by tradition as the crossing place to another life.

We were, as you may have gathered, a large household. Ours was one of the many brahmin families of Mathura city living on an income from the town's Krishna temples, and proving that wealth and piety need not be mutual strangers. During my precocious youth, the bounty of God and his votaries (especially the devout merchants of Agra and environs) rewarded our priestly offices with an adequate stipend; but to me the temple was also a crucible for certain latent gifts that have nourished me in my life as surely as the very air I breathe. The temple compound and the numerous artists, poets and musicians living under its patronage provided an aesthetic playground

that could hardly be matched outside the great courts of Orchha or Ajmer or the Rajput princedoms – remote and unthinkable prospects for a provincial youth such as myself, with barely the means to have a drumhead re-strung or a first crop of stubble mown from a foolish face.

Fortunately, the hierarchy that limited my role at Father's funeral also restricted my duties in the service of Sri Krishna. This happy fact allowed me to concentrate on the temple's requirements for music and verse with which to celebrate the receipt, in this material world, of divine grace. In short, throughout my youth I was left free to pursue the interests, talents and passions that came naturally to me.

But I digress.

We family members began to shamle away from the burning-ghat, each harbouring his own thoughts, each relieved that this part of the rite had passed without mishap and was finally over. I remember how a quickening riverside breeze tugged playfully at the clothing of my relatives – how a sudden flourish of hemlines translated them into them dancers cutting a caper that played too lightly with the sadness of the occasion.

There was nothing dutiful about the grief drawn on the mourners' faces; but my own thoughts of Father at this moment were tinged with regret rather than sorrow, for our relationship had always lain awkwardly on both of us, like a borrowed garment. Each of my many brothers had found his own accommodation to Father's expectations and prejudices, but the more I had imitated characteristics designed to attract paternal approval, the more I had seemed to earn its opposite; my attempts to please him had been fruitless, while on his side it never occurred to this most demanding of fathers to reach out to his youngest son. My brothers' plural successes threw my singular failure into sharp relief, and I was no stranger to a sense of shame.

My brothers...let me not count them out with mathematical precision, for their number fluctuated according to whether certain male cousins were reckoned among them, and our household was more easily defined by the number of grain-sacks delivered from the market than by the variable number of mouths fed from our kitchen. My siblings defined the contours and confines of my entire youthful experience; their personalities delineated for me all possible topographies of the human landscape, and their qualities of loving-kindness and humour would calm whatever moody squalls might threaten our domestic harmony. Like the proverbial frog in a well, I imagined that the broader world was nothing more than my family writ large, and that my future journeyings there would follow easy paths amidst benevolence and friendliness. Nothing ever hinted at the fissures and ravines waiting for the

unwary traveller; no-one ever warned me about long days alone on the road under a scorched and parching sky.

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I am Rup Chand, son of Kishan Chand Gusain to whom you were introduced a few moments ago through a funereal narration bereft of the auspiciousness in which we like to swaddle our fragile lives. Forgive my lack of decorum in this regard. I myself am now approaching the age at which my father died; and it is the recollection of his death that has me setting down some events from a life spent in the shadow of his memory. So you will understand if mortality has flooded my thoughts of late, overflowing my mind and spilling onto these pages. But if your spirit quails at the prospect of drowning in accounts of doom and failure, let me assure you that my purpose here is not to wallow in misery but rather to extol and celebrate a life – neither my own nor that of any kinsman, but rather the sublime life of my Master, my Gurudev – a poet, a musician in images and syllables, a celebrant of the inextinguishable joy that plays all around us like lightning among monsoon clouds.

I am Rup Chand, son of Kishan Chand. To those aspiring poets kind enough to count themselves my pupils, I am Gusainji; and the same epithet works well enough, albeit with some impertinent variation when used beyond my earshot, in the mouths of certain tradesmen with whom I still have occasional business. Forgetting that a balding greybeard grips his purse-strings more tightly than the threads binding him to this world, a few such diehards do continue to solicit my custom – tailors, cobblers, grooms and stablemen, an unhappy barber called Bal Chand, dear Narayan who prepares my inks and folios, and of course my short-sighted and long-suffering servant Nandlal. Of those who knew me in my youth as “Munna” there are precious few remaining from whom to hear such endearments, for it will be a twelve-month this Diwali since the last of my siblings followed our father’s path to the riverbank, and those few remoter cousins rumoured yet to survive have fallen away from the course of my life these many years past.

Already my indiscipline shows itself in the ragged telling of this story. I offer you hints where you seek clarity, I dabble in details when you expect to see the broader picture laid satisfyingly before you. Forgive the ramblings of an old man. How to proceed? Should I emulate the temple scribes who appeal to the “sympathetic reader to correct the ignorant and foolish errors of my pen”, adding for greater effect that “the light is failing and my eyes are dim”? No, this will not do, for neither am I to be dismissed as wholly foolish or ignorant, nor are you (forgive me!) in much of a position to judge the veracity of my tale. Let us settle, then, on a position of mutual trust, a

contractual agreement: I undertake to deliver to you, by the end of my screed, a coherent history, while for your part, you must allow me to reach this destination through whatever route I choose.

But there is so little time! The funeral priest doubtless has his eye on me by now, and may already have allocated to some modest household purpose the fee that is destined for his purse. When will that payment fall due? To very few is it given to know the span of their mortal years; and whereas Father's astrological skills allowed him to predict (or precipitate) the moment of his own death with alarming accuracy, I have no such way of knowing which sentence so tardily set down in these pages may prove to be my last.

And yet time may play other kinds of tricks also: it may be that this manuscript, this self-indulgence of an old man who thinks he has a tale to tell, survives the appetite of the white ants who share my lodgings (offspring of those who have silently consumed the entire final canto of my illuminated *Gita-govinda*, the pride of my library); my scribblings may fall one day under the eye of people not yet born, people for whom Mirza Jaisingh's grand extensions to this fortress-palace of Amargarh are not the hellish dust-bowl of masons' camps and camel excrement that I see from my window, but a pleasure-palace already thickly settled with its own stories and its own chapters of Rajput heroism.

My good friend William Swinton – the self-confessed “black sheep” of an English family whose fortunes were made and lost and made again in the factories at Surat – hints that my recollections may someday have a second life further afield. But first things first: as I dip my pen in Narayan's too-thin mixture of lamp-black and Ganga water (he may please note that a ratio favouring pigment over sanctity would suit better), it occurs to me to sketch the backdrop to my tale. Staring into the depths of the azure sky that blocks my window, I recall how courtly portraits of Krishna and Radha show us the setting in which those deities play their loving games – wooded hills and flowering arbours on the bank of the river Jamuna, whose succulent water-melons so generously quenched the heat of my childhood summers. Should I emulate those artists, setting my own narrative against a backdrop that you will keep you with me in the pages ahead?

Restraint, rigour and discipline – I have always lacked this elusive trio of qualities, and the various unfortunates who have ever sought to instruct me in the arts have advised me a thousand times to bridle my cantering tongue. “Too many notes!” was my singing-teacher's despairing refrain, and similar comments from Gurudev himself were richly earned by my early attempts at setting (too many) words down on the page. How he would have scoffed at my excesses now: “celebrant of inextinguishable joy”, “quenched the heat of

my childhood summers"! How he would have laughed; and yet his would be a forgiving laughter, partly because it was his nature to accept and forgive, but partly also because he understood, perhaps, that I would never come to compose a true line unless I experimented with the fruits of my own imagination. In whatever brief moments of time remain to me now, such autumnal fruits are perhaps the only harvest left to my weary hand. May the bountiful Saraswati lend me sufficient skill to speak of my Master without shaming him – and myself – entirely.

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Our family house in Mathura was barely a stone's throw from Vishram Ghat, a location that will be known to all who have spent more than the shortest stay in that most ancient of cities. The ghat seems ill-named today, when the hubbub of commerce banishes all prospect of its eponymous "repose". But my long-ago childhood fell at a period when certain political instabilities had becalmed many a business enterprise, leaving us residents to live in greater peace and quiet than could be dreamed of in that locality today. Our house was not grand enough to be thought of as a real "haweli", but its mansion-like properties made it stand out from the more modest dwellings of our neighbours, and I grew up enjoying a level of comfort that must have been the envy of my boyhood peers.

At the time of my father's death I was in my seventeenth year. Each generation supposes that it achieved maturity earlier than subsequent ones, and when I think back to myself in those times it is certainly no mere lad that I encounter but a young man, albeit one with that propensity for uncomplicated happiness (and mischief) characteristic of childhood. I had every reason to be happy; yes, and every temptation to be mischievous. Such human requisites as were consciously identified by me then, such as food and friendships, were routinely fulfilled, but my good fortune extended also to those more abstract needs that are rarely perceived in our youth, yet which mould our hearts as surely as a potter's hand – the security of a loving home, and the devoted affection of family members.

I have already referred to my father's remoteness from me, but as my eye runs back over my words I begin to wonder if my judgement has not been too hasty; for I know that he loved me, and that my repayment of this debt of affection bore the accumulated interest of filial regard. The value of the affection between us was never really in doubt, and its coin would answer the most searching assay: if he seemed parsimonious in his *showing* of love, it was merely that he mistrusted the debased currency of easy sentiment, favouring instead the gold reserves of a hidden heart.