

# Preface

## The Story Analyzed

This epic portrays on a cosmic canvas the trials of lowly clay in trying to attain stardom of the spirit. One fine morning she laments her sin-splattered state – all too human, of course – and tearfully prays to her mother the earth for a way out. A strong will creates its own vibrations in space and authors circumstance. The mother reassuringly prophecies that her shaper, her destiny-maker, will take her in his fold within a day. And so he does. The guru is an exalted soul, free from passions, kind of heart, but an uncompromising taskmaster.

Then begins the process of digging the clay, transporting it on donkey-back, sifting it, kneading it, shaping it into a pitcher on a wheel, inscribing it with scriptural symbols and messages, and heating it in the dire flames of a kiln. As this takes place, we meet a gallery of characters – some cooperating, some raising heckles, some obtruding, some warring – and a constant struggle goes on all the way between favourable and adverse forces.

The motives and arguments of these characters enable the story to elucidate many types of false perception as well as to bring to life entities with varying degrees of spiritual aura: the donkey that carries the clay comes across as a quiet collaborator; the fish in the potter's well that wants to be metamorphosed instantly into a swan as an impatient aspirant; the sea that scents the rise of a good soul with jealous intolerance as an arch-evil in the order of things; and the sun who counterattacks the sea as a stalwart keeper of goodness. The clay is enlightened enough even at the start of her journey to preach the misarguing grains and the overeager fish. But in advising a greedy king, she oversteps her limit and comes in for a mild reproof from her guru not to preach to one's elders. This foible gives the clay another humanizing touch.

The asphyxiating heat in the kiln and the vicious, viscous smoke drive the very life out of the pitcher. He wails for relief, for water, for dear life. This comes as still another humanizing touch in the characterization of the epic hero who might otherwise cross into the realm of an embodiment of goody-goody perfection.

After the clay's transformation into a pitcher, one more major character is introduced – a rich, benign, Godward merchant. He dreams an auspicious dream about a pitcher and sends his man to buy one. This is a second instance of a worldwide web connecting our destinies in the sphere of thought. Omens and presentiments very much exist to presage what is to be. The pitcher becomes

instrumental in the merchant feeding a pure saint, whereby he earns high merit. This saint is another character (after the potter) from the class of divinized souls. Significantly, the pitcher surrenders his residual ego at this saint's feet. The rest of the nail-biting story concerns the calamities that befall the merchant and his family from the quarter of terroristic forces at home and abroad, and how the victims put up a struggle with the pitcher's help.

Obviously, the potmaker's investment of labour and his blessings to the pitcher are meant to be a gift to the society, to uphold the righteous and put down the uppish, but in no case to reject any creature or condemn one. The victory of goodness is meant to assimilate the unfortunate forces of evil and enlighten them. Spiritual regeneration has for its aim not an escape into meditative trance but an active involvement in the woe and weal of suffering humanity, nay, imperilled creature-kind.

### ***The Mute Clay as an Epic***

The classical Indian criteria for defining an epic and the western ones coincide to a large extent. According to Indian aesthetics, an epic should tell of the mighty deeds of the leader of an era; should detail the life of a nation; should involve demonic or supernatural forces, though ordinary human life should predominate; should contain several subplots, incorporate warfare, long journeys, competitions, debates, discussions on destiny; and should be written in a style that is simple and straight but at the same time appealing, forceful and solemn.

According to *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, an epic in western aesthetics is "a narrative poem on a grand scale and in majestic style concerning the exploits and adventures of a supernatural hero (or heroes) engaged in a quest or a serious endeavour. The hero is distinguished above all men by his strength and courage, and is restrained only by a sense of honour." The *Columbia Encyclopaedia* says, "Some of the conventions, followed by epic writers in varying degrees, include a hero who embodies national, cultural or religious ideals and upon whose actions depends to some degree the fate of the people; a course of great and difficult deeds; the intervention of supernatural or divine powers; concern with eternal human problems; and a dignified and elaborate style."

In India, classical Sanskrit epics of the Ramayan and Mahabharat, which tell of the deeds of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna respectively, belong to the divine

category. Kalidas's *Raghuvansh* also narrates the tale of Lord Ram and so does Gosvami Tulsidas's epic *Sriramcharitmanas*. *The Mute Clay* is of a different type, though. It unfolds the drama of the clay's spiritual practice – *saadhanaa* – and then of her adventures in her empowered state.

If we juxtapose *The Mute Clay* with the pre-Christian mega-stories such as Homer's Greek poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's Latin poem *Aeneid*, the one major common feature of them all is warfare involving supernatural forces. But *The Mute Clay* is about the rise from ordinary to sublime. Our epic's storyline is also of a different type from that of modern epics such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise lost* and *Paradise Regained*. It has inventively given a new scope to this literary form.

*The Mute Clay* is an epic according to both Indian and western criteria, though one without an exact precedent. It extends the scope of the term while incorporating its defining features. If one were to seek parallels with Lord Ram's or Krishna's story, there is in our present epic a too long and elaborate treatment of the clay's time with her guru. Such lengthy accounts of the avatars' ashram life do not occur in the divine epics. Moreover, the mute clay does not have an avataric status but is like the person next door, with a hidden potential not normally suspected in her. She turns out to be an outstanding specimen of humanity of her time and circumstance. It is a democratic epic that could happen in our time. References to contemporary newsmakers such as Indian satellites Aryabhata and Rohini and even the Reagan-related Star Wars suggest this. And yet the imagery is taken from rustic and natural world, meticulously free from the use of technological achievements of our time in communication, transport, electricity, etc.

If one were to draw parallels with Wordsworth's autobiographical epic-length poem *The Prelude*, our epic is also an account of an “ordinary” individual's moral and spiritual growth. But Wordsworth's poem is subtly introspective all through, with a minimal of external action. In *The Mute Clay*, on the other hand, open wars, cataclysms, schemings and counter-schemings abound, with an array of embattled characters drawn from the natural world: elements such as the earth, the sea, the river, the wind, and creatures such as the donkey, the fish, the elephants, the snakes, the whale... A few of the characters are drawn from the world of artifice, such as the golden ewer, rich foods, garments... Parts of body also become

characters, and so do abstractions such as silence, surprise and the valiant mood.

The most important antagonists appear in the human shape, though, in the form of the robbers in the wild who subvert scriptural reasoning with cussed illogic. They represent the human nadir of spiritual evolution, with their hearts full of the most resistant soil for the germination of the seed of faith such as comes naturally to the clay, the fish, the rich merchant. The message is that the ability to believe, the power to foster faith, is a gift that not everybody is endowed with, but holy company helps. But how does holy company come one's way – of its own will or through aspiration – is an eternal conundrum.

### **A Note on the Translation**

The original Hindi is textured with a superabundance of verbal figures of speech – puns, alliterations, internal rhymes, inversions – which cannot obviously be translated, especially into a language from another linguistic family. No attempt has been made to twist English to achieve corresponding effects. Only, at places the word-play in the original has been brought out in plain prose, only to give a sample taste of what the Hindi is like. More of it would have hindered the flow without enriching the text. In fact even the line-breaks to give the translation “a poetic look” have been avoided. You could say therefore that this translation has the look of a novel in poetic prose, and what makes the prose poetic is the intensity of feeling and the imaginative quality. After Walt Whitman's poetry with the looks of conventional prose and Rabindranath Tagore's self-translation of *Gitanjali*, “prose sentences” are finding greater acceptance in the poetic canon, and now there is a regular school of poetry wherein the looks are of prose. It is the librarian's lookout therefore to classify this work as poetry or prose. While the choice of the prose-form presentation derives from a desire to be simple, it equally derives from a desire to make the work look less forbidding to a poetry-shy generation!

To minimize the reader's awe at the prospect of negotiating a slow-moving, highly decorative, philosophically dense text, the summary – or the “argument” as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* – has been extracted sectionwise and printed in bold type. Such an aid also appears in the

Valmiki Ramayan published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur. The sections have been numbered, too, to facilitate referencing. The device of summarizing should, along with the simplicity of the prose, greatly enhance the reading comfort of what is universally regarded as a highly complex poem.

### **The Author on His Work**

Jain naked monk Acharya Vidyasagarji clarifies in his interview to Prabhakar Machve, reproduced with the critical essays on the Hindi epic in *Mook Maati Meemansa* (Bharatiya Jnanpith, New Delhi: 2003) that the work was created in order to elucidate certain fundamental principles of Jainism. He comments on Jainism's tenets explicitly in Canto IV, when the craftsman inscribes the newly wrought pitcher with the seed words *hee* (representing absolutism, which is despicable) and *bhee* (symbolizing relative pluralism, which is adorable). But the author's meaning flows through every pore of the text, through the twists and turns of the plot and through the debates and discussions all the way. The author's attitude to various characters is fairly obvious and his own comments also help to illuminate his stand. The earth, the potter, the clay and the saint can be counted as his major spokespersons.

The author tells us that the theme was spontaneously and intuitively conceived. He had not read any Hindi epics when he composed the present one, only his gurudeo Acharya Gyansagarji's Sanskrit epics such as *Jayodaya*, *Veerodaya* and *Sudarshanodaya*.

The work was composed between 1984 and 1987.

### **The Title of the Translation and the Element of Personification**

In the Hindi title *Mook Maati*, “mook” means “silent, speechless, mute”, while “maati” means “soil, clay, earth”. In the epic we are faced with that aspect of “maati” which can be shaped into a pitcher. “Soil” connotes the earth in which a seed grows. But you cannot say “a soil pitcher”. That reduces the choice to *earth* and *clay*. We say “an earthen pitcher” as well as “a clay pitcher”. But then *earth* brings to mind not only clay but this planet as well. Moreover, the earth is a character in the epic. So, to say “The Mute Earth” would have been inadvisable.

Hence the choice inevitably falls on *clay*. As for the Hindi qualifier “*mook*”, the most exact word for it is “mute”. One is mute by necessity, out of debility or helplessness, as is the case with the clay in the story. “Silent” and “speechless” indicate either temporary states or maybe a choice.

The different styles of translation by the two earlier translators and this translator can be seen in this random sample from the opening of the epic:

a) In the limit-less void above

blueness is spread....

and here.... Below...

total silence prevails.

The night is passing away

and the dawn is coming on..

– Gyan Chand Biltiwala, Bhagwan Rishabhdev Granthmala Publishers, Jaipur 2005

b) In the boundless space

A bedding of bluishness,

And ...hither...underneath

Prevails absolute silence,

The night is touching its termination

The dawn is now attaining its arrival

– Lal Chandra Jain, Bharatiya Jnanpith Publishers, New Delhi: 2010

c) A blue tint fills the limitless void above, while here, down below, sheer silence prevails. The night is on its way out and the dawn is about to set in.

– Omprakash Biyani Bhaarati

Since animals, things and abstractions become characters in the story, and since they all have masculine and feminine genders in Hindi, the translation uses *he* and *she* for them as in Hindi. The genders of the characters are inseparable from their roles, hence it was felt necessary to retain their genders. The lead character clay, when it becomes a pot, changes in Hindi from *she* to *he*. This too has been retained.

The tense of the narration changes in the original from past to historical present quite frequently. This feature has been retained in the translation. And although the original Hindi did not have quotation marks at certain places, they have been assumed wherever necessary for the logic of the story. It seems that the Hindi version expects the reader to supply them on his own. But in English there is already a distancing of culture, and hence this facility has been provided.

### **Thanksgiving**

I am grateful to the author Acharya Vidyasagarji Maharaj for asking me to do this translation. My special thanks to Prasadsagarji Maharaj. I heartily thank my friend the late Dr. V.K. Jain who introduced me to the author and Dr. Mrs. Manju Jain for her enthusiasm in getting the translation published. Thanks also due to Sri Rajendra Patoria, Dr. Smt. Kusum R. Patoria, Dr. Bhagchandra Jain and Dr. Vrishabh Jain for various types of help and support. I also thank the scholars and critics for their learned feedback.

I shall be grateful for any suggestions to improve the translation.

**Omprakash Biyani Bharati**

## Dedication

The translation is dedicated to Lord Mahaveer

### Lord Mahaveer: Zero Violence

Son of your mother's ecstatic dream  
That presaged a perfect soul,  
You fronted a vicious cobra with a face serene.  
An elephant on the rampage stood still on the road.  
With an unstoppable will to redeem man  
You gave up palace as well as clothes in your quest.  
You did austerities only a divinity can,  
By virtue of your pains, our sins are redressed.

We rejoice in your victory over worldliness,  
We discover endless depths in what you say.  
Life is truly life when we kill all violence.  
Could we take this, only this, dictum, pray?

Peace percolates from your lofty still heights.  
Your nirvana is a day of sparklers and lights.

Omprakash Biyani Bhaarti

*Samadhi of Muni Shanti Sagarji Maharaj (41 Years old) on 13 th August 2014*



*108 Acharyashri Vidyasagarji Munisangh performing rituals of Divine Soul-Moksha*



*Procession of Muni Shanti Sagarji Maharaj in Vidisha (MP)*