

# State of nature (Prakriti)

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TALKING as if words were exploding out of his mouth like popcorn from a frying pan, what will it get him? Narayana, standing on one leg and leaning against a pillar, a sour look on his downcast face, was shaking as if a demon possessed him. Sankappayya was contorted with anger.

Great, the boy has finally grown up. Who else would have the nerve to talk back to the man who gave him birth? How fashionable he looks, hair combed back, fancy scarf around the neck, like a city loafer; probably has a packet of *bidis* and a box of matches in his pocket, too.

Sankappayya went on snickering and slicing the areca nut.

Sitamma peeked out of the kitchen, and seeing her husband and son confronting one another, she went back to grating coconut. After putting the *sandige* out in the courtyard to dry in the sun, Lakshmi came out on the verandah and stood there. Unable to look into her father's eyes as he wiped the sweat away with a kerchief, while her brother stood there on one leg in that strange posture, she felt a little uneasy. She went into the kitchen and asked, 'What's going on, Mother?' Sitamma only said 'Shh!' and Lakshmi fell silent.

Shanta came running up, the hem of her skirt in her hand. Not understanding why her father and brother were confronting one another but enjoying the show, she put her chin on Sankappayya's shoulder and brought her lips near his ear. 'Can I get you some lime for your betel nut?' She looked mischievously at her brother. How vain he is, with the notebook and pen in his pocket. Once a week, flashlight in hand, he goes to town to see a film and never takes me. Yet, if Appa so much as looks at him, he almost starts to cry. But she didn't say any-

\* Translated by the author in collaboration with Sheldon Pollock.

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thing. She was afraid he might hit her when Father wasn't looking.

Shanta, untying Sankappayya's knotted tuft of hair, quipped, 'Uttara's brave only in front of the kitchen fire,'<sup>1</sup> in response to the conversation between mother and son that could now be heard from where she was sitting with her father on the verandah. She laughed, but glancing at her father's face she felt confused.

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*Mother, I'm telling you, that 20,000 rupee debt Father incurred is something he has to answer for himself. I wasn't born to rot in this hole. Your brother has asked me to join him in running a restaurant in Shimoga. I tell you, I'm ready to leave home this minute, just in the clothes I'm wearing. My relationship with father is finished.*

Sankappayya stood up, brushing aside Shanta's hand as she playfully twisted his mustache. Shanta, who was already feeling confused, didn't know what else to do and began biting her nails.

*Nani, why should you be angry with me? You know he doesn't listen to what I have to say either. Thousands were poured into that useless orange grove madness. The whole village told him not to do it – did he listen? 'The rest of the world can go to hell' – that's how he feels, and he can't see beyond his own nose. Six years, and not one crop harvested.*

*Oranges will never grow in that cursed piece of land, isn't that what the village officer himself said to Father, over and over again? As if talking to a parrot.*

*In this cursed hole, it's the same story every day. I'm sick and tired of struggling. Today, a tiger picks off a cow; tomorrow, a leopard picks off a dog.*

1. Uttara is a braggart in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* (4.34).

*I can't keep count any more. Kogga was saying it now seems that a wild elephant is stomping around somewhere. As if that weren't enough, blight has hit the areca nut crop, and malaria has struck again. Tell me, son, why live and die here if you can't see a single paise coming into your pocket?*

*Isn't that the truth, Mother. Why doesn't he listen to Shanbhog, at least? He's the village officer and he given his son his consent to open the restaurant with me. At least that boy is lucky.*

*No doubt, but what sin I committed in a past life, to wind up marrying him, I don't know. What you gained by being born in my womb I don't know. The golden necklace with four strands that my father gave me, along with the earrings and the gold belt – have I been able to keep them? No, it's all gone to the bank for that orange grove madness. If I still had them, I would have given them to you, and told you to do what you want and be happy.*

*You know, Mother, it's not as simple as he thinks. This is hereditary property we're talking about. I have rights too. Do you understand what I'm saying? Father needs to understand this, and then talk to me.*

Shanta wondered why Father didn't go and slap her brother's face. She stared in disbelief at her father with her big eyes.

*As if these weren't blessings enough, it wasn't six months after her marriage that Lakshmi lost her husband and came back home with her forehead bare.<sup>2</sup> I had told him not to tie my daughter to the neck of Devayya's son. But does either of us have a voice in this house? When he heard that his son-in-law died, did he shed a single tear? Without a word he went straight to his cursed orange grove. Let me tell you, his sin couldn't be washed away even in seven lifetimes. What's the point of this farming of his when it brings the family no happiness? Why he gives his children such grief, God only knows.*

*Why are you crying, Mother?*

Untying the string of dried *ranja* flowers from her hair, Shanta looked curiously at her father's contorted face. Like a man possessed, Sankappayya angrily lunged at Kariya, the servant standing outside the gate with his arms folded across his chest. 'Get to work!' he shouted, and began pacing back and forth. Then he stood still as if trying to remember something.

*My stomach churns, Nani, when I start to think about Lakshmi. Doesn't she want to live happily like*

*other women? Her father may think it is enough for her to have his face to look at. Listen, son, I want to go with you wherever you are. I can't live here like dirt beneath his feet. I want to get out of this hole, and live happily with my son – if only for a day or two.*

*I'll take care of it, Mother. He can't lord it over me any more. Kittanna and your brother and I will open a restaurant in Shimoga. Done. Let the sky fall down; I won't be afraid.*

Sankappayya appeared before them with such sudden force that Narayana's voice caught in his throat. Shanta laughed at her brother as he began to retreat, step by step, deeper into the kitchen in embarrassment. Sitamma, looking at the figure of her husband standing there, lowered her head and returned to grating the coconut, now a mere shell. His whole body irritated by the scraping sound, Sankappayya felt like bashing in his wife's head, and only gained control of his anger by clenching the rod of the milk-churn.

'Narayana, enough!' he said, raising his voice. 'If I don't give you money to open a restaurant, what are you going to do about it?' With that, he took the rod and rammed it to the bottom of the churn. Narayana swallowed the thought that he would go to court to get his share if necessary, and lowered his head.

Sankappayya turned to his wife, who was thinking: when he starts screaming, it's as if the very tiles are going to fly off the roof. And he said in a softer but still angry voice, 'Was it Lakshmi herself that told you what bliss it is to live with her father, or was that your own nonsense? Speak up!'

Looking at Sitamma's ugly, crimson face while she grated the empty coconut shell, he felt disgusted. How hideous she is, he thought. And yet – wasn't she his wedded wife? He had never even looked at another woman in his life. Still, she had joined sides with her son and now was standing against him. 'Pshaw!' he mumbled in disgust as he went back to the verandah. Drying his armpits with the cloth he carried, he said in a very soft voice, 'Where is Lakshmi, Shanta?'

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As he passed through the shrine room, he said out loud, 'Absolutely not, impossible! They can stand on their heads if they want. As the elder of the family, the one who performs the Vow to the Cosmic Serpent, to the Golden Goddess, to the Elephant-headed God, I'm not about to listen to this puny boy or this money-hungry wife, and give away the deed to the garden and rice fields that my family has worked for generations in a desperate struggle with the hills. And for what? To sell food in

2. Hindu wives wear a dot of vermilion on the forehead as an auspicious mark.

a restaurant – for a Brahman to sell food in Shimoga, of all things! We'll see who wins this one.'

He stuck the sickle in the belt at his waist as he went out. When Shanta, who was gathering ranja flowers, threw a look at him as if to say, 'Appa, shall I come with you?' in his soul he felt a sudden rush of happiness. Yet he said to himself, 'Even if none of my flesh and blood were here, I would stay on here. On that I'd swear an oath and submit to an ordeal if necessary. That boy is nothing but a sissy, wandering around town smoking bidis. I can cut firewood, three cartloads full, even now. This son will never bring the family honor, will he? I'm going to drag him out of there by the scruff of his neck if he doesn't hold his tongue. I won't put up with it any more.'

He walked quickly, climbing the hill behind the house, and saw Lakshmi gathering matti leaves to make shampoo. What did he really want to ask her? Did he want to ask, 'Was it my fault, Lakshmi, that you had to come back to your father's house as a longhaired<sup>3</sup> widow?' Or did he want to say, 'So what if your husband did die? Don't you have a father who will see to it that you'll never want for anything?' He looked at her bare forehead, searching for words. He felt happy when she asked, 'Where are you off to, Father, in this heat?' Yesterday, she and Shanta had insisted he take a massage bath and had massaged his body with oil. They had him sit in the tub, and they poured water on him. After the bath, they made the bed and put two rugs on him and said, 'You have to sweat a lot, Father.' And as Lakshmi had sat by his side, what had he wanted to say? How could he tell her the things he never felt like saying to his wife, or his son, or his relatives? 'Lakshmi, this time if the areca price goes up, and I make 5,000 to 6,000 rupees, and get some oranges, too, I'll pay off the debts and fix up the house.' Absent-mindedly, Lakshmi, who had been listening to her father, interrupted: 'Father, why don't you tell that to Mother, and brother as well?' Sankappayya then thought to himself, 'No, that isn't what I wanted to say.' It was always like this – if he started to talk, what he felt was one thing, what he said was another. Some tightness inside him never let what was in the heart come into the mouth. 'I'm coming to eat. Soak the matti leaves, and you and Shanta can bathe. I'll open the mountain cistern for you,' he said, and turned away. Lakshmi said, 'No, don't Father.' 'What has gotten into you that you don't want to wash your hair?' he scolded, and went off without waiting for an answer.

3. Hindu widows are often forced to shave their heads. Lakshmi is permitted by her father to wear her hair long.

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*What if he were to take from his trunk the silver medal that the district commissioner sahib had given him eight years ago to honour him as the best farmer of Malnad, and to say, 'Lakshmi, this is for you to keep'? The girl might feel happy. It would be good if Shanta were with me now, he thought. She would be scampering about here and there, picking some wild fruit or other, chattering on and on. Even this child understands, not to speak of Lakshmi. This work isn't something one does out of greed for money. It, too, is a kind of spiritual discipline, no different from holding back the wild sense organs and demanding they keep still. An act of asceticism. What do you gain running around with your dhoti loose. This is work, not like that sissy's running a restaurant. That spineless boy has got to understand the difference here. I'll put the money I get from my areca nut sales into the orange grove, and then we'll see whether or not the land yields oranges. The men of Kodagu aren't the only ones who can raise oranges. I've only got to keep struggling a while – three, maybe four years. With the money left over after I clear my debts, I'll put in a kerosene oil pump for the pond at the back of the house, like Krishna Bhatta's, and I'll raise whatever can grow in the fallow land to the left of the house.*

He stood near the pond, trying to imagine what Lakshmi would say about his plans. (He suddenly remembered her bare forehead as he was letting out the cistern water for her bath.) As long as I'm hale and hearty, what if her husband is dead, or anyone else, why should she be miserable? And he remembered how Lakshmi had finished stringing the ranja flowers Shanta had brought, which the widowed girl herself could never wear again, and how she had wiped tears from her eyes. Sankappayya stood a moment, taken aback, as he let out the water. It may be a natural desire; but why shouldn't she, too, struggle and exercise self-control, as I do, he thought as he turned toward his garden. We'll see whether or not I can get oranges out of my garden. They think they can make easy money running a restaurant, but do they have the guts to take me on?

As he entered the sacred grove, he unwound the cloth he wore around his head, and said to himself, 'From now on I will only eat food cooked by Lakshmi. My wife and son can go to hell. I am still strong. This time, if the price of areca nut goes up, everything will be all right. But what if the boy listens to her brother and takes me to court, what will I do then? Nobody in

our family has ever gone to court.’ His pace slowed. ‘Dear God, the son born from my loins, the wife I wed, united against me.’ He picked off the leeches from his feet, and sighed. ‘I don’t care what happens, I won’t give in. If necessary I will ask Lakshmi if what I’m doing is right. If she supports me, we’ll see if they can stick out their tongues at me. I’d cut them to pieces without a moment’s hesitation.’

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He stood beside the deep chasm in the middle of the forest, and peered into the depths. When he was young, his father would bring him there, and say, ‘Earth, sometimes, cannot bear the burden of her hills. Then she sinks, and these chasms are created.’ ‘If Shanta were with me,’ he thought, ‘it would be good. “You mean even the earth sometimes trembles, Appa?” she would ask, in wonder, and open her eyes wide and look at me. My soul would then feel cool.’

Sankappayya’s eyes, which had peered into the bottom of the pit, became small and then opened wide and then slowly closed. The sight he had just seen took possession of his body entirely, and he began to tremble. Then he opened his eyes again, looked straight down, fearlessly. Like burning coal was the look of the tiger that was lying at the bottom of the chasm. Yes, just like him it opened its eyes, impassively. It’s true. As if possessed he stood there. Why he didn’t feel like screaming or turning tail was a wonder, a real wonder. What is it he is feeling now, that he doesn’t want to share with anyone, not even with Lakshmi? What is it that came coursing through his whole body, coursing with a roar through his whole body? The only thing that became clear to him was the thought that if one must live, one should live like the tiger. He said this out loud, was surprised he did so, and began to walk.

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He started awake, sweating profusely.

Rice field.

Jackfruit tree.

A thorn stepped on.

Standing before him was Shanbhog. But he didn’t tell him he saw a tiger in the chasm.

‘Say, Sankappayya, are you heading toward the garden?’ Sankappayya only nodded. As Shanbhog opened his snuff box, he thought it a prelude to further conversation, and stopped absent-mindedly.

‘Why should we stand in the way of the youngsters? Look, Sankappayya, what I want to talk to you about is ... isn’t it all out of our hands? Take for example Lakshmi, did you ever dream that such a thing would ever happen to Lakshmi?’

Ah, Shanbhog. Why should what happened to Lakshmi be of any concern to you? Sankappayya’s brow knitted.

‘The writing of fate can’t be wiped out. That’s why I say it’s futile, all this struggling and wanting things to happen in a particular manner, and pounding your head against a wall about it. Take for instance the orange grove. I tell you, your brother-in-law, my son Kittanna, and your son want to open a restaurant. There’s no profit in this farming, I tell you – why beat your head against a hill. There’s more cash in a restaurant, I tell you....’

‘Mind your own business, Shanbhog, and stop shooting off your mouth.’

‘Look at this Brahman’s coarseness,’ thought Shanbhog, his face distorted in an artificial smile. But as he looked at Sankappayya’s eyes, he felt uneasy. Before Shanbhog could recover his composure, Sankappayya left, meditating on the eyes of the tiger that flamed like torches.

As Sankappayya marched off like a soldier, he suddenly wanted to gather red hibiscus flowers by the basketful and worship the goddess Durga. All by himself, on the verandah, he will draw the sacred circle with red powder. In the middle of the circle, he will install the Great Mother. By the time the east turns red, he will have taken the holy bath, and be wearing the red silk lower garment for worship. His forehead will be smeared with sacred ash. With his neck adorned with a necklace of *rudraksha* beads, he will be chanting the *mantras*. He will worship the Goddess, so that the forest trembles, and the earth on which you sit trembles. The sinners, sissies, cowards, evil doers will tremble in their hearts. The holy sound of the Vedas will fill the air, and spread all-pervading. And then, riding her tiger, the great Mother Goddess will become visible in actual form. She will embrace him, fondling his whole body. ‘Body, bone, flesh, nerves, I am absorbed into Her.’

‘Shanta should be sitting by my side, wearing the red silk skirt,’ he thought, ‘grinding the sandalwood paste while the oil lamp bums.’

‘What does it matter if Lakshmi is a longhaired widow. She should be wearing the yellow cloth of the deity, and sitting by my side in deep meditation.’

‘I myself will be worshipping with total absorption, like sugarcane being squeezed in the press. And as I do, on Lakshmi’s forehead there will be a red vermilion dot like a drop of blood, it will smile upon her forehead. It will smile, the entire orange garden will bear red, red fruit. The forest, hill, and valley will become spellbound by mantras, and will fall at my feet’

The eunuchs and the sissies will be cut to pieces, and their blood will come pouring out. And if in the course of the service that wife of mine dares interrupt, I will rip off her wedding necklace and throw her out of the house,' he thought. And suddenly he felt giddy.

He saw his garden. It looked like a widow with a shaven head. 'My areca nut trees, their green foliage once swaying in the wind... why are they all lying about uprooted? Why are the banana trees scattered topsyturvy like this? And the areca flowers, the betel-leaf creepers, why have they been trampled under foot?' And he cried out loud, 'Oh God, Mother!'

'Hey, Kariya! Are you dead or what?' he started to scream. There was no answer. 'Dear God, everything has been destroyed by that wild elephant.' Stumbling over the areca trees, he ran off.

Kariya was snoring, drunk, on the verandah. Near his head, broken eggs and pieces of bread. All over the verandah jackfruit remains and seeds. The sickle thrown into a corner, after he had lost his senses. From the snoring man's mouth saliva dripped, telling a tale of sweet dreams.

A water buffalo came lumbering up drawn by the smell of the jackfruit leavings. When the mud on its body rubbed off on him, Sankappayya came to his senses. As his hand went to the sickle at his waist, he felt giddier, and his vision darkened. He struggled to regain his calm for just a moment, but felt sick from the smell of toddy, and turned and left.

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In the hot noonday sun, burning straight down on the top of the head, stupor. On hills like dissected limbs.

Where mango tree, jackfruit tree, the blackberry grew here and there in intervals, where cane grew in clusters; in sharp shadows, in the sky filled with fire, indifference and satiety.

Now and then a crow thirsting.

Woodpecker searching for water in a tree. Beyond that, only some bees buzzing. In the muddy ponds, the water buffaloes lying, lowing.

'Is this all unconnected?' Sankappayya thought, disoriented. 'Not the time to be awake and worrying. This is a time to be asleep, and forget oneself. Only if the bones didn't quarrel with the flesh, and the nerves didn't quarrel with the heart and with the liver would there be fulfillment. Where there is absolute inactivity, fulfillment

'If the elephant goes on a rampage, let him. Let earth's mouth gape wide and mock me. I will strangle them both, wife and son,' he thought.

But something went wrong – one thought kept coming to him again and again. If Lakshmi asked, 'Why

are you acting like this, Father?' he thought he would say, 'The elephant entered the garden and everything went wrong.' In the forest, where not a single being was to be found, he stood alone and said aloud, 'Oh Lakshmi, an elephant came in, and all my work was destroyed.'

On the way, he picked some cashew fruits thinking Lakshmi would like them. He picked some more fruit, wild white raspberries for Shanta. He thought, 'If that Shanbhog, or his son Kitta, or his ugly-faced wife, or his own sissy son were to come and give me any advice – "Have you finally learned your lesson, now that the elephant has destroyed the garden? Will you ever pay off your debts, will you ever get fruit out of that orange grove?" – I would smash in their teeth.

'It's only because I am walking so fast that my legs are growing weak. Only the hot sun,' he thought as his eyes grew cloudy. 'If Krishna Bhatta comes and bothers me for the debts, I will spit in his face,' he thought, and he tightly gripped the sickle at his waist.

Swallowing spittle to wet his throat, he thought he would call to his wife and say, 'I won't drink any water you touch. Get out of the house! Lakshmi and Shanta are here, they will cook my rice.' As he was thinking this, he realized he had lost his way. He had come to the foothills and became confused. He began to wonder, 'The path that I have walked all these days, how could I lose it?' And he looked at the height that his weak legs could not climb.

He wanted to say out loud, 'I have lost my way.' 'I have lost my way,' he whispered through his parched throat, looking at the cluster of bamboo to his left, and the bush beyond it. He held his hand up to his eyes and wondered what was over there, where the grass had grown almost as tall as a person. And trying to swallow spittle to wet his throat, he went a few steps further.

He felt as if he had tripped over a step. He covered his eyes with his cloth.

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Lakshmi lay blissfully, embracing Shanbhog's son Kitta in the shade.

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'Have I lost my way?'

Like a light that begins to grow in an earthen lamp, the red-pointed utterance lighted up in the darkness of his mind. Its light began to spread into all the nooks and crannies of his mind. Monkeys on the treetops bared their teeth.

'Did I lose my way?'

'No,' he said, as he stood again on the edge of the chasm, clenched his teeth and looked at the emptiness in the bowels of the chasm. 'Shall I turn left and go to

Krishna Bhatta's house, or shall I go straight to my house?' The sharp red sentence was spreading. As he heard footsteps, he remembered the monkey baring its teeth, and turned and looked. Shanbhog was there.

'Did you hear, Sankappayya?'

'Huh?'

'There was a tiger, it seems, sleeping listlessly in the chasm without a care in the world. The Kogga came up from behind, it seems, and shot at it.'

Like a tree standing calm in every leaf after a storm, Sankappayya stood there. Then he went straight to the house of Krishna Bhatta.

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One evening, some six months later, seeing Sankappayya drag his feet along on the edge of the rice field, the city merchant Ahmed Bari greeted him, 'Salaam.' Casually starting a conversation he said, 'I hear you are alone, farming only a rice field, and that you sold your garden and house to Krishna Bhatta and sent all your family to Shimoga. Is it true?' he said, lighting a bidi. Sankappayya didn't speak, but nodded his head. He also nodded his head when he was asked whether he had seen how the orange grove had at last blossomed. 'Krishna Bhatta wanted me to pay 850 rupees, but I said, not more than 700, and I succeeded in bringing him down at last. Do you think I'll wind up taking a loss?'

'Probably not.'

'What a pity, aren't you bored, living alone?' asked Bari, and turning his back to the wind carefully lighted up the bidi again.

'Why should I feel bored,' said Sankappayya, and went back to his shack.

He didn't want to eat. Who wants to light up an ash-filled oven, and cook rice? The earthen lamp went out when the wind blew, and he went out to the verandah. Because it was new moon, there was no light. Till midnight, he wandered around the verandah. He took the cloth from his waistband, tied it around his head, came back to the platform made of the wood of the jackfruit tree, and put one of his feet there, feeling weary. When everyone had been ready to go, Shanta had stood near the well, putting her hand on the rim. She had looked at me, he thought, as if to say, I want to stay with you, Appa. I shouldn't have scolded her. If she were with me now, she would be leaning against me and twisting my gray mustache. And as she breathed upon my neck, I could have stroked her soft black hair.

Sankappayya's legs ached. He sighed, 'Ah, Mother,' and wiped his eyes with his cloth. An old cow belonging to who knows what house came up and sniffed him, and he scratched its neck.