



RAJA RAO

Companions

*Alas till now I did not know
My guide and Fate's guide are one.*

—Hafiz

It was a serpent such as one sees only at a fair, long and many-coloured and swift in riposte when the juggler stops his music. But it had a secret of its own which none knew except Moti Khan who brought him to the Fatehpur Sunday fair. The secret was: his fangs would lie without venom till the day Moti Khan should see the vision of the large white rupee, with the Kutub Minar on the one side and the face of the Emperor on the other. That day the fang would eat into his flesh and Moti Khan would only be a corpse of a man. Unless he finds God.

For, to tell you the truth, Moti Khan had caught him in the strangest of strange circumstances. He was one day going through the *sitaphul* woods of Rampur on a visit to his sister, and the day being hot and the sands all scorching and shiny, he lay down under a wild fig tree, his turban on his face and his legs stretched across a stone. Sleep came like a swift descent of dusk, and after rapid visions of palms and hills and the dizzying sunshine, he saw a curious thing. A serpent came in the form of a man, opened its mouth, and through the most queer twistings of his face, declared he was

Pandit Srinath Sastri of Totepur, who, having lived at the foot of the Goddess Lakshamma for a generation or more, one day in the ecstasy of his vision he saw her, the benign Goddess straight and supple, offering him two boons. He thought of his falling house and his mortgaged ancestral lands and said without a thought, 'A bagful of gold and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.' 'And gold you shall have,' said the Goddess, 'but for your greed, you shall be born a serpent in your next life before reaching liberation. For gold and wisdom go in life like soap and oil. Go and be born a juggler's serpent. And when you have made the hearts of many men glad with the ripple and swing of your shining flesh, and you have gone like a bird amidst shrieking children, only to swing round their legs and to swing out to the amusement of them all, when you have climbed old men's shoulders and hung down them chattering like a squirrel, when you have thrust your hood at the virgin and circled round the marrying couples; when you have gone through the dreams of pregnant women and led the seekers to the top of the Mount of Holy Beacon, then your sins will be worn out like the quern with man's grindings and your flesh will catch fire like the will-o-the-wisp and disappear into the world of darkness where men await the birth to come. The juggler will be a basket-maker and Moti Khan is his name. In a former life he sought God but in this he sits on the lap of a concubine. Wending his way to his sister's for the birth of her son, he will sleep in the *sitaphul* woods. Speak to him. And he will be the vehicle of your salvation.' Thus spoke the Goddess.

'Now, what do you say to that, Moti Khan?'

'Yes, I've been a sinner. But never thought I, God and Satan would become one. Who are you?'

'The very same serpent.'

'Your race has caused the fall of Adam.'

'I sat at the feet of Sri Lakshamma and fell into ecstasy. I am a brahmin.'

'You are strange.'

'Take me or I'll haunt you for this life and all lives to come.'

'Go, Satan!' shouted Moti Khan, and rising swift as a sword he started for his sister's house. He said to himself, 'I will think of my sister and child.'

I will think only of them.’ But leaves rustled and serpents came forth from the left and the right, blue ones and white ones and red ones and copper-coloured ones, long ones with short tails and short ones with bent tails, and serpents dropped from tree-tops and rock-edges, serpents hissed on the river sands. Then Moti Khan stood by the Rampur stream and said, ‘Wretch! Stop it. Come, I’ll take you with me.’ Then the serpents disappeared and so did the hissings, and hardly home, he took a basket and put it in a corner, and then he slept; and when he woke, a serpent had curled itself in the basket. Moti Khan had *a pungi* made by the local carpenter, and, putting his mouth to it, he made the serpent dance. All the village gathered round him and all the animals gathered round him, for the music of Moti Khan was blue, and the serpent danced on its tail.

When he said good-bye to his sister, he did not take the road to his concubine but went straight northwards, for Allah called him there. And at every village men came to offer food to Moti Khan and women came to offer milk to the serpent, for it swung round children’s legs and swung out, and cured them of all scars and poxes and fevers. Old men slept better after its touch and women conceived on the very night they offered milk to it. Plague went and plenty came, but Moti Khan would not smell silver. That would be death.

Now sometimes, at night in caravanserais, they had wrangles. Moti Khan used to say: ‘You are not even a woman to put under oneself.’

‘But so many women come to see you and so many men come to honour you, and only a king could have had such a reception though you’re only a basket-maker.’

‘Only a basket-maker! But I had a queen of a woman, and when she sang her voice was all flesh, and her flesh was all song. And she chewed betel-leaves and her lips were red, and even kings . . .’

‘Stop that. Between this and the vision of the rupee . . .’

Moti Khan pulled at his beard and, fire in his eyes, he broke his knuckles against the earth.

‘If only I could see a woman!’

‘If you want God forget women, Moti Khan.’

‘But I never asked for God. It is you who always bore me with God. I said I loved a woman. You are only a fanged beast. And here I am in the prime of life with a reptile to live with.’

But suddenly temple bells rang, and the muezzin was heard to cry *Allah-o-Akbar*. No doubt it was all the serpent’s work. Trembling, Moti Khan fell on his knees and bent himself in prayer.

From that day on the serpent had one eye turned to the right and one to the left when it danced. Once it looked at the men and once at the women, and suddenly it used to hiss up and slap Moti Khan’s cheeks with the back of its head, for his music had fallen false and he was eyeing women. Round were their hips, he would think, and the eyelashes are black and blue, and the breasts are pointed like young mangoes, and their limbs so tremble and flow that he could sweetly melt into them.

One day, however, there was at the market a dark blue woman, with red lips, young and sprightly; and she was a butter woman. She came and stood by Moti Khan as he made the serpent dance. He played on his bamboo *pungi* and music swung here and splashed there, and suddenly he looked at her and her eyes and her breasts and the *nagaswara* went and became *mohaswara*, and she felt it and he felt she felt it; and when night came, he thought and thought so much of her and she thought and thought so much of him, that he slipped to the *serai* door and she came to the *serai* gate, flower in her hair and perfume on her limbs, but lo! Like the sword of God came a long, rippling light, circled round them, pinched at her nipples and flew back into the bewildering night. She cried out, and the whole town waked, and Moti Khan thrust the basket under his arm and walked northwards, for Allah called him thither.

‘Now,’ said Moti Khan, ‘I have to find God. Else this creature will kill me. And the Devil knows the hell I’d have to bake in.’ So he decided that, at the next saint’s tomb he encountered, he would sit down and meditate. But he wandered and he wandered; from one village he went to another, from one fair he went to another, but he found no *dargah* to meditate by. For God always called him northwards and northwards, and he crossed the jungles and he went up the mountains, and he came upon narrow valleys

where birds screeched here and deer frisked there but no man's voice was to be heard, and he said, 'Now let me turn back home'; but he looked back and was afraid. And he said, 'Now I have to go to the north, for Allah calls me there.' And he climbed mountains again, and ran through jungles, and then came broad plains, and he went to the fairs and made the snake dance, and people left their rice shops and cotton-wareshops and the bellowing cattle and the yoked threshers and the querns and the kilns, and came to hear him play the music and to see the snake dance. They gave him food and fruit and cloth, but when they said, 'Here's a coin,' he said, 'Nay.' And the snake was right glad of it, for it hated to kill Moti Khan till he had found God, and it himself hated to die. Now, when Moti Khan had crossed the Narbuda and the Pervan and the Bhagirath, he came to the Jumna, and through long Agra he passed making the snake dance, and yet he could not find God and he was sore in soul with it. And the serpent was bothersome.

But at Fatehpur Sikri, he said, 'Here is Sheikh Chisti's tomb and I would rather starve and die than go one thumb-length more.' He sat by Sheikh Chisti's tomb and he said, 'Sheikh Chisti, what is this that Fate has sent me? This serpent is a very wicked thing. He just hisses and spits fire at every wink and waver. He says, "Find God." Now, tell me, Sheikh Chisti, how can I find Him? Till I find Him I will not leave this spot.'

But even as he prayed he saw snakes sprout through his head, fountains splashed and snakes fell gently to the sides like the waters by the Taj, and through them came women, soft women, dancing women, round hips, betel-chewed lips, round breasts—shy some were, while some were only minxes—and they came from the right and went to the left, and they pulled at his beard—and, suddenly, white serpents burst through the earth and enveloped them all, but Moti Khan would not move. He said: 'Sheikh Chisti, I am in a strange world. But there is a darker world I see behind, and beyond that dark, dark world, I see a brighter world, and there, there must be Allah.'

For twenty-nine days he knelt there, his hands pressed against his ears, his face turned towards Sheikh Chisti's tomb. And people came and said, 'Wake up, old man, wake up', but he would not answer. And when they found the snake lying on the tomb of Sheikh Chisti they cried, 'This is a

strange thing,' and they took to their heels; while others came and brought *mullahs* and *maulvis* but Moti Khan would not answer. For, to speak the truth, he was crossing through the dark waters, where one strains and splashes, and where the sky is all cold, and the stars all dead, and till man comes to the other shore, there shall be neither peace nor God.

On the twenty-ninth night Sheikh Chisti woke from his tomb and came, his skull-cap and all, and said: 'My son, what may I give you?'

'Peace from this serpent—and God.'

'My son, God is not to be seen. He is everywhere.'

'Eyes to see God, for I cannot any more go northwards.'

'Eyes to discern God you shall have.'

'Then peace from this serpent.'

'Faithful shall he be, true companion of the God-seeker.'

'Peace to all men and women,' said Moti Khan.

'Peace to all mankind. Further, Moti Khan, I have something to tell you; as dawn breaks Maulvi Mohammed Khan will come to offer you his daughter, fair as an oleander. She has been waiting for you and she will wed you. My blessings on you, my son!'

'Allah is found! Victory to Allah!' cried Moti Khan. The serpent flung round him, slipped between his feet and curled round his neck and danced on his head, for, when Moti Khan found God, his sins would be worn out like the quern-stone with the grindings of man, and there would be peace in all mankind.

Moti Khan married the devout daughter of Maulvi Mohammed Khan and he loved her well, and he settled down in Fatehpur Sikri and became the guardian of Sheikh Chisti's tomb. The serpent lived with him, and now and again he was taken to the fair to play for the children.

One day, however, Moti Khan's wife died and was buried in a tomb of black marble. Eleven months later Moti Khan died and he was given a white marble tomb, and a dome of the same stone, for both. Three days after that the serpent died too, and they buried him in the earth beside the *dargah*, and gave him a nice clay tomb. A *peepal* sprang up on it, and a passing brahmin planted a *neem* tree by the *peepal*, and some merchant in

the village gave money to build a platform round them. The *peepal* rose to the skies and covered the dome with dark, cool shade, and brahmins planted snake-stones under it; and bells rang and camphors were lit, and marriage couples went round the platform in circumambulation. When the serpent was offered the camphor, Moti Khan had the incense. And when illness comes to the town, with music and flags and torches do we go, and we fall in front of the *peepal* platform and we fall prostrate before the *dargah*, and right through the night a wind rises and blows away the foul humours of the village. And when children cry, you say, 'Moti Khan will cure you, my treasure,' and they are cured. Emperors and kings have come and gone but never have they destroyed our village. For man and serpent are friends, and Moti Khan found God.

Between Agra and Fatehpur Sikri you may still find the little tomb and the *peeped*. Boys have written their names on the walls and dust and leaves cover the gold and blue of the pall. But someone has dug a well by the side, and if thirst takes you on the road, you can take a drink and rest under the *peepal*, and think deeply of God.