Courtesy: Navayana and Scroll.in.

We don't know who first told the story of the Buddha's life, or rather the stories, for there are many. They range from simple accounts of a different kind of man to wonderful sagas of a god who lived among men. There are no records either of those who first started putting the stories down in writing – nobody who remembers, for example, that the above version was begun by Upali, scribe and senior bhikkhu at the small monastery of Mahismati on the river Narmada, during the rule of one of the strangest kings the world has ever seen. Ashoka, or the Beloved of the Gods, as he styled himself, ordered Upali to write it.

By then, the Buddha had been dead nearly three hundred years. The accounts of his life and preachings had been memorized in verse by generations of his followers, which was why Upali's colleagues found it surprising, even appalling, that he did almost nothing for nearly a year after the royal command. He was mulling over it, he explained. Lazing is more accurate, said his colleagues amongst themselves. Let us hope he does not have to pay for his mulling, they added. Let us hope we do not have to pay for his mulling, they added further.

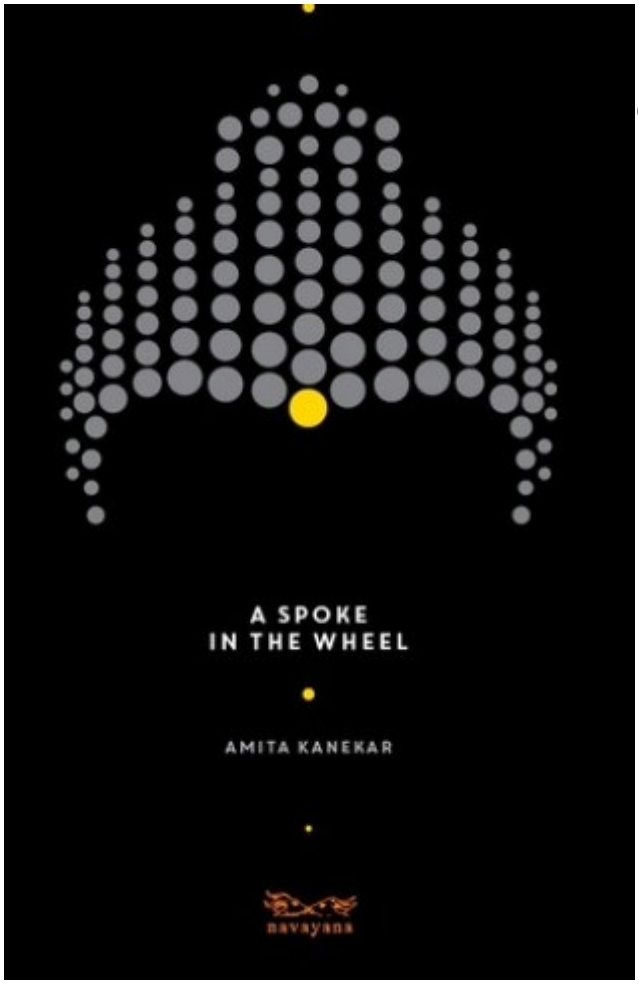
'Enough for today, Ananda. Just imagine – the mother never saw her child, for whom she had lived her life!'

His student rose and stretched. His hand ached from dipping the reed pen into the pot of ink and scratching it against the sheet. The sheet was of palm-leaf, flattened and oiled, but slightly rough. It required care to pull strokes across the ribbed surface without breaking the nib. He would never admit his tiredness though, for he was one of the few novices in the monastery who had mastered the skill of writing. Upali had taught him.

'But she attained everlasting heaven, didn't she, Master? Besides, didn't the Buddha visit her many times in heaven later on?'

'Ananda!' Upali was feeling rather pleased with his first finished chapter. It had, he felt, just the right mix of politics and pathos. Perhaps it was a little too long, as Thera Harsha had opined. Harsha had said other things as well, about disrespect and sarcasm and so on, which Upali had ignored. But it looked final and presentable, copied out in black ink and Ananda's beautiful longhand. In fact, he was proud of his student that afternoon. He forgot all that now.
'Where do you hear such things?'

'At the class Thera Mohan took yesterday.'



ook Excerpt: Amita Kanekar, A Spoke in the Wheel

‘Do you know anybody who has seen heaven, Ananda?’

The boy knew many who claimed to have, he realized. ‘Rather, have you? Then how do you know that it even exists, let alone that the Buddha visited it? The Buddha and his mother were ordinary people, like you and me!’

How do you know, Ananda’s scowl asked silently. Just because you have not seen heaven? His silence was not from fear. They had discussed such issues many times before; it was futile to try to change his stubborn teacher’s mind. Upali saw the look on his face and found himself thinking similarly. But he had a responsibility to Ananda and decided to give it another shot. ‘Well, maybe not entirely like you and me. The Shakyamuni was an extraordinary man, but with normal physical and mental powers – it was what he did with those ordinary powers that was so extraordinary. But people find it easier to believe in magical powers… And I don’t know whether heaven even exists. Some philosophers like the Lokayats held that nothing remains after death. Nothing.’

Ananda decided he could not give up on Upali either. ‘Thera Harsha speaks of rebirth. Nirvana is freedom from rebirth, he says.’

‘Thera Harsha’s brahmin background sometimes gets in the way of his brain!’ snapped Upali before he could stop himself.

Harsha was the head of the monastery.'I told him what you say, that nirvana is reason, and control of oneself, and so on, and he said yes, but all that leads to freedom from rebirth.'

Upali sighed. 'All I'm saying is that there is no *proof*. Of either heavens or rebirths. All that we know for sure is that a dead person's body becomes nothing in no time.'

'What about Santosh? He's exactly like his dead uncle, isn't he? He looks like him, speaks like him, even likes the same food! He is even beginning to remember his past life.' Santosh was a student at the monastery who belonged to a neighbouring village.

'He's his nephew, Ananda, and surrounded by people who speak of the dead uncle all the time! Why wouldn't he become like him?' Upali glared at his student who glared back, eyeball to eyeball. They were equal in height just now, and Upali, thinner, darker and slightly hunched, realized that he would soon be the shorter. 'These are all superstitious beliefs, according to me, at least. I think it's better to sit down while arguing – to maintain the decorum of debate, you know.' He wrapped his cotton shawl around his shoulders. It was late September and the evenings were cool and windy. 'Now go get a wet rag for that spilt ink. Quickly, before it dries.'

Ananda left. Upali blew on the finished sheets and began stringing them carefully onto the earlier pile.

To Upali's colleagues, his task seemed enviably simple.

The story and teachings of the Buddha had come down in the form of simple verses called the suttas, memorized and chanted by generations of bhikkhus. Upali himself had begun learning them at the age of eight and now could easily have recited the entire Sutta Pithaka, as the corpus was called, backwards – that is, if he wanted to indulge in what was a popular but highly frowned- upon challenge thrown by novices at one another.

When one knew the verses by heart, what was the problem in converting them into prose, asked his colleagues. Upali said that there were gaps and even contradictions in the account. The suttas had been developed to explain the Way, and while many contained specific incidents of the Buddha's life, including specific persons and places, they were not one coherent whole.

Also, they had been composed for the oral tradition, hence arranged along a metre and with a lot of repetition. The chanting could stir one's soul, especially when seated with eyes shut in the midst of disciplined rows of bhikkhus, with the hall, the earthen lamps, and the world itself seeming to reverberate as they raised their voices together and dropped them in very

slight but marvellous imprecision. To write them down as an account was another matter. Some of the suttas sounded like riddles, many were mystical, some childish. They had to be explained, as Upali did in his classes, but even more carefully, for this was going to be a permanent record. It could not be corrected the next day, as he tended to do in his classes, despite more than twenty years of teaching.

Not all of Upali's colleagues were impressed by his efforts.

Most did not subscribe to the importance of the written word, though all had heard of the fabled cities on the Sindhu where writing had been well known. But those cities had vanished long ago – if they had ever really existed – and for a long time now, rote learning had been the way to preserve and transmit knowledge. Frogs croaking, was how a vedic poet had described a school of his day. Writing was considered a new fad, a jugglery with learning, an idiosyncrasy of the present Magadhe-Raja, an anti-scholarly, crude, low-caste, foreign practice. Literate persons were rare – a few bhikkhus, some bureaucrats and merchants, that was it – though their numbers were growing, thanks to imperial patronage. The patronage did not stop the criticism, but muted it somewhat.

Writing, said Upali's colleagues, was something you would expect from a person like Upali.

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IT WAS SUNSET when a bhikkhu came to invite them to lunch. They followed him out of their room to discover four armed soldiers waiting outside.

'What is it?' asked Upali.

'Lord Thera, we are the bodyguards of His Highness.'

Upali scowled and marched ahead of them to the dining vihara, which was hot, crowded, and full of the sounds of food being served and eaten, except for a jovial crowd around the Sanchi Thera, who saw them enter and immediately motioned Upali to his side. The other two squeezed in at the end of another row.

Among those eating with the Thera was the yellow-haired Xantes, who immediately made space for Upali next to him. A bhikkhu hurried up with a banana leaf plate, and almost simultaneously heaps of boiled rice and stewed tapioca, a spicy curry of river fish, and some diced cucumber appeared on it. Upali was famished, but it was obvious that his neighbour wanted to talk, so after a few mouthfuls, he paused and nodded at him. It was like unplugging a dam. 'Thera, I must tell you, I was in the audience hall during your reading, and
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I was impressed. Your story is amazing. I am from Greece…'

Upali had already guessed as much, from the smell.

'My family is from Samoa, the home of Pythagoras – who spoke of the transmigration of souls. Later I learnt that his ideas probably came from around here. I had already heard of Indica, of course – all young Greeks nowadays dream of honey-filled reeds, gold-digging ants, and hills of gems! So when I was offered this position, I jumped at it. And I read the books of Lord Megasthenes – where I first heard of the Buddha, your spiritual leader.'

There were many questionable points in this tirade, but last came first. 'Spiritual leader?'

'Or god? As some say. But I discern a different approach in your reading.'

'My understanding is simple,' said Upali irritably. 'The Buddha was a very wise man, but a man.'

'When I heard of him in Greece, I understood that his sangha regards the gods with a kind of friendly contempt, like the Athenians. People in Athens openly laugh at the…'

'Athens is the city of Socrates, right? The city that killed him for his questions?'

'You know of Socrates?'

'A little. My childhood was spent in the Sarnath monastery, where we had a lot of merchant visitors. My old master was interested in such things. He had read some translations of another Greek – Aristotle – and spoke to us about them.'

'Yes, well, Socrates was killed, and Aristotle had to flee, or he might have been killed too. But they were exceptions; it is more normal for rulers to ignore philosophers – unlike things here! The Shahenshah is actually trying to implement the Buddha's teachings. I still cannot believe that divine sacrifices have been banned, even those before a battle – it is amazingly bold! It would have meant chaos in Greece!'

It took a moment for Upali to realize who was being referred to by the Persian title adopted by Alexander. 'I suppose he realized that the blood spilt on his battlefields is enough for the most gluttonous of gods!'

The Greek was surprised enough to return to his food.

But not for long. 'I wanted to ask you, Thera – do you believe that the Buddha was higher than the gods? That was the earlier sangha belief, wasn't it? But I heard in Pataliputta that

Buddha himself was a god!'

'All I know is the Buddha's message was to ignore the gods. I have nothing against the gods, but I am not interested in them.'

'A very Athenian statement!' It seemed to be a compliment. 'Yet the Emperor chose you to write the story. He recently financed the enlargement of an old stupa at Kosam, you know, which is said to be the grave of the Buddha in a previous incarnation. Will you be mentioning the incarnations in your story – perhaps the famous ones, when he was born as King Brahmadutta of Kashi, or as that clever merchant leader, or the wise old elephant, or the ancient banyan tree…?'

'This is the first I'm hearing of them! I think this incarnation idea has been adopted from the Jinas. They say their Mahavira was the twenty-fourth in a long line of tirthankars – or ford-makers – so some of the Buddha's followers must be seeking a similar pedigree.' Upali felt the Sanchi Thera stiffen a little on his other side. 'Besides, the Magadhe-Raja did not choose me to write the story. I was already writing it; he became interested.'

'But why were you writing it?'

Upali shrugged and began to eat.

'I mean, it's quite a task, and tedious too, trying to understand the hidden meanings in things composed such a long time ago, almost like a hunt…'

He paused again, but Upali ate on. It was a hunt, but difficult to explain. He would have to explain how he had lost himself first.

Xantes changed the topic. 'The Emperor is almost a preacher, don't you think? In our part of the world, it is unknown for conquerors to challenge the spiritual beliefs of their subjects. Quite the opposite. All the Persians, beginning with Cyrus, worshipped at Babylonian temples after conquering Babylon, and called themselves the heirs of the god Bel-Marduk; in Egypt, they worshipped at Luxor and Thebes as reincarnations of Ra! Alexander and his generals followed the practice. This is the first time I have heard of a monarch deliberately interfering in matters of religion.'

'The Buddha is hardly a matter of religion.'

'But banning the sacrifices surely is? Risky, some would say. Much easier to just collect your revenues and let your subjects worship whomever…'

‘But then His Majesty is a follower of dhamma, and a scholar as well!’ The Sanchi Thera was beaming away as usual. ‘He has been striving steadfastly towards enlightenment for many years now – he would obviously have a better understanding of such matters.’

Upali immersed himself in a tumbler of water, but Xantes was in enthusiastic agreement. ‘Yes, of course! The Magadhe-Raja is a king of awesome intellect. And piety.’

‘I’m really excited at the thought of the congress. It is a great honour for the sangha, don’t you agree, Upali?’

Upali drank more water. Xantes was now eating heartily.

On the other side of the Thera were two Magadhan merchants, on their way to Aden via Bharukacha, and volubly agitated about the number and rigour of highway checks, and the increased tolls. ‘Does the government want to discourage trade completely? We’re almost treated like thieves!’

Kautilya’s exact opinion, remembered Upali.

The redoubtable prime minister of the first Maurya had held that merchants, beggars, performers and, rather surprisingly, artisans as well, were all thieves by other names. Kautilya would not have been surprised by Milindachanda’s little transaction with the toll-keeper, for his opinion of officials was much the same. Stopping a government officer from robbing the exchequer is like stopping a fish from drinking water, he had said. Kautilya’s world was a world of thieves.

‘The worst thing is, the government wants to have a monopoly in everything – spices, grain, minerals, cotton, gems, everything! What is left for us? If we had more freedom and less taxes, the scope would be tremendous!’

‘But what of the advantages of the system?’ asked the Sanchi Thera. ‘Better organization, protection, facilities? Look at the south. Or at Kalinga, where our esteemed Upali lived. There too, there was wealth. Jungles teeming with iron, elephants and sandalwood, besides good land for grain, and the whole eastern sea trade, but you merchants were hardly flocking there, were you? Why? No facilities, and plenty of ferocious forest folk! But now Magadha has brought roads, ferry systems, porter gangs, inns, wells, all patrolled by the best troops ever seen – and caravans are wearing out the road to Tosali!’

‘We pay for everything, Lord Thera, with taxes, duties, tolls, fines, hundreds of things!’

‘The peasants pay as well, and faithfully too. If they complained, I could sympathize! With

you merchants, one can't be sure. Isn't it true that the toll-collectors are convivial with the generous, so that many a smart merchant crosses the tollbooths with only a mild lightening of his purse? Around Ujjayini especially, so I've heard?'

The merchant laughed and turned back to his rice.

Having successfully defended Magadha on both flanks, the Thera allowed his attention to wander. 'For heaven's sake, Upali, is that Prince Nigrodha? We must invite him here!'

Excerpted with permission from *A Spoke in the Wheel*, Amita Kanekar, Navayana.