

G.V. DESANI

*Country Life,  
Country Folk, Cobras,  
Thok!*

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## Cobras, *Thok!*

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I had been under a severe strain and did not need a doctor to tell me so. Some doctors don't talk enough. Some talk too much. My condition had something to do with the family of an old Indian bachelor who used to live in the U.P. I am not sure if it is still the most populated state in India.

The bachelor's sole surviving family was an adopted daughter. She was twenty-five when we met at a culture revival meeting. Her name translated into English as Good Friend or Friendly. I often added to her name the honorific suffix, *ji*. The Hindi terminal *ji* descends from the Sanskrit anticipated wish for the person saluted. "Friendly, may you live!" ("*jio!*") Did you know, that the term turf, too, descends from the Sanskrit? I think it is scandalous to refer to the potential human victims, living in the self-proclaimed U.S. gangster's territory, as his *turf*—*darbha*, Sanskrit for tufts of grass—intended for a gangster's or his rival's mowing!

Friendlyji was about to wind up her father's estate, she said. Her father was a professional hunter. The panther was his animal. She had a collection of panther skins. Panther skins were not an interest of mine. I do not think those were a collector's item either. She said she would throw in half a dozen if I accepted from her a freehold acre in a village nearby. It had been left to her by her father. He had wanted her to build a cot-

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tage on the land and to cultivate a fragrant jasmine garden around it. Moved by the refined characteristic of his wish, I confided in Friendly. I told her, in artless words of youth, of an esteemed childhood memory of my own: the sight of a green nursery of miniature lilies, sparkling in a still pool, and being bronzed by the setting sun, as if of an avowed design. Presently, I deferred to her view that you needed to own land to raise lilies of your own. I was deeply moved by her observation that I loved lilies, as poets did.

It so happened that I was reading an almost impassioned book by a French doctor who had left a successful practice in Paris for the bounteous fresh air of Sicily. When I discussed the extreme relevance of the book with Friendly, she said to me, "Would it not be better to live in one's own country than to go and live in Sicily? There is plenty of fresh air here!" Once again, the element of logic in her opinions appealed to me. At twenty, I respected her for her age too. She was five years older than I was. I had my hair cut short because, she said, my long hair made me look like a girl.

Friendly was giving away the land only to a *supätra*. She thought I was a supdtra, a well-deserving person, who would benefit himself and honor the wishes of her late father. She told me about her father's views concerning the virtues of country living and the country folk. The severe strain I spoke of was the result of my accepting responsibility for the land. No bargain hunter, which I was not, can resist what is thrown in for love. I took her father's panther skins too. Had he left us tiger skins, we might have been better off. Tiger skins were a collector's item.

Sometimes, life lavishes on you years' education within hours. Men have been known to nurse a private image of a cherished woman, as a source of all physical,

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psychological, spiritual and *financial* comfort. If you would lay claim to velvet, wealth is a necessity. Well, after a fierce encounter, involving excessive familiarity, adherence (overt and clandestine), bruised, the same men are known to name such a treat of a woman *hog!* and address all womankind with a hidebound hate thereafter. Contemporary love-inspired image and metaphor being mostly derivative, the worshiped *hogs* are known to reciprocally compliment their ex-angels, sweethearts and pets, as *pigs!* There is no substitute for *experience.*

The capacity to measure accurately, to assess and appraise, is a condition for success in any enterprise. If you wanted to set yourself up on the high pedestal with Shakespeare, and to compete keenly, with a line or two of your own addressed to Robin, alternatively spelled Robyn, your best girl—whom, for an equally abstruse poetic reason you named Myrtle, to remind you ever so tenderly of her pet turtle, and then named her Dove, for love—you are likely to fall off the pedestal, because, Robyn's no rival to his Julie, Juliana, Guilietta, Romeo's *cara spoza*; indeed Juliet by any name! Although I was convinced that I had discovered my direction, country life, a country cottage, lilies shortly to be my very own, upright country folk for neighbors, and fresh air, too, my measure of things was unsound. Life was about to lavish on me a lesson. *Experience!*

After we signed the papers, Friendly, very happy, left the scene. Before she sailed overseas, she threw in a whole yardful of lumber, household goods and garden tools. I might marry and have children, she wrote, and I would need these things. Splendidly endowed with stocks and supplies by Friendly, to say nothing of her faith, I boarded the crawling train to the countryside.

On arrival, late in the evening, and awed by the

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starlight, I met a bearded old man and his nephew, the sole work force of the village. It did not take me long to discover that the old man had been hired by a petty cottage builder a few years ago and never since. The nephew was green and underdeveloped and obsessively devoted to his uncle. Sensible men in the village had migrated long ago to the nearest town and found work. The old man and the nephew had lagged behind because they lacked stamina. Meanwhile, up to their necks in pauperism, they seemed to be subsisting on air. These two sons of the soil, the old man and his nephew, had no knowledge whatever of building, and yet, soon after we met, they unblushingly arrogated to themselves the combined functions of architects, carpenters, bricklayers, concrete masons and roofers too. Victims of widespread village illiteracy, these two did not know the *meaning* of the words *project* or *planning*. There was not much plumbing done in the U.P. villages, but they knew all about plumbing too. There were, in the village, matchwood outhouses attached to the few cottages occupied by government and railway officers. For reasons known to themselves, these cottages with the outhouses were called basket system cottages. The basket system is a rage in these parts. It is regarded as *class* by the village folk who, of necessity, are driven to transact their business *sub jove*, rain or shine, braving storm, hard rain, deluge, cloudburst, monsoons. Some nature-loving informed parties call it making the most of the freedom of the wide open spaces, the whole world their private prairie, savanna and outhouse; although, stalking them under cover are the peekers, to be sure, waiting to violate their privacy: the graffiti *virtuoso*, the *voyeur*, the hardened lout, the pervert: and the anti-pollution lobbyist, not to mention the environmental vigilante! “Who cried ‘Woe!’?”

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“*Je, Jacques-Yves Cousteau!*” And how do you respond, Yaqui sorcerer Don Juan, who frequents the bushes as frequently as el senor Castaneda narrates you frequent the bushes? (On the occasion of an unexpected meeting with the two of them, following their visits to the bushes, you squeeze your hat against your chest and say: “*Salud!... Buenos dias, caballeros!*” If you happen to meet others, who are not taken so seriously, to them you say, “*Hola*” or “*Amiga!*” or simply “*Que pasa?*”)

My own knowledge of building and construction and design might not have been astronomical or infallible. After weeks of killing labor, goaded on by the old man and his nephew, all I remember is that I hauled. The aching muscles, the blisters, are forgotten, but I remember hauling; hauling lumber, bricks, cement, gravel, rocks, mud, and the malodorous water from the communal well. An ultimatum to the two being out of the question, periods of self-pity and depression followed. I was disposed to be very irritated with the two blockheads and there were disputes between us about everything. These two, the old man and his nephew, had assumed the status of experts and specialists and they were not experts or specialists. Finally, I felt I needed to defend my health over and above all else; to cope with their systematic scorning of all the known laws of hygiene, and a passionate courting of infection, septicity, contagion; in spite of the substantial benefits reaped from abundant fresh air, the lack of electricity, the lack of safe water, the lack of laundry and other only too plentiful rural amenities. I needed to get away for a few days. But there was the face-saving factor.

I was at war with the two of them, my hired employees, bosses and taskmasters. I did not know then that the village folk hereabouts loathe and detest manual labor, which is their luckless lot, something of which

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they are heartily ashamed, such activity being, in fact, a punishment for the sins committed in their past lives. Now, if a prosperous soul, and a favorite of the goddess of prosperity, an *actual* landlord, should volunteer to serve as workhand and galley slave—indeed I had offered myself to help build the cottage, the garden and the hly pond—then these two bigots and empty-headed snobs would make an issue of it, take hurt from working for such a subspecies, and nurse an arrogant and a lofty contempt for him, as the lowest of the low, almost an outcaste, a renegade from his own feather and kind, the high breed that has you flogged with rawhide, to inflict summary damage to your backsides, if you so much as paused to breathe before complying with the command *chul! chul! move! move!* Anyway, I knew that it is not manly to admit defeat. In these parts, it is called *naak-katāi*, cutting off (one's) nose. (Did you know that the word *nark* is Hindustani for nose—*naak*—and that it is grafted into the substandard English through the gipsies?)

I was searching for a credible excuse to get away. It so happened that we in the village were very close, a matter of a hundred miles if not fewer, to an acclaimed temple. The temple happened to hold up to view an image of Lord Shiva which was very *awake*. In our idiom, that means that the image was particularly attentive to the suppliant's petitions. An ancient Indian book on Statecraft advises the king to give rise to rumors through paid agents, to advertise the miracle-working powers of a temple, so as to profit from the augmented income by taxing the temple. The value of donations made to a temple, in cash or kind, are a reliable guide to its influence. That the gifts made to the Lord by devotees are investments, returned a hundredfold, is an article of faith proclaimed by the priests.

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I asked the old man and his nephew if they could do without me for a few days. They were eager for me to go. Actually, they were overjoyed. A visit to the temple was the greatest good fortune. My land was so close to the Lord's, they said, and my home and my children's future home well within his *rājya*, that I had better go soon. He was so powerful. He fulfilled all desires. I did not know then that thieving in that part of the world is entirely justified, if, for any reason whatever, including a visit to a celebrated temple, the owner of a property is half-witted enough to absent himself from his property. A basket system cottage, which you put together by the sweat of your brow, like a bonded slave, under the heel of two humorless and capricious louts, can be dismantled by every household in the village, and your yard emptied, your trees uprooted for firewood, all within an hour or so. If you were foolish enough to make inquiries, at your next home-coming, your neighbors tell you, "Thieves! Robbers! Thugs! *Who knows!*" "*Kya mālum, sahib!*"

I want to tell you about what happened to me on the way to the temple. The only means of transport available to pilgrims in that part of the world are the free-plying buses. These are driven by anyone at all, with an old motor and a mother-and-father, the money-lender. They build a very low-ceiling body around the engine somehow and anyhow and with anything at all. It is unpardonable. It is inhuman. There is a total indifference to the safety of life and limb. I feel very strongly about it still, as you see.

The temple was situated in a raja's territory. I did not know this when I boarded the bus. I would have avoided the trip. The petty rajahs, with a few exceptions, were the worst of autocrats. As we entered the raja's territory, we had to acknowledge the fact by stopping at

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his *chowki*—the toll post. Our bus was due to reach the temple—and the adjoining dormitories provided gratis by well-meaning almsgivers, as pilgrims' roosts—at two in the afternoon. As we did not have the full quota of pilgrims, we started late, and reached the *chowki* at eight in the night, six hours off the arrival schedule by my entirely reliable watch. They do not invest in watches or clocks in these parts. It is real country.

It was very dark when the pilgrim bus approached the post, lowered its lights and stopped. The *chowki* was a wooden shack about eight feet by eight, which is to say, approximately three feet larger than a basket system outhouse. There was dense smoke around it. It gets very wet and cold in these parts. To keep his scullions warm, the raja dispenses wet logs. Dry wood costs more. So, the government property is veiled in smoke during the rains and in the winter months. They do not provide chimneys in *chowkis*. We were waiting for the *chowkidār*, the keeper of the post, to inspect us and wave us on.

Presently, I saw a hurricane lantern moving towards us. I could barely see the shrouded figure as it emerged from the curling smoke. The shape, wrapped up in a pressed felt sheet, the legacy from the ancestors, inherited by the poorest of the poor hereabouts, looked like a monster germ, making for caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea, to borrow an image from Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As it came closer, the fantasy began to melt, and the man, having acquired a false magnitude from the felt, a sculptured sideways stretch added to his puny figure, looked to me like a shivering reef fish of great girth, piloted by a hurricane lantern, and groping for the bus. It was obvious, as he came closer, the *chowkidār* was annoyed with us for turning up at that late hour. It was getting cold but the inspec-

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tion was supposed to be cursory. The keepers of the toll posts briefly speak with drivers, glance into a bus and contemptuously order you to move on *jaldi! promptly, fast!*

I must detain you: this is relevant. I have before me the facts sheet. The door of our bus was either the top half of a double-door affording egress from an old duck barn, or—possibly—it was half of a hatch on the deck of a tugboat. Quality timber, massive, superbly preserved, obviously stolen property. It was about four feet by four feet, and fitted vertically, not horizontally, as in the barn or the tug boat setting. This door, at the rear of the bus, was the only opening provided, the chasm you had to cross to enter or to escape. It was supported by two hinges screwed into the left of the bus. Opposite, on your right, as you entered, was a wooden post, about four inches by four inches square, and I recognized it at once as a historic old *kos* distance road marker, a genuine antique, also obviously stolen property. The post, nailed to the corpus of the bus, was about five inches taller than the door top on the left—but for a village smithy's home-forged spike, about half of its point-end hammered into the door top. Now, the post's five inches or so extra height, level with the shaft of the spike, was an ornamental carving, actually the bald head of a goblin, a figure with antecedents in Hindu mythology. With no regard for the utilitarian intent behind the design of the vehicle, and passenger safety factor, or the beauty of the carved artifact, the door was kept shut by dropping a discarded dog collar over the upright spike on the left, and the goblin's neck on the right. When the door was open, the leather quoit hung loose, ringing either the spike, or the goblin's neck, at your pleasure. I noticed several dovetail grooves in the goblin's neck, whittled, I suspect, by the driver, there-

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by, making the scarred road marker worthless as a valued antique. Although rattling at the least provocation, the door, when shut, remained anchored; the leather collar looping the spike on the left and equally at home roosting into the grooves on the right. In either position, the spike jutted out ominously, silently voicing warning of personal injury and harm to all comers. An appendage to the door was about nine inches below. It was an iron folding step, a sagging relic of salvaged miscellany of an old luxury bullock cart owned by a landlord, I imagine. As you stepped on it, to draw closer to the door, it squealed like several cornered rats, and while the bus was in motion, it dispensed notions of panic and perturbation; sincerely, matter-of-factly, unmistakably. As if that was not all, you had to double up, as you entered the bus, to avoid your head running afoul of the low ceiling. This sort of thing is *dabbling* at its worst. I will not endorse amateurism.

The bus driver politely lifted up the dog collar from the antique's head and held the door open for the *chowkidār*. With the bus at the mercy of the raja's man, the *chowkidār* faced the driver and wielded his prerogative. He hurriedly mumbled a list of goods. Drivers of vehicles are not allowed to bring for sale and resale tobacco, cloth, hay, cooking oil, rice, kerosene, salt, sugar, potatoes, flour, onions, spices, hair oil... If they did bring any, for sale and resale, they must produce a receipt showing that they had paid raja sāhib's toll. The bus driver nodded with folded hands. All bus drivers understand such proceedings. Distribution of the basics in the list is in the hands of the wholesalers and the money-lenders who know all tax and toll procedures and so do their expert transport personnel. The recitation of the list to pilgrim bus drivers is a stupid formality to assert the raja's *hukoomat*—author-

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ity, sovereignty.

Apart from this body, and one other, whom I rightly guessed to be a hay farmer, we were some twenty passengers in the bus—men, women, children and infants. We had, too, four goats with us. I had seen them for the first time—as I had paused abruptly on the folding step, unnerved by the fearful squealing under my feet—and as I stooped to enter the bus, my face level with their beards, I had counted them, one by one, as a silent protest against the outrageous freight hauling operation I was being asked to defer to. I had decided to swear out a complaint before the District Health Officer against the owners of the bus for transporting goats in a pilgrim bus.

The driver hastily pulled out a piece of paper, tucked in a fold of his turban, and showed it to the *chowkidār*. The man shined the shaking lantern on it. Other than fogging the glass with his steaming breath, nothing happened. No problems here. The goats belonged to the raja sahib. The *chowkidār*, holding fast to his felt wrap to resist the biting cold, now recited the list again, this time for the benefit of the passengers: “...for sale and resale, any tobacco, cloth, hay, cooking oil, rice, kerosene, salt, sugar, potatoes, flour, onions, spices, hair oil, *thok* ...?”

It was at that stage, a passenger at the rear, sitting nearest to the entrance to the bus, where the driver and the *chowkidār* were, interrupted the reading and answered, “Yes,” contending, thereby, as far as I could make out, that he carried the last item in the list, “*thok*.” I assumed this, since none among us was visibly carrying any goods for sale and resale, certainly no article on the *chowkidār*’s list except this *thok*. Following that disclosure, a veritable confession, incited and stirred, the *chowkidār* sucked in a quantity of air, loud enough

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to be heard by one and all as a whistle in reverse. Soon after registering his reaction, he shouted, “You are all under arrest!” and still shaking, he and his hurricane lamp disappeared into the smoking *chowki*.

Peering through the grimy window, I asked the entranced driver, “Why?” He pleaded with me. “Please, sâhib!” I did not question him further. Presently, not daring to approach the *chowki*, he noiselessly entered the cage separating him from the passengers, where the convict-type front and side view photograph of his face was hanging; got into his seat, turned off the lights, and he said he was in trouble. It was a raja’s territory—and I gathered from his monologue with unmistakable clarity—you don’t talk that way to a raja’s man. No passenger talks to a raja’s man. Only the driver talks to a raja’s man. He then struck his brow with the palm of his hand—I heard this happen since I could not see him in the dark—and he swore on his mother’s life that in all his years he had never offended a raja’s man. Always, he had said “*Ha!*” “*Yes!*” to a raja’s man. And now he and his passengers had been arrested! I could not intrude upon his thought further. He was choking from spasmodic sobbing.

Well, I do not wish to recall the details of what happened that night. All the devils who unfailingly escort and loyally attend upon Lord Shiva, because he loves them as much as he loves the good folk, were loose in the night. This is a blessed land. You always hear the gentle murmur of the river. The Ganga flows by, never too far, on her way to the Sâgara, her very own sea, to become the Sâgara, her very own sea. The echoes of that gentle dance of waters, towards immersion into the sea, the river soon to become the sea, her very own sea, is the music of these hills. In their kind of sky, the stars are a lovely sight, as is their gracious and yet gra-

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cious, and yet gracious moon. In settings like these, beauty melts and softens your heart, and the soul has remembrance of God. I have so thought. Yet, as it was, to hear an owl hoot filled you with fear and foreboding. We endured the night freezing in cold. There was unbearable crying by the infants, as if the end of the world had come. I complained about the noise and demanded of the hay farmer, sitting next to me, that he answer one simple question. His teeth chattering, he complied in a whisper, "...milk." At twenty, I did not know that the human infant feels hungry and would raise the squall, day or night, to sue for milk. You heard groans, sobbing by young women, laments addressed to Lord Shiva by everyone, including the man who had caused it all. It was he who had confronted a raja's man with a "*Ha!*" when the *chowkidār* was doing his bounden duty, and had alluded to *thok*—and to whom he had said, unmistakably, by implication, "I have *thok*. And let's see what you do about it!"

It is in situations like these that you rate a woolen blanket several rungs above your very life. Having abandoned all hope, I nevertheless saw the day break, the first light upon the frost, and heard the man sitting next to me on the rough hewn wood, implore Shiva; voicing in his usual Gorakhpurī my own unspoken thought: Innocent Lord! O Innocent Lord! for a sight of the sun before we all die! That prayer was immediately fulfilled. Though the skyline had no contours yet, I had a fleeting glimpse of a celestial thing: a sheer shawl, woven of the young sun's gold, hanging as a canopy over the blue and amber haze, veiling everything far and near! Meanwhile, down in the pilgrim bus, we looked like bundles you see in the railway yards, huddled together, and wrapped up in whatever *dhotī*, sari, turban, towel, scarf, handkerchief we could find. The

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wind, blowing free from all the windows and through the bars in the driver's cage, felt like needles and it hurt the face. My ears had lost all sensibility. Weary beyond endurance, I dozed off for a few moments. Soon after, I had a confrontation with a king cobra.

This is relevant. I have the facts sheet. The great cobra, the king, is not *Naja naja*, Sanskrit *nāga*, the cobra. It is *Naja hannah*, the hamadryad. To see one is *experience!* Reliable hunters have seen fearless king cobras stare at them standing erect well above fully grown stalks of corn. Witnesses have watched elephants fall and die following an argument with a king cobra.

Shiva, Shiva, it is an auspicious thing, a merciful thing that others do not partake of one's nightmares! Well, as soon as I dozed off, I saw this magnificent king cobra, in a witness box, standing erect like a rod and testifying against us—the humanity. He was wearing a tiny turban on his head, and an elastic cord chinstrap, to keep it secure. He was raging, all fifteen feet and better of him, and speaking for all snakes, he said, "You despise us! You despise us! You step on us! You step on us! Is this justice? Is this justice?" His hood spread like a mottled dish of aged iron, and, hissing from passion, he said, "You cannot count two and two! You cannot count two and two! We will wipe you out! We will wipe you out! You dust-eaters! You scum! You bastards!" I woke up, still hearing his testimony, and I cannot own up to a cold sweat. It was so cold. The sun was up, but it was as cold as it had been all night long.

Everyone, without regard to age, had difficulty in moving the limbs and getting out of the bus as ordered. The *chowkidār* had sent for the law to back him up. A sub-inspector of police, wearing a brown waistcoat, khaki breeches, boots, and a red turban with a brass badge on it, dismounted from a bicycle,

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searched the bus, the peasants' meager belongings, and our benumbed persons. I was the only one with luggage. An exhibition of your personal effects in such a setting causes resentment and active anger among the deprived classes. The *chowkidār* and the lawman belonged to the deprived classes. The sub-inspector held up my magnifying glass and asked me what does it do? I could not explain why was I carrying it to the Lord's holy abode, to the temple, myself being on a pilgrimage, bearing gifts for the Lord, except that I had always carried a magnifying glass along with these—and I pointed out the items to him—a compass and a set of four screwdrivers. These were my possessions, I explained. They were displeased with me, too, because I did not have an overcoat. Sub-inspectors of police, hereabouts, take a coat off your back for your own good. "Your family is rich, yes? You have two coats, no?" Actually, I had more than two. The old man and his nephew had advised me that the overcoats would be safer in the village.

Presently, the sub-inspector spat on the rear tire of the bus and said to the *chowkidār*, "*Jānedo!*" "Let go!" He signaled us with his thumb to get into the bus immediately. The bus driver, red-eyed and humbled, stiffly saluted the two, gently folded and boosted up the step, dropped the dog collar in place, the spike on the left and the goblin's neck on the right, and tried to start the engine as noiselessly as he could.

Within half an hour we sighted the temple and everyone sang loudly of the glories of Shiva. We were constrained because of our own deeds, our *karma*, and we magnified the Innocent Lord many times over because we were free and forgiven and with our Baba, our Father, after a night long separation.

As we sluggishly stepped out of the bus, one by one,

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every passenger, man, woman and child, avoided the man who had owned up to carrying *thok*. We feared him. Unable to resist it, I approached him guardedly and questioned him. “You had *thok*?” He said no. “What is it?” He said he didn’t know. I asked him patiently, “You don’t know what is *thok*?” He said he didn’t know what is *thok*. I raised my voice. “Why did you say ‘yes’ to the *chowkidār* when he asked if anyone had *thok*?” His mother, he said, had told him always to say “*ha!*” “yes” when spoken to by a government man.

To this day, after all the inquiries I made, I do not know what is *thok*. Speaking as a student of Hindi, however, and outside of our context, *thok* means *wholesale*, and *phutkar* is Hindi and Hindustani for *retail*. The relationship in Hindi and Hindustani between *thok* and *phutkar* is not quite syzygial; the terms, as you see, are not yoked together, in a condition of *yoga*, as it were, and yet, being correlative, and, in spite of the discernible quantitative difference between the two, and the corresponding volume/profit dependence factor—you sell to *one* (*thok*) and you sell to *many* (*phutkar*)—they are syzygial, inasmuch as you cannot have *thok*—wholesale—with there being *phutkar*—retail, or, retail without there being wholesale.

Well, whatever it was, the keeper of the *chowki* must have understood that one of the pilgrims was smuggling it and smuggling it *thok* (wholesale) for sale and resale (*phutkar*), in defiance of the authority, and our detention and subsequent search was a search for contraband—and therefore—legal and justified. I had been thinking of filing a First Information Report against the *chowkidār* and the sub-inspector, to protest in the strongest possible language I could command, quoting chapter and verse, and let the raja’s own procedures take their course.

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As I got out of the bus, I noticed the goats in the temple compound, basking in the sunshine, waiting to be collected by the raja's men. They were young goats, hardly three years old, intended for the raja's prized flock, as traditional symbols of his dynasty; in fact, one of his titles was goatherd. There are rajas whose titles honor the cow; for instance. His Highness the Maharaja of Baroda, the Gaekwād, the cowherd. As I approached the goats, I noticed they were Indian specimens, pure uncrossed breed, from the Jamna riverside, and *such lop ears, such convex faces, such prominent foreheads and such Roman noses*, as to shame all other such ears, faces, foreheads and noses! Superior to the Nubians I had known and befriended in the outskirts of Cairo, and again in Jerusalem, their ancestry goes back a few thousand years in Indian history. *Ajā* (goat) is mentioned in the *Vedas*. You should have seen their great soulful eyes, as they looked straight into yours, three doting does, and one solemn stalwart buck, who moved up a few feet, with his head raised, with an unmistakable demand for "me, too!" He wanted his chin tickled—and they ever so irresistibly drew you to themselves, by their excelling child-like faces, their beauty, and it all certainly merited your love, and a hug for each besides, and many passes with your fingers, from the noble forehead to the noble nose, ever so gently and ever so friendly. I muttered guilty apologies too for overlooking in the pilgrim bus such solid charm. And we had endured so much together! This conference with them was the only happy thing that happened to me since I arrived and left the village. I have never subscribed to the old English/Scottish superstition that once in every twenty-four hours a goat needs to go to the devil to have its beard combed. Fiddlesticks!

Soon after, having bathed in the sacred pond, I

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stood in the line, along with other pilgrims, to offer the customary worship to the sculptured snakes on the temple wall, and I was not at all lighthearted about the king cobra's testimony. We do *not* despise snakes. We do *not* step on snakes. We *honor* snakes. But the king cobra might not have been denouncing the Hindus, and addressing his slurs and insults to others.

I have not been in those parts for many years. Before I left the village for good, I wrote to my gentle sister Friendly to forgive me. I paid a Brahmin to pray for her father whom too I had failed. I expect the old man and his *supātra* nephew informed everyone that I had been overcome by the sight—*darshan*—of the Lord and was *stilled*. A rustic paraphrase of this sudden mystic stilling means that, being blessed in the shrine of the Lord, one renounced all earthly possessions. And it was the Lord's will that all the lumber, bricks, bags of cement, the leftover gravel, rocks, nails, tools and my precious books—the construction having been appropriated by thieves, robbers, thugs—and the panther skins, the overcoats, too, were the old man's and his nephew's by rights, won through their meritorious *karma*, their deeds in the past and the present incarnations. “Who knows!” “*Kyd mālum, sahib?*” This *kyā mālum* is very idiomatic; literally, “What's known?” Translation: “*Nothing's known!*” “Why do you ask?”

If they, the old man and his nephew, had been able to sign their names on a piece of paper, the freehold land would have been theirs too. The illiterates in these parts, and their fathers and forefathers, have been in trouble so often by signing their names by seal and such other devices, and stamping their thumbs on paper, too, pledging themselves, ignorantly, inadvertently, to everything, from lifelong serfdom to contracted slavery overseas, that they will *not* do it even if they

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were made landlords in perpetuity. I have fewer illusions about country living, country folk, fresh air and so forth now, than I had in those days.

William Cowper was pleased to reveal, "God made the country and man made the town." Nathaniel Hawthorne was born four years after Cowper crossed the Stygian ferry, as they say, and lived to be sixty-four. Having partaken of some accommodating wisdom, meanwhile, Hawthorne has written, "There is nothing good to be had in the country, or, if there is, they will not let you have it."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GOVINDAS VISHNOODAS DESANI (1909–2000), known only as G. V. Desani, was a British-Indian novelist, poet, and social commentator. He was born in Kenya, reared in India and came of age in Britain. An adept in ancient Eastern spiritual and mental-culture traditions, Desani was best known as the author of *All About H. Hatterr* (1948), a comic farce which lampooned Anglo and Indian culture, spiritual traditions and an admixture of the two. Forty years after the appearance of his classic novel (an edition of which we also published for a number of years), G.V. Desani broke his silence with a volume of twenty-three stories and one long prose poem, only the second full-length book of his fiction ever to be published. Many of the stories appeared first in literary anthologies and magazines, including *The Noble Savage* (edited by Saul Bellow), *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Transatlantic Review*, and *Boston University Journal*. The stories are mostly written in the humorous mode of his famous novel, relying upon comic timing and his keen sense of the incongruities in contemporary life. They often captivate in the same way as do Indres Shah's Sufi learning tales, and the titles alone convey a sense of the interpenetration of India's cultures: "Suta Abandoned," "Mephisto's Daughter," "The Second Mrs. Was Wed in a Nightmare," "Gypsy Jim Brazil to Kumari Kinshino," "Country Life, Country Folk, Cobras, Thok," "...Since Nation Must Export, Smithers," "The Lama Arupa." Whether send-ups of colonialism or lampoons of conventionality, there is a seriousness to Desani's comedy that crosses cultural boundaries and racial identification.