

Suryavamshi



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## The Sun Kings of Rajasthan

Abanindranath Tagore

Translated and adapted by  
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 **juggernaut**

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*To Ma,  
who has devoted her life to worrying about me*



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## Introduction

Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), affectionately called Aban Thakur by Bengalis, was an extraordinary talent, though he was obviously much overshadowed by his uncle, Rabindranath Tagore. In the early twentieth century, he and his elder brother, Gaganendranath, created the first modern Indian art movement. The Bengal School of Art broke away from Western traditions and sought beauty, freedom and inspiration in India's own artistic heritage.

Abanindranath also wrote several books, principally for children and teenagers, but they are classic works that anyone of any age can enjoy and mull over too. His tales brim over with the visual imagination of a master painter. In fact, in his children's novel *Buro Angla*, he describes himself as a man who 'writes pictures'.

The stories of *Raj Kahini*, which we have titled *Suryavamsi*, are adapted from – or rather, inspired

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by – *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* by Lieutenant Colonel James Tod (1782–1835), an East India Company soldier and amateur anthropologist and historian. Tod's account of Rajasthan's history and demographics was based on folklore, the race memory of the people of the land and his own diligent research.

Unless they are pursuing a PhD in the social and political history of Rajasthan, most readers today are likely to find *Annals and Antiquities* a boring tome. But Abanindranath picked out a few stories from it featuring the kings of the state of Mewar who were from the Suryavamsha – Dynasty of the Sun – and turned them into stunning word paintings. Light and shadow, and colours and changes of season, are ever present in his work. Fortresses perch on mountains like hovering banks of clouds, cavalries turn day into night with the dust stirred up by their charging horses, and a shrine inside a mountain cave appears drenched in blood in the fading sunlight.

The stories variously tell of love, sacrifice, jealousy, courage, greed and treachery . . . emotions and traits that define the human condition. Over every story hangs the shadow of violence, war and often senseless slaughter. Almost all the heroes are deeply flawed

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human beings or, reminiscent of classical Greek tragedy, captives of destinies over which they have little control.

*Raj Kabini* has been staple literary diet for generations of Bengalis. Translating Abanindranath's exceptional word imagery and the underlying themes for a wider audience – and a twenty-first-century one – has been a challenging task.

Many of the stories, especially the earlier ones, emerge out of the mists of legend, transmitted over the centuries by poets and travelling minstrels. Some of the later narratives too may have various versions, due to the fact that most of this is oral history carried down and altered and embellished over time. Tod recorded the most prevalent versions and Abanindranath brought his own extraordinary imagination to bear on them. Mapping the exact facts and their timelines is a complex task best left to ethno-historians and archaeologists.

The first story in *Raj Kabini* is about Shiladitya, supposedly the boon-child of Suryadev, the Sun God, and founder of the Mewar Suryavamshi dynasty. The last is set in the sixteenth century and is about the ascent of Rana Sanga, the one-eyed warrior who would fight Babur and lose to him in 1527 in the battle of Khanwa. More than the battle of Panipat, this would mark the beginning of the Mughal era. Sanga was the

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last independent Hindu king who ruled over a very large territory in northern India.

These tales were collected by Tod in the early nineteenth century. Abanindranath, in turn, rewrote Tod's *Annals* in the early twentieth century, and you are reading the stories from Aban Thakur's book in the twenty-first century.

Today we know some of the characters who appear here by names that are different from what they are in *Raj Kahini*. Bappaditya, who was the first Suryavamshi to sit on the throne of Mewar, is now referred to as Bappa Rawal. Jaimull, brother of Sangramsingh – Sanga – was actually Jagmull. Sanga was the youngest of three brothers, not the eldest.

Names of places too may have changed or some villages and towns may have disappeared. I have let all the names be as they are. I have not tried to correct the factual inaccuracies in the tales other than take care of a few obvious logical inconsistencies.

My reasoning for this is that Abanindranath was not trying to write 'history' as understood in academia, just as the tales of King Arthur and his Round Table did not come down through the ages as 'history'. It is also important to remember that Abanindranath wrote this book during the first flush of the Indian

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struggle for freedom from colonialism. His art played a key role in the revival of Indian pride. In 1905, soon after Lord Curzon announced the Partition of Bengal on communal lines, Abanindranath painted the first and still-iconic depiction of Bharat Mata. *Raj Kabini* was thus part of a bigger national project. However, Abanindranath refused to give his heroes a halo and their lives fictitious happy endings. He remained true to the basic plot lines that Tod had noted down while adding a rich layer of an artist's notion of what those times would have been like and how those men and women would have lived, thought and fought.

Abanindranath's book belongs firmly to the tradition of itihasa, the uniquely Indic concept that straddles history and mythology and tries to convey a truth that goes beyond dry facts and statistics.



# 1

## Shiladitya

Once upon a time, in the days before Shiladitya was born, when the last king of Raja Kanaksen's dynasty was still ruling Ballavipur, there stood a huge temple dedicated to Suryadev, the Sun God, next to a sacred lake called Suryakund – the lake of Suryadev.

A very old priest lived there. He had no children or friends. Like the sun, alone in the infinite sky, the noble priest was a lonely being in that sun temple on the banks of the vast sacred lake, whose waters were as blue as the heavens above. The priest did everything himself – lighting the lamps in the temple, ringing the giant bell and performing the daily rituals at dawn and dusk. He had no servants, no followers and no disciples.

At daybreak and at twilight every day, the old Brahmin would perform the aarti dedicated to the god

in the temple with a brass lamp that weighed thirty seers (roughly 30 kg). Every day the temple bell, as huge as the crown of a demon king, would be rung by his lean hand. 'If I could get a companion,' he would think, 'I could leave all these responsibilities to that person and die in peace.'

The god fulfilled his devotee's wish. One evening, early in the winter month of Paush, when the sun had set and a dark fog obscured the world, the priest was locking the temple's iron doors, as massive as the breast armour of the mighty Bhima. An ashen-faced Brahmin girl appeared before him – dressed in rags but very beautiful. It was as if the evening star, scared of the cold, was seeking refuge in the temple of Suryadev. The old man noticed that the girl, dressed in a widow's garment, appeared to be well born.

'Who are you? What do you want?' he asked. The girl put her two small lotus petal-like hands together and said: 'Lord, I ask for shelter. I am the only daughter of Devaditya, the Vedic scholar in the land of the Gurjars. My name is Subhaga, the lucky one. But I was widowed on the night of my wedding and my husband's family threw me out as they believed that I had brought them ill luck. Lord, I had a mother, but she is no more now, please give me shelter.'



‘My dear orphan,’ said the priest. ‘What happy home can you expect here? I have neither food nor garments. I am very poor and have no friends.’

But even as the priest spoke these words a voice inside his head was telling him: ‘You poor lonely man, make this girl your friend, give her shelter.’

*Let me give her a home, he thought. For eighty years I have worshipped the Sun God alone; now, at the end of my life, maybe I can leave that responsibility to this unfortunate girl.*

Still, he hesitated. And then, suddenly, a single ray of the sun from the western sky pierced through the evening dark and fell on the desolate girl’s face. It was as if Suryadev were speaking directly to the priest – ‘Accept her, my dearest devotee. I have chosen this poor widowed girl to be in my service all her life.’

The priest bowed to his god and offered shelter in the Temple of the Sun to the daughter of Devaditya.

Years passed. Subhaga learnt all the temple tasks, but her soft, delicate hands could never manage to lift the thirty-seer lamp. So the old priest continued to perform the twice-daily aartis.

One day, Subhaga noticed that the priest’s frail body seemed to have reached its limits – the lamp was shaking in his hands. She went to the market at Ballavipur and

bought a small lamp that weighed just one seer. 'Father, please use this to do your aarti to Suryadev this evening,' she told the priest. He smiled and said: 'The evening aarti has to be done with the same lamp that was used in the morning. Keep it. I will use the new lamp tomorrow, a new day.'

The next day, at noon, as the sun's light flooded the earth, the priest taught Subhaga the holiest of all mantras to the Sun God. Suryadev himself would appear before his devotee when the mantra was uttered, but it could be used only once; a second utterance meant certain death. Then, as evening turned to night and the glow of the aarti lamp dimmed, the light of the priest's life died softly. The sun sank, plunging the world in darkness. Subhaga was left all alone in the world.

She spent the first few days weeping over her loss. Then, one morning, she began clearing up the jungle around the temple and planting fruit trees and flowering plants. Many more days went by in cleaning the temple's stone walls and painting leaves, flowers, birds, elephants and scenes from the Puranas and itihasa on them. Finally, Subhaga had nothing more to do. She would roam around in her orchard and among her flower beds. In some time, a few fruits started to

ripen, a few flowers bloomed, and a few birds, colourful butterflies and a gaggle of children appeared.

The butterflies were happy with a little bit of nectar from the flowers, and the birds with pecking at one or two ripe fruits. The gang of naughty boys, however, would tear off the flowers, pluck the fruits and break the boughs of the trees. But Subhaga never scolded them and tolerated their mischief cheerfully. On the green grass under the trees, the little children would place their many-hued mats and play. And thus passed Subhaga's days.

The monsoon arrived with its black clouds, flashes of lightning and rumble of thunder. One day, a whistling razor-sharp eastern wind sliced the stems of Subhaga's flowering plants, tore off the leaves from her trees and nearly laid waste her beloved garden. The birds were blown away, the broken wings of the butterflies littered the earth like the petals of flowers, and the children disappeared.

As the rains raged, Subhaga sat alone and mourned over the memories of her parents, the cruelty of her in-laws, and her husband's smiling, handsome face on their wedding night. And she kept thinking – 'How will I spend all my life in this friendless foreign land?' Her eyes, as black and beautiful as a deer's, welled up.

She looked towards the east and saw darkness; towards the west, and it was dark there too; then towards the north and the south . . . which were also dark. It was dark all around. She remembered that it was on a day of blackness like this that she had come to the temple. Tonight too was just as dismal – the same stormy wind, the same huge, empty Temple of the Sun. But there was no kindly old man who had given refuge to an ill-fated orphan girl. Subhaga's tears fell in the dark like raindrops.

She shut all the doors to the temple, lit the lamp and did her aarti. And then, for some unknown reason, she sat down to meditate before the idol of the lord. As the minutes passed, her eyes became still – the shrieking of the storm and the crashing of thunder seemed to move far, far away. Subhaga no longer felt any sorrow or grief. It was as if the intensity of the sun had shredded the dark night that had enveloped her soul.

Slowly, fearfully, Subhaga uttered the mantra the priest had taught her. And the whole world seemed to shudder and wake up. She seemed surrounded by birdsong, melodious tunes from a flute and a joyous hubbub. Then, with a deep rumbling that shook the skies, bathing the world in glorious light, as if melting the stone walls and the iron gates of the temple,

Suryadev, the Sun God – brighter than a billion blazing fires – appeared before Subhaga on a chariot drawn by seven emerald horses.

No human eye could stand such dazzling light. Subhaga covered her face with her hands and said: ‘O Lord, save me, forgive me, the whole world burns!’

‘Do not fear, girl,’ said the god. ‘Ask for your boon.’ As he spoke, his radiance decreased and only a warm reddish glow remained on Subhaga’s head, like the streak of vermilion along the parting of a married woman’s hair. Subhaga said: ‘Lord, I have no husband or children, I am but a widow all alone. Grant me this boon that I no longer have to stay on this earth. Let me die today at your feet, rid of all pain and anguish.’

Said Suryadev: ‘Girl, gods cannot boon death. That can only be their curse. Ask me for a boon.’ Then Subhaga lay herself down before him and said: ‘Lord, if you have to grant me a boon, give me a son and a daughter. Let me nurture them. Let the son be as bright as you are and let the daughter be as beautiful as a moonbeam.’

It shall be so, said the Sun God, and vanished. Subhaga was slowly overcome by sleep and lay down on the stone floor. Outside, a downpour started again. As day broke, in her slumber, she seemed to hear two birds

singing a wondrous tune in her ruined garden. When the golden rays of dawn fell on her eyelids, she got up hurriedly and felt a tug at her dress.

Two little babies were sleeping next to her. Suryadev had granted her wish. The children looked as beautiful as the gods themselves. Because they had been born in the huge, empty temple, hidden from human eyes, she named them Gayab and Gayabi – the invisible ones.

Clutching Gayab and Gayabi to her breast, Subhaga walked out to her garden. The sun was rising in the east and the moon setting in the west. She saw the sun light up Gayab's face and the moonbeams sink slowly into Gayabi's black hair. But Subhaga's heart quaked at that sight. Something told her that it would not be possible to keep Gayabi on this earth for long.

The children grew up. Gayab began to go to school, and Gayabi started learning the work of the temple from her mother. Gayab was restless and naughty, and Gayabi quiet and obedient. Many children would come to the temple to play with Gayabi, but Gayab's mischiefs would drive the other boys to their wits' end. Finally, all of them got together and decided that Gayab was better than them, both in studies and in physical strength, so they would make him king and they would be his subjects. Then he would not be able to give them

such a hard time. And they lifted Gayab on to their shoulders and danced.

Gayab was up there, very happy, when a little boy said: 'I am the king's head priest. I will chant the required mantras and coronate him with the royal tilak.' The boys put Gayab down on a small mound of earth. Gayab was sitting there like a king on his throne, and one of them put the red mark on his forehead and asked: 'Gayab, we know your name, but tell us your mother's name and your father's.' Gayab said: 'My name is Gayab, my sister's name is Gayabi. My mother's name is Subhaga. My father's name – what is my father's name?' He did not know that he was the Sun God's boon-child.

The boys now laughed and jeered at him. Overwhelmed with shame, Gayab kicked down the mound that had been his throne, slapped and punched his mates in their already swollen and bruised faces and ran back to the temple, trembling with rage.

Subhaga was teaching Gayabi how to do the god's aarti with a small brass lamp. Gayab rushed in, snatched it from her hand and threw it with all his strength. The lamp rang against the stone wall and broke into pieces. A stone with Suryadev's image on it fell down on the floor. 'What have you done, you lunatic?' said Subhaga.

‘You have spoiled the holy aarti and insulted the Sun God!’

‘I know neither the sun nor the god,’ said Gayab. ‘Tell me, who is my father? Or I’ll throw the idol into the lake.’ And though even Bhima, the most powerful of all men ever born, could not have lifted the great idol, Subhaga, seeing Gayab’s fury, was afraid at the thought of what he might be capable of doing. She grabbed his hands and said: ‘Calm down, dearest, please calm down, don’t insult the Sun God any more. Why do you want to know your father’s name? I am your mother, Gayabi is your sister, what more do you need?’

Gayab burst into tears. ‘Then what am I, Mother – a mean, despicable, unholy piece of dirt, lowlier than the worst beggar?’ The words pierced Subhaga’s heart like deadly arrows. She sat down, her hands over her face. *Oh Lord, what have you done?* she pleaded silently. *How do I explain it all to this unruly child, how do I comfort him? Gayab and Gayabi are not mean, not unholy; they are the son and daughter of Suryadev himself, holier than all others.*

She thought of the sacred Surya mantra, but when she recalled that uttering it a second time would mean her death, and her children would be orphaned, she could not bear to do it. ‘Dearest, stop, let it be, let us



go away somewhere,' she said. 'And please know that Suryadev the Sun God himself is your father.'

Gayab shook his head; he would not believe her. So a helpless Subhaga said: 'Then shut all the doors of the temple. You will be able to see your father now, but you will lose me forever.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'Why do you torture our Ma?' Gayabi asked. Gayab did not answer; he shut all the doors.

Subhaga took her children's hands into hers and sat down in front of the idol to meditate. Once, desolate, she had uttered the mantra without fear when she wanted to die, but today, agony and dread coiled around her heart like poisonous snakes.

Soon, Suryadev manifested himself in his terrifying form, as if drenching the entire temple in a cascade of blood. Subhaga said: 'Lord, who is the father of Gayab and Gayabi?' The Sun God remained silent. Within moments his terrible heat burned his poor devotee Subhaga's body to ashes.

'Ma! Ma!' cried out Gayabi.

'Where is Ma?' shouted Gayab.

The Sun God did not reply; he merely pointed to the heap of ashes on the stone floor.

Gayab realized that his mother was no more. His eyes blazing with pain and rage, he picked up the stone

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with Suryadev's image on it and flung it at the god. It struck the god's crown and bounced off, like a piece of flaming coal. Gayab fell to the floor, unconscious.

When he regained his senses the god had disappeared and Gayabi was sitting by him. 'Where is the Sun God?' asked Gayab. Gayabi pointed at the black rock and said: 'Take this. This is the Adityashila, the sun-stone. Whoever you drop this on will die. Suryadev has given this to you, saying that you are his son. From today your name is Shiladitya, after this stone. Your dynasty will be called the 'Suryavamsha'. Your children, the Suryavamshis, will rule the earth. And whenever you call for it, the seven-horsed chariot of the Sun God will rise from the Suryakund lake and come to you. Go, ride that chariot with the sun-stone in your hand and conquer the world.'

'But what do I do about you?' asked Gayab. 'Leave me here in the temple,' said Gayabi. 'I will live on the fruits of the orchard and the water from the lake. When you become king, come back and take me to your royal palace.'

A very happy Gayab left his sister and rode off in the seven-horsed chariot to conquer the world. Gayabi immersed Subhaga's ashes in the lake and dropped to

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the stone floor, weeping over the loss of her mother and brother.

Late that night, when there were no stars in the sky and not a glimmer of light on earth, the temple suddenly shook and shuddered with a terrible noise. And then, half of it sank into the ground, taking with it the idol of Suryadev that weighed many tonnes, and Gayabi, as beautiful as the most exquisite doll. Terrified, she tried to escape, but it was of no avail. She tried climbing up the wall, but it was smooth as glass and offered no grip for her fingers and toes. She called out her brother's name and lost consciousness. Then it was all over, all became dark.



Years passed. Shiladitya, riding his seven-horsed chariot, roamed the world, raising armies from near and far and conquering many lands. Finally he returned to Ballavipur. Using the sun-stone, he defeated and killed the king of Ballavipur in a face-to-face combat, ascended the throne, appointed some of his schoolmates as ministers, some others as army commanders, and got rid of all the useless old officials. He then married

Pushpavati, the princess of Chandravati, in a splendid ceremony, after which he returned to rest in his bedroom made of the purest marble.

The night lengthened and there was silence all around. The servant girl who had been fanning him was dozing off and the flame of the golden lamp near his head had begun to flicker. Shiladitya saw his sister Gayabi's innocent face in a dream. She seemed to be looking at him from a great distance, and someone from the direction of the temple of Suryadev was calling out his name.

Shiladitya woke up with a scream. Dawn had broken. He quickly gathered some soldiers, climbed on to his royal chariot and rode to the temple. The doors of the temple, like the two plates of Bhima's breast armour, were shut tight. Creepers had grown around them over the years, fastening them tight like chains of steel. Shiladitya removed the foliage with his own hands and opened the doors. As sunlight burst into the temple, a swarm of startled bats flew out. Shiladitya went in. The spot where the idol had stood was cloaked in darkness, as if a pitch-black curtain had been drawn over it.

'Gayabi, Gayabi, where are you?' called out Shiladitya.

'Poor Gayabi, where is Gayabi?' the darkness replied.

Shiladitya ordered some torches to be brought in.

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In their flaming light he saw that the northern side of the temple, with the idol, had descended into the earth. Only the black stone heads of the seven horses were above the ground, splayed like the many hoods of a giant mythical serpent. There was no trace of the room where Shiladitya used to play with Gayabi, the room where, after a day's play, he and his sister would go to sleep, listening to their mother's bedtime tales of the land of the Gurjars; or of the room where the great brass lamp had stood like a deodar tree.

Shiladitya stood at the edge of the vast abyss and cried, 'Gayabi! Gayabi!' His desperate pleas spun around the chasm and were soon lost in the black world beneath.

Shiladitya sighed. There was nothing that he, the great king, could do. He returned in silence to his palace.

Later that day, on his command, workers began to wrap the entire temple in thick gold foil. The king did not place any new idol in the Temple of the Sun. The horses remained as they were, half awake at the mouth of the void. Then Shiladitya extracted marble from the mountains around and built a marvellous platform around the temple. Whenever there was a war, he would meditate on the banks of the Suryakund lake

and the seven-horsed chariot would rise from its waters. Whenever he went to battle in it, he won.

But in the end, one of his ministers, a man whom he had loved and trusted the most, betrayed him. He had been the only person other than Shiladitya who knew where the chariot came from. When the Parad barbarians from the land of Shyamnagar from across the Sindhu river attacked Ballavipur, this traitor, in exchange for a few gold coins, desecrated the water of the lake with the blood of a cow.

On the morning of the day of battle with those barbarians, when Shiladitya prayed to the Sun God on the banks of the lake, the heavenly chariot did not appear. The king kept calling out the names of the seven horses, but the water did not stir.

A dismayed Shiladitya rode out in his royal chariot to face the enemy and was killed. At the end of the full day of battle, as the sun sank over the horizon, so did Suryadev's boon-child. The victorious barbarians destroyed the golden Temple of the Sun and left Ballavipur in ruins.

## 2

# Goha

Nestled among the mighty Vindhya mountains that touch the skies, the marble palace of the kings of Chandravati was as pretty and pleasant as a small leaf-covered bird's nest in a grove of giant banyan trees. Some days before his battle with the barbarians, Shiladitya had sent his wife Pushpavati, the princess of Chandravati, accompanied by a few valiant Rajputs, to stay with her parents in this palace. Pushpavati was then with child.

Shiladitya had dearly hoped that after the battle he would spend the winter with Pushpavati resting in the palace in the Vindhya. Then, after Pushpavati gave birth to their child, they would return to Ballavipur with the newborn. But the Almighty had doused those dreams. A poisoned arrow shot by a barbarian