



Thirst

daya dissanayake

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winner of the State Literary Award 1998, for the Best English Novel

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'thirst' is dedicated to my granddaughter Radinka

other books by daya dissanayake

**kat bitha - ISBN 955-96508-0-7, 1998. – won the State Literary Award for the
Best English Novel**

the saadhu testament – ISBN 955-96508-1-5, 1998. the First E-novel from Asia

**the healer & the drug pusher – ISBN 955-96508-2-3, 2000 published by
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the bastard goddess – ISBN 955-96508-3-1, 2003 published on-line

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forward

The idea for this story came to my mind, around 1030 hrs on May 3, 2003, when I saw the preparations for a protest rally against the Upper Kotmale Hydro-power Project, while travelling from Talawakele to Pundaluoya, in the Central Hills of Sri Lanka,. However i appeal to the reader not to make an attempt to identify any king or ruler in Sri Lanka or India, past or present, with the characters in my book. This chain of events could have happened anywhere in South Asia.

Since i began writing fiction, i have used the simple ‘i’ for the First Person singular. I have not used capitals for the title of the book, or the chapter headings or my name.

As always, it was the love, support and encouragement from my wife Indrani, and our children Aditha, Nishantha, Raditha and Madhavi that made this creation possible.

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Place – somewhere in Asia

Time - sometime in the 1st Millennium

Names of people and places - given only for the purpose of identification

Reta – Chief Minister

Hagara – Chief Irrigation Engineer

Puna – Chief Minister's daughter

Abi – chief Minister's younger daughter

Taba – Project Manager

Tisaguta theravada- the Buddhist monk

Cita – sister of Tisaguta theravada

Uti – foreign Irrigation Engineer

Mayahala – Tisaguta theravada's village

Delwita – Sumana's village

wind

The monk was seated near the water's edge, leaning against a stone pillar. His hands were folded in his lap. He appeared to be in deep meditation, with his eyes closed. The rays of the early morning sun filtering through the leaves of the arjuna¹ trees made his shaven head glisten. The river flowed in slow motion. A cool breeze was blowing across the valley, carrying bird song and monkey chatter across the valley into the distant hills.

The men were on their way to work on the dam, when they saw the monk. One man ran back to the camp to inform the Project Manager, while the others stood still, as if rooted to the ground. Taba was the Project Manager in charge of the construction of the dam across the river, linking the two hills. The dam had reached the edge of the river from the two sides. Across the river, stone pillars had been fitted into holes dug into the bed rock. Only the boulders and earth had to be filled in to stop the river. At this point the dam was over thirty metres in height.

The workmen stood at a little distance, awaiting the arrival of the Manager. They knew why the Buddhist monk was seated here. They could not begin work till the thera moved away. He was seated in the path of the construction and appeared to be oblivious to everything around him.

Taba came to where the men were standing. He saw the monk. He looked around, at his men, who were waiting for him to talk to the monk. Taba realized that he had to face the situation alone. With slow hesitant steps, he walked up to the monk, went down on his knees and worshipped.

The monk blessed him with his hand, in silence. Taba waited for the monk to speak to him, but the monk had closed his eyes again and probably all his senses were closed against the world.

Taba heard the engineer shouting in his own foreign tongue and looked behind him. The engineer, Uti, had come up to where the other men were standing. Even though he was shouting in a foreign tongue, the men understood that he was cursing the monk, for holding up their work.

Tisaguta thera remained silent and unmoved.

'We are only carrying out the orders of His Majesty' Taba spoke to the monk.

'We have to continue with the work' he tried again when Tisaguta thera did not respond.

¹ Terminalia arjuna (arjuna in Sanskrit/Hindi, kumbuk in Sinhala)

‘We have to complete the dam on schedule. Our lives are at stake. The king will show no mercy if we fail.’ Taba said again. ‘We are not doing anything wrong. We are not committing any sin. This reservoir will benefit all the people in the district and the whole country. Could you please move away’ he begged.

Taba waited a few more minutes, kneeling in the hot sun. Sweat trickled down from his head on to his bare back and soaked into the cloth around his waist. Uti continued to shout from a distance. All the other workmen and soldiers remained silent.

Taba stood up, wiping the sweat from his brow. He looked once more at the thera and walked back to where the engineer was standing.

‘He will not move from this place till we call off this project’ Taba told the engineer.

‘We cannot stop work now. We have already completed more than three fourths of the work. The king will never agree?’ Uti said.

‘We have to inform His Majesty’

‘He will cut your head off, if you tell him that we have to abandon the work. Why can’t we just pull this old man out of here?’ the engineer wanted to know.

Taba pulled the engineer away from the rest of the men and tried to calm him. He explained that this was a Buddhist monk and had to be treated with respect, with as much respect as they treat a king. The thera was from a village nearby, and the workmen knew the monk well.

‘I don’t care how you treat him, but i have to continue with my work’ Uti could not be appeased.

The workmen had found places to rest under the trees, some had pulled out their pouches of beetle and started chewing. They did not mind the welcome rest, after many weeks of back breaking toil. Let the officers sort out the problem.

The men could not enjoy their rest for long. The engineer came out shouting at the men. His anger was now turned on his workmen. He shouted at them in their native language, in which he could converse. When he was excited or angry, he could speak only in his own tongue.

‘Why are you seated around like jackasses?’ the engineer asked. ‘There is work to be done. Come on. Move. Move. Get to work’ he began to shout at the top of his voice.

‘But the monk?’ someone asked, in a timid voice.

‘Let him sit there if he wants. When he gets hungry and tired he will move away’

‘He is there now’

‘We have to build another 120 feet of this dam. So for the moment we will leave a gap and continue our work. When the monk goes away we can fill the gap’

Taba left for the city to meet the Chief Minister. He did not want to send a message. He wanted to report the situation in person to the Chief Minister.

The Chief Minister decided that it should be brought to the attention of the king immediately.

‘The project should not be delayed for any reason. You have my authority to deal with any problem, the best way you see fit. Don’t waste your time’ the king had ordered, when Taba was allowed to present himself to the king.

‘The engineer has already got the men to continue the work, Your Highness’

It was already dark by the time Taba returned to the worksite. He went up to the river before going to his camp. The monk was still seated in the same position.

At the camp, Taba learnt that the monk had not moved at all. Tisaguta therā had refused all food and water offered to him. He had not opened his eyes to see who had come near him, or had tried to offer him food. Taba went to the river to get rid of the dust and the weariness of his long journey. While soaking himself in the water, he watched the therā under the faint star light. There was no sign of any movement. The therā appeared to be part of the stone pillar, a part of the dam under construction. If he had not known that Tisaguta therā was there, he would not have been able to notice him at all.

The following morning, when he went for his bath, the therā was still there, seated in the same position, his eyes closed. He went closer to make certain the monk was alive. Deep in his mind, he probably wished that the monk had died in the night, which would have solved his problem.

Taba had to send a message to the Chief Minister, to be forwarded to the king. He stated that the monk had not moved away but that the work was continuing without any interruption.

In reality the work had slowed down, Taba noticed, when he did his morning inspection. They had lost a few hours the previous morning, reorganizing the work plan. The surveyor had to mark the new positions for the foundations and the stone pillars, because the area to be filled in had been scheduled to commence in two weeks and had not been marked.

During his rounds, Taba also felt there was something different at the worksite. He looked around and it took him a short while to realise the change was in the noise levels. There was only the sound of metal against rock, of boulders dragged over the ground and

that of digging. The difference was that all the men worked in silence. It was the usual shouting, banter and cursing normally found in such a place of work where a few hundred men toiled, that was missing that day.

‘I can’t go on like this. These fellows are working as if they are at a funeral. Look at them. Just look at them, as if they have seen a ghost. How can they work in silence?’ the engineer complained.

‘We have to be careful. We can’t antagonise these men. I tried to explain to you yesterday, that these men hold the monk in very high esteem. They do not wish to disturb him. And they are also trying to be careful so that even a chip from a stone would not hurt the monk’

‘I have to meet a deadline. I have made a promise to your king. That’s all I have to worry about. I am not ready to sacrifice my life to save that of an old monk’

People from the nearby villages had gathered by the river. Taba knew most of them. He noticed that some of these people had been keeping vigil with the thera. They too had tried to persuade Tisaguta thera to accept a little food or at least a sip of water. The thera had not even opened his eyes.

The silence around him made Taba realize that the men had stopped work for a rest and for their mid-day meal. He knew that the villagers too would have gone back to their work in the farms. He also knew that the monk would be seated against the boulder, unmoving.

Tisaguta thera would be hungry too, and thirsty. Taba could not imagine how a person could survive for two days without a drop of water.

The monk would have to give up his fast very soon, he told himself, as he accepted the rice and curry served to him on a clay plate. The food stuck in his throat. He took a sip of water and started coughing. He called the two dogs that had taken up permanent residence at the camp and placed the food for them on a banana leaf under a tree a little away from the camp.

‘We have to get this monk to move away. We have lost two days of work’ Uti sat down on a boulder, near Taba, in the evening after the day’s work was over.

‘He will give up soon, when he cannot bare the hunger and thirst’

‘He must be eating during the night. The villagers would be bringing him food and water’

‘They would never do that, especially in the night. Didn’t you know that Buddhists monks do not take any food after mid-day. I know the monk, he will not accept such a thing, even if someone offered it’

‘That’s what you think’

‘No. That is what i know for certain’ Taba insisted.

‘It is what you want to believe’ Uti argued. ‘You don’t know much about people. They are not what they appear to be, or what you expect them to be’

‘I know i am right. All we can do is wait’

‘This monk must be expecting something from the king. A land grant for his temple, or a State Honour or something like that’

‘The Buddhist monks give up all such desires when they enter monkshood’

‘They are still human beings with human weaknesses’

‘Time will prove that you are wrong’

‘I can’t afford to wait. I have to get this done before the rainy season, or all this work will be washed away with the first rains’

‘Let’s sleep on it. Tomorrow when we wake up, perhaps the monk would have given up the fast’

Next morning, the priest was still seated in the same position, oblivious to everything happening around him

Taba still expected that the monk would give up his fast and that the village folk would persuade him to give up. The old monk was growing weaker by the hour. The entire village had gathered around, pleading with him to give up. The news was spreading to the other villages and more and more people came to see the monk on his death fast.

Uti decided to go up to the city to meet the king. Taba did not try to stop him. Let him face the king’s wrath, he thought. Uti travelled by a bullock cart, because he hated to walk in the hot sun. He had to wait for several hours to be taken to the king. He was suffering from hunger and thirst, yet he was too proud to ask for any food or even water.

‘I am unable to continue with the work, your Majesty’ he told the king.

‘What is your problem? I have given all necessary instructions, that nothing should hinder the work of the tank. You should not have any problems’ the king told him.

‘My problem is the monk’

‘Is he still there?’ the king asked in surprise. ‘What is that fellow Taba doing about it?’

'Taba will not do any thing. He is too scared of the monk. The monk won't leave the site. People are coming to see him from all over the country. This could create another problem, because trouble makers can spread all kinds of stories among the crowds and they can cause damage to the dam'

'Just forget the monk and continue with the work' the king ordered him, after a few minutes of thought.

'But he is seated right where i have to do the earthwork'

'I told to you to forget that the monk is there by the river. Just continue with the dam, as if he was not there' the king said again.

Uti waited for the king to continue. But the King dismissed the engineer with a wave of his hand and went back to the inner chamber of the palace.

'I don't want to hear about the monk again' were the parting words of the king.

When the engineer returned in the evening, Taba wanted to know the outcome of the meeting with the king, but Uti ignored the Project Manager. Taba decided not to press him for details, he would learn soon enough. Uti would have to tell him in the morning.

Uti was up early, earlier than he had done in the past few days after the thera had begun the fast. He summoned his workforce. Taba joined him, not knowing what the engineer had in mind, or what instructions he had received from the king.

Uti ordered the men to commence work. The men looked at each other. The engineer shouted again. The men looked at the engineer and then at Taba.

'What are you waiting for? Start work. Start filling up the gap' he shouted again. The men looked at Taba, who shrugged his shoulders and indicated that they had to follow the engineer's orders.

'Our priest is still seated there' one man spoke out.

'What priest? Where?' Uti looked around. 'I don't see any priest here'

'He is by the river, where we have to fill the dam'

'There is no one near the river. There is no one near the dam. I order you to go ahead with your work' he shouted again.

Taba remained silent. The workmen looked towards Taba for his advice.

Most of the men were from the village where the thera lived, the others also knew him, had listened to his preaching, had offered him alms, and received his blessings. They

were aware that he was one of the most respected monks in the region. The growing crowd from the surrounding villages and even the distant trade centre established this fact and would have been obvious even to any stranger, except Uti, who either did not understand, or did not wish to understand.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Uti thundered at the men, once again.

The men were getting restless. One of the gravest sins a man could commit was to hurt a Buddhist monk. These men were all Buddhists. Even if the person had been of any other religion, the people would still not lift a finger to hurt him. It was not their nature. People who grew up and lived with nature would never hurt another harmless, innocent living creature.

The engineer looked around in frustration. He summoned the officer in charge of the mercenary soldiers that the king had stationed at the camp. He explained to him what he wanted done. The officer shouted at the workmen to carry out the engineer's instructions. The men did not move. He pulled out his sword and threatened again. Still the men refused to obey. They stood in silence, unmoving, their eyes fixed on the ground at their feet.

The officer was a man who believed that if he pulled out his sword, he could not put it back in the sheath, without achieving his purpose. He held the weapon. He gave the order. Either the men should obey him, or fight him. He waited for a few minutes more.

He swung his sword, cutting down two men in one stroke. The others remained where they stood, watching the fallen men bleed to death.

‘You will have to kill all of us’ one of the workmen shouted. He was the next to be cut down.

Three men were already dead. A few others had been wounded by the swinging sword.

‘This won't solve our problem. We have to get these men to start work. If you kill them who is going to work for us?’ Uti stood before the officer.

‘This is the only language these bastards will understand’ the officer spat out, wiping the blade of his sword with his palm.

‘Can't you get your men to drop a few boulders and earth on the gap that we have to fill up today?’ Uti asked the officer.

The officer thought for a moment, because he too had realised that for once his sword had not been able to get him what he wanted. He looked at his soldiers. None of them were of the Buddhist faith, if at all they had a religion it would have been the worship of the filthy lucre. The gold coins with which they were paid would be the only sacred objects in the

world for them. Thus a Buddhist monk was just another ordinary mortal, and an enemy, at this moment. They were professional soldiers, who were paid to destroy their enemies.

He ordered his soldiers to follow the instructions to be given by the engineer. The soldiers knew what was expected of them. They had been watching the men at work for so many weeks.

When they saw what the soldiers were getting ready for, the men began to shout and scream in anger and frustration. Their cry was taken up by the villagers gathered by the river. A few soldiers took up positions to prevent any of the workmen or the villagers from getting closer to the river. The other soldiers began dragging the boulders to the edge of the half completed dam. When they had collected a sufficient number of boulders and smaller rocks, they looked at Uti. He nodded for them to go ahead.

One soldier pushed a boulder over the edge, giving a war cry. The others followed.

Tisaguta thera did not move. The village folk watched helpless. Soldiers formed a cordon around the construction. They stood facing the gathered crowd, their weapons at the ready. The people could only add their screams and cries trying to drown the war cries of the soldiers and the sound of the falling rocks.

Slowly the gap was filling up. The rising dust was like a curtain drawn across the brutal scene.

When the dust settled gradually, there was a huge mound of rocks and earth, becoming a continuation of the dam, jutting into the river. There was no sign of the monk. The villagers hoped that a falling boulder could have killed the monk, before he could suffocate slowly.

The people who were gathered around were silent now. Only their faces gave a hint of the thoughts going through their minds, the pain, the frustration and the sadness. They were unarmed. They were helpless. Even if they had the weapons and the urge to fight, they knew they would not be any match against the well trained fighting machines of the king. No one tried to hide the tears falling down their faces. Some women wept openly.

There was one woman, who stood a little apart. Her face did not show any emotions. The only indication of the turmoil going through her was her clenched fists.

She was Cita, the younger sister of the old thera who had just been so brutally murdered. She had known him only as a Buddhist monk, and never as an elder brother, because he had already been ordained before she was born. After her father and mother had passed away, she had looked up to the monk, as a father.

Tisaguta thera had sacrificed his life, for the sake of all the people in their villages and for the sake of all the future generations, who would live in this valley.

The sacrifice should not be in vain. The struggle he started should be continued. The valley had to be saved.

Cita decided to continue the struggle. She was prepared to sacrifice her life, but she had learnt a lesson that day, that to this king and all his men, lives of the countrymen were of no value. Not even that of a Buddhist monk. She should not throw her life away. She had to be careful, she had to think, she had to plan, to survive long enough to see the struggle through.

coronation

Astrologers had been consulted to determine the most auspicious moment for the festival of the King's coronation.

One hundred and twenty elephants draped in glistening armour and decorations led the parade. Many of the elephants had been brought from the temples around the country. Some of them had to march for many days, suffering the long journey through narrow dusty roads, without sufficient rest, sufficient food or water, prodded on by their mahouts and stared at by the children in the villages they had to pass through. By the time they had reached the city their feet were sore. Their skin dry and dusty. They were then chained to the trees in the ground beyond the outer moat.

The mahouts knew that the elephants badly needed to get into the water in the nearby tank, to splash the water on their backs and to be rubbed down by the mahouts. They also knew that the animals needed a good rest. But the mahouts were helpless, as helpless as the elephants themselves. They were at the command of the king and the owners of the animals.

The entire cavalry of the country followed next, raising dust clouds which later settled on the numerous multi coloured decorations and banners that lined the streets. The horses were luckier than the elephants, because they lived in the city, even though penned up. Thus they had not suffered a long unpleasant journey to attend the procession. The horses were only restless, not tired and hungry, and they were also used to the city streets.

All the townspeople and those from the villages within a day's journey had been made to stand from early morning, carrying the flags with the royal emblem. They had been ordered by the palace officials to wave their flags and cheer at the top of their voices as the king appeared. They had to stand in the hot sun, for several hours, before the procession had started. The soldiers did not want to take any chances of any sabotage or any attempt on the king's life. Every man, woman and child had been searched before they were allowed to line up on either side of the road, and they had been ordered not to move about.

They all had to suffer the dust and the noise from the drumming and the jingle of multitude of bells on the necks and feet of the elephants.

There were many more horses also on the street, with the king's men mounted on them, in their shining armour. Other soldiers moved about on foot, always vigilant, their eyes darting about, for any suspicious movement or incident.

The Mightiest of All Men, the Excellent Ruler of the universe, who had reduced all hostility to nothing, who had won lustrous glory, ascended the golden baldachin resting on the backs of two elephants also covered in golden cloth. On His Majesty's head was a diadem sparkling as if it was another sun competing with the brilliance of the mid morning sun.

The king wanted it to be the Festival of All Festivals. He wanted it to be etched in the memories of the people of his country, an occasion that would be remembered and talked about long after he was gone. He was not worried about costs. He had collected so much gold and treasures from the Southern and Western regions, that he did not have to worry about his treasury for a long, long time.

After parading the city, the Great Monarch, the Mightiest of the Mighty, the Bravest of the Brave, entered his palace.

The king had returned to his city in triumph, after a long and hard fought war. He had marched on through towns and villages, rejoicing in his triumphs. Behind him he had left many thousands dead, many thousands more maimed for life. There were only widows and orphans and total devastation in the land he had passed through.

Immediately after each battle, crows and rats and other scavenging animals had a feast on the bodies impaled on stakes by the roads leading to the villages. No one dared to bring down the bodies for a decent burial.

The women could not help seeing the bodies of their sons and husbands and brothers, as they returned to what was left of their villages and farms. Younger mothers tried to keep their little children from seeing the gruesome scene of tortured bodies of their fathers.

Some of the women would be carrying more than the memories of their dead. These were the young and better-looking women who had been ravished by the king's men. The scars the soldiers had inflicted would be with the women, both physical and mental, for the rest of their lives.

The king, however, did not see any of the murder and devastation, or the misery he left behind in his wake. He had always remained in the safety of his camp, guarded by strong and ever vigilant men, listening to the reports of the progress of battles and giving an occasional order. The king had made his instructions to his forces very clear, not to stop till they had vanquished all those who had refused to accept his leadership.

The king had told his commanders 'to treat the foe with sternness, so as to teach the people what evil results treason to the king brings about'. So the commanders had slain most of the enemies in the battle field. Those who were captured, were impaled on stakes, hung on trees or burnt to death. There was no mercy for any one who had crossed their path

The king's men were fighting and killing their own countrymen, destroying a part of their own country. They probably had not considered why they were doing it. They were following the orders of the king and his officers. Some of them were paid to fight. Others had been forced to join the battle, for fear of reprisals against their families and their entire villages.

The men who died at their hands had also been fighting on the orders of their local rulers, for the same reasons. As they faced death in battle, their thoughts would have been about their families, their loved ones, more worried about their fate than what was imminent. The men had joined the battle to save their families and their villages, but that gave their enemies the justification to destroy their villages, after the men had been killed.

The king had marched on, from one devastated village to another, till his armies had captured or killed all those who were against the king, till the forces of the rulers of all the other regions had been vanquished.

the new palace

The joy of conquest had begun to fade soon after the coronation. The king was becoming restless. The smile on his face had disappeared. The queen was the first to notice the change, but she expected it to pass, and did not make any comment. Then the palace officials too began to notice the change in the king's mood and they began to worry. The king was becoming irritable, and lost his temper over minor issues. He started shouting at everyone. They could not understand his change. They could not find any issue that should cause any worry to the king.

'This palace is too small. How can i live in this hovel?' one day the king complained to the queen, looking around his palace.

'We can expand it' she gave the simple solution, 'we can do some alterations'

'No. I am sick and tired of this old place. It is like a dungeon'

'Then let us build a new palace'

That morning when his ministers arrived, the king told them that he had decided to build a new palace.

‘Are we planning to reconstruct this palace?’ the Chief Minister, Reta, asked.

‘No. I want a new Palace, with a big royal garden’ the king turned to the minister.

‘We have to think of security’ another officer added.

‘The Inner City is the most secure place in the country, and it is safer to have the palace in the inner city, like all our kings have done up to now’ another minister said.

‘I don’t care what others did. I can’t live caged up like this. I am not a prisoner. I am the king. I rule this country. I can live any where on this island, as i please’ the king thundered.

When the king was in such a mood, none dared to say anything to the contrary. They all nodded their consent.

‘Then it is decided. Tomorrow morning bring the Architect’

At the meeting next morning, the king explained to the Royal Architect what he wanted.

‘I want a palace, seven storeys high, with one thousand chambers, hundreds of pillars painted in all the colours of the rainbow. There should be hundreds of alcoves, with manifold ornaments of climbing plants which should be always in flower. The doors and windows should be edged with gold. The palace should be designed so that it would always be pleasant and comfortable during all seasons. The beds and couches should be made of the best of marble, ivory and gold, the coverings should be the softest of silks from China’ the king went on describing his dream. For the listeners it sounded as if he was describing the Alakamanda on the summit of Mount Kelasa.

‘Now I will show you where I want it build. Come with me’ the king said getting up from his couch.

He left the palace with the Chief Minister and the Architect, and walked out of the inner citadel, accompanied by his personal security. The others walked behind the king, without any comment. The further away from the inner city they moved, the Commander’s worries increased several fold.

The king walked into the pleasure garden.

‘This is where I want my palace’

‘This is the garden developed by His Majesty, your grandfather’ the architect told the king. ‘I have heard from my grandfather that it had taken over twenty years to build it’

'So what? My grandfather wanted a garden. I want a palace'

'But all these beautiful trees and all the birds and animals who have made this their home?' the architect tried to remind the king, as he looked around the royal garden.

What the architect could see in the garden made him think that this is what it would be like in the heavenly garden of Nandana. Around him, he saw, campaka², asoka³, sal⁴, patali⁵, kadamba⁶, malati⁷ and mango trees. Bees and butterflies hovered around the flowers. Squirrels and birds pecked at the sweet fruits. Peacocks strutted around ignoring or showing off to the wretched humans who were invading their privacy.

There were several ponds, glowing in the sun light with their red and blue lotus flowers. The swans floated around lazily.

'Some of these trees will provide the ideal timber for the castle, so you don't have to fetch them from far away. The rest of the timber can be used for the work on the fortifications' the king was saying. 'Let the creatures find a new home' the king added in an after thought, when the architect remained silent.

'We have to build a wall and a moat around the palace' the Commander said.

'Then build it. You can start immediately. You don't need any architectural designs for that'

When the plans were drawn the king ordered many changes. The architect had to go back, to do fresh drawings. The new drawings were changed again. The king did not allow the architect to explain. Each change made the building more elaborate and more expensive to build.

The architect told the king it would take at least eighteen months to complete the construction.

'Are you out of your mind?' the king shouted at the architect, who could not understand why the king had lost his temper.

'I want it done in three months' the king insisted, 'if you can't do it let me know by tomorrow, so I can send for someone who can do it'

² *Michelia champaka*

³ *Jonesia asoka*

⁴ *Shorea robusta*

⁵ *Bignonia svaveolens*

⁶ *Nauclea kadamba*

⁷ *Jasminum grandflorum*

The architect was shivering as if he was suffering from high fever. He felt someone gripping his heart with an iron fist. He knew he had only one more day to live, because he could not see a way out of the problem. The construction that the king had in mind could never be completed in three months. He went in search of Reta, to seek his advice.

‘Why do you think it cannot be completed in three months?’ the Chief Minister asked him, after watching the man gulp down the cup of water offered to him.

‘It is not impossible. I have been thinking about it from the moment I left the palace. It could be done, but it will cost more, at least five times more. There is also a risk of the quality of the work. We may have to use unseasoned timber, which could go out of shape and deteriorate faster. We may not be able to get the best stones for the pillars and foundations. When we employ more men, and have too many jobs going on at the same time, I would not be able to supervise all the work to my satisfaction’

‘You don’t have to worry about the cost. His Majesty has already given instructions to the treasury to release all the funds you need. There is no limit’ Reta assured him. ‘So one problem is gone’

‘What about the quality of the work?’

‘That’s your responsibility. You will have to find a way to ensure that the work is done properly. I will talk to the army commanders to select good men with intelligence and who have either experience or a natural aptitude for carpentry, masonry and landscaping. We can also release a few good officers who could assist you in project supervision’

‘He may not agree. The soldiers may not listen to me, i will not be able to control them’

‘You leave that to me, I will sort it out with the Commander’

The Chief Minister talked to the architect for a few more minutes, about his family, his children’s education, his parents’ health, in order to calm him down further. The architect left Reta’s residence with a lighter step, after expressing his eternal gratitude for saving his life. Yet his worries were not over. He would not be able to have any sleep or rest till he finalised the drawings with the new alterations and also drew up his schedule in order to complete the job in three months.

Reta had taken on a heavy responsibility, to find enough capable people to complete the job on time. He had to support the architect, for he knew that if any one could build the palace in three months, the way the king wanted it done, then this was the only person in the country who could do it.

‘I was planning to meet you in the morning at your office, but now I can save a long walk to your camp’ the Chief Minister told the Commander of the armed forces, when he met him at the temple that evening. The commander was lighting a row of lamps on a stand before the Bodhi tree.

‘I could have always come to your house, if you had sent me word’ he told Reta.

‘I have a request’

‘Anything within my powers’ the commander said with a smile.

‘It is for the new palace to be built for His Majesty’

‘It is really worrying me. That location is not secure at all. It’s going to be a security nightmare for me. How can I assure the safety of the king, in such a wide open, vulnerable place?’

‘I know, but we have to find a way to ensure that security. Let’s all get together and work things out’ the Chief Minister placed his arm across the Commanders broad shoulder. ‘My problem is not that. I need some of your men, for the construction work’

‘Why do you need my men? They are soldiers. Professional fighters. All they can do at the site is to provide security’

‘H.M. wants the project completed in three months. The Architect estimated it would take eighteen months. The only way to keep to the timetable is by employing more men’

‘I will get you enough men from the villages. If you want I will bring men from the South and the Hill country. We rule the whole country now, you know’

‘But we need men with discipline. Men we can trust. There must be many men in your army who have experience in construction work’

‘That’s true, but I just got H.M.’s permission to let most of my men go on leave. They have not been home for over two years during the campaign, and then I had to keep them here till the consecration was over’

‘I’m sure you can talk to the men. I’m sure they will understand, when you offer some attractive bonuses. Funds are unlimited’ Reta said as he left the temple with his wife and two daughters. The mention of funds brought a smile to the Commanders face. He considered Reta as an idiot, not to siphon off some of the treasury funds from all these crazy project of the king. Already, during the war the Commander had amassed enough wealth for a few generations of his family to live in comfort. What was the point of fighting a war for someone else, unless you could also gain some benefit from it, was his view. He did not keep his wealth in the city. The Commander was always prepared for any situation, at any time.

Every morning the king visited the work site. All official meetings and visits had to be delayed till the king returned from the site. Every morning the king made new suggestions. He would stare at a wall being built, walk around it and look at it from

several angles, and then tell the Architect that it should be demolished, that he did not wish to have a wall in that place. On another occasion he would demand that a position of a door or window be shifted, or closed up altogether.

Sometimes a wall would have to be demolished and built all over again a few feet away, doors and windows added, or walled over. Balconies and eaves built, broken and re-built.

The architect tore his hair in frustration, trying to accommodate all the king's wishes. His knowledge and experience told him that some of the designs were not practical. That some of the designs were inauspicious and sometimes could have serious harmful effects on those who would reside in the building. Yet he dared not tell the king.

He dared not explain that a particular change would not be suitable, technically wrong, and sometimes too dangerous. Even when he knew that such a change would weaken the structure of the entire building, he had to do it anyway. At such times, the architect had to tax his brains, trying to find a way to strengthen the supports for the upper floors or a roof, without any significant alterations to the king's plan.

To add to his frustration, whenever the queen visited the site, she too demanded changes, especially on the interior décor and in the garden. Colours on the walls had to be changed over and over as would the curtains and the furniture. Outside, where a pond had been built, she would have it filled again to make it a terrace. A path would be changed, plants would be uprooted and replanted, or discarded.

Every time an alteration had to be done, he marked the lost time and made a note of it to ensure that he could compensate the lost time in some way. The only bright side of the entire project was that he had no restrictions of money or manpower. All he had to do was ask for it. For the three months that he had available for the project, he was the most powerful man in the country, next to the king. He could also have become one of the wealthiest men in the city. Money could be made at every turn, no one would dare to question him. Yet such a thought would never cross his mind.

He could also end up dead, at the end of three months, if he failed to complete the palace or if it was not up to the expectations of the king. He had already decided to leave the city, to migrate to another country if he could, along with his family, after the construction was completed. He did not expect the new palace to last a long time. The first rains would create havoc with the roofs, and the drains. Roofs and gutters could collapse, drains would get blocked. In some places he did not have enough space to lay down storm water drainage systems to his satisfaction, so the building could endure heavy monsoon rains. There would also be problems with the sewage disposal. The locations of the bathrooms and toilets had been changed so many times, and there were too many pipe lines, with too many bends on them. They could get clogged up at any moment. The changing seasons and temperatures could also cause problems with the doors and windows, because some of the timber had not been properly seasoned. Every time there was a problem, after the king moved into the new palace, the architect would

be summoned. Sometimes the defect would be beyond repair. He could not face such a situation.

The workmen, mostly the soldiers grumbled and cursed silently, in frustration and anger, because they could not go home to their loved ones. They cursed the building they were erecting, they cursed the king who ordered it, his family and also the architect. They were building a palace with one thousand chambers for one family to live. Most of the workmen had only one room in their cottages in their villages, and they dared not think what the condition would be after two years of absence, unless the womenfolk had been able to re-thatch the roofs. It was not an easy task for most women. The women and children could maintain the walls and the floor, if they could spare the time from their daily chores to keep the children fed and clothed.

The Head of the Treasury grumbled every time the architect requested more funds. It was already three times over the budgeted cost, and still the architect kept on demanding more money. They both knew, as did almost everyone involved in the project, as did the city dwellers who saw the buildings coming up, that all this money was the wealth of their country. That some of it had been looted from the treasuries of the Southern and Western kingdoms. All the money was to be spent on one building, when all public buildings, hospitals, alms halls, rest-houses around the country were in a very bad state of disrepair. So were the highways.

The people also knew that the chiefs and the merchants and the householders whose wealth had been looted by the king would be cursing the king every day, every moment, whenever they thought of their losses. The Chief Minister and the officials were worried that such cursing could harm them too. In secret they sought advice and help from astrologers, made vows to the gods, offered alms to the monks, praying that any curse should not affect them or their families.

The deadline for the completion of the palace was drawing closer. Anger and frustration grew in much greater proportions. Some of the men showed their anger openly, when the king visited the site. Such things either passed unnoticed or the king had decided to ignore them, because his dream was slowly becoming a reality.

Men had to work day and night. The overworked, over tired men began to fall ill. The number of accidents at the site increased, causing more losses in working time and more work for the physicians and the hospitals attached to the monasteries. The king was not aware of such problems or probably pretended not to be aware. The loss of a few fingers, or even a hand or a leg, even the loss of a life or two in accidents at the construction sites, did not concern him. He was the king. The life and limb of his country men belonged to him.

Then the men had a few extra days grace because the auspicious day for the house-warming fell a few days after the target date. Still there were unfinished sections, places where the plaster had not been completed, where the windows and doors had not been fixed, but such shortcomings were cleverly concealed from the king and the queen, by

draping them with white cloth, or shutting the doors to some sections, hoping that the king would not bother to inspect the rooms in the rush of the religious ceremonies.

Monks chanted Pirith for seven days and seven nights, non-stop, taking turns, in the palace, once it had been completed. On the seventh day, the king had invited fifteen thousand monks. The king had also wanted to offer the noon meal to all those who had worked on the project and to all the townsfolk, but the Ministers had pointed out the practical difficulties of cooking such a vast quantity of rice and vegetables. For once the king had listened, for he was in a good mood. Instead, dry rations were to be given to all the people. They estimated that the numbers to be around two hundred and fifty thousand.

Once again the army was assigned the task, bringing another happy smile to the face of the Commander. Here was another opportunity for him to earn an extra bonus. Procurement of such vast quantities of rice and dry rations at short notice could be made his personal gold mine. He knew the merchants who supplied food to the armed forces. He had his own arrangements with them, and in this case such arrangements could be improved upon, to benefit both the merchants and the Commander. The quality of the food distributed did not concern the Commander. These wretched creatures who were to receive the food, would not know the difference. Even if they did, there was nothing they could do. They were in no position to complain.

The Architect and the workforce had to go on working for several more weeks, after the king had moved into the palace, to complete the entire palace complex and the garden. The soldiers had got tired of cursing and given up any hope of ever going home.

the next dream

Once the palace had been completed and the king had moved in, every one around him thought they could relax. Though they had been so close to the king for so many years, thought they knew him inside out, the officials and servants of the king realized that even if they lived to be a hundred years they would never be able to understand their king, or how his mind worked.

The peaceful world erupted once again the day the king summoned the Chief Minister for a meeting.

'I have realised two of my dreams. Now i have the whole country under my rule and i have the palace i had always dreamt about.' the king told Reta.

The Chief Minister waited for the king to continue and there was a smile on his face as he looked at the other ministers. They could at last relax and attend to the day to day matters of the kingdom, which had been neglected for so many years.

'My biggest dream, my life's ambition, is yet to be realised' the king said and paused again, clouding up the faces of the ministers.

Reta still waited in silence, not daring to risk any comment. He had no idea what the king had in mind. The wrong word at this moment could send the king into a fit of anger.

I have to carve my name in gold, in the history of our country. Even to the end of time, my name should be preserved.'

'Your name is already written indelibly into our history' The Chief Minister told him.

'No. Not yet. Already people have forgotten my grand father.'

'You have achieved greater things than your grandfathers' Reta tried again.

'No. Not yet' the king thundered. The king closed his eyes and turned his head upwards and continued, as if addressing the gods above. 'I am going to build the largest tank in the country. I am going to give it my name, so people will talk about me forever, and be grateful to me. They will build temples in my name. My statue will be placed inside these temples. People will offer flowers and incense and light lamps at my feet. I will be worshiped as a god, after my death'

The ministers had gone through this several times. First when the king wanted to conquer the whole country. Next when he wanted to build the palace. Some of them wondered if this thirst would ever end.

'We have many tanks around the country now, sufficient to provide water for all the people' Reta told the king.

'What do i care if there is enough water or not? I have made my decision. I want to build this tank. Tell our irrigation engineers to suggest the best possible location for the largest tank to be built in this country' he concluded the meeting..

'I don't want to hear one word against my dream, from, any of you' he shouted at the Ministers who were walking backwards till they were out of sight of the king.

A few days later Reta presented himself with the Chief Irrigation Engineer, Hagara. They had drawn up several proposals. The king listened to them. He did not like any of the proposals. One tank was too small. One was to be built in a region where the local chieftain had not given his total support during the king's military campaigns. The next location was too far away to be noticed by many people, and thus could be easily forgotten after a while.

'We have not been able to think of any other location suitable for a large tank', they told the king, trembling in fear.

'Why do i have to do every thing by myself? Why do i have advisors around me?' the king shouted. 'Be ready to leave with me tomorrow early morning. I will show you where you have to build the tank'

Hagara looked at the Chief Minister. He had a puzzled look on his face. He was certain that he knew all potential sites in the country, especially in the districts around the city. He had sent all his assistants and trainees around the country, along each major river to identify any likely places they could have missed. The engineer was confident that there was no other suitable location for a major reservoir in the country. Hagara knew that the king too had travelled over almost the entire country in his campaigns of conquest. He should know the land very well, especially in areas closer to the city, where there had been prolonged battles.

Early next morning, the king left the palace with his royal entourage and the engineers. The advance guards cleared the way, ordering every one out of the road. Carriages and carts were pushed out onto side roads or open grounds, people on the road had to step in to the drains or the fields. Not even a stray dog could be on the road when the king was approaching.

Several years ago, on all the major roads approaching the city, the shade trees by the roadside had been cut down, on the orders of the Senior Army Commander. He had decided that the trees posed a major security threat, when the king had to use these roads. The king's enemies could hide behind or on top of these trees and attempt to assassinate the king.

The City Commissioner had tried to protest. The townsmen had tried to protest. They had tried to point out that the trees had been planted many decades ago, to provide shade for the travellers, that the trees added to the beauty of the surroundings.

'Any one who needs shade could carry their own parasols' was the comment made by the king, when it was brought to his notice. 'There are enough trees all over the country, so cutting down a few trees here and there would not matter. Why are people making such a big issue over a small matter, don't they have any work to attend to?'

'Please do not bother about such talk, Your Excellency. I have taken care of such people. They are the traitors and spies, who were initiating such protests, because they wanted to hide behind the trees to attack Your Excellency'

The king travelled in comfort, and what had been assured was perfect safety. He was seated inside a horse drawn carriage. The senior officials too had their carriages, and the rest of the entourage were on foot. Keeping up with the horses was not easy, for the soldiers, loaded down with their weapons, and for the palace servants who were burdened with the food and water and other necessities for the king. Since no one had been told where they were going, or how long the journey would take, they had to be prepared for any situation. They had to carry enough food for the king, and anything else the king

might need. The palace servants also knew that the king may not use any of the things they carried with them. Instead of the food prepared by the royal chefs, he would suddenly stop by the roadside and demand to eat a ripe papaya or drink the water of a king coconut which he could see in a garden they were passing by.

The men had to walk on without rest. The king did not know when the men were tired. Inside his comfortable carriage, he could travel for hours without a rest. Even when they stopped, there was no rest for the men accompanying the king. Everyone had to be alert, the soldiers for any possible threat to the king's life, the servants to answer any whim of the king, the officials for any command the king might give.

The men could see several hills in the distance over the rice fields, from the place they finally came to a stop. The king stepped out of the carriage. A servant, ever vigilant, immediately rushed forward with an open parasol. The Great Worrier, the Mighty Ruler of the Universe, should not be exposed to the harmful rays of the sun, even for one single moment. Soldiers formed a cordon around the king, while several of them formed an advance guard. Two men walked a few steps in front of the king, sweeping the foot path, removing any stones or sticks.

Everyone else fell in behind. They walked along the path, across the fields. Men and women from the village across the fields, watched from a distance. The time was close to midday. They came to the edge of the paddy field, from then on the foot path led up the hill. The climb became more and more difficult. The man holding the parasol heaved a sigh of relief, because the king pushed him away once they were in the shade of the trees. If the man had to hold the parasol on this winding foot path, he would have certainly lost his life. He was sure to trip over a root or a loose stone and stumble against the king. He shuddered at the thought. The men carrying the food and water and other royal necessities were not so lucky. They had to carry their burdens, not knowing when the king would decide to rest and ask for what ever he fancied.

It was more like an animal trail than a foot path. At most places there were creepers growing right across the path, fallen tree trunks blocked the path at places, and the advance guard had to look for alternate paths, which would not be too difficult for the king to negotiate.

At last they came to the top of a hill. Their tiredness and anger was immediately blown away by the blue and green vista before them and the cooling breeze that wrapped around them. The view from the hill stretched as far as the eye could see. The river flowed leisurely, through the trees and the plantations, like a silver skinned snake. At some places it glistened in the sun, at others it reminded one of a blue ribbon on a green carpet.

There were rice fields, thick forests and a few plots of coconut palms. Cattle grazed on open grassland, the ripening paddy swayed in the wind. Birds sang around them.

'This is where the tank is to be built' the king waved his hand.

He showed the hill on the other side of the river. He wanted to build a dam linking the two hills. His hand moved over the horizon, indicating where the bund should continue across the valley.

'This is going to be the largest man-made lake in the country' the king looked around at his officials, expecting applause.

There was only silence and blank faces. He thought they had not understood what he wanted, so he explained once again.

'The entire valley would go under water' Hagara said, in a hesitant voice.

'So at least you have understood what I want' the king looked at him happily.

'We mean that it would drown all the rice fields, the coconut plantations and the jungle'

'Yes. I know' the king said again 'that's what I want'.

'There are more than ten villages in the valley. These people live off this land'

'They will have to move out. There is enough land in my country where they can be settled' the king said in an off hand manner. 'We cannot let a few villages stand in the way of progress'

'Most of the food that comes into our city is from this valley'

'Once the tank is built, there will be ten times more food' the king smiled again. 'Why is it that none of you had looked at this place before this?' then he asked with a frown.

His officials tried to avoid his eyes.

'Have you ever checked this river and this location? You should have been able to propose this project, long before I thought of it. That is your duty' He growled at the engineer.

Hagara stared at the ground, apologetically, not daring to tell the king that he did not consider it a suitable place for a reservoir. The other officials remained silent, because none of them had the courage to tell the king that there would be a lot of resistance from the people if they attempted such destruction.

The king decided that he had earned a good meal. A carpet was immediately laid under a huge banyan tree. A collapsible chair was placed carefully on the carpet, a white cloth was draped over it and the king was invited to sit. A table was similarly unfolded, over which another white cloth was spread before the cook was allowed to place the food. The king's eyes were fixed on the slowly flowing river and the land before him.

He was not interested in how the men had carried all these equipment and items up the hill. He waited to be served. The men served him with trembling hands, hoping that the food had remained warm enough in the clay pots which had been wrapped with banana leaves to retain the heat.

After the king had eaten, and began to chew his betel leaves the other officials sought permission to eat. They found root stumps and stones at a level below where the king sat. The royal servants had to continue to attend to the king's needs. One man was holding a spittoon, because the king would spit the betel once in a while, and then he had to be offered water to rinse his mouth.

'You have exactly one year to draw up plans, build the dam and the anicut. This day next year, I will be here to declare the tank open for the use of my countrymen. It will be named Mahavapi, The Great Tank and it will be the Mahavapi in this country for ever. No one else will be able to build any tank bigger than this' the king said, getting up from his chair.

'I hold you responsible for the Project' the king told the Chief Minister.

Reta was silent all the way back, seated in his carriage. His mind was on the project. He had to find the right people to do it, the surveyors, engineers, work supervisors, stone masons, manpower, and most important of all, the money. The building of the new palace paled in comparison to this gigantic undertaking. He could not fail, and if he did, he decided he would kill himself, rather than suffer the torture and humiliating death the king would decide for him.

Reta realized that he had to approach this task with a fresh mind. He had to think of new systems, and forget all the traditional ways of planning a new irrigation project. In his mind he drew up his schedule. First of all he wanted to appoint a person, who would be reporting to him daily and who would follow up on the progress of every aspect of the project. The man would be answerable only to him. He had to find the right man for the job. Reta's life depended on it. He decided to call the new officer a Progress Chaser.

During the rest of the journey, in his mind he sifted through all the people he knew, assessing their capabilities and trustworthiness. He felt disappointed. There was no one suitable for the task he had in mind.

In the evening he told his wife about his problem, He could not trust any one else in the kingdom. There were several Ministers who were waiting for an opportunity to oust him, and there were others who had suffered at his hands and who wanted revenge. Unlike most high officials, he had a high regard and respect for his wife's intelligence and common sense. He had got used to discussing his official business with her often, in the evenings, and he had always listened to her opinion. He would take her advice when he found them to be reasonable and better than the ideas proposed by his ministers.

‘Are you certain that you have considered everyone you know?’ she asked. On such occasions she talked to him like an equal, not as the housewife or the mother of their children.

‘I have gone over and over in mind, the entire list of officials and elders in the city’

‘Did you think of our merchants, there could be young business men who could do this job for you’

‘There could be. But i can’t trust them. They will either wish to have some financial benefits out of it, or blackmail me someday. There is always the danger that one of my rivals could buy him off’

‘There should be at least one merchant you can trust, some one who is honest’

‘An honest man could never be a successful businessman’

‘What will you do then?’ his wife asked, seated beside him on the porch. Their children had gone to bed. This is where they usually relaxed in the evening, enjoying the evening breeze flowing across the tanks with the fragrance of the night blossoms.

‘I have to think of something, I have to find a good person’ he told her. ‘I could have done it myself, but how can i be away from the palace for so long a period?’

‘I know what you are thinking. If we had a son he could have been your ideal choice’ she said, looking away. She knew that he was disappointed that they had only two daughters. She knew how much he had wanted a son.

‘I am perfectly happy with our daughters. I am really a very lucky father’

‘Puna is the best person for your job’ she suddenly said.

‘Puna?’ he looked at her. ‘Our Puna? How can we send her to work in such a place?’

‘Why not? You would have sent your son, if you had one’

‘A son is different. How can a young girl work under such rough conditions. And it is a very hard job’

‘I know, that’s why I think she is the best bet for you. Your own daughter is the most trustworthy person you can have’

‘It’s unheard of. Her place is here at home, and then at her husbands, soon as we find a suitable young man for her, from a good family’ he had suddenly reverted to the typical upper class domineering male.

His wife did not say anything. She had planted the idea in his mind, and she knew it would grow slowly, she was certain that he would not be able to find a better person.

In the morning the Chief Irrigation Engineer, Hagara arrived at the Chief Minister's house. Hagara listened to the Minister's instructions. Repeatedly Reta instructed the engineer to plan his work so that the project could be completed in one year.

Hagara was a worried man. He recalled the building of the new palace. The Architect of that project had been his close friend. Sometimes they had discussed about the problems faced by the architect during that construction. At that time Hagara had thought he was lucky that he had not mastered housing construction. He had not wanted to be in the architects shoes even for one moment. He had thanked the gods for sparing him such an ordeal. The architect had gone overseas, with his family soon after the palace was constructed. Only Hagara and one or two other close friends knew he was leaving.

The Architect had been lucky, to be able to complete his job on schedule and to get away from the king. Will he have the same luck, Hagara wondered, while listening to the Chief Minister.

'I'll take the survey team tomorrow' he told the Minister.

'Can't you leave this afternoon? You can set up camp today. Tomorrow early morning the Surveyor can start work. If you leave in the morning, you would not be able to get any work done tomorrow. Every day, every hour, even every minute is precious'

Hagara hesitated.

'Is there any problem?'

'No there is no problem'

'I have already instructed the Treasury to release you sufficient funds for provisions, hiring of carts and for wages for your people. The Commander has been instructed to release his men for the work and for security. You can get more men from the villages in the district'

The king was happy to learn that work was commencing the following day.

'I want to see the plan soon as it is ready'

Reta went to the Mahavapi tank site. He still did not know the names of the villages around or the name given to the hill by the people of the area. On an impulse he asked his wife and daughters to accompany him for the journey. The daughters were taken by surprise, because Reta never took the family on official visits. But his wife realized that her idea was working on her husband's mind.

As they travelled along the highway, Reta pointed out places of interest, for the girls had not travelled this route for many years. He looked at Puna, seated by her mother, her eyes on the distant hills. Reta saw in her, his own wife when she was Puna's age. He had not realized that Puna was a grown up girls now, tall, slim and beautiful. He knew she was very intelligent, which had been confirmed by her tutors.

Reta told them the purpose of their visit and the plans for Mahavapi.

'I thought we did not need any more tanks in this region' Puna said.

'We have enough water for all our needs today, but it is always better to have more. We never know when there will be a prolonged drought. We can also cultivate more land'

'Then we could export more rice' his younger daughter Abi said, trying to show her father that she could remember some of the things she was learning.

'If we have to build another tank, shouldn't we do it further away from the city, so that we could improve the living conditions of people who live in more remote areas?' Puna asked her father.

'Once this tank is completed, His Majesty is planning to build other tanks'

At the summit Puna and Abi shouted in unison, how beautiful the place was.

'It will look still more beautiful when this entire valley is filled with water' Reta told them.

'Is it your idea, father?' Puna asked.

'No. His Majesty himself selected this location'

'All this beautiful land is going under water?' Abi asked with a sad look on her face.

Reta looked at her, but could not think of any thing to say. His wife tried to change the subject by suggesting they have their meal.

Puna kept on asking questions about the project, that for a moment Reta suspected if his wife had put her up to it, to convince him that she was capable of working for him. But the innocent face of his daughter convinced him that she would never deceive him.

'May be Puna could work for me, but she will have to work from home. I don't want to send her out there' Reta told his wife that night.

'That's not fair by your child. If you want her to work for you, and deliver what is expected, then you must give her a free hand'

‘How can I do that, she is my little girl’

‘That is your problem. She is no longer a little girl. She can think and act independently and you must let her do it, the same way you would have let your son do it’. Once again she did not press him any further.

Next morning when Puna was serving him his morning cup of herbal porridge, he looked up at her.

‘How would you like to work for the Mahavapi Project?’

Puna stepped back, unable to believe if she understood what her father had just said. She waited for him to continue, not knowing how she was expected to reply. Her mother came out to the porch.

‘I asked her if she would like to work for the Mahavapi’ Reta told his wife.

Mother looked at daughter.

‘I would love to’ Puna said with joy, ‘but.’ She stopped and looked at her mother.

‘But what?’

‘What am I supposed to do there? I did not study engineering science’ Puna asked her father.

‘I need a Progress Chaser for the Project, because H.E. wants it completed within one year. Already three days are gone. I need someone who can work hard and some one i can trust. I have engineers, but i need a person with intelligence and a person one hundred percent loyal to me’

‘I can work hard, as hard and long as any boy my age’ she said.

‘There’s only one problem. Travelling up and down daily to the worksite from home would not be very practical, which means you will have to stay there, at least for a few days at a time’

‘That is not a problem. You know i can adapt myself to anything’

‘I know that, but the camp would not have good facilities for a girl to live. You would be the only woman at the camp’ he said.

Puna was thrilled by the way father was now thinking of her as an adult, and no longer as his little daughter.

‘She could stay in the village, you could talk to the village headman’ her mother suggested.

‘So tell me what I should do, i am ready’ Puna said.

‘She will not let you in peace till you explain things to her’ Reta’s wife told him.

‘I have to go to Mahavapi this morning. You come with me, and i can explain everything on the way’

She ran back inside the house to get ready for the journey.

Puna went down on her knees and worshipped her mother and received her blessings, before she got into the carriage with Reta. Abi ran out and worshipped her father first and then her elder sister.

‘You will have your turn when you have completed your studies’ Reta stroked her head.

the progress chaser

The camp had been set up further away from where they had turned off the previous day. Reta explained that it was at the foot of the hill, closer to the river, for easy coordination of all the work. Already a road had been cleared, on priority, for a carriage to travel right up to the camp. The next time the king visited, he would not want to walk more than a few feet.

There was only a cook in the camp when they arrived. Puna followed her father, as they walked through shrub jungle in search of the survey team, absorbing everything she saw and heard, not yet knowing what was important and what was not, or what could be useful later on. For the moment, she had to assimilate every tiny bit of data.

An elderly man walked up to Reta. He introduced himself as the headman of Delwita, the village nearest the camp. Men from his village had been ordered to assist the surveyors by clearing the jungle in their path and carrying their equipment.

‘May we invite you to our humble village for a meal and a little rest’ he said with bowed head.

‘How far is your village?’

‘It is just across the rice fields’

‘Let me talk to my people first and then we can go’ Reta told him.

He talked to the Surveyor and the engineers, trying to assess how many days it would take for the survey, to test the soil, to trace the line for the dam across the river and the bund to retain the water once collected. They had to dig a few bore holes to find out how deep the bedrock was.

‘When can we really start work on the dam?’ he asked. ‘I want a schedule, and also the estimate of the volume of earth and clay and the boulders you would require.’

‘We also need stone pillars. The quantity would depend on the condition of the soil and the bedrock’ one engineer reminded them.

‘I will return the day after. Go on with the work, His Majesty might decide to pay a visit at any moment’ he warned them before leaving.

They had to walk along a main ridge of the rice field, in single file, with the headman in the lead. Soon they heard the barking of several dogs and then the cries of children, before they saw the village. The small village houses were in a cluster. One house stood apart, closer to the rice fields, larger than the rest, and with a large front garden. It was the house of the headman.

A mat was spread on the porch for the visitors. A middle aged woman came out with a tray of beetle leaves, which she placed near the Chief Minister. Next she brought two young coconuts, with the tops cut off. Reta and the girl sipped the delicious water.

‘Where are your children?’ Reta asked the headman.

‘We have only one daughter. Our son died two years ago’

Gods were looking down on him, Reta thought, as he realized this was where his daughter could stay. This family would look after her very well. With a family like this, and so near to the camp, he need not worry about Puna. He was a man who judged people by the first impression he had of them. So far this had never failed him.

‘My daughter will be working for me on this project’ he told the headman, who acknowledged her presence now with a slight bow.

‘Will she have to come here often?’

‘She will have to work every day till the project is completed’ Reta said.

‘The city is too far away for daily travel. She can’t stay at the camp. If you will permit us, we can arrange her to stay with us’ the headman said, after looking at his wife.

‘I don’t want to trouble you. Let her stay at the camp’

‘Let us have an opportunity to be of some service, and it would be a great honour for us’ the headman continued. Reta looked at his daughter.

‘I would like to stay here, it is much easier than travelling from the city’ Puna looked at her father.

‘Let us talk to your mother first’ Reta told her.

They left the village after enjoying a simple village meal. The food they had brought with them was offered to the headman’s family.

On their way back, Puna realized that the camp had been built below the location for the dam, and wondered if it had been intentional. The village they had visited too was below the dam and hence would not be affected.

‘Now do you have an idea of the responsibility and the work bad you have to carry?’ Reta asked his daughter.

‘Yes father, i understand, and i am ready to accept the challenge’ she told him, ‘if you will let me’ she added.

‘I knew all the time that you can do it, but I wanted to hear it from you’ Reta ruffled his daughter’s hair, like he had always done since she was a baby.

The following morning Puna went back to Mahavapi, this time with her mother. Reta had to attend to the palace duties and report to the king on the progress of the Project. He had told Puna several times, to be careful, to keep her distance from the men, not to argue with them, not to go out alone from the village. There were so many things she should not do. She had listened in silence, not wishing to annoy her father. She knew that he was really worried about her, to let her on this adventure.

On the way to Mahavapi, her mother talked to her, offering her advise on how she should handle the men, how she should be careful not to give the impression that she was more intelligent or knowledgeable, and not to try to argue with the men even when they were wrong and she was right and not to let any one person think that she favoured him in any way.

‘The most important thing for you to learn is to be patient, to learn to wait. Remember that time solves all problems, if you learn how to wait till the right time. Others could consider you weak, but you are stronger than most of the young men your age and remember your father’s life depends on you’

She explained to Puna the importance of completing the Project on time, that any delay would not be acceptable to the king. The king would not show any mercy to any one who

let him down. Her father was responsible for this Project. He needed all their support and they had to help him in every way.

They had brought a lot of food from the city, things they had thought would not be available in the village. The headman's wife had welcomed them warmly. Their daughter was about the same age as Puna. Her name was Sumana. She gave a shy smile and withdrew to a side, not knowing how she could treat this city girl, the daughter of the Chief Minister. Puna walked up to her, took her by the hand and began talking to her. At first Sumana only replied in monosyllables, but slowly she opened up. The two mothers sat talking on the porch, like long lost friends.

Puna wanted to start work at once, but she was made to have her noon meal first. The headman and Sumana came with her to the camp, while her mother left for the city. It had been agreed that Sumana would assist Puna in her work, but Puna knew that it was an arrangement for her safety more than the contribution that Sumana could make in her work.

Tisaguta thera

Mayahala was another small village near the camp site, but it was above the location for the new dam. Once the dam was completed it would go under water. The villagers were not aware of it, yet.

The people in the village became suspicious about the king's officials, and the work they were doing near the river, when it was noticed that they seemed to be avoiding the village temple. The officials passed through the village sometimes on their way to attend to their work. A few men from the village were already working for the officials from the city, as ordered by their headman.

The Mayahala temple was the oldest temple in the region, believed to have been built soon after the arrival of the first Buddhist monks to the island, bringing the message of the Buddha. Everyone who passed through the village would make it a point to visit the temple, offer flowers and incense to the Buddha and the Bodhi tree, and pay their respects to the Chief Monk. The temple was a popular resting place for travellers, on their way to the Southern region for business or on pilgrimage.

The village elders drew the attention of the Chief Monk to the activities of the king's officials and their suspicious behaviour. The headman did not offer any explanation and did not appear to have any interest in learning what their business was, or what they were doing so close to their village.

'If the officials do not wish to come to the temple, we should not be bothered. It is their concern' the Chief Priest told them.

'Perhaps the officials do not wish to face you, they are trying to hide something from the village' one old man said.

'I do not see why any one should try to avoid me or the temple. I do not know of any one who would want to do any harm to the temple or the village'

'We cannot think of any other reason for their secretive behaviour'

'Let us be patient. Even if they put on masks and dress up behind curtains, they have to come out on the stage to perform their dance'

Yet the people were not happy.

The Chief monk met one of the officials on the road one morning, as the monk was on his daily round to collect his meal. The official knelt before the monk and worshipped. The monk waited for the official to speak.

'We are sorry we could not come to the temple. We are on an urgent mission for His Majesty and could not find the time' the official said, haltingly.

The monk did not reply, but waited for the man to continue. The man expected the monk to ask him what his mission was. The monk did not ask him.

'We are surveying the land on this valley' the man said after a few minutes.

The monk remained silent.

'We were planning to come to the temple when we had settled down in the camp' the man said again.

'You are most welcome, any time you want'

'May i have your permission' the man said before he continued on his way.

When the Chief Minister came on his next visit the engineer came up to him with a serious look on his face.

'We have a problem' he told the minister.

'What is it?'

'We have studied the topography, the soil conditions and the quality of the bed rock' Hagara paused. 'The place is not suitable to build a dam of this magnitude. There could be continuous seepage and the threat of a breach all the time'

'We can't tell that to H.M.' Reta told him.

'That is not the only problem. Even if we build this dam, we would never have sufficient water to store in such a vast reservoir'

Reta tried to convey the information to the king the following morning.

'If this fellow can't do it, find another engineer. I thought he knew his job. Any fool can see that it is the best location for a tank' the king told the Chief Minister.

'He is the best engineer in the country, he has a lot of experience and he has also worked with his father in the construction of several dams. I do not know of any one else in our country, who could handle such a large project'

'If that is the case start looking for someone from our neighbouring countries'

'How do we know if the Irrigation engineer has changed sides?' the Commander asked Reta, 'May be he doesn't want us to succeed with this project'.

'He will never do that' the Chief Minister replied.

'He could be bought' the Commander said. 'Our enemies in the South are always on the watch-out for any opportunity to create trouble for us'

'They don't have any funds now'

'You don't know the amount of gold and precious stones that are still hidden in their ancient temples' the Commander continued.

'If you think he is trying to sabotage the project, you should look into it immediately. Send a few of your agents to the camp site. I want a report within a week' the king ordered.

The Chief Minister was aware that getting down an engineer from across the sea would take several months, and even then he doubted if they could find a man as good as or better than their own engineer. He also knew from the way the king reacted to the Commander's idea, that the engineer's days were numbered. Ultimately the king would hold him responsible for any delay of the project.

He sent royal messengers to several countries, while he persuaded their irrigation engineer to continue with the work, the way the king wanted.

'I will never be able to convince the king to change the location now. You will have to find a solution to your problem, to complete the dam and to see that it gets sufficient water'

'I know it will fail. It is a waste of money and manpower to work on a project that can never succeed'

'You need not think that far. Don't worry about what could happen in a few months or a few years, unless the dam would collapse immediately after it is constructed. As long as it would hold for a few years, it would be fine. Try to look at it positively. You know what happens to people who disregard the king's wishes. My advice is for you to stop talking about it at all' the Chief Minister reminded the engineer. The engineer's thoughts went to his family. He was the father of three children.

'I think the people in the next village are a little suspicious about our work. Shouldn't we tell them what the project is all about?' Puna asked her father, after she had made her report on the progress.

'No, not yet. They will start making a lot of unnecessary demands and complaints, then we will not get the maximum output from the workmen'

'There is a very old temple in that village. Can i visit the temple sometime?'

'I don't mind, you can go with Sumana'

'What if the monks ask me about my work'

'You can tell them that we are surveying the land'

'That would not satisfy them. I will have to put off the visit till you are ready to tell them what we are doing' she told her father.

By then more and more men were summoned to work. These men had to abandon their farms, rice fields, and all other work. Only the very feeble, old and the sick were excused. Farms were neglected. Little children had to attend to the basic chores in the farms. The work force did not know the purpose of their toil. Each gang was instructed to carry out a certain portion of the work, clearing of the jungle, digging trenches, and hauling boulders from distant hills.

They needed more buffalos for the compaction of the soil in the dam. Generations ago, the engineers had discovered that the buffalo was the best machine they could device to compact the soil on such earth works. Farmers had to give up their work in the rice fields to bring the animals for the king's work. The work was not easy, the men and animals were not used to such hard work, non-stop from morning to nightfall. Men and animals began to fall sick. There was grumbling all around.

When Puna passed through a village where all the men had been recruited for the Mahavapi Project, she realized what it would have been like during the war. During the past few years of internal wars, men had been forced to fight against their own people, not knowing the purpose of such murder. Womenfolk had to carry out double their daily chores, in the farms, and at home.

Trouble began once the village folk realized what the project was to be, when they learnt that their homes and the farms were to go under water, that the new tank would drown their lives and their past. They gathered at their village temples in the evenings to seek the advice of the monks and the elders.

'The time has come for us to make a protest' the Chief monk of the Mayahala temple, Tisaguta thera told his villagers one evening.

Next morning Tisaguta thera went forth to meet the senior official at the worksite. The monk told the engineer about the fears of the village folk. About the possible devastation of the forest and the plantations, about the loss of house and property. He explained that the people did not have any place to move. He also told of the danger to the ancient temple, and to several other temples, which would all be submerged'

The engineer listened with patience and respect and then explained his own position. He was only carrying out the King's orders. If he failed he would be put to death and someone else would come in his place. The king had decided to build the reservoir at this place, and it had to be built. There was no one who could question the king's decision.

Puna listened to the conversation. She realized that what the monk said was true. The devastation that would result from the tank would be enormous. Then she thought that she was not competent enough to judge the king or her father or the engineers. They would have evaluated all these issues. From that moment Puna decided to be more alert about what was happening around her. She decided to listen to the conversations of the engineers and the technical people. She wanted to learn more about it, before she talked to her father.

Instead of returning to the village after the meeting, Tisaguta thera went to the temple in the next village, where he discussed the issue with the chief monk of the temple.

'My people are also worried. I do not know what we could do about it' the elder monk had told him.

'That's why i came here. As the most senior monk in the district, we have to seek your guidance' Tisaguta thera said.

'If we can summon a meeting of the monks in all the villages that would be affected by this project, we could discuss this and plan some action. I will send word to them'

‘I will also try to inform as many monks as I can meet and persuade them to attend the meeting’

The news of the planned meeting of the monks disturbed the engineer. He informed the Chief Minister who had arrived that morning for his weekly inspection.

‘You go ahead with your work. Let them meet and discuss, but there is nothing much they can do about it’ Reta told the engineer, as he sat down with Puna to go through the progress of the project.

The senior therā who had summoned the meeting addressed the gathering. He could see that every temple in the district was represented, if not by the chief monk, at least by the next most senior monk of the temple.

‘We are faced with a very serious situation, which you are all aware of, to some extent. But we have to be very careful in how we handle it, because it is a project that has been ordered by the king and he is personally interested in it.

‘Our first option is to consider how we could try to convince the king to shift this location to an area where it could do least damage to the people and the environment, because the king is determined to build a giant tank. If we can show him an alternate site, may be we can persuade him to abandon this site’

‘He is not a person who could be easily persuaded’ an elderly monk said.

‘Yes. But there is no harm in trying’

‘If it fails?’

‘Then we have to think of another option, to try to minimise the damage that could be caused by this’

‘I have studied their plans. The options available for the engineers are also very limited, because this is not a suitable place for a large reservoir’ another monk contributed. The others looked towards him for more details. He had been an irrigation engineer before he had decided to become a monk and he had come to the meeting on the special invitation of Tisaguta therā.

‘We should not go about this in haste, because we will have only one opportunity to present our case. So let us pool all our resources to prepare our case’ the chief monk said.

The discussion went on till late evening, with only a break for the mid-day meal. They sent a message to the camp, that on the next visit they wished to meet the Chief Minister at Mayahala temple, which was the nearest to the camp.

The Chief Minister arrived at the temple, offered the gift of the eight requisites of the Buddhist monk, and sat down on the mat laid for him. He had come with his engineer and his daughter. Puna had insisted on accompanying him, but had to promise that she would not say anything out of turn. She agreed she would only listen.

Reta gave details of the Mahavapi Project to the monks, the advantages of the new reservoir, and how it would benefit not only the people in the area but also the whole country, with the increased food production.

'It will make this the wealthiest district in the country. You will be able to boast of the largest man made tank not only in this country, but in the whole world. It would improve the living conditions of all your people' Reta told them.

'Our people have heard all this, many times in the past, for generations, every time a new ruler takes over. But they usually remain as dreams' one monk said.

'You have told us all the plus points, what about the negative side of it?' Tisaguta thera asked Reta.

'We have not come across any significant disadvantages' he said.

'Loss of homes and farms for these families and their means of livelihood, the destruction of this temple, you think they are of no significance to you or your king?'

'I did not mean it that way. We have solutions for all such problems, we have already found suitable land for all the families that would have to be relocated. The advantages of what the reservoir could provide far out weighed the disadvantages' he said.

'Could you get us an audience with the king?' Tisaguta thera asked, realizing the futility of any further discussions.

'I do not know. I will try' the Chief Minister said and the monks told him that they would come to the city in three days, and stay in the city till they got their audience.

The king refused to see the monks. He told the Chief Minister that his decision to build the tank would not change, so there was no need for him to meet the monks. When Reta tried to plead with the king, he was told to increase the funds to be released for the relocation of the temples.

'Why don't you talk to some of the chief monks of the monasteries in the city to try to find jobs for the monks who are leading the protest, at least for that fellow Tisaguta? The king asked.

'They would think that we are trying to bribe them'

'Let them think anything, as long as we can buy their silence'

Reta went to meet the monks who were staying at one of the smaller temples in the outer city. They had refused to accept the hospitality of the bigger monasteries and temples.

'We are not interested in re-location' one monk told the Chief Minister.

'Do you think that a temple can be relocated like any ordinary house?' Tisaguta thera asked.

'I am only trying to convey the message from His Majesty. I have tried my best to try to persuade him to meet you' Reta told the monks with bowed head. He could not look up and meet their eyes.

puna

Puna could not share her thoughts with any one, seek advice from any one at the camp or the villages. Sumana was a simple village girl, who may not be able understand the intricacies of the world outside their valley, though she was intelligent. Sumana would not be able to advise Puna. Puna did not know enough about the headman to talk to him. She dared not go to the temple, because by then it appeared that they were at opposite camps. She wanted to talk to her father about it but every time he came to the site he was too busy and not in a proper mood to listen to her worries. She did not get an opportunity to talk to him alone.

Puna told her father that she wanted to go home for a day or two as she was not feeling well. Reta was immediately concerned, and wanted to leave at once, but she insisted that he should first attend to his work. The headman's wife and Sumana were also worried and Puna thought that they were not happy about Puna holding back about her illness from them. But she confided in Sumana that she was feeling homesick and she wanted to see her mother, which was an acceptable enough reason.

On the way home Puna was silent, because she did not want their driver to overhear her. Her father thought that she was silent because she was ill.

Reta ordered her to go to bed immediately on arriving home and he sent for the physician.

'There is nothing wrong with her' the physician decided after examining her. 'Let her rest for a day or two before she goes back. She must be missing her mother's cooking' he added with a smile.

Reta heaved a sigh of relief, not only because his daughter was not suffering from any serious ailment, which he had feared was the case, and also because he needed her presence and her reports on the Project. He had not realized till that day how much he had come to depend on her.

Puna waited till she was alone with her mother and then she poured her heart out, everything that had been bottled up for so many days.

‘I can’t go on working for this project, knowing that it is all wrong’ she said.

‘Your father has come to depend on you, you can’t let him down now’ her mother told her, sitting on the bed by her side, stroking her head.

‘We have to convince father that this is wrong’

‘Don’t even think of it. He has to carry out the king’s orders. That is his duty’

‘He doesn’t have to carry out all the orders, not if they are wrong, not if they are illegal or harmful’ she said.

‘If you try to say things like that it is going to hurt him a lot, you know how much he loves you’

‘Sometimes truth hurts, but not for very long. It is the lie that pleases you for the moment, that would hurt you for the rest of your life’

‘You are becoming philosophical now. We should not have let you learn so much’ her mother said in a lighter tone.

‘The last few days I learnt a lot, much more than I had learnt from our tutors’ was Puna’s response.

Puna described the lives of the people in the villages by the river, the scarcity of food and other basic necessities. The condition of the houses, which were no better than the cattle sheds near the city.

‘There is one village where they live in pits. It’s the first time I saw such houses. You have to see one of these houses for yourself to know what they are like. I had a look inside one house. It was so dark inside. A woman explained to me how it was built. First they dig a pit and tamp down the ground to harden the floor. They apply clay and cow dung to smoothen the floor. Then a conical roof is built over it with sticks and covered with straw. They don’t build any walls. You have to jump down in to the house’ Puna told her mother.

‘Where do they sleep?’

‘The men sleep outside in the open, the women and children sleep down in the hut, they do their cooking outside. We are trying to throw such people out of their homes’

‘Wouldn’t they be better off somewhere else if they get a better place to live and enough assistance to build a more comfortable house’

‘Will you leave this house, to go and live in some other town, even if you get a better house and father gets a better job?’ Puna asked her.

‘Sometimes we have to make sacrifices, for the good of the country’

‘There is nothing good about this project, except to satisfy the ego of one person’

‘Be careful of what you say, you can get all of us into trouble and could even cause your father’s death. You are tired now. Try to sleep. In the evening we will go to the temple’

Mother and daughter spent more than two hours at the temple. After offering flowers and lighting the oil lamps, they sat down in meditation on the sandy floor under the Bodhi tree. The sun had gone down and it was dark by the time they reached home. Reta was pacing up and down the porch, waiting for them.

‘You came home to rest, you should stay indoors’ he told his daughter in a slightly annoyed tone.

‘The visit to the temple is also a rest for me, i did not have a chance to go to a temple all the time i was at the project site’

After the evening meal Puna joined her parents on the front porch.

‘Father, what do you really think about this project?’

‘All i have to think about is how to complete it on time, every thing else is secondary’

‘Not even the lives of the people’

‘Nothing will happen to those people, they will be better off where they are to be re-settled’

‘Then why is it that so many people are protesting against it’

‘Throughout history people have always protested, whenever any thing new is to be done. That’s human nature. If every time a new project or new idea is launched, if it had to be abandoned due to a few protests, we would be still living in caves, no different from the wild animals. It is because our ancestors dared to take risks, dared to do things differently from the way things had been done all the time, dared to do things against the advice of the majority, that our civilization had progressed up to now’

Puna did not answer. Her eyes were fixed on the pinnacle of the Stupa across the tank, glistening in the moonlight. She did not want to say all the things that came to her mind. She did not want to hurt her father, who loved them so much.

‘You should go to bed now, we can talk tomorrow’ her mother told her.

After she had gone inside Reta asked his wife what was really bothering their daughter.

‘It is so unlike her to ask so many questions’ he said.

‘She is worried. She doesn’t have anyone at the camp site to talk to. She misses us a lot’

‘We should not have sent her on this job. She is too sensitive’

‘She is the right person. You made the correct decision, but we will have to guide her and keep an eye on her. She is still young and impressionable’

A few friends came to meet Puna the following day. She had grown up with them, and were among her closest friends, but today she felt there was a widening gap between herself and her friends. She could not identify the reason. Had she changed a lot after she started her work at Mahavapi, or had the other girls become more urbanized during her absence? As usual, they began to talk about the boys their age, and update her on all the gossip in the town. They wanted to know about the young men in the village where she was staying, and about those working at the camp.

‘I have not met many boys there’

‘Are they handsome’ one girl; asked.

‘They must be stinking of mud and dirt. Working in the fields and among cows the whole day’ another said, wrinkling her nose.

‘Are they wearing only a loin cloth or nothing at all?’ the other girl laughed.

‘I am not living among barbarians’ Puna said, tired of their questions. ‘They are very nice people, and better behaved than most who live in this city’

‘Ah, she is already defending them, there must be a reason for it’ they all laughed.

Yet it was not the jovial banter of the old days. Her friends attributed the aloofness which they noticed in Puna to her ill health, and left earlier than they had planned, saying that Puna should take more rest and recover her health.

Puna tried to rest, but there was a gathering storm inside her head. She tried to talk again with her mother. Abi wanted to know about her work and about the village where she

was staying and about Sumana. Puna wanted to tell her sister every thing that was going through her mind, but knew that she should not burden the young girl with such worries.

She realized that it was her problem, for which she had to find her own solution. She had to work it out by herself, no one else could help her. She went back to the camp the next morning.

protest

Three officers from the Chief Minister's office arrived at the camp one morning, along with two monks from the city. They explained to Hagara that the chief monk of the monastery in the city had sent them to talk to the monks and the villagers, to convince them of the advantages of the new reservoir. The monks would stay for a few days, at a temple a little distance from the project, which had been arranged by their chief monk. They did not want to stay at any of the village temples or at the camp.

The city team visited each village, meeting as many people as they could gather in one place. They visited the temples too, where they were received without much warmth, and sometimes with open resentment.

The officials tried to explain to the families in their villages, that even though they would lose their farms and houses, they would be given alternate land, down river, where they could make use of the water from the new reservoir. They tried to paint a picture of fertile land, ample water and better roadways. The king was planning to build a new hospital to serve all the new villages.

They explained to the gathering, that water has to be stored in the tank for the drought periods so that water was available, un-interrupted. They pointed out the advantages of cultivation during the dry season too. The village folk would be able to feed the whole country.

'The dry season is the best growing season. The yield would be much higher. There would be fewer problems from pests and weeds. New crops could be introduced, the office for agriculture would provide for all the seeds and provide all assistance to introduce new crops and new varieties.

Since the area was much closer to the main sea port, they should think of export crops, which would mean real money, gold coins, coming into the villages. They could be rich. The villages could grow up to be towns. We could make this the Rice Bowl of Asia.

'The king has an idea of developing this into an export village. He will build a trading centre where foreign traders will be allowed to deal directly with the farmers'

After the explanation by the officials, the two monks took over. They explained the merit that the people would earn by contributing to this good cause. The new reservoir would bring wealth and prosperity to the country and to the people of the region. The people could also be able to contribute more for the temples, renovate all the temples in their villages. The king has decided to build a new temple near the dam, which would be the tallest stupa in the world.

'It will be the tallest and the largest stupa not only in this country, but in the whole world. You will be partners in this project and will earn much merit from it' one monk said.

'We have been talking about the benefits for your region, but there will also be advantages to the rest of the country down river. The dam would control the floodwaters downstream, during the rainy season. The villagers should think of all the low-lying areas, which were getting flooded every rainy season, causing so much devastation and misery for the people and the animals'

Puna did not accompany the monks but learnt of what they were saying from the workmen who came from those villages.

After the monks and the official left, the villagers looked up to the monks of their own temples for guidance.

Tisaguta thera took the lead role. He rallied the priests and the people into one group moving in one direction, with one objective, to stop the construction of the dam.

'This project will do much more harm than good. I personally cannot see if any good would come out of it' explained Tisaguta thera. 'These trees are a national treasure. The forest has been here millions of years and should be saved. We have to save them for the sake of our children, and their children. No one has the right to destroy anything that is gifted to us by nature. When the forest is destroyed, it destroys the food and shelter not only for us but also for so many creatures. The king can provide land for you, but who will provide food and shelter for the innocent birds and the animals?'

'The land that has been offered to us is not so fertile. There are too many rocks and the soil too is not good' one of the old farmers added.

'The area that will go under water for the reservoir will be more than double the area we can cultivate' the ex-engineer monk contributed.

'What are we to do?' many of them wanted to know.

'I will think of a way. Give me some time' Tisaguta thera told them.

Puna watched and listened to all the developments, from a distance. She wanted to attend the meetings organized by the monk, not because of any disloyalty to her father or the king, but because she wanted to learn both sides of the issue. She had been carried away first by the enthusiasm of her father and the engineers, to construct the reservoir. She did not want to get carried away in the other direction now, by all that she was hearing from the village folk.

The headman of Delwita did not know much about the issue. He had not shown much interest because his village would not be directly affected. He thought he had to be loyal to the Chief Minister because his village had been chosen to recruit the first workers for the project. The Chief Minister had let his daughter stay with the headman. People in the region will be talking about it for generations to come. His house would be referred to as the 'house where the Chief Minister's daughter stayed'

Sumana did not know much about the protest movement either. She knew only that the monks in their temple too had started working with Tisaguta thera.

The monks began to visit temples in the other districts. The chief monk had advised the others to try to get the support of the main temples in the city, for they carried much clout with the king and the palace officials, and they could also influence the thinking of the city folk. The city temples were assigned to the more senior monks.

The monks in the city temples did not show much interest, they were always too busy. There was always a lot of activity in these temples, compared to the slow pace of the village temple. The monks from the village felt as if they were in a different country.

The monks did not have to go out to beg for their noon meal, every day there was an alms giving either in a house of a palace official or rich merchant, or a family would bring the meal to the temple.

In the larger monasteries, which housed more than ten thousand student monks, food was prepared in the temple. The teacher monks did not even wish to listen to the issue of Mahavapi. They were too engrossed in their academic discussions.

When Tisaguta thera learnt of the situation and response from the city, he decided to send several young monks to work with the student monks. They were told to identify monks from their district first, and to work on their young minds to try to convince them of the urgency and the gravity of the situation. Through them the teachers and elder monks could be approached.

The students were interested to learn more about the problem. It was arranged to meet them in small groups to be briefed. They in turn would brief others in the monastery.

The activities of the monks were brought to the attention of the Army Commander. He assigned several of his undercover men to disguise themselves as student monks. Through these operators he learnt that the students were getting involved and were

becoming convinced that the Mahavapi project should not be allowed. The Commander reported the matter to the king.

‘You have the full authority to stop this immediately. I don’t have to know the details’ the king did not elaborate.

A few days later the monks who had been working in the city had all returned to their temples. Puna tried to find out why they had given up their campaign and returned so suddenly, but either the village folk were not aware of the reason or were not prepared to tell her. She was worried that the monks had been forced to leave the city and that her father could have a hand in it. She could not ask her father, who would deny any involvement or knowledge about it. She would still not know if her father was telling her the truth, or was lying to her, which he had never done before. Even if he lied, she would not know if it was in her best interest or because he did not want her to think badly of him.

Her life was becoming too complicated, the worries that kept on accumulating was affecting her work, some times she could not concentrate on her work, she missed important events to be recorded or to be scheduled for the coming days.

The protest campaign away from the city, in the remoter regions continued as far as the South and the hill country. The work on the dam also progressed uninterrupted.

the foreign engineer

The engineer from the foreign land had arrived and had taken over. No one at the camp knew what happened to Hagara, their own engineer. The new man began pushing every one around, urging them to work faster. He said he had to meet the deadline, and vowed that he would do it, at any cost of money, men or material

At every turn he ridiculed the former engineer. He did not listen to any one, and expected total servility from all those involved in the project.

Hagara who had been in charge of the project had been suddenly recalled to the city. He never came back. Rumours began to spread that he had been beheaded on the orders of the king, that he had been banished from the city, imprisoned, his wife and children given as slaves to the Army Commander. The Chief Minister avoided a direct answer when his daughter asked about it.

Puna realized that the removal of the engineer had been well planned, because the following day her father arrived with the new engineer. He was from across the seas, from a neighbouring country. He could speak their language to some extent, which made some workmen remark that he was a stone mason who had been picked because he was the only person available who could speak their language.

The doubts about her father's involvement with all these activities made Puna drift away from him day by day. She wanted to get out of this project. By then she was almost convinced that Mahavapi Project was wrong, that it would only cause devastation and misery. She did not know how she could tell this to her father.

The incident about the engineer and the actions of the new engineer pushed her towards a decision. The work on the dam continued. The Engineer wanted to meet the deadline. More men were needed and were summoned from other villages. The maintenance work on other dams and canals and roads were suspended, to provide the manpower for the new project.

Puna told her father she wanted to go home for a day. In the evening she told her mother that she did not wish to go back to the site. Puna begged her to convey it to her father. Mother did not press her for details, she knew the reasons. Her worry was how her Puna's father would take it.

Reta accepted his daughter's decision philosophically.

'If she is not happy then I don't want to force her to work' was all he said.

'How are you to manage the project now?' his wife asked.

'I can't find a replacement for Puna. She was doing such an excellent job, I did not have to worry about the project or its progress till now. But now that the foreign engineer is here, may be he can take on some of the responsibility. He seems to be a tough character and a hard worker. What I need now is some one to coordinate the work'

Reta once again went through in his mind all the people available for such a task. His mind paused on one face. He was an official who was working as the Superintendent in charge of their Western sea port. Reta knew him to be a man who had the capacity to work twenty four hours a day for several days at a stretch, who thrived on problems, who worked better when the pressure was more.

It took a while for the Chief Minister to recall his name. His name was Taba, a man from the hill country.

The Chief Minister sent a message to Taba to hand over his work to his second in command and to proceed to the city immediately for a very urgent assignment.

Taba arrived at the Mahavapi site as the Project Manager to see the project through to completion within the target dates set.

The work progressed at a faster rate, till one morning they found Tisaguta therā seated at the foot of the half built dam.

cita

The protest led by Cita gathered strength and momentum, after the cruel and inhuman murder of the monk. The awareness among the village folk, about the possible harm of disturbing the ecosystem was very high. They knew how delicately their eco-system was balanced, though they would not have been able to express it in words, to explain it to Puna or any other city person. The villagers knew that any disturbance or disruption of the delicate balance could cause irreparable harm.

Even Sumana knew the fate that awaited the plants and animals on the other side of the dam. She explained to Puna the value of the small insects they found in the rice fields.

‘See this spider’ she one day showed a small web across several leaves of paddy, and in its midst a golden hued spider.

‘Why don’t you destroy them?’ Puna asked.

‘Because they are our friends. They catch the insects that come to our fields. So we need them here’

She showed many other examples. About the birds, who preyed on other harmful insects, ants that fed on the eggs laid by insects on the leaf blades. The fish in the muddy waters of the fields.

‘They feed on the mosquito larva, so we can sleep well in the night’

Yet with all this knowledge, accumulated over generations, the people were scared to join any protest movement. The people knew that the king had no mercy for any one who went against his wishes. Nature was more merciful. They preferred to take a chance with any punishment that nature had in store for them, than the wrath of their king.

After the death of Tisaguta therā, even the other monks had lost some of their enthusiasm. There was also pressure from the village folk, for the monks to be more cautious.

The protest campaign was mostly at the village temples, where people gathered on poya days and sat in silence, in prayer or meditation. This was the only form of protest. There was always talk of marching to the city, proposed by the more militant youth among them, but such plans were limited to lengthy discussions and sometimes heated arguments only.

Cita had listened to discussions on the environmental impact of the dam among the monks. She had begun to study the issue in detail, after the death of Tisaguta thera, because she realized that a person who wanted to guide the people had to know what they were fighting for. She managed to locate the old monk, who had come to several of their meetings and advised the other monks about the technical issues relating to the tank. She found him living in a cave at an abandoned monastery complex which was two days journey from their village. Before he entered priesthood, he had been one of the best irrigation engineers in the country. He had served under several kings. This monk had been able to tell her in simple language, what they should look for when building a tank or a dam, and what they should avoid. Thus Cita was able to explain to the village folk the damage that would be caused by the new dam. She could counter all the arguments put forward by the king's men.

She explained to the village folk in still simpler language, that all new land that was to be made available would not be suitable for cultivation under flow irrigation.

'Don't be carried away by the beautiful pictures painted by these officials. They can predict about how much land could be cultivated by the water from the new tank, but I was told by one of the best engineers our country has ever produced, that the land area that could be cultivated with the water from this tank will be much less than what is under cultivation at present. That means we will have less farm land and less food. Our children will starve' she paused. The men and women who listened to her were becoming more attentive. 'The best agricultural land in the region will go under water' she added.

At first people had not been interested in her arguments. She was just another young woman from a village, what would she know about Irrigation of environmental effects, they thought. The only regard they had for Cita was because she happened to be the sister of Tisaguta thera, and people were unanimous in their thinking that the theras death should not be in vain.

'This dam will do a lot of damage which we cannot see immediately It will change the flow of water and arrest the movement of the fish. We need the fish in our rivers, not only as food for our children, but because they are a part of our world' she looked around her to make sure that she had the attention of every one gathered. She was worried that if she tried to explain too much, they would lose interest. She also knew that unless the people learnt what this issue was all about, what they were fighting for, they would lose interest altogether in their struggle.

'This river has been flowing like this for thousands of years, without any major changes, and the plant and animal life has continued in the same manner. They have existed in

harmony. If we change this into one large body of water spanning this entire valley, instead of the slowly flowing river and the forest around it, it will disrupt the entire surroundings. When water evaporates from such a large body of water it would affect the clouds over us and rainfall patterns probably for the entire country. We would not be able to plant anything, anticipating rain or dry weather at the right time. Crops could wither away by prolonged drought or be washed away in torrential floods, unpredictably'

Cita believed that when the people understood what they were fighting for, they would be better committed to the cause, rather than simply trying to tell them that the dam was harmful and they should stop it.

Next a monk would speak about the destruction of their temples.

'If we have the funds and the resources, may be we can all get together and build you new houses, perhaps better than what you have now, but can we let these ancient temples go under water? Will the new temples be the same? Can we uproot these ancient Bodhi trees and plant them somewhere else? Are we to let our sacred Bodhi trees rot in water?' he asked.

The Bodhi tree at the Mayahala temple is said to have been planted from a sapling brought from the Sacred Bodhi Tree where Buddha had attained Buddha hood. The monk asked if they wanted to see the destruction of such a sacred tree.

'The fate of this country is linked to this tree. Our country will prosper and will be blessed by the three hundred million gods, only as long as this tree survives' he told the gathered men and women. He paused for a while to let the listeners digest this information.

'The project would also drown one of the oldest temples in the country, our temple in this village. Even if we dismantle this temple brick by brick, stone by stone, carry it across and build a temple somewhere else, would it be the same, would you be able to accept it as the same temple?' he asked next.

There were no arguments, no one among the people challenged any of the statements he made.

As long as the protests were confined to the temples, the king did not worry. He believed that his informants had penetrated the movement and they would sabotage any serious uprising. The king depended on the information reported by the Chief Minister and the Forces Commanders. The king had been assured by the Chief Minister that the work on the dam was nearing completion that there was nothing that the protestors could do to stop it.

Cita too was becoming aware of their failure to stop the dam. She realized that the work on the dam was too far gone, that perhaps it was already too late when Tisaguta thera sacrificed his life. She did not want to allow any thoughts to come into her mind that her

brother had been wrong. She did not want to think that Tisaguta thera could have handled the protest in the wrong way, that he had misjudged the king and his officials and their own people. Yet, she would not give up. Cita was determined to continue the struggle, till the last minute, till the last stone had been fixed and the last bit of earth had been pressed down.

mahavapi

As the king had expected, and his officials had predicted, the dam was completed in time, just before the rainy season.

Cita was not the only person to be disappointed. The king's face fell when he visited the reservoir after the dam had been completed.

'There should be more water in the tank. This looks smaller than some of the tanks around the city' the king turned in anger towards his Chief Minister.

'This is all the water we can collect from the river, and the flow below the dam has completely dried up already' Taba told the king. 'There will be no water for the people who live downstream'

'I expected a much greater flow of water' the king said again, ignoring the condition downstream. 'Is there any thing you can do about it?' he asked Uti.

'I have studied the problem. There is one solution i can see. We have to destroy the dam built further up, that will allow sufficient water to this reservoir' he replied immediately.

'Then what are you waiting for? Do it at once'

'That dam has been built hundreds of years ago to divert water to the main canal that leads to the tanks around the city' Reta told the king.

'I don't care where it leads to, but break it, if that is the only way you can fill this tank. I want all the water into this tank. This has to be the biggest tank in the country'

In the mood the king was in, none of his officers dared to explain the gravity of depriving the water to the city of over one million people.

Uti informed Taba that he wanted some workmen immediately. He asked his soldiers to accompany them, in case they encountered any resistance at the old dam. He did not want to delay it even for a few hours. It had to be done before people became aware of their intentions, or they would never be able to do it. His action would cut off the water supply to the entire city.

Uti did not worry about that. He had already received his payment and the king had arranged for his safe passage back to his country.

Breaching a dam was very much easier than building one, the men realized. Uti seemed to be an expert at demolition as well as construction. He knew the exact points where the rocks should be loosened, where to start digging into the earthworks.

He watched like a little child, as the earthen dam began to crumble away and then water seeped through the gaps, widening it by the minute, exposing the stone pillars and the foundation.

The breached dam did not have an immediate effect either on Mahavapi or the city tanks, and remained unnoticed by the city folk for a few days.

Uti left for the port taking his gold and his baggage. Taba ordered the dismantling of the camp and settled all the payments that were due to some of the skilled craftsmen.

As he looked at the place where the old monk had been buried alive, he recalled his attempts to prevent the tragedy.

Taba had gone to the temple in Mayahala to get the monks in the temple to convince Tisaguta therā to give up the fast. He had found only one young monk at the temple. The senior monks had gone to the temple in the next village where they were holding a meeting. Taba walked on, to the next village. At the temple he found over a hundred monks gathered inside the preaching hall. He went inside, worshipped the most senior monks and sat down on a mat.

‘It is good of you to have come’ the chief monk told Taba. ‘Tisaguta therā’s life is in your hands’

‘My hands are tied, reverend Sir, I am helpless. I have to carry out His Majesty’s orders’

‘You have to do what you consider is right, not what you have been told to do’

‘We all live under the rule of the king’

‘Yes, but we are also given a brain to think, and an education to reason out the good and the bad’

‘My wife and children are in the city, I have to think of them too’

‘All these people here in the villages have families. They also have small children’

‘I know all that, and I will do any thing in my power to solve their problems, but can’t we appeal to our Rev. Tisaguta to give up his fast?’

‘He believes that it is the only way left to save this valley. He has made his decision and we have to respect that decision’

‘But he is trying to commit suicide, which is also wrong’

‘It is not an attempt at suicide. He is seated by the river in meditation. That is all. If he dies, that death will be on your hands’

Taba saw the anger in the faces of the village men and women, He saw the resignation in the faces of the monks. The senior monks did not show any emotion. He worshipped them once again and left the temple.

The message that he had to send to the king had worried Taba. He knew the king’s temper, and how he reacted to any thing or anybody that stood in his way. Taba recalled what had happened to the Irrigation Engineer who had been assigned for this project. Taba had also to think of his family. His wife was expecting their second child. His son was only three years old. Taba realized that he was helpless. He knew he was a coward, that he did not have the courage to face the truth.

It was only after he had taken up the job he learnt that the Chief Minister’s daughter had been his predecessor. At first he felt degraded that he had to take over a task which had been done by a woman, a young girl at that. Slowly a respect began to grow in him for the girl he had never seen, an admiration for the way the girl had handled the Project. His respect towards her grew further, when he came to learn the circumstances under which she had decided to leave. She had been stronger and braver than he was, Taba had to admit to himself.

He had not been able to save the life of the monk. He had contributed to the successful completion of the dam, which would destroy such a fertile, beautiful valley, and disrupt the lives of hundreds of families. Taba would have to live with his guilt for the rest of his life.

Cita walked up to the top of the dam after the camp had been dismantled and every one had gone. The work was over. Her fight was over too. Tisaguta therā had failed. She had failed in her attempt. People still lived in their villages, but knew their days in the valley were numbered. She could see the houses and the cattle and the children. She looked at the river. It was swollen and spreading into the rice fields. Slowly the level would rise, drowning the gardens and then their houses. People were packing their meagre valuables. They would not demolish their houses yet, not until they had built a small hut in the new plot of land they had received down river.

The villagers who had not taken part in the protest movement, those who had actively supported the project, had received the best plots of land in the new settlements. The families of the protesting monks had got the worst. Tisaguta thera had no family, except for Cita and Cita had not applied for any land.

She looked at the place where Tisaguta thera had been seated. There was no trace of the murder, the dam continued uninterrupted. She decided to plant a tree right above where her brother was buried. A banyan tree or a Bodhi tree it should be, she thought. The people of this country should not forget him, or why he had to die.

What was she to do with her life now? She wondered. She did not want to move to the new village. She thought of remaining in her old house.

Instead of going back to the village she went up the river to the old dam that had been breached. The canal leading to the city tanks had nearly dried up. The river flowed down into the valley. Unconsciously she began to walk along the canal bund towards the city. She recalled what the engineer monk had told her about this canal, the amount of planning and hard work that had gone into its construction. The surveyors had predicted that it was not possible to take the water from the river into the city because the land was so flat. Water flowed from higher levels to lower levels. That was the way nature had planned. On very flat ground, it may not flow at all, and it would never flow uphill. The engineer in charge of the project had been the great grand father of the engineer monk. He had not given up. He found that the city was at a slightly lower level than the river. That was enough for him. He had measured the level again and again, tracing a line with a slight gradient. He reported to the king that he could build the canal. The canal that was thus built, had supplied water to the city till a few days ago.

That day the canal was dry.

Perhaps her fight was not over. She could draw the attention of the townsmen to their plight now. This incident could open the eyes of all the people in the town, including the monks in the big temples, who up to now had not shown any concern about the environmental devastation or the suffering of the people who had lived in the valley. Even the murder of the monk had passed almost unnoticed.

Cita did not feel any fear or hesitation to meet the townsmen all by herself. It did not occur to her to go back to the village and gather a few of her close supporters before she came to the city.

First she approached the market, looked around to identify the more senior traders, and among them she picked on a person who looked mature, steady and had a kind look on his face.

'I have come from one of the villages going under water today because of the new dam' she told him. The trader looked at her with suspicion, probably expecting that she had come to seek some favour or to beg for assistance.

'It is not about our village that I came here, but only to warn you that because of the Mahavapi, this entire city faces a grave threat'

'What kind of threat' the merchant asked her now, looking at her closely. He had first seen only a beautiful, but shabbily dressed young girl. What he saw now was a girl with an intelligent and brave look in her eyes.

'To get sufficient water for the Mahavapi, they breached the dam that diverts water to the city canal. Now the canal has dried up, and very soon all the reservoirs around the city will dry up' she told the merchant, looking straight into his eyes, challenging him to ignore her statement, like all the townsmen had done when the Mahavapi villagers came begging for intervention in their problem. The townsmen were not concerned about environmental problems in other parts of the country, they were too busy making money, serving the king or plotting political coups.

The merchant asked Cita to follow him as he rushed to the trade stall of another merchant of about his age and similar appearance. He told the other merchant what he had learnt from Cita, they beckoned a few other merchants in the market. When others saw this, more people began to drift towards the gathering. Word began to spread from the centre of the crowd, into the other trade stalls and then out of the market, gathering momentum and more details which continued to add on to the original story told by Cita.

They lost their battle against Mahavapi, but if their struggle could be revived, at least some of the land could be salvaged, if the city canal dam could be rebuilt. Tisaguta there would have been happy, had been alive today. The thought brought a smile to her tired face.

She followed the crowd to the open ground on the edge of the canal near the city tank. The already dried up canal was sufficient for the townsmen to believe what Cita had said. News spread fast, bringing more and more people, not only from the inner city, but also from the periphery, from the villages nearby. She had never seen such a large crowd, which made her sad again, with the realization that with all their efforts over the past year if they had been able to gather such a crowd, they could have forced the king to abandon the Mahavapi Project.

The first merchant she had spoken to wanted her to come to the centre of the gathering, to talk to the people, several others recognized her from her earlier visits and pushed her forward.

Cita was made to climb upon the tank bund to address the people. Several senior merchants and a few monks were already on the bund. At first the men became restless, when they saw a young woman trying to talk to them. She looked around her. She had

never talked to such a large and angry crowd. There were soldiers a little distance away, their weapons at the ready. She closed her eyes for a moment. She saw Tisaguta there seated at the foot of the half finished bund of Mahavapi, she saw the rocks falling on him. She saw the dust slowly settling over the rocks that covered the monk's body.

Cita began to speak. She started with the commencement of the Mahavapi project, the damage to the villages and the environment, the protests. She described the murder of the monk.

'We tried to draw the attention of the people in our country, we tried to convey the news of this murder to the other temples, but no one bothered. A Buddhist monk was murdered in cold blood, before the eyes of several hundred people' she looked towards the monks standing on the tank bund and among the crowd. They did not show any emotion on their faces. The crowd was silent.

'Had we been able to stop the construction of the bund, today you would not be faced with this situation' she ended her speech.

'We must repair the dam' a lone voice rose from among the crowd. It was picked up by others. Everyone present began to shout. The words echoed and re-echoed over the country side. 'Repair the dam', 'Repair the dam' they were shouting.

The threat of scarcity of water appeared to arouse these men more than the death of a Buddhist monk, or the devastation of several villages. The thought dampened the joy that Cita felt at the enthusiasm of the crowd to take action against the damage that had been caused.

The crowd was ready to head for the river, when a small group of young men came out of the city gate and moved towards the gathering. All attention was drawn towards them. The first impression was that the king's supporters were coming to disrupt the meeting. The man leading the group was recognized as the king's own son. The men in the crowd were getting ready to fight with the newcomers.

The prince walked through the crowd, ignoring them, pushing them aside to make way, till he reached the top of the bund. He stood near Cita. She had a close look at the prince. His dress was no different from that of most of the young people in the city, a cloth wrapped around the waist and tucked between the legs for easy mobility. Like the rest of the people he was bare bodied. He was of a fairer complexion. Muscles on his chest and arms rippled, glistening with tiny beads of sweat. He appeared to be taller than every one else.

The crowd had fallen silent. They waited for the prince to have his say. Cita wanted to see what excuses the young man could give, in support of his father's actions. She was getting ready to counter what ever arguments he brought forth. She had all the data at her finger tips.

‘Today I am here as one of you, because I agree with you that the dam should not have been breached, that our only source of water should not have been diverted’ he said. He waited for his words to be understood. All eyes were on him now.

‘There has been enough murder and destruction in the country. We have seen thousands of men die in battle. We have seen many thousands more, men, women and innocent children die in the war, die of starvation, die of epidemics, all caused by the continued battles. We have seen entire villages been wiped out’ he stopped again for a moment and then continued, slowly, pausing almost after each word. ‘when the battles were over, all of us believed that death and destruction was over, that there would be no more misery in the country, that we could start to re-build our country to it’s former glory’

The men listened to the prince, as he reminded the men of the atrocities committed by the king, of the death and destruction he had left behind him, where ever he went. Now the threat to the city, as the city tanks dried up. He painted a picture of children crying for water, women unable to wash their cooking utensils and clothes, of men unable to wash off the sweat and dust after work in the evening, of cattle dying of thirst, of jackals and crows feeding on the dead animals, and then the spread of diseases.

‘What has happened here tells us what will continue to happen in this country. Today our water has been cut off. In a few weeks we will have to cut down on water consumption immediately. Even then in another few weeks we will not be able to bath or wash our clothes. Then we will not even have water to drink’

‘Let us build the dam’ the men began to shout again.

The prince raised his hands and asked for silence.

‘We can build the dam, but that is not the answer to our problems’ he said and waited for the people to calm down again.

‘What do we learn at the temples, from our revered monks’ he asked, now looking at the few monks on the bund. ‘We learn about suffering. We learn that we have to identify the cause of that suffering. Once the cause is identified, we have to remove that cause. Isn’t that the truth we have learnt?’ he paused again.

‘Then let us remove that cause, so that we do not have to suffer any more’ he said. When the crowd did not show any emotion he knew he had to elaborate on it. The monks had begun to look worried. Cita was getting worried too. The prince appeared to be having his own agenda. Was he trying to hijack their program to attain some goal of his own, she wondered.

‘The time has come to stop all this destruction’, the prince was saying.

‘That’s what we have been trying to do’ one man said.

'You have been only talking about it' the prince told the crowd. 'Sitting down in temples, prayer and meditation is not going to stop the cause of your suffering'

The men who listened were becoming restless, they were growing angry.

'Do you know the root cause of your suffering?' now he asked the crowd. They remained silent.

'The root cause is there, inside that new palace' he pointed towards the palace a little distance away. 'The palace that was built of your toil, with your money, with money that should have been used to build roads, hospitals, schools, money that could have fed our starving children. The root cause is there' he shouted.

Most of the men felt confused. Their faces showed that they did not understand what the prince was saying. They could not believe that the prince could go against his own father. The merchants and the monks were getting increasingly worried. Was it an attempt to grab the throne or was it a plan of the king himself to identify his enemies, who were certain to come out if there was a possibility of getting rid of the king.

'He is my father. You all know it' the prince began again. 'I will be the next king. All i have to do is wait for my time. I am not in a hurry. I am young. I can wait. I can enjoy life for a while longer before i take on the burdens and responsibilities. That's what i believed till recently, till the happenings around the country opened my eyes. If i waited any longer, there would not be a country for me to rule, there would not be a nation for which i can claim to be king'

'If i am to be king, i want it to be over a healthy, happy nation. If not i would rather die today, trying to save our nation, than go on living a lie, closing my eyes and ears to the misery and sadness around me' the prince went on. 'Let me list the crimes committed by my father, which makes me ashamed to admit it. I am ashamed of my royal birth, today i would be a prouder man if i had been fathered by an untouchable or a poor farmer or a washer man. Now i understand what Buddha meant, when he said that man is a Brahmin or an untouchable not by birth but by his deeds. My father claims he is a descendant from the Solar Race, but he has forgone his right to make such a claim.'

'He is directly responsible for the murder of over twenty five thousand eight hundred and fifty men in battle' The prince started counting the crimes on his fingers. 'Indirectly he murdered another eight thousand one hundred and ninety men, who were his own soldiers, who died in battle because of him. Then there were another six thousand four hundred and twenty five women and children who died in the villages that had been burnt down.

Cita as she listened to the prince wondered where he had got these statistics from, and then the prince answered her question, as if reading her mind.

'I am not plucking these numbers out of thin air. I have done my research, i have travelled from village to village, collecting these data and i had my men going around, talking to people who were affected' he said. How true his figures were only he would know. No one else could confirm these numbers because no one else would have bothered to collect such data. The prince could still be plucking the numbers out of thin air.

'Because of his hunger for power he had caused the death of a total of thirty thousand four hundred and sixty five of our country men. He will try to justify this by saying he was doing it to save his country and religion, to bring the country under one flag to be strong against foreign invasions. But you and i know why he did it. He did it because of his obsession to be the monarch of the whole country. He was not satisfied with being a local ruler, he wanted more. Do you think he will stop with this? Next he will want to invade our neighbouring countries, to try to capture more land. This would result in the death of more of our people in battle. It would also be a terrible drain on all our resources' he continued.

'The worst crime he has committed in his life time, is something unthinkable for us Buddhists in this country. It is also unforgivable' he looked around him before continuing. 'The king has committed the ultimate crime. He has killed a Buddhist monk. A man who calls himself a Buddhist, a champion of the Buddhist cause has killed an innocent, respected, very senior Buddhist monk. Though he is my father, I have to tell you today, that he has no right to call himself a Buddhist. He is a follower of Yama, not of Buddha or any other world religious leader'

The prince did not appear to be in any hurry. Cita watched him, and she looked at the crowd, who hung on to every word the prince was saying.

The Commander had appeared among the group of soldiers who were standing at a distance. He was a worried man too. Immediately after the construction of Mahavapi he had discharged most of his men. He had allowed the men in the regular forces to go on leave. Some of them were returning to their homes after several years of service. They deserved it. Here was a problem he had not anticipated. He should have realized that the people in the city would not accept a scarcity of water. Yet he had not been worried much, because all he expected the crowd to do was to go down to the river and block it again, rebuild the dam and divert the water back into the canal and their tanks. He had already planned to send a few soldiers to the breached dam to show that he was protecting it. The soldiers were faithful to him and they had instructions to let the protestors overrun their barricades.

The arrival of the prince had changed the situation, making him come out of the city to assess for himself the situation. He would have to change his plans. His safety came before that of the king.

The Commander had only a handful of native soldiers. The others were mercenaries from the neighbouring countries. In a situation where the king's own son was getting involved,

the Commander did not know if he could trust his officers. He would not know who would back the king or who would join the prince.

The Commander knew that he too would have to take a decision.

The Chief Minister came up to where the Commander was standing. He had aged by about ten years over the past month. He was a beaten man, who appeared to have resigned himself to old age and death. He had failed his country, failed his king and failed his family. For his daughter's revolt he blamed himself. He knew that Puna was right.

'What is your assessment?' Reta asked the Commander.

'It's not very good. Now do you understand why i protested when the king wanted to build his palace outside the inner city? If he had been in the old palace i need not have to worry at all. I could have protected him with a handful of my good men'

The Chief Minister did not comment. He wondered where his loyalty should be. He knew that the people held him also responsible for the events of the past few years. They would not forgive him. He was prepared to face his fate. But he had to make certain that after he was gone, his family would be safe. Could he depend on the Commander to take care of his family? Reta knew that the Commander would somehow survive.

The king was the root cause of all their suffering, of all their problems. The prince told the people. So we have to remove the cause of suffering.

'To add to all these crimes, now he has committed a grievous crime against our city. The king has committed one million men, women and children to die of thirst. He has deprived our source of water, simply to feed his megalomaniac idiocy of trying to build the Mahavapi. We have to change the name to Mahavinasa, the great tragedy, because it is the greatest tragedy of our times, which could bring a worst calamity than the famines our country has gone through'

'We can't stop a sword with a blade of grass, we can't stop an arrow with our hand, we can't face violence with prayer and meditation. You all know what happened to the monk' the prince urged the crowd.

'The time for passive resistance is over. As long as you accept all suffering and humiliation meekly, those who cause such suffering will go on heaping more suffering on you. It is when a dog tucks its tail between its legs and start squealing, that we feel like kicking it, if it growls at you and try to snap at you, then you pat its head and try to make friends'

There was no one to counter his arguments. The monks kept silent.

The tide had turned. What Cita and all the others in their villages had attempted to do for many months, had happened within a matter of a few hours. A few thousand people were

gathered near the tank. They were ready to fight for their rights. Cita wondered why she did not feel any happiness about it.

'The time is now, to act. Let's go' The prince jumped down from the bund. 'Destiny is in our hands now'

The men fell in behind the prince, shouting at the top of their voices. Still they were empty handed. Cita noticed that instead of turning towards the river along the canal, the prince was leading the men towards the palace.

Within a short distance, weapons appeared in the hands of the men. Cita could not see how and from where the weapons had come. She looked around her, more carefully. Then she noticed some young men who were passing knives and swords to the men.

The prince had come prepared. Perhaps he had been getting ready for a revolt, when Cita delivered this opportunity right into his lap. Those who did not have weapons began to pull out stakes from fences and others picked up large rocks. More men were pouring in to the city. They carried agricultural implements and knives, the only items they had at hand, which could be used as weapons.

Their shouts could be heard long before the rioters reached the palace gates. When the king inquired from the Chief of palace security he informed the king that a few disgruntled men were shouting slogans. He mentioned that the elder prince was with the crowd.

'He is waiting for any opportunity to create problems in the country', the queen whispered to the king.

'He has changed, since your second son was made the Yuvaraja' the Chief of Security told the king.

'How can he be made Yuvaraja? How can the son by a woman of lesser birth become the next king?' the queen hissed at the officer.

'Let them shout as much as they want. Barking dogs can't bring down a mountain' the king ended the conversation.

whirlwind

The Chief of Security ordered the palace gates to be shut. The word had spread among the palace servants that the prince was leading an army against the king, to restore the

water to their tanks. Water was the magic word. Those men who were loyal to the prince, and those who had suffered under the oppressive rule of the king, urged the other servants to join the uprising. Some of these men had been briefed by the prince, some time back, on how they should act in such a situation.

These selected few collected their weapons which had been cleverly concealed in strategic places. The extra weapons were passed on to other servants who could be depended upon. These men approached the palace gate. They far outnumbered the mercenary soldiers who had been guarding the gate. Within minutes the guards had been killed and the gate was secured. The gates were flung open as the prince walked across the moat. To the men inside the palace, it appeared as if almost half the country was coming behind the prince.

The men poured in to the palace garden as the water had gushed out of the breached dam a few days ago. Cita followed the crowd, along with a few other young girls and women. Among the girls she recognized Puna. What was she doing here, was the first thought that came to Cita's mind. Then she thought that if the prince could revolt against his father, why couldn't Puna do the same.

Cita approached Puna. Puna recognized her.

'What will happen now?' Puna asked from the other girl.

'I don't know. The men are totally out of control now. Any thing is possible'

The prince and his men found very little resistance. The Chief of Security had disappeared. He was helpless. The Commander had not responded to his messages. Either he too had vanished or had already been killed by the rioters, the chief thought, and decided he would be safer away from the palace. He was helpless. The few mercenary soldiers who were with him could not guard the entire palace complex. He cursed the Commander for releasing most of the soldiers from service and sending others on leave at the same time. Then the thought came to him that probably that too had been part of an overall plan.

The men broke into the palace buildings. They lost all further interest in the uprising and the issue of water. Some began looting, carrying away any valuable items they could get hold of. Others went in search of the young female servants. Cita watched from a distance as the kitten she had nurtured turned into a vicious tiger.

The king had been dragged out of the building. Someone had thrown a rope around his neck and was dragging the king along the ground.

'Let's hang him from the nearest tree' one of the ministers, who had crossed over to the prince shouted.

'No' the prince shouted. 'Who are you to tell us what we should do?' the prince barked at the minister. The men pounced on the minister, beating him down to the ground.

The prince ordered his men to drag the king out of the palace and along the canal to the river, to where the dam had been breached on the orders of the king.

The prince followed his men.

'I know what should be done with the king.' He told his followers.

When the rioters reached the destroyed dam, they dropped the king on the ground. He was bleeding all over where the skin had been torn by the roots and stones in the path. His silk robe was covered with mud and his own blood.

'Let's start rebuilding the dam. Before all the water flows into the new tank' the prince shouted and the men started work, gathering the boulders that had been washed away, while others went in search of carts to haul earth and gravel and timber.

The king was thrown to the ground. His hands and feet were tied.

'What shall we do with this traitor?' the prince asked his men.

'Kill him' was the unanimous shout.

Cita rushed to the dam trying to protest.

'Vengeance is not the answer. It is not the way we have lived all these years' she cried.

'Death to the king' the men shouted, drowning her protests.

'Hang him'

'Impale him'

'Let's cut his hands and feet off, first'

'Skin him alive'

'No. There is a better way' the prince moved in front of the crowd, after he had let the men let off their anger.

'How?'

'Take him down to the river' the prince ordered, pointing down to the place where the dam had been breached.

'Now tie him up to this post' the prince pointed out one of the stone pillars of the old dam, which had survived the rush of water, standing erect on the river bed.

He watched the king struggling against the ropes.

'Be careful to keep his head out of the water' the prince advised his men. 'We can't let him die yet' He watched as the king was firmly tied to the post. The king was staring at his son, in silence. The blood from his wounds flowed down the river leaving red trails.

'Now you can start work. Go ahead and build the dam' the prince ordered, as he climbed out of the river.

'This is what he did to your brother, Tisaguta thera. So he deserves to die in the same manner' the prince told Cita. 'Aren't you pleased?'

'If we do this, we would be worse than His Majesty. Killing him today is not what we have been fighting for. It will not bring back the monk to life, nor can it wipe off the suffering we have endured. It will take months for us to re-build our homes, and several years to carry out a re-forestation of the valley' she started saying.

'We don't have the time to listen to your sermon. We have more important things to attend to' the prince went back, to urge his men working on the dam.

The woman watched, once again helpless, as rocks and earth fell over the king's body. The dam filled up, faster than at the Mahavapi dam, because there were more people at work, and they worked with anger and eagerness. They wanted to restore water to their city tanks.

Cita walked away, slowly. She was walking away from society, a society that had lost all human values. She would seek ordination as a nun at the small nunnery in the nearby town. She would have preferred to find a cave somewhere in the deep jungle, but knew that as a woman, she did not have such freedom.

Only Puna noticed her departure. She ran up to Cita, held her by the hand.

'Can I go with you, where ever you are going?' she asked.

'No. You have a family. They all love you, you love them. You have a nice home to go to. You can't leave them' Cita told her.

'But I am really disappointed with every one around us. I don't want to live around them' Puna insisted.

'I don't have a place to go. I don't have any one left. That's why I am going. You have a long life ahead of you and a good future. Now you have learnt a good lesson about human nature. You are much stronger now to face our society, and may be do something

to improve it. Your father is a good man. He was doing it to protect the family, because he loves you. You must forgive him'

Puna watched with tear filled eyes as Cita released her hand gently, to continue on her journey.

Cita felt sad and also guilty. She felt she was responsible for the murder of the king, because she had continued the protest movement, after the death of Tisaguta thera and gathered people from far and wide. If not for her, the townspeople would not have joined her movement, and then the prince would not have been able to hijack the organization to achieve his own ends.

The king had committed serious crimes. Killing Tisaguta thera was the worst deed the king had committed. May be he deserved punishment, but did they have to murder him the way they did. Did one crime justify another? All she had wanted was to save their village, their forests and the fields and the birds and animals in their valley. She did not want to see any one die because of it. No one had the right to take another's life. Life was sacred, whether it was that of a Buddhist monk or a king or a simple peasant, or even a predatory bird soaring high up in the sky looking for its prey.

Cita was also disappointed, for she had believed that the people in her country were more compassionate, that they believed and followed Buddha's way and would never resort to violence, for any reason. If that was what the people wanted, she did not want to stay among such people, or get involved with their lives. She would lead a life of meditation as far away from society as the society would let her live.