

Extract from Chapter 3 - Ancient History

by Sylvia Vetta

Rama came to Oxford in September 1995 because of a chance remark made by a visiting Englishman over thirty years ago. That brief encounter was with Rama's father, Gangabharti. He had not always been wealthy but had always been bright. At school as a young man, he was soon noticed for the ease with which he learned languages. Hindi was spoken at home but some of his relatives from the neighbouring state of that name preferred Gujarati. In school this was followed by the Persian based Urdu and when he was eleven, English.

His father ran a bookshop not far from India Gate where the young Gangabharti worked at the weekends. The shop had foreign language sections including French, Italian and Russian. It was a favourite destination for visiting diplomats, foreign correspondents and for all he knew, spies. Gangabharti would often get into conversation with them and pick up elements of their language. He supposed that this was a gift from Brahma for he could remember and imitate sounds perfectly. He also had a fine singing voice. The conversation often started when asked his name. At school, he sometimes regretted his parents' choice. Gangabharti was a heavy responsibility. After all he was burdened with the name of his great country and its sacred river. One, he could understand but thought both rather excessive. The boys used to tease him, sometimes to the point of bullying. They would mock worship him and then knock him down saying 'This god isn't up to much.'

The up got more personal as he got older. The god Shiva, in particular, has a magnificent *lingham* but at thirteen his was a rather pitiful thing, as his school mates enjoyed pointing out.

In the shop, however, his name was a positive gift. The customers' curiosity would lead to the most interesting conversations. Friendships were made. Some of the customers persuaded his father to bring him to prestigious hotels to sing. At first he sang the *ghazels* of the great poet Ghalib. Because of his proficiency in languages, some rather bored wives in the consulates taught him the songs of their homelands. Homesick Russians could listen to him sing Caucasian folk songs and the French enjoyed Songs of the Auvergne and of the night-clubs of Paris. Similarly, Americans wanted Gershwin and Rogers and Hammerstein. Before long, his recitals were earning the family more rupees than the book trade.

One day a rather dishevelled English man came into the shop and rummaged around in the section on ancient India. This section was seldom explored and consequently, soon customers in European literature were sneezing as a pile of leather bound volumes fell to the floor raising clouds of Bombay dust. Gangabharti rushed to help and was rather taken aback when this shabbily dressed man spoke to him in a very *pukka* accent. He apologised but did not seem conscious of the chaos he had caused. He was staring at a book open on the floor. This was in a script GB (short for Gangabharti) did not know. He left the clearing up and asked what it was... The man replied,

'It is Brahmi, an ancient language from the time of Prince Gautama, the Buddha. I am looking for books on Ashoka. Brahmi was the spoken language when he ruled India as a Buddhist.'