

## Gunda: The Rogue

[Translator's preface]

*"But what can you do"?*

*"I can give my life."*

*These lines sum up the extremely romantic, chivalrous spirit of this iconic story set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Varanasi. The year is 1857, and the British East India Company is slowly taking over the weakening kingdoms of India. They have their eye on the kingdom of Kashi (Varanasi/ Banaras) as well. Some local elite see which way their bread is buttered and join the new colonial power structure. But faced with alien rule, and in moments of crisis, the loyalty of the local population often lies with their traditional rulers. In this story, such a loyalty is heightened by an unspoken tale of lifelong love and devotion, forbidden but true.*

*Notions of honour, courage, commitment, duty, and being true to one's code run through the narrative, as do the typical Banarasi habits and traditions that constitute the city's heritage: eating paan, having bhaang, appreciating good music, spending leisurely hours by the river Ganges...*

*This story was written by one of the greats of Hindi literature, Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937), a son of Varanasi, as he might have called himself. He was a pillar of the Romantic Movement in Hindi literature, with his many novels, poems, stories and plays.*

*The translation has been done by Juhi Saklani and commissioned by Banaras Cultural Foundation.*

### 1.

He was more than 50 years old. Yet he was stronger and sturdier than most young men. Wrinkles hadn't visited his skin yet. He took pleasure in roaming bare bodied in strong rain, shadowy cold nights, and the harsh summer sun. His sharply twirled moustache stung the observer's eye, like a scorpion. His dark complexion was smooth and shiny like a snake. The red border of his Nagpuri *dhoti*\* caught the eye from afar. At his waist, a Banarasi waistcloth on which was tucked a shell broach. His curly hair was crowned with a gold-bordered turban, its end spread out on his broad back. And on his mighty shoulders, resided a blunt axe. Such was his style! When he walked with his feline lope, you could hear his bones crackle. He was a Gunda.

It was the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century after Christ, and Kashi\* was no longer a city where highly educated scholars used to come to pursue sacred knowledge in legendary King Ajatshatru's councils. Well after the era of the religious philosophies of Gautam Buddha and sage Shankaracharya, after centuries filled with the destruction of temples and monasteries, and the killing of ascetics, the tradition of debates and discussion had died down. Even a sect as rigid in matters of purity and pollution as the Vaishnavas, finding itself unsuccessful in the times of such anarchy, was turning to *Aghori*\* beliefs in Kashi.

In such times, watching as all fair play and intellectual traditions surrendered to the brute force of arms, the dispirited, disappointed civic life of Kashi gave birth to a new sect. Courage was its religion. Dying for one's word, living like a lion, never hitting a fallen enemy or a coward pleading for his life; helping the oppressed and the weak; and walking around fearlessly as if with life in one's pocket, this was their ethic. The people of Kashi used to call them Gundas.

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### Section notes

\*Kashi = Ancient and traditional name for Banaras/Varanasi

\**Dhoti* = Traditional clothing for Indian men, a length of unstitched cloth tied at the waist.

\**Aghori* = A radical ascetic sect notorious for its death-related rituals

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## 2.

Just as people sometimes become indifferent to life when an unattainable desire remains unfulfilled, Nanhku Singh too, wounded by an emotional hurt, despite being the son of a reputed landlord, became a Gunda.

He was profligate in squandering his property. For a long time the people of Kashi could not forget an expensive *Swaang*\* celebration he had arranged. In those days, to play out this comedic drama in springtime required considerable money, power, fearlessness, and a certain irreverence. Indeed, once Nanhku Singh himself wore anklets on one foot, took a *toda* in one hand, applied kohl in one eye, and wearing pearls worth thousands in one ear and the torn sole of an old shoe in another, with one hand holding an embellished sword and another on the shoulder of the actress playing the beloved, sang: "if you spy the brinjal-seller, call her to me...".

He could often be seen among the green patches outside Banaras town, on wells of sweet water, or on boats squirming on the waves of the Ganges. Sometimes, when he walked out of the gambling dens, and came to the town square, the colourful courtesans of Kashi would welcome him with smiles and feel his

firm physique. He used to sit on the *paan* shop and listen to their songs; he never went up to their rooms. When he would throw whole fistfuls of his earnings from gambling at their windows, society folk would scratch their heads and he would laugh. But if somebody asked him to come up to the courtesan's rooms, he used to fall silent with a secret sigh.

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### Section notes

\**Swaang* =A dance drama

\**Paan* = Betel leaf preparation, often taken with areca nuts and tobacco, popular after meals in India.

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### 3.

He had just emerged from Vanshi's gambling house. Today the dice had not favoured him. The dance of 16 fairies would not prove absorbing enough. He sat at Mannu's *paan* shop and said:

"It wasn't good today, Mannu."

"Why Master! What's the problem? What are we sitting here for? Everything here belongs to you."

"No you idiot. The day Nanhku Singh borrows money to gamble will be the last day of his life. Don't you know how I go to gamble? When I don't have a single paisa left, that's when I go, choose the biggest pile to bet on, and my bid is always successful. It's a blessing from Baba Keenaram."

"Then why today, my master"?

"Well, of course, the first bid worked. But then, after a couple of rounds, I lost it all. Still, these 5 rupees are left. Here, take them. Keep a rupee for my *paan* and give four to Malooki. Tell him to go ask Dulaari to sing. Yes... that very song... "Vilami Vides Rahe" (My love lives in foreign lands...)."

The moment he heard Nanhku Singh's instructions, Malooki – who had been crushing some smouldering coal to add to a pipe – got up with a start. He ran up the stairs, stumbling and hurting himself in the process for his eyes were on the pipe, but he was not capable of facing a frown from Nanhku Singh.

Malooki had still not forgotten that day, the day when Nanhku Singh had been sitting at this very shop, triumphant from his gambling, with a bag full of rupees. You could hear the music from Bodhi Singh's wedding procession approaching.

"Whose wedding is it"? Nanhku Singh asked.

"Thakur Bodhi Singh's son", Mannu replied.

And immediately Nanhku Singh's lips trembled. He said, "Mannu, this can't be. The procession won't go from here. Bodhi Singh will have to settle with me before they go through."

Mannu had said: "What shall I do then master?"

Nanhku raised his axe, which had been resting on his shoulder, higher up, and said to Malooki: "What are you watching for, run and tell the Thakur that Babu Nanhku Singh is sitting here. He should consider before proceeding further, it's his son's wedding after all".

Malooki went trembling to Thakur Bodhi Singh. Bodhi Singh and Nanhku Singh had not met face to face for 5 years. One day, they had had a quarrel but people separated them before it could get out of hand. Since then they hadn't met. Today, Nanhku Singh seemed ready to face a full procession alone.

Bodhi Singh understood this notion of honour perfectly. He said to Malooki: "Go, you! Say that I didn't know that *Babu Sahib*\* was present here. Now that he is present, what is the need for an extra father-in-law?" Bodhi Singh then returned home and Nanhku Singh led the wedding procession ahead. He spent whatever was required at the ceremony, and having seen to it that the wedding was satisfactorily concluded, returned to this very shop the next day. Malooki too had been gifted 10 rupees that day.

Obviously then, being slow to follow the orders of such a one was like personally sending an invitation to the god of death! So Malooki ran to Dulari and burst out, "I am starting with the beats, you sing, and by then the *Saarangi*\* player would have returned from drinking water".

"My god, has some crisis struck? *Babu Sahib, salaam*", said Dulari as she looked out of the window smiling, but Nanhku Singh had hardly responded to her greeting before his attention went to someone who was approaching.

A thin stick in his hands, some traditional eye liner, *paan* in the mouth, henna in the beard – though the white roots could be seen – a cap, an *angrakha* tunic and accompanied by two sepoy\* to boot. It's some Maulvi (a Muslim community leader), Nanhku Singh chuckled.

Without looking at him, the Maulvi ordered a sepoy: "Go tell Dulari that she has to perform at the Resident's house today, she has to come now, meanwhile I'll get some scent from Jaan Ali's shop."

The sepoy was climbing the stairs and the Maulvi had turned to go, when Nanhku called out: "Dulari, how long am I to sit here? Has the *Saarangi* player not returned yet?"

Dulari replied: "Really Babu Sahib, I am sitting here entirely in your service, but you never even come up..."

The Maulvi was stung. He shouted out to the sepoy, "That bitch hasn't come down yet? Go to the police station and tell the *Thanedar* (Police Superintendent) that I have called him. Take my name, say Maulvi Allauddin Kubra has asked for you. Come and teach this one a lesson, she needs a beating. Just because we have lost our titles these infidels are acting smart".

Maulvi Kubra! Dear god! Mannu started wrapping up his stall. A cloth merchant dozing off in his shop next door jumped out of his skin. This was the very Maulvi who had had the impunity to ask Maharaja Chet Singh for 3½ ser of ants'-head oil! Maulvi Allauddin Kubra! The market became tense.

Nanhku Singh said to Mannu, "Why won't you just sit quietly"? He turned to Dulari and replied: "Right where you are, madam. There's no need to move. Go ahead and sing. I have seen way too many of such Johnny-Come-lately grass cutters! Till the other day he was throwing dice and asking around for half pennies, today he has become too big for his boots."

Now Kubra turned towards our hero with a, "Who is this bastard?"

"Your uncle Nanhku Singh", came the reply, and along with it a true-blue Banarasi slap. Kubra's head spun. The sepoys ran in another direction while the Maulvi somehow stumbled his way to Jaan Ali's shop. Jaan Ali said: "Maulvi Sir, you really shouldn't have engaged with that Gunda. It's a mercy he didn't raise his axe". Kubra was unable to speak. Meanwhile Dulari had begun singing: "Vilami Vides Rahe"... The song finished. There was no movement. Then, Nanhku Singh slowly strolled away.

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#### Section notes

\**Saarangi* = A musical instrument

\**Babu Sahib* = A respectful way to address a man, especially a social superior.

\* Sepoys = Soldiers of the British East India Company

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#### 4.

After a while, a palanquin came covered with silk curtains. A guard came along. He conveyed Queen Mother Panna's command to Dulari and Dulari quietly sat in the palanquin. Through the dusty narrow alleys of Banaras, filled with the smoke of the evening, the palanquin wended its way to the Shivala Ghat.

It was the last Monday of the Hindu month of Shravan. Queen mother Panna was sitting in the Shiva Temple, performing her rituals. Dulari was sitting outside with some other singers and singing devotional songs. After the prayers, Panna offered a handful of flowers and reverentially bowed to the deity. She came out and saw Dulari. Dulari stood up, folded her hands apologetically and explained: "I would have come earlier but that cursed Kubra Maulvi came to drag me to the Resident's bungalow and it took hours to settle the matter".

“Kubra Maulvi? Wherever I go, I hear his name. I believe he came here too and created a...” Panna stopped herself from speaking further and became thoughtful, but then asked Dulari, “So what happened? How did you come here?”

“Babu Nahku Singh came by. I said, “Sir, I have to go to sing for my lady’s prayers but he is not letting me go.” Babu Sahib gave such a slap to the Maulvi that he forgot all his attitude. That’s how I was able to come here”.

“Which Babu Nanhku Singh?”

Dulari lowered her eyes and said: “Doesn’t my lady know? Babu Niranjan Singh’s son? That day, when I was very young, I was playing on a swing in your house and the Nawab’s elephant had turned rogue and come in? It was he who saved us that day”.

For some reason the Queen Mother’s face turned pale on remembering that old incident. Then she came to back to the present and asked, “So. Babu Nanhku Singh came by”?

Dulari smiled and bowed her head. She was the daughter of a prostitute who used to live under the patronage of Queen Mother Panna’s father and his estate. How often had Panna played on the swings with her in her childhood. She was a tuneful singer as a child and, being beautiful, was naughty as well. When Panna became the mother of the ruler of Kashi, Dulari rose to become a famous singer in the city. She gave frequent performances in the royal palace. And music had been an inseparable aspect of Panna’s life from the time of Maharaja Balwant Singh. But now she had lost all interest in songs that spoke of the sorrows of love and the pain of separation. Now it was spiritual and devotional music for her. Queen Mother Panna’s peaceful face, aglow with her spiritual experience of widowhood, became a bit wan.

The senior queen had not let go of her domestic ambitions even after King Balwant Singh’s death. The women’s quarters had become a theatre of strife. Which is why Panna often came to the royal temple in Kashi and surrendered herself to prayers. She found no peace in the Ramnagar Fort. She had been the king’s beloved because she was a new queen, and she had also been fortunate in giving birth to a son, yet the social stigma of being of an inferior status troubled her heart. The time when her marriage was arranged came to her mind.

Sitting on a small pavilion, Panna absent mindedly watched the flowing waters of the Ganga. There was no point in thinking of a matter which had vanished in the passing of time, like some object slips from your hand and can’t be found again. Nothing changes if you remember it, but yes, human nature does make a habit of totting up old accounts: “What if this had happened”? Panna too started thinking of the possibilities of her life before the king had forcibly married her. And this, on hearing Nanhku Singh’s name.

Genda was a maid very close to her. She had been with Panna from the time Panna became the king’s favourite. She brought information about the entire kingdom to her queen and was infinitely knowledgeable. At this point, Genda thought it necessary to say something to put Dulari in her place.

“My queen, Nanhku Singh lost all his estates in entertainments, buffalo fights, horse races, song and dance, and became a dacoit. He is involved in all the murders that take place around here. All the...” But Dulari stopped her; “That’s a lie. There is hardly anyone as saintly as *Babu Sahib*. God knows how many widows can cover themselves thanks to cloth donated by him and how many poor girls get married because he sponsors the ceremony. How many oppressed people are protected by him.”

Queen Panna felt a melting in her heart. She laughed and said, “Dulari, he comes to you right? That’s why you are praising him to the skies?”

“No, no, my lady. I can swear that Babu Nanhku Singh has never stepped foot inside my quarters.”

The Queen Mother became eager to know more about this surprising personality. Yet, she looked sharply at Dulari to stop her. Dulari fell silent. The *shehnai* \* announced the hour. She took her leave and went to sit in her carriage. Genda continued to the queen, “My lady, the city is in a bad shape these days. People are robbed in broad daylight. Thousands are losing their all in gambling dens. In the streets, even a frown can become a reason for knives being brandished. And the Resident is not getting along with the His Majesty.” The Queen Mother was silent.

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#### Section notes

\**Shehnai* =A musical instrument

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## 5.

The next day King Chet Singh received a letter from British Resident Markham in which the latter criticized the conditions prevailing in the city severely. He advised the king to arrest and keep a tight control over the robbers and the Gundas. The Kubra Maulvi incident was mentioned too. It was believed the Governor General Warren Hastings would be arriving soon. Unrest spread in Shivala Ghat and Ramnagar. The police chief started arresting anyone in whose hand he saw even an innocent stick or farming axe.

On one such day, Nanhku Singh was sitting on a hillock amid thick greenery with his chosen companions near the Sumbha Nala’s conjunction with the Ganga, and preparing his *doodhiya*\*. Their narrow boat was tied to a Banyan tree in the Ganges. *Kathaks*\* were singing and four *ikka*\* carriages were standing in readiness.

Suddenly Nanhku Singh said: “Malooki, this music is not appealing today. Go, fetch Dulari. Malooki ran and took off in a carriage. Today Nanhku Singh was getting no joy from anything. He’d had his *bhaang* many times but felt no intoxication. In an hour Dulari appeared. She smiled and asked, “What is your command, Babu Sahib?”

‘Dulari, I wish to hear a song today’.

“In this wilderness?”

“Don’t you create any problems”, laughed Nanhku Singh.

“Why that’s what I said to My Lady, the other day!”

“What? To whom?”

“To the Queen Mother, Panna Devi”.

And from that moment, the music did not work for Nanhku Singh. Dulari noted with surprise that from time to time his eyes would become moist. The music finished. In that rainy night, the sound of the crickets was reverberating in the greenery. In a small room near the temple, Nanhku Singh was sitting lost in thought. His eyes were sleepless. The others had gone to sleep but Dulari was awake. She was pondering. Today, she was trying hard to control herself, but eventually she was unsuccessful. She got up and slowly drew close to Nanhku Singh. Hearing a sound, he picked up his sword. Dulari laughed and said, “Babu Sahib, what is this? Are women to be attacked with swords?”

Seeing her lustful face in the light of the little earthen lamp, he laughed a bit. He said, ‘Why madam, you want to leave at this hour? Has the Maulvi asked for you again?’ Dulari sat next to him and he asked, “Are you feeling scared”?

“No, I have come to ask something”.

“What?”

“That... whether... did your heart ever....?”

“Don’t ask that, Dulari. It’s because I consider the heart useless that I keep it in my palm and roam around carelessly. I wish someone would do something to it – crush it, tear it apart, fling it. I do everything I do to die, but I am not able to die.”

“You hardly have to search for death around here. Do you know anything about the state of Kashi? Anything can happen in a moment. Everything may be turned upside down. The city streets seem to be baring fangs.”

“Why, has anything new happened?”

“Someone called Hastings has come. I hear he has stationed a company of soldiers at Shivala Ghat. King Chet Singh and Queen Mother Panna are there. Some people say they may be captured and shifted to Calcutta....”

“What! Even Panna... the Queen... is there?” Nanhku Singh became restless.



“Why Babu Sahib, why did your tears come to your eyes when you heard the name of the Queen Panna today”?

Suddenly Nahku Singh’s face became forbidding. He said, “Keep quiet, what concern is it of yours?” He stood up. He started looking around for god knows what. Then he became calm again and said, “Dulari, it is the first time in my life that a woman is sitting on my bed, like this, alone, at night. And I, one who has sworn to abstain forever. To be faithful to my one vow I have spoken scores of falsehoods and drowned myself in crime. Why? Do you know? I am against women... and Panna... but what is her fault... I wasn’t able to stick a knife in that oppressive Balwant Singh’s chest. But Panna! The foreigners will arrest and send her to Calcutta! Not that...!”

Nanhku Singh became passionately restless. Dulari saw, how he reached to the bottom of the tree in the darkness and launched his boat, in that same inky blackness. Dulari’s heart became afraid.

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#### Section notes

\**Doodhiya* = a local intoxicating drink.

\**Kathak* = Traditional bards, whose songs told stories.

\**Bhaang* = An intoxicating preparation from the leaves and buds of the cannabis plant, traditionally had in north India.

\**Ikka* = a one-horse carriage.

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## 6.

16 August of the Hindu year 1781. Kashi was becoming unstable. At Shivala Ghat, King Chet Singh was under house arrest by Lieutenant Stalker. There was feeling of terror in the town. Shops were closed. In the homes, children would ask their mothers: “Ma, won’t the sweet seller come today?” And she’d reply, “Quiet, my child”. The roads were deserted. Sometimes you could see Kubra Maulvi approaching at the head of a company of Sepoys. At that time, even an open window would be shut tight. There was a reign of fear and silence. At Chowk, the Haveli of Chithru Singh, having gathered all of Kashi’s courage in its protection, was playacting as the city police headquarters. At this point someone called out:

“Himmat Singh”.

Himmat Singh peeked out a window: "Who is it"?

"Babu Nahku Singh".

"Oh, you are still roaming outside?"

"Listen fool. The king has been imprisoned. Let loose all your braves and let me lead them to Shivala Ghat."

"Wait", said Himmat Singh and turned to give an order. Some policemen came out. Nanhku Singh's sword flashed and they ran back inside. Nanhku said: "Traitors, go wear bangles". And he vanished. Silence once again took over the police headquarters.

Nanhku was enraged. His few companions were ready to give their lives if he so asked. He could not understand what political crime the king could be accused of. He thought awhile and then sent a few of his men to the gates to create a diversion.

Meanwhile he took his boat and reached Shivala Ghat. He managed to hook the rope to a rock, stabilized his boat and jumped in like a monkey through a window.

At that point Babu Manihaar Singh was speaking to Queen Mother Panna and King Chet Singh: "Since you are present here, it is very hard to decide what to do. If only you had returned to Ramnagar after finishing your devotions, then..."

Panna said: "How can I go to Ramnagar now"?

Manihaar Singh said sadly: "How can I suggest anything? All my soldiers have been imprisoned."

Suddenly, noise erupted at the gate. Deep in their discussion, the royal family hardly registered the arrival of Nanhku Singh. He checked the river and saw – a boat was fighting the waves to reach the Ghat below. He was pleased; this is what he'd been waiting for.

He called attention to himself: "Where is the Queen"?

They all turned towards him, and saw a fearless stranger – like some god come resplendent with his weaponry.

Chet Singh asked: "Who are you?"

"An unpaid servant of the royal family".

Panna let out a tiny gasp. She recognized him. After so many years! The same Nanhku Singh!

Manihaar Singh asked, "But what can you do"?

"I can give my life. First of all, send the Queen down to the boat below. There are good boatmen in it. Then we'll discuss the rest."

Manihaar Singh saw that there was indeed a boat waiting with four oarsmen and the head guard of the women's quarters. He said to Panna, "Come, I will escort you".

"And...?" Looking at Chet Singh the loving mother hinted at a question which no one could answer. Manihaar Singh asked, "So should I stay?"

Nanhku Singh laughed: "My lord, you go sit in the boat. Till the king too gets away safely, Nanhku Singh swears not to die even if 17 bullets hit his body".

Panna looked at Nanhku. For a moment, two pairs of eyes met, and in them a lifetime of trust was shining like a light. The gate was being forcibly pounded. Nanhku said emotionally, "Hurry, my lord".

In a trice, Panna was in the boat and Nanhku Singh at the gate with Stalker. Chetram gave a letter to Manihaar Singh. The Lieutenant said, your men are creating a disturbance. Now I can't stop my soldiers from shooting". Manihaar Singh laughed: "What men do I have here, Sahab"? The noise grew.

Chetram said, "First arrest Chet Singh".

"Who will dare do it?" shouted Manihaar Singh drawing his sword.

Kubra Maulvi appeared. This was not a place where his authority ran, nor could he escape outside. He said: "What are you waiting for, Chetram?"

Chetram had barely kept a hand on the king that Nanhku Singh cut off his arm with a measured stroke. Stalker started forward, Maulvi Kubra started screaming. But Nanhku Singh finished off Stalker and several of his men. How then could the Maulvi escape?

"Why, my slap that day didn't teach you any good sense, you scoundrel?" said Nanhku and finished him off with a clean hit.

The whole momentous episode took barely some seconds; no one was quite prepared for it.

Nanhku Singh called out to the King, "Why are you waiting? Go down to the boat".

Fountains of blood were flowing from his wounds. Soldiers had started entering the gate now. As he climbed out of the window, King Chet Singh saw Nanhku, undaunted, taking on scores of soldiers with his sword. Blood was flowing down that rock-like body. One by one the limbs of the *Gunda* started falling to pieces. He was a *Gunda* of Kashi!

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