

THE HUMP ON NANDI'S BACK

D. D. Kosambi

(Perhaps the only story which Prof. D. D. Kosambi wrote for children. This story was sent to Divya Bhanusingh Chavda in London by DDK just a few months before his untimely death in 1966.)

(It is the day of the annual cattle festival. Rama, son of the village headman, takes their great bull Nandi to graze, before the cattle procession in the evening. Near a pond at the edge of the forest, beneath the Bo tree of the village god, his friends of the jungle join him, one by one. They try to answer the question why have Indian cattle humps on their backs).

Rama: "Nandi! Why is it that only cattle have humps on their backs? Look at that water buffalo. See that horse. Their backs are flat."

Just then Rama's dog Moti came bounding up, panting in his haste. He said, "Bow, wow! You know how our cat arches up when I chase her. That must have happened to Nandi's back too. Something scared him." Moti and Nandi went to drink at the water trough.

"Chug-a-rum-rum-rum!" a frog croaked, leaping out of the water. "What scare our Nandi? The other day even Sher the tiger couldn't drive him away. Now see how I swell up. Nandi must have filled the hump with air, like me."

Old Naag, the Cobra crawled slowly out of his hole at the root of the Bo tree. "Hiss! Hiss! Air fills up the chest, not the back. Once I swallowed a big rat and slept for a week. There was great lump about my middle. Nandi gulped down something big, sure enough."

"Ho, ho ho!" roared Bhalu the bear, coming out of the forest. "Nandi takes one little bite at a time. You think he swallowed a big pumpkin, do you? Last year, I robbed a beehive. The bees stung me good and hard. What a swelling I had on one side of my face. Sure, sure! Nandi was stung."

Monkey came down with a leap from the Bo tree. "Whoop, whoop, whoop! Look how the pouches under my jaw swell by suffering this tree's fruit. Nandi must have stored the grass he was grazing. If he hasn't put it in that hump of his, how does he get it back to chew his cud? Look he is chewing the cud."

“Spoken just like a greedy monkey,” said Rama. “That hump is always the same size. Your pouches flatten out as you eat the fruit. Why doesn’t Nandi’s hump go down then? Look Nandi, you tell us about the hump.” Nandi said, “I used to think that all cattle have that hump, just as they have horns. But yesterday I took first prize at the district exhibition. There they had brought some European cattle. Very funny they looked to me! No horns, and queer flat backs. They were muttering to each other. “Just look! No horns, and queer flat backs. They were muttering to each other, “Just look! First prize to that big hunch backed bull! I think that you humans must have done some something to us cattle. The yoke fits easier with this hump. I can draw the cart or the plough better. Those cattle told me: In their country they hitch up horses. And now machines do the work.”

Rama didn’t agree: “This book says that our god Shiv rides Nandi. The god made a hump on Nandi’s back to lean on in comfort. Look, here is a picture of the god, riding at ease. Now our village god is in this very Bo tree. Come, let us ask the Bo tree about Nandi’s hump.

The old Bo tree replied: “Nandi is right. Man made cattle like him. Man made dogs like Moti. Man made rice and wheat. Man made himself what he is, at the same time.”

Rama: “How can that be? Our new house was built last year. Men made that. Trees had to be cut down. The logs and planks were sawn to length. That took many men. The whole frame was nailed together. I helped father put on the thatch. But how did we make Nandi? He was born a little calf, with hump on his back. Moti was only a pup, year before last. All I did was to feed him a little extra from my plate when mother wasn’t looking. We didn’t make him a dog. The grain was planted from the seed. In four months, we got lots more grain just like it. No one made that.”

Bo tree: “Rama, you are a bright lad. This is the way to learn. To go on asking questions till you get at the truth. Now listen carefully. Let me tell you what I saw with my own eyes. Thousands of years ago, men lived almost like your friend monkey. They climbed trees for fruits and nuts. They plucked berries and mushrooms. Yams came out of the ground. Like Bhalu they would gather honey. They caught fish just as Bhalu does with his paws, sometimes. They would kill other animals for meat. No fire, no plough, no houses or huts. There were no villages. Of course no village gods. They just lived by gathering food. Now they make it grow.”

Rama: “But if you can live like that, why grow food? Look how hard father and my elder brother work in the fields. Why can’t we live without such hard work?”

Bo tree: “You can’t always gather enough food. There are bad years when the streams dry up. No fish. The game moves away. There is no fruit. Besides, you don’t gather things all the year round. Man had to learn how to store food. You get some good crop after the rains. Then you eat the grain for the whole year. If you grow good, more men can live. From my top branch, you can see five big villages. In the old days, I couldn’t see even five humans in all that land.”

Rama: “All right. But how and why did they make dogs like my Moti?”

Bo tree: “In hunting, wolves used to follow the game, just like men. Men tamed some of the cubs. Mostly, when the cubs grew up, they became wild wolves again. But some stayed with man. They chased wild game for him. Men fed them with scraps of meat and the bones. So you got a tame wolf. You call him Dog.”

Rama: “I am glad they did that. What would I do without Moti? But what about the hump on Nandi’s back? We started with that. And you haven’t told me the answer yet.”

Bo tree: “Men found it hard to chase wild deer all the time. But cattle too ran wild. Cattle moved more slowly. Men followed them for meat. Then they found that some calves could be tamed, just like Moti. They took the fattest. A few had small humps. A hump gives more meat. So, they just went on picking out the humped calves, and fed them. That way, the hump grew bigger. But men found that these humped cattle tamed more easily. The cows gave milk. Instead of hunting, men began to pasture herds. That is how you get big cattle with fine humps, like Nandi.”

Rama : “That was clever too. Now what about grain?”

Bo tree: “Ages ago, I used to see man eat leaves and grass seeds in times of hunger. They got nothing else. Soon, they learned to pick out the fattest grass seeds. All grasses are not alike. Man found that these nice grasses grew best in soft ground. You don’t get soft ground very often. But if you dig up

yams with a sharp stick, the grass grows better there next year. So, man made holes in the ground for fat grass seeds. Always, they picked out the biggest seeds to plant next time.”

Rama: “We don’t plant grain that way. We use the plough. How did people learn to use that?”

Bo tree: “It took them a long time. Firstly, they scratched the ground with a stick. That didn’t help much. Also, raw grain isn’t good to eat. Men had to find out about fire. They were afraid of the big forest fires. Men ran away from the fire just like animals. Then they cooked food. With fire, they could make clay pots too. For big furrows, they needed someone strong to pull. So, they started trying cattle to the big, crooked furrow stick. That way, you get more food too. But men needed bigger cattle. So, they stopped killing them for food and got fine strong bulls like Nandi.”

Rama: “Just fancy eating my Nandi. How stupid. But you said something about man making himself. I thought the gods did that.”

Bo tree: “I told you how man stopped being afraid of fire. First he used to worship Fire as a god, too. Soon, humans found out how to make fire. They rubbed two sticks together. Then they started worshipping me and Nandi. We gave them food. My fruits are still good to eat. But man likes my little cousin Fig better. Figs are larger and sweeter. Only, fig is a small tree, very weak. He needs good soil. Lots of water too. The jungle has to be cleared, I grew by myself. Many times, the forest fires burned down the rest of my family. I always grew again. People still worship the fire and me, and Nandi. But not so much. We did not make man, I tell you.”

Rama: “Then who did?”

Bo tree: “Man made himself what he is. In the beginning, he was a nice small, friendly creature like Monkey. But helpless. After fire, he found about metals. First copper. Then iron. Before that, he made his tools of stone. He made bows and arrows for hunting. He made baskets and leather bags for storing food. Nets for fishing. That way he got more food. The heavy work of farming made him strong. He carries head loads. That makes him walk upright. He made huts and houses. He wears clothes. In the old days, even grown up people lived in my shade naked. Just like you, when you were a baby.”

Rama: "I still don't like many clothes when it is hot. But mother says not to run about bare. Now tell me one more thing. When did the gods come?"

Bo tree: "First, man found that things grew. He gathered them for his own use. So, he thought that everything was born from some great mother. We still say, 'This Earth is our Great Mother.' Then man learned to make many more things than he picked up. So he thought: 'somebody made me too'. So humans made up gods. But they said, 'the gods made everything'. I know better. I am older than all your gods. I saw how man made himself. He has a long way to go yet. He is sometimes very cruel even to other men."

It was getting on to dusk. Rama's mother came up with a basket of fresh red flowers. She put the basket down by the spring. Then she bowed down to the old Bo-tree. Rama's friends left quietly. Mother said: "Rama, come. Get ready. Nandi has to lead the great procession tonight. You know he came before all the other cattle. Come, let us take Nandi home and decorate him."

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