

LANKAPURI

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KRISHNA KUMAR (b.1951), a professor of education at the University of Delhi, is presently working as Director, NCERT. He has published short stories and essays in Hindi as well as books and papers in English on education. He has written both for children and the teachers. Among his publications for children are Neelee Ankhonwale Bagule and Aaj Nahin Parhoonga and for teachers The Child's language and The Teacher. The present short story 'Lankapuri', translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, is a revealing study of adolescence – the sudden changes that the adolescence brings with it.



LANKAPURI

1. I did not always remember that Manno was a little older than me. But, I now know that Manno was very conscious of it. She used to **torment** me over the **pettiest** things. She used to make me pay her a price before she would **deign** to grant my very simple requests. Both of us are very fond of listening to film songs on the radio. I could never remember the exact wordings of any song, while Manno could memorize the whole song after listening to it once. Sometimes I couldn't even follow the song properly. 'Yon to hamne lakh hasin dekne hain', a very **favourite** song of mine at that time, would be misheard by ears as 'Yon to hamne dhak wahin dekhe hain.' When my mind got tired of **deciphering** a meaning out of these words, I would **resort**

to asking Manno for a correction. On such occasions Manno used to first **embarrass** me by laughing very loudly and then she used to make me enter all kinds of business transactions for each and every line of song. The jobs she made me do might have been very easy - like bringing a glass of water for her or putting a cover on her book or sharpening her pencil - but to pay for each line of the song by doing jobs like this seemed a very **exorbitant** price. Despite this I used to attend to all such **chores** quietly as the attraction of the song was very powerful. To know a song entirely and correctly seemed worth going through all the trouble.

2. The promises were also quite easy to fulfil - that I will never pull her hair or tell against her and things like that. And even as I gave my **pledges**, I used to **resolve** in my mind to do exactly what I was promising never to do again. Not that I always succeeded. Many a time it became impossible to pull her hair as she also knew about the **fickleness** of my promises and was prepared for their immediate **infringement**. But, I will say that I had become **habituated** to taking my promises lightly. Though I was different about the **oaths**. For instance, Manno would sometimes put me under Vidya's or God's oath, that I would not trouble her like that, and then I used to be a bit **subdued** for a day or so. By next morning neither Manno nor I remembered the oath.
3. Manno used to live opposite my house and her father taught in a school like my father's. The only difference was that her father wore spectacles and dressed in dhoti and kurta while my father wore pyjamas and kurta and didn't use spectacles. They were very good friends, but I am of the opinion that my friendship with Manno was far stronger and deeper. Manno didn't have a mother. She had only an elder sister who visited them once in a while. I was alone in my house and Manno is, hers, but it did not matter because we hardly ever stayed apart. Except during the days we had to take examinations, we hardly ever separated. Manno was one year ahead of me and so she had to study more. In appearance too she was superior. What did I have to compare with her colourful frocks and ribbons? I in my brown or blue or khaki **knickers** and yellow or white or green shirts could never dare compete with Manno's well-turned-out appearance. And then, when were my clothes ever clean? My shirts always had big rings of black dirt around the collars and in the front you could find spots of ink or grease. My hair was always **dangling** over my forehead in the most unruly manner while Manno's shining hair was neatly

braided. My knees were always adorned with lots of flies or else there would be a big bandage around them. I wonder if Manno ever had even a smaller **blister**, nothing to say of an injury.

4. While I did give her a blow or two during play or pulled at her braids, I had a very special place for Manno in my heart, far above my mother and father. Once when I saw Manno in a drama in her school I couldn't believe it was the same Manno I knew. She was dressed in a long red skirt which was **glimmering** in the bright stage light. And her cheeks were red with **rouge**. After that evening I didn't even dare go near her for three or four days. All my clothes looked very **shabby** to me and all my books and copy books seemed quite irrelevant. Four or five days later, after the stage personality of Manno had faded a little, I made her write out the song she had danced on the stage. It was summer and after one line she sent me running to the bazaar to get her some ice. I got the complete song out of her only after that. I still remember the first line. *Guriya aurat ek kahani* (O my doll, woman's life is a story).
5. Oh yes, I forget to mention that Manno always managed to keep her school books and copies brand new. And her handwriting was so neat that the words looked printed. On the other hand, all my books were dog-eared and my copies were **stagnated** with **blobs** of ink on almost every page.
6. Every evening we used to play Nagin Tapa on our rooftop. One could see a large portion of our town from there. There was a big lake at one end of the town. One day during our play I was looking at the lake and asked her, 'Manno, what is that in the middle of the lake?'
7. 'Lankapuri,' she answered, without even looking at the lake.
8. 'What do they do there?'
9. 'Nothing.'
10. 'Nothing happens there?'
11. 'Sometimes.'
12. 'What?' I asked, stopping in the midst of the game. I was quite outside Nagin Tapa now. I had already flown to Lankapuri.
13. 'They burn the **effigy** of Ravan on Dussehra and then drown him there.'
14. 'What happens during the rest of the year?'
15. 'Nothing.'
16. 'Does it lie vacant all the time?'

17. 'What do you think?'
18. I was not satisfied with this answer. It was very strange for me that a place like Lankapuri should remain vacant. At least they could leave some stuff belonging to Ravan there.
19. Manno took away the **puck** from my hand, saying, 'You have lost your turn by throwing the puck in the fourth house. As for me, the Nagin Tapu had **submerged**; only Lankapuri remained.
20. That night I dreamt that there is a school in Lankapuri where only Manno and I got to study.
21. Next morning, when we were on our way to the school, I told Manno that we must go to Lankapuri one day. The first time she absolutely refused on the **pretext** that it would involve a lot of walking. And that was quite true. One had to go around the lake in order to reach Lankapuri. And it was certainly no ordinary lake. It touched the two important landmarks of our town: the temple of Shivaji and the veterinary hospital. All the houses of the town could not cover the space which the lake occupied. Lankapuri was at the other end of the lake, but, seen from afar, it seemed right in the middle. On its two sides were some date trees and in the front one could see a stretch of sand.
22. At last, Manno was persuaded that one morning we would get out early and go up to Lankapuri. We did not **disclose** this plan to any one at home. There would certainly be problems if we had told them. Perhaps, they would have forbidden us to go. First of all, Lankapuri was so far off. Secondly, it was quite isolated. That week I looked at Lankapuri from my roof many times. I never saw anyone there. How could Manno and I be allowed to go where nobody ever went? Therefore, the best thing was not to talk about it at all.
23. I started practising getting up very early in the morning, but it didn't work for the first few days. By the time we reached the lakeshore, the sun would be up and so we would have to come back to get to school in time. Again next morning, my pulse would start beating fast as soon as I left the bed, but I would find, to my disappointment, that it was already too late to start. I would keep my eyes fixed on Lankapuri while I walked along the shore. The lake would come inside me and Lankapuri would be in front. I couldn't even hear the **splash** of the divers and the bells of the temple.
24. At last, one morning we found that we had the time to get to Lankapuri. We hit the road much before sunrise. There was a very faint light in the

east across the lake and it was difficult to see things **distinctly**. Above our heads were stars – stars that **peep**, not the ones that stay as if stitched in the night sky. There was a soft wind blowing which had a slight chill.

25. We made the end of the lake in record time. From there onwards we had to leave the road and get into the fields. My feet were in the air and the fields were slippery like wet soap. Manno was in front, walking **gingerly**. I was **hopping** like a bird, my steps hardly touching the ground. Immediately after we left the road I felt that I had arrived in a strange place. I had travelled in a train only once before. Otherwise I had never been out of my town. The jungle was for me a place seen in dreams. Rabbits **loitering** on soft, green grass and birds **chirping** on tall, thick trees. A village was like a picture in my third standard book: women drawing water from well, **groves**, people sitting under trees, tiny cottages and children on swings.
26. There. That is Lankapuri. The east was blazing red when we reached Lankapuri. There was sand all around and **desolation**; the voices on the shore seemed far, far away.
27. Lankapuri was like a very old house. There was moisture in the walls and plants **jutted** out of corners.
28. 'We have arrived,' Manno said as she put her foot on the first step.
29. 'Let us get in first,' I said and started to walk in.
30. 'Let us first rest a little.'
31. 'No, I want to go in first.'
32. 'No, I'm very tired.'
33. And Manno sat down on the steps. I didn't like her sitting down like that at all. I said with great anger in my voice: 'Keep sitting all day if you want.' I jumped two steps at a time and entered Lankapuri.
34. I saw that Lankapuri was totally **deserted**. There was nothing there except walls on all sides. Suddenly, I saw in the morning light that there was something **scribbled** on the walls. I went near the front wall and tired reading it. In big letters was **etched** the name 'Sushila' and after that were such words as I had seen behind the school wall, on the lake road and at several other places. Near the words was the picture of a girl and she had nothing on.
35. My glance **penetrated** the dark. I saw that the same words were written on all the other walls. As I went looking at them, my feet started getting

cold. My hands went into my pockets and I lost all sense of place. Still, I kept moving ahead till I reached the window and the sun suddenly **glared** in my eyes.

36. I recalled that Manno was sitting outside. I **tip-toed** to the steps where I found Manno dozing with her head on her knees. My hand reached for Manno's braids out of habit but stopped. I put it back in my pocket and started looking at the waves. A little later I felt like hitting her on the back, but this time my hand didn't even come out of my pocket. I resumed looking at the waves.
37. Suddenly I raised my head and I looked towards the shore. There was light all over the lake and **commotion** on the shore. I felt as though my head had a **fissure** and the tip of a knife was pointed straight at my eyes when I thought that the people bathing on the shore must be staring at Manno and me.

LET'S THINK AND DO

1. How do the narrator and Manno behave with each other? What does their behaviour signify? Is it common to all adolescents?
2. Do you have any friend with whom you can be as free and informal as the narrator used to be with Manno?
3. When the narrator comes out of Lankapuri, he becomes conscious of the people staring at him and Manno. What does he become conscious of? What makes him conscious?
4. At the end of the story the narrator feels a knife pointed straight at his eyes. What does this image signify?

