Pictures that come alive

Vikramaditya was a great king who ruled in India many years ago. His capital was the beautiful city of Ujjain which had broad streets and splendid buildings. King Vikramaditya himself had a magnificent palace with a very famous throne. It was said that the beautiful black marble throne with its carved figures helped him make wise judgments.

One day, in the month of Chaitra, king Vikramaditya was seated on his throne looking out at the semul trees which filled the sky with red blossoms. Just then two hermits came up to him with a dispute on a point of philosophy. The king pondered a while and then gave his opinion which, as usual, was full of knowledge and wisdom. This pleased the hermits very much. As a reward they gave him a piece of chalk saying that whatever he drew with it in the day would come alive at night. Then they left.

Needless to say, the king was happy with the gift. He immediately shut himself up in a room with high, blank walls and spent the whole day drawing pictures. He first drew pictures of Gods and Goddesses. He drew Siva and Parvati conversing on the icy peak of Kailash. He drew Indra’s shining heaven filled with devas and exquisite apsaras. He drew Kubera’s glittering palaces in Alkapuri. He drew Vishnu and Lakshmi in Vaikunta. Then he drew the sage Narada with his veena travelling through all the celestial worlds. At night all these figures came to life and spoke to him. The king was simply delighted.

The next day he drew armies and scenes of great battles with horses, elephants and camels. He drew mighty heroes on armour carrying colourful flags. These too came to life at night. Then he drew apsaras wearing tinkling anklets and gandharvas with veenas and lutes. When they came to life at night, the king was entranced by their music and dance. So it went on for weeks and weeks. By day the king drew all the beautiful, good and great things that he could think of and saw them come alive on his walls at night. He was so absorbed in creating and seeing beautiful pictures that he forgot about his duties and his queens. His ministers were worried, for matters of government cannot wait forever. They grumbled to the Prime Minister that decisions were not being taken and judgments were due. But the Prime Minister dared not disturb the king when he was enjoying himself so much. The queens were upset because they had not seen the king for days, but they didn’t know what to do.

Finally, one night, when they could not bear it any longer, the queens got into their silk- covered palanquins and rode up to the hall where the king was busy looking at his pictures. The king turned around at the sound of their bitter crying and asked, “Why are you so sad? Why are your beautiful faces shadowed and your lotus eyes so red?”

After a little hesitation the oldest queen waved at all the other queens and complained, “O mighty King, you promised to spend your life with us and never desert us. Yet, we haven’t seen you now for days. You have neglected not only us but your kingdom as well.” The king was so absorbed in the pictures on his walls that he did not really pay any attention. His queens waited for some time and then went away, disappointed.

The youngest queen, called Rooprekha, however, was not willing to leave it at that. She was cleverer and wiser than the rest and resolved to try again the next day. So the next morning, when the pictures were still, Rooprekha, who had sparkling eyes, tripped into the king’s room. The king was resting before starting his drawing again. Rooprekha spoke to him in a low and musical voice. “O King,” she said, “it is not right that you ignore us and all your subjects for the sake of these pictures.” The king opened his eyes and smiled. “What can I do for you then?” he asked. The queen lowered his eyes and said softly, “If you agree to grant me a boon, then give me the chalk that is in your hand.”

The king suddenly saw the wisdom of what she was saying. He realized that for a while he had lost his senses. He handed over the chalk to the young queen. She hid it away so that it could not be found ever again. The queens and the kingdom of Ujjain got back their wise king. And never since then have pictures come alive.