



**My
Lokayatika Mom**

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THIS STORY ISN'T REALLY ABOUT MY MOM. It's about me and Manik. My Mom was off in the jungle getting clay when it all happened. But none of it would have happened if my Mom hadn't been a Lokayatika.

Not everyone knows what a Lokayatika is, so I'll try to explain. It's complicated, so please pay attention.

First of all, not many Aryans are Lokayatikas. The Aryans are horse breeders who invaded our valley when my grandparents lived in the city of Mohan. Most people in Mohan were farmers, but not my grandparents. They were potters. The Aryans conquered Mohan. They started collecting taxes from the farmers. But my grandparents escaped and settled in a village called Palod - near the jungle where the Nakas live.

The Nakas liked the pots my grandparents made. So the Nakas protected my grandparents from the Aryans. The Aryans stayed away from Palod because the Nakas are good fighters. And Aryan war chariots are too big to go on jungle trails.

My Aunt Kamita married a Naka named Namir. He taught me and my Mom to ride elephants. It's lots of fun.

Some of the Aryans settled in a village called Revati - near Palod. They were angry because they couldn't conquer Palod. But they still wanted my grandparents' pots. So sometimes Aryans would visit Palod to trade gem-stone beads and salted meat for pots. They traded with the Nakas, too - spices and herbs for beads and salted meat.

My Dad, Charvaka, was one of the Aryans who visited Palod. That's how he met my Mom. After they got married he left Revati and came to live in Palod with my Mom. I was their only child. They named me Nagina. It means 'jewel'.

My grandparents and my Mom taught Dad how to make pots. Dad taught me and my Mom archery. My Mom is very strong. Her arrows never miss.

Dad said that he hated living in Revati. Some of the men there are priests who call themselves Brahmins. They say that men are better than women and that Aryans are better than Nakas. In Revati, the Brahmins boss everybody around.

The Brahmins have an idea called caste. Families who do the same kind of work make up a

caste. The Brahmins say that some castes are better than others. The Warrior caste is supposed to be better than that Trader caste. The Trader caste is supposed to be better than the Farmer caste. The slaves don't have a caste. And the Brahmins say that their own caste - the Priests - is better than all the other castes.

The Brahmins say that no one should marry outside their caste. That's why they hated my Dad so much. Because he was a Brahmin who married my Mom. She isn't from a Brahmin family and she isn't an Aryan. The Brahmins were afraid that other people would marry outside their castes, just like my Dad.

The Brahmins say that there are parts of people called souls that keep on living after people die. The souls of dead people supposedly pass into the bodies of newborn creatures. If a woman from the Farmer caste obeyed the Brahmins, her soul might pass into a baby Brahmin. If she didn't obey the Brahmins, her soul might pass into something bad, like a baby cockroach.

My Dad thought that the Brahmins were wrong about everything. He didn't think that men were better than women. He didn't think that Aryans were better than Nakas. He didn't think that there are souls that keep on living after people die. He didn't think that there should be castes. He thought people should be able to marry whomever they like. And he didn't think that people should let Brahmins boss them around.

A lot of people liked my Dad's ideas. Sometimes people came to Palod, not just to trade for pots and spices, but to hear my Dad talk. Dad's ideas became so popular that people gave them a name - Lokayata. It means ideas for ordinary people - not for Brahmins. People who agree with Lokayata ideas are called Lokayatikas.

My Dad died last year after he was bitten by a krait. A krait is a snake that's really poisonous. I hate snakes now - especially kraits and cobras.

My Mom and I really miss my Dad. We think about his ideas a lot. Mom still explains Lokayata to people who come to trade at Palod. A lot of people come to hear her, just like they came to hear my Dad. She's a really good Lokayatika.

The Brahmins hate Lokayata. But they came to Palod for pots and spices anyway. That's how

I met Manik. He was standing behind Manu on an Aryan chariot. Manu is the most powerful Brahmin in Revati. He has a big, black beard, long black hair, and dark eyes. He wears a big, gold armband that gleams in the sun. Manik looked very small beside him. There was another chariot driven by an Aryan warrior. He carried a bow and a big spear. He was as big as Manu. A slave drove a donkey cart loaded with beads and salted meat. A trader called, Tarak, sat on a big chair at the back of the cart.

The Nakas hadn't come to Palod to trade that day.

My Mom and I had put our pots in the shade of a big tree in front of our house. Manu and the warrior watched from their chariots as the slave carried the beads and the meat from the cart. Manik started to help, but Manu shouted at him to stop. Manik frowned, then went to stand beside the tree.

After the meat and beads were unloaded, Tarak got out of the cart and walked over to my Mom. He said that if Mom would give him all our pots, he'd give her all of the beads and half of the meat. My Mom said no.

While Mom and Tarak bargained, I walked over to Manik.

"Hi, I'm Nagina."

"I'm Manik. Your pots are beautiful."

He wore a thin, white shirt and loose white trousers, like Manu. His eyes and hair were dark, like Manu's.

"Your father, Charvaka, was part of my family," Manik said. "I liked him. I'm sorry he died."

"Thanks," I said. "Would you like to see where we make our pots?"

"Yes."

Manik looked about fourteen. Two years older than me. He had a nice smile. Manu never smiled.

I led Manik to the back of our house and showed him our potters wheel and the kiln where our pots are fired. He was really interested.

Manik walked over to a pile of pots that we'd taken out of the kiln the night before. I was about to tell him not to touch them, but he'd already picked one up. A cobra reared up in front of Manik and opened its hood.

Without thinking, I picked up a small pot and threw it as hard as I could at the cobra. The pot hit the cobra's head and the snake quickly wriggled away.

Cobras are very tough.

Manik looked at me and smiled. Then we heard shouting from the front of the house. We ran to see what was happening.

My Mom was speaking firmly to the trader, Tarak.

"If you don't want to give us all your meat and all your beads for our pots, then you can put your meat, your beads, and yourself back on your cart and have your slave drive you back to Revati."

Tarak was very angry. He looked at Manu and pointed at my Mom.

"This woman, Kokila, is showing us disrespect," Tarak said.

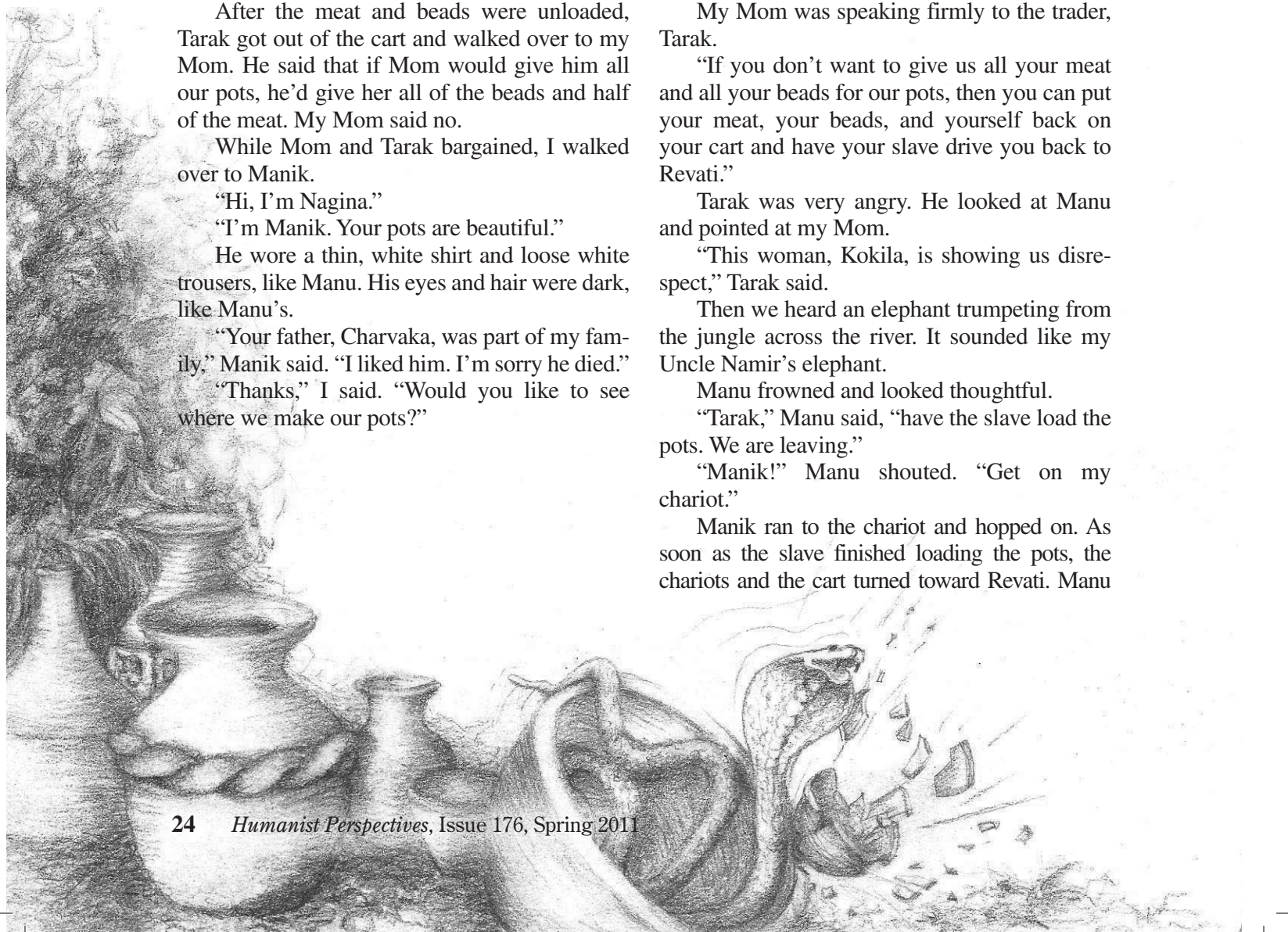
Then we heard an elephant trumpeting from the jungle across the river. It sounded like my Uncle Namir's elephant.

Manu frowned and looked thoughtful.

"Tarak," Manu said, "have the slave load the pots. We are leaving."

"Manik!" Manu shouted. "Get on my chariot."

Manik ran to the chariot and hopped on. As soon as the slave finished loading the pots, the chariots and the cart turned toward Revati. Manu



whipped the horses. Manik turned and waved at me.

My Mom got all the beads and all the meat.

Eight months later, Manik came to Palod again with Manu, Tarak, the slave, and the warrior.

Again, the Nakas didn't show up to trade.

Manik ran over to me as soon as Manu's chariot stopped.

"Hi, Nagina," he said. "I never got a chance to thank you for hitting that cobra. I think you saved my life."

"I'm glad that you didn't get bitten," I said. "Cobras like to stay warm by wrapping themselves around the pots that have come out of the kiln."

"I didn't know," said Manik.

"You couldn't have. I should have warned you," I replied.

"Would you show me around Palod?" Manik asked.

"Sure. There's not much to see."

I showed him the blacksmith's house, the carpenter's house, the woodcutter's house, the sandal maker's house, and the brick maker's house. Farmers live in the other houses. They keep gardens by the river.

We walked to the back of my house and I got water for us. We sat on the ground, far away from the pots cooling near the kiln.

"Why does Manu bring you to Palod?" I asked. "You're not from the trader caste."

Manik didn't answer right away. When he did, he looked away from me and sounded nervous.

"I don't know why Manu brings me here," he said.

We heard my Mom bargaining with Tarak and we smiled at each other. Then Manik asked me tell him about Lokayata.

I talked for awhile about Lokayata. After I finished, I asked Manik whether he thought he was better than me because he was a Brahmin.

"No," he said. "I'm not better than you. Your father, Charvaka, was a Brahmin, too."

"But my Mom, Kokila, isn't from a Brahmin family. She isn't even an Aryan."

Manik looked embarrassed and didn't say anything.

After awhile, Manik asked, "You really don't believe that you have a soul, Nagina?"

"No," I replied. "I can't see a soul. I can't touch it. I can't taste it."

"But you can't see, touch, or taste love," Manik said. "And you loved your father."

"I still do. I can feel my love for him. But I can't feel a soul."

"But what would happen if everyone didn't believe in souls?" Manik asked. "A warrior must be brave in battle and not run away from the enemy. If he believes that by being brave his soul will someday pass into a newborn Brahmin, then he will be brave. If he believes that running away from the enemy will mean that his soul will someday pass into the body of a newborn rat, then he won't run away. If people didn't believe that their souls will live on after death in good or bad creatures, then people wouldn't behave properly."

I'd never heard Manik say so much.

Then it was my turn. I can make long speeches, too.

"Lots of people are afraid their souls will pass into bad creatures after death if they don't obey the Brahmins. If people realize that there are no souls, perhaps they'll stop obeying the Brahmins. But people will still know right from wrong. Even though I don't have a soul, I still know that I did the right thing when I saved you from the cobra."

Manik didn't say anything. He was thinking. Then Manu called him and they went back to Revati.

My Mom got all the beads and all the meat again. She gave most of the meat to my uncle Namir and my aunt Kamita. They shared it with the other Nakas.

Two weeks after Manik left, my Mom went into the jungle with some Nakas to get clay for us to make pots. My aunt Kamita and uncle Namir came to stay with me in Palod. They brought two elephants. When we weren't riding them, the elephants liked to doze under the tree in front of our house.

I had just gotten out of bed one morning when I heard one of the elephants trumpet. What had bothered him? I looked out the door and saw Manik driving up in a chariot. He'd been driving fast and the horses were sweaty and tired. So was Manik.

Manik reined in the horses, jumped out of the chariot, and ran to me.

"Manu and the warriors are coming," he said. "You must go to the jungle to escape."

"I don't understand," I said. "Aren't Manu and the warriors afraid of the Nakas?"

"They're especially afraid of the Nakas' elephants," Manik said. "But Manu had his slaves build wood towers and the warriors are bringing them to Palod. The warriors will be able to shoot arrows at the Nakas' elephants from the tops of the towers."

Aunt Kamita and uncle Namir were up now. They were listening to Manik.

"You must hurry to the jungle," Manik said. "The warriors will be here soon. Manu has told them to kill all the men in Palod and to enslave the women and children."

"Why should we believe you, Manik?" my uncle asked. "Maybe Manu told you to make us leave so he can take over Palod without a fight."

"I'm not lying," Manik shouted. "I don't want Nagina to be enslaved!"

By this time, all the villagers had gathered in front of our house and were listening.

"I don't think that Manik is lying," I said. "If he's lying, he won't go with us to the jungle.

He'll try to stay here and wait for Manu. If he's telling the truth, he'll come with us."

"I want to go with you," Manik said. "Please, let's go now!" He sounded desperate.

I helped Namir and Kamita put howdahs on the elephants. Howdahs are platforms that can be strapped to the elephants' backs. Most of the women and children were able to ride in the howdahs. The rest of us walked. It wasn't far to the jungle. We followed the elephants across the river to the Naka village.

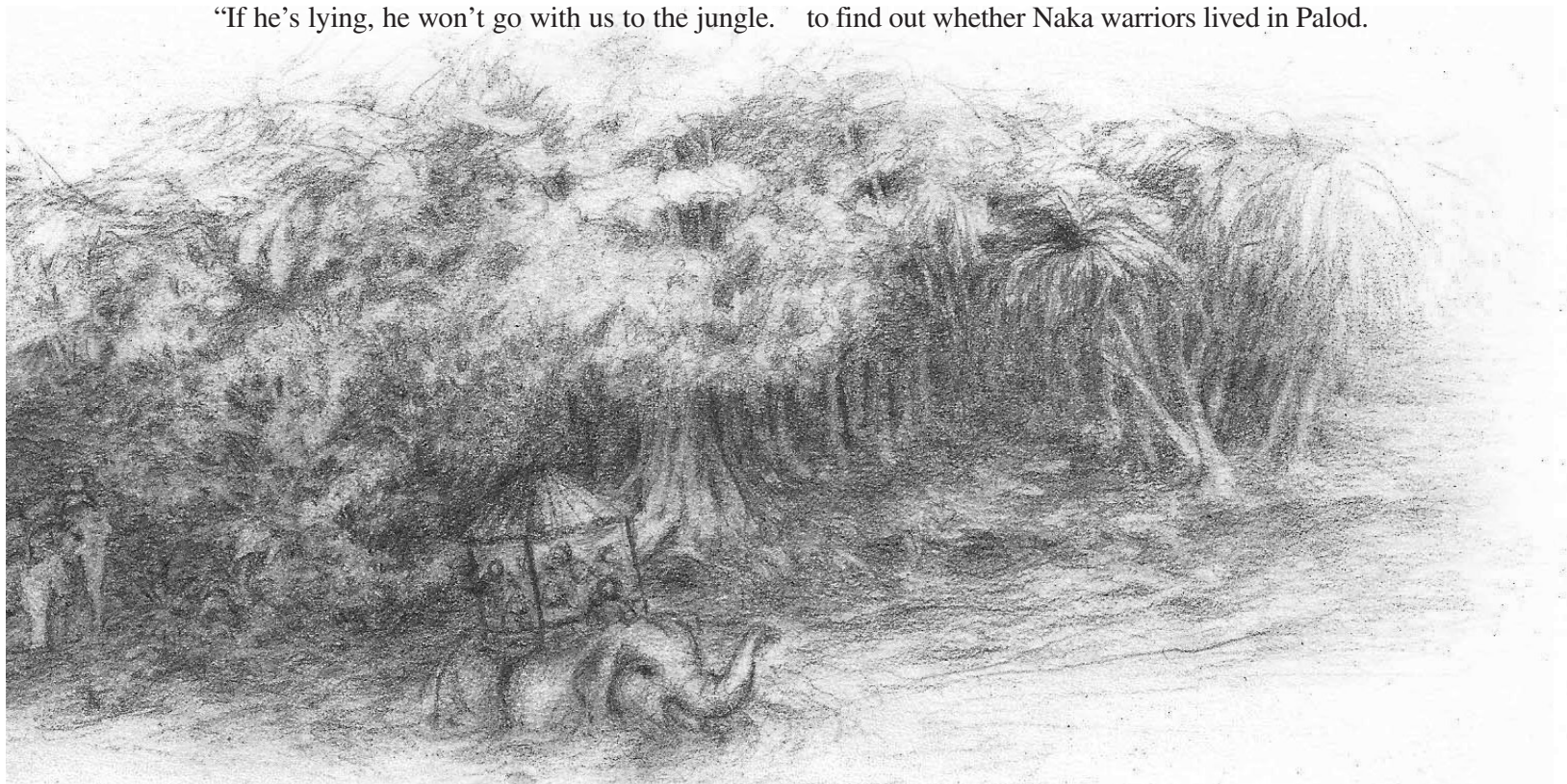
While the Nakas showed the villagers where to sleep, to wash, and to relieve themselves, I went with Manik, aunt Kamita, uncle Namir, and some Naka warriors to the river bank. Namir climbed a big tree so that he could see across the river to Palod. After a few minutes, he came down.

"Manu and his warriors are there," Namir said. "They've put up towers, just as Manik said they would."

Namir looked at Manik and said, "I'm sorry that I doubted you, Manik. You saved us."

Manik didn't say anything for a moment. He frowned. Then he spoke.

"I am ashamed. Manu brought me to Palod to spy. He told me to make friends with Nagina and to find out whether Naka warriors lived in Palod.



After Nagina showed me around Palod, I knew the Nakas didn't live there. I told Manu and he decided to attack."

"You shouldn't be ashamed," aunt Kamita said. "You saved us."

Manik looked at my aunt and smiled. Then he spoke again.

"Manu told me that my soul was impure because I was from the family of Nagina's father, Charvaka. Manu said Charvaka was a traitor and a renegade. Manu said that if I spied on Palod it would make my soul pure again. I believed him until Nagina told me about Lokayata."

Manik turned to me and said, "you saved me from the cobra. Was I to repay you by helping Manu to make you a slave?"

"Thank you," I said. "You are a friend."

On the way back to the Naka village I tried to figure out a way to make Manu and his warriors leave Palod.

At night, the Nakas sat around a fire and made plans. I sat between aunt Kamita and uncle Namir. After awhile, I put up my hand to speak.

"I've got an idea about how to drive Manu and the warriors from Palod," I said. "Can I tell you about it?" They said I could.

After a lot of discussion the Nakas decided

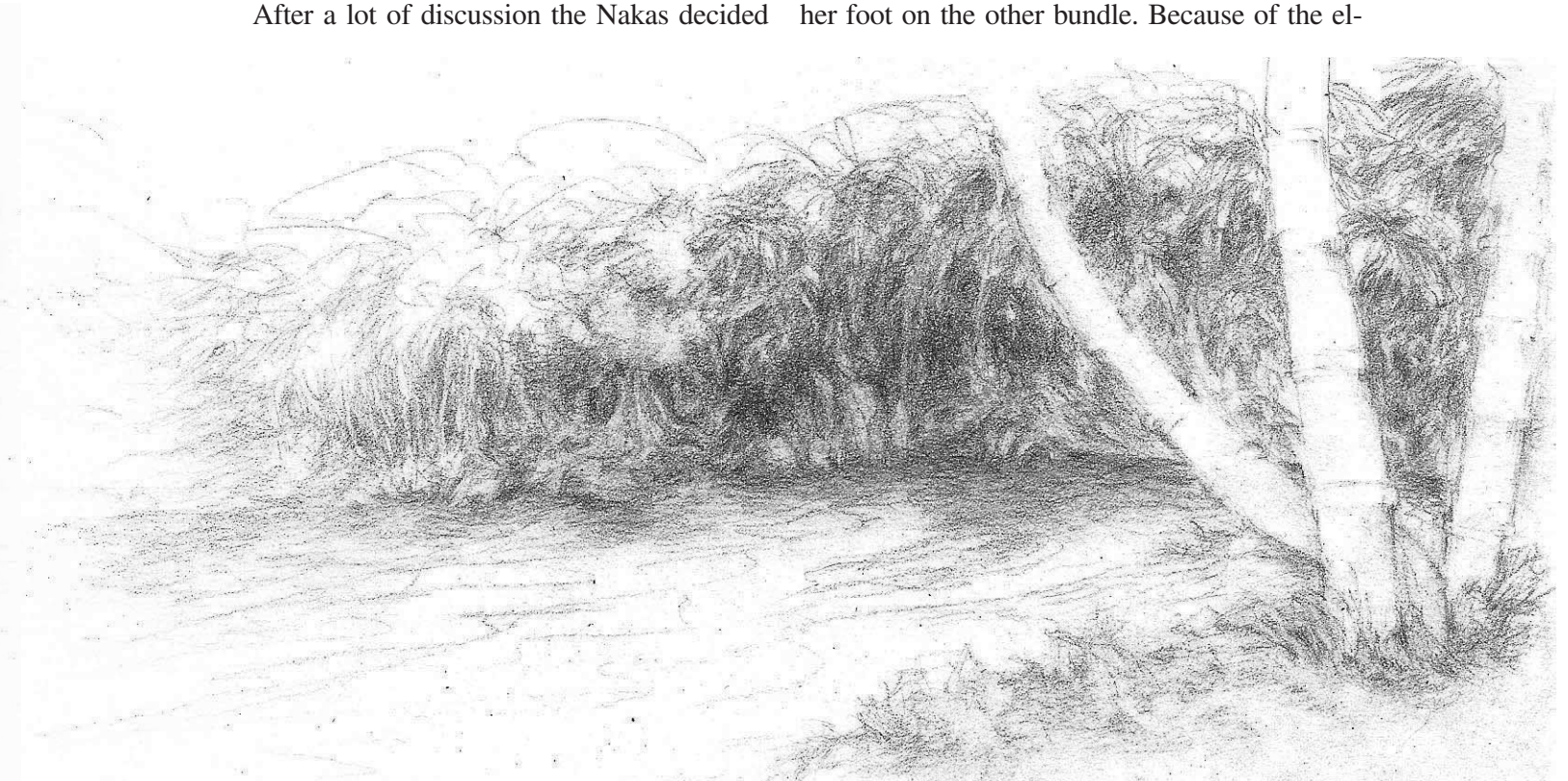
to try my idea.

The next morning, uncle Namir, Manik, and some of the Naka warriors cut lengths of bamboo and tied them into two big bundles. Aunt Kamita and I and some of the Naka women cut two long, springy pieces of bamboo. We braided some vines into cords and gathered some coconuts. Namir and Manik helped us load the bamboo bundles, the cord, the springy bamboo pieces, and the coconuts onto elephants. Some Naka women joined us with some of the pots that my Mom and I had made.

We all followed Namir and the elephants to the river bank where Namir had climbed the tree. Namir and Naka warriors cut down some of the bushes so we had a clear view of Palod. There were three wooden towers at the edges of the village. After awhile, the warriors on the towers saw us and started shooting arrows at us. The arrows fell short. Then the warriors started shouting.

"Hey, Nakas! Bring on your elephants. We'll kill them!"

We got to work. The men put the two bundles of bamboo on the ground, about two man-lengths apart. Namir had one of the elephants put her foot on a bundle. Then he had another elephant put her foot on the other bundle. Because of the el-



elephants' weight, the bundles couldn't move. We stuck a long, springy piece of bamboo upright into each bundle. We bent the springy pieces back and tied the end of the cord to the top of one of the springy pieces. We tied the other end of the cord to the top of the other springy piece. I tied a small basket to the middle of the cord.

We had made a big slingshot. Uncle Namir called it a catapult. Anyway, it was ready. I put a coconut in the basket. Uncle Namir, aunt Kamita, Manik, and five Naka warriors were the catapult crew. They pulled the cord back until the bamboo poles were bent way back. I knelt down behind the basket and estimated how the coconut would fly toward the nearest tower. I pulled the basket down a bit and raised my hand. On my signal, the crew released the cord. The bamboo poles sprang upright. The coconut soared through the air and landed near the tower.

The next coconut hit the top of the tower. The warriors there laughed and shouted,

"Thanks for sending us food!"

Then the Naka women put a pot into the catapult basket. The pot's lid was tied on tight with twine.

We shot the pot at the tower. My aim was good. The pot burst on top of the tower, releasing the kraits and cobras that had been trapped inside.

The warriors on the tower stopped laughing and started screaming. Two of them fell from the tower.

Manik looked sad. He'd known the dead warriors when he lived in Revati.

We shot more coconuts at the next tower, then another snake pot. The Aryan warriors were terrified. They started running toward Revati. Some of them rode on the donkeys that had pulled the towers to Palod. Manu yelled at the warriors to stay and fight, but they kept running. Soon, Manu was all alone. He looked in our direction and shook his fist. Then he turned his chariot toward Revati and followed the running warriors.

We danced around and hugged each other. We were especially grateful to the Naka women who had caught the poisonous snakes and put them into pots for the catapult.

We took apart the catapult, loaded it on the elephants, and returned to the Naka village. I

thanked the Nakas for their help and friendship and promised that my Mom and I would give them lots of nice pots.

Then the women and children of Palod got back on the elephants' howdahs. Uncle Namir and aunt Kamita led the elephants back across the river. I followed them with Manik and the other villagers. They were arguing about what to do with the towers. Most of the villagers wanted to use them to watch for another attack. The woodcutter wanted to use the towers for firewood.

Our house was a mess. Uncle Namir, aunt Kamita, and Manik helped me clean it up.

Toward evening, Mom arrived. She was leading an elephant loaded with clay. She ran to me and gave me a hug. Then she asked a lot of questions.

"Nagina, are you all right? What's been happening? Why is Manik here? Why are those towers here? Why are there potsherd and coconuts everywhere? Why are there so many snakes around?"

Aunt Kamita laughed and said, "Sit down, Kokila. A lot has happened while you were gone. Nagina will tell you about it.

"Let's unload the clay first," my Mom said. We helped her. Then we sat down. Aunt Kamita gave us cups of herb tea. I told Mom about Manik's warning, our escape to the Nakas, and the catapult.

After I finished, my Mom looked at me and smiled. "You've done well, Nagina," she said. "Your father would have been proud of you."

Then my Mom turned to Manik. "Thank you for saving Nagina and the people of Palod," she said. "You shall live with us now."

"Thank you, Kokila," Manik said. "I'd really like to live here. Especially if you and Nagina teach me how to make pots - and about Lokayata.

The End.

Dennis Bartels is a retired anthropologist who is interested in the cultural contexts in which ancient materialism arose. He has also written stories about ancient materialism in India and China.

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