

## THE GATES OF HEAVEN

AT THE BACK OF THE STAGE IS A LARGE PLATFORM WITH STEPS LEADING UP TO IT. BEHIND THE PLATFORM ARE TWO LARGE DOORS THAT LEAD INTO THE BEYOND. IN FRONT OF THE PLATFORM, NEAR THE STAGE IS A TABLE AND TWO CHAIRS. THERE IS A MODERN GADGET ON THE TABLE WHICH LOOKS SUSPICIOUSLY LIKE A COMPUTER. A GENTLEMAN DRESSED IN A DHOTI, CLOSED COAT AND TURBAN IS SEATED ON A CHAIR, LOOKING SOMEWHAT MYSTIFIED AT THE GADGET IN FRONT OF HIM. THERE ARE CLOUDS AND MIST EVERYWHERE WHICH CLEARS AS THE PLAY OPENS. SIVARAMAKRISHNA SASTHRI AND MERCHANT MANIKKAM COME ACROSS EACH OTHER IN FRONT OF THE PLATFORM.

SASTHRI: Where am I? What am I doing here? It is all dark and misty. I feel as if I am floating on air. Only two minutes ago, I lay down because of a stomach upset. The feast at merchant Manikkam's funeral must have disagreed with me. My wife went into the kitchen to prepare some stomach mixture. But the pain became terrible. I cried out many times for her to come, but she did not seem to hear me. Now there is no pain; but where has my wife gone? I bet she is gossiping next door about my weakness for feasts! And why is it misty on a bright afternoon?

MANIKKAM: Is that you Swami? Just before I died, I gave you many gifts, godhan, boodhan, swarnadhan, and so on. But you had no luck to enjoy them all and have followed me so soon.

SASTHRI: Who is that? Merchant Manikkam, is it? It means I must also be dead I suppose. It is your funeral feast that did it with all the adulterated stuff you used to pass on to your customers.

MANIKKAM: Don't worry Swami. How many times have you told me that Eternity in heaven was any day preferable to the ocean of domestic misery on Earth? I have merely accelerated your wish a little perhaps.

SASTHRI: Yes, you are right; I must be dead. Even when I pinch myself hard, I feel no pain. But where are we? Is this heaven or ..... the other place? I don't understand.

MANIKKAM: I don't care where it is! So long as my wife isn't here, it is like heaven to me. But you are a clever man Swami. You told me about all kinds of punishments for my sins in hell and took so much money off me. But here, it is nothing like what you said. (HE NOTICES CHITRA GUPTA) You see that man sitting there? He seems to be in charge here. Let's go and ask him. Come on.

(THE TWO OF THEM GO TOWARDS CHITRA GUPTA AS THE MIST CLEARS)

CHITRA GUPTA: What is your name?

MANIKKAM: Please tell us who you are first. One of the principles I have always followed in life is, never to do business with anyone without knowing his antecedents.

CHITRA GUPTA: Who do I look like?

MANIKKAM: You could have been an elementary school teacher when I went to school some fifty years ago, or a collector's office clerk perhaps. But now-a-days, even they have long side burns and bell bottom trousers sweeping the office floor. So, I don't know who you are. Are you also waiting for service like we are?

CHITRA GUPTA: I keep accounts here.

SASTHRI: Ah! Chitra Guptan! My prayers, My Lord! (HE RAISES HIS HANDS IN SALUTATION)

MANIKKAM: But where are your account books? You should have a day book, a ledger, and duplicates for income tax and sales tax.

CHITRA GUPTA: I used to, though not for income tax or sales tax, since we were not called upon to pay any of those. But now, this machine does everything. When the population of the Earth broke the five billion barriers, it was decided by the higher authorities that our accounts should be computerized. It is a bit confusing at first but it has more than five billion memories....."

MANIKKAM: Does it use fortron or some other language?

CHITRA GUPTA: I have really no idea. But some Japanese technicians have installed it and they assure me that it is fool-proof. All I have to do is to press these buttons and information about any individual is at my finger tips.

MANIKKAM: What is the use of paying for an expensive computer like this and still keeping you in employment? Have your higher authorities no sense at all?

CHITRA GUPTA: (SMILES) There are so many protestors and dissidents coming now-a-days. So, I have been retained to do a public relations job.

MANIKKAM: (THOUGHTFUL) Alright. My name is Manikkam. I am ..... or rather was, the owner of a chain of shops selling general merchandise until I was transferred here. I can assure you that I was known throughout the town for my honesty and integrity. Even when I did any adulteration, only pure ingredients were used, as this Swami here will testify. Now, tell me Mr.....Mr..... I didn't get your name.

CHITRA GUPTA: My name is Chitra Gupta.

MANIKKAM: Oh, that is who you are! Of course I have heard about you. In fact, I have always taken you as a model for all accounting purposes. I have also been told you are open to..... persuasion. If so, I am the right man for you and Manikkam has never let anyone down, in this world or the next. But tell me, where are we? Is this Heaven or Hell?

SASTHRI: Sir, I am Sivaramakrishna Sasthri, a temple priest. I am well versed in all the Vedas, puranas and agamas and entitled to conduct all ceremonies according to our ancient traditions. In fact, every year, I conducted a Yaga to the rain God for a bountiful monsoon.

MANIKKAM: That is why we have had a drought for so many years.

SASTHRI: (IGNORING HIM) If you are here to receive us, it must be Kailas, the abode of Siva, or the milky Sea, the abode of Vishnu, or perhaps, the world of the Devas.....

CHITRA GUPTA: Look, I have no time for answering all your questions. What with so many wars, revolutions and terrorist activities going on, it is difficult even for a computer to keep pace. Just climb those steps and go through those doors and everything will be clear to you.

MANIKKAM: Sir, how can you brush us aside like that? It is not good public relations, is it? As I understand it, P.R. consists in telling something to your clients, even if it means nothing. (HE TURNS TO THE PRIEST) Swami, all those homams and yagas you

made me perform and the money you got from me seems to have got me nowhere. The only consolation is, you are in the same boat with me. At least, if I had prayed to this gentleman, it might have been more use.

SASTHRI: (IGNORING MANIKKAM) My Lord, you must pardon me for all my sins committed knowingly or unknowingly. You must forget them all and arrange for me to enter HEAVEN. (HE FALLS AT HIS FEET)

CHITRA GUPTA: You don't understand. I no longer keep accounts. The computer does it all now. And a computer never tells a lie. Ask your friend; he knows.

MANIKKAM: Yes, when the sales tax people raided me, they pressed a button on the computer and all was revealed!

CHITRA GUPTA: Therefore, please go up those steps and through those doors and they will take you wherever you wish to go.

(DORAISWAMY ENTERS)

DORAISWAMY: Are you in charge here?

CHITRA GUPTA: Yes, what is your name?

DORAISWAMY: Good heavens! This will be the death of me!

CHITRA GUPTA: Exactly! Now you know why you are here.

DORAISWAMY: Am I really dead?

CHITRA GUPTA: That is how your present status will be described on Earth.

How is it then that I am still alive? There is obviously some deception. Look here, I don't know who you are, but I do know there is nothing after death. Nothing! I have proved beyond any shadow of doubt, through scientific, objective methods that there is no Heaven and no Hell. You yourself should know that there is no such thing as a God.

CHITRA GUPTA: There may be a lot of truth in what you saying, but who are we two against a whole lot of believers? Besides, I have to earn my living.

DORAISWAMY: (RUBS HIS EYES) No! It is not true; it cannot be true. I am dreaming.  
How can I come to a Heaven that I have denied all my life with my heart and soul?

MANIKKAM: Perhaps you are destined for the other place.

DORAISWAMY: Don't be silly! If I go anywhere at all it will only be to Heaven. But this is surely some trickery of the orthodoxy. I will not believe it!

CHITRA GUPTA: Why don't you go up those steps and you will know the truth.

DORAISWAMY: I will not go up or down any steps!

MANIKKAM: Staying on level ground is difficult enough these days.

DORAISWAMY: Everyone knows that there is no such place as Heaven! But I demand that you answer all my questions!

CHITRA GUPTA: I have no time for it now. And even if I explain, you will not understand.

DORAISWAMY: Then I will not go! I want to know the Ultimate Truth!

CHITRA GUPTA: Alright, please wait.

(DORAISWAMY OCCUPIES THE ONLY OTHER CHAIR AVAILABLE)

SASTHRI: I knew it: I guessed it! This must be Hell. Otherwise, how can unbelievers come here?

MANIKKAM: But there is justice in what this gentleman is asking. Let us also wait and see.  
After all, Eternity is a very long time.

(NEELAMBAL, A PROSTITUTE COME IN)

CHITRA GUPTA: What is your name Amma?

NEELAMBAL: My name is Neelambal; but everyone knew me as Neela. My profession was..... pleasing men in their moments of need. But I never cheated or pretended to be what I was not; always gave value for money. My Men went away happy and came again often. I made no distinction on the basis of status, caste or religion; totally secular. But the men called me names just the same. Is this place Heaven?

CHITRA GUPTA: If you go up those steps, you will find out.

NEELAMBAL: What beauty! Divinity! What brightness and ecstasy! This was what I had always dreamed! I did not think I would attain the lotus feet of the Lord so easily!

DORAISWAMY: All lies! Lies! (HE TURNS TO NEELAMBAL) Don't believe all this trickery and hypocrisy of the orthodox! (HE TURNS TO CHITRA GUPTA) Look here, if all your religious texts are true, how can this woman come to Heaven? She who had sold her body to every man who had money to pay, how can she enter the place reserved for great souls and benefactors of Mankind?

CHITRA GUPTA: She has told you already; she gave value for money, without adulteration and without black marketing, which is more than can be said of some people. (HE LOOKS AT MANIKKAM AND SASTHRI: THEY TURN AWAY) But why should we follow the distinctions and prejudices of the Earth you have left behind? Neelambal has seen and experienced Hell even while she was on Earth. (HE TURNS TO NEELAMBAL) You can go up those steps now.

NEELAMBAL: I am afraid to go alone. If someone could go with me.....

(SHE LOOKS ROUND DESPERATELY BUT NO ONE LOOKS IN HER DIRECTION)

CHITRA GUPTA: Alright; please wait. If someone you know comes along, you can go with him.

NEELAMBAL: Many people know me intimately, but they wouldn't recognise me in public, not even in Heaven.

(SHE LOOKS POINTEDLY AT MANIKKAM AND SASTHRI BUT THEY TURN AWAY IN EMBARRASSMENT SUNDERAM, A MAN ABOUT TOWN, ENTERS)

SUNDERAM: Is this where one buys tickets to get into Heaven?

DORAISWAMY: The whole thing is deceit, deception and degradation of the freedom of Man. Don't fall into the trap.

SUNDERAM: Please do not interfere sir. It is difficult enough for me to enter Heaven without your obstruction. This gentleman looks as if he is in charge. (TO CHITRA GUPTA) Sir, Is this the way to Heaven?

CHITRA GUPTA: Please go up those steps and through the doors.

SUNDERAM: Really?

CHITRA GUPTA: Yes.

SUNDERAM: I mean, I never dreamt I would get into Heaven.

CHITRA GUPTA: Ninety three point four two percent of the people who come here think like you do. The computer has said so.

SUNDERAM: I cannot say that my behavior on Earth has been particularly exemplary. I lost all the money my father left me on drink and women. And I have been living on my wits ever since. Somehow, I managed to be happy so long as I lived and I have never thought ill of anyone else. Isn't that the most important thing?

CHITRA GUPTA: Right, you can go now.

SUNDERAM: I say, I hope you won't lose your job or anything like that because of sending me to Heaven. If so, please tell me. I don't mind in the least going to the..... other place. Perhaps, many of my friends will be there.

CHITRA GUPTA: You will find your friends in both places.

DORAISWAMY: Stop! Stop! Somebody is trying to fool us all. Let us find out what it is before we commit ourselves.

SUNDERAM: Let go of me sir! I have heard of picketing the foreign cloth shops and toddy shops in the old days and even government offices now-a-days. But whoever heard of picketing at the gates of Heaven? (HE TURNS ROUND AND NOTICES NEELAMBAL) Is that Neela? How nice to meet you here! When did you come? O.K. I will stay with you for a little while and see what happens.

(SARALA COME IN)

CHITRA GUPTA: What is your name please?

SARALA: I am Sarala. You may be surprised to see me. You see, I have come on a sudden impulse, without telling anyone.

SUNDERAM: Why did you do that? What was the hurry child?

SARALA: When your heart's desires are not fulfilled, what is the use of living? I loved one man dearly. But Society saw to it that our love was doomed. When I could not bear the pain in my heart and when there was no peace for my soul, I went to bathe in the river and let myself be carried away.

SUNDERAM: Poor girl! If there had been one woman who was willing to give up her life for my sake, I would have been a better man.

CHITRA GUPTA: Please go up those steps and through the doors.

SARALA: Before I go, you must answer one question that is important to me. Will He follow me soon?

CHITRA GUPTA: We cannot give information about such things.

SARALA: Will He come to where I am going?

CHITRA GUPTA: We cannot tell you that either.

DORAISWAMY: What he means is, he doesn't know.

SUNDERAM: I say, that is rather tough. Is there no pity in Heaven?

SARALA: Why do you make us suffer so much when we are on Earth?

DORAISWAMY: Good question! Come on man, answer the poor girl.

CHITRA GUPTA: Did you suffer a lot?

SARALA: Yes, I had enough suffering for my twenty short years. But it is over. Therefore, I am not asking for myself. I am asking on behalf of everyone else. Why are there wars, famines, conflicts, tragedies and hatred on Earth? Why should Mankind be made to suffer? And what is to be the end of all this?

DORAISWAMY: Look here Mister! You are here before us as the so-called God's representative. And this girl is here representing suffering Humanity. She has raised

some very pertinent questions. Either you should give satisfactory answers or admit that all this is a whole lot of hocus-pocus.

CHITRA GUPTA: What can I say to you? How can I satisfy you? Even after death, you have not given up your human weaknesses, your prejudices and your bonds and desires; Heaven, hell, sin, sacrifice, idealism, pity, avarice, and a hundred other things. They have all been created out of your own ingenuity and now you want me to be responsible for them. You want me to say if they are true or false. How can I? How can I explain to you the basis of the Universe and the Ultimate Truth when you are still bound down to the Earth? How can mere human knowledge grasp eternal wisdom?

DORAISWAMY: There you are! You admit that they are all lies then?

CHITRA GUPTA: Truth and Falsehood, illusion and reality do you know the real meaning of those words? Who am I? Am I really here? Or, am I also a mere fiction in your fertile imagination?

SARALA: I do not want to know about the Universe or the Eternal Truth. All I am asking is, Is there no way out for suffering Humanity?

CHITRA GUPTA: Only if you are able to grasp the Eternal Truth, you will know the cause of your suffering and its cure. You have all done what little you can in that direction. It is for others to carry on now.

DORAISWAMY: It means, you are yourself a lie; an illusion in our minds.

CHITRA GUPTA: I am nothing more or less than the conscience that evaluates your life. I am not outside you. Ultimately, you and I are one.

SARALA: Does it mean that this is the end? That there is no eternal life for us when we pass through those gates?

CHITRA GUPTA: You are all sparks from a flame. You may glow, flicker and die. But the flame that gave you birth is eternal.

DORAISWAMY: All this only proves that what I have been saying so far is right. I will not go up those steps until I find out the so-called eternal truth.

CHITRA GUPTA: You will not learn to swim until you jump into the water. Now, you can all go up those steps; your time is over.

(EVERYONE WALKS UP THE STEPS. SARALA KEEPS LOOKING AT DORAISWAMY WHO DOESN'T MOVE. THE DOORS OPEN AND THEY DISAPPEAR. ONLY CHITRA GUPTA AND DORAISWAMY ARE LEFT BEHIND)

CHITRA GUPTA: I regret to inform you that you have reached Heaven.

DORAISWAMY: How is that possible? I have not climbed those steps!

CHITRA GUPTA: Climbing those steps merely represents a state of mind. It is purely metaphorical.

DORAISWAMY: No! No! You can't fool me like that! I shall not go to a Heaven that I know does not exist. So long as there is blind superstition clouding the minds of men, so long as there is poverty, disease, hatred and injustice, I shall go on fighting....

CHITRA GUPTA: Now, you are really in Heaven.

DORAISWAMY: If so, even here, I shall raise the banner of revolt, I shall unite all Mankind for the last and final onslaught on prejudice and blind faith! I shall not rest content until victory is won. We shall inherit Heaven as we have inherited the Earth.... What can you; a few celestial beings do against the vast majority who will follow me.....

CHITRA GUPTA: Mr. Doraiswamy, I should like to remind you that the Kingdom of God is not a democracy. God does not have to stand for an election every five years.

(CURTAIN)

