**Hayavadana: a summary of Act I**

The play opens on a near-empty stage with one character and a group of musicians. The character is Bhagavata, the leader of the singers and the storyteller who acts as narrator and chorus through the play(the Sutradhara of traditional Indian drama). He is a holy man and leads the team of actors who are about to perform a play. As a ritual invocation to the performance, a mask of Lord Ganesha is brought centrestage and worshipped.

Bhagavata begins his song praying for success to the Lord of successes. The god is an emblem of incompleteness with his broken tusk, bloated belly and elephant’s head put on a human body, yet he is lord of success and perfection. This is an enigma beyond human understanding and Bhagavata leaves it to return to his story, but the paradox of elusive completeness within apparent incompleteness begins to operate from here. Bhagavata begins narrating the story of two young men from the city of Dharmapura, ruled by king Dharmasheela – Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta is a fair Brahmin excelling in scholarship and poetry – a man of letters whose body and appearance match his poetic temperament. Kapila is his polar opposite – a robust ironsmith and farmer, and a wrestler and warrior of great physique, deft in all bodily skills and acts. While Devadatta is romantic, Kapila is engaged with the material – together they embody all the human virtues, and are fast friends. Bhagavata’s introduction of them is however interrupted by terrified shrieks offstage, followed by an actor running in fear and finding shelter in Bhagavata. After some breathless moments the actor is soothed enough to tell his story – he had been late in coming, and having drunk a lot of water was sitting down on the roadside to urinate when he heard a voice warning him against committing the act in a public place. Upon searching the speaker, he found a speaking horse and ran in terror. Bhagavata laughs at him, and seeing him in a state unable to perform, sends him back to check and alleviate his fear. But the actor runs in again and announces that the speaking horse is approaching the stage. Alarmed that this may interrupt the play’s performance, Bhagavata orders curtains to shield the creature from the audience, so that the speaking horse is exposed on stage with a mounting dramatic tension – we first hear his sobs, then see the horse’s head, and finally a man’s body with a horse’s head sitting dejected, backstage. Bhagavata’s cynic realism makes him think the head a mask. He and the actor try to pull it out and, failing, realize it to be a real head. Surprised, Bhagavata attributes this miracle to some curse working on the man for some sin he committed, and this infuriates the horse-man into speech. With anger and anguish, he declares his innocence, gives out his name Hayavadana, and moved to tearful memory by the assuaging words of Bhagavata goes to relate his misfortune. His mother was a princess who had made a strange choice of husband – when all the princes of the world failed to win her heart, she fell in love with the white stallion of the Arabian prince and got married to it against all advice. The stallion was really a gandharva – a heavenly creature who was cursed into this state by the god Kubera. Fifteen years after their marriage he was freed of the curse and returned to his original shape. Now he wanted to take his wife with him to heaven, but the princess insisted on his becoming a horse again. In anger the gandharva now cursed her and she became a horse herself and ran away, leaving Hayavadana their child to fend for himself. Since then Hayavadana has been leading a sad mongrel existence rigged by incompleteness – he has tried to be a human participating in society and a life of ideas, but found no place there just as he cannot lead a purely animalistic life while possessing a human intellect. The incompatibility of head and body is the root of his crisis, which he has tried in vain to get rid of by visiting all the gods and holy shrines of all religions. Bhagavata suggests visiting the goddess Kali of mount Chitrakoot, who is famed to grant all prayers. Hayavadana is eager to go and jumps up in hope, and sets out in company of the actor whom his master has tagged on to him as guide.

Resuming his narrative, Bhagavata sings a symbolic prologue to the plot in conjunction with a female chorus: the two friends are divided by a mysterious woman who begins to work her feminine desire on them, and the men submit to the mad throes of her passions. The triangle of love leads to widening breaches within their human selves, self-sacrifice, and a macabre dance of life and death that raises the characters to superhuman, grotesque heights. As the human plot unfolds, we see Devadatta and Kapila meeting. Devadatta is distraught, unmindful of the conversation, and Kapila infers that he is thinking of some new girl he has fallen in love with. After some light banter, Devadatta begins a poetic description of feminine beauty which Kapila mockingly parodies, but soon understands the gravity of this new love. Devadatta expresses his desperation at having this girl as his muse, and promises to sacrifice his head and arms to Kali and Rudra to get her. Learning that the house of this girl has a two-headed bird as the door-emblem, Kapila goes out in search, finds the door and knocks. As Padmini opens the door, Kapila is stunned by her beauty and loses words. Their conversation grows comic as she is playful, conscious of the powers of her beauty, and he does not know what to say. He finally surrenders and begs to talk to even a servant of the house, and then refers to Devadatta whom Padmini has heard of. At this Padmini blushes and runs in, Kapila follows her, beginning to feel his own desire for her mounting within him. At this point, we return from action to narration as Bhagavata relates that Devadatta and Padmini are hereafter married, she is pregnant and Devadatta is extremely careful, even finicky about it. When action resumes the three are about to set out on a cart journey to a fair at Ujjain– Kapila is to arrive with the cart and they would start. As the couple speak of Kapila, it becomes evident that Devadatta has begun to dislike her intimacy with his friend, seeking private marital bliss instead. He feels jealous inwardly but is ashamed to admit it, and Padmini’s coquettish nature shows forth when she teases her husband with a loose tongue saying shocking things, and calling him ‘still a baby’. As they await Kapila and converse on him, it is found that complexities are growing between husband and wife over Kapila’s presence. She is attracted by his masculinity that Devadatta lacks, and vainly tries to hide the carnal longing behind the lawful, religiously sanctioned allegiance that marriage entails. Devadatta senses his friend’s lust for Padmini and tries to warn her away. In an attempt to placate his jealousy, she offers to cancel the trip to Ujjain and proposes to go by themselves sometime later. Devadatta is elated and tells Kapila that they have called off the journey because Padmini is sick. Kapila had been excited about it all and is now crestfallen, and admits his despair at this turn while warning himself of a moral slippage rising within him. However, he accepts it calmly and is about to go when Padmini suddenly rushes in and demands to go, completely reversing and ignoring her earlier proposal of cancelling the trip. She pleads to Devadatta that she now insists on going out of sympathy for Kapila’s boyish disappointment, but Devadatta sees beneath into her repressed desires and bears the humiliation in silence. The journey starts along a densely wooded road to Ujjain, which is the shortest route as Kapila says. Padmini is talkative during the journey, happily prattling on, plainly admiring Kapila’s skill at cart-driving and laughing at Devadatta’s ineptitude. They stop to rest at a wooded spot where her eyes are drawn by the tree of the Fortunate Lady’s flower. She is curious and Kapila climbs the tree to fetch the flower – as he strips and climbs she is mesmerized by his muscular, powerful body into a sexual trance. Devadatta, standing by her, notices her illicit desire in the depth of her eyes; it naturally burns him but he resolves to strangle his agony like a strong man. Kapila returns with the flower and in answer to her query, explains the flower’s name by showing its parts that pertain to the marks of a married (fortunate) woman. Kapila informs that there are temples of Kali and Rudra nearby, and this reminds Devadatta of his forgotten sacrificial promise. Out of a vengeful but suppressed ire, he insists that Padmini and Kapila go to the temple of Rudra while he stays back to guard the cart. After some hesitation they set out, and Devadatta starts alone towards the Kali temple along the wooded risky path. Once before the goddess he begs pardon for the forgotten promise, and finding a sword cuts off his own head in fulfillment of his vow. Padmini and Kapila, on returning to the cart do not find him. Kapila notes his footsteps towards the Kali temple and rushes to bring him back in alarm – Padmini resents being left alone, she had wanted Kapila’s company in Devadatta’s absence. Kapila reaches the temple and finds the horrible incident; he immediately understands his friend’s silent agony that motivated this suicide, and is deeply repentant. He laments saying that he was ready to do anything for his friend, even die himself. Then, in desperate sorrow and longing to meet him in the next world, he picks up the sword and cuts his own head in the same manner. Padmini, after a sojourn during which she feels ignored by the men, starts out towards the temple in the dark. She is feared by the darkness and calls of wild animals, and upon entering the dark temple stumbles over the corpses. Curiously, her first reactions upon the discovery are concerned with her own present and future rather than lamentation for husband and beloved, which point at the essentially self-centered hedonism she embodies. Finding no way out of the shame and helplessness, she too picks up the sword. As she is about to jump on it, the goddess speaks up. Padmini is dumbstruck while the sleeping goddess wakes with deafening drumbeats and appears in her terrifying shape. She begins to speak to Padmini in a direct, no-nonsense tone that is weary of human hypocrisy, subterfuge and mincing words. She orders the whining Padmini to put the heads back in place and press the sword on their necks, and the men would come alive. When Padmini asks her why she did not stop the men from doing what they did if she has foreknowledge of everything, she is initially surprised at the selfish turn of Padmini’s thoughts, and then replies that she was disgusted at the lying men – one offers her with much false rhetoric his head which he promised to Rudra, and the other dies for the ostensible sake of friendship when he was really afraid of being caught as a murderer. Following the Mother’s order, Padmini places the heads but in darkness, frantic hurry and confusion, swaps heads and bodies – Deavadatta’s head is set on Kapila’s body and vice versa. The goddess warily notes the subconscious feminine motive behind the confusion, but lets it happen as it is. Gradually the men recover, and Padmini confesses she has ‘mixed them up’. The resulting jumbles and paradoxes begin to intoxicate and transport them to a mad ecstasy of creation, expressed in their collective laughter and dance celebrating the dissolution of all known rational premises of thought. Slowly the problems of social and familial identity arising out of this mix-up dawn on them. A row begins about whose wife Padmini is now, according to the now opposing laws of society and nature. Physical features, faculties and intellectual capacities have been reversed between the men, but memories are retained. The row leads to the debate over supremacy for the body or the head, and both men offer arguments to prove that the body (for Kapila’s head and Devadatta’s body) and the head (for Devadatta’s head and Kapila’s body) constitute the real person with rightful claim over the woman. As Padmini makes her preference clear for the poet’s head supported by the wrestler’s body (her image of male completeness), some bad blood rises, but subsides soon before the great dimensions of the existential question – what is superior and makes for human identity, head or body, intellect or sense? Act I leaves us at the crest of this dramatic climax.