

## The Theatre of Subversion: A Case from Kannada Theatre

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### Abstract

The paper proposes to evaluate the on-stage politics of representing the subalterns through the medium of folk theatre in the selected plays of the distinguished Kannada playwright and poet H.S. Shiva Prakash. It provides a brief analysis of Shiva Prakash's two plays performed widely viz., *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring* (1985), and *Madaiah, the Cobbler* (1991). Further, it focuses on the politics of adaptation in his unpublished play *Sati: The Divination* based on a Puranic story and its first stage production by H. Tomba in Assam. Our contention is that playwrights like Shiva Prakash use the power of the stage to subvert theatrical, political, and social conventions in India by employing the folk idioms of Karnataka.

### Keywords

Kannada theatre, folk theatre, Indian theatre, subaltern studies, post-colonial studies, Shiva Prakash

The paper aims at generating discussion on a well known, oft quoted question, which has almost achieved the status of a cliché amongst literary circles, viz. "Can the subaltern speak?" The subaltern subject, as Spivak aptly points out, is subjugated and silenced by the imperialist power structure. Further, she contends that the intellectual stationed at a relatively privileged position in society, can speak on behalf of the silent/silenced subaltern subject (120-30). Nevertheless, at the same time she is rather sceptical about the legitimacy and authenticity of such substitutive articulation. Contesting Spivak's position, Benita Parry accuses her of being "deaf" to the voices of the subalterns. According to Parry, there are numerous ways of making the subaltern "speak" and even interpreting their silences. Parry points out that colonised subjects

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“spoke” by inscribing themselves as “healers, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists” (19); thus she underscores the performability of the colonised subjects as a way of subverting the hegemonic discourse of the coloniser. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) explicates the positions taken by both Spivak and Parry. According to her, it is unnecessary to choose between the two contentions, “Parry takes anti-colonial nationalism as emblematic of the native ability to question and counter colonial discourses. But ‘natives’ are divided by differences of gender, as Spivak so effectively points out, and by those of class, caste and other hierarchies” (235). Loomba has reservations about Spivak’s premise of the subaltern being silent, and questions Parry’s viewing the category of the “subaltern” as a homogeneous group. This paper contends that it is possible to discern an underpinning of the theoretical positions of both Spivak and Parry in the dramatic works of Shiva Prakash. As a creative intellectual, Shiva Prakash illustrates heterogeneity and plurality of the Indian subalterns in his plays. Furthermore, he addresses countless tribulations faced by subaltern groups in India by employing the subversive power of the folk theatre, thus privileging their worldview.

Indian folk theatre, according to Madan Mohan Bhalla, is operatic and provincial. He rightly observed as early as the 1960s, that “the folk theatre in India is the most elastic form of theatre expression, incorporating pageantry, dance, mime, song, caricature, lampoon, ritual, ceremonial; decorative arts and crafts; in fact everything that has become a way of life of the people. Its ultimate aim is to reaffirm or demonstrate folk beliefs” (42). But he asserted that folk form couldn’t become the working model for *the* Modern Indian Theatre precisely because of its folk elements. The fetish for the folk form began during the very decade in which Bhalla’s essay was published. Dramatists like Girish Karnad, Chandrasekhar Kambar, Habib Tanvir, and others, popularised Indian folk theatre with their own diverse theatrical practices. Consequently, recent studies on Indian theatre celebrate the folk theatre as an alternative theatre, as opposed to the enclosed proscenium theatre, which upholds European realism. For instance, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in her path breaking work, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) contests the concept of a single representative Indian theatre and foregrounds plurality in the Indian dramatic scenario by theorising the idea of Indian “theatres.” Folk theatre claims a considerable space in the collective whole of heterogeneous Indian theatres. Dharwadker clarifies the paradoxical category of folk in India:

The political conception of folk theatre as a people’s theatre evokes in part the European Enlightenment definition of ‘folk’ as ‘the people.’ But in India it also points to the popular appeal of village forms, their potential for subversive social meaning, and their connection with various forms of populist street theatre. The folk repertoire thus appears as a historical legacy as well as a powerful resource in the present. (312)

Shiva Prakash uses the folk form with its multiple connotations. He juxtaposes the

classic with the popular, the traditional with the modern and evolves the folk form in Karnataka. Folk theatre has influenced modern Indian playwrights in several ways. We can identify two dominant trends. On the one hand, there are playwrights like Girish Karnad who incorporate elements of the folk theatre, yet base them on the principles of European realism. And on the other, those working within the paradigm of the folk theatre and simultaneously exploiting a new range of themes and symbols derived from the contemporary socio-political milieu. Shiva Prakash belongs to the latter category. He assimilates folklores of the marginalised groups (whose performances are paradoxically based predominantly on classical themes) into the traditional folk forms. Moreover, he employs theatre as a site wherein subalterns articulate their existence and perform their subalternity.

Folk theatre invariably falls within the broad gamut of the post-colonial theatre. Post-colonial theatre is mostly, if not always, acutely political; and in its domain, the cultural groups which had been rendered silent and invisible are endowed with speech and presence. According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, post-colonial drama, “respond[s] to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly... [and] interrogate[s] the hegemony that underlies imperial representation” (11). Now, after acknowledging folk theatre as a contested political site, let us explore the nature of hegemonic structures as well as the strategies of subversion employed by Shiva Prakash through the medium of his plays. G.P. Deshpande correctly observes that Indian playwrights and directors “hark back to tradition and the ethnic” (xiv). They portray the power politics operating within the Indian society, drawing inspiration from the pre-modern theatrical form and content. The imperial power of the colonial era is replaced by the casteist/capitalist societal structure – the Dalits, tribals, minority communities, women and so forth have been relegated to the position of the Indian subalterns. To reiterate the balance between Spivak’s and Parry’s contentions: the Indian theatre foregrounds playwrights like Shiva Prakash, who speak on behalf of the subalterns by using the folklores and legends of the subalterns as a subversive tool.

H.S. Shiva Prakash’s plays are not overtly political neither does he claim to espouse any particular ideology, but his *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring* (1985) was one of the most controversial pieces of literature in Karnataka and it created a furore for its anti-Bhramanical stand. It was strongly attacked by some elite sections of society and passionately defended by the Leftists, Dalits, and women’s groups. His plays, according to Chandrasekhar Kambar, address contemporary problems like, “consumerism, exploitation and, above all, an unnerving degree of desacralisation of man and nature” (ix). Shiva Prakash’s plays are either mythical or historical; thus by placing his characters in the timeless past he critiques the present. Being a post-colonial artist, he re-writes history from the worm’s eye-view by accommodating the experiences of the subdued communities. Shiva Prakash quite proficiently incorporates the myths and lore of marginalised groups into the mainstream Kannada theatre. His *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring* and *Madaiah, the Cobbler* (1991),

discussed at length in the paper, are based on *Sannata*,<sup>3</sup> a form of a traditional folk theatre in Karnataka. Shiva Prakash's innovation lies in the fact that he made the form of *Sannata* flexible so as to incorporate folklores of the "lower" castes, whereas traditionally *Sannata* deals with *Puranic* themes. Consequently, his plays create a modern, egalitarian paradigm in Kannada theatre by Sanskritisation of the folklore and desanskritisation of traditional theatre. The boundaries between the seemingly "base" Prakritic tales merge seamlessly with "high" Sanskrit performing art. We can infer that thematically and technically Shiva Prakash's plays foreground the amalgamation of the modern and the traditional by co-opting the elements of the folk and the classic. Most of his plays are poetic, thus making his work densely political and deeply poetical simultaneously.

Shiva Prakash frequently integrates into his plays the legends and myths foregrounding the deities of marginalised communities and presents them on the stage with epic grandeur. One such play is *Madari Madaiah*, translated into English as *Madaiah, the Cobbler*. The play beautifully juxtaposes the modern and the traditional, as Madaiah, the timeless hero of a Dalit oral narrative, fights the villainous, capitalist King Saravna of Bankapuri. The opening scene of the play introduces the audience to seven characters on stage personified as seven *Guddas* or hills, embodying seven aspects of nature. The hills are moved by the sorry state of affairs in Bankapuri, the imaginary kingdom of a wicked king and thereafter commences Shiva Prakash's favourite trope, the play within the play. One of the hills decides to play the part of Lord Madaiah, as he could not tolerate the capitalist king exploiting Mother Earth. The folk theatre forms like *Sannata* do not adhere to the convention of realism – the performance oscillates between the real and the theatrical. Gudda 7 "becomes" Madaiah and the play commences after problematising the idea of role-playing within the play:

*GUDDA 7 enters striking the kamsale.*

GUDDA 7. Hey! Stop that! I'll go to the king!

*Others stare at him in surprise.*

GUDDA 1. You? You really mean that?

GUDDA 7. Sure! When Samana treats Earth Mother like footwear, who else but a cobbler should rescue her? Now I shall dress up like Madeswara.

*He wears the headgear with seven plaits of hair and becomes Madaiah.*

MADAIAH. Come and be my Guddas.

GUDDAS (*stretching out their hands before him*). Release us from all our ties, Master.

<sup>3</sup> *Sannata* is a part of *Bayalata* (open theatre form) in Karnataka. The performance revolves around one story instead of multiple stories enacted in *Bayalata*. There are three main types of *Sannata* – the *Vaishnava*, the *Shaiva*, and the social plays. The prelude to each one differs as different deities are invoked in each type. Unlike other forms of *Bayalata*, *Sannata* addresses contemporary social issues. For more information, visit <<http://www.indiaprofile.com/religion-culture/karnataka-folk.htm>>.

MADAIAH. Will you consider your parents dead and think of me as father and mother?

GUDDAS. We will master...

MADAIAH (*claps the kamsale*). All right, go on with the play then.

(120-21)

The hill is transformed into the cobbler god for protecting Mother Earth from the King, who symbolises the exploitative urban worldview. The cobbler-god Madaiah sets on a long journey to get sandals of human skin made from a mythical cobbler named Hallaiah and his wife Kalyanamma. During his journey, he performs various miracles which contribute to the making of the new world order. He emancipates a bound woman deserted by her husband because of her infertility, exposes the hypocrisy of religious institutions and even sets free the spirit of Bassavanna – the socio-religious leader of Karnataka who had been petrified as an idol for centuries. Throughout the play, the protagonist, i.e., the hill playing the role of Madaiah, performs his subalternity; instead of summoning up his miraculous strength to kill the evil King, he acts servile in front of him. He presents the King with a pair of sandals made of human skin and tricks him into wearing it, by making him believe that it would make him immortal. And as a result, the King is reduced to ashes. Madaiah's feigned servility is not just a dramatic device but also a political one – the cobbler being the lowest in the social hierarchy cannot openly defy the power structure. He stays within the confines of the system and yet rebels against it. Moreover, the sandals, symbolising the downtrodden lot that produces them, become an effective subversive tool, instrumental in the downfall of the King. Madaiah being the cobblers' deity has to resort to trickery as a strategy to overpower the almighty King. His repartee and trickery reminds one of the trickster characters of the Afro-American folklores.<sup>4</sup> The slave character outwits his master just as Madaiah outsmarts the King; these characters are situated at the peripheries of the power centre and thus they try to subvert the

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<sup>4</sup> The trickster characters like Brer Rabbit and John (a black slave serving white masters) constitute a large portion of the folk narratives in the African-American tradition. An example is the famous story of Tar Baby where Brer Rabbit outwits stronger enemies like Brer Fox. Brer Rabbit saves his life by requesting Brer Fox not to throw him into the thorny bush. In order to traumatise his quick witted enemy all the more, Brer Fox does exactly that. However, to Brer Fox's chagrin, Brer Rabbit hops away happily from the bush informing the former that he grew up in a briar patch. A frail, harmless rabbit, as most of the anthropologists contend, symbolises the helpless but spirited African-American slave. Similarly, trickster John, a folk-hero created in the post-bellum America, is an overt manifestation of the black slave. In one of the stories, he fools his naive Old Master into believing that there is a rogue hiding in the lake, whereas in fact there is just a frog. In one of the tales, John even gets his master killed on the sly. Interestingly, most of these stories are originally from Africa, and have been creatively preserved through the oral medium. The fact that African-American peoples preserved them proves that these tales provided an imaginary outlet from the oppressive regime of the slave masters. These characters constantly subvert the system of slavery by outwitting the apparently stronger enemy/master. According to John Willie Roberts, the trickster character "reflected the retarded psycho-social development of black identity under white oppression, while the trickster's actions revealed black feelings of rebelliousness against the values of the system which denied opportunities for self-definition" (21).

societal order with whatever tools are available to them. Undoubtedly, the cobbler who mends and makes footwear and is considered “lowly” in the caste hierarchy, is empowered in the play. Nevertheless, one cannot elide the implication of the hill personified in the play. The hills unmistakably represent the powerless people inhabited therein. The tribal communities have been subalterns for several reasons, the two main being: a) history and literature being elitist discourses never acknowledged their presence, and b) their traditional thriving place has been eroded by unbridled urbanisation, under the guise of their development. The deification of the hill as the cobbler-god is symptomatic of ascribing power to one invisible section of society through another powerless community (the Dalits empowering the tribes). Therefore, Shiva Prakash implicates a nexus between different communities that have been excluded historically as well as socially, and further hints at the political consolidation of these groups in order to write themselves back into history and undercut the capitalist/casteist hegemony in the Indian society.

Another play, which centres on the dismantling of the rigid power structure operating in society, is *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring*. As pointed out earlier, it created controversy through its depiction of Brahmins and Lingayats. *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring* is an apocalyptic play, which embodies the raw *roudra* or destructive energy. The *roudra* ensues as the traditional caste hierarchy breaks down. The social change and its repercussion cause the downfall of the powerful Kalachurya Empire. The play is based on a twelfth century episode which has left an indelible mark in Karnataka’s social history. Bassavanna, the socio-religious leader of Karnataka, effected the inter-caste marriage of a cobbler boy and a Brahmin girl. This marriage, instead of dissolving the caste distinction, infuriated the Brahmins and triggered off caste riots. As a result, the King Bijjala, in order to propitiate the higher castes, banished Bassavanna, whose utopia, the city of Kalyana, had established itself as a casteless, egalitarian haven. The people of the lower castes who had been subjugated for centuries were enlightened by Bassavanna’s new principles of Shaivism. His doctrines aimed at binding the society through monotheism. He initiated social mobilisation of the lowly artisans and facilitated the formation of a new community, which engulfed into its folds many other marginalised communities, thus forming an alternate societal structure as against the traditionally established social order. The formation of *veershaiva* or *lingayat* community can be termed sociologically as a process of “sanskritisation” as explained by M.N. Srinivas.<sup>5</sup> The stigma attached to the “untouchability” of certain castes dwindled away as these

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<sup>5</sup> M.N. Srinivas coined the term “sanskritisation” in his DPhil thesis, which he elaborated in his book *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* in 1952. According to him, upward mobility in the middle regions of the caste hierarchy is possible. He observed, “A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adapting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon.... This process has been called ‘Sanskritisation’” (32). Lingayats or the Veershaiva community consisted of artisans of lower castes, who by adopting the principles of Shaivism propagated by Bassavanna, were upgraded in the caste hierarchy. See M.N. Srinivas for details.

communities adopted vegetarianism and religious rituals emulating the Brahmanical way of life, albeit, sans the hierarchisation. The play very successfully portrays the epic confrontation of the orthodox traditional worldview versus the new revolutionary one. Interestingly, Bassavanna is never present on stage; he is discussed, referred to, invoked or even cursed by almost all the characters in the play but he never appears on stage. Despite his absence, he is the protagonist, the agent of change, and the propeller of action in the play as he was in the Kannada society. As the playwright mentions in his note on the play, “Bassavanna is the *paroksha nayaka* of the play in the sense that he appears nowhere in the play itself, but manifests himself through different characters in different ways” (xv). Bassavanna’s death does not deter the social revolution; his followers carry on the reformation of the society even after the violent outburst in the empire. Shiva Prakash’s ploy of keeping Bassavanna off stage is a symbolic way of suggesting that the spirit of change may manifest itself also through the most oppressed and marginalised individuals as through the most privileged ones like Bassavanna. The victimised lot in the society has to take the onus on itself in order to execute the social makeover in the world. Moreover, this is how the play climaxes; the actors who conduct the play on stage in a quasi-play-within-the-play mode slay King Bijjala ritualistically. According to the historians, taking advantage of the social unrest in the kingdom, either the crown prince or the King’s brother murdered the King. But the play portrays that the actors and followers of Bassavanna, Nageya Maritande, Kalaketaiah and Chowdaiah, kill Bijjala. These actors perform the play within the play acquainting the audience with the socio-political background of twelfth century Karnataka. *Sannatta* form of theatre involves a group of *Sutradhars*, the play conductors, who act as a rudder of the play – they regulate and conduct the performance. But Shiva Prakash improvises on their traditional role and enhances their significance in the play. The actors become *sutradhars* – not only narrating but also performing the events. Besides, they bring about the denouement of the play after “performing” the murder of the King. The playwright has compared the episodes of Veerabhadra’s slaying of Dhaksha while performing the sacrifice, with the murder of Bijjala by the actors/*sutradhars* at the sacrificial ceremony. The actors perform *Veeragase*, a Karnataka folk dance depicting Veerabhadra’s devastating power, when they are about to kill the King.

BIJJALA. Vile beings, you have destroyed the sanctity of the yagnashala.

CHOWDAIAH. Sh!... Yours is now the role of Dakshabrahma. Mine, that of Veerabhadra.

BIJJALA: Born in the sacred womb of Kshatriyas, we are not destined to die in such street plays. Cowards, give me a sword. I will behead you all. (61-62)

According to Khambar, the introduction of *Veeragase* in the climax of *Mahachaitra*, “takes on mythical and ritualistic dimensions as the assassins and the assassinated take on mythical roles: the slayers become ‘Veerabhadras,’ and the slain ‘Daksha Bramha,’ the whole scene becomes a re-enactment of the feud between Vedic and non-Vedic traditions in our Culture” (ix).

Shiva Prakash's unpublished poetic play, *Sati: The Divination*, elaborates on the divide between Vedic and non-Vedic cultures. He has adapted the story of Sati narrated in "Satikhanda" in *Shiva Purana*. According to the Puranic story, Sati, the daughter of King Daksha, was married to Shiva. In order to settle scores with Shiva over a trivial strife, Daksha decides to pique Shiva's pride by not inviting the couple for *Ashawamedh Yajna* (the grand sacrifice to establish political supremacy over neighbouring states). Despite this, Sati attends the sacrificial ceremony. At the sacrifice, Daksha hurls abuses at her and her husband, Shiva. Hurt and humiliated, Sati gives up her life by jumping into the sacrificial fire. On receiving the news of Sati's death, Shiva is infuriated and devastated. He procreates Veerabhadra out of his wrath in order to destroy Daksha and his sacrifice.

Sati's self-annihilation in *Shivapurana* is not an act of rebellion as it seems to be, but reinforces the patriarchal structure she wants to dismantle: "I am the offspring of your race as Lord Shiva has often said.... This body born of your limbs I shall cast off as a corpse. It is worthy of contempt. I shall abandon it and gain happiness."<sup>6</sup> She discards her body, the very corporeal entity provided by her birth giver, as a response to her husband's public humiliation. She rebels against her father, the literal and the figurative patriarch, only to yield to the domination of her husband, the patriarch allotted by the law.

On the other hand, Shiva Prakash's Sati is a political dissenter; her suicide is not an escapist strategy but a political act. She comes to meet her father, not as his daughter, or as an enemy's wife, but as a representative of the wretched victims of the war. She willingly jumps into the sacrificial fire in order to desacralise it. She declares,

Yours is the Yajna of destruction.  
I'll inflict destruction on this.  
Yours is the Yajna of the profane.  
I'll now profane it.  
Let all your looted treasure  
Turn to ashes, like my body cursed by birth.

The playwright has inscribed the Aryan-Dravidian angle into the story of Sati's suicide. Shiva is depicted as a Dravidian, and Sati elopes with him abandoning her father's name and her Aryan identity. She returns to Daksha's palace after several years, as she wishes to warn him of the impending Dravidian onslaught and advise him to stop the bloodshed that he and his men had been perpetrating on the Dravidian tribes because of the *yajna*. Here too, as in *Mahachaitra: The Great Spring*, the two royal maids of Daksha's palace act as *sutradhars* of the play. They even provide the

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<sup>6</sup> *Shiv Purana*, like the other Puranas, is a compilation of the history of the universe – destruction, creation, and preservation all centring around its titular figure, Lord Shiva. In this paper we have referred to verses 60-61 of "The Shiva Purana," Vol 1, 414.



audience with the conflicting viewpoints of the Aryan conquerors and the vanquished Dravidians. The play constantly refers to the Vedic/Non-Vedic dichotomy – the Aryans or the Devas are supposed to be “fair,” “civilised” and the Asuras are “dark,” “magical” and emitting “primitive darkness.” The devas symbolise Sanskriti/Culture, while the Asuras symbolise Prakriti/Nature. Daksha, the imperialist, annexes the tribal kingdom, in order to establish the supremacy of his race. Veerbhadra, the head of the Asura army embodying demonic traits, rears an army to fight back the empire. Although in the Purana, Shiva’s vengeance designs Veerbhadra’s birth; in the play, Veerbhadra executes the political mission of halting the racist destruction. Thus, Shiva Prakash has elaborated the racist implications in the Puranic episode of Sati and turned it into a feminist text.

*Sati: The Divination* was written in the late 1980s. However, it was neither published nor performed till recently (2005), when it was performed in Assam as a multilingual play. The Manipuri director, H. Tomba, the prodigal son of two committed theatre personalities, H. Kaniyalal and Sabitri Debi, saw in this play the potential of evoking the ethnic tension which has been tearing North-eastern states apart for decades. Shiva Prakash portrayed the *Devas* as Aryans and *Asuras* as Dravidians. Tomba further contextualised the play by depicting *Devas* as the elite Ahomiyas, and *Asuras* as representing Rabha and Bodo tribes. Language becomes the racial signifier in the adapted version, as Daksha speaks in Assamese and his estranged daughter, Sati, answers him back in Rabha. He is infuriated at being addressed in the language of the lowly *Asuras*. Thus language becomes Sati’s counter hegemonic tool. The ethnic conflict between the Ahomiyas, the Bodos, and the Rhabhas corresponds to the friction amongst the elite Metei community and the Kuki and Naga tribes in Manipur. Tomba is not only critiquing the socio-political scenario in Assam, but by implication commenting on the similar Manipuri ethnic situation. Performing Shiva Prakash’s mythical Kannada folk play in Assamese, Rabha, and Bodo, is a subversive way of commenting upon the ethnic politics operating within the region. Tomba, through the medium of this play, has made the subalterns perform, as all the actors in this production were the tribals of Assam. Folk theatre in India has always been provincial, and according to Stuart Blackburn, the performances in the south Indian states have clearly defined “performance zone boundary” (9). But the Assamese adaptation of a Kannada play by a Manipuri director compels us to investigate the existence of such boundaries.

We can conclude that Shiva Prakash’s historical, *Puranic* or folk myths carry strong political agenda. He deploys myths as a subversive tool in much the same manner as Brecht does in his epic theatre. According to G.P. Deshpande, modern Indian directors seem to have used Brechtian techniques as a celebration of Indian national forms. However, he is of the opinion that most of the modern Indian directors have employed Brechtian aesthetics, devoid of the political essence accompanying it (xvi). But as we can infer from the foregoing analysis, Shiva Prakash’s plays deploy not only Brechtian aesthetics but are deeply political; hence they are justifiably a part of the theatre of subversion. His kind of theatre foregrounds myths and embellishes them with a new range of symbols. The loose spatio-temporal boundaries of the folk

form enable him to distance the backdrop of the play from the play itself. Thus he assigns to the audience, responsibility for reading the play within a broader political paradigm. He speaks on behalf of the subalterns and the subalterns speak through him.

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