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ONCE IN INDIA

The violence of non-violence

SYNOPSIS

Once in India is a historical play based on a historical event that took place about twenty-two centuries ago which constitutes the core of the play. But the play is not mere narration of history. It is a creative exploration of those times, in dramatic idiom, to give contemporary audiences a meaningful theatrical experience.

The history

Alexander the Great invaded India in 326 BCE. His invasion remained confined to the peripheral kingdoms on the northwestern borders of India. He had to abandon his ambition to conquer India because his men rebelled and refused to go any further. After Alexander's death, the Governors and Satraps in the conquered lands became independent. They divided the empire between themselves. Of these, Seleucus Nicator, with his

capital in Mesopotamia, invaded India again, but was defeated by the Indian King Chandragupt Maurya in 305 BCE. As a result, Seleucus ceded some Afghan and Iranian territories and gave the Indian King a Greek princess in marriage.

After Seleucus' death, his Kingdom got fragmented into many smaller Greek kingdoms. One such kingdom emerged in Afghanistan, with its capital in Bactria (modern-day Balkh), whose rulers were called Indo-Greek rulers. Cut off from their homeland for over a century, many Greek Kings converted to Buddhism. Of these Indo-Greek Kings, Demetrius (205-170 BCE) and Minender (865-155 BCE) are the most well-known. They invaded India to complete Alexander the Great and Seleucus Nicator's unfinished agenda, which they did with some success.

King Brihadrath was on the throne of Magadh at the same time as King Minender was on the throne of Bactria. He was a descendent of King Chandragupt Maurya, who had foiled Seleucus' invasion and defeated him. Unlike Maurya, King Brihadrath was a pacifist. He converted to Buddhism and was a votary of non-violence. Frustrated by the King's diffidence and vacillation in taking on the Indo-Greek invaders, the Army Chief Pushyamitr Shung decided to depose the King. He invited the King to inspect the army. While the King was doing this, Pushyamitr beheaded him in full view of the soldiers, occupied the throne, and threw out the Indo-Greek invaders. The core of the play is based on this first—and last—recorded army coup in India's history of 5,000 years.

The play

A dimension of this play exists in the realm of ideas. We are conditioned to view life in contradictory dyads, such as good and bad, rich and poor, past and present, traditional and modern, materialistic and spiritual, violent and non-violent, etc. But there are no such sharp distinctions between black and white in reality; there are also shades of gray. By courageously

embracing out-of-the-box thinking, the play points to a third dimension, which is nonaligned with traditionally opposite, binary elements.

The Truth is one, indivisible and inclusive; it aims for the peace and welfare of all of humanity. From this perspective, even a heinous act like murder, committed to further the peace and welfare of mankind becomes a spiritual act.

In ancient India, before the advent of Buddhism, Indians did not believe in the principle of absolute non-violence; they discriminated between violence against evil and violence against the noble. For ancient Indians, violence against the noble, innocent, and good was bad, while violence against evil was good and desirable. In this context, it may be noted that in the Sanskrit language there are two words for manslaughter: “*vadh*” and “*hatya*.” If an evil man is killed for the safety, security, and welfare of society, it is called *vadh*. If a man is killed for personal vendetta or gain, it is considered *hatya*. While *hatya* is a sin and condemnable, *vadh* is praiseworthy and necessary. In the context of *Once In India*, the Army Chief Pushyamitr kills King Brihadrath, whose vacillating non-violent resistance would have otherwise led to the massacre of millions of Indians. In doing so Pushyamitr committed an act of *vadh*, not *hatya*. The play thus illustrates how, in certain circumstances, even the evil act of killing another man becomes ethical and socially desirable.

Non-violence has been an obsessive concern amongst Indians since the inception of Indian civilization. Indians believe in absolute non-violence; that is, non-violence even in the face of evil. They do not realize that non-violence is unable to resist evil forces, and that this, in effect, actually promotes evil and can ultimately lead to the annihilation of all that is noble. Lord Krishna had warned Indians against absolute non-violence in the classical Indian spiritual text *The Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna pronounced the limits of non-violence in unequivocal terms when he exhorted the warrior Arjun to take up arms against

evil, for the purpose of upholding peace and righteousness. It may also be mentioned that all of the Hindu deities are always depicted with weapons in their arms, which are symbolic of their readiness to fight for righteousness. The Goddess Durga carries a trident and Goddess Kali is armed with a sword. Of the male deities, Shiva carries a trident, Vishnu has a discus and a club and Raam has a bow and arrow. But, the Hindu mind has refused to follow the example of its deities, as Indian history demonstrates throughout the centuries.

India succumbed to the Muslim invasion in 1192 CE because the Indian King hesitated and vacillated whether and how much to defend the country. He did not want to shed the invading soldiers' blood. The King's piety resulted in the entire country passing into tyrannical foreign rule for 600 years.

Absolute non-violence is a Hindu cultural frailty. Even the most noble and well-intentioned Mahatma Gandhi, the embodiment of non-violence, was not free from this frailty. When World War II broke out, Gandhi went to the British Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow and told him that the British should fight Adolf Hitler with absolute non-violence. He told Lord Linlithgow that the British should surrender their homes, their wealth and themselves to Germany, which would lead the British to ultimate victory over the Germans. Fortunately, the Viceroy did not abide by Gandhi's advice; otherwise, the whole world would have come under the Nazi sway.

GEOGRAPHY

- Bactria:** Present-day Balkh in northern Afghanistan; capital of the Indo-Greek Kings in the 2nd century BCE.
- Gaandhaar:** An ancient name for the modern-day city of Kandhar in Afghanistan.
- Gangaa:** A river in India revered as holy by Hindus.
- Magadh:** The name of an empire ruled by the Maurya Dynasty in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE, with its capital at Paataliputr.
- Mysore:** Name of a city in South India famous for jewelry-making.
- Paataliputr:** Capital of Magadh Empire; present-day Patna city in the state of Bihar, India.

GLOSSARY

Aaryaa:	An honorific for women.
Alexander the Great:	The Greek King who invaded India in 326 BCE. He could only conquer some peripheral territories on the northwest border of India because his army revolted.
Angulimaal:	A bandit according to Buddhist legend whom the King's forces could not subdue. Lord Buddha approached him alone. Angulimaal surrendered to Buddha and became a Buddhist monk.
Arjun:	A warrior who refused to fight for righteousness due to his compassion and concern for human life.
Arthashastra:	A book on statecraft written in 4th century BCE by Chanakya.
Ashokaaram:	The Buddhist monastery named after King Ashok in 3rd century BCE.
Bahujana Hitaay Bahujana Sukhaay:	Lord Buddha's injunction to monks to "go spread Buddhism for the welfare and happiness of the majority of mankind."
Bhante:	The term of address used for Buddhist monks.
Brahmans:	The scholarly people who constituted a caste in India.
Buddha:	The founder of the Buddhist religion in India in the 6th century BCE.

- Buddham Sharanam Gacchaami:** The most well-known Buddhist prayer, meaning “*I take refuge in Buddha.*”
- Buddhist:** Name for a follower of Buddhism, a religion founded by Gautam Buddha.
- Chakravartee:** The term used for powerful kings in ancient India who subdued neighboring kings.
- Cheever:** An ancient Paalee word for maroon-colored Buddhist garments.
- Dhamma:** The Paalee equivalent of the Sanskrit word *Dharma*.
- Dharma:** The Sanskrit word for everything noble and positive, such as duty, good deeds, charity, altruism, ethical values, compassion, religion, etc.
- Dharm-mahaamaatra:** The name of a class of administrators created by King Ashok whose responsibility was to ensure that all citizens follow *dharmma*.
- Dhyaan:** Meditation; attention.
- Guru/Gurudev:** The spiritual teacher.
- Har Har Gange:** A playful expression of reverence for the river Gangaa, which a devotee chants after taking his first dip in the river; literally meaning, *Hail Mother Gangaa*.
- Kaling Conquest:** The war waged by King Ashok against the Kaling Kingdom of India, in which more than 100,000 people were killed and an equal number were wounded and maimed. This conquest moved King Ashok so much that he decided never to wage war again.
- Karma:** Literally meaning *action* or *deed* in the Vaidic and Buddhist traditions. It is part of the belief system of all religions of Indian

origin. All Indic religions believe that one's good or bad deeds (*karmas*) committed in this life determine the quality of one's next life.

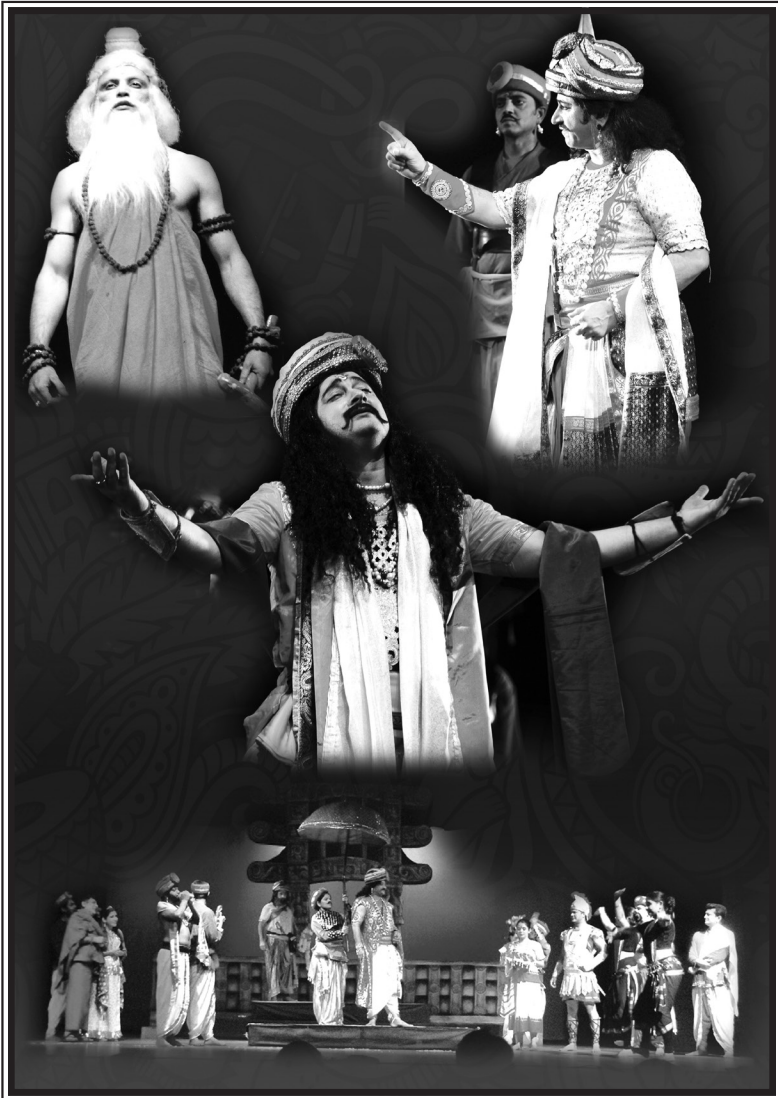
- Kautily:** The author of *Arthashastra*, a book written in 4th century BCE on polity and statecraft.
- King Ashok:** The King of the Maurya Empire in 3rd century BCE, known in history as the first pacifist King. He gave up war as part of State policy and devoted himself entirely to the welfare of humanity.
- Krishna:** Believed by Hindus to be a reincarnation of God in a human body, to protect the noble and destroy the evil. Also called "Lord Krishna."
- Kumbh fair:** A massive congregation of millions of Hindus held every twelve years since ancient times on the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna.
- Lotus feet:** Traditionally, the feet of the divine or gurus are reverentially described this way.
- Maar:** The god of sex and desire in the Buddhist tradition.
- Mahaabhaag:** A form of address to a king in ancient times.
- Mahaaraaj:** Literally meaning "great king" in Hindi and Sanskrit; a form of address to a king in ancient times.
- Maalaa:** Term for a garland as well as a rosary.
- Maurya:** Name of the Empire and Dynasty that ruled in India in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE, with its capital in the city of Paataliputr.
- Mauryan:** One who belongs to Maurya clan.

Nirvaana:	A Buddhist concept in which a soul, due to good <i>karma</i> , gets free of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and attains Ultimate Buddhahood.
Paalee:	The language of the common people of ancient India from the 2nd to 6th centuries BCE.
Paarseeks:	Name given to Persian people.
Pashoons:	Aggressive, war-like people living on the northwest frontiers of India (now in Pakistan).
Patanjali:	The 2nd century BCE Yoga Guru and author of <i>The Yoga Sutra</i> , the seminal work on the system of Yoga.
Prajaamukh:	People's representative in the Mauryan King's Court.
Prayaag:	Name of a city where the Kumbh fair has been held since ancient times.
Raam:	Believed by Hindus to be a reincarnation of God in a human body to protect the noble and destroy the evil. He is the hero of the Indian epic <i>Ramayana</i> who rescued his wife Seeta and killed the demon Raavan who had abducted her.
Raavan:	A villain in the epic <i>Ramayana</i> who abducted Raam's wife Seeta and was ultimately killed by Raam.
Renunciate:	An individual who withdraws from the world and devotes his or her entire life to the service of God and society.
Samaadhi:	The ultimate stage attained by an individual in meditation.
Sangh:	A Buddhist order.
Sanskrit:	An Indian language of ancient origins.

Seetaa:	Raam's wife.
Senaapati:	The Sanskrit equivalent of "Commander-in-Chief."
Seleucus Nicator:	One of the generals in Alexander the Great's army. After Alexander's invasion of India (in 326 BCE), Nicator invaded India in 305 BCE and was defeated by the Indian Maurya King Chandragupt.
Shaktipaat:	In the Yoga context, the transmission of energy from a Guru to his or her disciple, wherein the Guru places his or her hand on top of the disciple's head.
Shramans:	Term for non-Vaidic (usually Buddhist and Jain) monks.
Tathaagat:	An appellation used for Gautam Buddha.
The Four Noble Truths:	Propounded by Gautam Buddha in his first sermon—the first of which is that there is suffering in life.
Tripitaka:	The Buddhist holy text—similar to the Bible in Christianity.
Ujjain:	Name of an Indian city.
Vaidya:	Means doctor in Sanskrit.
Vaidic:	Followers of the ancient Hindu holy text called the <i>Vedas</i> ; non-Buddhists.
Vishkanyaa:	Literally meaning <i>poison girl</i> . In ancient India, a woman sent by one king to poison another.
Yoga:	A spiritual system and practice leading to Samaadhi.
Yogah karmasu kaushalam:	One of Patanjali's Yoga <i>Sutras</i> (aphorisms) in his seminal work <i>The Yoga Sutra</i> , meaning "Yoga is dexterity in action."
Zeus:	The famous Greek God.

THE CHARACTERS

Minender	The Indo-Greek King, with his Capital in the city of Bactria (modern-day Balkh in North Afghanistan)
Titus	Greek Army Commander
Heliodorus	A Greek soldier
Brihadrath	King of Magadh of Maurya Dynasty
Pushyamitr	Army Chief of Magadh
Antonia	A Greek; wife of Titus
Batuk	A Nepali; former Indian soldier
Patanjali	Yoga Guru of Pushyamitr
Veersen	A Minister of Magadh
Sheelbhadr	A Minister of Magadh
Prajaamukh 1	People's Representative in the Magadh Court
Prajaamukh 2	People's Representative in the Magadh Court
Four Indian soldiers	
6–8 Greek citizens	
	Musicians, Dancers, Drummers, Conch players, Umbrella bearer, Courtiers, etc. in the royal procession of King Brihadrath



'ONCE IN INDIA': Photographs from an earlier production in India



SCENE 1

CHARACTERS

Minender || Titus || Heliodorus ||
A bunch of Greek citizens

[A Zeus temple in Bactria, where an idol/portrait of Zeus is in the center of the stage. Solemn religious music plays in the background. One torch is kept in front of the idol of Zeus. It highlights the mysterious darkness on the stage. Standing on one side of the idol is the Greek King Minender, and on the other side, a bunch of Greek citizens.]

Minender: O Zeus! You are our heavenly God. Our Lord. Our protector. All other gods are thy servants. Zeus! We supplicants are standing before thee with bowed heads.

ALL: O Almighty One! Be kind to us. Protect us.

Minender: The sun shining in the sky, the stars and the moon, they are all circumambulating you, Zeus. The mountains, the roaring seas, the abundance of rich crops, the dry deserts, trees swinging in the air, the birds soaring high in the sky—these are all the miracles that you have created.

ALL: O Zeus! We are thy petitioners.

Minender: O Zeus! I, Minender, the King of Bactria, swear by you, making you the witness that there will be only your kingdom in India. Their gods and goddesses will lose their existence after you defeat them. The dream of Alexander the Great to conquer India remains unfulfilled. O Zeus! Kindly bless me to realize this dream.

ALL: Zeus! We are thy supplicants.

Minender: Our ancestors went to India with Alexander the Great to conquer that country. Alexander died on his way back to Greece due to the injuries he sustained there. He ascended to heaven with an unrealized dream in his heart. But most of my ancestors did not return to Greece. They stayed behind in Bactria to avenge the death of Alexander the Great and the defeat of the Greek General Seleucus Nicator. You have entrusted me with this responsibility. I swear by thy holy feet, I will discharge it faithfully.

ALL: O Zeus! We are thy servants.

Minender: Titus is going to India to execute the conquest of the country.

[Titus comes forward and bows before the idol of Zeus.]

He will lay down the foundation for Zeus' empire in India.

[Titus kneels down.]

O Zeus! He is kissing thy feet.

ALL: O Zeus! We are thy sheep.

Minender: Just as lemon curdles milk, Titus will weaken the might of India by creating a rift between the Vaidics and the Buddhists. And then, O Zeus, your slave Minender will attack India and Paataliputr to realize the dream of Alexander and Seleucus. O Zeus, bless thy slave to conquer India.

ALL: O Zeus! We are thy slaves.

[All kneel down in prayer.]

[SCENE FADES OUT]



SCENE 2

CHARACTERS

Titus || Heliodorus

[In the spotlight on the front right corner of the stage, Heliodorus is seen standing with the maroon clothing of a Buddhist monk.]

Titus: *[entering]* Heliodorus, where is my *cheever*?
[Heliodorus hands over the Buddhist garb to Titus, who puts it on over his Greek dress.]

Titus: *[while wearing the Buddhist dress]* The bastards have detained one thousand Greek immigrants at the entrance gate to the city of Paataliputr. The soldiers have arrested them. My wife Antonia is amongst them.

Heliodorus: This is the mischief of that one man—that Pushyamitr Shung. So long as he remains the army chief of Magadh empire, he will not allow Zeus' Kingdom in this country.

Titus: He will have to be dealt with first. He is our enemy. Enemy number one.

Heliodorus: And Indians?

Titus: These Indian people, they are very greedy. Their eyes get blinded by the effulgence of gold. They cannot see anything beyond it. Throw some gold coins at every check-post; all hurdles will automatically get cleared away. But here in Paataliputr, Pushyamitr Shung's problem will have to be solved one day. [*In changed tone*]
Where is the maala?
[*Heliodorus hands him the rosary.*]
Lo! I have become a Buddhist monk.
[*In lighter vein*] "*Buddham Sharanam Gacchaami*" (I take refuge in Buddha).

[SCENE FADES OUT]



SCENE 3

CHARACTERS

Brihadrath || Pushyamitr || Titus || Heliodorus

[Maurya King Brihadrath is sitting on a royal divan with his eyes closed in a meditative posture. Heliodorus is standing behind him as his bodyguard, with a lance.]

Pushyamitr: *[entering]* *Mahaaraaj*, I bow before your lotus feet.

Brihadrath: What brings our army chief here? Tell us, *Senaapati* Pushyamitr, what news have you brought?

Pushyamitr: The news is worrisome.

- Brihadrath: Worrisome?
- Pushyamitr: The Greek King Minender is preparing to invade India.
- Brihadrath: You told us about this before.
- Pushyamitr: Yes, but the latest intelligence further confirms the earlier reports.
[*King Brihadrath closes his eyes and goes into meditation.*]
The army of the Greek King was composed of Persians, Turks and Greeks. Now we've learned that they have also recruited ferocious tribesmen, the Pashtoons, to their forces. These Pashtoons trespass into our territories and indulge in plundering and killing innocent civilians. Our complaints to the Greek officials are of no avail. Instead, they made false counter allegations that it is we who are violating the boundary and indulging in acts of violence.
[*Upon seeing the King in meditation*] Sorry, I will come some other time. *Mahaaraaj* is in meditation.
- Brihadrath: [*with eyes closed*] Keep speaking, *Senaapati*, keep speaking. I am listening.
- Pushyamitr: As you desire, Sir...
- Brihadrath: [*opens his eyes*] *Senaapati*, I have taken birth into this world. But while doing everything that this world demands of me, my *dhyaan* always remains at the feet of Buddha.

Pushyamitr: I am aware of that, Sir.

Brihadrath: It is true that I am a King, but my heart does not rejoice in the battledrums of war. It is the *Dhamma-ghosh*, the trumpet of *Dharma*, that we Buddhists enjoy. I am a Chakravartee King, because I have turned the wheel of righteousness and taken refuge in Buddha. [*Changing his tone*] Now, continue with what you were saying.

Pushyamitr: The Greek King of Bactria is planning to attack India.

Brihadrath: I have heard this. What else do you have to say? [*He closes his eyes in meditation*].

Pushyamitr: *Mahaaraaj*, we will have to do something about it. History will not pardon us if we sit quietly. Destiny has entrusted the responsibility of protecting and defending this country to you. The aliens may attack us, destroy our homes, violate our women and hang our youth. It is better to commit suicide than to face such a possibility.

Brihadrath: [*opens his eyes*] No such thing will ever happen.

Pushyamitr: Sir...

Brihadrath: The Greeks will never attack us. I know this.

Pushyamitr: [*surrendering*] Certainly.

Brihadrath: What happens in the future, I come to know

beforehand. I hear an inner voice and get to know everything.

Pushyamitra: *Mahaaraaj*, you are great!

Brihadrath: Don't worry at all. [*Confidently*] Whatever I say is inviolable. It is bound to happen. [*He goes back into meditation.*]

Pushyamitra: [*hesitating*] There is one more piece of information, *Mahaaraaj*.

Brihadrath: [*opening his eyes*] What else is left to be said?

Pushyamitra: A group of one thousand Greek men and women, all illegal infiltrators, have entered India. They have reached the city's boundary, where they were accosted and arrested.

Brihadrath: [*shocked*] They have been arrested! But why? What is their crime? Have they killed someone? Was there any violence?

Pushyamitra: No. But they have arrived here illegally, by crossing our boundaries.

Brihadrath: What boundary? Did Buddha make these boundaries? They are neither guilty of bloodshed, nor of looting. Yet they have been subjected to the torture of prison! No...no...we cannot inflict such cruelty on non-violent people.

Pushyamitra: But they have entered illegally. They are infiltrators.
[*Titus enters.*]

Brihadrath: *Bhante* Aananda, come. You have arrived at an opportune time.

Titus: *Mahaaraaj*, what's the command?

Brihadrath: Our army chief is saying that a group of Greek immigrants has reached Paataliputr.

Pushyamitr: Illegally.

Titus: My sister is also part of that group.

Pushyamitr: Your sister, *Bhante*!

Titus: Yes, my sister Antonia.

Brihadrath: Your sister is imprisoned! This is grossly unfair. No, no, Pushyamitr. She will have to be released.

Pushyamitr: As commanded by *Mahaaraaj*, the sister of *Bhante*, Antonia, will be released.

Titus: What about the other Greeks? They have come seeking your refuge. Your *dharma* is to protect those who seek refuge with you.

Pushyamitr: If Greek infiltrators keep violating India's boundaries...

Titus: Where are the boundaries? There are no boundaries. Boundaries are imposed by the human heart. *Dharma* has no boundaries. Lord Buddha had said *Bahujan Hitaaye: Bahujan Sukhaaye*. "O monks! Go in all the

four directions for the welfare and happiness of the people.” There were no boundaries for Buddha. He commanded that we transcend the boundaries of all countries for the sake of humanity.

Pushyamitr: Many such settlements of illegal Greek immigrants have come up in the Maurya Empire. In every settlement, they have Greek temples. Every week, the Greeks assemble there...

Titus: Every week they assemble there to worship and receive the teachings of love, compassion, kindness and non-violence.

Pushyamitr: No, they go there to dream and plan a Greek takeover of India.

Titus: [*vehemently*] That’s a lie.

Pushyamitr: This is the truth. This is the secret intelligence report, *Mahaaraaj*.

Titus: It is a false allegation. [*appealing*] *Mahaaraaj!* *Senaapati* is Indian and Vaidic. He hates us because we are Greeks and Buddhists.

Pushyamitr: [*draws his sword angrily*] If you speak one more word... [*He places the sword against Titus’ chest.*] this sword will be in your chest.
[*Titus closes his eyes in fear and nervously moves the rosary quickly in his fingers.*]
For me, the Indians, the Greeks, the Buddhists, the Vaidics, the Braahmans, and the Shramans—

all are the same and equal. But above all is my country, the Mauryan empire. Defending the country is my foremost duty. I will destroy whosoever will come between me and my duty or make false allegations against me. I cannot accept a falsehood as a truth in order to appease anyone.

[*Silence for some time.*]

Brihadrath: I agree with you, *Senaapati*. *Dharm-mahaamaatra* Aananda has unwittingly accused you. Forget about it and release all the Greeks.

Pushyamitr: [*putting the sword back into the sheath*] The *Mahaaraaj's* orders will be carried out, but...

Brihadrath: But?

Pushyamitr: *Dharm-mahaamaatra* will have to apologize first.

Titus: My heart is full and overflowing with the milk of human kindness. Non-violence is my life. Nobody is Greek or Indian—Buddhist or Vaidic. All are one. They have the same grace of *Tathaagat*. Don't listen to words, *Senaapati*—look into my heart.

Pushyamitr: *Bhante!* Apologize.

Titus: My heart is brimming with compassion and love...

Pushyamitr: [*sternly*] Apologize.

Titus: [*nervously*] I apologize.
 [*The King goes into meditation.*]

Pushyamitr: The orders of the King will be obeyed. All Greeks
 will be released. I beg your permission to leave.
 [*He bows and exits.*]

[SCENE FADES OUT]