



**Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti hi!**

**Saligrama K. Aithal**

It was dark, past midnight.

Lost in a pathless wood, Shanti at last saw diode led light at a distance.

She walked towards the lighted area. She found herself at the western end of the National Mall, Washington, DC, near Lincoln Memorial, across the Washington Monument.

The sight of the statue drove away her depression. She wiped her tears with her loose upper garment and walked towards the statue.

She couldn't believe what she saw: Streams of tears were rolling down Lincoln's eyes and running into streams to the Reflecting

Pool. She wiped her eyes once again with both hands, thinking that her sight was somehow clouded from her own wet eyes.

She heard Lincoln sobbing.

With a rush of emotions, Shanti climbed four score and seven steps from the Reflecting Pool to the chamber of the statue.

Shanti wasn't imagining things. What she saw and heard was correct.

Quickly, she removed her shirt, clambered the platform, and finally reached the pedestal, gasping. Standing on the pedestal and stretching her hands as high as she could, she reached the face and began to wipe Lincoln's tears.

"Hon'ble President Abraham Lincoln, why are you crying? Please don't cry!" implored the visitor.

"Please call me Abe," Lincoln said, and asked Shanti to sit by his side. He asked Shanti, "May I know your name. You seemed to be crying too. Why were *you* crying?"

"My name is Shanti. I am one of your 'people' now."

Shanti's original home was India. She became an American citizen after completing her studies in the United States and taking up a job.

A long conversation followed.

Lincoln said, "Shanti, I feel lonely."

Surprised, Shanti said, "I am surprised to hear you say this. Almost all the countries of the world today have democratic governments of the people, by the people, and for the people, exactly how you described a democracy. People cast their votes and elect their representatives who form the governments. You should be jubilant."

"Theoretically, democracies, yes!" Lincoln said. "Unfortunately, the voters don't meet my expectations, nor their leaders who use all conceivable means to seek votes to get elected—gerrymandering, creating vote banks, bribery, and so on."

Shanti didn't need an explanation. She had herself felt that way.

Didn't she know that Lincoln, after the Civil War, wanted the people of the country to unite as one belonging to a nation? The spell he cast no doubt worked for a while, but did all really unite? Doesn't one see, for example, the divide between northerners and southerners, blacks and whites, mainstream and minorities?

Based on her experience of her original homeland, she said, "True, the voters don't see beyond their own narrow personal views and interests when they cast their votes in support of a candidate. The well-being of the country on the whole often goes beyond their vision. The leaders are too eager to dance to their tunes instead of enlarging their people's vision. Most of them are really made of the same clay. They plant their own seeds of viral vision, water them, and see them grow into plants and then into sturdy and stubborn trees. In fact, the leaders make every possible effort to protect these crooked trees so that they could find shelter in the shadow of these trees from the heat of the sun."

Lincoln said, "I understand your feelings. How I wish political leaders everywhere help people see the inclusiveness of the DNA in the blood flowing in their veins, the veins carved by the work of one God in one case, and three hundred and thirty million gods, if my statistical information is correct, in the other!"

Shanti was amazed by Lincoln's knowledge of Indian history and of culture.

"You took people, I guess, thinking that they are governed by mutuality of interests, and taking for granted Civility, Affability and Amity exist towards one another. You overlooked the fact that while people are governed by their personal and group interests, they do not ignore the national and global interests, and that neither side can flourish, singly, alone," Shanti said.

"Yes, I took the meaning of the word 'people' for granted, and thought it goes without saying the rest in so many words," Lincoln

replied. “Anyway, the time when I said it demanded this assumption on my part,” he added.

Lincoln asked Shanti, “Why were you sobbing and crying by the way?”

It was break of dawn. The sky was getting brighter and the morning twilight was heralding the beginning of a new day.

When Lincoln noticed visitors to the Memorial started arriving, he asked Shanti “Please come another day, dear. I do want to hear what is hurting you.”

Shanti responded, “Yes, I will, and very soon. Thank you. Have a wonderful day!”

Before Shanti could complete her parting words, Lincoln said, “May God bless you!” and chanted “*Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti hi!*”

Chanting the words, he turned back into the statue of marble ready to receive the words of praise and gratitude of the world, pleasing though they were to the ears, received sadly because the promise mostly missing from the thankful expressions absent the fact “the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

## Saligrama K. Aithal

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Saligrama K. Aithal has published six collections of short stories *Many in One, One in Many, Inside India, Overlapping Worlds, Passage to More than India, Make in India and Other Short Stories* and *Home and the World*. He has also published a collection of poems *Flowers and Weeds*. His publications include a literary biography *Riyana: The Child Once Everyone Was*, and a study of Toni Morrison’s fiction *Toni Morrison Novelist*.

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