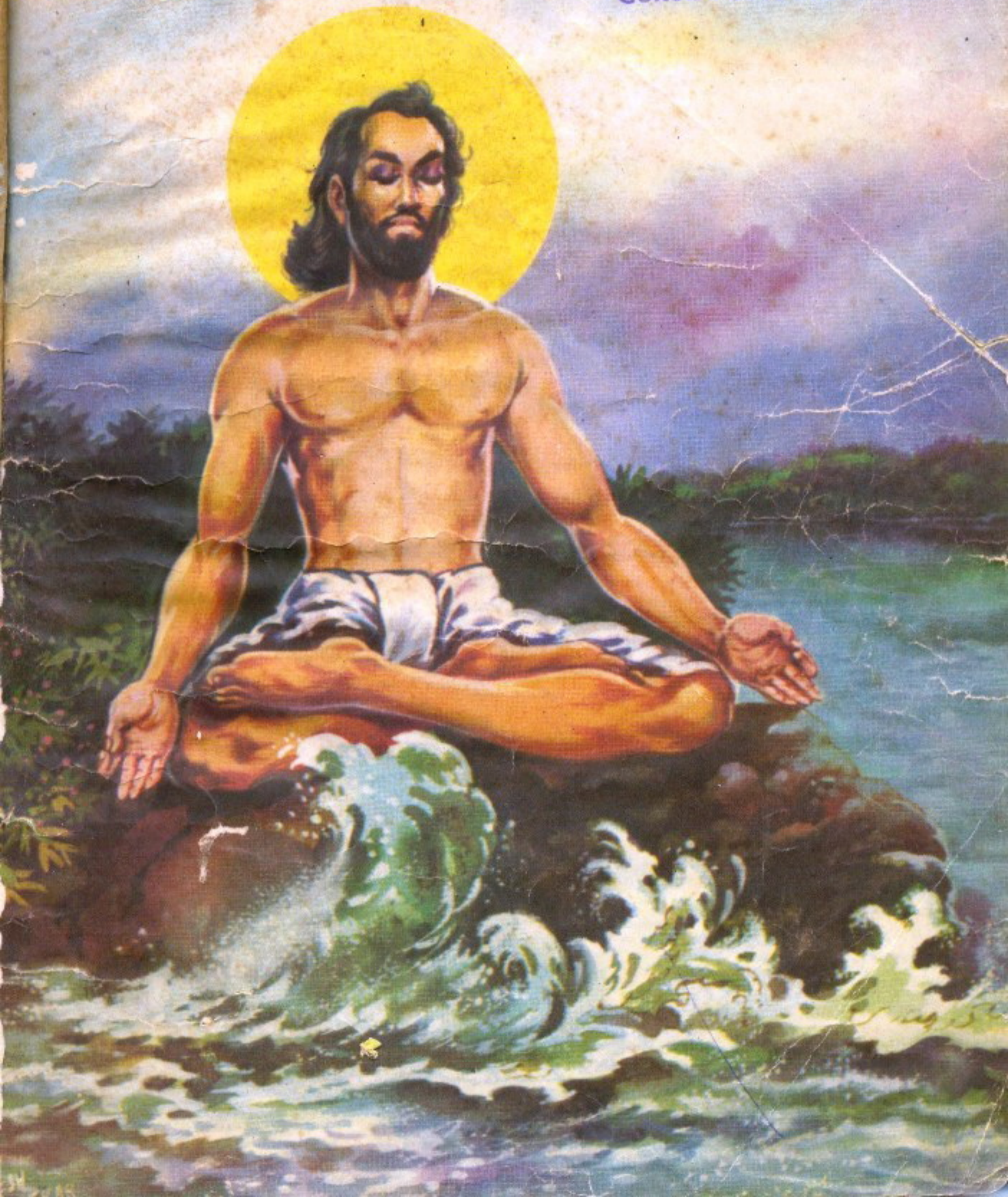


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Guru Ravidas

Guru Ravidas (c. A.D. 1450-1540) was the son of a cobbler who lived in the village of Mandua Deeh near Varanasi. He is also known as Raidas, Rohidas, Ruidas and so on.

Very few authenticated facts of his life are known. His extant poems give us an idea, however hazy, of the poet-saint who attained union with God. It is said that Kabir, Nanak, Dhanna and Meera were his contemporaries and that when he was very old, Guru Nanak, then a young man, came to pay his respects to him.

Ravidas' philosophy is a blend of the different faiths and beliefs of his day. He considered differentiation between man and man on grounds of caste, religion and worldly possessions as artificial and exhorted his followers—commonly known as Ravidasis—to strive for a classless society. Ravidas renounced the comforts of the world but not his worldly duties. He did not live on alms, as other saints did, but earned his living as a shoe-maker. Obviously Ravidas firmly believed in the sanctity of honest labour.

The following pages tell the story of Ravidas based mainly on his poems.

*

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GURU RAVIDAS

AT KASHI, A DEVOUT COUPLE
CAME EVERY MORNING FOR A
HOLY DIP IN THE GANGA
AND THEY UTTERED BUT
ONE PRAYER.

O SURYA,
MIGHTIER THAN ALL,
GRANT US A
CHILD.

O GREAT RAVI*,
MAY A CHILD
BE BORN TO
US.

YOU
SHALL HAVE
YOUR WISH.

SANDAN
SWAMI...

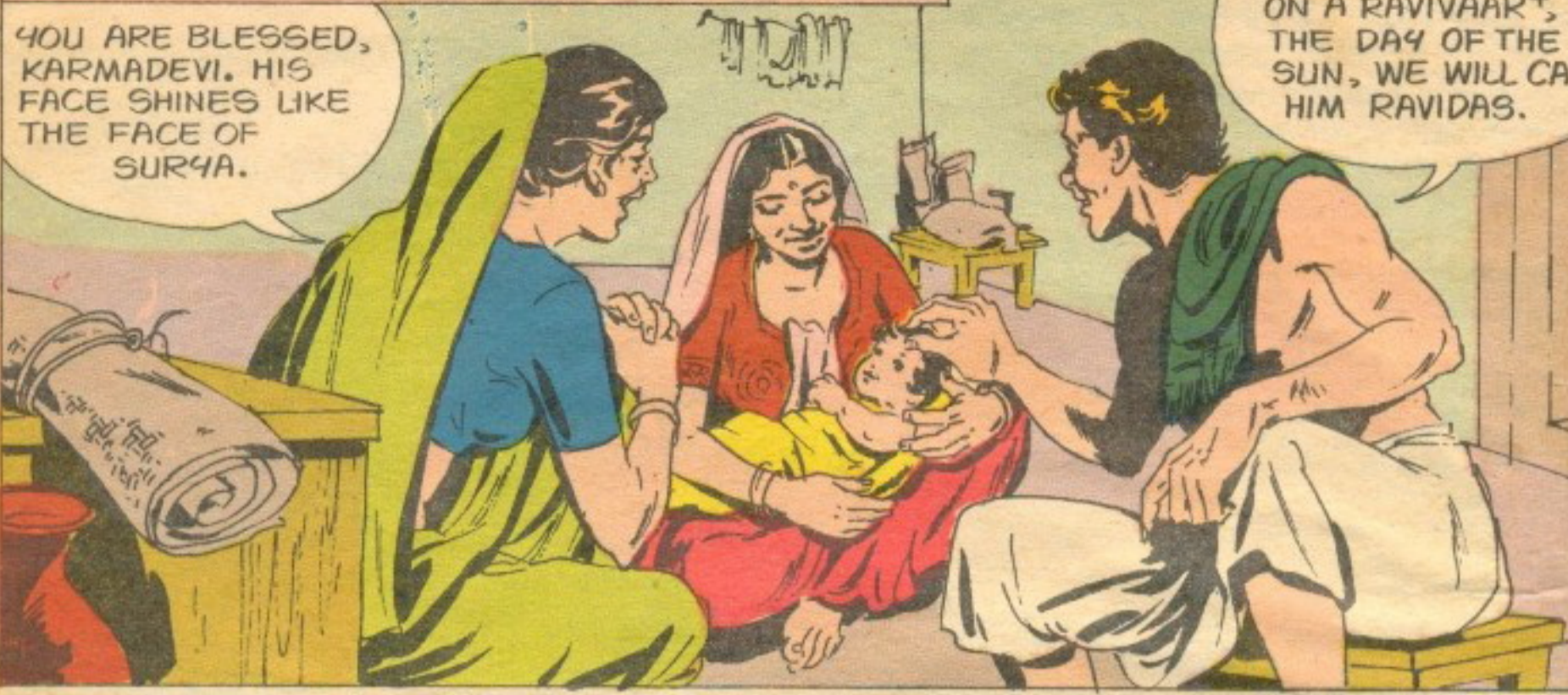
REJOICE, GOOD PEOPLE,
FOR A SON IS SOON
TO BE BORN TO
YOU.

* ANOTHER NAME FOR THE SUN GOD.

AND SURE ENOUGH, IN COURSE OF TIME —

YOU ARE BLESSED, KARMADEVI. HIS FACE SHINES LIKE THE FACE OF SURYA.

AS HE WAS BORN ON A RAVIVAAR⁺, THE DAY OF THE SUN, WE WILL CALL HIM RAVIDAS.



THE CHILD RAVIDAS GREW UP AND BEGAN TO HELP HIS FATHER, RAGHAV CHAMAR, IN HIS WORK.



EVERY FEW DAYS, RAVIDAS, WITH HIS FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, WENT TO THE NEARBY TOWN OF VARANASI. ONE DAY —

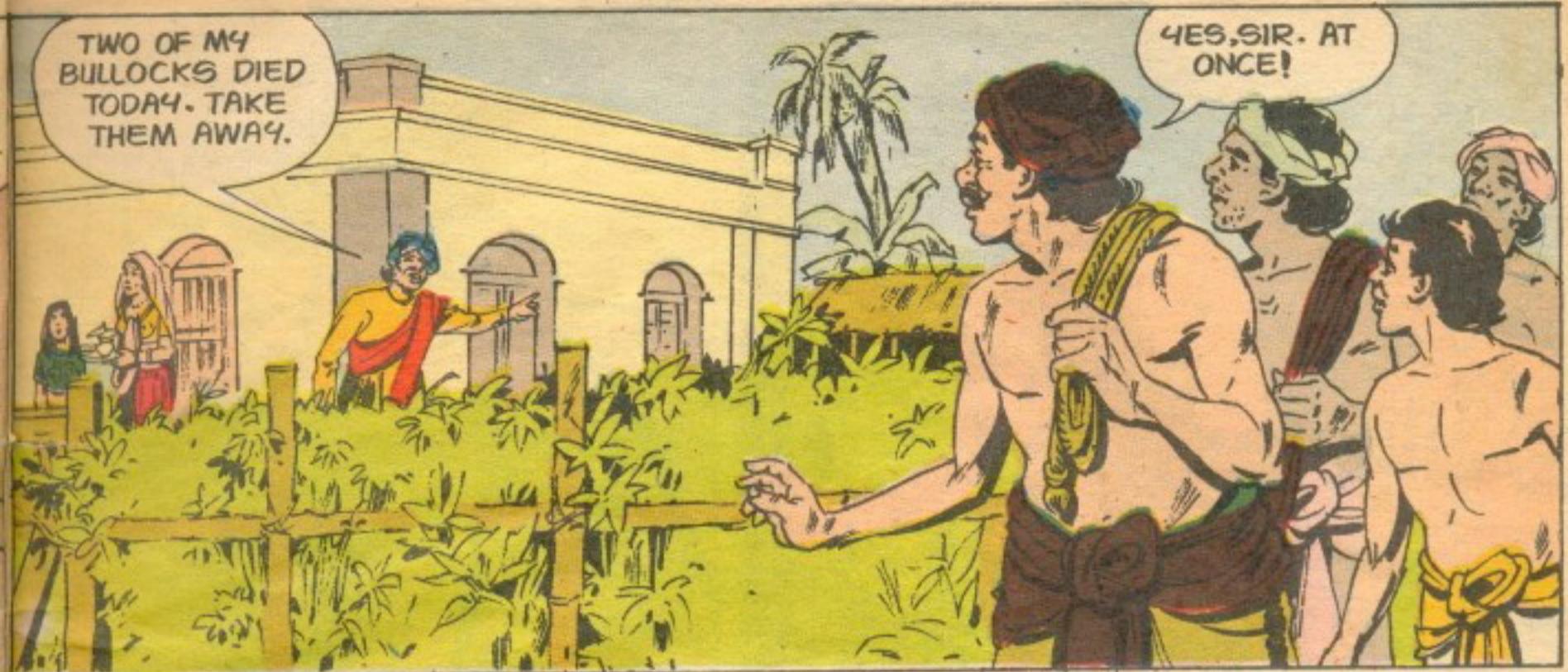
HO, THERE! HO... YOU CHAMARS*!



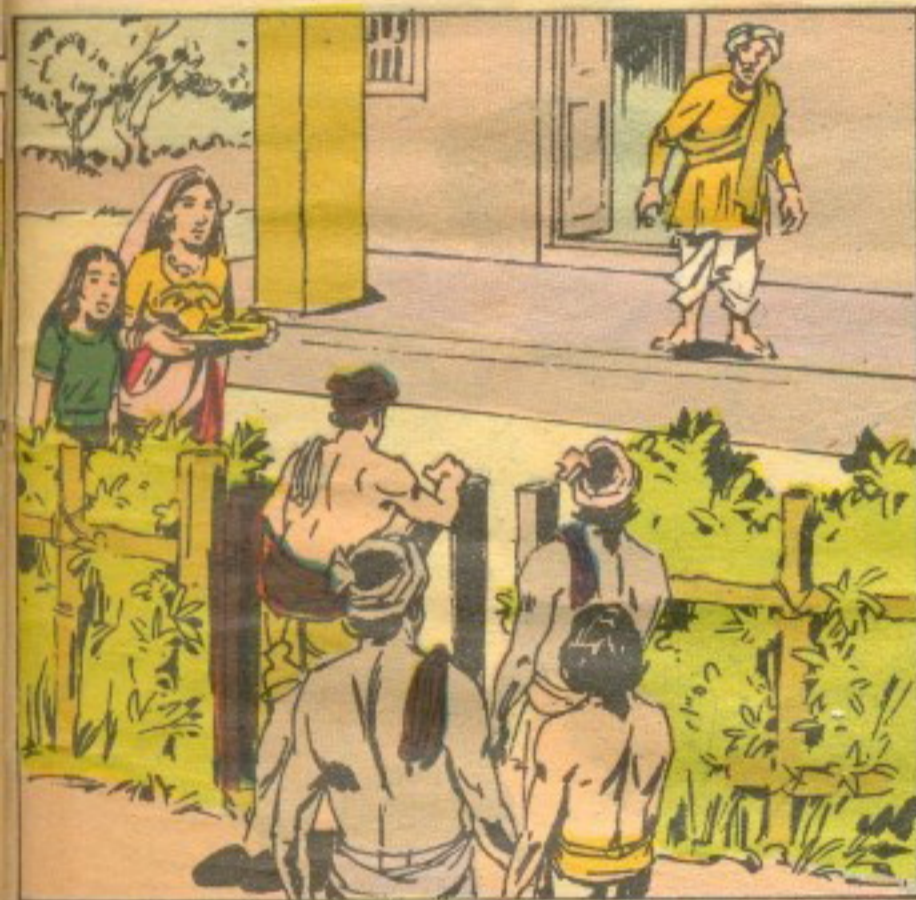
+ SUNDAY. * COBBLERS

TWO OF MY BULLOCKS DIED TODAY. TAKE THEM AWAY.

YES, SIR. AT ONCE!



WAIT!
WAIT!



DO YOU WANT TO BE POLLUTED?
MOVE ON. GET INTO THE HOUSE. QUICK.





JUST THEN, ANOTHER CHAMAR CAME UP.

SON, WE WILL HANDLE THE BULLOCKS. YOU GO TO THE TOWN-GATE. THERE IS A DEAD CALF THERE WHICH WILL BE EASY FOR YOU TO CARRY.



RAVIDAS, DID YOU HEAR ME?



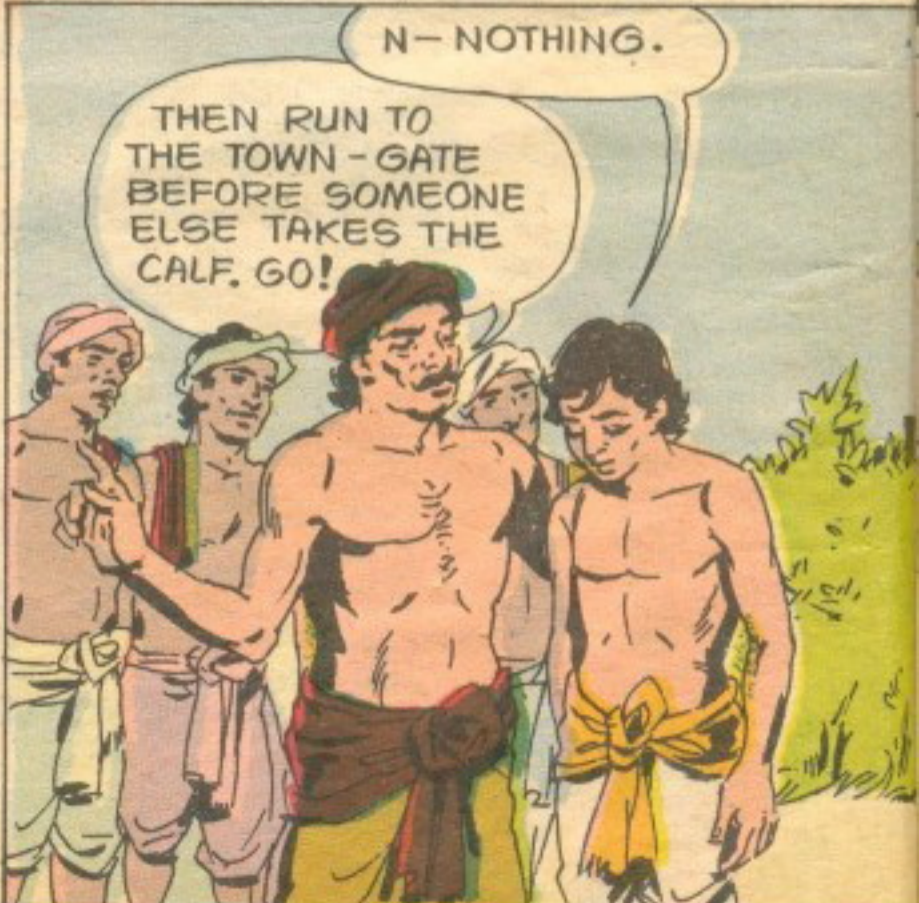
UH...? WHAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY?

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?

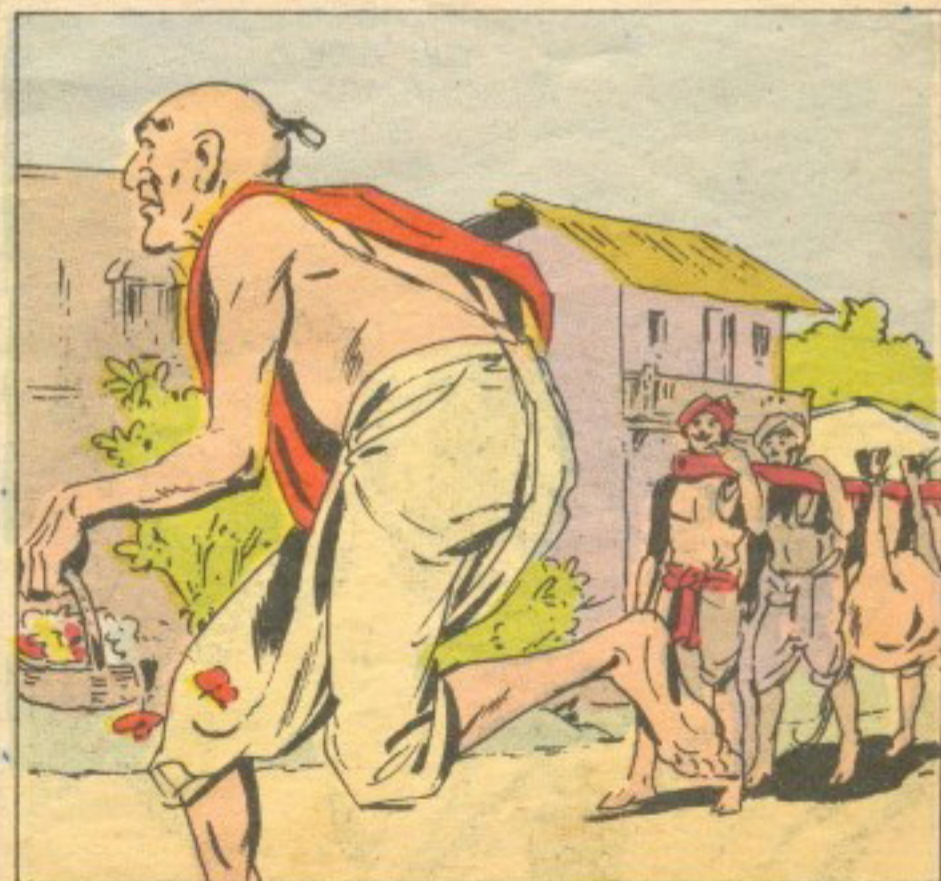
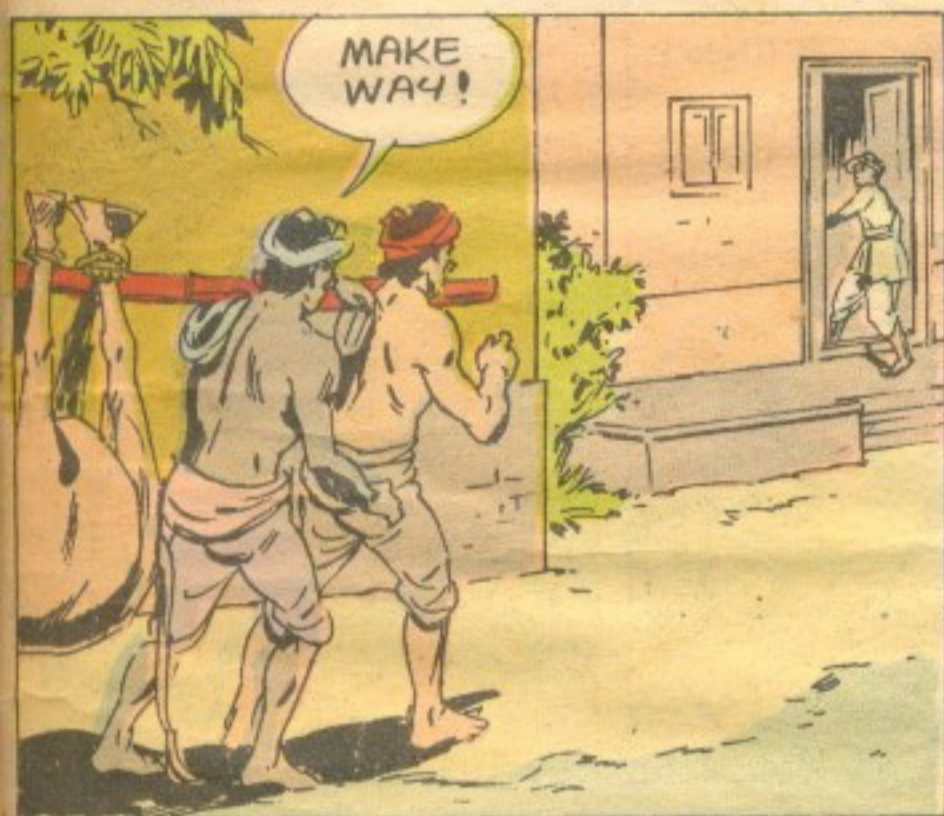


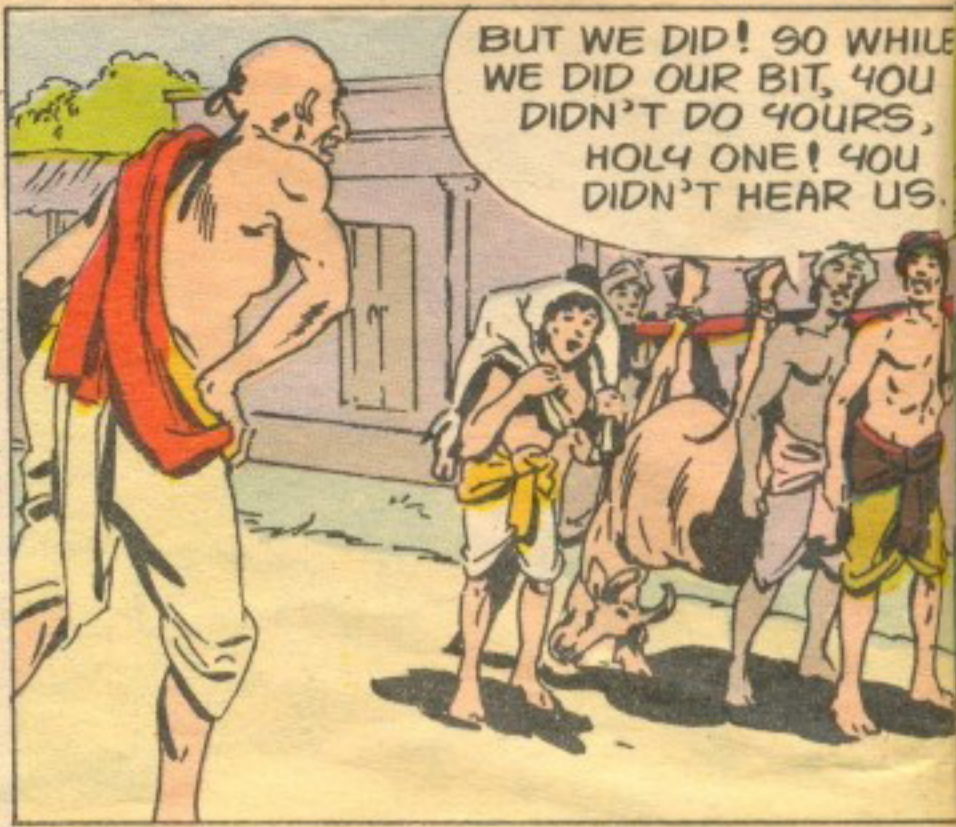
N- NOTHING.

THEN RUN TO THE TOWN-GATE BEFORE SOMEONE ELSE TAKES THE CALF. GO!



SOON, THE CHAMARS WERE READY TO GO BACK TO THEIR VILLAGE.





HOLD AN UMBRELLA
RESPECTFULLY
OVER YOUR
HEAD?

HA,
HA, HA!

COME ON,
CHEER
UP!

CHEER UP!
SMILE!

HOW CAN YOU LAUGH WHEN
INSULTS ARE HEAPED UPON
US LIKE THIS? ARE WE NOT
SUPPOSED TO HAVE
ANY FEELINGS?

RAVIDAS,
YOU DON'T
KNOW HOW
WE BURN
WITHIN!

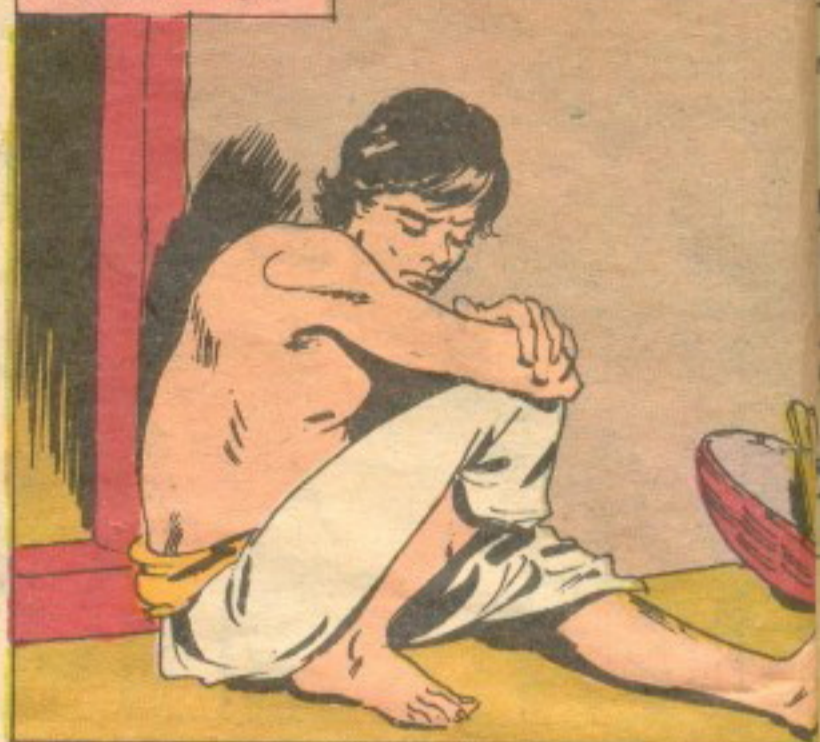
IF WE SHOW A SMILING
FACE TO THE WORLD,
IT'S BECAUSE IT
LESSENS OUR PAIN.
TEARS WON'T HELP
US... NEVER!

BUT HOW LONG WILL
WE SUFFER...
SUFFER WITH
A SMILE?

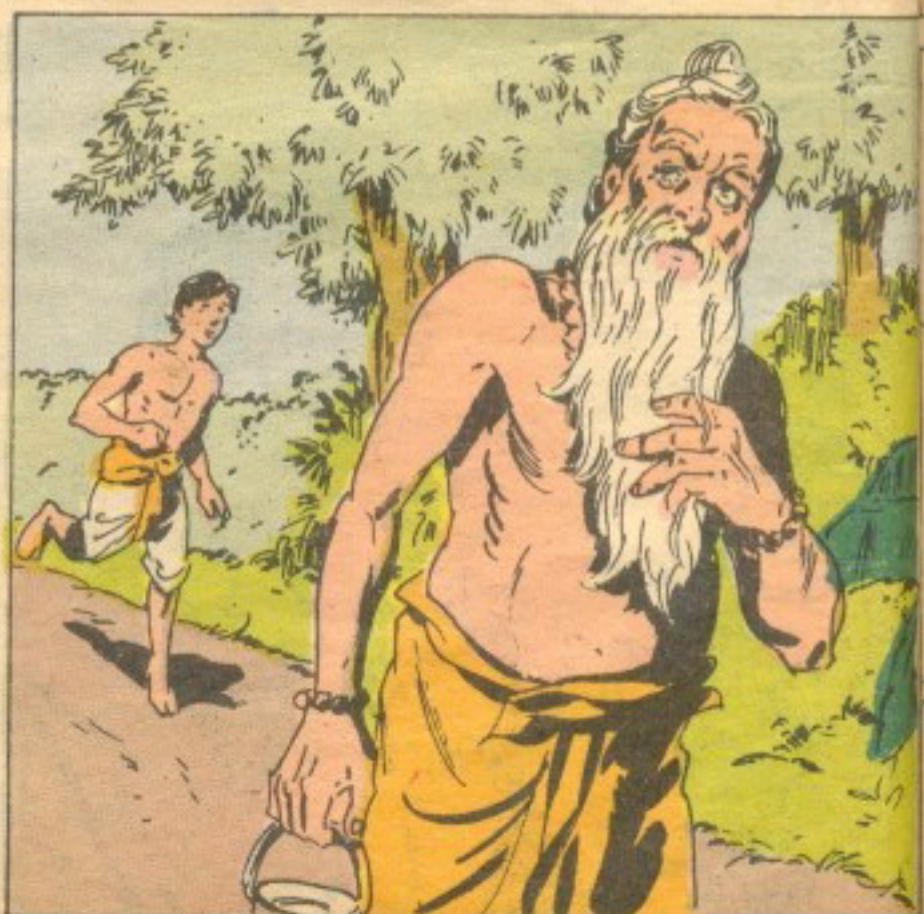
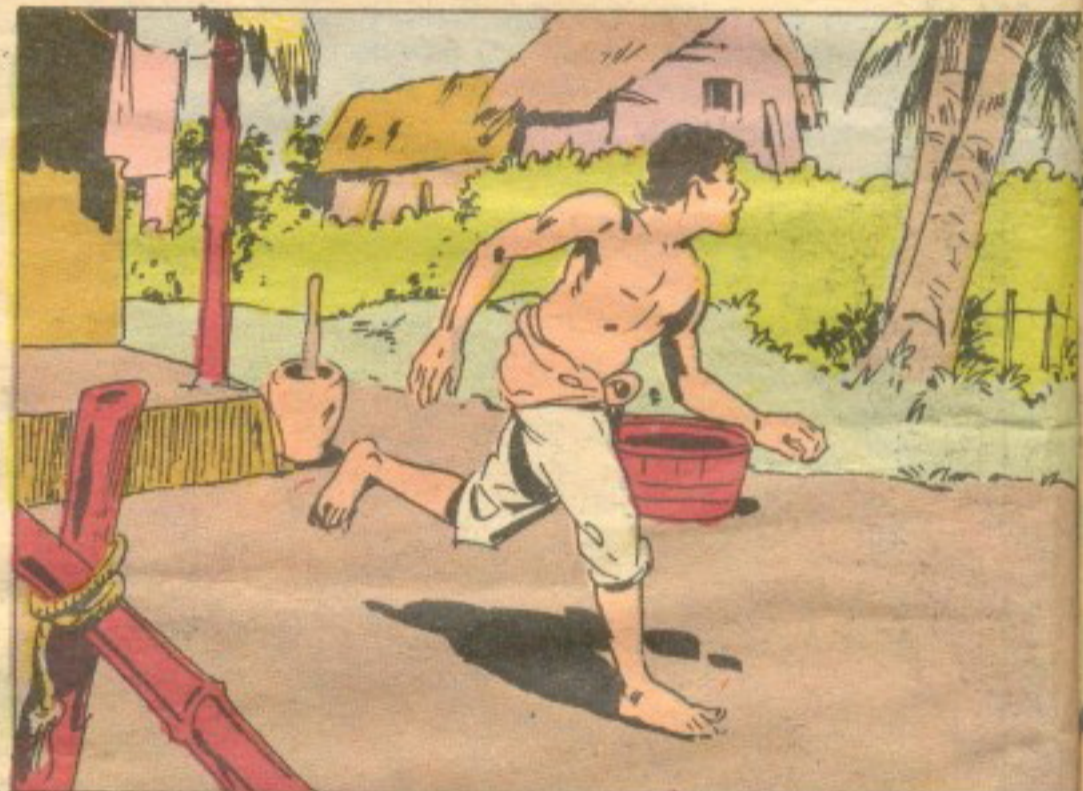
FROM THAT DAY ON, RAVIDAS STOPPED GOING OUT ALTOGETHER.

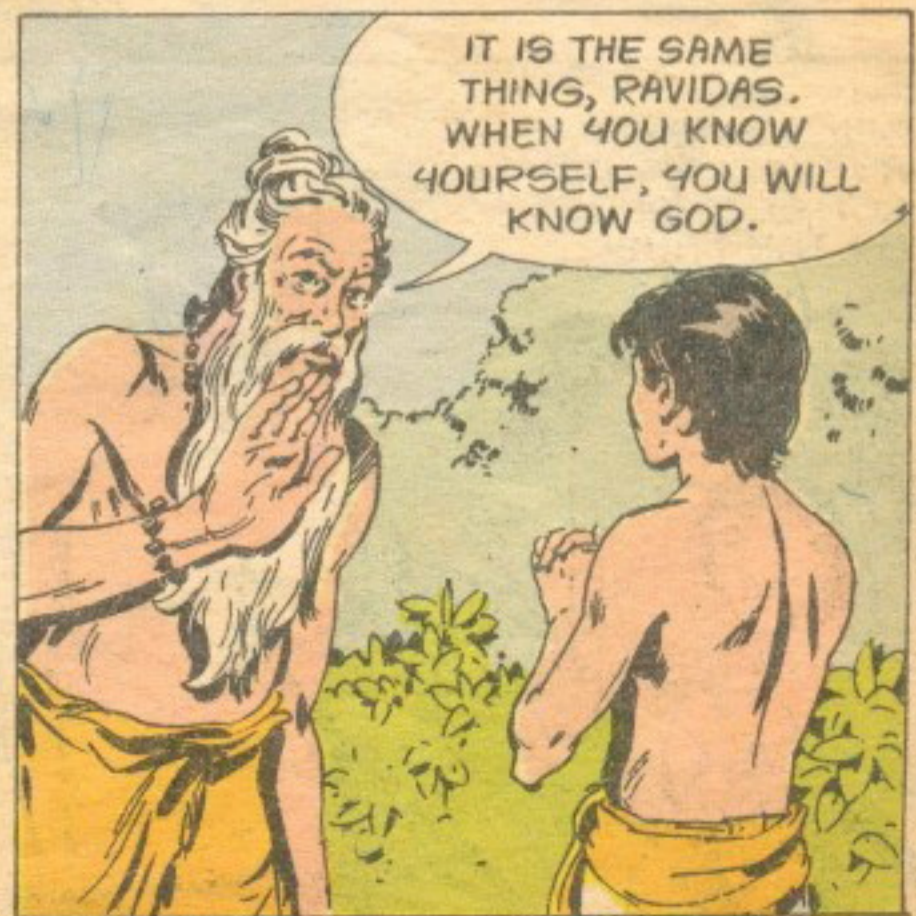
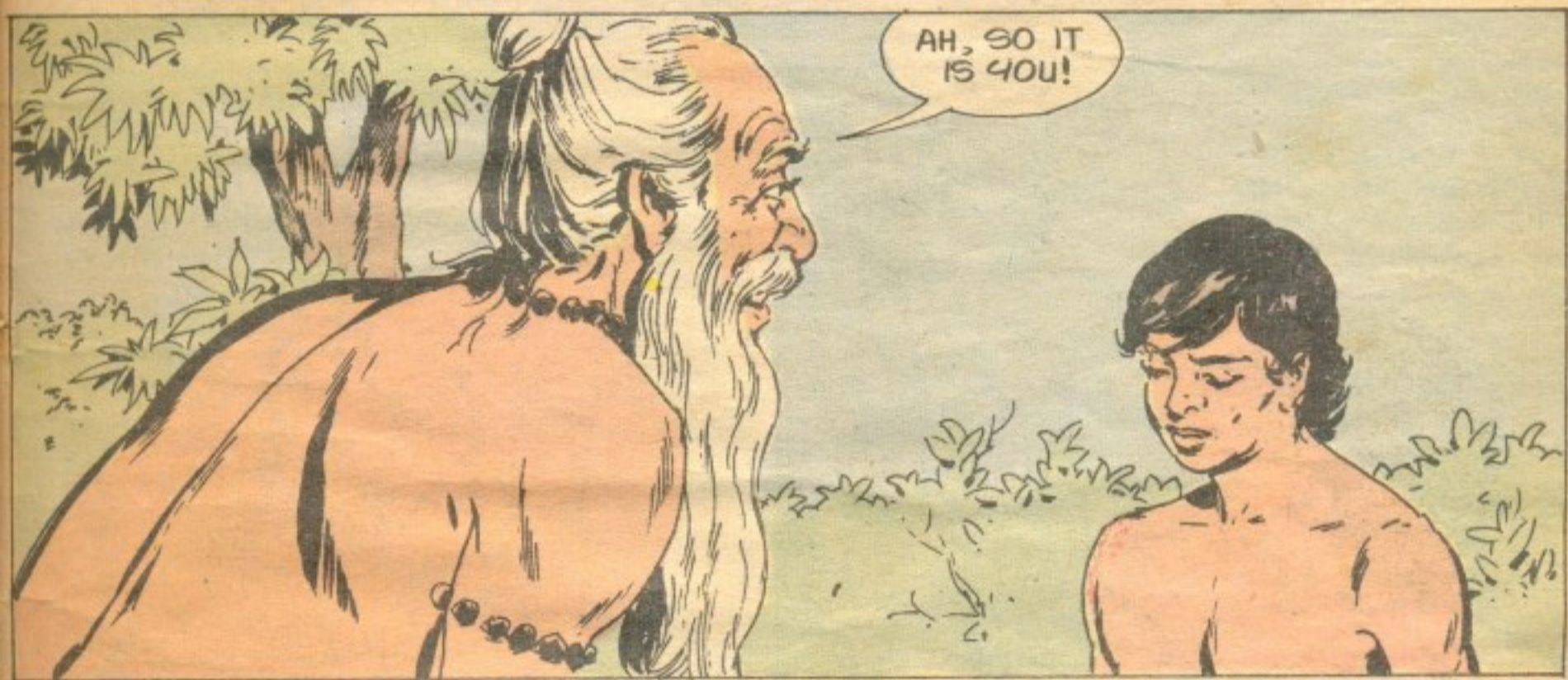


ALL DAY HE SAT, LOST IN HIS OWN THOUGHTS.



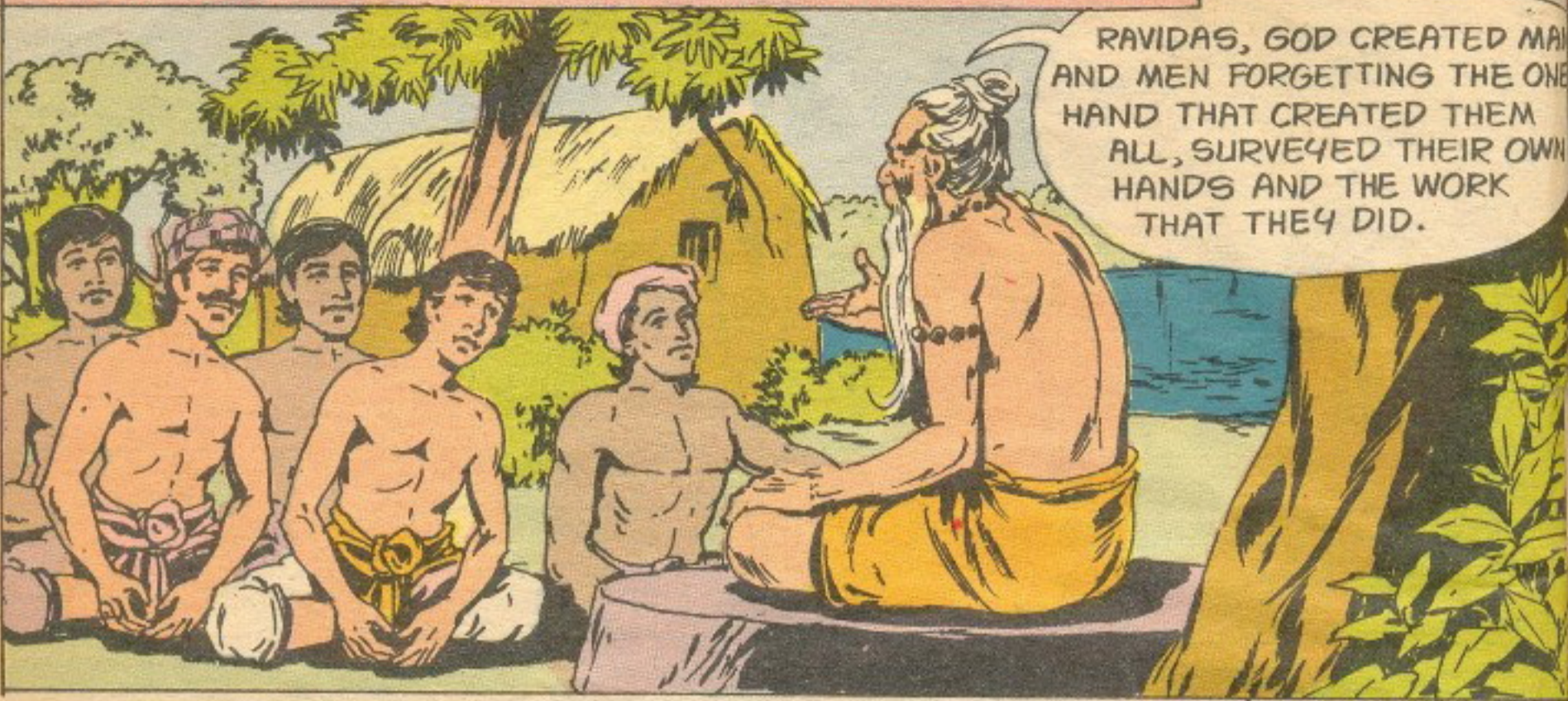
SUDDENLY, ONE DAY —





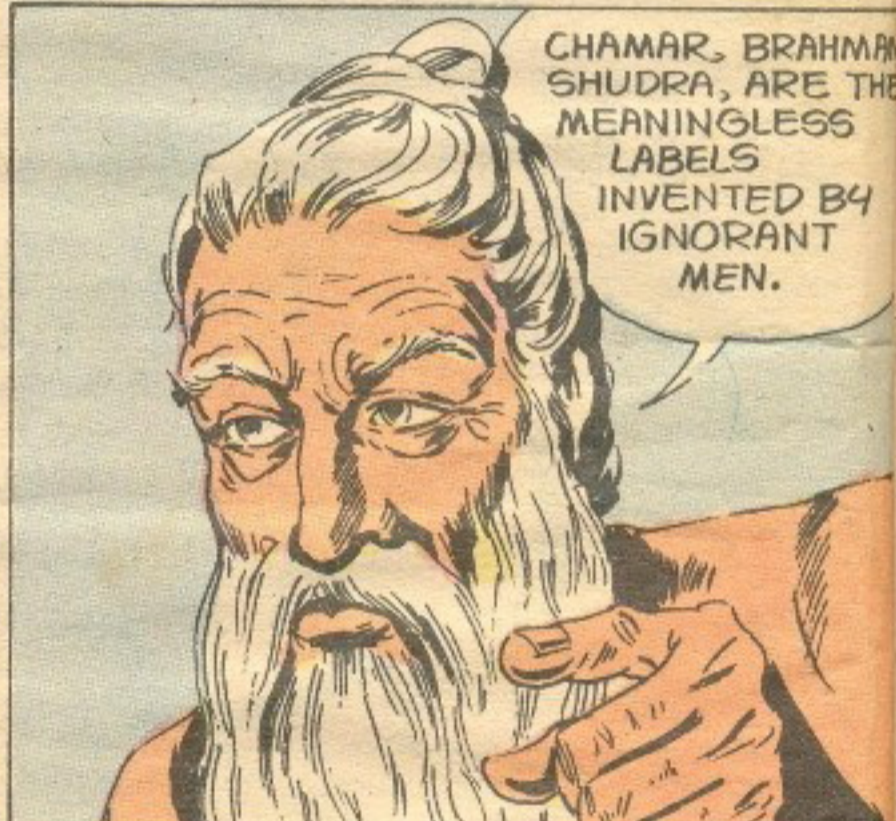
SANDAN SWAMI ACCEPTED RAVIDAS AS ONE OF HIS DISCIPLES.

RAVIDAS, GOD CREATED MAN AND MEN FORGETTING THE ONE HAND THAT CREATED THEM ALL, SURVEYED THEIR OWN HANDS AND THE WORK THAT THEY DID.



AND ACCORDING TO THE WORK THEY DID, THEY CLASSIFIED THEMSELVES AND GAVE EACH OTHER LABELS.

CHAMAR, BRAHMAN SHUDRA, ARE THE MEANINGLESS LABELS INVENTED BY IGNORANT MEN.



SEE YOURSELF AS YOU ARE. DO NOT SEE YOURSELF BY THE LABEL.

SEE... MYSELF... AS I AM... SEE MYSELF... AS I AM...



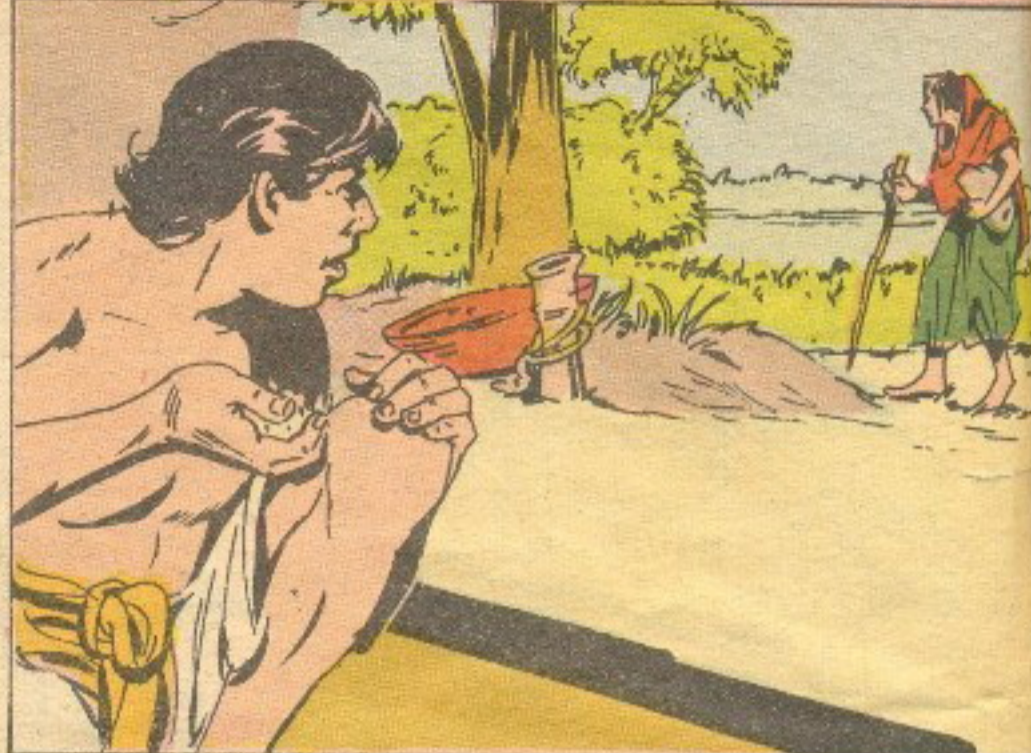
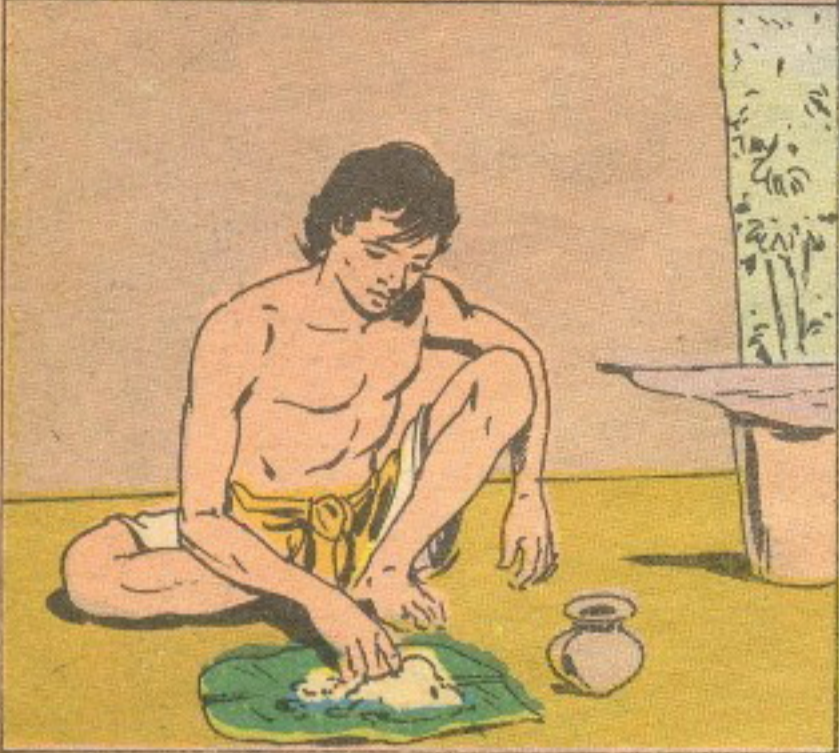
IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, A CHANGE CAME OVER RAVIDAS.



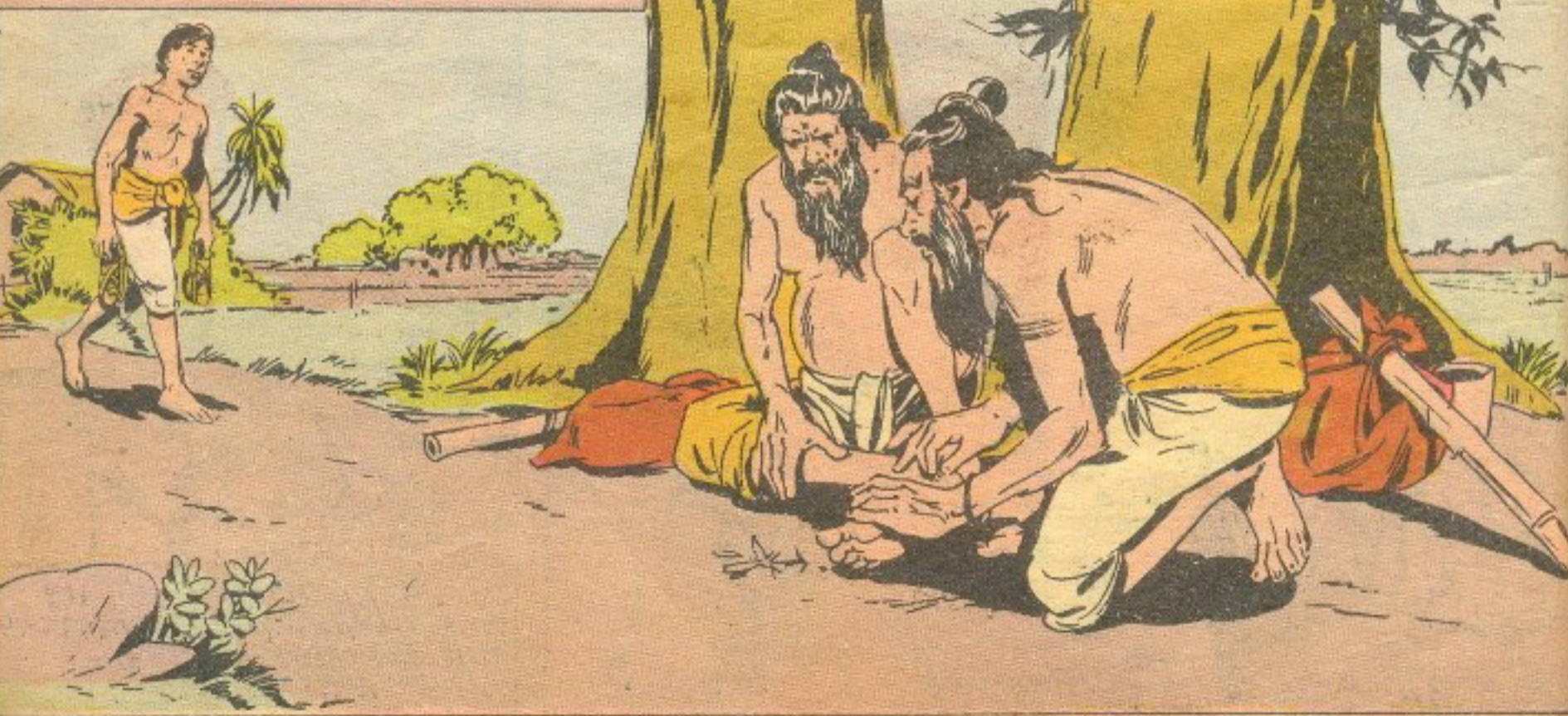
IN SEEING HIMSELF AS HE WAS, RAVIDAS HAD FORGOTTEN THE CHAMAR HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE.

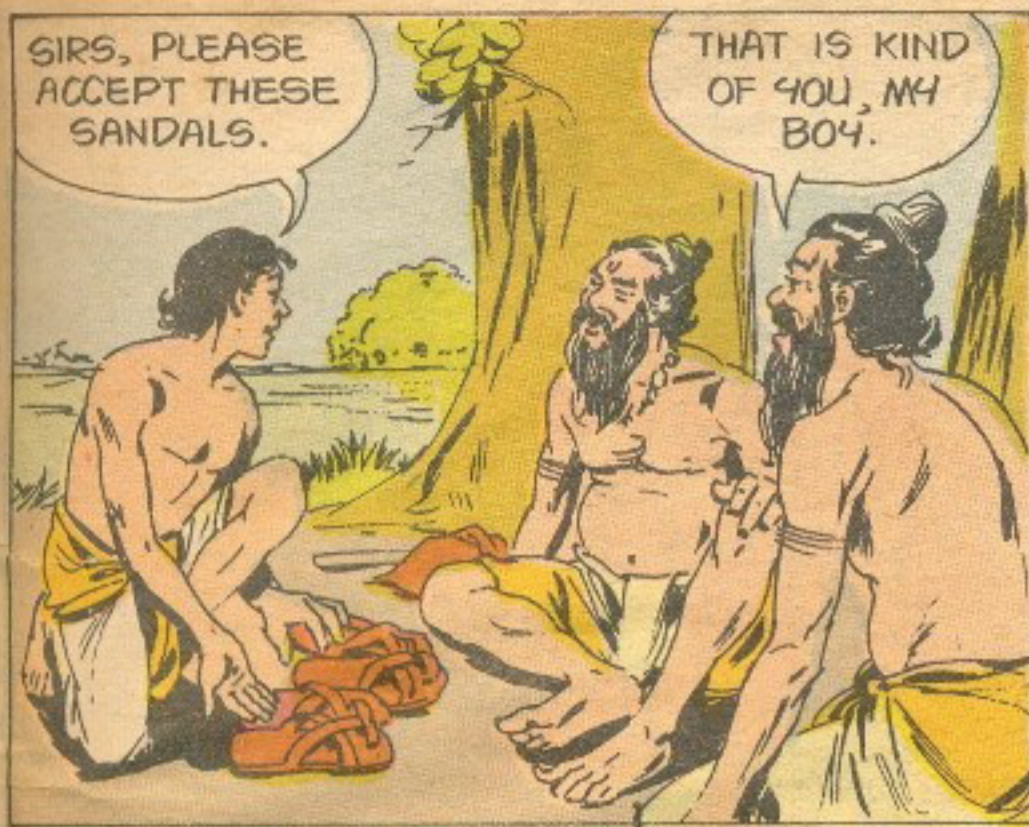
AND AS HE GREW TO KNOW HIMSELF...

... HE BEGAN TO SEE HIMSELF IN OTHERS.



AND SO IT BEGAN! ONE DAY —



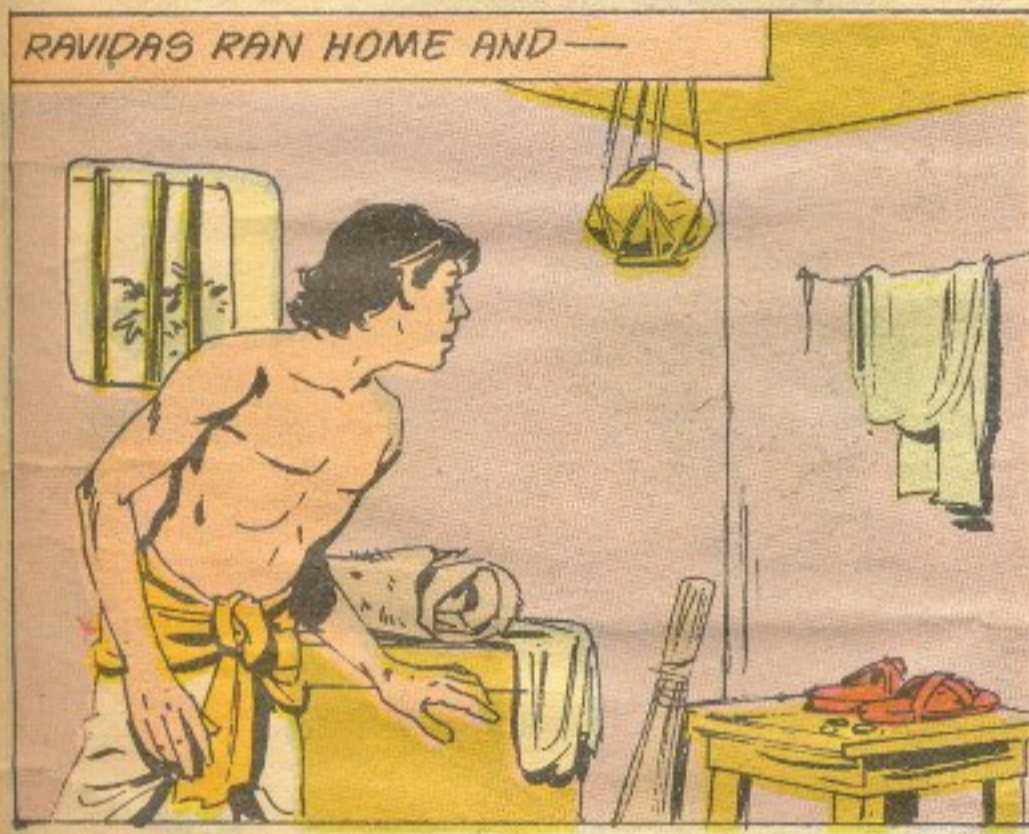


SIRS, PLEASE ACCEPT THESE SANDALS.

THAT IS KIND OF YOU, MY BOY.



AS HE WALKED AWAY —



RAVIDAS RAN HOME AND —



THEN HE RAN BACK TO THE WOMAN.

PLEASE TAKE THIS MONEY AND BUY THE CHILD SOME MILK ...

MAY GOD BLESS YOU FOR THINKING OF THE NEEDY.

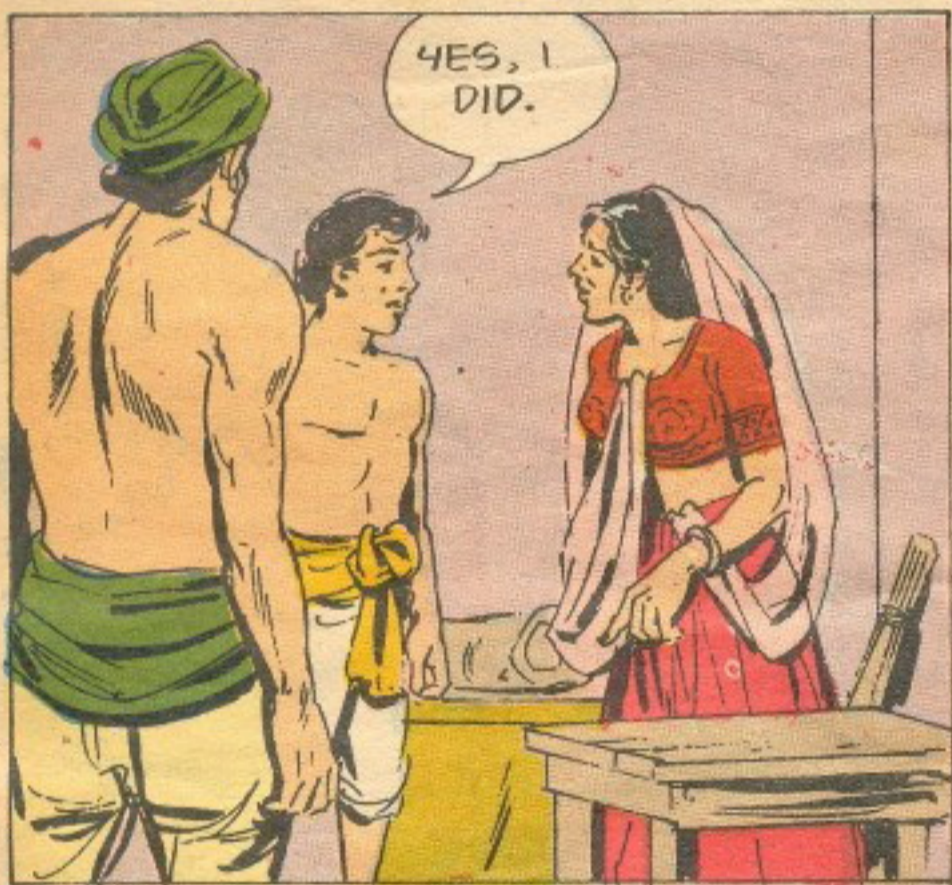


... AND KEEP THESE SANDALS TOO.

WHEN RAVIDAS RETURNED HOME —



RAVIDAS, YOU TOOK THE SANDALS AND MONEY JUST NOW, DIDN'T YOU?

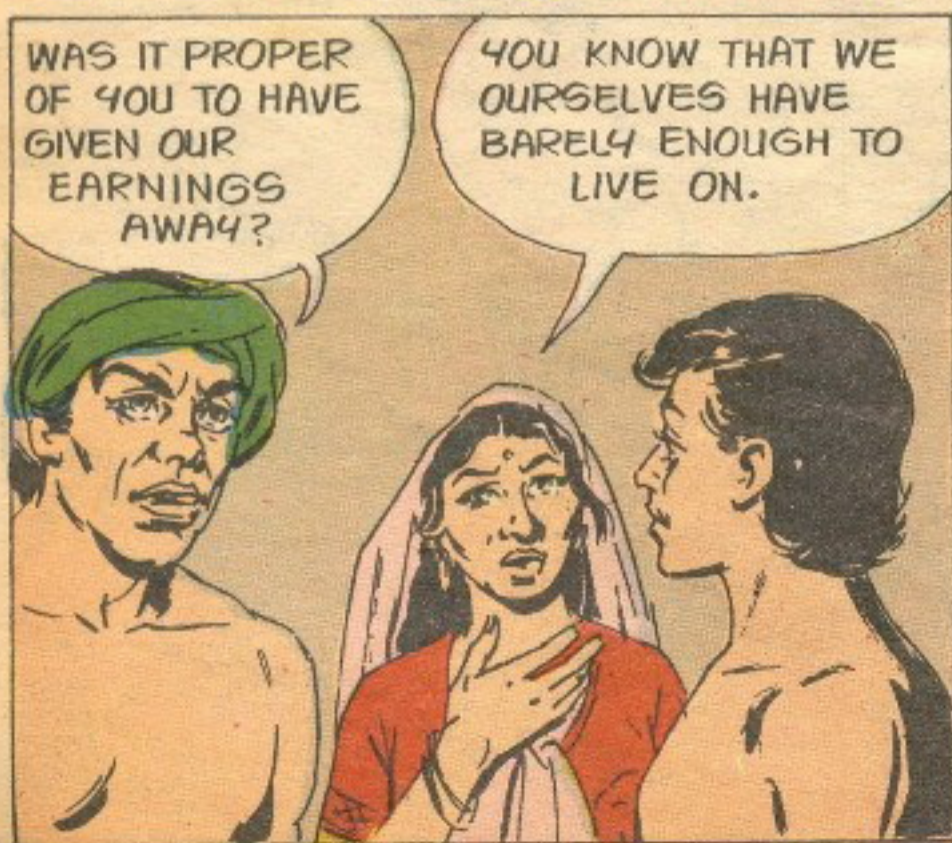


YES, I DID.



WHERE ARE THEY, SON?

I GAVE THEM TO A POOR WOMAN.



WAS IT PROPER OF YOU TO HAVE GIVEN OUR EARNINGS AWAY?

YOU KNOW THAT WE OURSELVES HAVE BARELY ENOUGH TO LIVE ON.



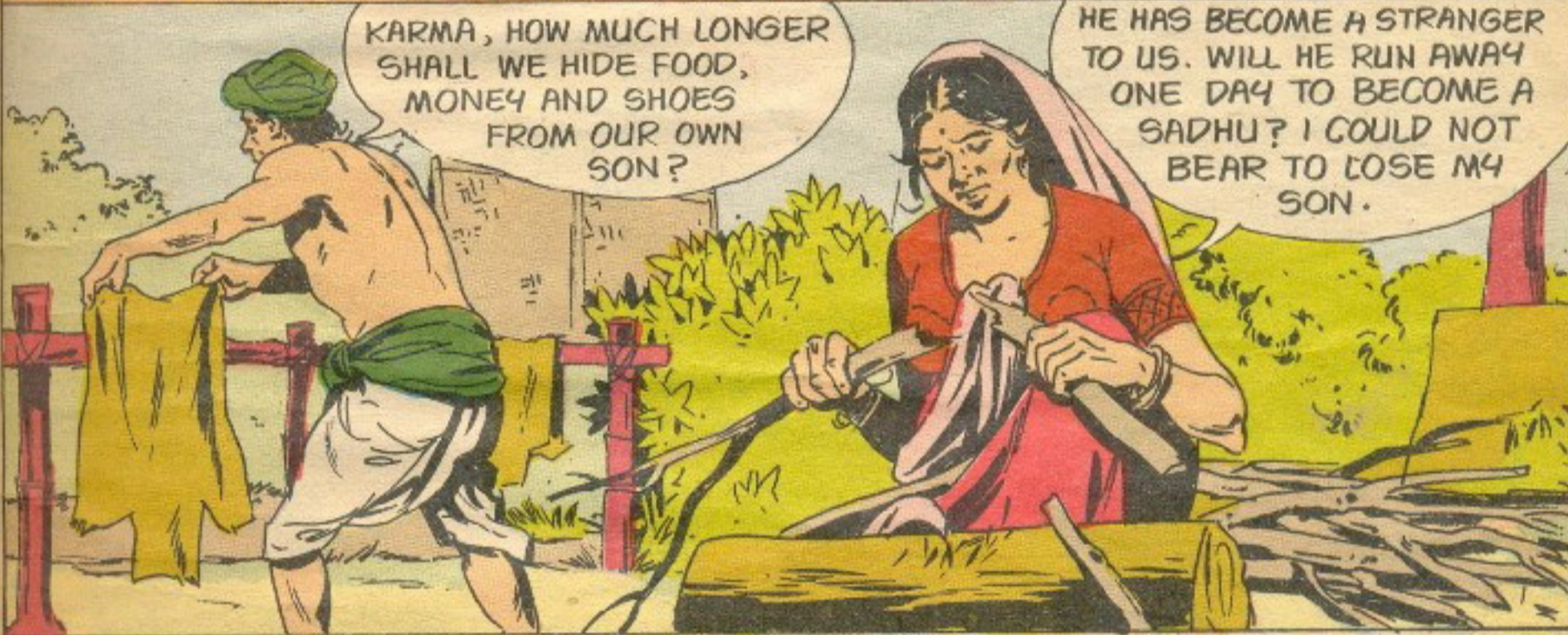
MOTHER, HER NEED WAS GREATER THAN OURS.

HIS PARENTS STOOD SILENT, HAVING NOTHING TO SAY TO THAT.

THE YEARS PASSED. RAVIDAS WORKED HARD AND DILIGENTLY, AS BEFORE, BUT HIS THOUGHTS WERE ALWAYS ELSEWHERE.



HE DID NOT KNOW WHAT A SOURCE OF WORRY HE HAD BECOME TO HIS PARENTS.



KARMA, HOW MUCH LONGER SHALL WE HIDE FOOD, MONEY AND SHOES FROM OUR OWN SON?

HE HAS BECOME A STRANGER TO US. WILL HE RUN AWAY ONE DAY TO BECOME A SADHU? I COULD NOT BEAR TO LOSE MY SON.



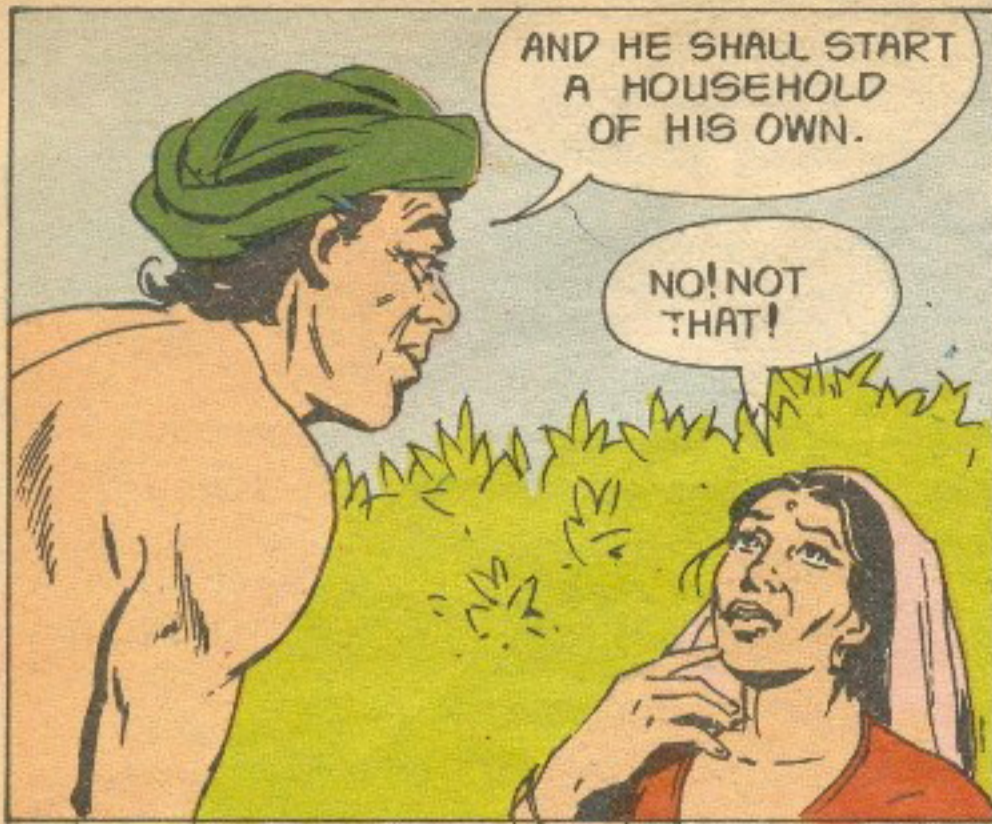
YOU WILL HAVE TO BEAR LOSING HIM.

WHAT!



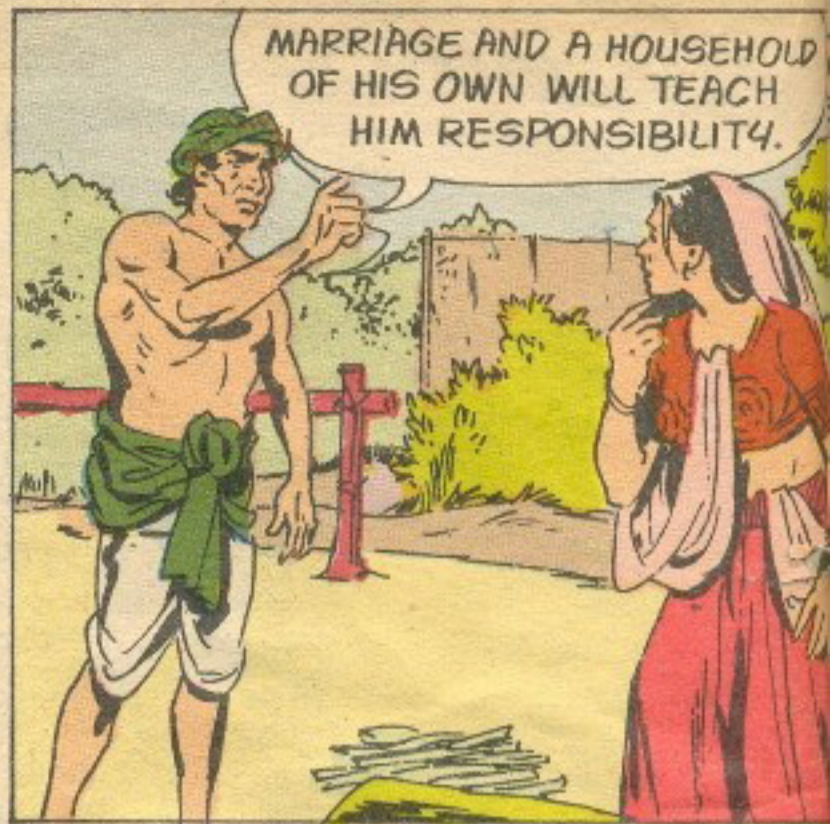
THERE IS A GIRL FROM A GOOD FAMILY.

OH, DO YOU MEAN HIS MARRIAGE? I WILL BE ONLY TOO HAPPY TO SEE HIM MARRIED...



AND HE SHALL START A HOUSEHOLD OF HIS OWN.

NO! NOT THAT!



MARRIAGE AND A HOUSEHOLD OF HIS OWN WILL TEACH HIM RESPONSIBILITY.



OR SHALL WE BEG IN THE STREETS, KARMA, BECAUSE OF OUR SON'S THOUGHTLESSNESS?



NO... DON'T CALL IT THOUGHTLESSNESS IT IS GENEROSITY. OUR SON HAS A LARGE HEART.



I AM SORRY, MY DEAR, BUT OUR EARNINGS DO NOT MEASURE UP TO RAVIDAS' HEART.

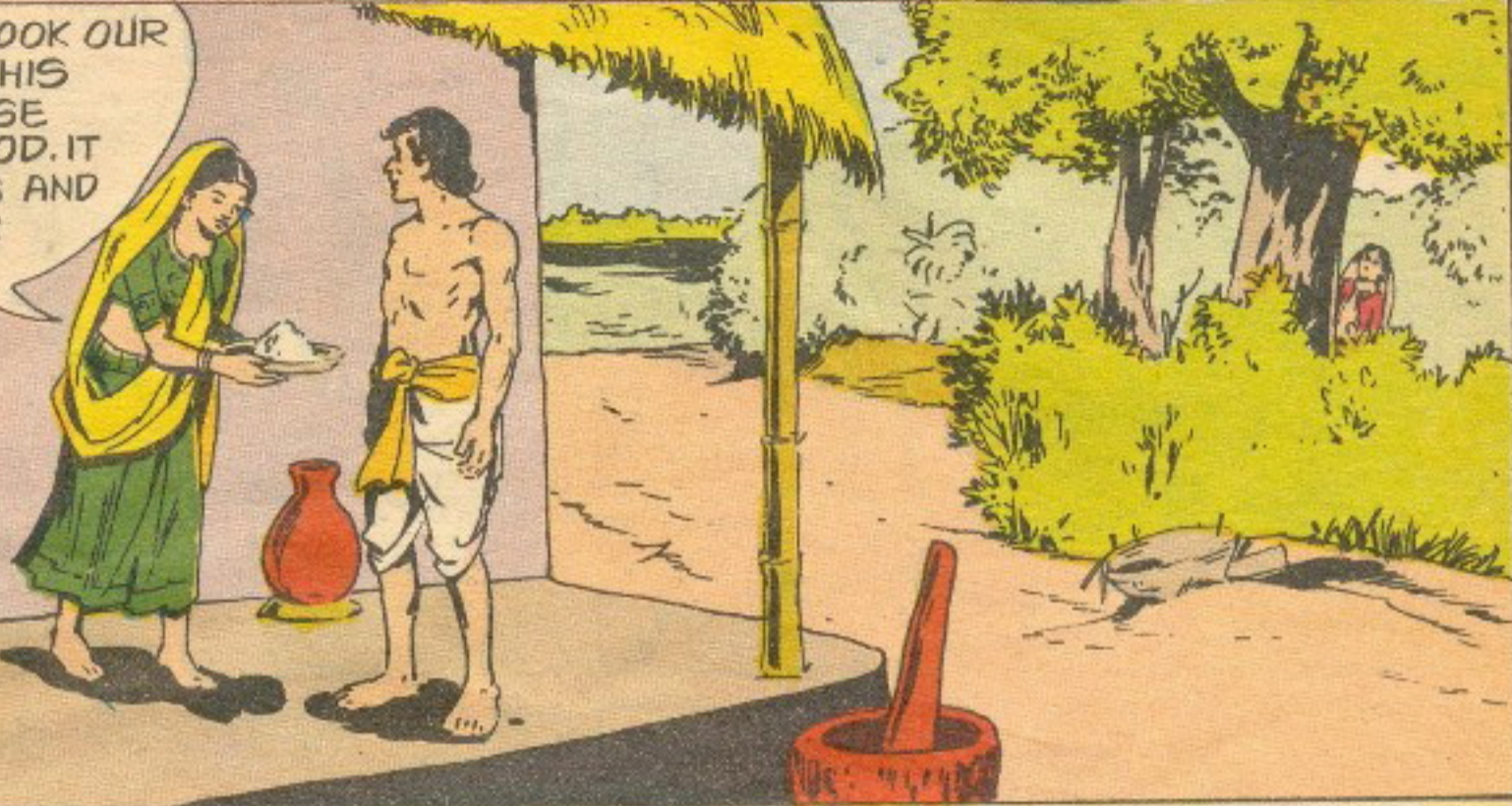


SO, BEFORE LONG, RAVIDAS WAS MARRIED TO BHAGWATI...

...AND THEY WENT TO LIVE IN A SEPARATE HOUSE BUT CLOSE TO THAT OF HIS PARENTS.

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN RAVIDAS' MOTHER WENT TO VISIT THEM, SHE PAUSED A WHILE BEFORE SHOWING HERSELF AND WATCHED HER SON AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW.

I AM GOING TO COOK OUR FIRST MEAL IN THIS HOUSE. SO PLEASE TOUCH THIS FOOD. IT IS AUSPICIOUS AND SPECIAL FOR BOTH OF US.



THERE, BHAGWATI, BUT MIND YOU, WE MUST EAT THIS SPECIAL FOOD TOGETHER.

BUT SHOULD I NOT SERVE YOU FIRST AND THEN EAT?



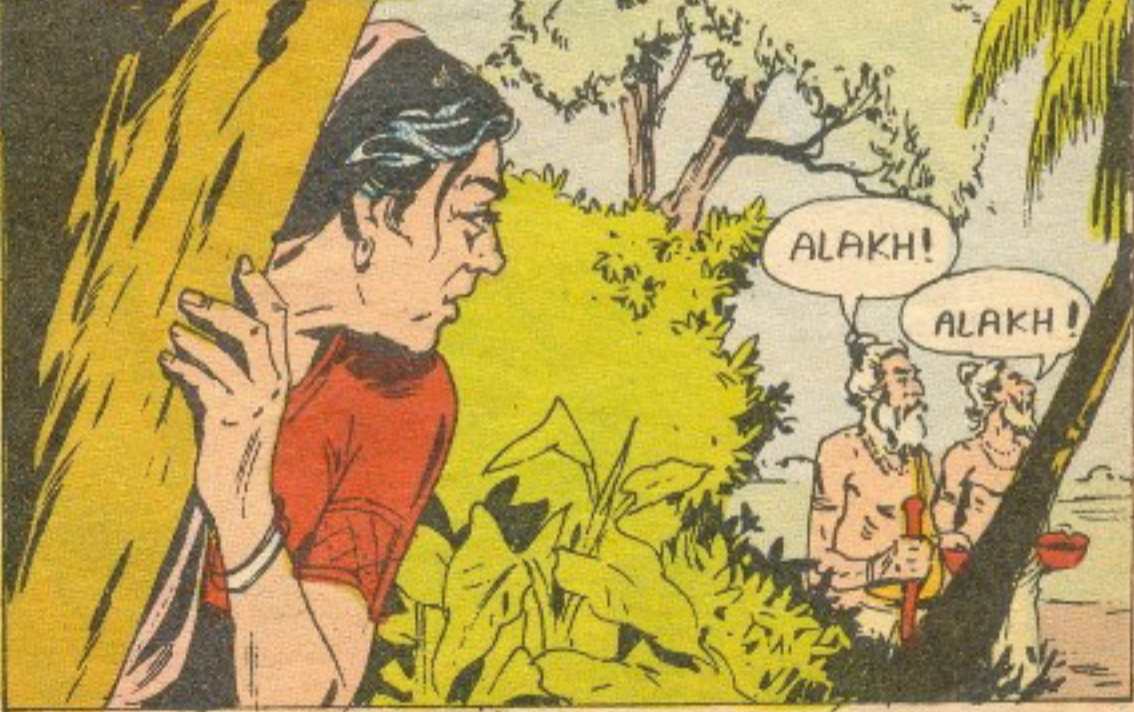
IF YOU DO THAT, THEN HOW CAN I FEED YOU AND YOU FEED ME AT THE SAME TIME?

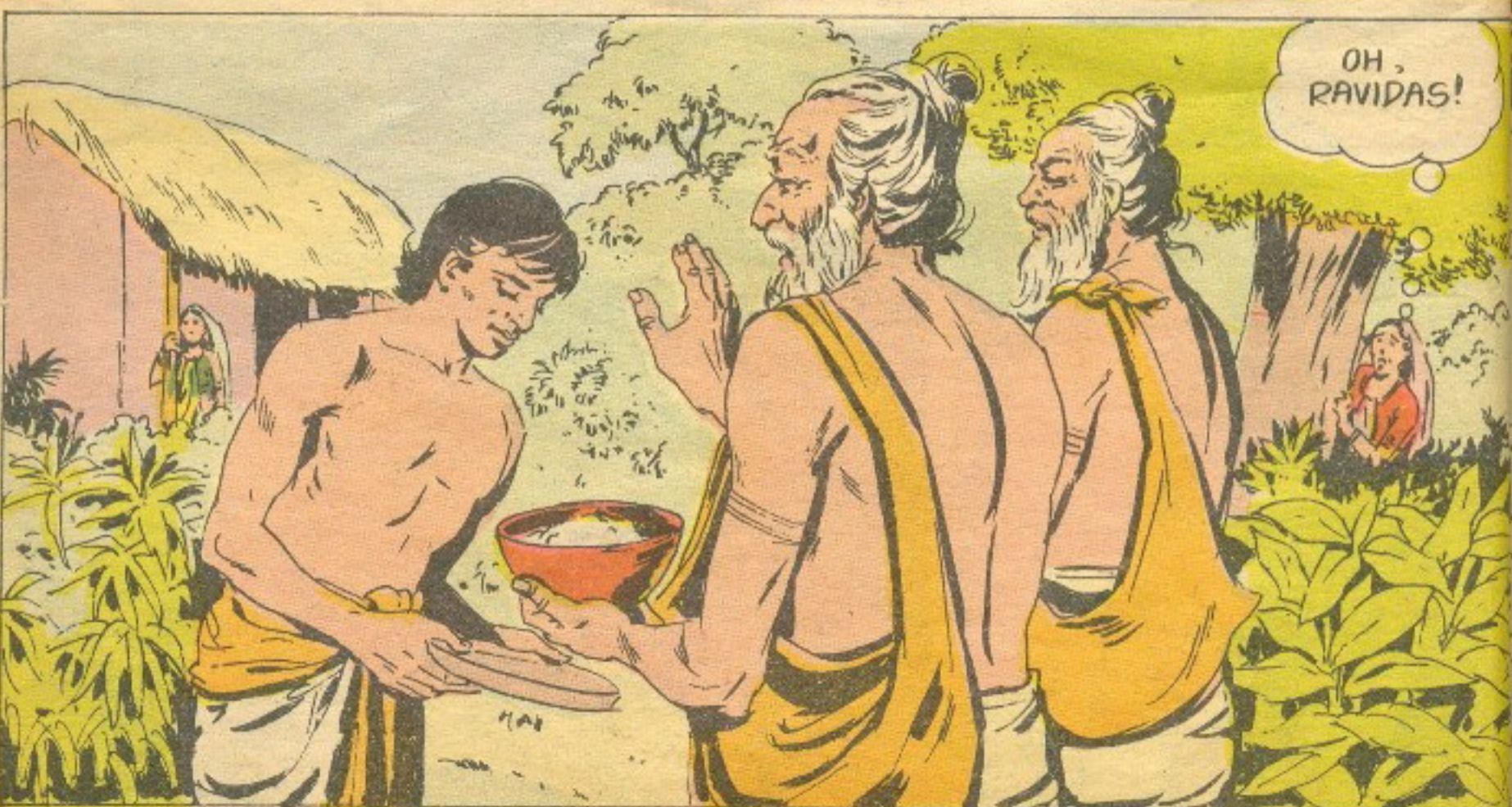


HMM ... PERHAPS HIS FATHER KNEW HIM BEST.

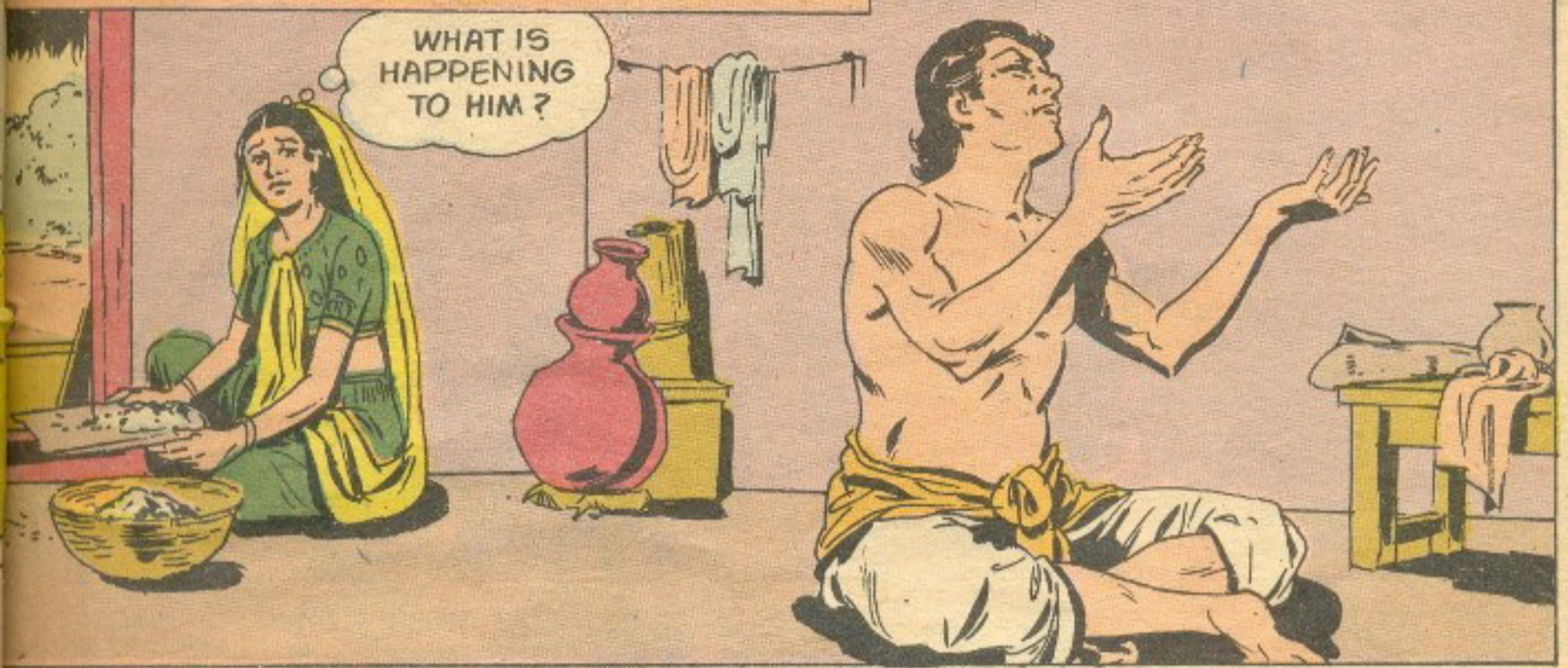


JUST THEN —





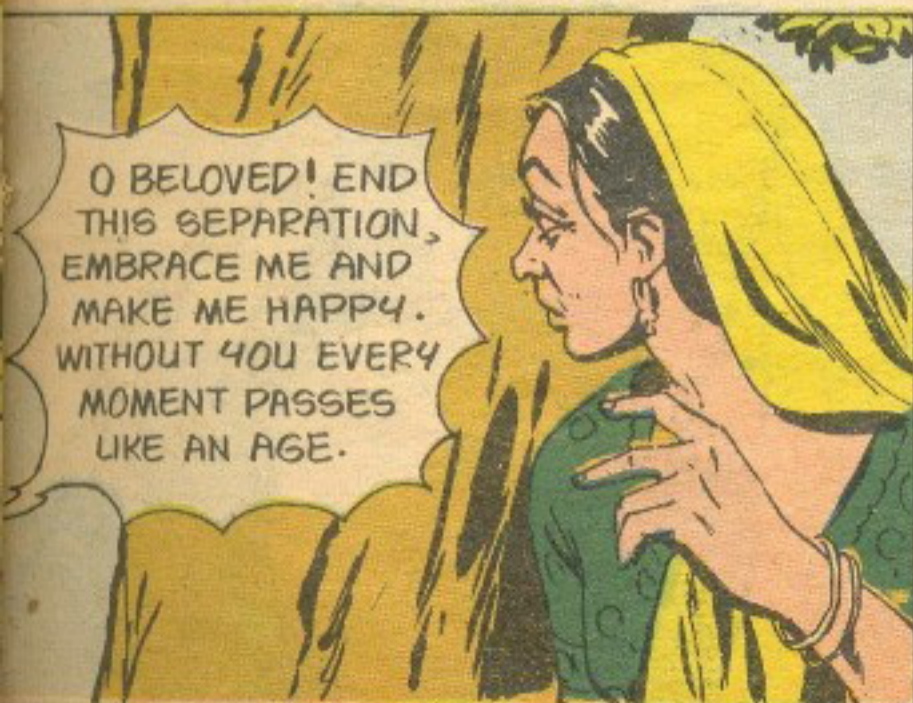
RAVIDAS AND BHAGWATI CONTINUED TO LIVE IN THEIR HUT. BUT SOON BHAGWATI NOTICED THAT THE SENSITIVE MAN WHO WAS HER HUSBAND WAS GROWING MORE AND MORE WITHDRAWN; MORE AND MORE SILENT.



ONE DAY, WHEN SHE RETURNED FROM THE FOREST WITH A LOAD OF FIREWOOD, SHE SAW RAVIDAS SITTING UNDER A TREE.

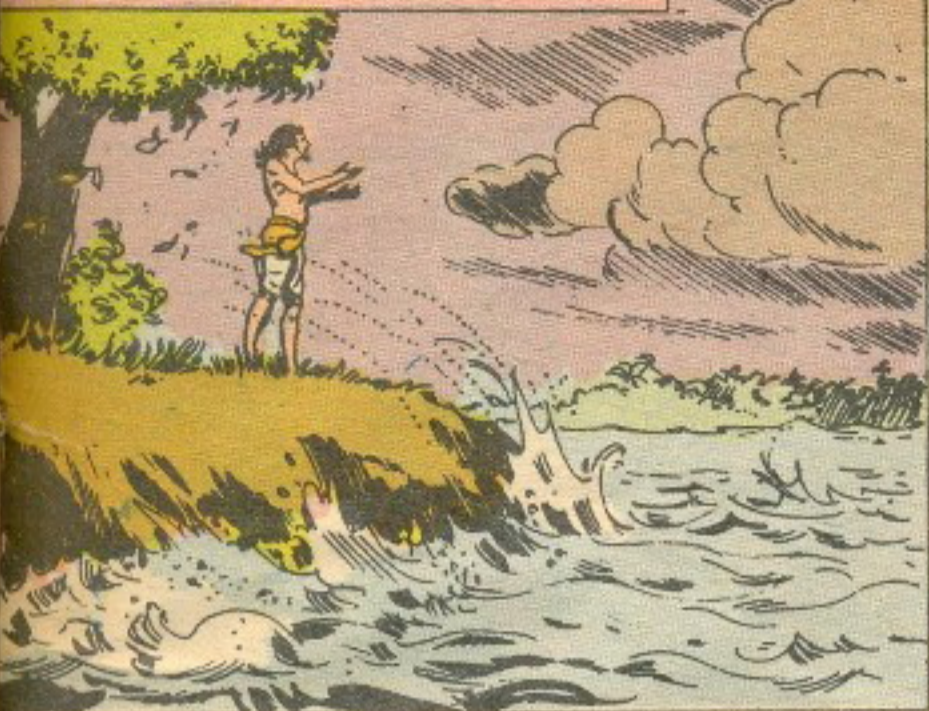


SHE CAME AND HID BEHIND IT TO SURPRISE HIM WHEN —

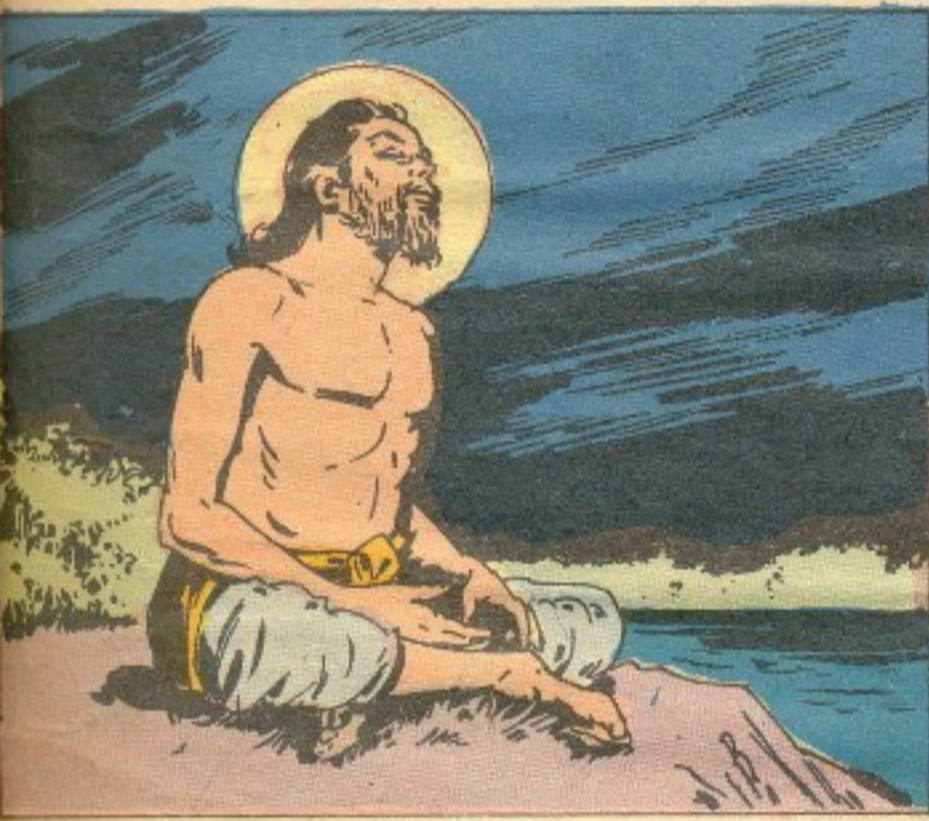
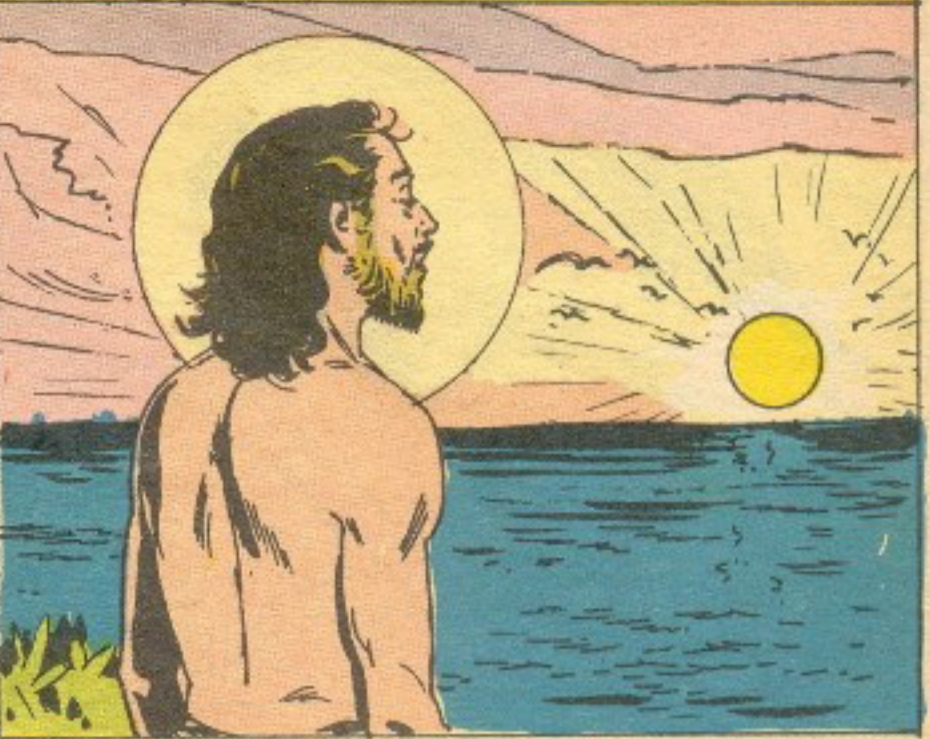




AFTER THIS, DAY AFTER DAY, RAVIDAS' THIRST GREW AND GREW...



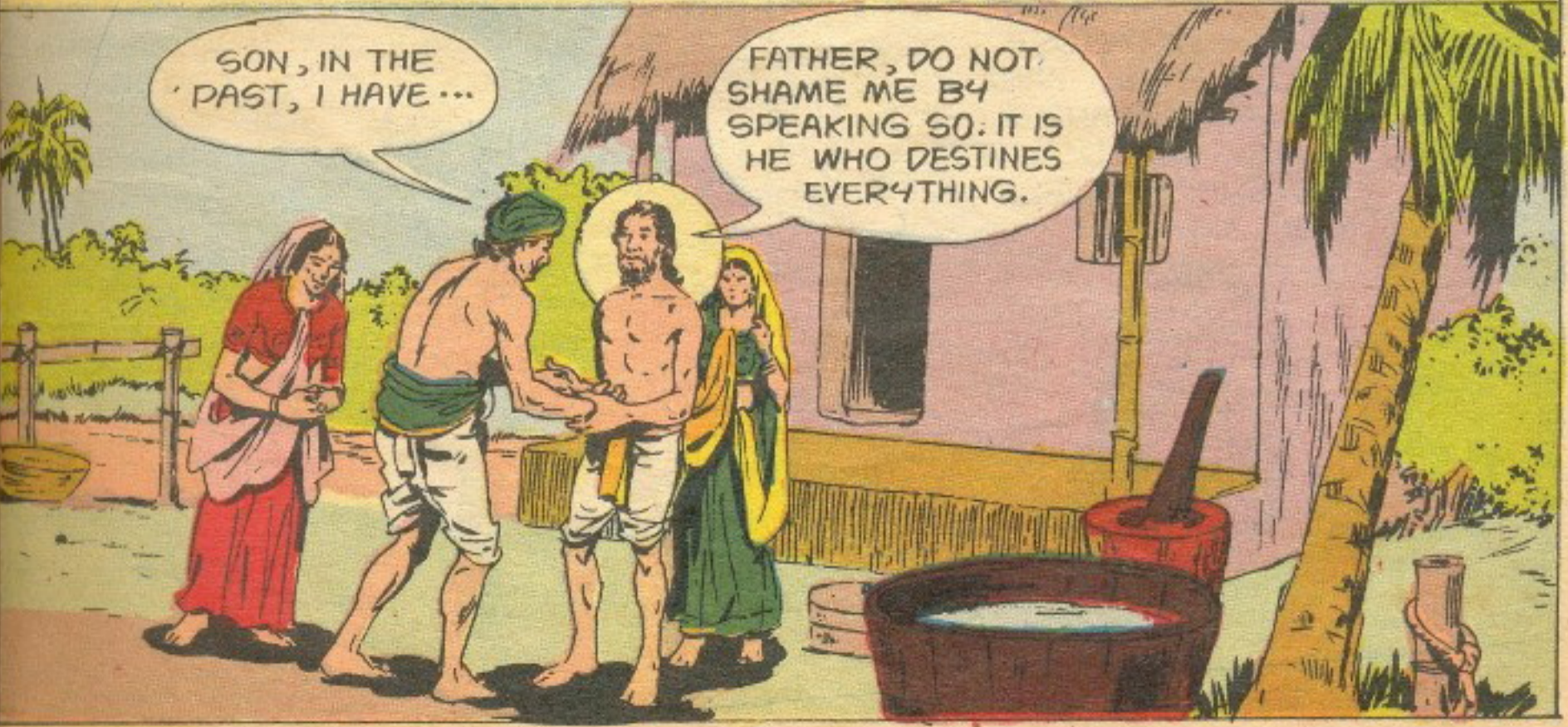
...TILL AT LAST, IT WAS QUENCHED.

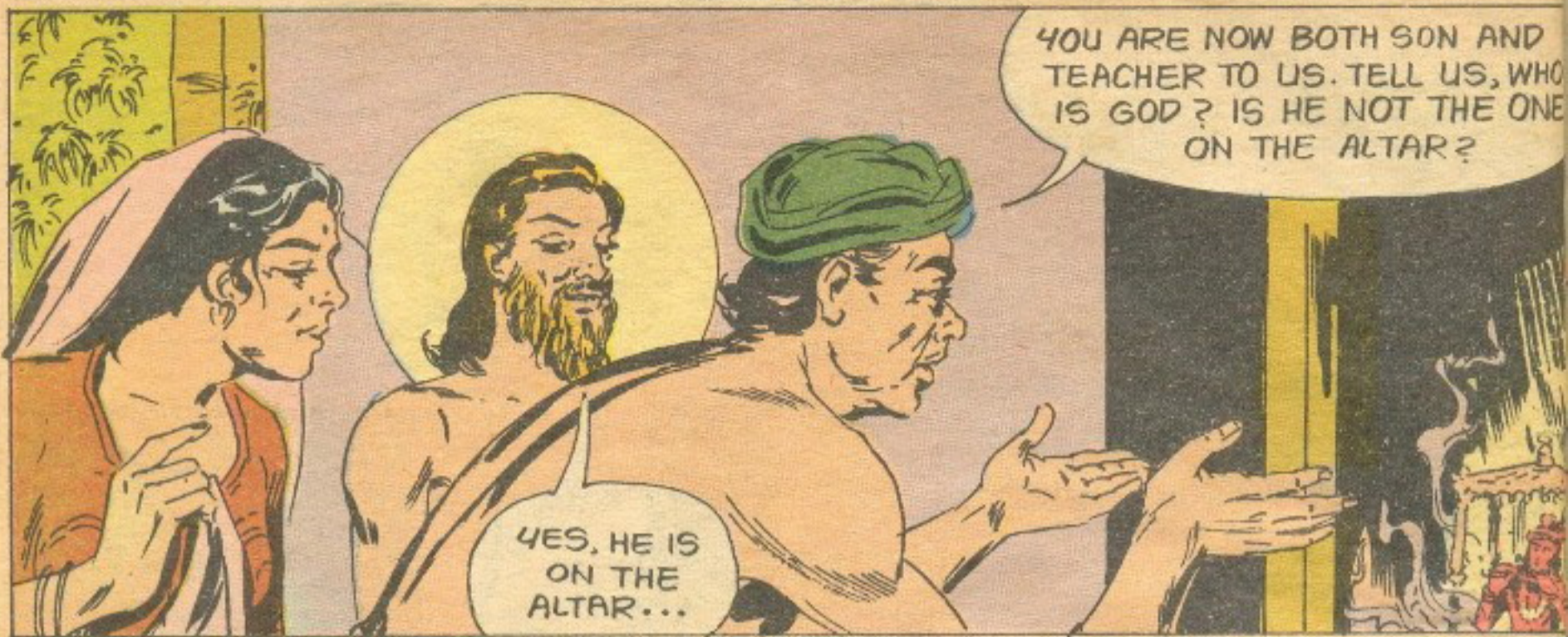


AND WHO SHOULD FIRST NOTICE IT, BUT RAGHAV, KARMADEVI AND BHAGWATI?

SON, IN THE PAST, I HAVE ...

FATHER, DO NOT SHAME ME BY SPEAKING SO. IT IS HE WHO DESTINES EVERYTHING.





YOU ARE NOW BOTH SON AND TEACHER TO US. TELL US, WHO IS GOD? IS HE NOT THE ONE ON THE ALTAR?

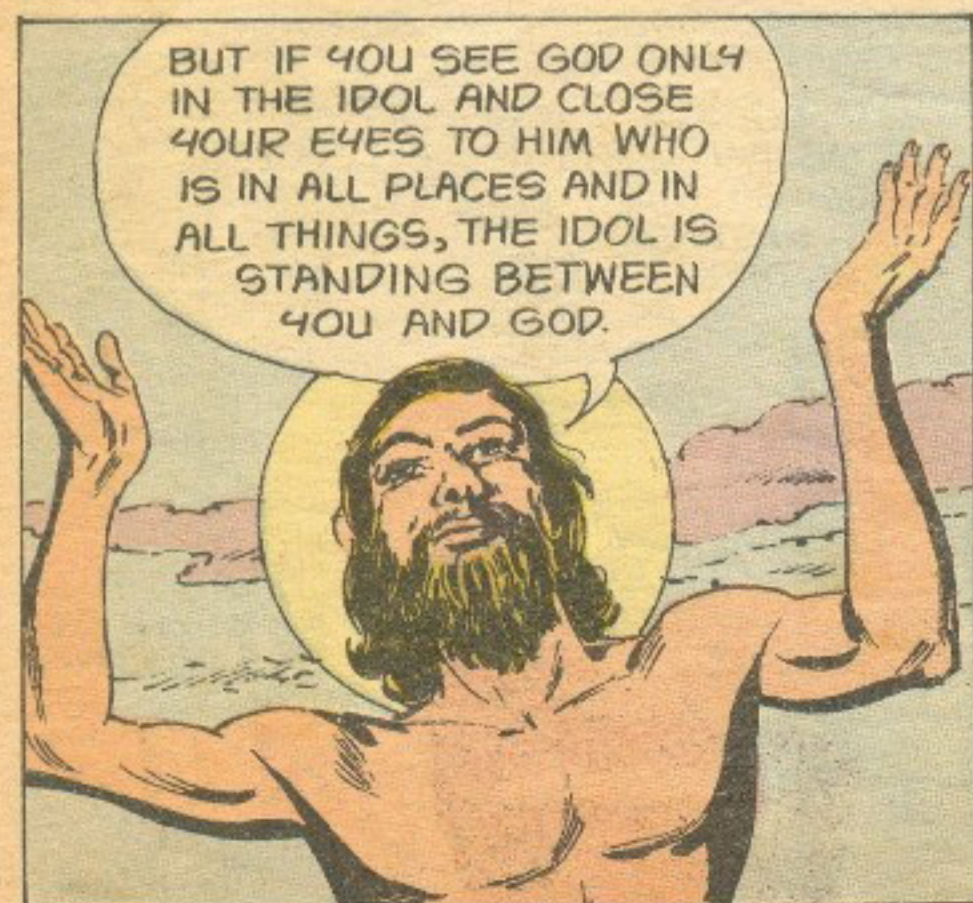
YES, HE IS ON THE ALTAR...



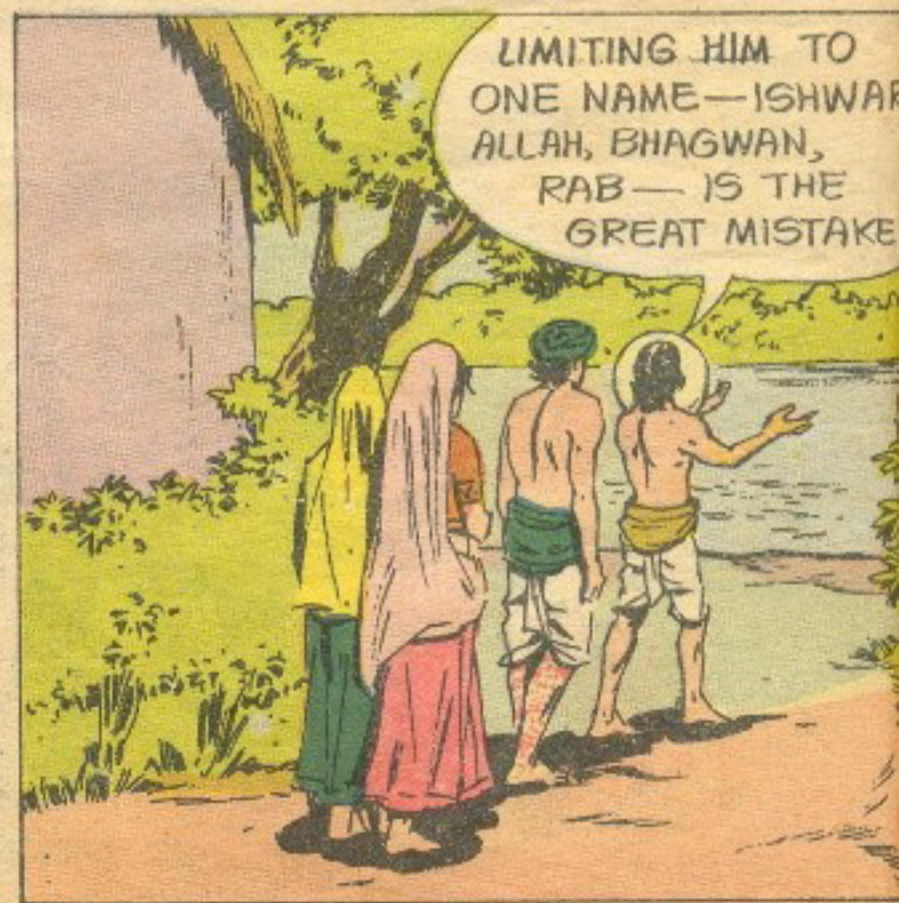
... BUT SO IS HE HERE...




... AND THERE.




BUT IF YOU SEE GOD ONLY IN THE IDOL AND CLOSE YOUR EYES TO HIM WHO IS IN ALL PLACES AND IN ALL THINGS, THE IDOL IS STANDING BETWEEN YOU AND GOD.




LIMITING HIM TO ONE NAME—ISHWAR, ALLAH, BHAGWAN, RAB— IS THE GREAT MISTAKE



HE IS ALL THIS AND MORE; MUCH MORE. HE IS ALL! SO I CALL HIM JUST THIS...

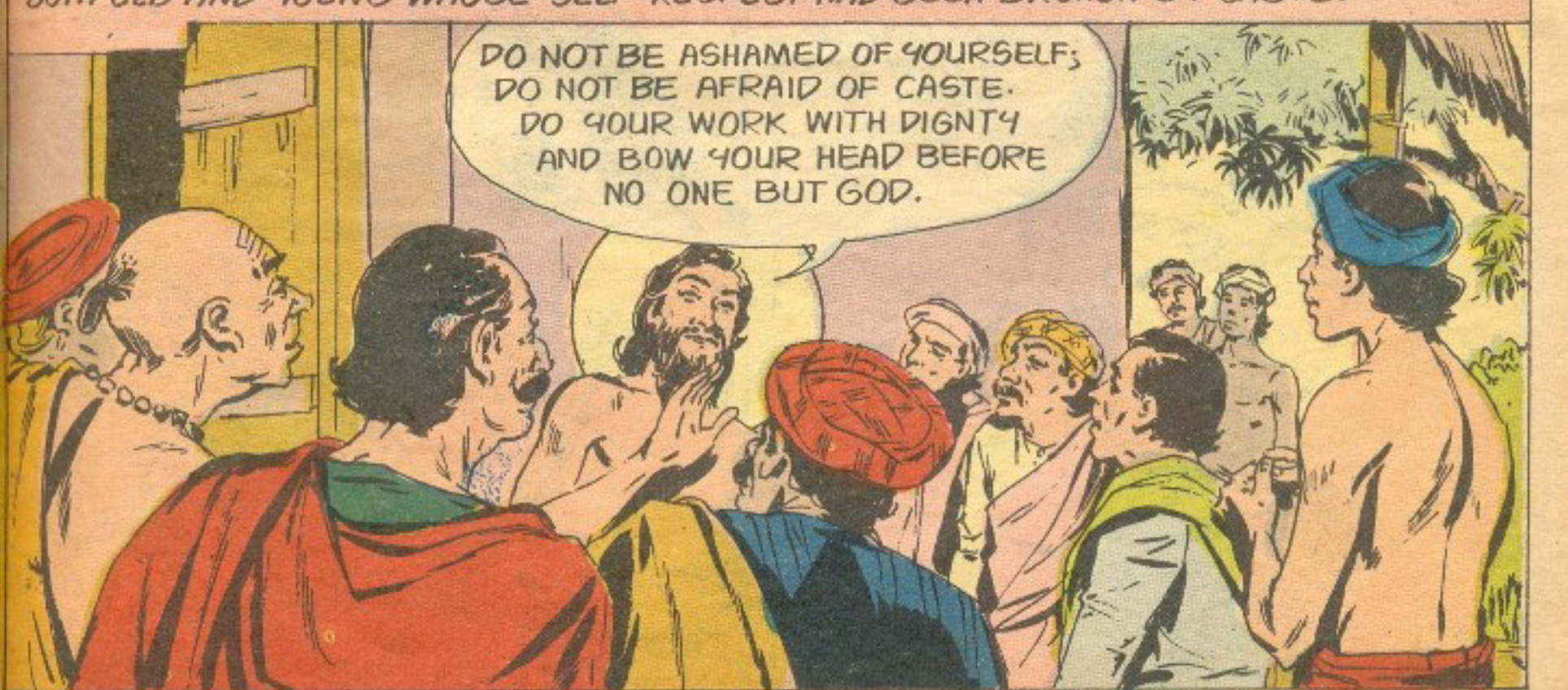


...I CALL HIM 'NAME'...

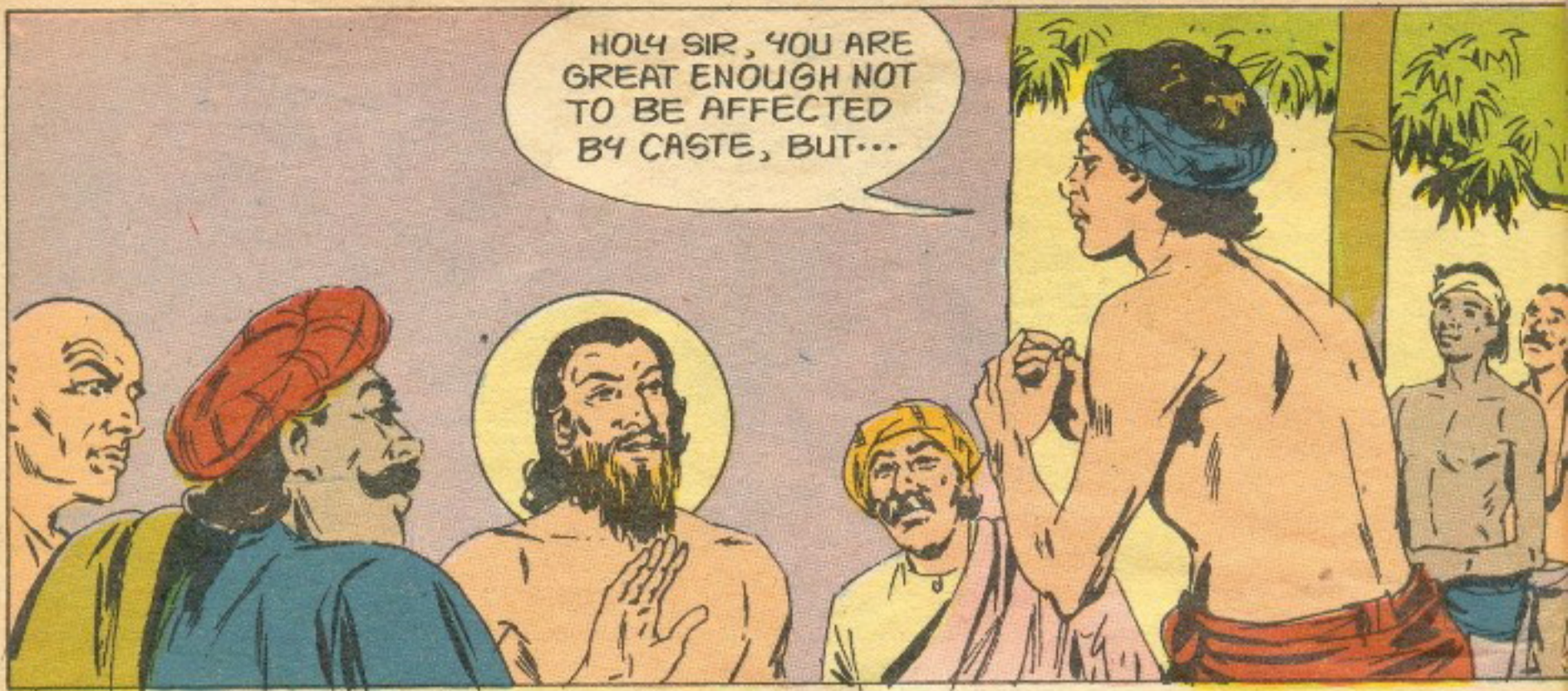


... ANY NAME, EVERY NAME. THAT IS GOD.

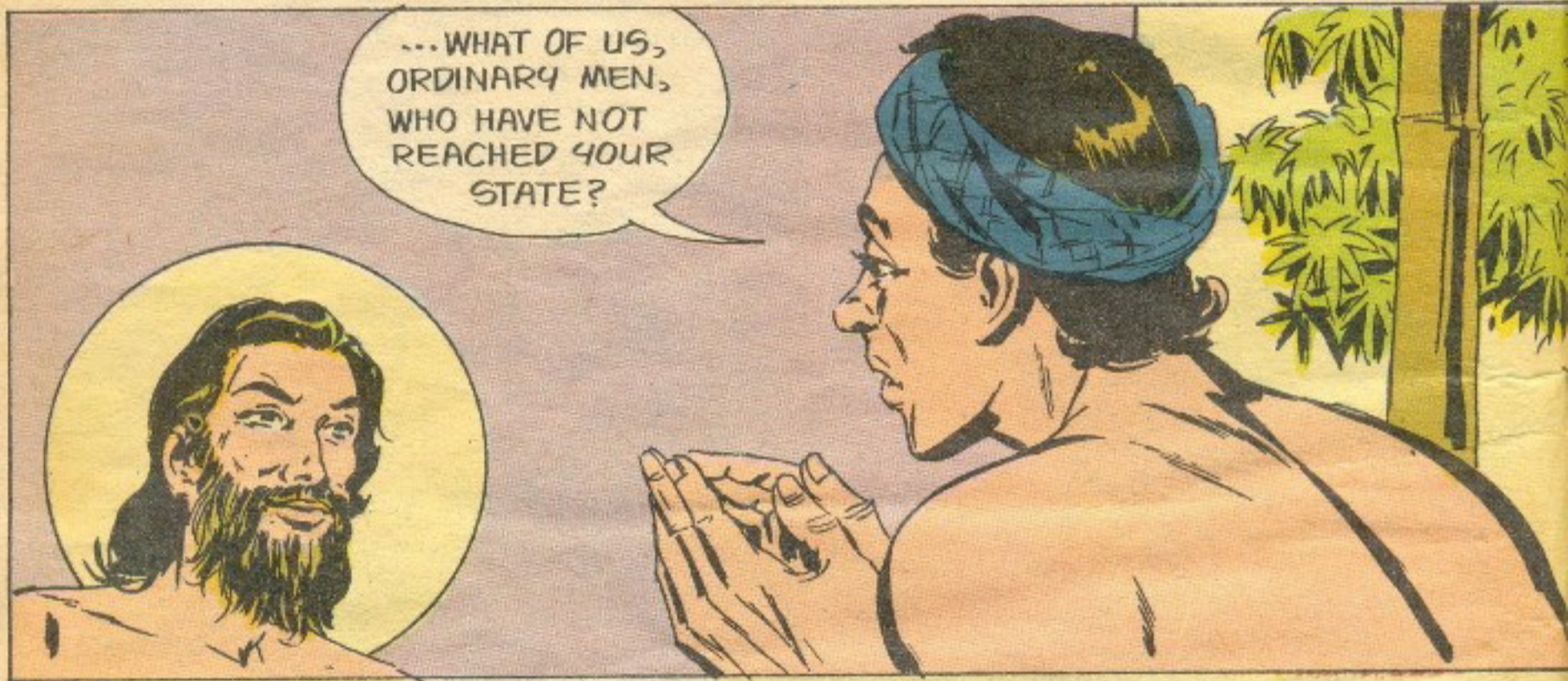
AS RAVIDAS' FAME SPREAD, PEOPLE CAME TO SEEK HIS ADVICE AND GUIDANCE; PEOPLE BOTH OLD AND YOUNG WHOSE SELF-RESPECT HAD BEEN BROKEN BY CASTE.



DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF; DO NOT BE AFRAID OF CASTE. DO YOUR WORK WITH DIGNTY AND BOW YOUR HEAD BEFORE NO ONE BUT GOD.



HOLY SIR, YOU ARE GREAT ENOUGH NOT TO BE AFFECTED BY CASTE, BUT...



...WHAT OF US, ORDINARY MEN, WHO HAVE NOT REACHED YOUR STATE?



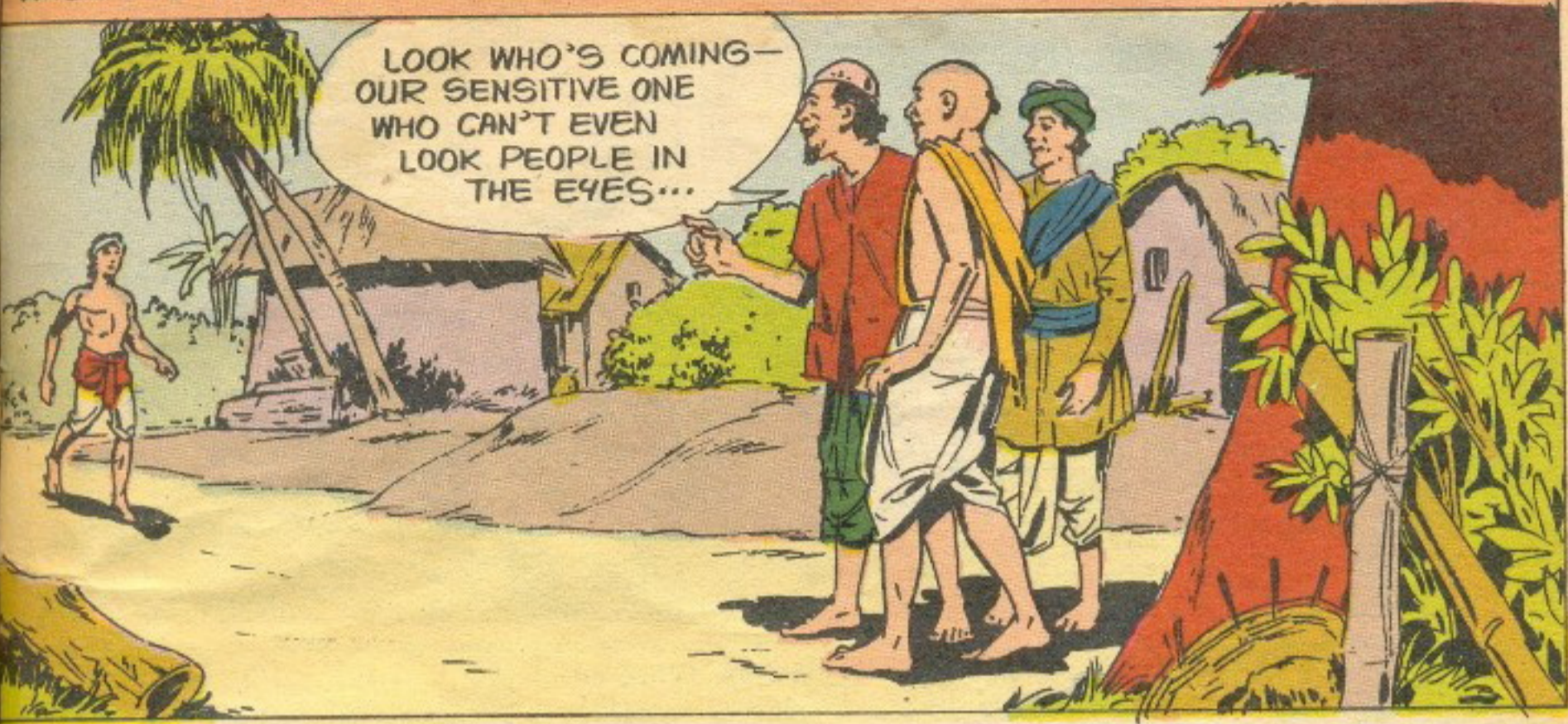
SHOW US SOME WAY. GIVE US A NEW IDENTITY...



A NEW IDENTITY? ALL RIGHT, I WILL GIVE IT TO YOU.

WHEN THE YOUNG MAN LEFT THE SAINT, THERE WAS A SPRING IN HIS STEP.

LOOK WHO'S COMING—
OUR SENSITIVE ONE
WHO CAN'T EVEN
LOOK PEOPLE IN
THE EYES...

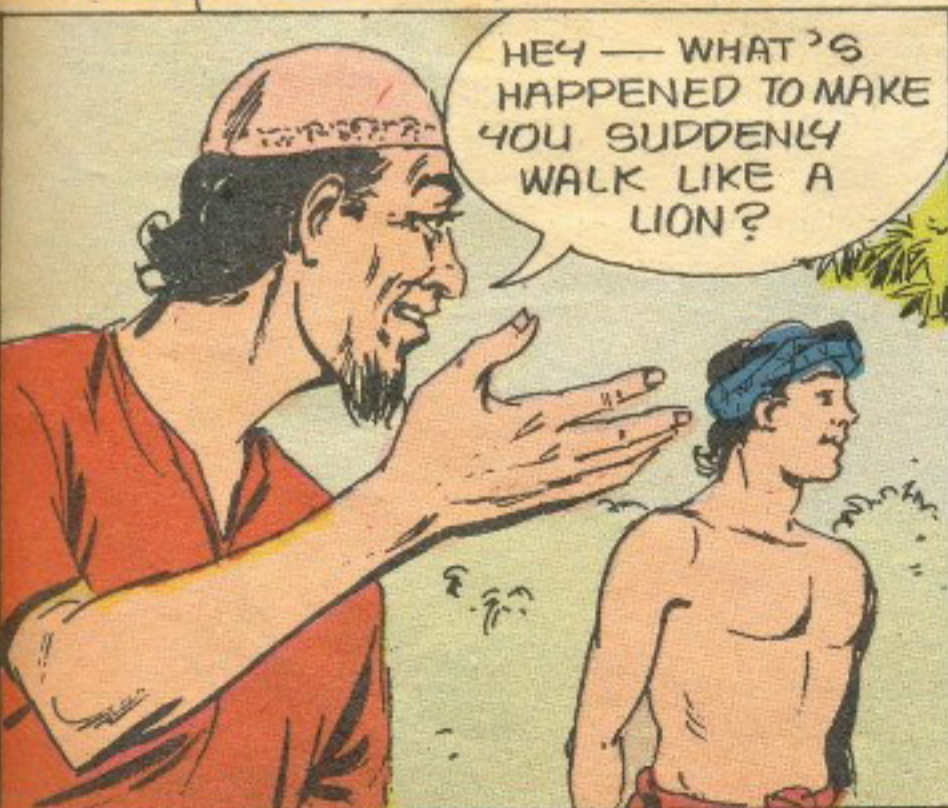


... AND EVEN IF HE
DOES, HE DROPS HIS
GAZE AT ONCE LIKE
A SHY BRIDE! WELL,
WELL—HOW'S THE
SHY BRIDE
TODAY?

SHY BRIDE, DID YOU
SAY? WHY, THAT'S NOT
OUR USUAL MOUSE
WHO'S COMING
ALONG THERE!



HEY—WHAT'S
HAPPENED TO MAKE
YOU SUDDENLY
WALK LIKE A
LION?



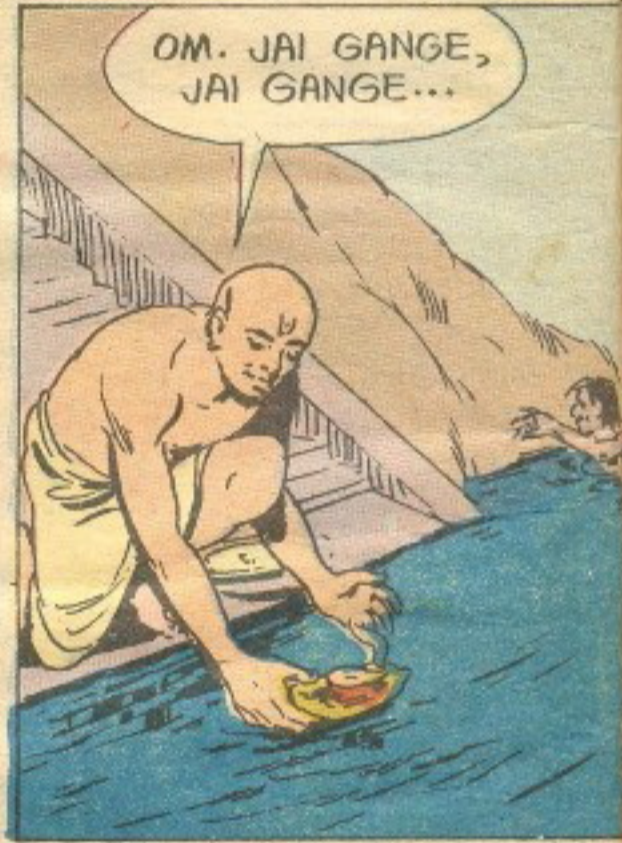
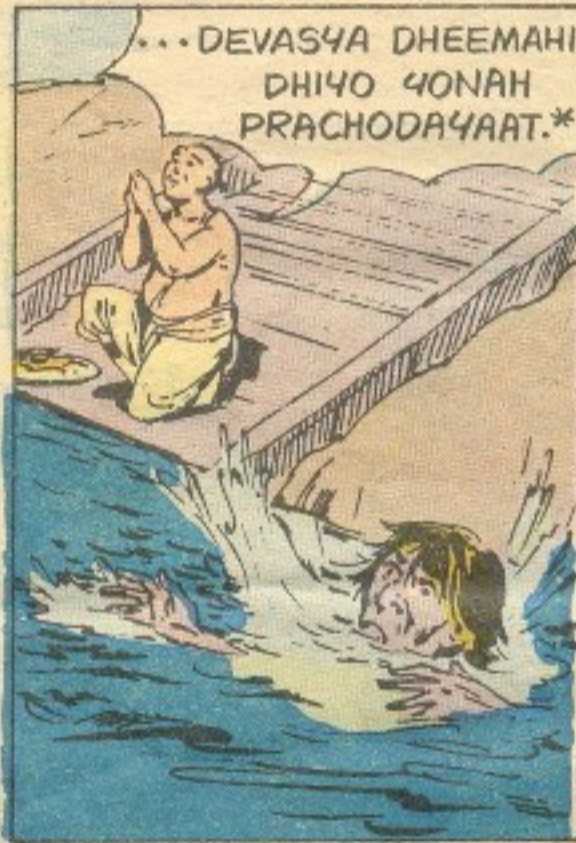
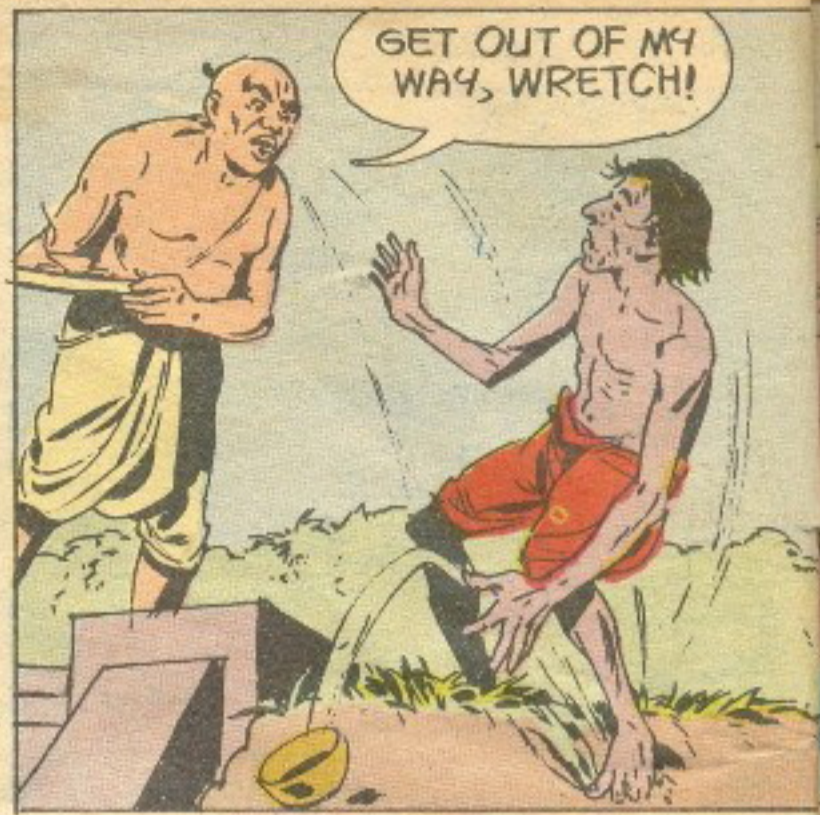
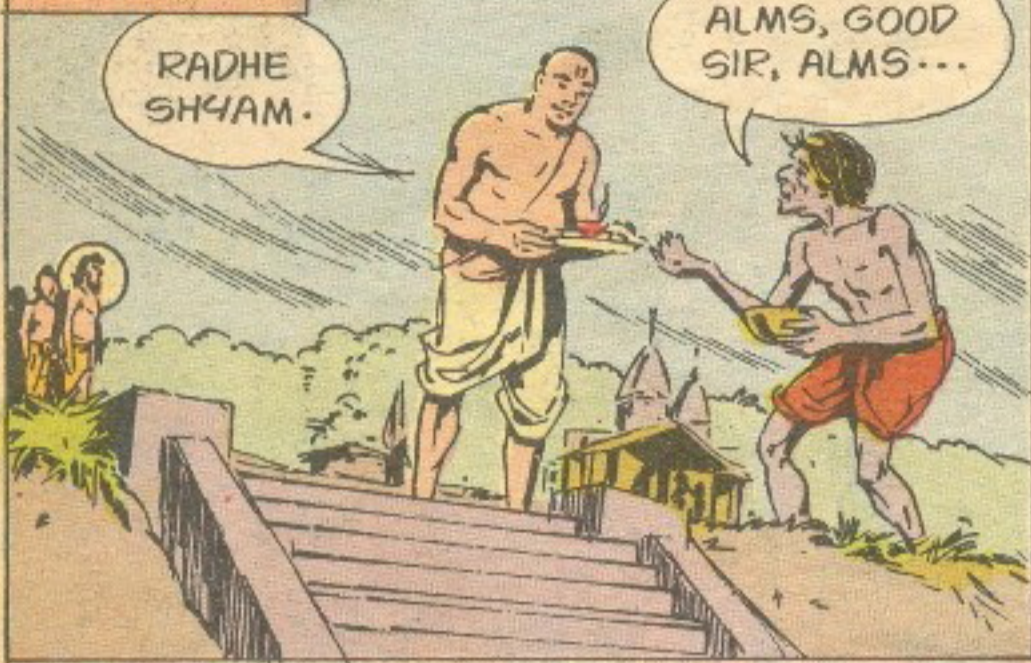
THE YOUNG MAN'S EYES WERE
BLAZING WITH DIGNITY, WITH CONFIDENCE.

I HAVE BECOME
A RAVIDASI.

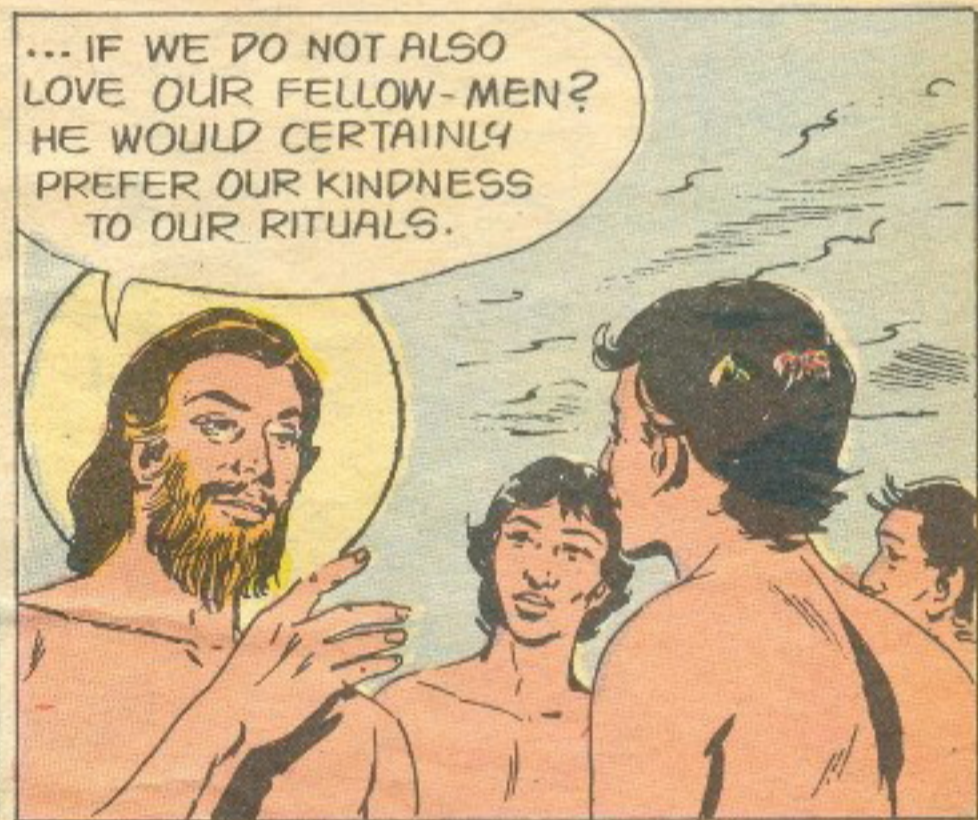
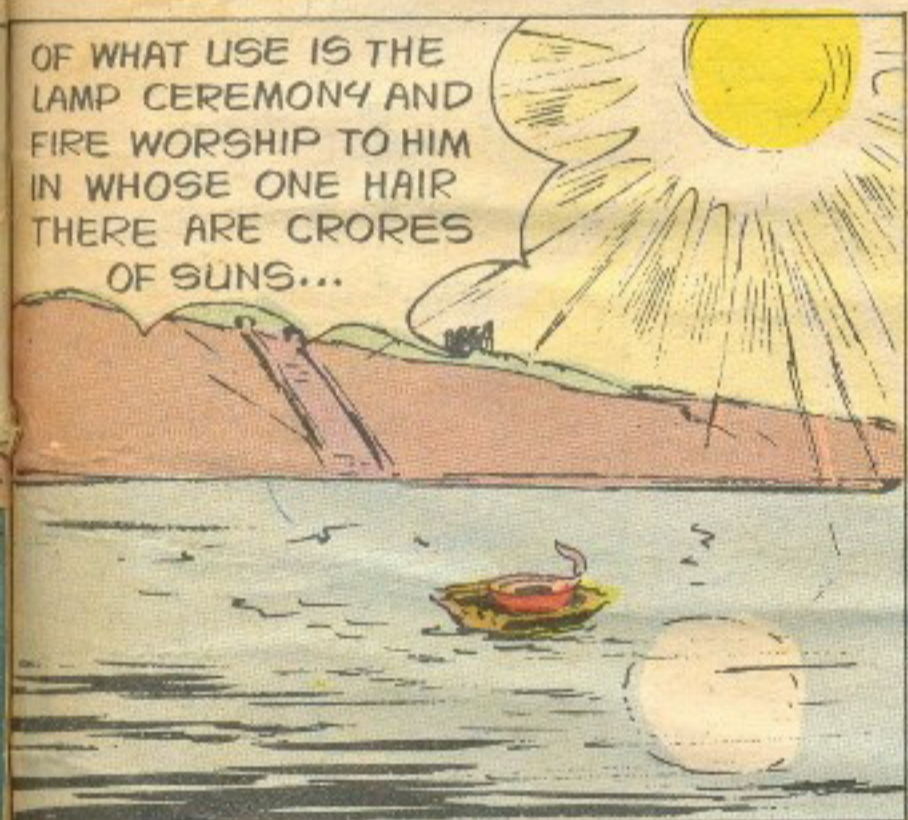
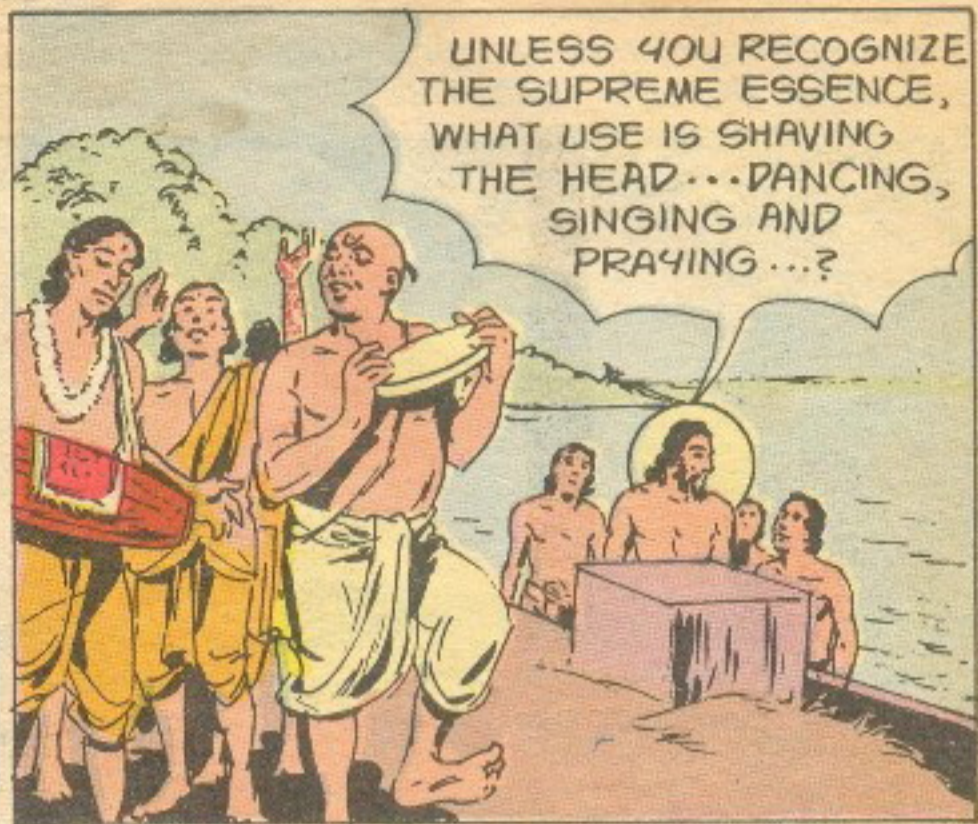
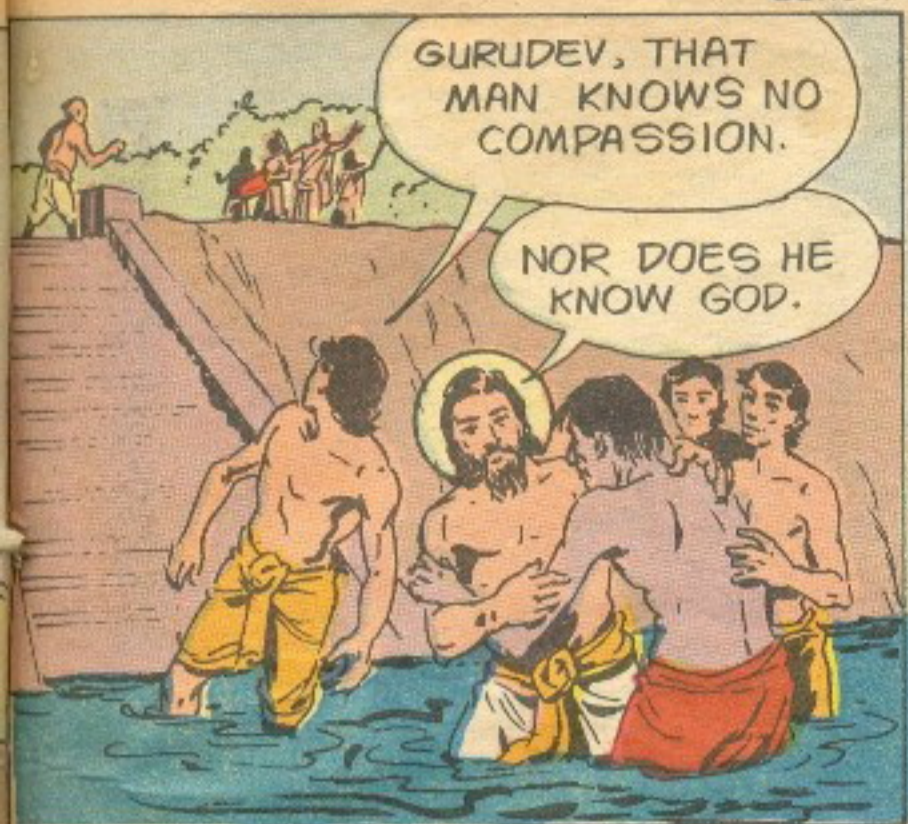


RAVIDASI—THAT WAS THE IDENTITY THE
SAINT GAVE TO HIS FOLLOWERS.

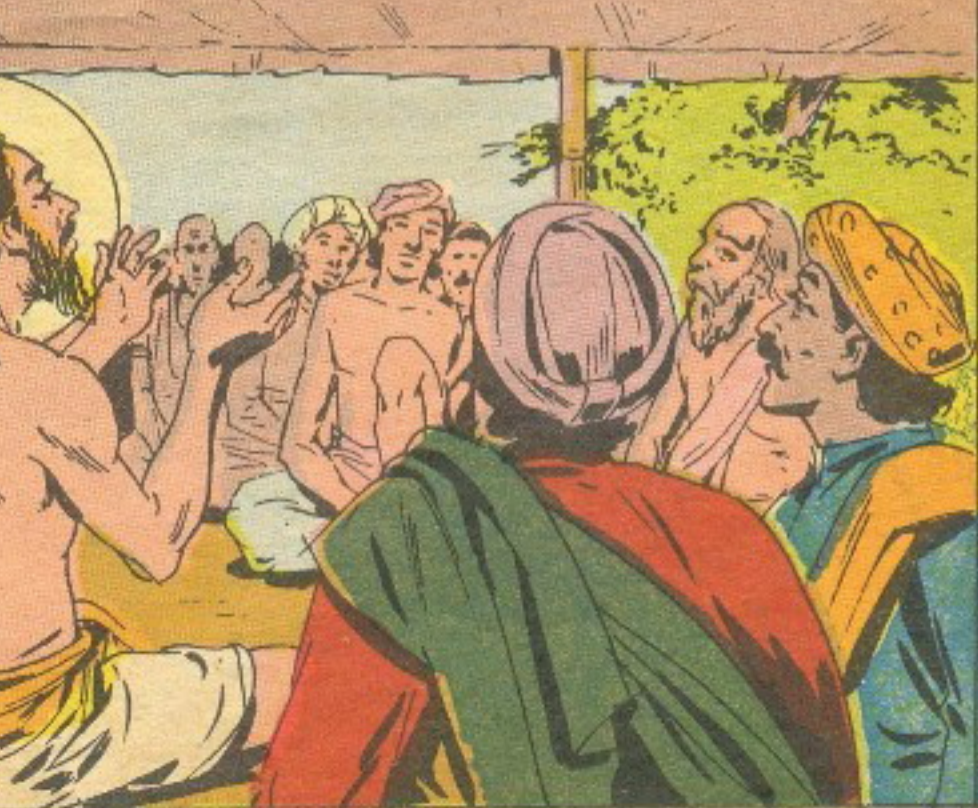
ONE DAY, WHEN GURU RAVIDAS AND HIS DISCIPLES WERE WALKING ALONG THE RIVER GANGA —



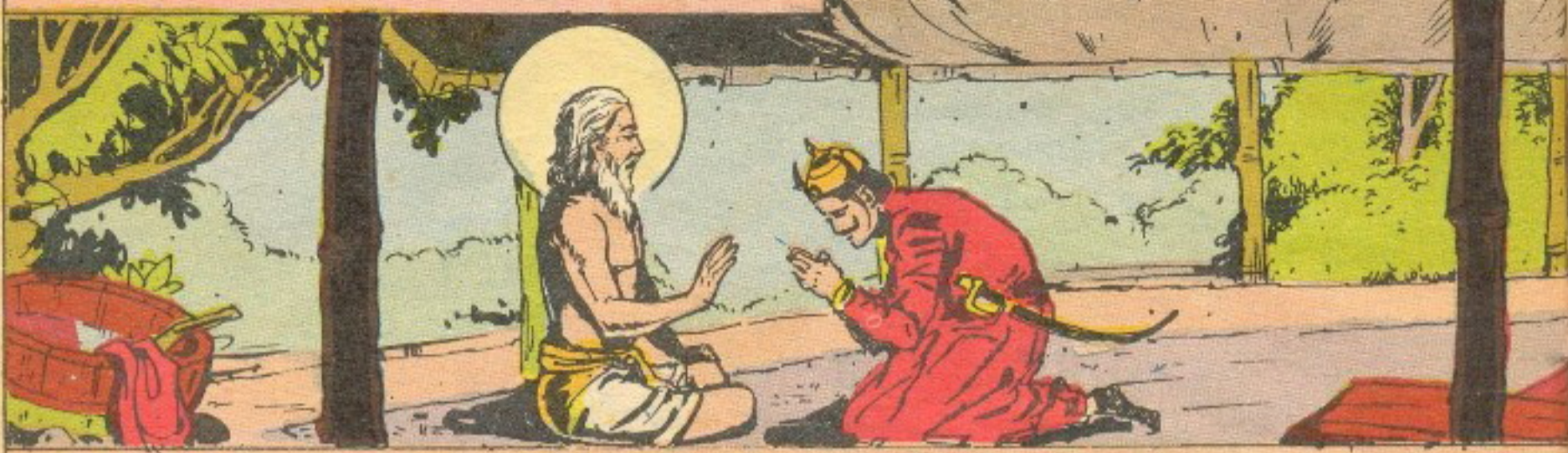
* GAYATRI CHANT (HOMAGE TO SAVITR, THE SUN GOD)



IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, THE NUMBER OF GURU RAVIDAS' DISCIPLES RAPIDLY GREW AS DID HIS BODY OF VERSE.



HEARING OF RAVIDAS' GREATNESS, PEEPA, NANAK, SADHNA, GAINA, KABIR, OTHER SAINTS OF THE TIME CAME TO MEET HIM.

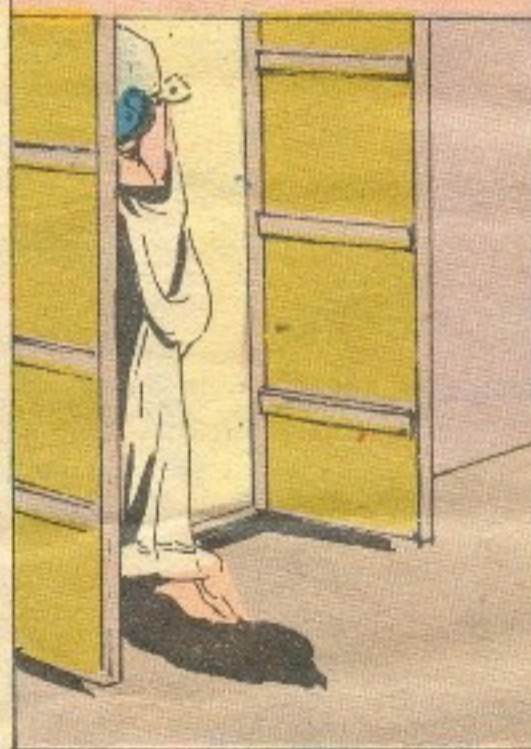


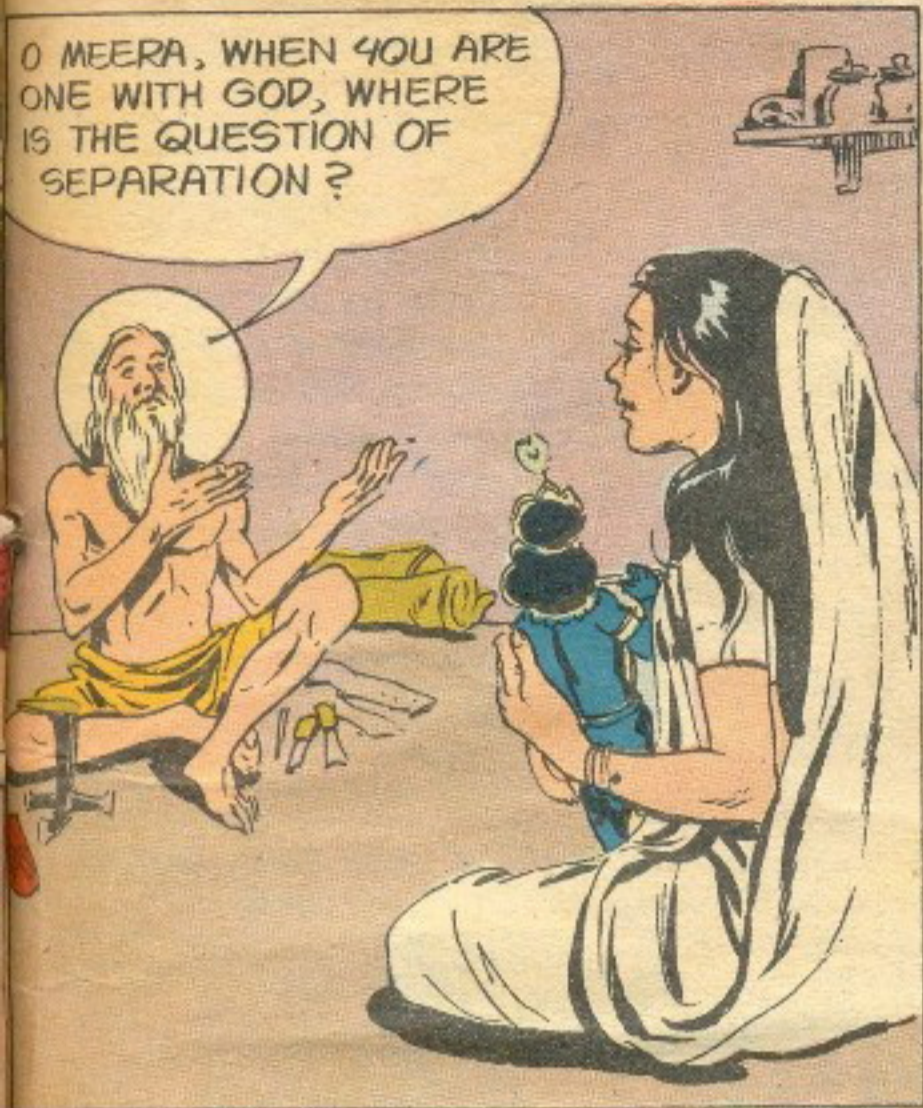
AND RULERS LIKE RAJA HARDEV SINGH NAGAR OF KASHI AND SIKANDAR LODHI OF DELHI PAID THEIR RESPECTS TO HIM.

ONE DAY, THERE WAS A KNOCK AT HIS DOOR.



THE DOOR OPENED AND THE CALLER SLOWLY CAME FORWARD.

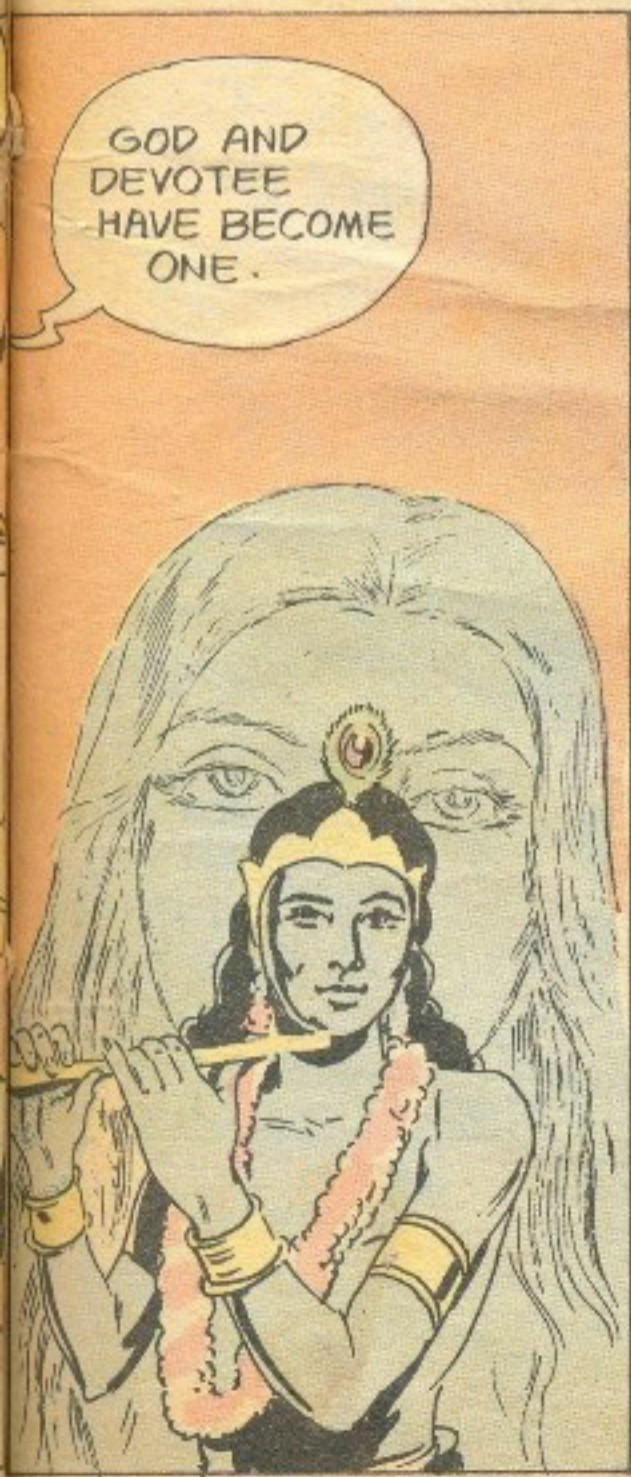




O MEERA, WHEN YOU ARE ONE WITH GOD, WHERE IS THE QUESTION OF SEPARATION ?



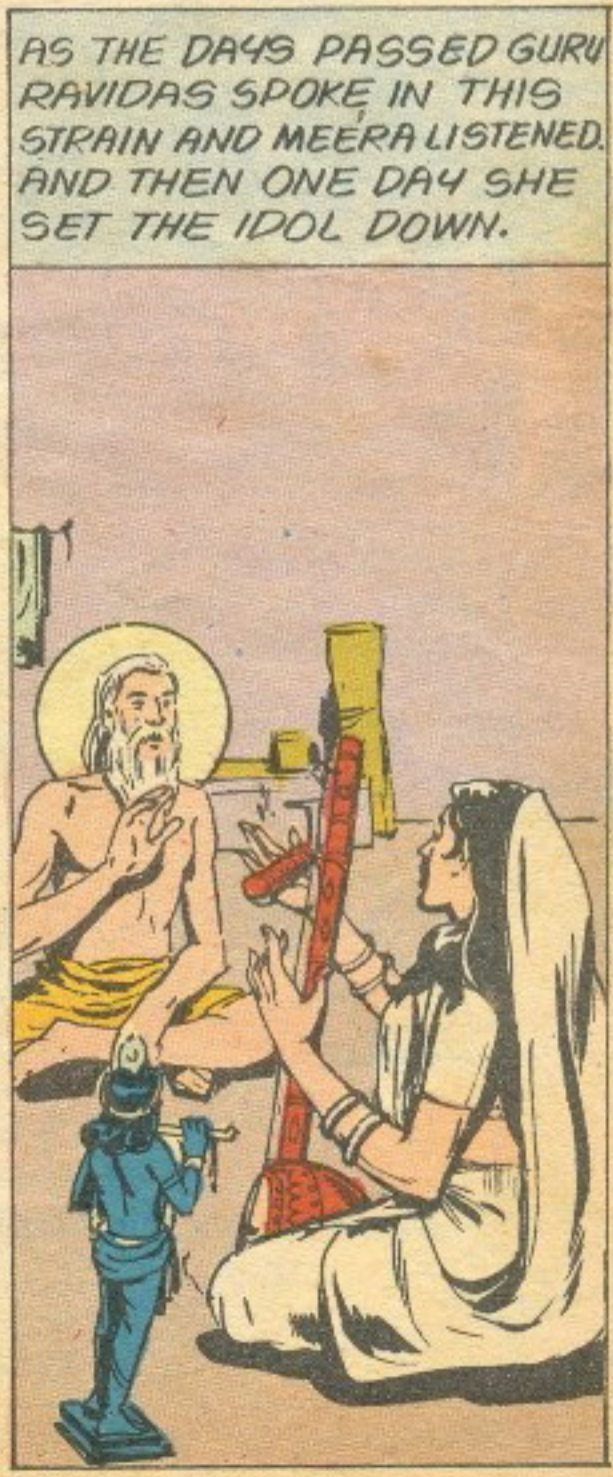
LIKE A RIVER, YOU HAVE ENTERED THE WAVES OF GOD'S OCEAN.



GOD AND DEVOTEE HAVE BECOME ONE.



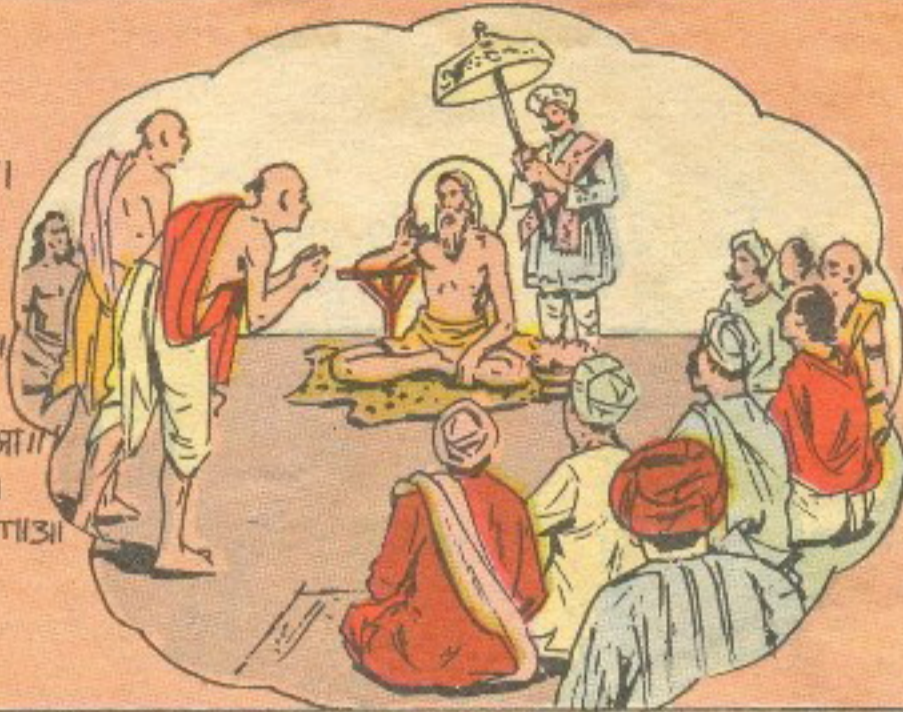
SO HOW CAN THERE BE TWO ?



AS THE DAYS PASSED GURU RAVIDAS SPOKE IN THIS STRAIN AND MEERA LISTENED. AND THEN ONE DAY SHE SET THE IDOL DOWN.

PEOPLE WHO ONCE SPURNED THE YOUNG COBBLER BOY NOW BOWED BEFORE HIM.

हरि हरि हरि हरि हरि हरि हरि ।
 हरि सिमरत जन
 गपु निरसतरि करे ॥१॥
 हरि के नाम कबीर उचार ॥
 जनम जनम के काटे कागर ॥३॥
 निमत नामदेउ दूधु पीआइआ ॥
 तउ जग जनम संकट नहीं आइआ ॥
 जन रविदास राम रंगि राता ॥
 इउ गुरु परसादि नरक नहीं जाता ॥३॥



भाई रे राम कहों हें मोहि बताओ
 सत्य राम ताके
 निकट न आओ ॥ टेक ॥
 राम कहत सख जगत भुजाना,
 सो यह राम न होई ।
 करम अकरम करुणामय केस
 कर्ता नांव सु कोई ॥ १ ॥
 जा रामहिं सब जग जानत,
 अरम भुनें रे भाई ।
 आप आप ते कोई न जानें,
 कहैं कौन सूँ जाई ॥ २ ॥

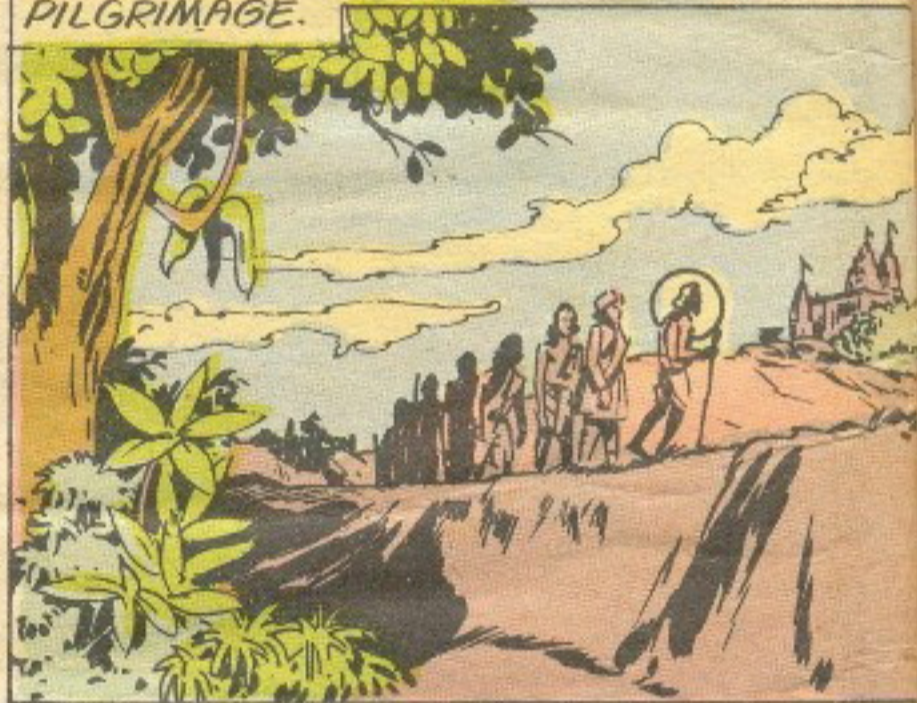
BUT TILL THE END OF HIS LIFE, GURU RAVIDAS WORKED AT HIS TANNING AND SHOE-MAKING.

THOSE WHO ARE COLOURED IN THE NAME OF GOD. WILL FIND NO OTHER DYE AGREE-ABLE.

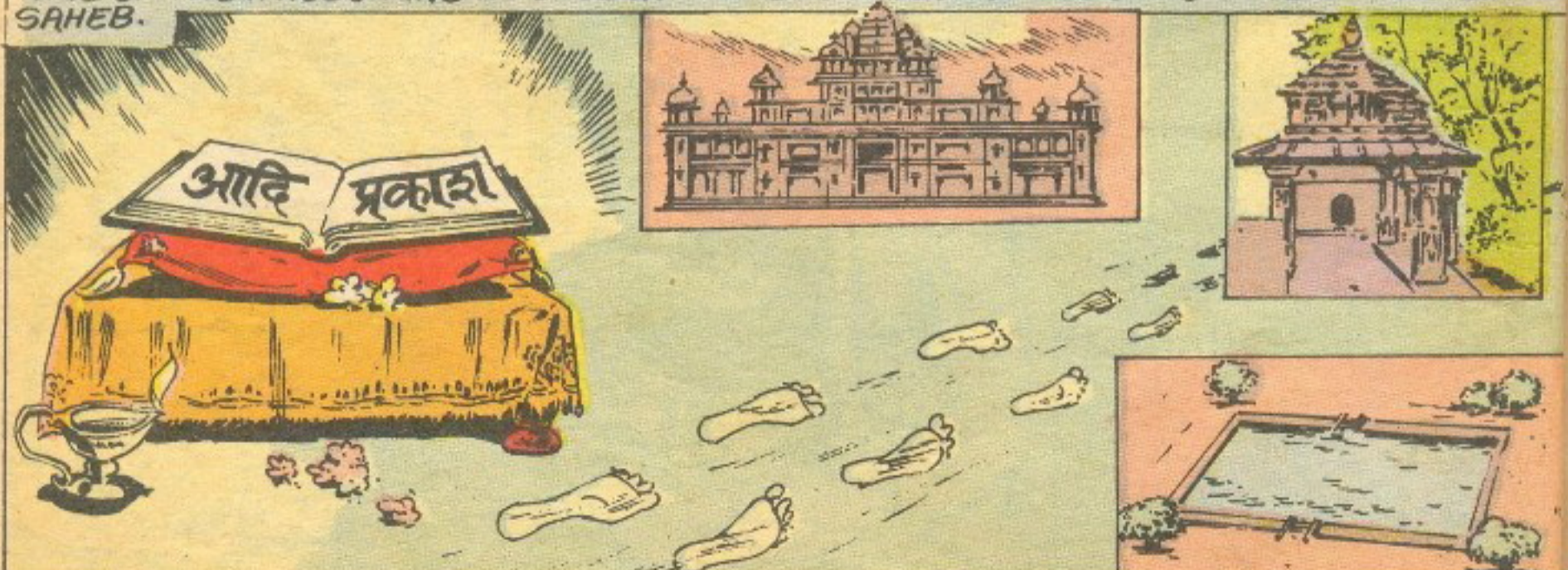
SIR, I AM CERTAIN THAT YOUR VERSES WILL FIND A PLACE SOME DAY, IN SOME GREAT BOOK.



TOWARDS THE END OF HIS LIFE, GURU RAVIDAS UNDERTOOK A LONG PILGRIMAGE.



WHEN HE PASSED FROM THIS WORLD, HE LEFT BEHIND HIM, THE RAVIDASIS (THE SECT THAT BORE HIS NAME) AND HIS SIMPLE BEAUTIFUL BANIS*. HUNDREDS OF SHABDAS OF THE GURU ARE PRESERVED IN "AADI PRAKASH", THE HOLY BOOK OF THE SECT. THIRTY NINE OF THEM ALSO FIND A PLACE IN THE GREAT BOOK OF THE SIKHS - THE GURU GRANTH SAHEB.



AND DOTTED ALL OVER NORTHERN INDIA ARE SHRINES, PONDS AND ASHRAMS BUILT IN HIS NAME

* SONGS ("BANI" LITERALLY MEANS "VOICE"). † LITERALLY 'WORDS'