

For a Place in the Sun

CHAPTER 1

Calcutta, January 1902.

It was just light.

The stars weary with their non-stop night watch were s-l-o-w-ly dropping off one by one.

The river lay still as sheet glass, her placid bosom barely making any move.

A flight of moss-covered steps went down straight to the river. Raghu stood on the last one and looked all around. The *ghat*, otherwise crowded, looked strangely empty now.

Not a soul was in sight. Even the beggars who normally slept on the pavements had shifted to the porches of the surrounding houses.

He wrapped the shawl tightly for the predawn chill was mercilessly biting into his bare skin at the slightest exposure.

Stooping slightly, he dipped the tip of his forefinger into the river.

And shot back.

Instantly.

Instinctively.

The water felt like ice. He stood still for a while, mentally preparing himself for the plunge.

Then suddenly, he threw back the shawl and with an impulsive determinedness dived headlong into the river.

The first impact was terrible. He felt numb, as if an electrifying effect had suddenly disabled all his senses. The entire system of his body seemed to have shut down momentarily as he bobbed like a log in the freezing suspension.

The insensate state lasted for barely a few seconds. Then slowly normalcy returned and he could savour the latent warmth of the ice-cold waters. The muscles loosened their strain, the nerves abandoned their amassed stress, and blood gushed through unbridled from top to toe. Soon, every bit of his body was revelling in an ethereal ecstasy.

By then, the day had already broken. Raghu, chanting his daily quota of the sacred distich positioned himself in knee-deep water and facing east with folded hands paid homage to his ancestors before he began his day.

He filled his pitcher and climbed up. Just beside the *ghat*, beneath the spreading branches of an oversized Banyan tree was a giant lingam of Lord Shiva. Its original jet-black colour had long been eroded under the impact of ceaseless devotion - vermilion marks, withered petals, dried specks of sandal paste, all vied with each other for every inch of the godhead.

Raghu too poured the entire contents of his pitcher on the deity and devotedly placed a handful of *bel* leaves at the base. Then leaving behind a shivering Shiva, he entered Akrur Mistri lane, a narrow serpentine alley that somewhere, along its length, displayed a spurt of protuberance as it crossed the palatial house of the Singhis-usually referred to as the *Singho-bari* (*and not Singhi bari*) in the surrounding locality. This corruption in name was largely due to the presence of a pair of stone lions or *singhos* guarding the entrance in hunched back pose. They had been in that position since

centuries-from the day JayNarayan Singhi, the founder of the family had built this sprawling mansion almost 300 years ago.

Raghu opened the side gate and went in. He lived in a room at the backside of the mansion. Two discoloured steel trunks tucked underneath a rickety bed were the only chattels adorning his modest room. He was tempted to lie down, but on second thoughts abandoned the idea and closing the door behind him set out in search of *sarkar mashai*.

At the other end of the mansion, a mischievous sunbeam stole in through a half-open window and struck straight at the eyes of the person fast asleep on a magnificent four-poster mahogany bed in the centre of the room. The warmth of its touch woke up RudraNarayan. He took out his watch from under the pillow, took a look at the time, and immediately cried out for his personal servant Ananta.

“Call Raghu”, RudraNarayan ordered without opening his eyes and turned on his side, his mind going back to the fireworks on the *maidan* last night.

Raghu, sitting in *sarkar mashai's* room, too was recounting the celebrations of last night to a wide-eyed audience, intentionally exaggerating at times.

“What rich assortment of *bajis!* I have never seen more fascinating fireworks in all my life! There were all kinds of them, *atashbaji* , *chuchobaji*, *byangbaji*, *chorkis*,.....”

"But one thing I always fail to understand, Raghu-*da*", Rakhal was saying "Why do the *sahibs* make such a fuss over the arrival of a new year? What is so special to celebrate in that? It is just a normal happening, the passing of time!"

Rakhal looked after the accounts of the *Singhibabus* and in accordance with the nature of his job, he wanted all actions to be accountable and logical.

"You don't understand, Rakhal", *Sarkar mashai* volunteered to explain, "God has given the *sahibs* only two occasions to celebrate -*Kissmus* and *Burradin*. They do not have so many festivals like us. But then, they are very enterprising people. So what did they do? They went ahead and created their own festivals..." he stopped abruptly seeing Ananta standing at the door.

"Raghuda *Choto Kumar* has sent for you. Come quickly."

The palatial mansion of the Singhis stood glowing in the clear morning light. It had withstood the brunt of nearly 3 centuries; still it wore its age with the craftiness of a mellowing actress. It was a huge house spread out over a large area and sectioned into a series of *mahals*. Occupying the entire frontage, was the *bahar-mahal*, a two-storied rectangular building with an open-to-sky central courtyard. The far end of the courtyard was flanked by a flight of steps leading to a double height hall. That was the *thakurdalan*, the venue of the annual Durga Puja.

Behind the *bahar-mahal* was the *andar-mahal*, *bahar-mahal's* prototype, a structure similar in plan but with a smaller courtyard. The women of the family lived here, the male members being permitted selective entry.

The kitchen along with the stores was the last one in the row. It was mundane looking and spaced quite apart from the main house. Again the distance was intended and justified too-, as it was always the hub of perpetual hullabaloo.

A long linear veranda was the connecting link between the *bahar-mahal* and the *andar-mahal*. As Raghu hurried along, his attention was drawn to a lean figure stationed diagonally above, leaning on the window bar, with a far away look in his eyes. That was SuryaNarayan, RudraNarayan's elder brother.

Right from his very childhood, SuryaNarayan had proved in many ways that he was not the typical Singhi-*babu*, all unbridled and unfeigned. At an age when his brother was busy flirting with every girl he could lay sight upon, his favourite place in the entire house was the library and his only companions were the dusty termite eaten books and ancient manuscripts stacked there. Nobody disturbed him. He was a recluse, quietly relishing his reverie.

Years rolled on. Then one day in spite of his extreme unwillingness SuryaNarayan was married to a beautiful girl called Kusumkumari and a year later, a daughter was born to them. The event unexpectedly brought about a radical change in his nature. He shed off his earlier introversion and became extremely outgoing and jovial.

But the days of celebration were short-lived. The child died mysteriously and her mother followed suit soon after. And SuryaNarayan, too shocked and shaken beyond belief again returned to from where he had ventured out.

“So Raghunath-*maharaj* has at last found time for his poor subject”, RudraNarayan remarked in jest, seeing Raghu entering the room.

“Why are you up so early? Raghu asked, ignoring the comment outright. “We will be going out only in the afternoon! ”

He had been with RudraNarayan since the last two decades and such a long association had involuntarily accorded him an authority over *Choto Kumar*. Raghu had started his career in the *Singhi-bari* 30 years ago as the personal assistant of ChandraNarayan, RudraNarayan's father. He had seen RudraNarayan being born, swayed him in his arms, played horse-horse with him. And when the mantle of *babugiri* passed on to RudraNarayan after his father's mysterious death 4 years ago in the house of a nautch

girl, there was no change in Raghu's position except for the fact that instead of keeping the father company he started accompanying the son on all his outings.

Raghu loved RudraNarayan with a fierce passion that far surpassed his love for his own son. His family lived in a faraway distant village. He visited once every two years and was content with the arrangement.

"I have to go to Gahar's house", RudraNarayan said, "She will be waiting for me. I have promised to take her to the circus."

Gaharjaan *baiji* was one of the prominent rages reigning the city and RudraNarayan devotedly frequented her place at least once every two weeks.

There was no power on earth, which could make him abort this fortnightly pilgrimage.

An hour and a half later dressed in a crackling white *dhoti-punjabi* with a heavily embroidered *Jamewar* shawl spread over his shoulder, RudraNarayan was ready. Waiting under the porch for the landau to be brought, he unmindfully stared at the cloth less fairies encircling the wrought iron fountain in the garden. There had been rumours that they had once been human beings- *baijis*, that is, nautch girls brought by his grandfather from Lucknow. One day, while they were strolling in the garden, they happened to taunt a passing by mendicant whose curse had frozen them to stone forever. The incident had however stopped the practice of bringing other women into the house once and for all. Still, on clear starry nights when the moon rose in full and the place resembled a fairyland, RudraNarayan had yearned many a times for a magic wand with which he could infuse life in them. Once. J-u-s-t once.....

The clip-clop of approaching hoofs over the cobbled path broke his thought and transported him back to the present. RudraNarayan gathered his shawl and was about to

get into the *landau*, when Raghu softly reminded him that *Kartama*, his mother expected him to pay a visit to his expecting wife before leaving.

RudraNarayan changed his direction.

Radharani lay on a bed, her back to the door, eyes closed and the quilt partially covering her face which was as pale as the bedspread beneath her.

“She has just gone to sleep”, whispered Jamuna, the mid-wife who had been looking after her. “She was in great pain last night. ”

“Did you inform *kaviraj-mashai*?” he asked in a demanding tone, all of a sudden sounding like a dutiful husband.

“There is no need for it, *Choto Kumar* ”, she stated quietly. “Such pain is absolutely normal as the child is due very soon.” The hypothesis was Jamuna's own deduction from past cases.

RudraNarayan stood up. His duty was complete. He could depart now.

As his footsteps died in the distance, Radharani removed the quilt from her face and stared at the door in the direction of her just-departed husband.

“Thank God, he didn’t stay for long!” she murmured and a sad sarcastic smile slightly arched her pale lips. “He wouldn’t have, at any cost. His mind had already left!”

“But still you shouldn’t have avoided him!” Jamuna unhesitatingly voiced her opinion.

“I don’t feel like seeing his face when he is on his way to that woman’s den!” Radharani blurted out with a sigh, staring at the blank wall.

“You are very adamant *boumoni*! Women should not be so headstrong. Whatever he might be, wherever he might go, after all, he is your husband! And tell me, which man doesn’t go after other women if he has the chance? My man is over three dozen and ten.

Even at this age, he has the tendency to stray at the slightest pretext! " she rattled off quite unashamedly, trying to reason, as if it was something absolutely normal. She had been with the Singhis for the last 45 years and had almost become a part of the family. Both RudraNarayan and SuryaNarayan had been born in her hands and she nursed a sophistic affection for them.

But Radharani was not listening...she was thinking of the fateful day 3 years back when *Kartama* had seen her and her fate had been unknowingly sealed once and for all.

Radharani was hardly 11 then. She had just had her bath and a Brahmin was printing sandal marks on the long of her hand.

"What a beautiful child," *Kartama* murmured, staring admiringly at her long black tresses and affectionately holding up the small of her chin. "What's your name?"

"Radharani." Then the little girl hurriedly added " *Kumari* Radharani Devi."

Her intelligence and presence of mind impressed Dayamayi and in an impulse, she decided upon making this girl the life partner for her son RudraNarayan.

Radharani's parents had died soon after her birth. She lived with her paternal uncle and his wife. Her grandfather had been the head-pundit of a sanskrit *tol* and after his demise, his son had taken over the cudgel.

Radharani's uncle initially was strongly against the match for they were a family of pundits, whereas, the Singhis though very wealthy, had no education, barring the bare introduction to alphabets.

But his wife did not see eye to eye with him in this matter.

"Are you mad that you want to turn down such a proposal? If our Radha is married there, she will never have to get up to fetch herself even a glass of water!" She was determined

to get the girl married there, not because she was really concerned about her well-being, but for the 2000 rupees that the old lady, *Kartama* had promised them as dowry.

Radharani did not know anything then. For her, it was all like a dream. It was only when RudraNarayan renewed his nocturnal excursions within a month of their marriage that she came to know of the transaction. But by then, it was too late. The damage had already been done.

"*Boumoni!* Again you are brooding!" Jamuna mildly rebuked her "haven't I told you to keep cheerful? Or else your son will also be born like that! Always sulking and in a bad mood."

"How are you being so sure that it is going to be a son?" she suddenly asked "I will be happy if I have a daughter."

"You are really strange *boumoni!*" Jamuna stared at her in disbelief "In my whole life, I have never seen anyone wanting a daughter so willingly! A son will carry on the family line. He will look after you when you are old. But of what use will a daughter be? Sooner or later, she will have to go away to another house."

"Jamuna, want to know why I really don't want a son? " Radharani took a deep breath , "Because as soon as the faintest streak of moustache appears he will start going out to women, like the custom in this house. All the wealth will ruin him completely. There is no way in which I can prevent him from becoming what I don't want him to become! Whereas, with a daughter it will be so different! She will be with me till she is married. I will bring her up in the way I want to, play dolls with her, teach her how to sew and perhaps also send her to that school in Bagbazar (she was referring to the school started by Sister Nivedita to impart education to the girls of Hindu families)...I have heard that it

is a Hindu school and perhaps *Kartama* won't object to sending her granddaughter there..." she looked up at the ceiling dreamily.

"*Boumoni*, a daughter has no birthright in this house."

"What"? Radharani asked, unable to understand.

"Yes", Jamuna whispered after looking around and ensuring that no one was listening (for even walls have ears), "Do you remember how *bara kumar's khuki* died?"

She was talking of SuryaNarayan's daughter who had died within a month of her birth.

"Why, she died of high fever!"

"Wrong! She was suffocated with a pillow in the room. That is why her mother committed suicide. And look how *bara kumar* has become!"

"Who ordered it?"

"*Kartama*".

"But why?" Radharani asked in a rising pitch.

"Sssh, *boumoni*. Don't talk so loudly. If *Kartama* comes to know that I have told you all this....." she trailed off.

The incomplete sentence was enough to indicate the measure of authority the old lady enjoyed over everyone in the house.

The *landau* made its way through a labyrinthine of lanes and by-lanes and stormed into Chitpur road. It had to slow down soon, for the narrow thoroughfare was a stream of multifarious humanity that late morning-frail looking locales wrapped in coarse *chaddar* and their fairer up-country counterparts seeming all the more stouter in tight fitting *chapkans* and imposing turbans.

Shops standing in cheek by jowl fashion cluttered the roadsides, the dingy interiors crammed with all types of saleable wares—brass, bronze, and bell metal displayed in pyramidal fashion and reaching right up to the roof. In one shop, an old woman was engaged in ceaseless bargaining with a pot-bellied shopkeeper over a bronze pitcher. She had lost hers the other day at the riverbank when in a fit of stoicism she had temporarily abandoned it. In the vicinity of the Chitteswari Kali temple lepers lay in untidy ill-wound bandages shouting for alms and threatening with eternal penury if their demand went unheeded. Like most of their patrons, they too believed that their mere acceptance of the pie pieces reduced the givers' quota of penance.

The busy thoroughfare that began its journey amidst the tinkle of temple bells at Baghbazar towards the southern suburbs of the city rested on its way a bit where it crossed the palatial house of Gaharjaan. There, considerably rejuvenated by the soft strain of *ghazals*, it resumed its journey.

Gaharjan's actual name was Edilian Angilina Edward. Her father was an Armenian. When she was barely eight, her mother fell in love with the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Mehbub Ali and deserting her husband, eloped with him also taking her daughter along with her. They came to the city of Calcutta where she took up residence under the name of Bibi Malikajan. Gaharjan grew up in Calcutta. From an early age she learnt singing and dancing under tutelage of the best masters and in course of time she became adept in both. Soon, her fame as a *baiji* spread like wildfire and men of all ages from every corner of the society flocked to her place.

Nevertheless, the *baiji* was quite choosy. Not everybody who knocked at her door managed to gain entry into her domain.

RudraNarayan was one of the lucky few.

Just outside the Gaharjan's palatial mansion was a big babul tree. It was a common belief in the locality that the tree was the favourite abode of spirits- frustrated mortals who had failed in their lifetime to get close to *baiji* took up residence there after death. Eerie things often happened when one passed under it, especially late in the night. At times when the disturbance became too much, exorcists had to be called in to pacify the spirits- they poured water at the base of the tree continuously for 13 days together and the spirits residing in it would come under control, till a fresh bout of excitement made them restless again.

Stepping out of his landau and looking up through the dense maze of verdure, RudraNarayan was instantly reminded of the rumour though for some unknown reason the spirits of the tree had never obliged him with their presence.

"Send message to the *baiji* that I have come," he ordered the man who had appeared to attend to him.

Gahajaan's room was divided into two parts by an ogive arch that had a floral border running all along its length. The sitting area, where the *baiji* held her *mujras* and other performances was very modestly furnished. In contrast the bedroom was an extravagant affair. The entire area exuded exuberance-velvet drapes, satin bedspread, silver hookahs on brass stands, gilded panels of intricate *ponkh* work on the walls- and above all a huge Bohemian chandelier with a rain of crystal droplets added to the garish glitter of the room. In the centre was an elaborate four poster bed. Almost all who gained entry to this chamber ended their journey there.

Seated in front of a huge Belgian mirror, Gaharjaan was deeply occupied in a dreading a *paan* when RudraNarayan entered the room. A multicamerate silver tray filled with the numerous ingredients lay on her lap and she was taking a pinch from one and a dash from the other and gently rubbing it on the spread out betel leaf. Squatted on the floor, a young girl was simultaneously painting the edge of her toes with *alta*, and the combination - red border against her pearly white feet looked deadly even from a distance.

He stopped at a wayside wall mirror just opposite the door. He was still in his early twenties, yet he had already begun to bulge in the middle in the manner of his predecessors. He stared disapprovingly at his own reflection.

“*Singhibabu* why are you standing there?” Gaharjaan called out. “Come here, near me.” She beckoned him to a settee near her.

“Selina, bring a glass of that scented *sharbaat* for *Singhibabu*” instructing her maid she folded the betel-leaf in conical fashion and tucked it inside her mouth.

RudraNarayan sat down on her bed and looked all around. He was not a newcomer here, still the place never ceased to fascinate him. The soft glow of the tinted windowpanes imparted a romantic glow to the room and it seemed totally cut off from the rest of the world. All the hustle and bustle of the city was strangely muffled here.

Gaharjaan picked up a silver goblet filled with fragrance and lightly rubbed her finger on it. The liquid had frozen in the chill.

“This year it looks to be unusually cold” she commented pointing to the solidified mass.

“Selina!” she called out again “Will you melt this?”

“Give it to me” RudraNarayan took it from her.

“What will you do with it?” She was a little puzzled.

“I will melt it for you.”

“How?”

He didn't reply. Instead fumbling in one of the pockets of his *punjabi* he pulled out a thick wad of notes. From the other emerged a matchbox. With the two he struck a fire and held it beneath the goblet.

"What are you doing? Have you gone out of your mind?" she cried out in alarm, trying to snatch the notes from him.

But he held them well out of her reach.

“What kind of madness is this?” She called out sharply.

RudraNarayan just gave her a glance but did not pay any heed to her words.

The note by then was just a mound of ashes.

He pulled out another from the bundle. In a matter of minutes it too was gone. He took out another. And another.

Soon the bundle got exhausted. He pulled out a new one from his pocket and started afresh.

Soon the room was filled with ashes and the air was heavy with the smell of smoke and burnt paper, a few flying around haphazardly.

The fragrance too had melted. With a winning look, he handed the bowl back to her.

Gaharjaan took it dumbly, too stunned to say anything. Being a *baiji* she had had a fair chance of witnessing many a crotchet but the present one surely surpassed all. It almost physically hurt her to helplessly stand and see money (whose ever it might be) being destroyed like this. True, she was wealthy now, but she alone knew the history of toil and tears that had accumulated in her chest to fill up her coffer.

“What happened to you?” RudraNarayan looked at her, irritated at her unresponsiveness. He had expected amazement and then appreciation for his unique feat. But instead of applauding him, she looked quite miserable as if it was her money that he had burnt.

“Nothing” Quickly controlling herself she forced a broad smile and dipping her forefinger in the melted perfume lightly rubbed it on his cheeks

In a beige coloured brocade sari with silver *zari* work in the border she looked deadly. Her aquiline features accentuated by her almond shaped eyes and lustrous lips made her look all the more alluring.

“Gahar” he whispered holding her by the waist and drawing her towards him “You seem to be growing more beautiful with each passing day.” He stared admiringly at her shapely contours and suddenly felt a strong desire to explore them all over again.

“Leave me” She fidgeted a bit, feigning to free herself.

He only tightened his grip, feeling her all over and softly nibbling her in the nape.

“Let me get up” she made a last attempt “I have to get ready. Won't we go to the circus?”

“I don't wish to go anywhere. I just want to be with you,” muttering, he lifted her in his arms and kissed her lightly in the navel.

“You are the flame in which I have no regrets in burning myself out,” he whispered, immersing himself in her.

Soon.....

He was breathing heavily. She was breathing deeply.

Suddenly there was a sharp knock on the door.

“Who's there?” RudraNarayan yelled out in irritation.

"Its me, *Choto Kumar*" came Raghu's voice from other side of the door. " Sarkarmashai has brought the news that a son was born to *Boumini* a short while ago!"

"That is great news! " RudraNarayan sounded jubilant. "Tell *sarkarmashai* to distribute sweets among everyone!" And after I get back I will"

"But *Choto Kumar*, Raghu interrupted him, sounding strangely subdued, "*Boumini's* condition is very critical. *Kartama* wants you to go home."

For a moment RudraNarayan was involuntarily reminded of the woman who was his official wife and had just become the mother of his son. But that was all. The piece of news did not affect him beyond that.

"What will I do there? I am not a doctor!" he answered back, shrugging his shoulders.

"Tell *Sarkarmashai* to get the best physicians in the city instead of wasting time here. Go away now!"

As his footsteps died in the distance, RudraNarayan attempted to return to what had been engaged in earlier. But somehow it didn't feel the same and he could sense the discordance even in Gahar's attitude.

"*Singhibabu*, I think you should go home now. Merrymaking can wait. But a life will not." She sat up and tying her loose hair into a knot stepped out of the bed.

"I think it would have been better if you didn't give me sermons about what I should do and what I should not." he shot back defiantly.

She said nothing. But it was clear that she did not approve of his behaviour.

People voluntarily come to us. We don't tell them to abandon their wives, yet in the end it is we who are blamed for ruining their lives. Their wives curse us, perhaps even spit at the very mention of our names. But are we really to blame?

“Gahar, why are you getting so upset?”

“No, don’t touch me, at least not now” she instantly shrank back as if struck by lightning as he tried to patch up and draw her towards him.

RudraNarayan was really bewildered. Women were really an enigma. Sometimes he could not make out head or tail of their behaviour.

A few miles away in another part of the city, a crowd had collected in front of the room where Radharani had just given birth to a son. But it was strangely silent, only once in a while a hush-hush could be heard as a newcomer arrived on the scene and was updated about the condition of the mother and the newborn.

A little later the door of the room opened and everyone waited with baited breath for the news.

Jamuna emerged. She looked tired but considerably relaxed.

“*Boumoni* is out of danger” she declared to a visibly tensed *Kartama* who immediately let out a sigh of relief as she touched her forehead with the string of rosary.

“And how is the new born?” she enquired in a quivering tone.

“Oh! He is fine. I have rarely seen such a fine baby.”

“Gurudev has saved us!” *Kartama* mumbled with clasped folded hands. “I was fearing that he would be motherless right from birth!” She murmured in an undertone. Slowly the tenseness in her face disappeared and she looked relaxed.

She was about to get up and retire to her room when *Sarkarmashai* slowly entered, his head hung low.

“Choto Kumar refused to come. He is with *baiji* Gaharjaan.”

He didn't say anything more. He didn't need to say anything more.

Inside the room Radharani who had just regained her consciousness too heard the words.

She closed her eyes and clasped the tiny bundle close to her heart as best as she could.

Immediately a shrill cry accompanied by a slight movement emanated from the bundle.

The heir was authoritatively announcing his arrival on earth.

CHAPTER 2

Ganga, the maiden of the mountains was born in an icy cave as a thin feeble creek high up in the lofty Himalayas. The new born playful rivulet skipped over rocks and rugged terrain and reached the foothills, where her infancy ended and she expectantly stepped out into the outside world with an air of dignity.

But there, out on the plains she encountered an entirely different realm as she painstakingly carved her way through the maze of human habitat. It was a world where verbally everyone gave her lot of respect, but treated her quite the otherwise. People called her mother- "*Ganga Mai* ", but again, it was they who polluted her as per their selfish requirements, dumping all their undesirables, filthy things in her flow. She was treated worse than a whore, used and abused by all.

Ganga was soon disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the human society. But still she ran on and on, through fields and forests and gorges, eager to meet her Godmother-the Sea. The mature much-mellowed down river longed to take leave of her task, merge into the limitless blue and lay there in peace forever.

The confluence of Ganga and *Sagar*, or the sea is called the Gangasagar. A fair –the "*Gangasagar mela*" is held there every winter when people from all over the country assemble on the auspicious occasion of the *makar sankranti* to take a dip in the holy waters and wash away their sins.

ChandraSwami too had come all the way from Kasi to participate in the event and on the way back; he had break-journeyed at Calcutta at Dayamayi's special request to bless her grandson.

The western wing of the Singhi mansion where he had put up overlooked the river.

Seated on the wooden floor on a woollen rug, ChandraSwami was bent over a low height wooden desk, deeply absorbed in examining a sheet of paper with a magnifying glass. Beside him, were a few half-open scriptures, the pages flip-flapping in the light breeze that blew from the river.

He got up to close the window. The breeze seemed to be fast growing into a gale. Was a there going to be a storm? He looked out of the window. The sky was imbued with a reddish glow. All the stars seemed to have suddenly disappeared.

Suddenly, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Who's there?" he asked, raising his voice slightly.

"It's me *gurudev*" sounded Dayamayi and entered, her head wrapped in a black shawl. In her hands was her grandson, fast asleep.

ChandraSwami gently lifted the baby in his arms and opening its cupped palm held it near the light of the lantern.

Dayamayi looked on. A faint clamour of voices came from the scullery, where the cooks were quarrelling with the storekeeper over the share of daily ration or some other equally insignificant matter.

Clip-clop, clip-clop- came the faint clatter of horse hooves as a carriage cantered by on the adjoining Chitpur road.

A little later, ChandraSwami finished his inspection and turned back.

"Now there is not the slightest doubt!" he soliloquised, handing the baby back to its grandmother.

"What is the matter *gurudev*?" Dayamayi who had been silently watching him all the while could not hold herself back any longer.

"Your grandson will come to grief on account of his mother, which might even lead to his death!"

"What?" she gasped in disbelief.

He again repeated the verdict, slowly and in very clear words. And this time there was no room for any doubt.

"Is there no prevention?" She asked in a shaky voice.

"Of course there is. Like every disease has its cure, every problem its own remedy. The child must never be allowed to come in contact with his mother!"

Dayamayi sat stupefied, unable to think anything clearly! Send Radharani away forever for no fault of her own! Already she had a soft corner for her younger daughter-in-law and it had increased tremendously after she had gifted the family an heir.

"Looks like I will have to send the poor girl to Kasi tomorrow itself" she stated with a sigh, sounding extremely morose.

"But that is just a makeshift settlement!" her *gurudev* pointed out "The danger still remains. When your grandson grows up can you stop him from seeing his own mother?"

"I will tell him that his mother died soon after he was born."

"He will know the truth sooner or later. Then what will you do?"

"What will I do?" she mechanically repeated after him, unable to think anything clearly.

The unexpectedness of the situation had left her completely dumfounded.

"Don't get carried away by emotion Dayamayi!" He glanced at her, sounding extremely calm and composed. "Unfortunately, as destiny dictates there is no place in this world for both mother and son. One has to go to make place for the other."

"What are you saying, *gurudev*?" She almost stammered as the full implication of his words dawned on her.

"Who is more precious to you, this baby or his mother? You can easily get another bride for your son. But a grandson is god's gift!" ChandraSwami paused for a while to allow the implication of his words sink in her mind.

Dayamayi glanced at the sleeping bundle. There was a completely unworried look on the tiny face as if it had bestowed itself to the custody of someone it trusted with its whole heart. Unknowingly her eyes filled with tears as she kept on staring at the elfish face. The baby went on sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware of the complexity its presence was causing.

Flying pigeons was bestowed with a special pedigree as compared to other forms of sport for the very sight of birds circling and tumbling in the infinite azure created an esoteric

impact in the minds of the onlookers. RudraNarayan had a keen forte for the sport and his aviary had a rare collection of the best breed. Most were of the Rampur Kalsira variety with long white spotted head, luminous eyes and black spots in the tails and wings bought from Sher Nawab Khan's pigeonary at Ferozpur. His favourite was a pair of blue rock pigeon called Hira and Moti who lived in a special niche just outside his room. They had participated in many competitions and brought him innumerable laurels.

Radharani too was fond of them and since the day she had stepped into this house she had voluntarily taken it upon her to feed them every morning. She would take a handful of gram in her hand and call out to them in a sweet sing song voice and in no time they would appear from no where, circling above her. Then they would settle down on her shoulder and swiftly pick from her palm. After that they would swiftly fly away again, till they were no more than two tiny specks in the boundless blue.

Standing on the terrace and watching them, Radharani's fantasy too would take flight and she would momentarily imagine herself to be one of them, flying free, soaring and sinking and soaring again, exploring unknown lands, gliding over and fields and forests.... And she would unknowingly shiver in the ecstasy of the feeling.

That day too after feeding her son she had come up to the roof to feed the birds. But RudraNarayan was already there mashing something in a bowl very attentively.

"Oh you are here!" He turned round hearing her footsteps and seeing her retreat gently pulled her towards him.

"Leave me" she tried to break free "Someone may come up any moment and see us" she tried to put the *aanchal* over her head.

The day when RudraNarayan had refused to return home in spite of knowing that she was virtually on her deathbed had been an eye opener for her. Till then she was aware of his attitude towards her and the reason behind it (her well-wishers had enlightened her about Gahajaan at the very first opportunity). And over the years she had slowly reconciled herself to her fate, but she had never realized how very insignificant her existence was to him.

He noticed her unresponsiveness and pretended to be perturbed.

"You are still angry with me!" in an apologetic tone, he eyed her, trying to gauge what was going on in her mind. "How many times have I told you that when *sarkar-mashai* brought the news of you being critically ill, I had got up to come home, but that whore of a *baiji* gave me such a *sharbaat*, after drinking which, I lost all my senses. Still, forgive me, if I have hurt you even unknowingly." he gently squeezed her palm. "I promise it will never happen again."

Radharani had mentally decided to distance herself from her husband after that day so that his actions would cease to have any impact on her. But now standing under the clear blue sky on the sun-caressed terrace, she was unable to hold herself back. To her dismay, she discovered her resolve weakening. She found herself wanting to forgive him and forget all his misdeeds. At least momentarily.

"Are you going out again?" she asked after a little while.

"Yes, on a cruise. I will be back in a fortnight."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh! we will just sail down the river, stop wherever we feel like."

"Take me with you!" she looked at him imploringly.

"What? Have you gone berserk?" he remarked glaring at her, "How can you even think of such a thing? There will be other men with me, the Lahas and that *sahib* who lives in Chandannagore. I am trying to get the contract for that colliery and also enter into a partnership with them for the tea gardens. This trip is just a trick to get intimate with them and win their confidence."

"Is that *baiji* going with you?" she asked sharply, cutting him short.

"Who Gahar? Of course she will go. Or else, how will I entertain my guests?"

"But why are you getting so worked up with all these trivial details?" he tried to pacify her, "My relationship with Gahar is purely a commercial one, whereas you are my wife, the mother of my son. Our relationship is not of just this birth but for seven births! What more do you want?"

Seven births! Six more births of similar suffering! Radharani unknowingly shuddered at the thought.

At that moment there was a shout from below and RudraNarayan hurriedly went down, leaving her all alone on the terrace.

Radharani leaned onto the parapet and gazed at RudraNarayan's *Mayurpankhi* boat anchored to the private *ghat* of the Singhis, all ready to set sail. Extremely elegant looking, with a peacock-tailed rear and stern shaped like a peacock's head, the barge with sides of teakwood sheathed with copper commanded an impressive sight as it stood rocking lightly on the lap of the river.

Suddenly the green Venetians were thrown open and standing on the roof Radharani could see the ornamental bed perched proudly on the parquet floor in the centre of the

room. She unknowingly squirmed as she visualised her husband sharing it with a bejewelled figure in swishing silk a few hours from now.

Oil your hair -Kuntalin/ in your paan put-Tambulin;

Use perfume-Delkosh/and remember the great Bose

The middle-aged dowager was humming softly as she sat behind Radharani on the venetian blinded veranda oiling the latter's lustrous locks and arranging them into neat streamlined plaits.

Radharani had long curly tresses that filled her back in a serpentine manner, and it was tedious task everyday to straighten them out and arrange them into any kind of knots or knits. But the maid was endowed with enormous tenacity who never gave up till she had succeeded in taming the curls.

"*Boumoni*, I have finished making the plaits. Now tell me what kind of ball shall I make? She asked.

"Do whatever you feel like." Radharani replied absentmindedly, gazing outside at the rapidly retreating gloaming through the myriad perforations in the *chik*. She was observing the *shodo brata* for the wellbeing of her son, and as per the rules of the quasi-religious ritual she had been fasting the entire day and now her throat was cracking with thirst.

The last strains of the receding daylight filtering in through the venetian blind created a strange checkerboard of shade and shadow on the veranda floor. Staring at the pattern she

was suddenly reminded of Kasi, where as soon as the sun set, a thousand temple bells would ring in the evening and the *aarati* by the river would begin, myriad earthen lamps lighting up the dusky water with their soft glow.

"*Boumoni*, let me make something special. After all, today is an auspicious day."

Radharani deeply engrossed in her own thoughts, just nodded in agreement. In Kasi, she along with her friends too had observed many *bratas*. Just a few days before her marriage she had observed the *belpukur brata* to eliminate all possibilities of a co-wife in her marital life. In that particular ritual, with a paste of powdered rice, one makes a drawing of a Mayna bird on the floor and holding a flower to the bird prays:

"Mayna Mayna on your life

Let there be no rival wife"

But did it really make any difference? Radharani wondered. For though, she did not have to share the house with another woman, it was equally true that her husband's heart was not with her.

"*Boumoni*, are you ready? Kadam, *Kartama's* chief maid appeared. "*Kartama* has asked me to accompany you to the *ghat*."

After taking a bath in the river and performing a puja in the family temple, Radharani's ordeal would end and she would be eligible to eat and drink something once again.

A little later, two figures could be seen scurrying along the veranda. They reached the entrance of the *andar mahal*, but instead of taking the usual direction, as Kadam rounded a corner and turned the other way, Radharani stopped short.

"Where are we going? This is not the way to *ghat*!" she exclaimed.

"Since it is already dark *Kartama* has instructed me to take you to an alternate place where your purpose will be fulfilled and yet it will be safe."

She started walking again, and Radharani was left with no other choice but follow her. They walked in and out of many rooms and passages and finally came to a long dark corridor with rows of locked rooms on either side. The place was unusually quiet and seemed to be abandoned. Cobwebs festooned the discoloured walls and a few bats flew hither thither, miffed at being disturbed in their slumber.

"This is the original part of the house that your great grand father-in-law had built." Kadam mildly brushed aside a stubborn cobweb and continued.

"Before the *sahibs* had firmly anchored themselves in this country, there was a lot of anarchy. Everywhere there was unrest and disorder. People used to live in constant fear of *Bargi* invasion. It was then that your great grand father-in-law had constructed a secret underground passage, which was used as an escape route in times of emergency. Later on as the river shifted course, this passage became useless as the water used to come in during high tide."

They reached the end of the corridor and stopped in front of a room. Taking out a giant rusted key from the folds of her sari, Kadam inserted it into the lock and gave the door a push. It responded by emitting an eerie creaking sound but did not open. Decades of collective disuse had sealed the doorway with dust and made it hostile.

The first few attempts proved to be futile, but finally with a heavy grumbling sound, the door reluctantly relented.

The inside was dark and damp. There was a curious repugnant odour-smell of a space, which had remained untrodden for years together. Radharani stood at the doorway staring

at the uninviting interior, initially blinded by the intense darkness. Then slowly her eyes got accustomed and she could figure out the faint frame of a door at the far end. Unbolting it was a comparatively easier affair, as sheltered from the external elements, it offered lesser opposition. Beyond it was a flight of steps that descended to an underground chamber with a sloping floor and a slanting ceiling.

There was a semicircular channel punched into the skirting at the far end of the floor. It looked wide enough for a man to crawl through.

“That is the secret passage.” Kadam put down the smoky lantern and squatted on the ground beckoning Radharani too to sit down.

The lantern glimmered, throwing shimmering shadows on the damp walls. The wet slippery floor shone dimly, emitting a faint pungent smell.

“Kadam let us go up. I am getting suffocated in this dungeon.”

“Why are you getting so panicky *boumoni*?” she comforted her. “All you have to do is to just go down when the tide comes in and standing on the last step sprinkle a handful of water on your head.”

She abruptly peered down. A thin sheet of water had already trickled in and the floor was no longer visible.

“*Boumoni*” Kadam nudged her. “Go down quickly. The tide will soon come in full force and submerge all the steps.”

Radharani appeared hesitant. She closed her eyes and was reminded of the night outside, the sequined sky canopying the courtyard and the soft caressing breeze. They had never seemed so dearer before.

Seeing her hesitating, Kadam glanced at her disapprovingly "What kind of a mother are you *Boumoni*? You are not prepared to endure this much for your son's well being!" she spoke in a shrill and sharp tone.

Her words had the desired effect and Radharani, without saying anything further started to descend. She reached the last step and as her feet touched the ice-cold water she shivered unknowingly. There was a slithery feeling in the black moving mass, which menacingly embraced her feet. She slowly bent down and scooping a handful sprinkled it on her head.

Suddenly on hearing a clinking sound she turned back and froze at what she saw. The door had been shut from outside.

Like lightning, she ran up the steps and began hammering at the door.

"Kadam! Open the door!" she frantically screamed, beating the door desperately.

"*Boumoni* !" came Kadam's voice from the other side. "I can't. Forgive me. I am only carrying out *Kartama's* instructions."

Radharani could hardly believe her ears.

"But why?" she spoke in a feeble tone.

"*Gurudev* has warned *Kartama* that your son will die because of you."

"Impossible! I don't believe it! Take me to her. I want to hear it from her own mouth!"

There was complete silence on the other side.

"Kadam the tide is rising rapidly! Well if that is so, I promise to go away this very moment and never come back again! Now open the door!" she spoke, simultaneously beating the door with all her might. Her hands were bruised, but still she did not stop.

Kadam unable to hear any more, swiftly retreated to the courtyard and flopped on the floor. The starry sky looked down on her. A scalloped canopy hung menacingly over her head, fluttering in the draft.

The tide in the meantime had sunk most of the steps and was swiftly moving up. As it touched the topmost one, the lean figure leaning against the wall lost its balance and toppled headlong into the adjoining waters, a sharp splashing sound instantly ripping apart the stillness of the room.

A little later silence again returned to the enclosed space. Only small ripples playfully paced the placid water. The tide had touched the ceiling and lay still.

A few miles upstream from the bustling city of Calcutta, the linear river while crossing RupNarayanganj took an abrupt U- turn and changed its course, chiselling out a conical piece of land in the process. The country-house of the Singhis stood on the index of this snout. The forefathers of RudraNarayan had built it as a hunting lodge in the days when the surroundings were thickly forested and home to a wide variety of wild fauna. Slowly, with the passage of time and population pressure, the jungles had vanished and with it their inhabitants too but the tradition of hunting continued to live on, though with a difference. Whenever RudraNarayan came here, he would instruct his attendants to bring all the young good-looking girls they could spot in the village to the hunting lodge. Even those who were married and had children were not spared.

This time however, RudraNarayan had brought Gaharjaan along with him and the people of the village had heaved a sigh of relief. His *bajra* was anchored midstream and the duo spent most of the time aboard, occasionally setting foot on land for a short stroll.

Full moon was just a few nights away and the entire earth was awash in an ethereal brilliance. The silvery sphere cloaked in a shadowy embrace by rainless clouds was reigning the sky, its luminance considerably paling the presence of stars and other elements. Trees on the far bank stood like silent sentinels in the silvery light that permeated everywhere, flooding the bare earth and even overflowing the burrows in the fields. All around it was extremely still, except for the occasional plaintive call of a cicada.

On the deck of the *bajra* two figures sat closeted, their shadows almost overlapping. Reclining in a chaise longue, RudraNarayan was relaxingly smoking a *hookah*, with the golden nipple resting lightly between his lips. The aroma of roasted tobacco wafted in the still night air. Precariously perched on the handle with just the railing between her and the river was Gaharjaan, with an arm coiled round his neck for support. Her veil fluttered in the mild breeze, playfully tapping him on the cheek every now and then.

A sudden squall almost dislodged her and she squealed in alarm, causing RudraNarayan to immediately pull her towards him. Then noticing that she was shivering, he unwound his shawl and gently wrapped it round her.

“Don’t” she tried to stop him. “You will catch a cold.”

“Let me. I am ready to do everything for you.”

He longingly eyed her. Dressed in a bluebell chiffon sari and heavily jewelled from top to toe, she looked gorgeous. She shook a little and the jewels immediately jingled in response. The moonlight mirrored in her diamond diadem created a coruscating effect.

There was silence for a while.

"Are you really ready to do everything for me?" she asked, with a meaningful smile between her lips.

"Yes everything" he eyed her deeply, sensing a challenge in her voice.

"I need your help in a certain matter, but for giving it you might have to risk the rage of the Raj."

"I don't care." He retorted audaciously. "What happened? Is anyone troubling you, some white skinned son of a bitch?" he asked after a little while, stung with curiosity.

Gaharjaan didn't answer. Instead she asked again "Have you heard that the *baralaat* has banned the entry of women in the Fancy Fair at Chowringhee?"

RudraNarayan reflected on it for a moment. He remembered Raghu mentioning something of that sort two days ago. Nevertheless, how did it affect her? He was somewhat bewildered.

"It happened because of me " she explained as if reading his thoughts, "I came across the *baralat* at the fair and he, thinking me to be an aristocratic lady, raised his hat. Later when he found out my real identity, he must have thundered like anything at this self-inflicted humiliation. And hence this ban to rule out the possibility of any such future mistake. "

“But he will get a fitting reply” She began again in right earnest “From next year, coinciding with the Chowringhee fair, I am also starting the “*Mohini Mela*, an even more elaborate affair,” she sounded extremely confident and determined.

"Singhibabu", she looked at him earnestly, gripping his hand "I will look forward to your support. You are one of my pillars of strength."

"I, I will have to think a bit. " he stammered, "I cannot give you any commitment right away."

Instantly she let go of his hand.

"Never mind" her lips curved in a sarcastic smile "I am not forcing anything on you. Abhay *babu* has pledged to do everything possible to make the fair a success."

Hearing that name on her lips RudraNarayan sat up.

"You mean Abhay Mullick!" the strain of envy in his tone was clearly palpable.

Abhay Mullick was his arch rival and expectantly RudraNarayan did not approve of his proximity with Gaharjaan. Many a times he had openly expressed his disapproval but the *baiji* too was equally adamant. She had made it clear to him that she was not his wife on whom he could enforce his quirks and quibbles.

Still, as she noticed RudraNarayan sitting silently she felt bad for she had no intentions of spoiling his mood that moonlit night.

"Singhibabu, why you are still brooding over all these? She took his hand once again, trying to break the deadlock. "Forget it. It was my fault. I should not have brought up the subject now."

He withdrew his hand.

"I am ready to give you whatever assistance you need in organising this fair. But you have to keep Abhay out of this!" He got up and gathering his shawl proceeded to retire to the saloon below.

Gaharjaan stared at the slivery landscape and sighed. How could she turn away Ahbaybabu when he had voluntarily promised her unconditional support in this matter? He was a passionate singer and respected her for her art and to him, perhaps only to him, she was not just a young and beautiful woman. She remembered the nights they had spent discussing the different *raags* and *raaginis*. Both of them had even planned to put up a special performance at the Mohini Mela! Ahbaybabu's wife had died long ago and since then he had not remarried, deciding to remain immersed in music and only music. How could she shut her door on such a person?

But on the other hand it was equally true that Ahbaybabu was an intensely impractical person when it came to worldly matters. RudraNarayan would perhaps be more effective. And it was risky to earn his displeasure for he had the capability to mar her plans too, if he so desired.

"So what did you finally decide?" RudraNarayan had come up and was standing behind her.

In a trice Gaharjaan made up her mind.

"If I get all what I want from you then why would I need to go to anyone else?" she looked at him flashing a forced smile.

At this remark his face lighted up in satisfaction.

"Gahaar enough of argument. Lets' have some music." He was back to his former self.

"Why don't you perform that lotus dance? It's been a long time since I last watched it."

She nodded in agreement and a little later, two men carrying a circular copper plate got on to the deck and set the stage for the performance. It was filled with red powder and a milk-white sheet was placed on it, the three corners clamped to nails while the fourth one was left free.

Gaharjaan appeared. She had in the meantime changed into a deep red voluminous *ghagra* and a heavily embroidered blouse. Her georgette veil studded with spangles was sparkling like a flight of fireflies.

She stepped on to the sheet and remained still for a brief moment with her right arm raised to her forehead. Perhaps she was remembering her master and paying a silent reverence to him.

Then she began to dance and the jingling of her ankle bells instantly shook up the night out of its slumber. With nimble steps and elegant swan like movements, she danced, confining all her movements to the tray and never stepping out it even mistakenly. The plate shook and vibrated with the impact of her performance. She looked like a raging flame in her fiery attire and RudraNarayan watched on breathlessly. For a brief moment he felt as if he was in heaven, in the court of God Indra and a nubile nymph, the most beautiful female in the entire universe was performing for him. And as he looked on, he was tickled with a rising desire, a desire to hold her close to his chest and make her his very own. The magic in the soft moon-bathed surroundings increased his yearnings even more.

Gaharjaan took a swirl and stopped. The faint strains of the accompanying music too came to a halt.

The sheet was taken off the plate. On it was imprinted the impression of a blushing lotus in full bloom.

RudraNarayan got up from his seat, still spellbound, and taking off his golden chain garlanded the lotus dancer.

Soon everything was still again. As the man made sounds died down, the usual songs of the night once again resurfaced. A crow could be heard crooning at infrequent intervals to the waning moon. From far off floated the monotonous pecking sound of a woodpecker. A caressing breeze lightly rustled the sleeping trees and raced through the fields in boundless glee, knocking the sleeping weeds out of their nap.

On the deck of the *bajra*, the two shadows moved closer and closer till they had merged and become one. The sequined sky looked down on them. The lean silhouettes fringing the far banks looked away. And below them all, an inky river, rippling in the ebbing moonlight effortlessly inched its way towards the sea.
