

Section I

Chapter I

Udaipur was once the capital of the State of Mewar; now it is only a town like many other towns in Rajasthan. But the change in its status hasn't diminished its beauty, nor the air of mystery that hangs over what is now known as the 'Old City'. It is surrounded by a bastioned wall, which after four hundred years is crumbling; in fact there are now big gaps, but the wall still divides Udaipur into two halves. The new township is beyond the old wall and the city within it.

The west side of the city is bounded by Lake Pichola. Men bathe in it; washermen unload their donkeys and beat the clothes clean on slabs of granite on its shores. Women on the river banks go to ring the temple bells before they return to light the household fire. The waters of the lake that touch the city are not clean; they even give off an offensive odour at times but that's only when the rains have not replenished it.

To the north of the city is the hill of Sajjangarh. It is steep and at one time it was covered by a dense forest in which the royalty hunted tigers and leopards. The poor climbed up to the slopes and collected twigs and branches for their daily fuel. But today the trees stand stark and exposed; there is no thick foliage that made the paths into the forest invisible. Everything in Udaipur depends on the rains and when they fail then the lakes dry up and the trees wither.

In the city wall there are four gateways to the city. These gates are huge with metal spikes on each panel. In the days when the kings of Udaipur were ever ready to meet the invading armies of the Mughal rulers they were shut during the night. Now there is no danger, so they are never shut. All traffic flows through them in and out of the city.

There is only one main street and that leads to the palace. But there are many little gullies that branch off from it and reach deep into the city; some are wide enough for a car if none other is coming in the opposite direction. There are others in which only a cyclist can pedal; broad or narrow little shops are on either side of the *gullies*. Through the network of gullies every house is connected and the children can run from one house to another carrying messages of a birth, a marriage, a death. On both sides of the main street are the big shops; they are always crowded. The pink, orange and green silks and satins hang from the ceiling to attract the passer-by.

The white granite palace in which the Ranas held court for four hundred years stands on the crest of a ridge that overlooks Lake Pichola. The palace with all its splendor was near the humble huts and houses of the people. They looked at the lights and heard the grunts of the elephants and were content. Their king, the Rana, was there to take care of them. It was only twenty-five years ago that the palace lights were dimmed and the flag of Mewar came down. The people were sad, for the Rana had lost his power and his ministers were no longer in charge of the treasury and could no longer give away land. Everything had changed in the State of Mewar and in its capital. But the people in the old city remember the days when everything was bright and gay, when the Rana sat on his throne and received his people, rich and poor alike. No one in the city can forget those days when Udaipur belonged to the people.

They know a new township has developed outside the old city wall. They have seen the rows of neat houses on either side of the broad tarmac road. The houses have neat gardens in which roses grow and the grass is green. The air is clean and in it there is no cow dung smoke but there is no soul in the new township. Its people have no memories of what Udaipur was like, they are newcomers, they don't have common ancestors, they don't know what they did, who they worshipped, what sorrow and joy they felt. They don't belong to the soil of Mewar; they have come to the town because of work; they love the lakes and the low-lying hills that keep them cool in the hot summer months. In the new town the rich and poor are separated by the rose gardens; they don't know each other; they live separate lives. The only thing common between them seems the tarmac road, on which the poor too have the right to walk.

The people in the new town explore the old city, again and again. They cannot understand why the people don't move out of the congestion, the smells, the little gullies, and come and join them where the air is clean, where there is land to build on. More than anything they are puzzled by the wall-enclosed havelis, some in marble, others in stone; they wonder how much gold lies buried in the vaults. There is no way they ca

Sangram Singhji's haveli is the biggest in the gully although it is not the biggest in the old city. The haveli has no real shape to it; the marble and stone seemed to have been hastily piled on top of one another. It expanded through the years but without any plan, it recedes in places leaving empty land, and yet it pushes out in other directions, making the gully even more narrow where it bends around the mansion which has three storeys.

The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within their apartments. The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. Even so no man entered the co

Chapter II

Sita was b

'Ganga, oh Ganga, where are you?' shouted Pari. 'Are you dead that you do not hear me?'

'Jiji,' Ganga said, running up the stairs to the verandah. 'Jiji, I went down just this minute to see Lakshmi. She has had a girl.'

'So has your mistress; go upstairs and don't waste time talking. Looking at you, one would think that Lakshmi is rejoicing the birth of a girl. The poor girl must already be worrying about the dowry which will have to be given, especially if the child looks like the father.' Having got the servants on their feet, Pari sat down on the floor and took her snuff box from her blouse. She took a little pinch, placed it delicately under each nostril and sniffed deeply.

Pari was only a maid servant in the haveli like the other eight, but with her tact, hard work and devoted service for forty-five years, she had established a special place for herself in the family. She had come to the haveli as a child of eight. The year her father had brought her to the mansion there was a terrible famine in Rajasthan. Pari's parents had lost three of their seven children. Pari was her father's favourite child. He did not want to see her suffer from hunger and then slowly wither away like the other three. So he decided to give her away. In this he was following a common practice of feudal Rajasthan where villagers in desperate circumstances gave their sons and daughters to the care of aristocratic families.

Once accepted, these children became the responsibility of the family. When Pari entered the gates of Jeewan Niwas, Ram Singhji, the father of Sangram Singhji, was the head of the family. Even as a child, she was helpful to the mistress and soon became her favourite child maid. Two years later she was married. But after fifty years she could recollect neither the day she was married nor the day she became a wi

must be celebrated as if a boy had been born to the family. That is certain. But there is no time for dreaming now. I must get back.' Her mind made up, the blood raced through her veins. She was already thinking of the details of the festivities to come. She got up agitated, put her snuff box in her blouse and hurriedly went inside.

As soon as Pari entered the young mistress Geeta's room, the lady doctor took hold of her shoulder and pleaded, 'Parijiji, tell these women to talk somewhere el

Chapter III

Lakshmi, like Pari, came to the haveli as a young girl of ten. The other servants teased her saying that her parents had given her away because she was dark and ugly' and that her dowry would have been heavy. But Lakshmi did not care what anyone said. She was happy when playing in the backyard of the haveli, but grumpy when she had to work. Sangram Singhji's wife, who was a shrewd judge of character, had arranged Lakshmi's marriage when she was fourteen to Gangaram, who was a servant in the haveli. Gangaram was gentle, soft spoken and kind to everyone. The servants' children loved him. He did not scold them when they laughed at him as his legs wobbled under the weight of the firewood that he carried every day to the kitchen. He did not mind the children making fun of his crooked nose on a pock-marked face. He went about his work quietly, never complaining, ' never grumb- ling. But Lakshmi found everything wrong with him. She complained about his temper and about his tattered clothes. She even blamed the mistress for marrying her to a poor man, and that too with a crooked nose.

Pari would comfort her. 'Look at me,' she would start, 'though I have been a widow almost all my life, I am still not free of my in-laws. You have no one to worry about, no mother-in-law, no brothers-in-law; you can enjoy your pay and do what you like with it. I never have a penny left after the demands of my in-laws. And what do I get from them? Nothing. Not even a blouse. But I don't complain. We all have to accept fate. There is no escape from that.'

Lakshmi would listen but nothing would convince her that cleaning and sweeping was wonderful or that she was fortunate in having Gangaram as a husband.

Lakshmi paid equal little attention to Dhapu, another maid, who kept reminding her that she was no longer a child but a married woman. 'Look at you with your head uncovered. Were it any other man he would beat you, but Gangaram is a saint. I warn you, Lakshmi, that if you sit pouting the whole time, even Gangaram will turn one day. Which man can put up with a wife who does not make him comfortable?'

But Lakshmi went her own way, doing work when told to, otherwise sitting around day-dreaming. Her favourite pastime was to wash and polish the silver anklets and bracelets given to her by the mistress. After all, she was only a little over fifteen.

Lakshmi lay on the floor of her small, dark, damp room content with life. 'I will have a child every year. This is the only way to get rest and comfort,' she said the next day, smiling to herself. 'Twenty-one days of rest from sweeping and washing. If only women were considered unclean for longer what fun it would be,' she thought. Having found an easy way to escape the haveli drudgery, Lakshmi picked up Sita who nestled beside her and nursed her.

The door of the room creaked open and Ganga slid in as if she were a thief and said excitedly in a loud whisper, 'Lakshmi, do you know that the birth of Vijay Bai Saheb is going to be celebrated as if she were a boy? Don't glare at me like that. Don't you realize what this means, you silly girl?'

'I knew something was on that old woman Pari's mind when she came to see me in the morning. She hardly spoke. Just sat scratching her head. She must have been going over the list of the saris to be distributed on the great occasion.

'You are really impossible to please. Lakshmi, everyone is excited but you. We will get sweets and new clothes. There will be dancing and singing, what more do you want?'

'Do not be so sure, I can already hear Pari saying "Do not give Ganga this, she is lazy, don't give Champa that, she will be spoiled." In the end I know we will all be handed out threadbare saris, dyed in bright colours to make them look like new. Remember, I didn't come to the haveli yesterday.'

"Sh! sh! sh! you talk too much,' chuckled Ganga. 'You will get me into trouble too.'

As if she had suddenly remembered something, Lakshmi sat up erect, her eyebrows knitted together and nodding her head she said: 'Now I know where Sarju is, with the mistress of course, trying to flatter her so that she gets what she wants. Just let her come. Who does she think she is? After all, I am also paying her for my delivery. She is not doing it for nothing. But that woman is so greedy that for a few more rupees she would gladly see anyone die.'

'You are a fool, Lakshmi! How many times have I told you that walls have ears but you go on babbling as if this haveli belongs to you.' Ganga drew the sari over her face, opened the door and went out.

Sarju walked in the open door grinning. 'Lakshmi, you better get up soon or you will miss all the fun,' said the midwife tucking the end of her sari into her skirt, all ready to start massaging the baby.

'I hope yo

'Who do you think you are that you dare talk to me like this?' said Sarju, putting her hands on her hips, 'I am not your servant. Keep your ten rupees and get another midwife. I am not about to starve that you can talk to me in-this fashion. Did you think for types like you I would neglect Bindniji, especially with her first child? Don't forget I have eaten the salt of this haveli for twice as long as your years. Now lie down and don't waste my time, I am in a hurry, there are still two houses I have to visit.'

For once Lakshmi lay down like a little child who had been given a proper scolding and put in her place.

Sarju cleared her throat, took a little oil in the palm of her hand and started rubbing Lakshmi's stomach. The even sure strokes of the midwife soothed the girl, her furrowed brows straightened out and her anger subsided.

Sarju also forgot the exchange of harsh words and said in a voice full of warmth: 'I told the young mistress to be really generous and not to forget that she had given birth to the first great grandchild.' Then lowering her voice she added: 'I have been here long enough to know how things work in the haveli; that is why I went before Pari could get a word in.' Lakshmi opened her eyes and smiled.

'Now go to sleep, I promise not to be late tomorrow,' said Sarju, rubbing her oily hands on her arms and straightening her sari before she went out.

Chapter IV

It was the eleventh day after Vijay had been born. Geeta lay in the huge four-poster teak bed with thick puffy pillows on either side. The pale green mosquito net was loosely draped around the stained brass poles. There was no one in the room; Geeta felt relieved. Outside the window near her bed she could see dark monsoon clouds floating, ready to break their silence any moment. The threat of rain had kept even the vendors off the streets. Geeta closed her eyes and let her mind wander.

Two years ago when she left her parents' home in Bombay, she did not know that she was leaving behind a way of life in which there was a free mingling of men and women. Geeta had met her future husband Ajay in the company of her brothers' friends. She was not quite sure which of the young men had come to see her. When her parents asked if she liked the man in the grey suit, she had said, 'Yes'. Her parents seemed sure that she would. Her mother had told her that Ajay came from an old aristocratic family of Udaipur but he, unlike many in such families, was highly educated. He was a science professor. He was not interested in entering a more prestigious service much to the disappointment of his parents. Geeta's parents' only doubt seemed to concern Ajay's family. The women of the upper class in Udaipur, among them his mother, remained in purdah. Geeta had been differently brought up. She had gone to college and studied with boys. How would such a girl learn to live in the constricted atmosphere of a world of women, to give her elders the traditional deference? But, they reassured themselves, since Ajay was of the new generation, he couldn't possibly believe in the old customs. Her parents' anxiety was not really so much about Geeta's adjustment, but about whether a girl like her would be approved by Ajay's parents. The more orthodox relatives might be afraid of an educated girl and caution them against her, particularly one who was not from Udaipur. Geeta knew that her mother had worried that she would spoil everything by talking too much on the day Ajay came to see her.

There was a week of suspense before the reply came from Udaipur. Geeta had been approved. In between getting the trousseau ready, Geeta remembered her mother's advice and smiled. 'Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much.' She didn't think it necessary to tell her about purdah. Geeta wondered whether she knew anything about it.

Geeta's eyes had filled with tears as the train lost speed and was getting ready to halt at its last stop. Her light pink bridal sari was stained as she wiped the tears off her cheeks before Ajay could see them. Bombay seemed so far away; her mother was not within call; and she was alone in the compartment with a man she hardly knew. But her tears had dried up and the thoughts of her mother had vanished the minute she had put her foot on the platform. She was immediately encircled by women singing but their faces were covered. One of them came forward, pulled her sari over her face and exclaimed in horror, 'Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?' Geeta, bewildered, frightened, managed to get into the car without talking to the women who followed her, singing as loud as they could. It was when the car started she realized that her husband was not going to join her. She had lost him while the women had crowded around her. Two young girls of about sixteen who were his cousins-in-law along with four women had all squeezed into a four-seater Fiat car. Geeta felt suffocated but dared not lower the glass. The maids had chattered away excitedly as the car gained speed.

When the car slowed down to enter the city gates, Pari had said, 'Binniji, this is Surajpole Gate. That building on the right belongs to your elder uncle-in-law, Pratap Singhji.'

Geeta had lifted her face and pulled the sari back to see. 'No, no, you cannot do that,' Pari had snapped, pulling back the sari over her face. 'In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face.' Then as the car came to a halt, to let a cow cross the street, Pari had pointed her finger. 'That house on the extreme left belongs to Gopal Singhji, your mother-in-law's brother. At the corner of that gate is Nandu Bua Sa, your aunt-in-law's haveli, and next to it is Kanta Bai Sa's house.' Nothing had made sense to Geeta who had listened to the maid with her head bent.

'That pink house belongs to Manji Bua Sa, your widowed aunt-in-law,' Ganga had said lifting Geeta's head a little but pulling the sari lower over her face. As the car turned into an even more narrow street where cyclists got down to let the car pass, Ganga had stretched her hand out and said, 'That, Binnijii, is your mother-in-law's parents' haveli.'

To Geeta it had seemed that the whole city belonged to her in-laws. Every gate they passed, the maids sat up erect and with pride pointed to a house that belonged to the family.

'Do not look so confused. Soon you will know everyone.'

It is in these families that you will have to make your reputation as a good devoted daughter-in-law. Don't ever forget that your head must always remain covered,' Pari said solemnly and with authority.

Then, before Geeta had recovered from Pari's last remark, the car came to a halt.

Geeta could only va

The room she entered was large like an audience hall with high ceilings from which hung pale green chandeliers. The floor was paved in intricate mosaic tiles. The walls were painted with murals depicting various hunting scenes. There was no furniture except for a few low stools and a large mattress on which a white sheet was spread with big velvet bolsters to rest on. Two big richly embossed silver spittoons stood on two sides of the mattress.

Geeta stood for a while in the richly decorated but austere room, before she looked up to see the walls from which hung gilt-framed portraits of her husband's forefathers in their court dresses.

The finely chiselled faces framed in neatly groomed beards seemed to be looking down as guardians of the haveli and observing how succeeding generations were living up to the traditions bequeathed to them. Their hands with long tapering fingers wore rings, (he wrists, bracelets; from the neck fell heavy enamelled necklaces studded with precious stones. Looking at the strong determined faces, Geeta had thought with pride these must have been the kind of men who had fought and won battles against the Moghuls. Just as she took a step backward to get a better view of the handsome faces, a cold hand touched her shoulder.

'What are you doing here all alone, Binniji? I know you are an outsider but it is time you learned our ways. In this section of the haveli women come only when properly escorted.' Pari's tone was severe. 'What would your father-in-law think if he saw you with your face uncovered? Binniji, daughters-in-law of this haveli do not behave like this.'

At first Geeta was embarrassed but later she was filled with anger. She wanted to say accusingly, 'I am here because you left me alone to go down to the servants' quarter for a little gossip.' But luckily her anger choked her.

In the first few months of her marriage she had found the separation of men and women romantic, full of mystery. In her parents' home men and women talked quite freely, her mother respected her father but didn't hide behind a screen when his friends were present. But in the haveli men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care. And yet, her mother-in-law was a force that could not be ignored. The huge haveli was managed by her, she kept the servants going from morning to night and saw to it that the men were free from household worries.

When Geeta first came to her new home, she had no one she could trust. Everyone was waiting to find fault with her. Yet, if she was to do things right she needed advice. Her husband was the only one who could have helped her but she only saw him in the night.

The whole day she spent with relatives who only talked of other relatives and that kept her constantly in fear of making mistakes. Besides, she yearned to talk with someone who could tell her what was happening in the world. Ajay realized her need and occasionally came upstairs on some excuse or the other but these visits were short and hurried; Geeta was embarrassed by them. The maids laughed as if they understood why he came so often to the women's apartment.

After his marriage Ajay too had found the segregated way of life in the haveli oppressive. Geeta was a companion to him, with whom he could talk and discuss things that were not related to Udaipur. But he had to wait till the evening to talk to her. Though men could come to the women's apartment when they wished it was not considered dignified to do so during the day except when women had to be consulted on some family matter. Like everyone else in the haveli there was a form that men maintained too. It was in deference to this form that Ajay left the suite of rooms he shared with his wife after he had bathed and dressed. It was in his section of the haveli that he worked and received friends. Even though Ajay did not agree with this kind of formality, at the same time he was not prepared to do anything to challenge his father's authority, whom he admired and respected.

In those first few months her maid, Dhapu, was her only friend and guide. Dhapu told her the etiquette which was expected of daughters-in-law. She never made Geeta feel embarrassed not even when she instructed her that a daughter-in-law talks only when talked to by her elders. Without Dhapu, Geeta would have insisted on going back to her parents. She couldn't have taken the taunts about her upbringing with proper meekness. The period of loneliness and uncertainty was brief. Geeta soon discovered that she had little time to brood over her difficulties. If she was not sitting, head bent, with relatives, then she was in the kitchen, helping to prepare refreshments for them. In spite of the many maids and a cook, her mother-in-law was in and out of her kitchen, seeing that there was no waste. After the morning meal when she went up to her room, the maids gathered round her and chatted. She was hardly ever alone; she had not read a book in six months. The day passed quickly and by the time evening came she was exhausted and ready to drop off to sleep.

Though only relatives came and only relatives were visited, even after two years Geeta had not got the various aunts and uncles in their right relationship to her husband. This did not bother her; everyone she met was either a Kaki Sa, Mami Sa, Bua Sa or a Bai Sa. Some were close relations, others were three or four generations removed, but everyone was related. Gratefully remembering Dhapu's warning she seldom spoke. All she had to do was to shake or nod her head demurely; the questions to her were answered by her mother-in-law. She came to love the veil that hid her face, this allowed her to think while the others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she

could see everyone and yet not be seen by them.

She heard the rain slashing down as if it were making up for not having quenched the earth the year before. Geeta picked up the book she had started to read a month ago. Just as she found the page, Pari appeared at the door with the baby in her arms, looked around and then exclaimed: 'What! Are you alone, Binniji? Is there no maid here, has no one brought you juice, what has happened to these girls, every day they get more lax in their work!'

'I have had my juice,' said Geeta, feeling guilty for not having called someone. Pari put the sleeping baby in the crib and sat down beside the bed. After peering at the baby she wiped her nose with the end of her sari and then sighed. 'Binniji, do you know when Bapu Sa, your husband, was born, I did not leave your mother-in-law for a minute. But the times have changed. These days maids have ideas of their own.' Then she stretched out her wrinkled hands and stroked Geeta's head as if to apologize for not having been more attentive herself.

'You see,' she continued, her thin lips parting in a smile and her tiny watery eyes lighting up, 'I was a child when I came to the haveli and your great grandmother-in-law trained me. She was strict. I had to be up winter or summer at four in the morning and she kept me busy the whole day. Then once I became a widow, she would not let me put on coloured saris or bangles like the other girls. I don't know what colours a widow can put on in your part of India, but in Udaipur we can only wear grey or black.'

Pari paused a little and continued. "'To be young is dangerous," your great grandmother-in-law used to say. She was right.' The maid took a deep breath as if reliving the past was like lifting a heavy bucket of water.

'Parijiji, you must have been very unhappy,' said Geeta gently, in a voice full of sympathy. 'Unhappy, did you say?' asked Pari surprised. 'I was too busy to think of things like happiness. By evening I was so tired that I slept like a child. It took two maids to wake me up. Besides, I do not even know what the word means. When I had a minute to myself I stitched my clothes; and that was not often. After I had washed the utensils, and there were at least fifty pots and pans, and swept the courtyard, the morning was over. In the afternoon I pressed your great grandmother-in-law's feet till she fell asleep. But before her afternoon rest she always gave me a sack full of grain to clean. You forget that in those days there were twenty-four family members to feed and that's not counting the servants. The mistress was shrewd. She knew if I had time on my hands I would get into mischief. After all I was young and loved talking with the servants. I was not allowed to play like other girls of my age. It was not considered proper for a widow to be gay and carefree. I was too young to understand this and thought the mistress was unfair. But Binniji, in those

days there was always noise and laughter in the courtyard. Those were great days when your great grandfather-in-law and his three brothers, their wives and all the children lived in this haveli.' She looked at Geeta, with a mischievous look in her eyes, and said in a teasing voice, 'You remember, do you not, the portraits of Ram Singhji, Akhe Singhji and Jeewan Singhji Ba Saheb; well then you know of whom I am talking.' Geeta looked away in embarrassment.

'Then when Sangram Singhji's wife Bhabha Sa, your grandmother-in-law, became the first lady of the haveli, life was more difficult for me. Some day your mother-in-law will tell you what it was like to be a daughter in law of Bhabha Sa. Now your grand mother in law is too old to keep you in check. But in her time she ruled the haveli with an iron hand. No one ever dared raise their voice in front of her. Her word was law. The young maids were not allowed out of the courtyard till they were married. There was no question of disobeying her; she kept a stick near her and we knew she would use it, too. Bhatianiji and I were her personal maids. We accompanied her wherever she went, even to the palace.' The word 'palace' evoked a nostalgic sigh in Pari. Then she continued, 'What a pity you never saw the palace when Udaipur was the capital of the State of Mewar. In those days even the havelis had more glitter. Now it is all so different, everyone thinks he is equal; how is that possible?'

'Our Maharana was like God to us; so generous, so kind, he knew every child in the city; he worried about the poor. And the Maharani Sa, she loved dance and music, she was fond of entertaining. This kept us maids also busy. The women of the nobility were called to the palace to celebrate the most minor festival. It took me two days of hard work to get the clothes and jewellery ready for my mistress. The Maharani Sa was particular not only how the ladies of the court dressed, but also their maids. She herself was always resplendent in her jewels. Oh! those days were wonderful, even though I could never wear any jewellery and my sari as now was always grey. But my eyes have seen such splendour that I feel you have been cheated.'

Geeta was again about to say a word of sympathy when Pari got up. 'Look at me talking to you when I should be with Bhabha Sa. These days she feels neglected if she is left alone even for a second. Bhatianiji is as old as she and as frail; she cannot sit and talk to her for long. I must go. Another day I will tell you more about those old times.' Pari straightened the sari over her head, dusted her skirt and walked slowly to the door; her thoughts were still of the past.

'Bhabha Sa has been calling you, Jiji; Bhatianiji is sleeping,' said Dhapu coming in with a tray of food.

'I knew I had stayed too long, but once I get talking of those days, I can't stop,' said

Pari quickly going out of the door.

'See how clever I was,' said Dhapu winking, after Pari left. 'I did not give Parijiji time to scold me. She thinks that we are all like her without families. She can't understand why we go down to our quarters, poor thing. She has never known what it is like to have a husband and children. Her whole life has been devoted to the haveli. But she is the type that would neglect even her own child for the sake of the mistress. There is no one like her, certainly not me: Dhapu put the tray of food down and bent over the crib to see Vijay . who slept.

'You really are a cunning old thing,' said Geeta sitting up, relieved to be with Dhapu. Pari always made her feel inadequate. There was a kind of authority and self- confidence in her that made Geeta uncomfortable, but with Dhapu who was in her early thirties, she felt at ease.

'If one were not cunning in this household, Binniji, one would be lost. I am simple compared to the others. That's why I do more than my share of work.' She made a face and grinned.

'You call yourself simple, do you?' said Geeta tauntingly. 'Never mind what I am; eat your food and just remember that you will not even get maids like me these days; so you had better learn to cook. Reading and writing will not keep the rats from nibbling at the sacks of wheat,' said Dhapu teasingly. She was small-built and pretty. Her pug nose went well with her button mouth. Her husband lived in the village taking care of the land that Sangram Singhji had given him. He visited her from time to time. She was the mother of three girls and all of them were married. But only one was old enough to live with her husband; the other two still lived with her in the haveli. They played in the courtyard or did errands for the mistress.

'Bai, oh Bai,' Champa, Geeta's junior maid, said coming into the room panting. 'The accountant of the haveli is just this minute discussing the details of the celebrations with the master. I overheard the most important thing. The whole community is to be fed; the celebrations will be for three full days. They will be exactly as if a son had been born and not a girl.'

'Don't tell me that you came running up here just to tell me this,' said Dhapu disdainfully. 'Once Parijiji had made up her mind, I knew she would persuade even the master. The thing now to do is put in our demands before-Parijiji has time to think about us.

'Three days of ceremonies and feasting,' said Geeta, her eyes wide open full of surprise and fear.

'What are you afraid of, Binniji? We will dance and sing, wear our best clothes, and

eat as many ladoos as we can. You have just to sit in a corner and see that your sari falls well over your face. I will not be there to keep pulling it down for you,' said Dhapu frivolously.

'But Bai,' Geeta started to say something. 'Now don't you discourage the mistress. As it is Bhabha sa has started mumbling about the expenses .If not on this occasion then when will the servant servants get gold and silver ?"said Dhapu in crisp voice.

'Binniji, don't forget I want a red sari with a matching skirt,' said Champa before Geeta turned and pulled a pillow over her ears.

'It's my turn to get something more than just a sari,' added Dhapu. 'On this occasion I will demand gold. It's my right. After all, I was the first to hold Vijay Bai Sa in my hands.'

Geeta paid no attention to Dhapu. She thought of the courtyard full of women looking her over and criticizing her as they had the day she arrived, and felt depressed. She, like Lakshmi, looked forward to the twenty days' seclusion of her room; she had enjoyed the peace and quiet of the last two weeks. But now the period was more than half over. The thought of three days of feasting and merry-making made her feel positively ill. Geeta tried to take comfort in the hope that her stay in Udaipur was temporary. Her husband was not quite satisfied with the university. They had often discussed the idea of going to Delhi. Geeta felt better as she dwelt on the prospect of leaving the haveli.

Chapter V

Geeta tossed and turned in her bed. A cold sweat erupted all over her body as she thought of the day ahead of her. The noise from the kitchen below her room woke Geeta up well before dawn. It was twenty-one days after Vijay had been born. Even after two years in the haveli she felt nervous when relatives gathered; she was still not comfortable moving around with her face covered.

The women of the haveli, rich and poor, young and old, knew exactly what to do; they were never awkward. No matter what they were doing they carried themselves with effortless grace. Geeta got no confidence from her college education. Nor did the admiration and constant reassurance from her husband make her feel more at ease. The remarks the women had made on her first day in the haveli came back: 'She will never adjust. She is not one of us.'

As the clamour of voices and the clanging of utensils grew louder, Geeta decided it was time to get out of bed. Any minute the maids would be there to prepare her for the festivities. She went into the adjoining bathroom to bathe and had returned to the bedroom to put on her sari when her mother-in-law came almost noiselessly into the room.

'Binniji, Dhapu will bring your clothes. I have brought the jewellery. See if you like the pearl set, if not, I will take out the enamel one,' said the mistress of the haveli, sitting down on the floor. She seemed preoccupied as she carefully separated the bangles from the bracelets, the anklets from the armlets, the necklaces and the earrings.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife was called Kanwarani Sa by the servants. She was a tiny person with small bones delicately fitted which made her look frail and fragile. Her complexion was smooth though sallow from lack of exposure to the sun. Her movements were birdlike but she held herself erect. Her mouth was firm; there was rigidity in her thin lips when pursed together. She walked with indescribable self-confidence and exuded strength and dignity as if she were naturally born to command.

'Binniji,' she said gently but firmly, 'keep your face covered; by now you should be able to move around without uncovering your face.' Then, after a brief pause, as if to give emphasis to her words, she said, 'Do not talk too much to your young cousins-in-law, it's not becoming. You know, the women are critical because you are still clumsy. I want to

show them that even an educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my only son. Besides, I am getting old now and soon you will have to take over,' she said, and carefully fastened the bracelet on Geeta's wrist.

Then as an afterthought she added, 'Give Parijiji all the money you receive for Vijay; the accountant will note it down so we know what to give on a similar occasion in another haveli.' .

'Yes, Hukkum,' said Geeta, using the politest form of address to cover her humiliation. She knew all her fears were justified. No one thought her worthy of the family. Everyone was afraid she would embarrass them by an indiscreet word or a faulty move.

'Binniji,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife, getting up, 'I know you don't eat properly when there is confusion around you. As soon as the women sit down to eat, you come upstairs. I will have your thali sent up. Wait till Dhapu comes to put on the rest of the jewellery,' she said lightly shutting the door behind her.

This was the kind of concern and affection that made Bhagwat Singhji's wife so difficult to fathom. Though she was strict she was not uncompromising. In many small ways she showed an understanding of Geeta's nature and tried to adjust to her needs. But on essentials she did not compromise.

From the day Geeta came into the family she had to abide by the form and the etiquette of the haveli. Her mother-in-law's personality was such that it was difficult to contradict her or even express a different point of view. She had her own way of prevailing over others, a blend of craft and tenacity. She never lost her temper. She was always seemingly considerate and gentle, She never raised her voice; she was patient and prepared to listen. It was due to her tact and her gentle persuasion that Geeta had been gradually drawn into the life of the haveli without even wanting to resist it. There was something in this way of life that frightened and fascinated her at the same time.

Dhapu came into the room smiling with the bundle of clothes balanced on her head. Since Geeta was pensive she said, 'Binniii, has something upset you that you sit staring at the floor?' as she put the bundle of clothes down. 'Today I have no time to hear your complaints about the haveli. I have a thousand things still to do.' Dhapu started to unfold the red brocade sari with quick strokes of the hand. 'Oh, I nearly forgot, Kanwarani Sa told me to warn you not to lift the baby or show any concern for her in front of others, not the way you lifted Vijay Bai Sa and kissed her the other day in the presence of your aunt-in-law.'

'Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here,' said Geeta in a high-pitched voice, at last releasing the irritation she felt. 'I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don't tell me what I should do with my own child!'

Dhpu cringed a little, she wasn't prepared for this outburst. 'Binniji, don't be angry with me. Today is a very special day for us, servants. We have waited for it for twenty-seven long years,' she said in a voice full of emotion, and silently continued to drape the sari round Geeta's slim waist, then with deft fingers closed the clasps of the bracelets and anklets. It was when Dhpu pulled the sari over her face that Geeta knew she was ready.

As she came out from her room, her head was bent more than usual, as much by the heavy jewellery she wore as with anxiety at the relatives gathered in the courtyard.

When at nineteen Geeta had come as a bride to Jeewan Niwas, she was lively and spontaneous. She had not been taught to stint in giving affection; nor was she taught to keep her feelings concealed. Her parents had encouraged her to speak her mind. There was a child-like enthusiasm in everything she did or said. She knew marriage meant going into unfamiliar surroundings, but she was not afraid. In her youthful confidence she believed that with love she could win over anyone, anywhere. But after two years she was not so sure of herself. In the haveli no one really expressed their feelings. They covered their emotions in an elaborate exchange of formal gestures and words. Even her husband talked to his parents as if they were dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties. The form and courtesy which the young maintained before the old lacked spontaneity. In the two years Geeta had never heard any really unpleasant exchange of words between different members of the family. She was aware that certain relatives were not liked and others were definitely disliked; but each time they came to the haveli, her mother-in-law met them as if she was overjoyed to see them. Everyone moved cautiously; every word was weighed before it was spoken. Even with the servants no one lost their tempers; they were reprimanded with polite but cutting words which was almost worse than if they had been openly abused.

In the two years Geeta had lost much of her exuberance but still she was unable fully to control either her words or her feelings. She was still capable of talking frankly with her younger in-laws. Because of this, her mother-in-law kept reminding her of the importance of reticence.

The courtyard was already full of chattering women in bright red, green and orange saris and a host of unruly children in their tinsel embroidered frocks. The widows, some of them young girls, were in black, the contrast of their saris with those of the married women like 'a blot in a spectrum of bright colours. Everyone was talking as if they hadn't seen each other for years. As more guests arrived they joined in; there was no need for introductions: everyone knew each other. The children played hide-and-seek behind their mothers' skirts, shrieking with delight, but nothing disturbed the women; they kept on talking.

Pari steered Geeta through the crowd to her grandmother- in-law. Bhabha Sa sat on

her bed in the covered verandah of the courtyard. Vijay lay next to her. Her maids, Bhatianiji and Gopi Bai, fanned the flies off the baby's face.

Geeta bent down and touched her grandmother-in-law's feet. 'May you have many many sons, my child, and may you always wear red,' said Sangram Singhji's wife, fondly stroking Geeta's covered head.

In the centre of the courtyard the priests sat under a canopy, chanting prayers. Then, at the exact time set by the astrologers, Bhagwat Singhji and his son entered the courtyard. There was an immediate lowering of voices. They walked slowly with great dignity to the canopy as if what they were about to do was of great significance. As the priests lit the pile of sandalwood fire, Pari escorted Geeta to the specially erected platform and seated her next to her husband on one side of the fire. Bhagwat Singhji and his wife sat on the opposite side. The chants grew louder as the priests poured melted butter on the fire, and instructed Bhagwat Singhji and his son to follow suit. The incantations of the Vedas were drowned in the screams of the children who continued to run around the courtyard. But as if noise were a natural accompaniment to prayers, the priests went on undisturbed.

The worship over, Bhagwat Singhji and his son quietly went out of the courtyard. As soon as the men left, the women relaxed; their voices rose again; they started where they had left off. Pari helped Geeta off the stool, adjusted her sari and then pushed her way to the senior-most relative for the ritual of touching the feet. Geeta could hardly see through the gold embroidered sari; the tinsel tickled her nose and she wanted to sneeze. She had never felt so nervous before. She walked cautiously lest she trip over someone's feet in the congested courtyard. As she bent down to touch the feet she vaguely heard, 'May you have eight sons; may the gods bless you. May this haveli flourish forever.' The words barely registered in her mind; all she was aware of was the next pair of feet she must touch without losing her balance. The heavy sari, the full pleated skirt, the gold, all combined to make her feel as if she was a heavy log of wood that had no mobility. When Pari led her back to sit down next to Bhabha's bed again, Geeta could hardly believe that the ordeal was over.

The noise and confusion were getting worse; the air was stifling around Bhabha's bed, as one woman after another came to her offering their congratulations and placing money in the tiny clenched fists of Vijay. The amount they gave was according to the status of each haveli and its relationship to Sangram Singhji. The family accountant with his steel rimmed glasses sat with his head bent, noting down the name of the haveli and the amount, as it was called out by Pari.

It was nearly twelve o'clock by the time the last woman had greeted Bhabha Sa and blessed her little great-grand daughter. The priests had left with gifts of fruit, grain and

cloth. The maids had spread thick white strips of cloth along the verandah surrounding the courtyard and on the edge of the cloth they placed large green banana leaves for plates and cups made of dry leaves pinned together with thin twigs. Steaming rice, dal, vegetables and different kinds of curries were in buckets, ready to be served. The sweets were in large thalis. The aroma of spices, mixed with incense, made the air heavy.

Once everything was ready, Bhagwat Singhji's wife, with great formality, invited the women to sit down to eat, as if they were guests who had come to the house for the first time. Tantalized by the smell of food, the children were getting restless. They jostled and scrambled to get what places remained or squeezed themselves next to their mothers or grandmothers. The chatter of voices was soon replaced by the smacking of lips. The close relatives served the guests. As soon as the serving buckets were empty, full ones were brought.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife with her elder relatives went around coaxing the guests, 'Have some more rice', 'One more puree', 'At least a laddoo'. There were protests, but finally they were persuaded to take something more. Having eaten with relish they belched with satisfaction and got up, washed their hands and crossed into the adjoining courtyard where there was room for them to stretch their legs and relax.

The first group of women having finished, the maids quickly picked up the leaves and cups and threw them outside the courtyard wall. The stray dogs and cows were ready to lick them. The maids moved rapidly; through years of experience they had become experts at feeding a large number of people without getting flustered. The relay of feeding and clearing went on till all the guests had been served. Bhagwat Singhji's wife was on her feet till the last row of women had been served. ;

In between the eating sessions Geeta was given the sign that she could go up to her room. When after two hours she came down she felt a little more composed. There was less noise, the maids were busy cleaning up the puddles of dal and curry, sweeping the grains of rice and savoury crumbs off the floor. The ladies were quiet; the heavy spicy food seemed to have dulled their spirits for a while. Bhabha Sa seemed happy. The elder women sat around her bed talking. She would doze off for a few minutes and again sit up. She did not want to miss anything. The younger women had formed a group of their own at the other end of the verandah so that they could talk freely. But still their saris fell over their faces lest some elder relative see them. Geeta came quietly and sat down among them.

Late in the afternoon the household seemed to be astir again. The professional singing group had arrived and started to serenade the ancient house of Sangram Singhji. The families of these women had served the havelis for several generations, singing and dancing on festive occasions. As the singing gathered momentum, an elderly lady got up and came

to where the young married girls sat huddled together and said, shaking one of them by the shoulders: 'You have had enough time to digest your food. Get up and dance. This is an auspicious day, you have also talked enough.'

The girls coyly demurred and dipped their hands deeper into their laps. 'Come on! Don't act as if you have fresh henna on your feet, as if you are a bride,' said Kanta, the widowed niece of Bhagwat Singhji, 'In my days I didn't wait to be persuaded; in fact I had to be forcibly taken off the floor. Ask Parijiji if you do not believe me.'

One of the girls reluctantly got up, pulled her sari well over her face and shyly went to the centre of the courtyard. At first she made graceful gestures with her hands but her body refused to tilt or bend to the beat of the drum. She tried for a while and then fled in embarrassment. The singers did not conceal their disappointment.

After nudging and nagging a tall slim girl got up and went hurriedly to the centre. At first she too faltered and hesitated, but then her limbs became supple. Her body turned and twisted with grace, her skirt swirled and her hands were cupped in the shape of a lotus and the arms turned into floating fishes. The singers raised the pitch of their voice and the drummers quickened the beat. The courtyard echoed with rhythm and song. The girl paused for a moment to pull the sari over her face and then she started again.

'She is graceful, she is talented,' the women said with admiration as they came up with their rupee notes, carefully taken out from inside the blouse. Solemnly they encircled the girl's head with the money and then threw it into the lap of the singers. Thus the evil spirit was bribed from casting its envious eyes on the youthful dancer.

'Come on, you are next,' said Kama to a plump girl who sat bundled up, her head between her knees. She shook her head vehemently but Kanta took her by the hand and led her to the middle of the courtyard.

The girl stood awkwardly for a second and giggled and then she looked through her sari at the drummers. They took the hint that they had to go a little slow; the singers cleared their throats and struck the tune that was romantic but languid.

'Oh! She can dance,' said the women surprised as the girl swirled effortlessly around the courtyard.

'Who could have said that with a heavy body like that she could be so graceful?'

'She was slim once; it is after her fourth child that she became fat,' put in another woman.

The girl's tight face relaxed and she smiled, then her lips parted and she began to sing with the women. Her body contours kept the romantic mood and her gestures portrayed the sentiments of love.

'One more dance. No you cannot now sit down,' the women shouted as the girl stopped to wipe the perspiration from her face. Geeta was relieved when the girl did not leave the courtyard. She was terrified lest anyone asked her perform. She did not know that there was no danger of her being asked as she was not considered strong enough after child-birth.

The senior women got up as before, encircled the rupee notes over the head of the dancer and then gave them to the smiling drummers. The singers glanced at the ever growing pile of notes and continued with their singing with renewed force. The ladies of the havelis for once were not going stint. This was a special occasion. Even the older women shed their reserve and danced to the slow familiar rhythm they had heard a thousand times before.

Amidst the singing and dancing the women didn't notice that the sun had gone down and that the evening light was turning dark; the lights were switched on unnoticed, but the ladies were in no hurry to leave. The singers had cast a spell that kept them longer than usual.

'Binniji, come with me,' whispered Dhapu in Geeta's ear.

She got up half in fear. Had she done something wrong? 'I have never seen you sit so quietly for so long; don't tell me you are not longing to see what is going on in the other side of the haveli.' There was a mischievous glint in Dhapu's eyes. 'Follow me; no one will miss you at least for some time.'

Geeta followed Dhapu out of the women's apartment, not quite sure where she was being led, but glad to be away from the noise. 'No, no, not that way,' said Dhapu in a frightened whisper. 'Come up these back stairs from here; we can see better and no one will know we are looking.' She led Geeta through a dark passage up the narrow stairs to the men's apartments. 'Stand on this step,' she said helping her up.

Geeta looked down through the lattice window, shading her eyes with her hands to get a good view. She saw her husband, Ajay Singh, in a white knee-length coat and a red turban, standing beside his father who wore a multi-coloured turban with a white coat. Father and son had the same clear-cut sculptured features; they looked exactly like the portraits on the wall; they had the same aristocratic faces with piercing eyes. The guests looked elegant in formal attire with turbans and coats of silk brocade over tight fitting pants. There was a quiet dignity in this gathering. Even the many servants moved quietly serving sherbet and sweets to the guests. Geeta's eyes rested on her grandfather-in-law Sangram Singhji who sat erect on the mattress; his white flowing beard made him look like a prophet. He was frail with age, but still one could see from his fiery eyes and determined lips that he was a man of strength. His face was gentle but not soft. His eyes had a faraway

look, as if he were not interested in those present, but recollecting the past. He remembered
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Reluctantly and yet filled with joy Geeta withdrew her face from the marble screen, and followed Dhapu down the steps.

The girls were still dancing. The singers' voices were tired and hoarse but the heap of rupee and two rupee notes kept them going. The ladies were getting ready to leave, they had already stayed longer than usual. Bhabha Sa had fallen asleep. No one disturbed her. In her place Bhagwat Singhji's wife with great modesty accepted the lavish praises for the day's celebrations, as the ladies and their maids quietly went out of the courtyard.

It was late. before the activity in the courtyard came to an end. The relatives staying the night retired to their rooms. But Bhagwat Singhji's wife, tired as she was, locked up the leftover ladoos and the savouries in the kitchen cupboard. The maids swept the courtyard, washed the utensils, counted the silver plates and cups and stacked them on the shelves. It was only after everything was put away that they relaxed. Though it was late they were too tired to sleep; they sat together singing in the courtyard. They sang softly the songs of gods and goddesses, of Radha and Krishna, of Ram and Seeta, of Shiva and Parvati. Their voices faded only when the jackals howled and the dogs barked. When the silence of night became forbidding, they quietly lay down to sleep.

Chapter VI

Geeta had done very little to contribute to the festivities, yet she felt exhausted. She got up later than usual; she knew she should be downstairs with her mother-in-law but she didn't have the energy to get out of bed. Even Dhapu was taking her time as she bathed Vijay in Geeta's bathroom.

'Binniji, Binniji,' said Ganga as she burst into the room, 'I got the red sari and skirt to match I wanted. I don't have the time to put them on now and show you. I must go and help Khyali in the kitchen, he is already screaming.' Ganga left her bundle next to Geeta's bed and bumped into Champa as she left.

'I also got what I asked for,' said Champa entering the room. Her face beamed as if she held the world's choicest brocades in her hands.

Geeta was touched by their genuine pleasure, there was nothing false in their expressions of gratitude. For the first time she felt that the celebrations were worth the trouble.

'So, you went up to Binniji to show your saris,' said Lakshmi as she stopped sweeping the verandah on which Bhabha slept. Holding a broom in her hand, her voice full of sarcasm and eyes filled with malice, she added, 'Has Parijij shown you the gold bangles she got and Sarju her gold earrings? Even Dhapu got a gold ring; you wouldn't think so looking at her face, but I know for certain she got a gold ring.'

'And so what if she did? Did you think we all would get gold?' retorted Champa defiantly.

'I am not a fool to think that, but on this great occasion I expected at least a new sari. Mine won't stand two washes, I snapped back Lakshmi in anger.

'Keep quiet! Bhabha Sa may be hard of hearing but she I not deaf,' said Champa putting her hands to her ears as if she didn't want to hear any more.

The maids' voices woke up Bhabha Sa. As if suddenly is remembering something, in a sharp shrill voice she shouted 'If there is no food cooked for me, tell me, so that I can at least sleep in peace. Half the morning is already over and still my thali has not come. No one cares if I die of starvation. I don't know why God keeps me alive. No one has any use

for me now.'

Bhatianiji, who was by her bedside, gently stroked her legs and told her that it was not yet time for her food. Then seeing the maids chatting, Bhahba Sa recalled what she really had on her mind. 'I told you, Bhatianiji; it is no good spoiling servants. Look at these shameless girls, flitting in and out of the courtyard, but do you think anyone of them has the decency to show me what they got? Why should they? I have nothing to give them. I am no longer the mistress, my days are over. I am on my way out.'

'Don't talk like this. It does not become you. Take God' name when you are angry,' said Bhatianiji soothingly putting her thin wrinkled hand on her mistress. 'See, here comes your food,' the old woman added as Ganga placed the silver thali on a stool beside the bed. Then she helped the old mistress to get down from the bed and sit on the floor.

Kanwarani Sa and Pari came and sat opposite Sangram Singhji's wife. The old lady first picked up the silver cups one by one and brought them close to her eyes to see what was in them. She made a grimace and put a cup outside the thali.

'Try a little. They are fresh beans from the garden,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife almost in a whisper, putting the cup back in the thali.

'No, I don't even want to taste it. You know I have never liked beans.'

'Try a little, just a very little,' Pari coaxed.

For fifty years Bhagwat Singhji's wife had sat with her mother-in-law while she ate. Bhagwat Singhji's wife had come to the haveli at the age of twelve or at most thirteen. Bh

you. Keep what I have given you and do not throw it away on trying to please servants. This is my advice to you, but you have never listened to me.' Her voice gradually faded. She was tired after her outburst. Pari helped her to get up and then gently lowered her head on the pillow.

'Bhabha Sa, if Kanwar Sa had not fed the community on this occasion, what would the people have said?' said Pari after the old mistress lay down. 'Would you have approved if your son had not kept the traditions you brought him up to respect?'

Sangram Singhji's wife raised herself immediately and retaliated, 'Did I say not to feed the community? They come first, but why give these wretched girls new clothes? You deserve gold bangles, but why give them to Sarju and Dhapu? Why not wait till a son is born? I know the mentality of servants. They will forget they received gold on the birth of a girl. Not one of the maids has shown me their saris. Why should they? The old are forgotten by everyone.' Then changing her tone of voice she continued, 'Of course, my son did the right thing to feed the community, but he can't be expected to see what goes on in our part of the haveli. That's our responsibility. Did you see the children with three and four ladoos in their hands? Sugar is expensive these days. Binniji is to be blamed for the waste.' The old mistress spoke aggressively, looking at her daughter-in-law accusingly.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then suddenly Pari shouted, 'What are you girls doing hiding behind the pillars? You should be ashamed of yourselves. Today you are what you are because of Bhabha Sa. She arranged for your marriages, fed you, and yet you stand there grinning like so many little monkeys. Go and get your new saris and place them at her feet. Get her blessings.'

'Do not scold them, Pari. They know whom to please in the haveli. They are wise. I have given away every tola of gold to Binniji. I have nothing left to give and they know it,' said the old mistress with bitter resignation in her voice.

For fifty years, Bhagwat Singhji's wife had heard her mother-in-law taunt her, scold her, find fault with her in this manner. She had gotten used to her sarcastic words. She did not mind them any more. In fact, when a kind word escaped the old lady, she was amused. But in spite of everything, Bhagwat Singhji's wife was devoted to her. For fifty years they had shared the joys and sorrows of the family which bound them together. Nothing could break such a bond. Just as the old mistress was about to doze off, the maids came tripping into the yard with their little bundles tucked under their arms and sat down next to the bed. Bhabha Sa sensed their arrival and was wide awake again and looked at the assembled heap of colours.

'Is Lakshmi pleased or not?' asked the old mistress in a feeble voice, as she felt the texture of the sari with care. 'She is the difficult one to satisfy.'

But then suddenly she lost interest, and with the edge of the sari still between her fingers, she closed her eyes. The maids picked up their bundles and left without looking at Pari who stood over them.

The women's courtyard was always quiet once the midday meal was over. The servants collected the food from the haveli kitchen; some ate in the verandah of the kitchen, others took their rotis to their quarters and ate with their husbands. This was the time when the servants relaxed after the morning work. The children of the servants kept the mistress amused telling her stories. She needed only a little sleep to feel fresh again. Neighbours or maids from other havelis dropped in to see the mistress of Jeewan Niwas during the afternoons. They sought her help and advice on a hundred things; they told her the latest gossip in the city and what was happening in the other families. In fact, Bhagwat Singhji's wife was happiest when the verandah was full of women. She hated being alone. Noise did not bother her, but silence she could not bear. While the maids talked they also worked. They put the utensils out to dry in the sun, cleaned the rice and wheat. Bhagwat Singhji's wife had a way of getting work out of anyone.

Lakshmi never came up to the verandah in the afternoon unless she had to. She preferred being in her own little room. After Bhabha Sa fell asleep, Ganga and Champa joined the other maids on the verandah, Lakshmi took her bundle and went out of the courtyard.

Just as she had put one foot on the steps, from the front verandah of the men's apartment a muffled voice said, 'Take this, I brought it for the child.' It was the voice of the driver Heeralal. But before Lakshmi could turn her head, the short slim figure disappeared behind the pillar, leaving the packet in her hand.

She ran down the steps, without looking to either side.

She nearly dropped Sita in her confusion. Once she had shut the doors behind her, she felt better. She looked at the newspaper package with surprise. Then she tore it open. 'Oh, this is beautiful, really soft and lovely. It's real silk,' she exclaimed. She turned the pink blouse in her trembling hands and caressed it to feel better its soft, smooth texture. Her cheeks became purple with excitement. In spite of the shafts of fear that ran through her body, a soft glowing warmth filled her. She stood still for a second, confused, not knowing what to do: whether to rush out of the room and go straight to the mistress with the pink blouse or to tear it into shreds and throw it out. Then, as if not quite certain of what she was doing, she went to the corner of the room where she kept her boxes. She lowered the tin box and opened the larger one below it and threw the soft silk blouse among her old clothes and locked the box. Then, hurriedly, she arranged her hair, picked up her sleeping child and went out of the room again.

Chapter VII

For weeks after the celebrations Sangram Singhji's haveli had been the talk of Udaipur. After all, everyone from the closest relative to the family barber had been invited to the festivities. The shop-keepers said, 'What a noble son of a noble father! Real aristocrats do not change overnight.' The men in the bazaar had reason to praise Bhagwat Singhji's generosity. They were aware that the lands of the nobility had been forfeited and that the days of feudal generosity were over. To have been lavish in the days when the Maharana of Udaipur ruled was nothing extraordinary. He had given generously to those who served the state loyally. But the times had changed. The Maharana could no longer help the nobility. He had lost his revenue; so had the aristocracy. Even so, Sangram Singhji and his son had not forgotten to include distant relations and those who had served him in the past. Who else would have thought of the smallest menial in such difficult times to celebrate the birth of a great grand-child, and that too only a girl?

The monsoons were over, the skies were clear; the nip in the evening air heralded the approach of winter. The dense blackness of the night had not yet spread over the city. Inside the haveli was quiet. Geeta could hear from her rooms the last calls of the street vendors before they packed up for the night.

Ajay sat at his desk deeply engrossed in reading. The table lamp with an orange shade spread a warm glow in the spacious bedroom. The three-room apartment of Geeta and her husband was on the side of the women's apartments. Geeta had made these rooms comfortable and cheerful. She had hung paintings and hangings on the wall. The sitting room was lined with bookshelves. Geeta had no opportunity to buy books but her husband did. The servants chided her for this extravagance and she knew that they were echoing the sentiments of her mother-in-law. She had turned a deaf ear to their advice, and continued to ask her husband to buy books. In fact, no one approved of her way of spending money. She bought old statues and brass objects; the dealers once they knew of her interests came to the haveli.

Geeta sat on the thick mattress on the floor, her head uncovered, her hands tightly wrapped round her drawn up knees. She breathed heavily as if what she held within was choking her. 'Ajay,' she said with sudden sharpness.

He turned, and seeing the indignant face of his wife, immediately sensed that something was wrong. Ajay shut the book and came and sat down next to Geeta; he realized that she needed to talk to him but her sullen face inhibited him from making casual conversation and so he said, 'I know, it is difficult for you here, but, Geeta, by being depressed, you will not change things.' Ajay's voice was anxious and gentle. He paused and then in a slow, soft voice added, 'I have neglected you and not thought enough of your life in the haveli. This life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me to try and see what you could do in this atmosphere. You must always have confidence in me that I will support you in whatever you decide to do.'

'But Ajay, you said we would only be here for a short time. It is nearly three years,' replied Geeta with a certain hopelessness in her voice.

There was silence, neither spoke. Ajay's face darkened, his shoulders drooped, he lowered his head as if to hide his confusion. Then in a heavy, weary voice he said, 'You are not happy in my family.'

'Of course I am,' she said hastily. 'Who said I was not happy? I was only thinking of you. With your academic qualifications you could not be satisfied working in Udaipur.' There was force in her voice even though it lacked conviction. She knew she had upset him and wanted to dispel his doubts regarding her happiness. Ajay Singh broke into a smile. His face lost its austere look. He looked at his wife and smiled. He understood that Geeta was trying to hide her own frustration at living in a constricted atmosphere so as not to hurt him.

'So you are worried about me,' he said tenderly. Then as if the magic of Geeta's concern had lost its power over him, he sat up. His face became taut, and he spoke looking through and beyond her. 'As far as my work goes, I am quite happy at the university. I like my students and I like my subject. No, do not start protesting. Listen to me first,' he said firmly as Geeta opened her mouth to speak.

'I have not given up the idea of going to Delhi University. We will some day, but I do not know when. Just now my father needs me here. I do not want to leave him alone; he is getting old. The problem is not of my happiness but yours.'

'I know the men have no problems in this world of Udaipur; you are all pampered. You lead your lives and think women are mere chattels,' replied Geeta with anger. 'In fact, I don't even see any point in being here. I may well go and stay with my parents. You won't miss me; there are hundreds of people to take care of you.' Geeta's cheeks burned with emotion and her tone was bitter. She no longer hid her feelings.

'You are right, we men are spoilt, but surely you know how important you are to me.'

I never thought that you would also make my parents happy. Do you know, Geeta could never have been content in Udaipur had you m adjusted to the ways of the haveli. I would then have real run away from here.' Ajay paused and then in a controlled voice said, 'I am really proud of you, but that's little consolation to you.' Geeta looked vacantly at the floor. There was nothing more to say. But at the same time the dream of leaving Udaipur died in her heart. She realized that her husband wastoo rooted in the traditions of Udaipur. To leave his parents would be impossible for him at a time when his father needed him. And yet, deep down she felt relieved. At last she was sure that her life was to be in the haveli. She could not afford to regard her stay in Udaipur as temporary. Ajay didnt say anything; there was nothing he could say. Both Geeta and he' sat silently absorbed in their thoughts when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

'Bapu Sa, Bapu Sa, come down, Bhabha Sa is ill,' said Pari from behind the closed door. Her voice was broken as if she was controlling the sobs from choking her words.

Geeta and her husband were out of the room even before Pari had turned her back.

Bhagwat Singhji stood beside his mother's bed; his wife sat on the floor next to the bed. The doctor was examining the old mistress. After the doctor finished, he stepped aside. 'Doctor, how serious is the heart attack?' asked Bhagwat Singhji in a calm voice.

'Kanwar Sa, your mother is no longer young, but who can tell? The last attack she had was also very severe; yet she recovered.' After writing out the prescription, the doctor left.

As soon as the doctor had gone, Pari lifted the sari from her face. The old mistress opened her eyes and with a slight nod of the head, beckoned her son near her.

'Bapu,' she said in a feeble voice as Bhagwat Singhji bent over her, 'You know the heavy gold bangles I am wearing, I want you to give half of one to Bhatianiji and the other half to Pari. The other bangle, give to Geeta.' Then she paused, took a deep breath and said with difficulty, 'Bapu, do not forget to give my relatives saris, especially my sister's children who are poor. Feed the community, but be careful. Do not let Binniji be too lavish; times have changed.'

'Hukkum, your every wish has always been an order for me. Don't worry about anything. Think of God and repeat His name. You will soon be well,' said Bhagwat Singhji in a grave and respectful voice.

'Bapu, you have been an ideal son. God bless you,' she said, placing her hand on her son's head. Then, turning her eyes, she asked, 'Where is Binniji?'

Bhagwat Singhii's wife put her hand on her arm to indicate that she was near her.

'Come nearer to me, Binniji,' said the old mistress impatiently. 'I know you have had a hard time understanding me, but God bless you. You have been a good daughter-in-law. Look after my son.' The mistress of Jeewan Niwas closed her eyes suddenly, as if it were painful for her to see the faces of those she loved. Her daughter-in-law held a cup of water to her lips. She sipped the water but breathed uneasily.

The news of Sangram Singhji's wife's illness had spread even during the night. Early next morning men and women began coming to Jeewan Niwas. The courtyards of both the men and women were full of people. On one side of the bed sat Sangram Singhji, his son and grandson, and on the other side the ladies. Relatives sat silently along the verandah. The women with their saris well drawn over their faces talked in whispers. The whole day people came and went but close relatives stayed on.

The first lady of the haveli slept uneasily. From time to time she lifted her weary eyelids and gazed around her. She recognized her family, her eyes showed contentment. There was peace on her face as if she had done her earthly duties to her satisfaction; her lips muttered the name of the god, Ram. There was no fear of death. no panic that the end had come. To the very last she was aware of feminine decorum. As long as she was conscious. she insisted the maids cover her face before the doctor.

It was early in the morning on the second day after the heart attack that the end came.

Overnight. the verandah in which Bhabha Sa lay lost its colour and noise; even the children were quiet. The loud, frivolous chatter of women while picking stones from the grain had been replaced by women walking and working quietly. Even the jingle of anklets seemed muffled. There was still a bustle but it was the bustle of the priests, the family accountant and the servants going in and out of the courtyard assisting the maids to prepare for the cremation.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife and her daughter-in-law sat on the floor against the wall of the verandah adjoining the main courtyard with the elder relatives. The women wailed loudly and with abandon, as if they wanted the mistress of Jeewan Niwas to know that her death was being properly mourned. The empty terrace. upstairs the courtyards, almost every crevice in the haveli seemed to echo the sound of death.

As the relatives and women of the community approached the haveli gates, their wailing grew louder. They entered the courtyard, and still crying, they sat down in the verandah. They joined the chief mourners in their grief. When, exhausted from their crying and their throats dry, the relatives moved forward, they touched Bhagwat Singhji's wife and said with feeling, 'Do not cry, you have been an ideal daughter-in-law. There is no one in all the havelis who can even touch the hem of your skirt.'

'You are weak, conserve your energy. You are now in charge of this great haveli that has stood here for three hundred years. You cannot afford to shed tears. You have to start from where Bhabha Sa left off,' said an elderly relative, clasping Bhagwat Singhji's wife's head in her hands.

'Only the truly blessed die still wearing red. Don't cry. Your tears will distress the departed soul,' said another.

Between sobs, Bhagwat Singhji's wife replied, 'She has left me alone. For fifty years she guided me. To whom shall I turn, now that she is no more? I am lost without her; the haveli has lost its light.' Her feelings were genuine, even to the relatives who knew that Bhabha Sa had been a demanding mother-in-law and that Bhagwat Singhji's wife had suffered under her.

The visitors, after they had consoled the ladies, moved to Bhatianiji who everyone knew had been with Bhabha Saheb for sixty years. Some other maids had served her for thirty years, others for forty, but none for sixty. As the ladies came near the maids and Pari, the wailing started again. Bhatianiji was too weak to join in their loud outpouring, but streams of tears rolled down her shrivelled cheeks.

'I have lost a mother. I have lost everything,' sobbed Bhatianiji, hitting her head with her hands. 'Bhabha Sa should have taken me with her. In her lifetime she never went anywhere without me and now she has gone alone leaving me behind. God is not just.'

'Listen,' a woman said, 'no one has control over life and death. You will go when your turn comes and not a day before. If only tears could bring death, there would be no suffering.'

Wiping the tears from Bhatianiji's face with the end of her sari, a woman said, 'You served your mistress as a daughter-in-law and daughter combined. No one will ever be able to match your devotion.'

The younger relatives and the junior maids had meanwhile bathed the body and draped it in a red sari, the colour that brides wear, and put bangles on her hands and rings on her toes, the jewellery that only married women had a right to wear. She lay adorned in death as she had been when she was alive. She had gone before her husband and that was considered the good fortune of those blessed. As soon as the dressed body was placed on the bier, the priests started chanting the vedic hymns.

In the male section of the house a hundred relatives had gathered ready to join the funeral procession. They were barefooted and wore white turbans. They came in light cotton clothes each bringing a towel, indicating that they were going to join the head of the family in the cremation ceremonies on the banks of the river.

As Bhagwat Singhji and his son lifted the bier from the verandah with the help of two other relatives, a crescendo of wailing went up. The ladies touched the feet of Sangram Singhji's wife for the last time.

The chanting of prayers grew louder as the body was brought out to the men's courtyard. Bhagwat Singhji and his son stood aside as Sangram Singhji came out of his room. The elderly man's chiselled face, behind his groomed beard, was calm, but his eyes were misty and there was a faraway look in them.

As the body left the men's courtyard the mourners shouted, 'Ram, Ram, Satya Hai, God is truth.' People stood on either side of the gully and threw flowers on the bier. The family accountant scattered small silver coins before the bier to be picked up by the family sweeper and his children. Sangram Singhji stood there watching the procession till it was out of sight. He was too weak to walk to the cremation grounds.

An eerie silence descended on the women's section. The ladies of the house and close relatives prepared for their purification bath. The touch of death had to be washed away before the living could start once again their daily routine. As the ladies went in to bathe, Sarju, the midwife, and her assistants, scrubbed the ladies and helped them change into clean new skirts and saris.

It would be hours before the men came back from the cremation grounds. Meanwhile, it was necessary to make preparations for the thirteen days of mourning. Relatives and friends who were not in Udaipur would also come to condole with the family. They would all be fed and housed in the haveli. Arrangements to feed two hundred guests for the thirteen days had to be made. Even in sorrow, hospitality had to be appropriate. But the immediate problem was to prepare the evening meal for those who had accompanied the body on its last journey.

The maids peeled vegetables in the verandah; relatives kneaded the dough in the courtyard; the cook carried large utensils into the kitchen. Pari weighed the wheat and dal to be ground for the days ahead. But there was no confusion. Silently everyone went about their allotted work.

This was not the first death that the family mourned. In the courtyards for three hundred years, birth, marriage and death ceremonies had been performed. The walls of the haveli had remained firm while they absorbed the echoes of joy and the wails of death. For seventy years Sangram Singhji's wife had walked in the corridors of Jeewan Niwas as the trustee of the family traditions. She had lived always in the shadow of her husband's ancestors. While she carried on her duties, she had at the same time carefully instructed her daughter-in-law in the rituals and customs of the haveli. That was the only way to

ensure the continuity of family traditions. Therefore, even though Sangram Singhji's wife was not there to light the wick of the little earthen saucer, its tiny flame flickered as always in front of the family deity.

Bhagwat Singhji was the first to enter the women's courtyard when the mourners returned. His head clean shaven, he stood at the door of the prayer room. His face was grave as he reverently touched the floor with his forehead. He stood for a moment in front of the smiling image of the goddess of fortune and then walked away.

Even before the sun went down the leaf plates pinned together with little twigs were laid in the courtyard. The food was ready to be served. The women sat down without any fuss. It was the custom to eat at the house of the dead. They spoke to one another in subdued tones. There was no joy, no sparkle in their voices.

The two parts of the haveli mourned the death separately.

There was no wailing in the men's side of the haveli. The visitors came in quietly; they sat down in the big hall which had been cleared of all the furniture; a white sheet had been spread to cover the floor. At least one member of Sangram Singhji's family was always there to receive the rich and the poor, the great and the humble, who came to express their sympathy. Whatever their status, members of the family would get up to receive and say farewell to the guest.

Sometimes not a word would be said-their visit conveyed the sense of shared grief.

The women's courtyard was never quiet. The wailing women came and went till the evening shadows fell on the courtyard. Then an uncertain quiet spread over the huge sprawling haveli. In spite of all the relatives, an air of emptiness hung over it that nothing seemed to fill.

Chapter VIII

It was the sixth day after Bhabha Sa's death. Lakshmi had worked hard with her heart in her work. No one had to tell her anything. She was everywhere. But while she worked, she remembered the feel of the soft silk blouse. Each time she thought of it, electric waves seemed to pass through her body, giving it new energy to sweep and clean. It was after the women had eaten their evening meal that Lakshmi went out of the courtyard to rest a while in her room. As she went down the stairs and put her foot on the ground, a familiar voice said almost in a whisper, 'Take this, it is for you.' Heeralal, who was standing near the car, took out a package from inside his coat and threw it in the girl's hands.

Lakshmi could not stop. There were men on the verandah and on the open terrace in front of it. Once safely in her room where Sita was sleeping soundly, she tore open the newspaper, her heart beating faster and faster. But this time her body was covered with perspiration. There was no thrill, no joy as she looked at the light pink sari. The cloth she held in her hand seemed unclean. She threw it on the ground and stamped on it. Then she quickly lowered the trunk and opened the one below. She picked up the sari with the tips of her fingers as if she did not want to soil her hands and threw it in. Lakshmi moved rapidly as if a new force had entered her body. She put the trunk back, picked up the sleeping child and walked out of the room, her shoulders thrown back in indignation.

The courtyard was full; some women talked, others slept. They were tired, for wailing was more exhausting than crying. Lakshmi spread her mat on the verandah floor and lay down next to the other maids.

'What shall I do now?' she thought. 'No one will believe I am innocent. "Why did you hide the blouse? Why didn't you tell us then?" they will ask. "We know you, lazy good-for-nothing; it's all your fault. You are a bad woman. We know how you like the good things of life." If only I had torn that blouse into shreds and then taken the pieces to the mistress, she would have believed me. But now it's too late. No one will believe I did nothing wrong.'

Lakshmi lay awake, thinking. Her throat seemed parched and she felt sick in the stomach. The maids around her snored and she longed for their peace of mind. 'What have I done to deserve this?' she kept repeating to herself while the rest of the haveli slept.

It was the thirteenth day after Bhabha Sa's death. The professional cooks had installed

themselves in the backyard, dug a fireplace in the ground for the large utensils to rest on. Tins of oil and drums of wheat and cans of rice stood open before them. The little hired helpers had already cut and peeled the vegetables. This was the last feast in honour of the dead. The whole community, friends of the family and their servants were to be fed on this final day of mourning. It was late in the afternoon when the last group of women and children sat down to eat. Lakshmi swept the floors and washed the utensils in the kitchen, as the relays of women poured into the courtyard for the morning meal. She worked faster than any of the other maids. It kept her from feeling giddy. 'Lakshmi, go up to the little terrace,' said Pari tenderly as Lakshmi picked up the broom to sweep the courtyard once again. 'Go and rest a little and nurse your child in peace. You have worked so hard, Bhabha Sa's spirit will bless you.'

Lakshmi picked up Sita who lay sleeping in the verandah, crossed the courtyard and went behind the store-room where the staircase led to the little secluded terrace on the far side of the inner courtyard. The narrow staircase was common to the two sections of the haveli. Once on the landing she walked with quick steps to the side of the terrace that had a high wall. The fresh air soothed her aching head but the dull throbbing pain in her heart continued. Lakshmi sat down, leaning against the parapet wall. She put Sita across her lap to nurse her. Just as she was about to lift her blouse, something fell before her. 'This is special halva, you will like it,' said Heeralal, thrusting his head out of the open door and quickly withdrawing. Lakshmi looked stunned as if she had been struck by a rod on the head. Her eyes dilated with terror. She clutched the child in her lap till it cried out in pain. The cries of the child brought her back to the reality of the packet on the ground. She got up, picked up the packet and threw it behind the old earthenware pots and rushed down as if she were being pursued by a thief.

The women and children had finished eating. They were already taking leave of Bhagwat Singhji's wife. Lakshmi put Sita down on the floor and mechanically gathered up the dirty leaf plates and cups, and stacked them outside the courtyard.

By evening the haveli was quiet. There was little activity in the courtyard. The last thirteen days had been emotionally and physically exhausting for everyone. As soon as the courtyard was swept, the maids spread their mats on the verandah and lay down. Lakshmi continued polishing the silver thalis.

'Before anyone gets up, I will go up and throw the halva to the dogs. Then I will tell the mistress what a rascal, a thief, she has in the haveli a man who will take the honour of women-who does he take me to be? A cheap street woman, that he throws presents at me. I will show them the blouse and the sari and I will see that he is dismissed.' Then something blocked her thoughts; a long, hopeless sigh escaped her. 'Who will believe me? No one, just no one, not even the young mistress.'

'Leave all the polishing for tomorrow, Lakshmi,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife coming out of the kitchen. 'Go and sleep. You have worked hard all these days, very hard. For the next few days take rest; or you won't have enough milk for the child.'

The maids were already asleep in the verandah. Lakshmi lay down with Sita beside them and closed her eyes.

Before it was dawn, Lakshmi crept out of the courtyard and went up the stairs on to the terrace. There was a certain calm within her. But then as she stood before the pots her heart stopped beating. The packet was not there. Instead, an army of ants were busily carrying away bits of crumbs that were left behind. She stood dazed for a second and then, as if she were sleep-walking, she retraced her steps back to the verandah and lay down beside her sleeping child.

The day broke as usual, but the haveli did not seem to come to life. The thirteen days of mourning were over. Now there was no urgency. The maids got up leisurely. The mistress herself was tired. Even she got up later than usual. Instead of going to the kitchen, she sat outside her room while one of the servants' children pressed her back and another massaged her feet.

Ganga and Champa sat lazily in the little dark room along the verandah, in which Pari kept her clothes, where the brooms; the baskets and the stone grinder were also kept.

'Look, Ganga, what I found on the terrace behind the pots last night,' said Champa in a quivering voice, taking out the packet of halva from behind the stone grinder. Then, as if her being on that particular terrace needed to be explained she added quickly: 'I went up to hang Kanwarani Sa's skirt to dry on that terrace. It gets the last rays of the sun. As I stretched out my hands, I stumbled against the pots and what do I see: a neatly tied up packet of this expensive halva. I did not dare tell anyone. Ganga, you had gone to help Manji Bua Sa in her haveli, so I hid it behind the grinder and waited till I was alone with you.'

'How on earth did this get up there?' chuckled Ganga, her eyes narrowing to examine the sweet. 'None of us can afford to buy this halva and then to hide it behind broken pots; this is all very mysterious.'

'I know nothing more. Now don't involve me in all this. I just found it there and took the packet so that no one else would find it,' replied Champa in a dry, hurt voice.

'Did I say you knew how it got up there? Stop pretending. This is a serious matter and you know that. The packet did not walk up to the terrace. That is sure,' said Ganga with a sense of importance. 'Wrap it up before anyone else comes in and puts it behind the grinder again.'

But before Champa could do so, another maid burst into the room. 'Ganga, are you going back to sleep?' she asked looking into the room through the half-open door.

'What do you want? Can't you leave me alone?' said Ganga in an irritated voice. 'Once in my life I am allowed to rest and the whole haveli seems to be asking "Where is Ganga? Where is Ganga?"'

The maid came in and quietly shut the door behind her. She was surprised to see Champa there. She looked at both of them and asked with a twinkle in her eyes, 'What were you two girls whispering about? Why are you looking so agitated, Champa? Has your husband run away with someone?' she said jokingly.

'Stop fooling, you, too, would be agitated if you knew what I know. I will tell you later,' said Champa, giving a side glance to Ganga.

'Come out with your secret, Champa. When did you get so secretive? Everyone knows you are the greatest gossip amongst us and can't keep anything in your stomach for long,' laughed the young maid.

'Don't be silly. Look at this and then let me see you giggle,' said Champa, opening her palm with bits of halva stuck to her perspiring hand and thrusting it in front of the girl.

All three were silent for a moment. Then Ganga got up, dusted her skirt, and said in a conspiratorial voice, 'If you want my advice, keep your mouths shut. I know someone is in for trouble. I just hope it is not one of us.'

Lakshmi saw the three maids come out. The way they glanced at her and looked the other way she knew that they had discovered the halva. She lowered her head and continued polishing the cooking utensils with ash to bring out the shine.'

'What were you girls whispering about in that room, leaving me alone? Even your children have not come up today,' moaned Pari, sitting scratching her head in the verandah. 'These days Dhapu never comes down from Binniji's room. She is always with the baby. Kanwarani Sa is with the accountant and here I am sitting all alone while you girls gossip inside.'

The maids, with solemn faces, came and sat down with Pari. Bhatianiji, who sat outside her dead mistress's room, came and joined them.

'Everything seems different now,' said Bhatianiji, her tiny eyes filling up. 'There is no one left to shout at me. No one to tell me what happened fifty years ago.'

'Yes, Bai, look at us all. Do you think even I would have dared to sit and tal

Bhagwat Singhji's wife, the new mistress of the house, came out of her room and joined the maids. She, too, was lost without Bhahba Sa. There was no one now to make impossible demands on her. She found her freedom irksome.

As they talked, they seemed to have forgotten the day's routine of getting the vegetables cut, the rice and ghee taken out of the storeroom. The sun was already streaming into the verandahs. But no one was in a hurry to start. It was only when Khyali, the cook, came in with a tray of uncut vegetables they suddenly realized that the log in the kitchen fire had been burning without anything on its flame to cook. Bhagwat Singhji's wife gave hurried orders to the cook and selected the vegetables to be cleaned and cut.

Just as the maids started to peel the potatoes, they heard the screams of Gangaram and their hands froze with fear. 'Where is that rotten woman? Let me catch her! I will kill her! I will wring her neck till she chokes to death.'

The maids got up petrified. Bhagwat Singhji's wife stood up as if someone had struck her. Gangaram stood breathing heavily, looking around wildly. Then as he saw Lakshmi, he ran across the yard and caught her by the neck. She was quick and wriggled out of his grip and ran towards the mistress.

'Do not let her touch you, Hukkum. She is dirty,' said Gangaram as he spun around and faced the women. 'Ask her, who gave her this and this. Ask her! She is worse than a street woman,' he said, flinging the blouse and the sari on the ground. His red eyes like fire balls bulged over his long crooked nose. He raised his hand high, but before he could touch Lakshmi, the quiet but commanding voice of the mistress came.

'Leave my maid alone. Get out of here. Who are you to talk to her in this fashion in front of me? I have brought her up. How dare you .raise your hand in my presence? Did I marry her to you that you treat her like this? Remember, she is your wife.'

Gangaram's hand fell limp to his side as if someone had hit him on the head, but his body trembled with anger.

'Keep her, Hukkum. I will never see her face again. The children are running around gathering the crumbs of the halva that your trusted maid threw away. Ask her who gave her the halva, the blouse, the sari.' Gangaram's voice was thick, but before he could continue the mistress said with authority: 'Not one more word from you. Leave my presence.'

The cook came from the kitchen and dragged Gangaram out of the courtyard.

Lakshmi had been pushed inside the tiny store-room and Pari stood guard outside. Once there was quiet, the mistress opened the door. Lakshmi sat with her head buried in her knees, sobbing, speechless and helpless.

'Get up and wash your face. Do not leave the haveli for a single second,' said the mistress, lifting Lakshmi gently.

The rest of the day passed. There was an oppressive gloom in the courtyard. The maids worked silently; no one spoke.

Everyone felt relieved when the dark night covered the haveli courtyard.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife took Pari aside and said in confidence: 'Tomorrow, Pariji, you talk to the girl. Someone has been taking liberties with her, poor thing. After all, she is still only a child. It is natural for her to get tempted. It is not her fault. Men are men. They take advantage of the innocent. No wonder Bhabha Sa disapproved of bright clothes and jewellery for young girls. It is my fault. I have neglected Lakshmi. From now on I will be more vigilant,' said the mistress.

'Do not worry, Hukkum. Tomorrow I will sort everything out. Who could have dared to do this when I am here keeping my eyes and ears open twenty-four hours a day?'

It was a dark still night. The jackals howled and the dogs barked. Lakshmi lay awake on the verandah. She heard her husband's accusing voice, 'You are a cheap street woman. I never want to see your face again. You are a street woman.' Her lips tightened and her body burned with rage. The barking of the dogs sounded like thunder in her ears. She thought they would never stop. Then as the night grew more black, the dogs became silent. She knew it was the dead of night and even Gokul, the master's servant, would be asleep. She smiled defiantly and with steady hands she took off her anklets, tied her skirt tighter round her waist and got up. As she tiptoed out of the courtyard, the snores of the sleeping women faded out of her hearing.

Chapter IX

In the morning Ganga discovered Sita lying all alone “where her mother had slept. The baby sucked her fingers and “kicked her tiny legs. Before the child cried from hunger, “Ganga picked her up thinking that Lakshmi had gone down “to wash before Sita woke up. Ganga knocked at Lakshmi's “quarter and getting no response, went behind the servants' “quarter to the wash-room of the servants. She was not there “and no one had seen her in the morning. Sita began crying “from hunger; Ganga decided the first thing to do was to feed “her. She had no difficulty in finding a woman who could “nurse the child.

Ganga left Sita with the woman and went upstairs. The “maids were up. Dhapu slept upstairs in Vijay's room. The “morning routine of getting bathed and ready had kept “everyone busy. Lakshmi was not missed, she like the others “was assumed to be changing. Ganga went up to Geeta's “apartment. She had a vague fear about Lakshmi. She did not “want to alarm the younger maids about not finding Lakshmi “in the servants' quarters.

Dhapu sat with Vijay in her lap massaging her body “before her bath.

'Bai,' Ganga said sitting down beside her, 'Lakshmi is not “in her room, nor in the wash-room.' Her face was serious “and her voice had lost its usual playfulness.

'Where is Sita?' asked Dhapu putting Vijay in her crib. “I left her to be nursed with Gokulji's daughter.'

Dhapu picked up Vijay and left her with Geeta saying she “would be back soon. The two maids came downstairs “without saying a word. As soon as they came into the “courtyard; they realized that Lakshmi's absence was a “serious matter of concern for Pari and the others.

'Where could she have gone on such a dark night?' asked “Dhapu breaking the ominous silence. 'She must be hiding “from Gangaram.'

Pari sat with her head in her hands and in a tearful voice “said, 'No, Lakshmi has gone. She is not hiding, Dhapu, it is “all my fault. The way she worked from morning to night, I “should have known that something weighed heavily on her “heart. I should have talked to her and drawn the poison out “of her; instead I admired her and thought being a mother had “made her mature.'

'But why did she leave?' Dhapu insisted. 'Bhabha Sa "always said bad temper was a person's worst enemy and she "was right.'

The other maids stood behind the pillars, sniffing and "wiping their noses with the ends of their saris. They all felt "guilty in some way.

'What is all this crying for? One would think Lakshmi "was dead. Parijiji, even you, with all your experience, are "sitting there shedding tears. Is this the time to do that?' said "the mistress, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Kanwarani Sa, in times of trouble it is men that count. Women are good only at shedding tears,' said the cook coming out of the kitchen, shaking his forefinger reprovingly at Pari.

'You are right, Khyali,' said the mistress gratefully. "Kanwarani Sa, I will go to Arjun, the fortune teller. He is "the one who found the thief when Dhapu's gold bangle "disappeared. 'I forgot all about Arjun, the fortune teller. Of course, he "is the man who will know where Lakshmi is. But Khyali, go "first to my brother's haveli. There is an aunt of hers who "lives in the little gully that runs parallel to his house. In the "night, where else could the poor girl have gone but there?'

'Hukkum,' replied the cook unconvinced that this was a "good idea.

'Parijiji, you go with Khyali. It will help. Tell the girl I "am waiting for her, that she has nothing to fear and that her "child is crying. Tell her what you like but bring her back.'

'Hukkum.'

Pari got up, the cook washed his hands under the kitchen "tap. He left instructions about the dal on the fire. Then both "of them went out through the back door.

They walked silently. The streets were still quiet; even the "vegetable sellers and vendors had not started their morning "rounds. The two walked fast. They didn't want to meet "people. This was not the time for Pari to be out except on "urgent business. But, nevertheless, there were people on the "streets.

A man shouted from the sidewalk, 'Khyali, what brings "you out so early? I hope all is well in the haveli.'

'With God's grace, everything is well in the haveli,' "replied the cook coolly and walked on.

'Parijiji,' said a woman known to the haveli with a water "pitcher on her head, 'what are you doing in Surajipole at this "time?'

'I am taking medicine to Kanwarani Sa's brother who, you know, is ill,' replied Pari

without a moment's "hesitation.

The woman nodded and went on her way.

The cook and Pari began walking faster. They turned into "a little gully with a row of thatched mud houses.

'This is the house,' said Pari, pointing to a broken-down "wall. Then she adjusted her sari. She stopped and cleared "her throat before shouting, 'Kaluji's wife, are you there?' "Pari lifted the sari from her face as she stood in front of the "hut.

There was a bustle inside. A woman hurriedly came out of "the door and said, 'Jiji, how fortunate I am to see your face "first thing in the morning. Come in, Jiji. The house needs "repairs but my husband is away in the village. What can a "woman do alone?' she said nervously to cover up her surprise "at seeing Pari. Khyali sat down on a stone slab out of view of "the two women.

'You are right. A woman cannot do anything alone,' said "Pari in a flat voice.

'Jiji, let me make you a cup of tea.' 'No, no,' said Pari impatiently, fumbling with her sari.

After a brief pause during which she mastered her agitation, "she asked politely, 'Kaluji's wife, did Lakshmi come here by "any chance?'

'Yes, Jiji, she came in the dead of night. I was fast asleep.

She said her great aunt was ill in the village and she had to "catch the first bus. But now that I think of it, there is no bus "that goes from here. I got up specially early to make a cup of "tea for her but she had left.'

She moved nearer to Pari. 'Jiji, is there some trouble?' "asked Kaluji's wife.

'No, of course not. Lakshmi wanted to see you before "going to the village. Poor girl, she must have forgotten that "buses do not run from here. I must be on my way,' said Pari abruptly and started to walk on. Khyali got up, seeing Pari "leave, and joined her.

'I told you, only Arjun will know,' said Khyali with a "proud grin. He turned back and took the road to Hathipole, "the southern gate of the city, and entered a gully on either "side of which were little brick houses with cows and "buffaloes tied in the yard close by. The street was slushy and "smelly. For Pari the stench of decaying hay was over- "powering. She had forgotten what it was like to live in dirty, "damp surroundings.

'There is Arjun the bhopa's hut,' said Khyali in a low "voice. 'Follow me, do not say a word, just sit and listen.'

Arjun's oily hair was parted and fell in unstudied strands "on the sides. His eyes were

large and looked as if they might “warm up with the right persuasion. He sat on his haunches “on the ground outside the hut smoking a hukka. Cows and “three calves were tied in front of his half-mud half-brick hut. “Khyali jumped over the puddles of cow dung and urine and “stood with folded hands in front of him.

'Come and sit down. I can tell something is wrong in the “haveli,' pronounced Arjun gravely as he saw Khyali “approach him. Pari sat down in a corner and pulled her sari “even lower over her face.

Khyali, hands still folded, replied respectfully, 'Last night “one of the maids left the haveli, Bhopaji.'

'Yes, I know,' he said prophetically and continued to “draw on his hukka in silence; his dark eyes had an opaque “look.

Khyali took out a five rupee note and put it at the feet of “the bhopa. As if there was magic in the paper note, Arjun put “his hukka down, crossed one thin leg over the other and “closed his eyes. His face was strained as if he were trying to “pour all his energy of mind and body to see better what was “happening in this world. After a few seconds his body became stiff as if it had been cast in stone. Then, as if a top “had burst inside, he began quivering and moaning. His body “contracted into weird shapes. Then just as suddenly as he “had started to shake, he became calm. He panted heavily, his “eyes became dilated and his lips started moving but no sound “came. He was in a trance in another world, as if he were “trying to gauge what lay in the future. That was the moment “to ask questions.

'Bhopaji, where is Lakshmi?' asked the cook reverently. “‘She is in the city.'

'With whom is she staying? In which gully?'

'Yes, I can see her smile; she is in a room with no “windows. The house leaks; it is dark inside. Now I can see “her better.' The bhopa blinked and groaned. 'Yes, she is “all right. No harm has come to her.' Then the bhopa was silent.

The bhopa began grunting and whining alternately as if “the clarity he had achieved did not satisfy him. Then “suddenly as if to wake up the spirit within him he began “beating himself, first his chest, then his bare thighs. Then “again he was calm and in an unnaturally thin voice said, 'She “is in the third or fourth house next to the Jagdish temple in “the town where the cobblers live. The planet Saturn has cast “its spell on her, but she will return to the haveli; yes I can see “her temper is already subsiding.'

The cook and Pari touched the ground with their “foreheads before sitting up. They shook their folded hands “several times in front of the bhopa, who sat stiff like a “statue, and left.

'Next to the Jagdish temple, in the gully where the "cobblers live,' repeated the cook, impressed by the powers of "Arjun and satisfied with the information.

Pari, engrossed in thought, walked briskly behind the cook. They took the short cut to the temple. The cobblers "lived in a row of houses behind the temple.

'You stand here, Parijiji. I will go and see which house it "is,' said the cook wiping the perspiration off his forehead.

He had walked on only a few yards when Pari saw a man "stop him. 'Khyali, how are you? It is a long time since I saw "you,' said the man tapping Khyali on the shoulders.

'You know, Jeewan Niwas has been in mourning,' replied "the cook sternly.

'I am sorry, I forgot. Are you looking for someone? Can I "help?'

'Yes,' replied the cook in a tight cold voice.

'Are you by chance looking for Lakshmi? I saw her this "morning; you know I open my shop early.'

The cook smiled, he lost his aggressive manner and this "encouraged the man to continue talking.

'I saw her going into that house with a broken wall,' he "said pointing to the left. 'It belongs to Hari, the betelnut "seller,' said the man and grinned, as if he wanted to crack a "joke. But seeing Khyali's face he restrained himself.

'Yes, of course, she went to return some money she had "borrowed from the rascal,' the cook said casually. The man "walked away, and Khyali beckoned to Pari to follow him.

'She is in Hari the panwala's house, not in the cobblers' "gully,' said the cook in a loud whisper, and turned into one "of the side alleys behind the temple. As soon as he came to "the brick house, he straightened himself, cleared his throat "and then shouted loudly, 'Is anyone in?'

A thin man wrapped in a loincloth came out. His brows "were tightly knit together. As soon as he saw the cook, he "threw back his shoulders and looked defiantly into Khyali's "eyes.

'You are Hari, the panwala?' asked Khyali accusingly. "Yes, I am. What do you want?'

'Where is Lakshmi?'

'How do I know! A woman came this morning and rented "a room from me. That is

all I know. I am not a man who “asks questions; everyone in the gully knows I have two extra “rooms to rent. How else do you think I feed a wife and eight “children?”

Khyali took a step forward as if he were going to strike the “man for being insolent, but he stopped as he saw a woman “coming to the door. It was Lakshmi. She stood before them, “her hands on her hips, and her face uncovered.

'What do you want?' asked Lakshmi defiantly. Her eyes “were red and swollen.

'Come home, Kanwarani Sa is waiting for; you. The “whole haveli is weeping,' said Pari in a tearful voice, rushing “to the door.

'Jiji, go away, I will not come back. Never! I will starve “but never return to the haveli, Do you think I am an orphan “that has no home? Well, you will see that I am not. I will “show my husband that I am no street woman either. Go “back to the mistress and tell her Heeralal is a thief, a rascal, a “scoundrel. Just go and tell her that and leave me alone.' “Then, as Lakshmi paused to take breath, Pari took “advantage of the pause.

'Lakshmi, Gangaramji was wrong in calling you names, “you know he has a bad temper, but you cannot leave your “home and your child; Pari pleaded.

'I don't want any advice. I know you all. For the rest of “my life you will poke your finger at me and say, "That bad “charactered woman. She enticed Heeralal to give her gifts. “She would do anything for a sari". I know your sweet words “now don't mean anything. Have you all not accused me “before for being frivolous and untrustworthy? No, I will “never, never return to the haveli to be taunted and jeered at “by all the servants and their children for the rest of my life.

No, never.' Lakshmi's voice was sharp and contemptuous. “Go away, Jiji. You and Khyaliji both of you go away or I “will shut the door right in your face,' Lakshmi screamed, “and moved threateningly towards the door.

'Listen to me, Lakshmi. I have brought you up, even “slapped you, when you were naughty, but you didn't run “away. Every husband has a right to scold his wife, even beat “her if necessary, but it does not mean a woman runs away “from her husband. Listen to me, Lakshmi,' Pari pleaded “almost beggingly.

'I have told you I don't want your advice. I know what “it's worth. Now go or I will shut the door. I warn you, Jiji, “leave me alone.' Lakshmi's voice wavered. Even as she “shouted, her eyes were filling up with tears.

'Your child is crying for milk. Have you thought of her?

She will die without a mother,' said Pari, sobbing.

'Let the child starve to death. That will teach her father to “control his long, poisonous tongue,’ shouted back Lakshmi, “brushing aside the tears defiantly from her cheeks. And then “she banged the door in Pari's face.

'What a woman,' said Pari obviously shaken. She stared “at the door, but moved away finally, a little unsteady on her “feet.

In the haveli the maids sat with the mistress in her room “trying to while away the time till the cook and Pari returned. “They got up the minute the outside door rattled.

Pari walked in, her head drooping. The cook who “followed her had lost his confident smile.

'Forget that girl, Hukkum. The devil has taken possession “of her,' Pari said bitterly.

'You saw her? You talked to her?' the mistress asked “eagerly.

'The bhopa was wrong. Lakshmi will never return. She is staying with Hari, the panwala. She has taken a room there,' “said Pari. 'I never liked his wife. She is good for nothing, a “bad influence,' Pari added thoughtfully.

'What did Lakshmi say?' the mistress asked dismissing “Pari's remarks on the panwala's wife.

'She said, "Let my child starve, let her die, but I will not “return to the haveli"'. 'Pari sat on the floor and putting her “head between her knees she sobbed loudly.

The maids scattered in various directions, gagging their “sobs with their saris. The mistress went into the kitchen. “Nothing more was said about Lakshmi.

GLOSSARY

diminished (v)	: reduced
replenish (v)	: restore, to fill something up again
stark (adj)	: strong, stern
ridge (v)	: line of meeting of two sloping surface
vaults (n)	: arched roof
recedes (v)	: to move or fall back
etiquette (n)	: the customary code of polite behavior in society or to a person
midwife (n)	: specialist who helps women during the birth of a child.
sighed (v)	: to emit a long deep audible breath expressing sadness or relief
snuff (n)	: powdered tobacco that is sniffed up the nostril, rather than smoked
sniffed (v)	: to draw up air audibly through the nose to detect a smell
mansion (n)	: a large impressive house
tattered (adj)	: old and torn
wobbled (v)	: moved unsteadily from side to side
grumbling (n)	: complaining or protesting
crooked (adj)	: bent or twisted out of shape
pouting (v,pp)	: push both lips forward to exhibit displeasure or disappointment
drudgery (n)	: hard menial or dull work
grinning (v,pp)	: smiling broadly
sarcasm (n)	: use of irony to mock
deference (n)	: a way of behaving that shows respect for someone

puffy (adj)	: soft, light and rounded
bewildered (adj)	: confused, puzzled
intrigued (v)	: aroused the curiosity or interest of, fascinated
trousseau (n)	: a collection of personal possessions of bride such as clothes, accessories and linens
chandelier (n)	: a large decorative hanging light with branches for several light bulbs or candles
mural (n)	: painting or work of art executed directly on wall
austere (adj)	: simple or plain
bequeath (v)	: leave (property) to a person or other beneficiary by a will
oppressive (adj)	: cruel and unfair
segregated (v)	: separated
crib (n)	: a bed with high sides for a baby or young child
nostalgic (adj)	: remembering happy and glorious past time
resplendent (adj)	: attractive and impressive having great beauty and splendor
nibbling (v,pp)	: biting or eating gently in small amounts
disdain (v)	: treat with contempt, despise
frivolously (adj)	: lacking any serious purpose
mumbling (v,n)	: talking indistinctly, usually in a low voice
clamour (n)	: loud and confused voice
clanging (adj,v)	having a loud resonant metallic sound
bracelet (n)	: an ornamental band, hoop or chain worn on the wrist
frail (adj)	: weak and delicate
fragile (adj)	: not strong or sturdy
sallow (adj)	: unhealthy appearance
clumsy (adj)	: awkward in movement and grace
tenacity (n)	: persistent determination
considerate (adj)	: kind and helpful

exuberance (n) : the quality of being full of energy, excitement and cheerfulness

reticence (n) : the trait of being uncommunicative

Answer the following questions in about 60 words each-

1. Describe the old city of Udaipur surrounded by the bastioned wall.
2. “A new township has developed outside the old city wall”. Describe the new township and the people living there.
3. Who is Pari? How does she come to Jeevan- Niwas?
4. Why was Lakshmi not happy marrying Gangaram?
5. Why did Laskhmi scold Sarju for her greed?
6. What doubt did Geeta’s parents have about her adjustment in the old traditional family?
7. How did Geeta spend her first day at her in-laws, house?
8. Why did Geeta trespass into the men’s apartments? What did she see in the room?
9. Dhapu was a friend and guide to Geeta. Comment.
10. How did Geeta pass her daytime in the haveli in the beginning of her married life?
11. Bhabha Sa ruled the haveli with an iron hand. Comment
12. The thought of three days of feasting and merry making made Geeta feel positivity ill. Why?
13. Describe the personality and manners of Kanwarani Sa.
14. Why did Bhabha Sa upbraid Kanwarani Sa after the festivities?
15. What are the emotions that fill Geeta’s heart when she sees through the lattice window in the men’s apartment?
16. Why did Lakshmi leave the haveli?
17. Why did Laskhmi refuse to return to the haveli?
18. Who was Arjun? Why did Khyali and Pari go to meet him?