

PREFACE

AFTER traversing through the sharp and zigzag turns of Haldwani, Khatgodam, Jyolikhhot and Baldiyakhan, and when the jeep was about to enter the plains of Naini Tal, Ratna felt that the vast expanse of Tarai Bhabar situated at the place where the Hills and the Plains met, had completely changed. And the Hill Station Naini Tal, too, had changed beyond recognition. The incomparable and renowned lake Naini, the most famous landmark of that place, appeared to have contracted within itself. Earlier, its waters used to come in great waves breaking the banks and overflowing on to the sides. The greenery on the mountains surrounding the lake had disappeared. Cluster of residential buildings, hospitals, hotels, tourist rest houses and convent schools had been built by felling down numberless green, tall trees. The stony, narrow lanes had transformed into regular, strong metalled roads. What was once a clean, neat and almost desolate Mall Road, now bore the resemblance of a congested, busy metropolis with rows of illuminated shopping centres, glittering restaurants and overflowing streams of flashy tourists – all scattered in a disarray. Previously this spot had in offer only sights of nature's brilliant beauty, but now there were the changed scenes of modernity in its abundance. It looked as if Nature and Modernity were in confluence here!

Proceeding ahead via Cheelchakker, Hanumanghadi and Lake Bridge, the jeep came to a stop in front of the CRPF Guesthouse located at Hospital Road in Mallital. When Priya asked Ratna to alight from the jeep, the thought-waves of Ratna were at once disturbed. With moist eyes a startled Ratna glanced at Priya for a moment and got down.

There were lines of the Security Force vehicles. Many CRPF Officers and cadets were standing in a formation to accord a rousing welcome to their new Commander Priya. After taking charge at the Regional Head Quarters in Nainital; Priya would leave for Pithoragarh along with her entire force the day after tomorrow. There in Pithoragarh she would be leading the force. They would, apart from ensuring local security and peace in the hilly villages of Jhoolaghat, Didihat, Rameshwar, Jogeshwar etc., in that vicinity, put up a new camp for imparting training to the widows and other women of that area for growing fruits and vegetables, processing jams and pickles, and for marketing the produces.

Naini Tal and Pithoragarh are now two districts of the newly formed state of Uttranchal. Ratna's own native town of Dehra Dun was the capital of the new state. She would have to go back to Dehra Dun from Naini Tal. She had come with Priya only up to Naini Tal and she was not desirous of going to Pithoragarh or anywhere else. Priya too was not inclined to take Ratna along. In fact she was not even willing to take Ratna to Naini Tal. But, when Ratna learnt that Priya was going to Naini Tal prior to Pithoragarh, she assumed the attitude of an adamant child, telling Priya that before her death she wanted to see Naini Tal once – the place where she had spent an important part of her life.

Priya's face appeared graceful and there was a polite smile on her lips. Head erect with pride, she was shaking hands with all the officers and the cadets, one after the other. Ratna tried to sharpen her vision and observe closely the officers and cadets standing in front of her. Because of their identical uniforms the gender differences were not clearly distinguishable to her. Nevertheless, she knew that the majority of them were women. She

remembered what Priya had told her. At Dehra Dun, Priya had mentioned that she would command the women force of the CRPF at Pithoragarh and that there would be only women in her force. Ratna looked at the women of the police force with great fascination.

Glancing in all directions, Ratna whispered, "How much everything has changed during all these years!"

After the lapse of 53 or 54 years, once again Ratna stood, wonder-struck, at the very place where her life had once actually began. During these years, so many changes had taken place in her life. If each one of such changes were to be recalled, it would only keep growing like Draupadi's attire or like Hanuman's tail! However, it is worthwhile mentioning about certain incidents that occurred in Ratna's life and some closely related individuals who brought about a complete change in her life.

Ratna is not only a mother, or a grandmother, but she is also a great grand mother now. How many childbirths she happily witnessed, and how many deaths she conveyed her condolences to! Gangadhar and Gayatri – her companions – left her and were gone. Sridhar – once her beloved – passed away. Usha, her own daughter, has grown old before her very own eyes. Her granddaughters, Prachi, Pragya and Priya – all have reached such juncture of their ages, when the false playfulness of childhood is over-shadowed by the prowess of adulthood intellect to reveal their genuine stature as matured persons.

Ratna, Usha and Prachi-Pragya-Priya are those links of the three generations that represent changing characteristics of women in the ever-changing society. While Ratna silently accepted the atrocious social bindings as a way of life, Usha, her daughter, resisted them. And her grand daughters not merely discarded but tore them to pieces. Prachi divorced her Indian husband, and settled abroad – with her foreigner husband. Whether or not she would be able to put up with him, was an uncertainty. Presently, she was battling for her son, born to her through the Indian husband, to come and live with her abroad.

Pragya married a Christian boy. How the seemingly unchangeable, harsh and ruthless distinctions of religion and caste kept disappearing with the changes that occurred as times passed! Ratna's ancestors would not have even imagined that their future descendent would dare to marry a Christian! When and where did Ratna herself think about such a thing! She, in fact, had very strongly objected to this. Prachi laughingly dismissed her objection and said to her, "Grandma, gone are those days when to be a Brahmin was considered a matter of honour."

Priya is nearing thirty, but is not marrying. Any time the topic was taken, she would rebuke, stating, "Getting married and producing children are not necessary. Look at the way our Government is popularising the slogans like 'One Family: One Child.' " Suddenly, she would become serious and question Ratna, "Grandma, there are already so many children in the country. Many children have become orphans whenever there were floods or earthquakes. It is not necessary that a flower for the decoration (booke? Guldasta?) has to be from one's own garden. It can be picked up from anywhere."

On account of her revolting attitude, Ratna kept mum. What else could she do, after all! These kind of thoughts, conscience and ideas had been taught to the daughters only by Usha, their mother.

Priya, teasing and taunting Ratna, would ask her, "Oh, Grandma, in what thoughts are you lost? Don't you know that the 21st Century has arrived?"

Ratna would mumble to herself, "Yes, yes, the 20th Century has gone past and the 21st Century has indeed arrived."

Ratna was born in early-mid of the twentieth century – two decades prior to Independence. During those days the country was fraught with enormous struggles. That generation endured extreme hardship. Ratna was a representative of such an adversely affected generation. She was born in the ‘Bhatt’ family of the small village, Shail, located midway in the peaky hills of Uttarkashi in Uttaranchal . Her mother died in childbirth. Her grandmother brought Ratna up, and, when she was eleven years of age, the grandmother, too, passed away.

She had hardly crossed thirteen when, her father – Shambhu Prasad – who used to be a priest in the Gangotri Temple, got her married to Bansidhar, the second son of the ‘Pant’ family from Dewalgarh village in Tehri Garhwal. Bansidhar was ten years older than Ratna. He was in the Indian Army as a Havaldar in Gorkha Battalion. Although he had joined the army as an ordinary cadet, in his six years of service he had risen to the position of Havaldar. Most of the time, soldiers of the army were posted at distant border-fronts on field duties, where keeping their family along was not allowed. However, occasionally, if luck favoured, they could get peace postings. Only then would they get a chance to live with their families for some years.

When the marriage of Ratna and Bansidhar took place, Bansidhar was posted on field duty near Mount Gorichand in Arunachal Pradesh. As such, Ratna had to spend the first three years of married life with her mother-in-law at her house.

The in-laws house was devoid of the presence of father-in-law. She had heard from the people that her father-in-law, Vishweshwar Dutt, was a noble man with high values and principles. But, alas, her father-in-law had died before her marriage and she had to encounter with her daring, cruel natured mother-in-law, Rukmini.

Apart from the mother-in-law, there were Bansidhar’s three brothers in the family-one older than Bansidhar and two younger. The older brother was married also but Ratna could hardly meet any of the family members except Rukmini during the first three years of her marriage.. The other family members were living far from their village, in the cities, pursuing their studies or job.

Yes! In between those three years, Bansidhar came to the village on leave on two occasions, but, before his arrival, Rukmini would send Ratna to her father’s house at Shail. Rukmini firmly believed that until Ratna attained puberty, it was not proper for her to be with Bansidhar. However, Bansidhar’s eyes would eagerly look for Ratna in the house. Rukmini used to notice Bansidhar’s searching eyes, but both remained silent. Neither did Bansidhar dare to enquire about Ratna, nor did his mother feel the need to tell him anything about her. He would go out of the house and enquire about Ratna from the boys and girls of the village. They would reply, teasing him and laughing, “When Ratna Bhabhi goes to her father’s house, we know that you are going to come from the city.”

After three years, when the field duty of Bansidhar’s unit in Arunachal Pradesh was over, and his unit was transferred to Nainital, Bansidhar wrote to Rukmini very clearly that he would come to the village the next month and take Ratna along with him to Nainital. By then, Ratna had become a sixteen-year-old youth, so Rukmini did not raise any objections.

Bansidhar brought Ratna from the village to Nainital to live with him.
And, then...

CHAPTER 1

RATNA, shy and apprehensive, walked slowly behind Bansidhar from the bus station. It was not a long walk, but the newness of the place bounded her by a hitherto unknown excitement. They reached their abode. The house was in the army area which was about one and a half km from the bus station. It was a little distance away from the busy main road, located on a hillock and overlooking the beautiful lake. It was easily accessible by foot. Inside the compound surrounding the army quarters was a vast playground where dry tall grass swayed monotonously. There were many tall pine and devdar trees along the compound walls. Just beyond the ground were the building and living quarters, divided into three units. Plentiful growth of wild vegetation surrounded each of these units and separated them from one another. Each unit had a square shaped enclosure, a yard with a long corridor – like verandah. There were eight independent quarters housing eight army soldiers and their families in each of these three units.

Crossing the vast playground, Bansidhar entered his quarters in Unit 3. In Unit 3, there were three soldiers from the Rajputana Rifles, two from Maratha and two from Sikh Regiment. Bansidhar was the only one from the Gorkha Rifles' there.

Ratna followed Bansidhar.

Pacing the long corridor Bansidhar stopped in front of Room No. 7. Ratna also stopped, and stood near him. He put down the trunk, and, taking out the keys from his trouser pocket opened the big brass lock. He entered the room and turning around extended his open arms towards Ratna, and said, "Welcome home. This is our palace."

Vibrantly happy, Ratna entered the room and at once her inquisitive eyes began exploring the room; the big, broad room did not have many things inside. A metallic cot – in the right hand side of the room- rested along the wall. The large military leather shoes below the cot were so conspicuously kept that she could not miss them. There were two black wooden boxes on which was painted, in white, "Havaldar Bansidhar Pant, 121 Gorkha Rifles."

Ratna's eyes could not miss the worn out wooden table either. An alarm clock, two combs, a tin of talcum powder and a brand new radio were all on the table – kept as if to decorate the otherwise pathetic looking appearance of the table. Ratna's vision was now transfixed on the new radio. Being new, it stood out, attracting attention. Bansidhar read her face and told her, "I bought it only last month, because you'll be all alone here. You can listen to it whenever you want."

Ratna silently moved a little ahead and found herself stop in front of what looked like a partition. A floor-to-ceiling wooden plank stood extended from one side of the wall, and a not-so-tall wooden cup-board from the other side, so placed that the gap between them served as the entrance – stepping towards the cup-board, she casually opened it.

Bansidhar's military uniforms were hung inside it, and there were few other clothes lying in the shelves as though they had long been forsaken.

The wooden plank and the cupboard separated one third of the long room and the remnant cubicle-like space served as a kitchen. Ratna entered what would be her future domain. On the floor was a pump-stove. Near that were a kerosene tin, two canisters, and a plastic water bucket. A small wooden rack was fixed on the side of the wall. A row of bottles containing tea leaves, spices, sugar etc. were stacked on the upper shelf. Below that were a few aluminium vessels and utensils. She could also see another wooden rack in which an oil bottle, stove-pin, matchboxes, and some paper packets containing an assortment of pulses and grains were stored. On the top of the wall far behind was a small window that provided both light and air to the cramped kitchen.

After taking a cursory survey of the kitchen, Ratna came back to the main room to have a thorough look of the place. A mirror was hanging from the wall in front. Two calendars, - one depicting a scenery of Nainital, and the other of Gandhiji - were hung adjacent to the mirror. On the right side there was a broad window, on the sill of which were kept a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush.

Opening the window, Bansidhar enquired of Ratna, "Have you inspected our Palace?"

Flashing an affectionate smile, Ratna came near the window and stood by Bansidhar. Bright light and a gentle breeze entered the room through the open window. Ratna looked out of the window. The row of high and tall trees could not hide the enthralling view of the hills beyond. Bansidhar started describing the house and exclaiming the chores to her. "You've to fetch water from the taps located in the compound. Common bath and latrine facilities for all are provided in the compound. There're two bathrooms and three latrines for the eight families. Actually, this's supposed to be a bachelor accommodation, but all soldiers're living with their families here. What to do? Though quite difficult, at least we've the opportunity to live together with our families. Some are living with their children, and some have even brought their parents to live with them. There is always a scramble for bathroom and latrine".

Still smiling cheerfully, Ratna walked away towards the kitchen to, what would be her very first job in that house after joining Bansidhar, prepare tea.

Bansidhar turned towards her and said as though to caution her, "Ratna, always remember: do not ever leave toothpaste or soap in the bathroom – even by mistake; they'll vanish in no time".

Ratna could only continue smiling - for everything looked pleasant to her. Everything was new and fresh! In fact this was the happiest period of her life. A kind of period in which one enjoys life despite undergoing severe hardship. Even after toiling away hard, one tends to feel agile and able.

In Nainital's single-room abode, Ratna's life may not have been as reassuring, but the thought of beginning of a long life with Bansidhar was all the same sweet to her. She hailed from Garhwal and Nainital was the part of Kumaon region; Kumaon, like Garhwal, was also a part of Himalayan region. So, in Nainital also she had the hilly atmosphere as in Garhwal – there were plenty of Devdhar, Pine and various other types of trees – but, in spite of these similarities, to Ratna, Nainital looked very different from her Garhwal. There

were electricity and water in the house; and there were many other things that usually went with the urban environment. However, what Ratna found strange and felt odd about was that there were only unknown and unfamiliar people all around. In her village in the hills, people had a deep bondage and intimacy with each other. . Some families were even related with each other through earlier generations. Here, Ratna did not had much work to do other than the usual small household chores. There was no farming, nor were there any cattle like they had in her village, the lack of all of which created certain listlessness and inactivity in her.

Every day Ratna would get up at four in the morning, by which time no one else in the quarters woke up. She would finish her washing and bathing in the common facilities *quite* early so that she conveniently avoided the long queues and habitual arguments between women at the bathrooms.

One day Havildhar Chowdhry's wife asked Ratna, "Ratna, when do you get up? How's it that there is never an argument between you and the other ladies in front of the bathroom?"

Ratna did not reply, except giving her usual smile. On most occasions, Ratna replied by just smiling cordially. She was not habituated to much talking. She was hesitant to talk to these ladies and remained silent most of the time.

Jawan Goswami's wife intervened and said curtly, "I know she gets up at 5 'o clock in the morning – from tomorrow I'll also get up at 5 in the morning."

However, in those quarters, no one other than Ratna woke up so early. Waking up at four, she would finish all her bathroom chores in an hour and awaken Bansidhar. He would also get up and complete his morning chores. From six the wrestle of the unruly people would start.

Unit 3 was national in character. People from different provinces of India lived there. Goswami was from Rajasthan, Parvana from Punjab, Chowdhry hailed from Bengal and Dhandekar from Maharashtra. Sinha came from Bihar, Sharma belonged to MP, and Shukla was a native of U.P. All of them used to call Bansidhar, 'Pahadi Bhai' (brother from the hills). Bansidhar would set off for duty at half past seven after his morning tea and snacks. On weekly exercise days, he would leave a little earlier. Ratna never remained idle even after Bansidhar's departure. She formulated a routine of her own – besides preparing meals and doing other household chores. Ratna showered great care towards the up-keep of her one-roomed residence. Bansidhar had never kept the house tidy. Everything lay scattered all over, his clothes were in desperate need of washing.

Ratna put rearranged the kitchen and the main room, and made them presentable. She replaced the sticky and smelling bedspread on the cot with a Peshminey sky-blue sheet, which her father had given her at the time of her marriage. She put one beautiful, satin over the radio. In the kitchen she dusted every single plastic and glass container and stacked them on the shelves very orderly. She made it a point to wash and sweep the floors on a daily basis. In fact, she brought about a complete new-look and appearance to the house. Now the house was not only attractively tidy, but it was also well organised.

The very next day after her arrival in Nainital, Bansidhar had taken her to the class run by Kalyani in the Mallital. Kalyani was the wife of Major Banerji who was also in Gorkha Rifle. Kalyani was a very sociable, brave, and kind-hearted lady. Her personality was such that it would not be unnatural or exaggerating to say that one should have been lucky enough to gain her acquaintance and friendship. Wheat-coloured and sweet mannered Kalyani stood 5'5" and always wore only khadi. Gandhiji's way of life had a very great impact on her. Her active involvement in the politics had Major Banerjee enraged. It was well-known in army-circles that Major Banerjee had fights with Kalyani over this, and annoyed he would cook his own food and sleep on a separate bed after such fights. . Apparently, Kalyani had made it clear to him, quite sternly, that being a wife of an army officer would not stop her from participating in India's freedom struggles.

Together with the other officers' wives, Kalyani, with all earnestness, took keen interest in teaching the soldiers' wives to read and write, and crafts like sewing and knitting etc. In addition, she taught them hygiene and sanitation.

Bansidhar took Ratna to Kalyani's makeshift class, which was running in the premises of the Shiva Temple in Mallital, and registered her name. The next day onwards Ratna started going to Shiva Temple, in Kalyani's class to learn to read and write, and to master the skill of sewing and knitting.

The class ran every morning from 10:00 to 11:30. Around 1.0 o'clock Ratna returned home from the Shiva Temple, and engaged in preparing lunch. Bansidhar came home for lunch around half-past-two. After lunch he invariably relaxed lying on the cot. But Ratna, even after finishing her kitchen chores, never relaxed. She would continue working in the kitchen with something or the other. Of late, because of her newly acquired skills, even when she had spare time, she decided to sew or knit. She even bought wool from the local market and started knitting a sweater for Bansidhar.

Exactly at five in the evening it used to be their teatime. Both of them enjoyed a cup of tea and then ventured out for their daily evening stroll, sometimes on the banks of the lake and at times aimlessly on the Mall Road. Occasionally they would go boating from Tallital to Mallital. Once in a while, they would also go to the Naina Devi temple on the northern side of the hills. And yet, at times they would go for a tour of the treacherously winding roads and bends atop the hills. In winter when it snowed, they would play in the snow, throwing snowballs at each-other or making footprints on the fresh snow.

After the evening stroll, they would eat dinner, then they would talk for a little while, and then lights were switched off. And then, in dark room Bansidhar would seize Ratna in his arms...

There was always a decided schedule for all routine. Life had been going on smoothly. No doubt, if there was a bit of tension, a satisfying moment was always there. While life inside the one-roomed house was quiet and without any discomforts, outside it was always with full of bustling activities.

The British were still ruling India. The patience of Indians had reached its limit. Only one aspiration was left in every heart – British, quit India! British liked the hill station Nainital very much- perhaps such places used to remind them their England. The greenery and the cold weather. Nainital used to be their summer-station. By the beginning of April, the British started arriving there. Ratna always looked at them with some inexplicable

unease - as if some strange beings from a far-away planet landed there. Bansidhar used to taunt her at this. He always tried to improve and increase Ratna's general knowledge. Since Ratna hailed from remote hills, her awareness about the outside world was as good as nothing.

"Do you know, Ratna, that a British discovered Nainital 1841? His name was Byron (?) and he was the proprietor of a sugar mill. Flying high in an aeroplane once, he looked down and he saw this beautiful lake with the greenish hills surrounding it."

"How do you know? You were not even born in 1841".

Bansidhar looked into her eyes. With a mischievous smile he patted her cheeks gently with his fists.

"What are books meant for? Ratna, why do you not start reading books on general knowledge?"

Though disconcerted, Ratna responded in a placid tone. She asked him – "What all shall I learn? Go to the Shiva Temple for learning to read and write? Or listen to the radio to know about what is happening around. Now you're asking me to start reading books on general knowledge".

Bansidhar said, "I'm doing all this for your own benefit".

But Ratna's attention had been diverted towards an Englishman on a horseback climbing down the Mallital hill. She was staring at him with wide and curious eyes.

Not only did the English come to Nainital, great fighters of India's Freedom Movement also frequented this place to vent their strong feelings of patriotism through eloquent speeches and explain the serene national atmosphere to the people. Even in those cooler environs, everyone could feel waves of heat of the freedom movement. This place provided Ratna the opportunity of seeing many national and provincial leaders. They all came here – delivered their speeches-raised the spirits and enthusiasm of the people of Nainital – and went away.

And one year elapsed.

In the women's section of the crowd Ratna was sitting right in the front, looking intently at Nehruji without ever winking an eye. Lean and majestic looking Nehruji was wearing a churidar pyjama and jacket. Entire Nainital, as well as a sea of people from the nearby hillside villages had thronged the plains of China Peak to see and listen to him. As Nehruji made his appearance on the dais, a continuous, thunderous applause rent the air, and on several occasions Nehruji waved his hands to the vast enthusiastic crowd to calm them down. He surveyed the vast friendly crowd for a moment and started his address. "Our Nation is now at the verge of attaining independence, but our fight for freedom is not yet over. Our aim will be achieved only when the social status of every single citizen of the country -whether it is a man or woman – is raised. After securing independence for the country, the prime attention of our struggle will be directed towards women's education and their rights".

Pausing for a while, Nehruji continued in his impressive voice. “Philosopher Charles Fourier (?) had once said that, women’s status in a society is indicative of how much civilized a country is. Therefore, if we have to take a decision about future for our country, we have to look at status of women in our society. Whatever we do to build our future, the decision will be based on the status of our women. I am not a bit hesitant to admit that the status of our women today is no doubt depressing. For the progress and advancement of our women, we have to struggle and fight valiantly. Evil forces should be destroyed from the root. In many fields, our women are deprived of their rights. All those women who have assembled here” – he turned towards the women’s section of the crowd – Ratna felt that Nehruji was looking at her – “I want to remind you that women are as much the part of the country as the men. That is why I hope that women will very vehemently oppose and fight against the prevailing atrocities and social evils. And fight those who are opposed to your progress.”

Once again pausing for a while, Nehruji looked at the women’s section – again Ratna felt as if he was looking at her – and she turned shy. Raising the pitch of his voice he questioned them, “Will you revolt against the customs of social atrocities?”

The women remained silent and motionless. Perturbed by their silence, Nehruji once again asked, this time still more emphatically, “Will you struggle for your progress?”

“Yes, we will. Yes!” said Kalyani suddenly, standing on her feet.

“Yes, we will, yes!” All the women in the crowd joined Kalyani in a chorus.

Nehruji left leaving the women in Nainital highly motivated. Kalyani became the leader. The following day she convened a meeting of the wives of the army soldiers and a few local women at the Shiva Temple, where they were running their school.

‘The ladies would discretely and without informing their husbands, take out a procession for freedom and women’s liberation.’ The discussions on that point went on for a long time. The wives of the army soldiers stood withdrawn.

“No, we cannot take out such a procession,” they said jointly.

“How can we take out a procession? The jobs of our husbands will be at stake,” some protested.

“I’m also the wife of an army officer,” said Kalyani.

“But, we cannot imitate you,” said Captain Sharma’s wife, Urmila, in a plain voice.

Concurring with Urmila, the wives of the soldiers joined her in a group.

Finding herself isolated, Kalyani argued, “Dear friends, if our husbands are in the armed forces, does it mean that we should also be slaves of the British? A police officer’s son can be a mischievous scoundrel while a traitor’s wife can be a great patriot.”

All of a sudden, Ratna stood up, her feet trembling.

Kalyani looked at her and questioned, “Ratna, will you take out the procession with me?”

Hesitantly Ratna nodded her head in consent. The wives of the soldiers looked at Ratna in amazement. Ratna, in turn, glanced at them through the corner of her eyes.

Making a face, Havildhar Goswami’s wife, Saraswati, said, “Oh, this Pahadan (hill woman) will take out the procession!” As Ratna turned to glare at her, she changed to a softer tone and said, “Ratna, you better sit down. In your present condition how can you do

such an arduous thing? And your husband would also be angry with you. Soldiers and their wives cannot take out such processions. And, then, look at the condition you are in now.”

All the ladies looked at Ratna’s bulging, pregnant stomach.

“No, I have to take out the procession with Kalyani Didi,” said Ratna with firm determination.

The women remained speechless. Kalyani was glad that at least someone was ready. Appreciating the boldness of Ratna, four of the local ladies also agreed.

The lone Ratna and four local women! Kalyani decided to go ahead with the support of these women. She devised a slogan and made the women memorise it. The route for the procession was also decided. Starting from the Shiva Temple, it would first pass through Darshan Ghar, the library, the Main Bazar and Ashok Talkies, and continue through Lake Bridge, and would then proceed towards Customs Office and Hanuman Gate until it reached Cheel-Chakker. After circling the Cheel-Chakker as the last lap, the procession would wind up, and the women would find their way to return home. Thus, they would have gone through the important thoroughfares between Mallital and Tallital.

The next day at ten in the morning, all the women assembled at the Shiva Temple precincts. After three-quarters of an hour, the group under the leadership of Kalyani left Shiva Temple carrying flags and banners. Enthusiastic and energetic Kalyani in the front, followed by the five ladies including Ratna, the group started the march shouting the slogans.

Kalyani roared like a lion, “Unity of the Country.”

The women’s responded in equally forceful voice, “Long Live.”

Kalyani shouted, “Naya Inquilab.”

The women responded with, “Aaya Hai.”

Kalyani again- “Naari Shakti Ka”

The women - “Uday Hua Hai.”

And then all would shout together “Bharat Mata ki Jai.”

‘Naya Inquilab Aaya Hai, Naari Shakti Ka Uday Hua Hai, Bharat Mata ki jai!’ (A New Revolution Has Arrived, Woman’s Power Has Arisen, Victory to Mother India). The women continued with their slogan in great spirit.

People started spilling on to the streets out of their offices, houses and shops. Local women, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, the old and the young – one after the other joined the procession. The army soldiers’ wives, who had earlier hesitated, joined the procession too, with enhanced enthusiasm. The strength of the procession kept swelling. It’s size gradually grew more and more. The men, somewhat shaken but alert kept watching as the slogan-shouting procession of the women marched past. A stunned and surprised Bansidhar kept staring at Ratna. He kept shifting his eyes – sometimes at the innocent face of Ratna, and sometimes at her stomach, there where a child had just started taking shape. Ratna let a mild smile as she walked close past Bansidhar, making eye contact with him and raising her voice along with the surging crowd. Bansidhar did not seem angry, but just looked at her inquisitively.

Today Ratna had worn the costly sari, which Bansidhar had purchased from the main bazaar of Mallital on her arrival. With the dark-green Assamese silk sari wrapped around her slim body, she looked gorgeous. The Peshminey shawl hanging on her shoulders presented a pleasing contrast. Her father had given this shawl to her at the time of her marriage. He was not very affluent. Yet, as per custom he had arranged a few selected items and given to Ratna at the time her marriage; a Peshminey shawl, a bed sheet, some new clothes, a new trunk and one golden Nath (a traditional nose-ring of around 15 grams). He had the nose-ring made from a goldsmith at Tehri, and had acquired the shawl and the bed sheet from a Tibetan woman who sold them on the roadside, during one of his trips from Shail to Gangotri. Many a time, during summer, these Tibetans came down from Tibet to sell a host of things to the tourists on the Gangotri bus route. During those days Tibet was not part of China. Borders between India and Tibet were open. Small and petty traders flocked to the hilly areas for selling their merchandises every now and then.

Ratna was an extremely beautiful woman. She was tall, with a measured and well-built body, a clean and healthy physique. Her fair complexion added more to the exquisite facial features of her beauty, and the thick locks of black hair supplemented further charm and grace to her personality. But, sadly, because she was brought up without much education and grew up in the hills, she lacked the sharpness and boldness in her individuality. She appeared somewhat oppressed and disconcerted. And she was too shy. One could easily take full command over her and dominate her.

The women advanced ahead, walking past the mountains, the valleys the streams and lakes shouting full-throated slogans. For a few hours all the houses in Nainital were devoid of women and the men-folk had to take care of the houses and children.

Ratna returned home at around four in the evening after the strenuous ordeal with the procession. She had to walk about 8-9 km through steep and spiralling lanes and by-lanes of the hills shouting slogans almost without stopping and as a result, she was completely exhausted. No sooner she entered the house, she ran straight to the cot to lay down and relax.

Bansidhar had already come home by then. On seeing Ratna he asked her, "What sort of a chaos you women created today! There were no ladies in any of the houses. All of them were on the streets."

Ratna remained silent.

"Are you tired?"

Ratna continued to be silent.

"Would you like to have tea?"

Ratna nodded her acceptance.

Bansidhar headed towards the kitchen remarking sarcastically, "Now it seems that we men only will have to do the household chores. The New Revolution has arrived. Woman's Power has woken up."

Ratna, lying on the cot, was looking blankly at the ceiling above. Suddenly, from nowhere, two images appeared before her eyes. One was of Nehruji and the other, of Kalyani. Nehruji's explosive speeches and Kalyani's bold personality had a very great impact on her naive mind. Nehruji's words reverberated in her mind – "Break all the old and unwanted traditions which are hindrances to your progress." Ratna murmured within herself "Nehruji wants to make every woman a Kalyani." Kalyani's bold personality was floating in front of her eyes – how sharp-minded was she – she spoke good and neat Hindi, and she also spoke English with ease. She was able to talk to men without fear or hesitation. On the other hand was she herself – she trembled with fear even amidst women, leave alone opening her mouth in the presence of men – speaking English was too far away when she was not even able to speak Hindi with perfection – she had the pahadi touch. Wives of the other soldiers in the neighbourhood mocked her at the way she spoke. They made fun of her whenever she spoke. Goswami from Rajasthan was the one who made maximum fun of Ratna, and because of that she did not dare to talk to her. She never joined their group for gossips. But, Kalyani never ridiculed Ratna. Instead, she listened to her intently. Today, when Ratna was with Kalyani tying flags and banners to the poles, Kalyani looked straight at her and told her. "Ratna, how beautiful you are! Your complexion is very fair and your skin is so clean. Alas ! If at all I could get some of your complexion!" Ratna murmured to herself, "Kalyani didi, if at all I could get a bit of your intelligence and boldness."

"Take your tea," Bansidar extended the cup towards Ratna. She got up languidly, and took the cup from him. Bansidhar, drawing the chair near the cot, sat resting his back on it and started sipping the tea.

Stroking Ratna's sari, he said, "You're lying on the cot without bothering to change the sari. How crumpled it has become."

Ratna did not care to reply. Holding the cup in her hand, she remained immersed in her own thoughts. Steam was emanating from the hot tea.

For a short moment Bansidhar stared at her and, in an annoyed frame of mind, he asked her "What have you been thinking so deeply about ever since you returned home from the procession?" Promptly, as if in reconciliation, he said, "I admit that the women's power has woken up. Come on, now drink your tea. It's getting cold".

Ratna smiled lightly, and as though to oblige him, she started sipping the tea little by little. "I was thinking about Kalyani. Nehruji wants to make a Kalyani out of every woman." Remorsefully she added, "How can I become a Kalyani? She is well educated. I heard that she even has a degree from a college in Calcutta. I've gone to the school only up to class fifth. Only now, with the courtesy of Kalyani, I'm able to read and write with a little perfection. Earlier I could read words only one by one and that too, with great difficulty. In what way could I ever be equal to Kalyani?"

"Have you also heard about the fact as to whose daughter Kalyani is?", Bansidar asked her tauntingly.

"No. Whose daughter is she?" Ratna questioned without showing any signs of excitement.

"She is the daughter of a great revolutionary leader. In the whole of Bengal, her father has caused revolt against the British administration. He always has a rifle in his hands."

Ratna did not elicit any reaction, but continued to sip her tea.

Bansidhar looked at her mischievously and asked her, “What does your father have in his hands all the time?”

“What does my father have in his hands all the time?” She repeated the question, by way of reply.

“A bell. The bell that is used in the temple,” Bansidhar told her with a laughter. “You’re the daughter of a priest and Kalyani is the daughter of a revolutionary leader. There’re bound to be some differences between you two.”

“My father is not a priest of any ordinary temple. He is the priest of Gangotri Temple– Gangotri from where the holy river Ganga takes its source,” Ratna said irritatingly.

“Wherever he may be. He is a priest nevertheless. After all, he only holds the temple bell for a living, unlike Kalyani’s father, who fires guns.”

Ratna became infuriated and sat quietly as if in protest.

Without any stress in his tone Bansidar told her, “Kalyani’s father has a 303 Rifle in his hands, and your father has only a bell in his hands. Her father’s hands are smeared in red with the blood of the enemies and your father’s hands are stained with the red colour of the vermilion that he offers to the pilgrims,” Saying this Bansidar started laughing loudly. Ratna became intolerably agitated now.

Bansidhar became more and more playful and taunted her with sarcastic remarks. “Anyway, this is not the only difference between you and Kalyani. There is another big difference.”

Ratna turned and looked at him pleadingly, trying not to reveal her anxiety.

“Kalyani is the wife of an officer, and you are the wife of a Havildar – Havildar Bansidhar. Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha.”

“Get lost,” Ratna shouted at him shyly, and, taking a pillow from the bed, she raised it pretending to beat him. Bansidhar started to run away from her and Ratna got up from the bed and ran after him in pursuit.

“Oh Oh, Ratna, don’t run. Better think about the little one inside of your womb.”

Ratna was worried and at once, walking steadily, she went back to the cot and sat down.

Bansidhar walked towards her, and taking a letter from his shirt pocket, he showed it to her. “Congratulations, Ratna. God has made you a sister before making you a mother.”

“What? Pitaji (father) has got a child?” A surprised Ratna questioned him, snatching the letter from his hand. She opened the letter in a hurry and started reading it.

“Dear Bansidhar and Rattan,

Let the Almighty keep you both ever happy.

You will be pleased to learn that day before yesterday evening at 7.0 clock, a brother has been born to you. The birth has been at an auspicious time. The star sign is Revati and the ???..is capricorn.. The pro-Saturn is at its top place. Health, education and professional aspects are highly favourable. Perhaps you may feel this as an absurd thing to happen at this juncture, especially when you are yourself going to be bestowed with a child soon. But, after all, certain occurrences take place on which man cannot have control.

Everything is designed by destiny. I very profoundly hope and wish that you both would take proper care of this child always.

Your mother is in good health and she conveys her blessings to both of you. The doors of the Temple will be opened for the Pilgrims next month, and I will go back to Gangotri. If you like, you may write to me at the Gangotri address.

Your father,
Shambhu Prasad.”

Ratna read the letter thrice. Heaving a long drawn sigh, she kept the letter under the pillow. After having boldly endured many worse absurd things in the past, the birth of the brother absolutely did not look absurd to her. On the contrary, the birth of the brother brought a good end to all these absurdities.

Ratna’s mind went down the nostalgia lane.

About three years back, Ratna had been asked to come to Shail from Devalghad, that is to her parents’ house from her in laws’ house. Pratap, who was the grandson of Ratna’s father’s eldest brother – in effect a third cousin – arrived to take her. Her father had only sent him. Her father was going to marry a second time. This news became a big joke in her in-laws’ house. They had been laughing with a maddening frenzy after learning that Ratna’s father was going to marry after the marriage of his own daughter. Rukmini, her mother-in-law, openly condemned her father – “After so many years – and at this age – what has tempted him to marry? He should have married a second time when your mother...” her voice trailed into a silence. She could not continue further as Ratna glared at her angrily. Minding her language with care, Rukmini went on to complete, “meaning that when he was young, when you also needed a mother to bring you up. Deciding to marry again at this age and stage, he has made himself a laughing stock.”

Some people in the village criticised it and some called it a joke.

Bhola, a very naughty and happy-go-lucky lad of the village, laughed aloud at her mockingly and said to her bluntly, “Oh, your father always thought of marrying the second time. That is the reason he got you married and sent you to your in-laws’ place while you were still young.”

Shakuntala Tai (aunt) had been waiting to have a poke and she intervened with her rejoinder, “This has become the most absurd thing. First the daughter’s marriage and thereafter the father’s!”

Her father’s second marriage did seem absurd to her, but Ratna could not openly criticise or condemn her father as others did. Silently she packed some clothes and some food for the long journey from Devalgarh to Shail. Taking leave of Rukimni, she left with Pratap for Shail for attending her father’s marriage.

Confronting a young woman in the role of her father’s wife was startling to her. When her father said, “Rattan, this is your mother,” she felt even more awkward. Once upon a time, she used to anxiously long to utter the word ‘Maa.’ That day, when she got the opportunity, uttering that word seemed unpalatable to her tongue.

How could she address a woman of her own age as 'mother'!

"This is your daughter." Her father introduced Ratna to his newly-wed wife. She too had become uneasy.

How could a young woman who got married only a few hours ago accept another young woman as her daughter? There developed a strange and unusual situation between Ratna and her stepmother – so unusual that one was not able to face the other without restraint. How could a mutual introduction of a mother to her daughter be deemed probable under normal customary circumstances? At no time, the daughter needs introduction of her own mother, nor is there ever the necessity for a mother to be introduced to her own daughter. That sort of an introduction would have taken place as much before as the mother began carrying the daughter in her womb. Even before the birth of the child both of them would have known each other. "This is your mother - This is your daughter," to have to be introduced in such a way is sheer mockery of the mother-daughter relationship.

"What have you started thinking about?" Bansidar waved his fingers in front of Ratna's eyes to alert her, and asked, "About your brother?"

Coming out of the stupor, Ratna replied seriously, "No, I was thinking about the mother who has given birth to the brother."

"About the brother's mother," muttered a confused Bansidar.

Ratna said, "Earlier, I used to hate her. But now I've started liking her. Remembering Nehruji's words, I'm feeling only pity for her. The poor young woman has been given in marriage to an old widowed man."

"I've seen your step-mother only once – when we had gone to your village to meet your father just before we left for this place," Bansidar said. "Yes, when compared to your father, she looks much younger."

With a tinge of sadness Ratna said, "Did you know that her marriage to my father had been decided because she was 'Mangali' and 'Ashlesha' (a spinster with her horoscope consisting of some very adverse and inauspicious omens in it). Such a girl is considered an ill omen to the mother-in-law and to the elder brother of the husband. Fortunately my father's mother was not alive then, and my father did not have an elder brother. These two factors looked favourable, and her horoscope matched with that of my father. Thereafter, perforce (?) her people got her married to my father."

"Perforce!" exclaimed Bansidar.

"What else? Would any young woman marry an aged widower otherwise, on her own accord? Once, she had herself told me that under any circumstances, it was not her wish to marry an old man having a married daughter. But, her people compelled her because she was already 21 years old. Marriages of her younger brother and a younger sister had already taken place by then."

"Oh my dear, don't call my father-in-law an old man again and again," Bansidar told her jovially. "What would be his age?"

"Pitaji (father) may be about 44 or 45."

"It means he would have been around 40 or 41 at the time of his marriage. Then father-in-law is still young. We, in India, consider ourselves as old a little too early. Look at the Englishmen. They think they are still young even when they have turned 60. They play golf, go swimming, jogging, make boyfriends and girlfriends. They derive all pleasures

from life. They always try to stay happy. We, on our part, go in search of sadness even when we are happy.”

Ratna remained quiet.

Then Bansidar said in a cheerful tone, “On the good news of the birth of brother-in-law, come on, let us go to Halwaii’s shop to eat sweet jalebis in celebration.”

Ratna joined him in his merry mood. Enthused by what he said, in a flash she got up from the cot and hurriedly re-adjusted her sari, combed her hair and, wearing her sandals, made herself ready to leave. Bansidar pulled his sweater down over his shirt, adjusted the collar, wore his shoes, and, without even looking at the mirror, combed his hair. Picking up the lock and key from the table, they came out of their house.

In the compound outside the house some children were playing. A little way ahead, a few ladies had gathered and were deeply engrossed in their routine gossiping. Today, an important event had taken place in their lives – they had taken out the mammoth women’s procession – these women had also been part of the procession. In all probability their topic of gossip was the procession.

Seeing Ratna and Bansidhar coming out of their house, the ladies at once disengaged themselves from their gossip and turned their attention towards the couple. Ratna turned stealthily away and avoided their probing eyes. Bansidhar closed the room and locked the door. Strolling along the verandah, compound and the playground, they were about to come out of the quarters. From behind they could hear Mraudula Dandhekar - “They got married recently and that is why they are always in such a joyous mood”.

“No, no,” Paramjit Parvana interped. “Their marriage is four or five years old, but only now they are living together for the first time.”

“When they get a child, all these frolics will vanish,” Saraswati Goswami said.

All the women burst into a loud laughter.

Bansidhar looked at Ratna and Ratna turned to face Bansidhar and both smiled.

Coming out of the quarters, and climbing down a few dilapidated red brick stairs, they reached a narrow muddy track along the banks of the lake.

Far away behind the western hills, the setting sun was spewing its very red glow of rays. With the radiance of the red rays of the sun, the entire part of that side of the hills was bright. The eastern side of the hills was slowly turning dark. There were some people still boating in the lake. After walking a short distance along the muddy track, they climbed up a small steep and reached the Mall Road. Continuing along the Mall Road for a while, they stopped in front of Ghanshyam Halwaii’s shop.

Ganshyam was busy making jalebis in a huge frying pan placed over the bellowing red flames of the furnace. Ganshyam Halwaii greeted Bansidhar with a lavish smile and a respectful salute. His acquaintance with Bansidhar was rather intimate. Ganshyam Halwaii’s correct full name was Ghanshyam Bisht. He hailed from Almora. His family was still living in Almora itself. He had brought with him from Almora, a teenage boy Kishore, as his deputy to help him carry out various odd jobs in the shop. He and Kishore worked from 6.0’ clock in the morning till 10.0 in the night. Thereafter they tidied up the place, closed the shop and slept inside it. This shop meant everything to them. In a small dark room, behind the shop, hung some soiled clothes. For washing and bathing and other such needs they went to the public facilities near the Boat Club.

Besides Ghanshyam Halwani, Bansidhar had made quite a few friends in Mallital's main market, such as the Bhattas of Anand Vastra Bhandar, the Saklanis of Saklani Shoes and Chappals Mart. Bansidhar had very cordial relations with them too. The Bhattas were a mix of Garhwal and Kumaun (the two prominent hill regions of Uttar Pradesh). Their textiles and garments business had grown extensively, far and wide, in addition to Nainital and Almora of Kumaon region, to Chamoli, Karnaprayag, and Gouchar of Garhwal region.

The Saklanis of Saklani Shoes and Chappals Mart were from Srinagar, Garhwal. They bought shoes from Bareilly and Lucknow and sold them in Nainital. Besides this, they also traded in an assortment of small and odd items bought from the Tibetans. The Tibetan ladies also gave them hand-sewn warm footwear made of woollen threads. The colourful and beautiful woollen footwear were displayed and sold in their shops and they attracted the attention of every one. As a matter of fact, there was atleast a pair or two of the warm, woollen footwear in every house in Nainital. Ratna had also bought a pair for her to wear in the house.

With his Garhwali (a dialect of Hindi language), Bansidhar could very fluently converse with the Bhattas and the Saklanis. They too spoke perfect Garhwali. But Ghanshyam Bisht used to talk only in his Kumauni (also a dialect of Hindi). In fact, the dialects of Garhwali and Kumauni have similarities between them, but a slight deviation in the usage of words would make a big difference to their intended meaning. However, Bansidhar talked to Ghanshyam Bisht in his Garhwali and, in turn, Ghanshyam Bisht responded to him in his Kumauni. One understood the other well.

Letting Ratna sit on the bench placed outside the shop, Bansidhar went inside the shop to Ghanshyam Bisht and enquired about his well being.

Two or three youngsters entered the sweetmeat shop and took their seats on another bench outside the shop. They were all looking at Ratna who was sitting alone. Even Ghanshyam Bisht's handyman (?), Kishore, was looking at her. They were all looking at her as though they had never seen a woman before. No doubt they were admiring the graceful appearance of a young beautiful woman, whose features had become more attractive due to the fact that she was in her early pregnancy – or probably they had seen her in the morning procession. She was becoming nervous. When people on the streets had looked at her in the morning, it did not matter, as she was one amongst a crowd of women. She was a part of the big procession then. But at this moment it was altogether different, because she was sitting alone on the bench outside a shop. She felt strange about the way they were eyeing her. Coolly she got up and went inside the shop to where Bansidhar was standing.

When Ghanshyam Bisht saw her there, he offered lavish compliments, "Sister, today you ladies have started the real full-fledged revolution. Such a big thing has never happened in Nainital."

Ratna was too nervous and preoccupied to speak.

Bansidhar told him, "You know Major Banerji's wife Kalyani. The procession was organised by her. She is a great woman."

"Yes, yes," agreed Ghanshyam Bisht. Taking out some of the hot jalebis from the frying pan, he said, "Even in front of Nehruji, she stood boldly and went on shouting, 'We will fight for our progres. We will...'"

Suddenly something struck Bansidhar's mind. He asked Ratna, "Why've you come inside the shop?"

Before Ratna could answer him, Ghanshyam Bisht intervened to say, "Yes, yes, go and sit there. The jalebis are ready now."

Ratna was looking at the saffron coloured crisp and juicy jalebis, which Kishore was arranging in a large aluminium tray.

Bansidhar ordered two plates each of quarter kilo jalebis and two glasses of milk for them. Then both of them retraced to sit on the bench.

Kishore brought two plates full of jalebis and two glasses of warm pure milk for them. The jalebis were so hot that they almost burnt their fingers and mouths. But they were so sweet and tasty that they did not bother to care about anything else. One by one they ate the jalebis and drank the milk. Bansidhar went to Ghanshyam Bisht and settled the bill.

Both of them resumed their stroll along the Mall Road.

After walking for a while from Tallital they reached Lake Bridge. The water under Lake Bridge was full of quiet waves. They watched for a while golden, grey and black coloured fishes swimming in the lake. Then, turning left, they proceeded towards Mallital. In a corner, a middle-aged man was selling roasted peanuts. Bansidhar bought two packets of peanuts from him. Holding the paper cone with the nuts in it, they went and sat on a big rock, and busied themselves with eating the peanuts. The biting cold of March was not yet over. Still they could see two boats in the lake, which meant that there were people who were not averse to go boating even on cold evenings.

"Who could be going for a boat ride in the lake at this chilly hour?" Ratna asked him anxiously, pointing towards where the boats were.

"It won't be Indians, for sure. It must be some British only," Bansidhar told her in a subdued voice. "These people are really brave. See there, Ratna. In this piercing cold wind some British Madams are sitting on the cold iron bench near the lake-banks. And some are enjoying rides on horseback."

Finishing the peanuts, they threw away the paper cones.

Slowly it was becoming darker. Few stars started appearing in the sky with their eye-catching twinkle. The streetlights on the tall lamp-masts had been switched on. The gently swaying clear water of the lake reflected the lights, and the shadows of the tall trees on the banks looked as if they were swaying under the waters of the lake. Ratna and Bansidhar had been sitting on the rock for a long time. When they got up they could feel the cool moisture in their clothes. Then, deciding to go to the Naina Devi Temple, they resumed their walking again.

Incidentally, Bansidhar's eyes fell on a studio – Azad Studio .

"This studio was not here earlier," he told Ratna.

"No," said Ratna. "I'm also seeing it here for the first time. Maybe, it opened recently".

Instinctively, he held Ratna's hand in his and rushed towards the studio. The studio man stood up to greet them as they entered.

"Want to be photographed?" he enquired.

“Yes.”

“What size?” “Post-card size,” he said himself, without even waiting for a response.

“No, three times bigger than that,” said Bansidhar.

Hearing this, the studio man could not help but laugh. Bansidhar also joined him. Ratna didn't laugh, as she had not understood what these two were laughing about. She glanced once at her husband and then at the studio man, not knowing what to do. Her eyes blinked in bewilderment and her mouth remained open in some unexpected joy.

The studio man took keen interest and helped them get readied for an attractive pose. He asked Ratna to sit on a chair and made Bansidhar to stand near her. Carefully, he helped Bansidhar to place his hand on Ratna's shoulder. He then directed them to not look at the camera, but to look at his fingers.

Bansidar and Ratna faithfully followed to what was being told by the studio man, and fixed their visions on his fingers.

“One, two, three. Smile please.”

It took some time for both to bring about a natural smile on their faces. The camera clicked and photo taken.

Both of them came out of the studio. Bansidhar looked at his wristwatch, and asked Ratna, “Shall we go back home, it is now 9.0 clock”

As usual, Ratna gave her assent in silence and both took their way back. They started climbing down the Mallital steps. No one was seen boating in the lake now. The night had become cold and quiet.

At the pier in Darshan Ghat, an elderly man was tying his boat to a mast. It looked like all the other boatmen had already left after anchoring their boats.

It was not clear what went on in the mind of Bansidhar that he suddenly started climbing down the steps of the pier at a quick pace. Ratna was perplexed, but she followed him though she was unable to keep up with him. She wondered whether Bansidhar preferred to go back by boat instead of walking in the cold night. When she came close, she heard him asking the boatman a barrage of questions.

“In a day how many people do you take to and fro?”

“I make something like ten or twelve trips,” the boatman said with the least of interest.

“How much money do you earn in a day?”

“Three or four rupees.”

“That's all!”

“That too only when English tourists come here during the season. Indians don't know anything about spending. In any case our people don't have the money in the first place,” he said pathetically.

The boatman turned silent and busied himself tying the boat. It was terribly cold, but the boatman was wearing such light and thin clothes as though it was hot and warm.

“Where do you live here?” Bansidhar asked him.

Ratna was bored to the extreme by the unending and unwarranted questions that Bansidhar was asking to the boatman and she murmured, “God knows what his habits are? He is trying to make friendship with strange people unnecessarily.”

“Patwadangar,” the boatman informed him.

“Will you go back to Patwadangar at this hour?” Bansidar asked him in surprise.

“Where else shall I go?” replied the man laughing.

The boatman looked like a Nepali but his way of talking was absolutely Kumauni. Bansidhar realised futility of his question. As if to justify, he said, “I’m only asking because Patwdaangar is very far from here.”

“To rest during the night, one has to go to his house.” With no more interest in anything, the boatman started climbing the stairs of the pier. Bansidhar, too, followed him. Ratna had to follow them both in a hurry. The boatman turned to the right towards the Mall Road. Bansidhar and Ratna also turned to the right side, as that was the way for them too.

The boatman said, “What to do, Sir? Only the tourists, who come here, enjoy the thrills and pleasures of the hills. Whereas, we’ve to face the problems of living in such places.”

“That’s very true,” Bansidhar said. “Which part are you from?”

“Near Dharchula,” the boatman replied, walking with fast pace.

Bansidhar also increased his speed to keep pace with him. Ratna had to almost sprint after them.

“Dharchula is right on the Nepal border. Oh, that’s why you look like a Nepali.”

“From the hills of Dharchula one can see the hills of Nepal right across. Half of the hills are theirs and half are ours.”

“From our Garhwal hills, one can see the hills of Tibet. Half of the hills are theirs and half are ours,” Bansidhar pointed out in the same rhythm.

“Oh, that means you are from Garhwal! Garhwali!” exclaimed the surprised boatman.

“And, how come you are here?”

“I’m posted to this place. Have been here for the last year and a half. I’m in the Indian Army”.

“Very nice, very nice,” said the boatman delightfully. Then at once he turned a bit serious and brimming with eagerness, asked Bansidhar, “What does your army say? Will these English people go or not from our country?”

Bansidhar thought for a while, then said, “They don’t want to go, but they’ll have to go. After all, how long can one stick on to the other’s place?”

“You’re right, Sir”.

The boatman’s mood of boredom seemed to change to a happy one as he was laughing now. Bansidhar also started laughing. Ratna was becoming restless. She was very angry on Bansidhar. She felt that Bansidhar had ignored her ever since he started the wasteful gossip with the boatman.

“How long you have been...” Ratna pulled Bansidhar’s hand even before he could finish his question.

Angrily she said, “You’re forgetting that I’m also with you. How long you have been engaged in the unwanted and useless conversation with that boatman!” Pulling him by the hands she led him to the narrow muddy track parallel to the Mall Road. Bansidhar hesitated for a moment, and turned back to look at the boatman as if he had forgotten something important. From the body language of Ratna, the boatman realised the situation had gone beyond toleration for her.

“OK, Sir,” he wished them both with a broad and generous smile and a warm salute, and walked away.

Bansidhar then started walking with Ratna on the muddy track along the lake.

They were both angry with each other. Bansidhar had completely ignored Ratna during his conversation with the boatman, and Ratna had not let him finish his interesting conversation with the boatman. This created a sort of friction between them and neither of them talked to the other as they walked. They continued walking along the banks of the lake in utter silence. The breeze was becoming severely colder and chilly.

Suddenly Bansidhar murmured, "The impact of the Azadi (freedom) movement on the people is so great that they've started naming their shops and children as 'Azad.' Who knows when the British'll leave our country!"

Whether Bansidhar was talking to himself or to Ratna – no one could make out. Yet, Ratna said, "Don't get disheartened. Freedom is just on the way. The British are leaving."

"Even now no one can trust them if they'll leave our country or not," expressing his doubts Bansidhar told her.

All of a sudden Ratna stopped walking. Putting her hands on her stomach, she said, "The quitting of the British and the arrival of freedom are now as certain and true as the impending birth of our child."

Bansidhar could only laugh, but appreciating her prophetic observation, he said, "How's it that you've started making such intriguing and serious remarks lately?"

"Because of the radio that you've given me, daily I'm listening to the news. Then, Kalyani was also telling the women that freedom is now not far away."

"The influence of Kalyani on you seems to have worked," Bansidhar teased her.

Both of them looked more reconciled and normalcy was back again as they reached home.

When Ratna lay on the bed, sleep was evasive. In place of fatigue and tiredness, there was a new vigour in her body. She wondered aloud if life could be happier and more pleasant than this. Thinking of it she was becoming restless out of sheer joy.

Whatever happened since that morning had been good and very pleasing: taking out the procession – shouting the slogans of patriotism – holding the National Tricolour – Kalyani's appreciative words about how beautiful she looked, and if at all she could have her complexion – eating sweet and hot jalebis at Ghanshyam Halwai's shop – taking photos at the Azad Studio – receiving a letter from her father. But the most pleasant thing was that she had a brother now. Some unknown abundance of love had been born in her mind for the unseen halfbrother. May be that was because of the fact that the same blood would be running through his veins!

She wondered, "How might the brother look like? With small hands, small feet and a cute little face!" Ratna, in her deep thoughts, was caressing her bare stomach with her hands and at once she could feel the soft movement inside. Earlier she had heard that the child rolled inside the mother's womb. A short happy shriek came through her mouth.

Bansidhar, who was lying next to her, asked her, a little worried, "What happened"?

Instead of giving him an answer Ratna lifted his relaxed hand and placed it on her bare stomach.

"Is your stomach aching?" enquired Bansidhar, and in the same breath, suggested, "it could be because of the jalebis."

"No, it's not aching. Can you not make out any thing? The child is rolling inside."

“Oh, yes! The child has started rolling now?” saying that he gently placed his hand on Ratna’s stomach and felt the soft movements.

“How many months now?”

“It’s a little over four months,” Ratna muttered in an almost mute voice.

“Arrival of freedom now is as true as is the birth of our child,” he said, and then he took his hand away as tenderly as he had placed it on her stomach, rolled on to his side of the bed, and was soon asleep.

Ratna was still trying to go to sleep. There was no sign of sleep coming to her. After a short while, she heard Bansidhar snoring.

Once her father had told her that whenever one was unable to sleep, one should recite within the mind some holy mantras. Such reciting had to be so deep and continuous that it alone would echo in the mind and no other extraneous thoughts would come in the way.

Ratna started thinking as to which mantra she should be reciting. Automatically, her lips muttered, “Naya Inquilab Aaya Hai, Naari Shakti Ka Uday Hua Hai, Bharat Mata ki jai!... Naya Inquilab Aaya Hai, Naari Shakti Ka Uday Hua. Naya Inq...”

CHAPTER 2

EVERY Moment was heading towards the Independence, and, along with it the child in Ratna's womb was growing. About months after taking the women's procession under the leadership of Kalyani, one fine morning around 4.0 clock Ratna woke up in Independent India. Bansidhar did not sleep throughout the night. Sitting with the other soldiers, he had been listening to the speeches of Nehru broadcast at midnight, and thereafter he had been talking with his colleagues.

Throughout the entire length and breadth of the country, there prevailed an atmosphere of joy and delight. But, regrettably, amid such joy and delight, there was a certain deeply painful and lasting sorrow. Prior to quitting the Indian subcontinent, the British administrators partitioned the country into two nations. A dreadful situation arose, where the British administrators, the Congress camp and the Muslim League could think of no option except to go ahead with the partition. Mahatma Gandhi was the only one who opposed the partition, but what could his lone voice do? In the process, there was bloodshed all around and the relations between Hindus and Muslims strained so badly that its reverberations would be felt for generations to come. But, whatever the cost associated with British quitting India, was acceptable to the people. Their departure from India was an occasion for the greatest joy and delight for the people. Therefore, forgetting their current misery, the people resolved to take part in celebrating the newly acquired independence.

In Nainital also people celebrated the arrival of Independence. On that joyful occasion of the British quitting India, people burst crackers on the streets and lit lamps in shops and houses. At the open grounds of army quarters all the families joined together and celebrated the occasion in their way. First, in the morning the men, in their uniforms, went to the office and hoisted the National Tricolour after a grand parade. Thereafter, collecting eight annas from each family, they bought many sweets from the shop of Ghanshyam Halwai and lavishly distributed those to everybody. In the evening, the ladies prepared one speciality dish each of their respective states and all of them assembled in the yard of the quarters for the combined celebrations.

August month... Monsoon season in India... Unsteady dark clouds were sending down sporadic thundershower, but neither the thunder nor the downpour dampened the spirits of the celebrating mass – they were already fully drenched in the sea of ecstasy. The ladies had taken shelter in the verandah and were watching the young and the old men-folk singing and dancing in delirium in the open ground in circles around the flag mast with the hoisted tricolour proudly fluttering. Many small paper flags in rows were planted in the soil which, due to the pouring rains, had soon become moist.

They did not seem to be in a mood to stop the dancing and singing. Words of hearty exchanges of greetings and pleasantries, the continuous beating of the drums and the laughing of the merry-makers indicated the happiest mood they were in.

While everyone was at the peak of ecstatic joy and delight, only Ratna was not able to share their joy.

She was under labour.

She went to one corner of the verandah and sat with her back resting on the wall. Observing her weary appearance, Bansidhar approached her and asked, “What happened, Ratna?” The pungent stench of alcohol from his mouth made Ratna pull back .

“Nothing, nothing. You go. Go and dance.”

Their conversation attracted the attention of some of the ladies sitting and talking nearby.

Paramjit Parvana was the first one to come to Ratna. She asked her, “What happened, Ratna? Why’re you sitting here alone?”

Before Ratna could reply, Sarswati Goswami intervened to comment, “Oh! When does she ever speak? She keeps her mouth shut all the time.” She then went close to Paramjeet Parvana and whispered in her ears, “As such, this ‘Pahadan’ is courageous enough. Do you remember how firmly she told Kalyani that she was willing to take out the women’s procession with her? We’d only stood withdrawn out of fear.”

Mrudula Dhandekar looked a bit concerned for Ratna. In her own typical kind words she said, “Please do not tease Ratna in this way. Her condition is not all that good.”

An expression of despondency appeared on Ratna’s face.

Maithili Sinha enquired, “How many months more, Ratna?”

“Now it is full month,” Ratna replied straightforward.

“Full month! What does that mean!” asked Krishna Chowdhry. At that Sarswati Goswami and Tara Shukla giggled.

“This poor woman doesn’t even know of how many months it is now,” Tara Shukla uttered in between her mocking laugh.

As the women kept laughing, Ratna got up and silently walked away towards the other end of the verandah and stood alone.

“Oh! She’s become angry,” observed Tara Shukla.

“Wait a minute. I’ll change her angry mood,” told Maithili Sinha. From where she was standing, she addressed Ratna at the top of her voice, “Ratna, your child is coming at a very lovely moment. Our country has just obtained freedom. If it is a boy, name him Azad, and if it is a girl name her Azadi.

Naomi Mishra added, “Ratna’s child is arriving at a very unique time. It should be a very lucky child.”

Ratna ignored them and watched the soldiers one by one. Their condition was no different from Bansidhar’s – drenched uniform, wet faces, sticky hair dripping water – and no one seemed to be in a mood to put an end to the merry-making. Shukla was beating the drum vigorously to the blaring sounds of which the others danced. All soldiers were in their uniform. Earlier in the day they had all gone to the parade grounds and had saluted the hoisted national flag. Ratna’s sight shifted from the soldiers to the children. There were fourteen children in the quarters between the ages of one and eight years. The elder children were dancing along with their fathers, and the younger ones were clinging on to the saries of their mothers.

Subconsciously, Ratna's hands reached her stomach. She could feel the impact of the increasing labour pain. She wondered whether those men would at all conclude the celebrations.

Meanwhile, Paramjeet Parvana and Krishna Chowdhry had started serving food on plates. Sarswati Goswami and Mrudulla Dhandekar were handing over the filled plates to the men.

Ratna had prepared "Phana" a hill area's speciality dish, which had turned out to be very tasty. Every one lavishly praised her for the excellent and delicious dish. Sinha approached Ratna with his plate in hand and asked, "How did you prepare this wonderful dish?"

Ratna was baffled by this sudden query. She could not even think of a reply.

"Ratna, you come here," just then called Mrudula Dhandekar.

Sinha also said, "You go Ratnaji. Go and eat first."

Ratna muttered to herself, "After all they remembered to call me at the right time. I'm so afraid of talking to the men." She went to join the ladies.

Paramjeet Parvana served food for Ratna in a special plate. "This is Punjab's puri and chhole, this is Maharashtra's pooranpoli, Rajasthan's kacchori and raita; fried rice from U.P. is here, and here you've special sweet from Bengal," she explained, pointing towards the various items on the plate. Ratna had never seen, leave aside eating such assorted varieties of dishes all at one time.

Merely looking at all the different items was filling. In fact the majority of the people present there had not eaten so many varieties of food at any one time.

Parvana was very much pleased, and spontaneously announced, "We should organise this sort of get-together more often. Eating in a group like this, we will be able to taste different types of dishes. Otherwise we have to content with the same old usual roti and one vegetable daily with a glass of plain water to flush it down into the stomach."

"Do you want coloured water to drink daily?" Bansidhar was at his jovial best. As if in appreciation, they all clapped their hands. Ratna could not help but let a brief, shy smile.

"Ratna, if you want more of anything, please ask," said Paramjeet Parvana, who was still laughing.

"Ratna, do you know why Paramjeet is taking so much care of you?" Krishna Chowdhry asked her, turning her head towards Paramjeet Parvana.

Ratna looked at her obliviously.

"Her condition is also similar to yours", she said teasingly.

All the women enjoyed the bit of pleasure offered by Krishna Chowdhry's remarks, but Ratna could not react in any way.

Sarswati Goswami then whispered to Krishna Chowdhry, "This Pahadi woman will not be able to understand it that way. We've to tell her openly to make her understand it."

Ratna heard what Sarswati Goswami whispered to Krishna Chowdhry and she felt deeply offended. "What's there in it that I can't understand?" Ratna retorted, looking at Sarswati Goswami in the eyes. "She was only saying that Paramjit Bhanu is also pregnant like me."

Watching Ratna's unusually provoked expression, the women preferred to stay silent.

"Please let Ratna eat her food peacefully," entreated Mrudula Dhandekar of the women, full of compassion for Ratna. "Please don't annoy her in her present condition."

Ratna was so irritated that she took the plate of food and walked away to sit in a corner. Her labour pain was increasing. With the mixed feeling of joy and anxiety, she thought whether her child would really arrive at this unique time and if that child would be truly lucky!

The celebrations went on till one o'clock in the night. The programme came to a stop only when the soldiers felt they were fully exhausted after the dancing and heavy eating; the women realised that they were bored of their gossips and the children had already slept on their mothers' laps.

At last they decided to put an end to the celebrations. Every one greeted and congratulated the others for the newly acquired freedom, and slowly they started disbursing. Winding up everything, all of them went to their houses.

Ratna and Bansidhar entered their house and closed the door. Bansidhar removed his wet uniform and dumped it in the bucket. Ratna removed her silk sari and wore her normal house clothes. She had to do the washing and cleaning of vessels and plates. But, she was too tired to do anything and went to lie down on the bed.

Standing before the mirror and looking at his image, Bansidhar said, "Today we really danced a lot. I had never danced so much in my entire life."

"And you drank a lot too," Ratna complained grudgingly. "I did not know that you were in the habit of drinking."

"It was only a casual thing, Ratna. This cannot be called drinking," he tried to convince her.

Saying that, he went near Ratna and exhaled near her face.

"No, no, you go away from here," said Ratna moving away her face. "Today, you sleep facing the other side. I cannot tolerate this stench" She continued.

Bansidhar switched the light off and said, "Don't insult it in the name of stench."

He switched tried to put his arms around her and take her in his arms.

"Keep away from me. I'm in pain."

"What did you say?" he enquired, rather anxiously, utterly ignorant of her present condition.

"It's hurting." She got up from the bed and switched the light on.

"Since when is it hurting"?

"It's been hurting lightly since morning. Now it's become very severe."

"Then why did not you tell me?"

Ratna sat down quietly holding her waist.

"What should we do now?"

"Nothing is to be done now. You sleep."

"How can I get any sleep if you keep sitting like this?"

Lying on the bed, Bansidhar kept looking at her.

The severity of the labour pain had become intense and Ratna was continually clutching her stomach. Watching Ratna's distressed countenance, he muttered to himself, "The arrival of freedom is now as much certain as is going to be the birth of our child." He thought to himself – freedom has come now: the child also wants to come now.

"Shall I call the midwife?"

"Not now."

Ratna opened the door and started pacing up and down. Bansidhar could not take his eyes off her. When he realised that her pain had become very acute, he got up, dressed, and after taking the torchlight and one umbrella, left in a hurry to call the midwife. He had earlier obtained the address of midwife Janaki of Gurkha lines, Mallital with the help of the Bhattas of Anand Vastra Bhandar.

The fifty-five-year-old, experienced midwife Janaki observed the writhing Ratna for a while. She examined her stomach and the dialation of the cervix. "Boil one bucketful of water, and get me a sharp and clean knife," she directed Bansidhar.

Bansidhar walked into the kitchen and worked on the stove. He boiled two vessels of water and readied the knife after sharpening and cleaning it thoroughly.

Meanwhile Ratna was struggling, unable to bear the pain. Turning her head towards Bansidhar in an almost unconscious state, she told him, "It's really paining too much. I can't bear it anymore."

Bansidhar came close to the head of the cot and started fondling her hair gently and tenderly. He massaged her hands to bring some warmth and consoled her. "Everything'll be fine in a short while. You'll become a mother and I'll become a father."

"Oh!" groused the midwife to Bansidhar. "Now you better go out of this room."

"Why?"

"Because there is nothing for you to do here now," the midwife cautioned him, "If you continue to remain here, it'll be a hindrance to my work."

"If my presence is required...?" Bansidar argued with her.

"No. There is absolutely no need for your presence. Whatever you could do, you've already done. Now, you please go out."

Bansidhar looked at the midwife and then at Ratna. Struggling to hold her breath, Ratna said, "Please go out."

"Then I'll go and wake someone from the neighbourhood. Mrs. Parvana or Mrs. Chowdhry would come to help you."

"No," Ratna admonished him. "You'll not wake any one. I don't need any one. Dai (the midwife) is with me and that is sufficient."

"I shall wake Mrs. Dhandekar. You like her."

"Have I not told you? Don't wake any one – I don't need any one" – panting, Ratna had to struggle for words.

"Why'e you so obstinate!" Janaki the midwife exclaimed to Bansidhar. "When she says she does not want any one let it go at that. These women would keep interfering unnecessarily as they please."

Eventually, the helpless Bansidhar went out of the room. Janaki the midwife immediately closed the door and bolted it from inside.

Bansidhar stood there looking blankly into the open enclosure and beyond that the playground. He observed that the silence and darkness had consumed all twenty-four quarters. Every one had slept in their houses. He walked through the enclosure and reached the playground. The high and tall trees presented an inanimate stillness. There was no movement of any kind nor was there any noise of insects. Bansidhar walked back and sat down on the verandah stairs. He recalled those earlier moments of the day when there were dances and dinner, frolics and feasts at this very place. Now it had been swallowed fully by

a deep, agonising stillness. There were no lights in any of the houses except for the one in his house where a new life was about to come into being. All the light that Bansidhar could discern was the lean, lone and long line of beam of light that escaped through the tiny gap in the front doors of his house.

It started to rain again. Fountains of sharp raindrops fell on his feet. Withdrawing his feet from the stairs, he changed his position. Turning to the other side he sat on the verandah and leaned on a pillar. With the help of the torchlight, he had been glancing at his wristwatch nervously every once in a while. It was 3.15 A.M. He was tired and worried, and quite drowsy too. He drifted off to sleep now and again but woke up with a start, determined to remain awake.

Anxiously, he checked his wristwatch again. It was quarter to five. He got up, walked towards the room, and leaning on the door he tried to listen. He knew that Ratna was in great agony. Yet, she had not raised her voice in any manner.

Janaki the midwife was urging her hard with words of encouragement. “A little more force... Yes, a little more...”

“Oh my God! When I don’t have the strength to breathe, how can I exert more force?”

He could hear Janaki the midwife reprimanding Ratna. “By breathing deeply inwards, you are drawing the child up. No need to be so ignorant. I’ve been sitting here for the last four hours. Now you make it fast.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh...” Ratna tried her best to exert more pressure.

“Yes! Yes! OK, now one good push. Come on now, come on. More pressure.”

Ratna was panting intolerably, her face contorted with severe pain. In between the panting she stammered, “Now I’ll not survive. I’ll also die the way my mother died in childbirth.”

Bansidhar was unable to sustain the anxiety and tension any longer. Perturbed to the extreme limit, he started knocking the door.

“You be patient for a little while more,” Janaki the midwife responded from inside. “When everything is over, I’ll myself call you in. Until then, wait there quietly. Don’t keep bothering me.”

His knocking ceased and he stood outside in silence. In a moment, the sound of Ratna’s cry and wail became too high and too severe. The destined moment for the delivery had come. It was becoming more and more impossible for Bansidhar to bear the agonising minutes.

“Now you open the door at once, or else I’ll break it open,” he shouted from outside.

There was no response from the midwife.

Once again Bansidhar shouted, “Are you going to open the door or not? If not I’ll break it.”

Again there was no reply whatsoever from the midwife. Bansidhar kept pounding at the door.

“Yes, yes, it’s come.” Bansidhar could hear the midwife’s words that sounded both excited and relieved.

“What’s come?” Bansidhar shouted back.

“Yes, yes. OK. It’s come!”

“What’s come?” Bansidar pleaded impatiently.

“The baby!”

Immediately the faint noise of the crying infant could be heard. With that, the sharp shrieks of Ratna’s panting and screaming came to a gradual stop.

Relieved, Bansidhar drew a deep and comfortable breath, went back to the verandah stairs and sat down silently.

Outside, the intensity of the rain had reduced and the skies were opening clear. Bansidhar sat looking blankly at the skies. After about half an hour, the door of the house opened and Midwife Janaki came out carrying the tiny infant rolled in a cloth.

“Come here, and take this,” she told him. “You had become too impatient. It’s a girl.”

Thrilled and overjoyed, Bansidhar got up, and in quick long strides, went towards the midwife with open arms to take the child from her.

Janaki the midwife held the infant in her hands, and even before she could hand over the infant to him, started to narrate the ordeals of the previous few hours. “Oh God! It was a very difficult night. In my twenty years of experience, I have attended to hundreds of deliveries and I have very easily got the babies delivered. But I have never come across a difficult case as this one. Inside, the woman was keeping her breath up, and outside the man kept pounding on the doors. The effect of it was so bad that I told to myself, Janaki, now you’ve become old, and it’s high time you stopped doing this job.”

Bansidar did not know whether to smile at this happy ending or to pity the midwife. Quietly he pulled out a five rupee note from his pocket and extended it towards her. The midwife was astonished on seeing it, but instead of accepting it from him, she refused to take it, saying, “My fees are not that much, my dear Sir.” People give me twelve annas. Some times some benevolent ones give me a rupee. Now, because I had to remain awake throughout the night in your house, you may pay me two rupees. But my fee is not so much.”

Such words and gesture of the midwife touched Bansidhar’s heart. He said, “Keep it.”

Janaki the midwife became immensely pleased and was thankful. Her hitherto coarse voice turned softer. She took the note from him, and running it over the infant’s wrapped body, she heartily blessed the child. “She is Goddess Lakshmi in person. She is born just at the advent of our long yearned independence. Even the mother of the child is so noble and divine that she gave birth to the child at this most thrilling moment. This is her first delivery. After all, she is young and in her carefree ages. Poor girl, she was really frightened. She kept telling me, ‘My mother died at the time of my birth, and now I’ll also die!’”

Janaki and Bansidhar laughed at the ignorance of Ratna. Suddenly, the midwife stopped laughing and became serious. “Oh, Sir, *now* we are laughing happily. But hearing what all she said at *that* time, I was very nervous myself, and panicky.”

Bansidhar’s smiling lips turned dry. He too recalled how worried and anxious he had been, hearing the Ratna’s screams. Now that everything had ended well, they had both laughed on the same thing.

“Everything will be fine during the second child,” she told him giving the baby a most benign and benevolent glance. “Sir, next year when this child will get a brother, please remember to call Janaki Dai only.”

Bansidhar could not say anything except for giving her a broad and grateful smile, taking the child in his arms. He felt as if some light and soft lump of flesh had come into his hands. But the regular heartbeats of the infant which he felt on his palm convinced him that there was life in it. Very much relieved, he glanced at his creation with great adoration and admiration.

In the meantime, Janaki had gone back into the house, and, after a few minutes later she came out carrying with her a bundle of cloth that smelled of the stains of blood. “I’ll wash all the cloth. Where’s the bathroom?”

Holding the infant in his arms, he turned his head towards the direction of where the bathroom was.

“Normally I don’t take up the job of washing the cloth at any place after the delivery. But, here as I don’t see anybody who could help you, I’ll do that for you,” she told him in a haste and headed for the bathroom.

Bansidhar was looking at the baby very adoringly and lovingly. He was trying to discern signs of life in the newly born child. Eyes closed; opened only occasionally for a wink. The small, pink mouth opened to yawn.

Bansidhar smiled out of ecstatic happiness. He kept looking at the infant. His eyes turned towards the skies. It was slowly brightening up. The red rays of the rising morning sun were scattered on the eastern sky.

Bansidhar muttered to himself: “Usha Kaal (dawn). Yes, Usha!”

He was thrilled by a sudden thought-wave, and carrying the baby he entered the room. The smell of remnants of the delivery was very pronounced inside. Ratna was lying on the bed entirely inanimate.

“Our daughter’s name will be ‘Usha,’ ” he told Ratna. This name is the most apt and suitable one for her, because she was born at Usha Kaal. It means day break: dawn.”

Without paying much heed to his logic and explanations, Ratna asked him, “Are you happy with the birth of a girl?”

“Is anything to be doubted?” In fact I wanted only a daughter, because I don’t have a sister. True, Ratna, the absence of a sister in the house had always been felt.” After a moment’s thought, he said, “Ratna, in fact you also don’t have a sister.”

“I have no one. Neither brother nor sister....”

“Ratna, you’ve started your repentance. Why should you at all cry for the kith and kin that are not there? Feel happy with the one that you’ve and with the one that you’ve just got. And now it seems that you’ve completely forgotten your brother so easily.”

“Yes, yes. I’m forgetting that now I’ve a brother also.”

“And a daughter too.”

Bansidhar very carefully placed the baby on the bed near Ratna.

Ratna most carefully and tenderly observed the baby. She felt strange as she thought that that was the very baby, who had been in her womb only a few hours ago! She removed the cloth wrapped around the baby’s body and inspected her – the feet, stomach, naval, chest, neck and head – and then she held the baby closely against her chest...