

t w o



Two days later, Deeti and her daughter were eating their midday meal when Chandan Singh stopped his ox-cart at their door. *Kabutri-ki-má!* he shouted, Listen: Hukam Singh has passed out, at the factory. They said you should go there and bring him home.

With that he gave his reins a snap and drove off hurriedly, impatient for his meal and his afternoon sleep: it was typical of him to offer no help.

A chill crept up Deeti's neck as she absorbed this: it was not that the news itself was totally unexpected—her husband had been ailing for some time and his collapse did not come entirely as a surprise. Rather, her foreboding sprang from a certainty that this turn of events was somehow connected with the ship she had seen; it was as if the very wind that was bearing it towards her had blown a draught up her spine.

Ma? said Kabutri. What shall we do? How will we bring him home?

We have to find Kalua and his ox-cart, Deeti said. *Chal;* come, let's go.

The hamlet of the Chamars, where Kalua lived, was a short walk away and he was sure to be home at this hour of the afternoon. The problem was that he would probably expect to be paid and she was hard put to think of something to offer him: she had no grain or fruit to spare, and as for money, there was not a dam's worth of cowrie-shells in the house. Having run through the alternatives, she realized that

she had no option but to delve into the carved wooden chest in which her husband kept his supply of opium: the box was nominally locked, but Deeti knew where to find the key. On opening the lid, she was relieved to find inside several lumps of hard akbari opium, as well as a sizeable piece of soft chandru opium, still wrapped in poppy petals. Deciding on the hard opium, she cut off a lump the size of her thumbnail, and folded it into one of the wrappers she had made that morning. With the package tucked into the waist of her sari, she set off in the direction of Ghazipur, with Kabutri running ahead, skipping along the embankments that divided the poppy fields.

The sun was past its zenith now and a haze was dancing over the flowers, in the warmth of the afternoon. Deeti drew the ghungta of her sari over her face, but the old cotton, cheap and thin to begin with, was now so worn that she could see right through it: the faded fabric blurred the outlines of everything in view, tinting the edges of the plump poppy pods with a faintly crimson halo. As her steps lengthened, she saw that on some nearby fields, the crop was well in advance of her own: some of her neighbours had already nicked their pods and the white ooze of the sap could be seen congealing around the parallel incisions of the nukha. The sweet, heady odour of the bleeding pods had drawn swarms of insects, and the air was buzzing with bees, grasshoppers and wasps; many would get stuck in the ooze and tomorrow, when the sap turned colour, their bodies would merge into the black gum, becoming a welcome addition to the weight of the harvest. The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect even on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly. One of these landed on the back of Kabutri's hand and would not take wing until it was thrown up in the air.

See how it's lost in dreams? Deeti said. That means the harvest will be good this year. Maybe we'll even be able to fix our roof.

She stopped to glance in the direction of their hut, which was just visible in the distance: it looked like a tiny raft,

floating upon a river of poppies. The hut's roof was urgently in need of repairs, but in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by: in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare—it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could.

When Deeti was her daughter's age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops—wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Her mother would send some of her poppy seeds to the oil-press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables. As for the sap, it was sieved of impurities and left to dry, until the sun turned it into hard akbari afeem; at that time, no one thought of producing the wet, treacly chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats.

In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to pykari merchants from Patna. Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold: no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies—fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies—but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would

allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asámi* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance.

Reaching down, Deeti snapped off a poppy pod and held it to her nose: the smell of the drying sap was like wet straw, vaguely reminiscent of the rich, earthy perfume of a newly thatched roof after a shower of rain. This year, if the harvest was good, she would put all the proceeds into the repairing of the roof—if she didn't, the rains would destroy whatever was left of it.

Do you know, she said to Kabutri, it's been seven years since our roof was last thatched?

The girl turned her dark, soft eyes towards her mother. Seven years? she said. But isn't that when you were married?

Deeti nodded and gave her daughter's hand a squeeze. Yes. It was . . .

The new thatch had been paid for by her own father, as a part of her dowry—although he could ill afford it, he had not begrudged the expense since Deeti was the last of his children to be married off. Her prospects had always been bedevilled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn—Shani—a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony. With this shadow darkening her future, Deeti's expectations had never been high: she knew that if she were ever to be married, it would probably be to a much older man, possibly an elderly widower who needed a new wife to nurse his brood. Hukam Singh, by comparison, had seemed a good prospect, not least because Deeti's own brother, Kesri Singh, had proposed the match. The two men had belonged to the same battalion and had served together in a couple of overseas campaigns; Deeti

had her brother's word that her prospective husband's disability was a minor one. Also in his favour were his family's connections, the most notable of which consisted of an uncle who had risen to the rank of subedar in the East India Company's army: on his retirement from active duty this uncle had found a lucrative job with a merchant house in Calcutta, and had been instrumental in finding good posts for his relatives—it was he, for instance, who had procured a much-coveted job in the opium factory for Hukam Singh, the groom-to-be.

When the match advanced to the next stage, it became clear that it was this uncle who was the motive force behind the proposal. Not only did he lead the party that came to settle the details, he also did all the negotiating on the groom's behalf: indeed when the talks reached the point where Deeti had to be led in, to drop her ghungta, it was to the uncle rather than the groom that she had bared her face.

There was no denying that the uncle was an impressive figure of a man: his name was Subedar Bhyro Singh and he was in his mid-fifties, with luxuriant white moustaches that curled up to his earlobes. His complexion was bright and rosy, marred only by a scar across his left cheek, and his turban, which was as spotlessly white as his dhoti, was worn with a negligent arrogance that made him seem twice the size of other men of his height. His strength and vigour were evident as much in the bull-like girth of his neck, as in the surging contours of his stomach—for he was one of those men on whom a belly appears not as an unnecessary weight, but rather as a repository of force and vitality.

Such was the subedar's presence that the groom and his immediate family seemed pleasingly diffident in comparison, and this played no small part in earning Deeti's consent for the match. During the negotiations, she examined the visitors carefully, through a crack in a wall: she had not much cared for the mother, but nor had she felt any fear of her. For the younger brother she had conceived an immediate dislike—but he was just a weedy youth of no account, and she had assumed

that he would be, at worst, a minor source of irritation. As for Hukam Singh, she had been favourably impressed by his soldierly bearing, which was, if anything, enhanced by his limp. What she had liked better still was his drowsy demeanour and slow manner of speech; he had seemed inoffensive, the kind of man who would go about his work without causing trouble, not the least desirable of qualities in a husband.

Through the ceremonies and afterwards, during the long journey upriver to her new home, Deeti had felt no apprehension. Sitting in the prow of the boat, with her wedding sari drawn over her face, she had experienced a pleasurable thrill when the women sang:

Sakhiyā-ho, saiyā moré písé masála
Sakhiyā-ho, bará mītha lagé masála

Oh friends, my love's a-grinding
Oh friends, how sweet is this spice!

The music had accompanied her as she was carried, in a nalki, from the riverbank to the threshold of her new home; veiled in her sari, she had seen nothing of the house as she went to the garlanded marital bed, but her nostrils had been filled with the smell of fresh thatch. The songs had grown increasingly suggestive while she sat waiting for her husband, and her neck and shoulders had tightened in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed. Her sisters had said: Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don't let him touch your breasts.

Ág mor lágál ba
Aré sagaro badaniyá . . .
Tas-mas choli karái
Barhalá jobanawá

I'm on fire
My body burns . . .
My choli strains
Against my waking breasts . . .

When the door opened to admit Hukam Singh, she was sitting coiled on the bed, fully prepared for an assault.

But he surprised her: instead of parting her veil, he said, in a low, slurred voice: *Arré sunn!* Listen there: you don't have to curl yourself up, like a snake: turn to me, look.

Peeping warily through the folds of her sari, she saw that he was standing beside her with a carved wooden box in his hands. He placed the chest on the bed and pushed back the lid, to release a powerful, medicinal smell—an odour that was at once oily and earthy, sweet and cloying. She knew it to be the smell of opium, although she had never before encountered it in such a potent and concentrated form.

Look! He pointed to the interior of the box, which was divided into several compartments: See—do you know what's in here?

Afeem naikhé? she said. Isn't it opium?

Yes, but of different kinds. Look. His forefinger pointed first to a lump of common akbari, black in colour and hard in texture; then it passed on to a ball of madak, a gluey mixture of opium and tobacco: See; this is the cheap stuff that people smoke in chillums. Next, using both hands, he took out a small lump, still in its poppy-petal wrapper, and touched it to her palm, to show her how soft it was: This is what we make in the factory: chandu. You won't see it here, the sahibs send it across the sea, to Maha-Chin. It can't be eaten like akbari and it can't be smoked like madak.

What's done with it then? she asked.

Dekheheba ka hoi? You want to see?

She nodded and he rose to his feet and went to a shelf on the wall. Reaching up, he brought down a pipe that was as long as his arm. He held it in front of her, and she saw that it was made of bamboo, blackened and oily with use. There was a mouthpiece at one end, and in the middle of the tube there was a little bulb, made of clay, with a tiny pinhole on top. Holding the pipe reverentially in his hands, Hukam Singh explained that it came from a faraway place—Rakhine-desh in southern Burma. Pipes like this one were not to be found in

Ghazipur, or Benares, or even Bengal: they had to be brought in, from across the Black Water, and were too valuable to be toyed with.

From the carved box, he took a long needle, dipped its tip in the soft black chandu and roasted the droplet on the flame of a candle. When the opium began to sizzle and bubble, he put it on the pinhole of his pipe and took a deep draught of the smoke, through the mouthpiece. He sat with his eyes closed, while the white smoke drifted slowly out of his nostrils. When it was all gone, he ran his hands lovingly over the length of the bamboo tube.

You should know, he said at last, that this is my first wife. She's kept me alive since I was wounded: if it weren't for her I would not be here today. I would have died of pain, long ago.

It was when he said these words that Deeti understood what the future held: she remembered how, as children, she and her playmates had laughed at the afeemkhors of their village—the habitual opium-eaters, who sat always as if in a dream, staring at the sky with dull, dead eyes. Of all the possibilities she had thought of, this was one she had not allowed for: that she might be marrying an afeemkhor—an addict. But how could she have known? Hadn't her own brother assured her that Hukam Singh's injury was not serious?

Did my brother know? she asked, in a low voice.

About my pipe? He laughed. No; how could he? I only learnt to smoke after I was wounded and taken to the hospital barracks. The orderlies there were from the country we were in, Arakan, and when the pain kept us awake at night, they would bring us pipes and show us what to do.

It was useless, she knew, to be seized by regret now, on the very night when her fate had been wedded to his: it was as if the shade of Saturn had passed over her face, to remind her of her destiny. Quietly, so as not to rouse him from his trance, she reached under her veil to wipe her eyes. But her bangles tinkled and woke him; he picked up his needle again and held it over the flame. When the pipe was ready to be smoked, he

turned to her, smiling, and raised an eyebrow, as if to ask if she wanted to try it too. She nodded, thinking that if this smoke could take away the pain of a shattered bone then surely it would help in calming the disquiet in her heart. But when she reached for the pipe, he moved it quickly out of her reach, holding it to his chest: No—you won't know how! He took a mouthful of the smoke, placed his mouth on hers and breathed it into her body himself. Her head began to swim, but whether from the smoke or from the touch of his lips she could not tell. The fibres of her muscles began to soften and go slack; her body seemed to drain itself of tension and a sensation of the most delectable languor followed in its wake. Awash in well-being, she leant back against her pillow and then his mouth closed on hers again, filling her lungs with smoke and she felt herself slipping away from this world into another that was brighter, better, more fulfilling.

When she opened her eyes next morning there was a dull ache in her lower abdomen and a painful soreness between her legs. Her clothes were in disarray and she reached down to discover that her thighs were crusted with blood. Her husband was lying beside her, with the brass box in his arms, his clothes undisturbed. She shook him awake to ask: What happened? Was everything all right last night?

He nodded and gave her a drowsy smile. Yes, everything was as it should be, he said. You gave proof of your purity to my family. With heaven's blessing, your lap will soon be filled.

She would have liked to believe him, but looking at his enervated and listless limbs she found it hard to imagine that he had been capable of any great exertion the night before. She lay on her pillow trying to remember what had happened, but was unable to retrieve any memory of the latter part of the night.

Shortly afterwards, her mother-in-law appeared by her bedside; wreathed in smiles, she sprinkled blessings from a container of holy water, and murmured, in a tone of tender solicitude: Everything went exactly as it should, beti. What an auspicious start to your new life!

Her husband's uncle, Subedar Bhyro Singh, echoed these blessings and slipped a gold coin into her palm: *Beti, your lap will soon be filled—you will have a thousand sons.*

Despite these reassurances, Deeti could not shake off the conviction that something untoward had happened on her wedding night. But what could it have been?

Her suspicions deepened in the following weeks, when Hukam Singh showed no further interest in her, being usually in a state of torpid, opium-induced somnolence by the time he fell on his bed. Deeti tried a few stratagems to break him from the spell of his pipe, but all to no avail: it was pointless to withhold opium from a man who worked in the very factory where it was processed; and when she tried hiding his pipe, he quickly fashioned another. Nor did the effects of temporary deprivation make him desire her any more: on the contrary, it seemed only to make him angry and withdrawn. At length, Deeti was forced to conclude that he could never be a husband to her, in the full sense, either because his injury had rendered him incapable, or because opium had removed the inclination. But then her belly began to swell with the weight of a child and her suspicions acquired an added edge: who could have impregnated her if not her husband? What exactly had happened that night? When she tried to question her husband he spoke with pride about the consummation of their wedding—but the look in his eyes told her that he had no actual recollection of the event; that his memory of that night was probably an opium-induced dream, implanted by someone else. Was it possible then that her own stupor had also been arranged, by someone who knew of her husband's condition and had made a plan to conceal his impotence, in order to preserve the family's honour?

Deeti knew that her mother-in-law would stop at nothing where her sons were concerned: all she would have had to do was to ask Hukam Singh to share some of his opium with his new bride; an accomplice could have done the rest. Deeti could even imagine that the old woman had actually been present in the room, helping to roll back her sari and holding down her

legs while the deed was done. As for who the accomplice was, Deeti would not allow herself to yield to her first suspicions: the identity of her child's father was too important a matter to be settled without further confirmation.

To confront her mother-in-law, Deeti knew, would serve no purpose: she would tell her nothing and spout many lies and soothing reassurances. Yet every day offered fresh proof of the old woman's complicity—in nothing more so than the look of proprietary satisfaction with which she watched over the progress of the pregnancy; it was as if the child were her own, growing in the receptacle of Deeti's body.

In the end, it was the old woman herself who provided Deeti with the impetus to act upon her suspicions. One day, while massaging Deeti's belly, she said: And after we've delivered this one, we must make sure there are more—many, many more.

It was this throwaway remark that revealed to Deeti that her mother-in-law had every intention of ensuring that whatever had happened on her wedding night would be repeated; that she would be drugged and held down, to be raped again by the unknown accomplice.

What was she to do? It rained hard that night and the whole house was filled with the smell of wet thatch. The grassy fragrance cleared Deeti's mind: think, she had to think, it was no use to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets. She thought of her husband and his torpid, drowsy gaze: how was it that his eyes were so different from his mother's? Why was his gaze so blank and hers, so sharp and cunning? The answer came to Deeti all of a sudden—of course, the difference lay in the wooden box.

Her husband was fast asleep, with drool trickling down his chin and an arm thrown over his box. Pulling gently, she freed the box from his grasp and prised the key out of his fingers. A ripe odour of earth and decay came wafting out when she opened the lid. Averting her face, she pared a few shavings from a cake of hard akbari opium. Slipping the pieces into the folds of her sari, she locked the box and replaced the key in

her husband's hands: although he was fast asleep, his fingers closed greedily on this companion of his nights.

Next morning Deeti mixed a little trace of opium into her mother-in-law's sweetened milk. The old woman drank it thirstily and spent the rest of the morning lazing in the shade of a mango tree. Her contentment was enough to dispel whatever misgivings Deeti may have had: from that day on she began to slip traces of the drug into everything she served her mother-in-law; she sprinkled it on her achars, kneaded it into her dalpuris, fried it into her pakoras and dissolved it in her dal. In a very short time, the old woman grew quieter and more tranquil, her voice lost its harshness and her eyes became softer; she no longer took much interest in Deeti's pregnancy and spent more and more time lying in bed. When relatives came to visit, they always commented on how peaceful she looked—and she, for her part, never stinted in her praise of Deeti, her fond new daughter-in-law.

As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoy—for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only such substance upon the earth?

She began to pay closer attention to dais and ojhas, the travelling midwives and exorcists who occasionally passed through their village; she learnt to recognize plants like hemp and datura and would sometimes try little experiments, feeding extracts to her mother-in-law and observing the effects.

It was a decoction of datura that wrung the truth from the old woman, by sending her into a trance from which she never recovered. In her last days, when her mind was wandering she often referred to Deeti as 'Draupadi'; when asked why, she would murmur drowsily: Because the earth has never seen a

more virtuous woman than Draupadi, of the Mahabharata, wife to five brothers. It's a fortunate woman, a *saubhāgyawati*, who bears the children of brothers for each other . . .

It was this allusion that confirmed Deeti's belief that the child in her belly had been fathered not by her husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, slack-jawed brother-in-law.



Two slow days on the silt-clogged river brought the *Ibis* to the Narrows at Hooghly Point, a few miles short of Calcutta. There, beset by squalls and sudden gusts of wind, she dropped anchor to await the incoming tide that would carry her to her destination early next morning. The city being only a short distance away, a messenger was dispatched on horseback, to alert Mr Benjamin Burnham to the schooner's impending arrival.

The *Ibis* wasn't the only vessel to seek shelter at the Narrows that afternoon: also moored there was a stately houseboat that belonged to the estate of Raskhali, a large landholding a half-day's journey away. Thus it happened that the approach of the *Ibis* was witnessed by Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the zemindar of Raskhali, who was on board the palatial barge with his eight-year-old son and a sizeable retinue of attendants. Also with him was his mistress, a once-famous dancer, known to the world by her stage-name, Elokeshi: the Raja was returning to Calcutta, where he lived, after a visit to his Raskhali estate.

The Halders of Raskhali were one of the oldest and most noted landed families of Bengal, and their boat was among the most luxurious to be seen on the river: the vessel was a brigantine-rigged pinnace-budgerow—an Anglicized version of the humbler Bengali bajra. A double-masted houseboat of capacious dimensions, the budgerow's hull was painted blue and grey, to match the Raskhali estate's livery, and the family's emblem—the stylized head of a tiger—was emblazoned on its prow and its sail. The main deck had six large staterooms,