

Stories from the Womb

A translation of Himanshi Shelat's
Garbhgatha



Pratixa Parekh



Rupkatha Books

Dr Himanshi Shelat (b. 1947, Surat) is a renowned Gujarati author and Sahitya Akademi Award recipient, celebrated for her psychologically nuanced and socially conscious fiction. Holding an M.A. and a PhD in English, she taught at M.T.B. Arts College, Surat, until 1994. Her literary journey began in 1978, and she gained nationwide recognition with *Andhari Galima Safed Tapakan* (1992). Influenced by Mahasweta Devi and Jane Austen, Shelat's writing delves into everyday realities, marginalised lives, and women's struggles, often inspired by her social welfare work. Her oeuvre includes acclaimed story collections (*Antaral, Ae Loko*) and novels (*Aathamo Rang, Saptadhara*), as well as essays, memoirs, and literary criticism. She has also edited numerous volumes and served on the Sahitya Akademi advisory board (2013–2017). In 2024, she was honoured with the Kuvempu Rashtriya Puraskar. Married to Vinod Meghani, son of poet Jhaverchand Meghani, Shelat remains a vital voice in post-modern Gujarati literature.

Dr Pratixa Parekh is a translator and academician currently serving as Assistant Professor of English at Dolat-Usha Institute of Applied Sciences and Dhuru-Sarla Institute of Management & Commerce, Valsad, Gujarat, since 2006. She has presented and published research in numerous national and international forums, with interests spanning Comparative Studies, Translation Studies, and Gender Studies. Her translations of Gujarati fiction and poetry into English have appeared in esteemed journals such as *Indian Literature, Sahityasetu, Translation Today, and Sahitya*. Notably, her translated short story features in the anthology *Redolent Rush: Contemporary Indian Short Fiction in Translation* (Hawakal Publishers, Kolkata).

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Stories from the Womb

A translation of the Sahitya Akademi
Award-winning author
Himanshi Shelat's *Garbhgatha*

By Dr Pratixa Parekh

Edited by
Dr Tarun Tapas Mukherjee



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Stories from the Womb

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CONTENTS

- Preface by Sachin C. Ketkar vi
- Translator's Preface viii
- Stories from the Womb 1

PREFACE

Himanshi Shelat's *Stories from the Womb*, translated by Dr Pratixa Parekh, is a poignant and layered narrative that intertwines myth, folklore, and stark social realism to examine the fragile existence of the female foetus, Asti, within a patriarchal Gujarati society. The distinctive stylistic and cultural characteristics of the text stem from its seamless integration of oral storytelling traditions with a contemporary feminist critique, resulting in a narrative that is both timeless and urgently relevant.

The story begins with an allegorical nod to "One Thousand and One Nights", where a princess uses storytelling to delay her execution. Similarly, Asti, the unborn protagonist, narrates tales to her mother, Revati, to secure her right to be born. This narrative device is a stylistic triumph, embedding stories within stories to create a hypnotic rhythm that mirrors the oral traditions of Indian folklore. Each tale – spanning generations from Sarasti's tragic suicide to Parvatimasi's bond with her cat Godavari, Sunita's disappearance, and the chilling account of a well filled with discarded female fetuses – serves as a cultural mirror reflecting the systemic devaluation of women in Indian society. These stories are told with vivid sensory detail, from the fragrance of Ratrani flowers to the chaos of a protest outside an abortion clinic, grounding the narrative in a tangible, culturally rich milieu.

Shelat's narrative style is characterised by its emotional intensity and introspective depth. Asti's voice, imbued with an almost supernatural omniscience, contrasts with Revati's conflicted pragmatism, creating a dynamic interplay between hope and despair. The prose, fluidly translated by Parekh, oscillates between lyrical and conversational tones, capturing the rhythm of Gujarati storytelling while remaining accessible. The use of regional dialects, references to rituals like puja, and vivid depictions of village life anchor the narrative in a

distinctly Indian cultural context, yet its themes of gender inequality and maternal agency resonate universally.

Culturally, the text directly addresses the taboo of female feticide, a widespread issue in India, with unwavering honesty. It critiques societal pressures that favour male heirs, as illustrated by Amar's desire for a son and the family's dismissive attitude towards a third daughter. The stories Asti shares are not mere diversions but acts of resistance, challenging the commodification of women's bodies and the erasure of their agency. The final tale of the well, a haunting metaphor for societal indifference, highlights the collective complicity in gender-based violence.

Shelat's narrative brilliance lies in its ability to balance despair with hope. Asti's ultimate transcendence, merging her identity with Revati's, offers a radical reimagining of maternal-fetal unity, suggesting that empowerment begins within. This poignant resolution, combined with the text's rich cultural tapestry and compelling storytelling, makes 'Stories from the Womb' a powerful testament to resilience and the enduring power of narrative to reclaim agency.

Dr Pratixa Parekh's translation of Himanshi Shelat's *Stories from the Womb* is a skilled rendition that preserves the cultural and emotional depth of the original Gujarati text while making it accessible to a wider audience. Phrases like "the fragrance of Ratrani" and the vivid portrayal of Sarasti's suicide evoke sensory richness, while maintaining clarity and emotional impact. Parekh adeptly captures cultural nuances, retaining references to rituals such as puja and regional dialects, which situate the story firmly in its Indian setting without alienating non-Gujarati readers. The dialogue, especially Asti's introspective monologues and Revati's conflicted responses, flows smoothly, preserving the characters' emotional sincerity. Parekh's sensitivity to feminist undertones ensures that the critique of gender inequality remains sharp and poignant. Her

ability to balance the story's allegorical elements with stark realism demonstrates her skill in honouring both the spirit and the substance of the original, making this translation a compelling and faithful bridge to Shelat's powerful narrative.

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Translation has evolved alongside the growth of various languages and has always aimed to bridge gaps in meaning while conveying messages from one language to another. For a long time, this activity was largely overlooked, and translators received little genuine recognition, as translation was seen as less creative than the original work, and translators were regarded as less talented or imaginative than the authors. Recently, however, the industry has gained prominence due to the expansion of the translation sector, which has shifted perceptions – from viewing translation as a secondary activity performed by less talented individuals to recognising it as a vital endeavour undertaken by equally creative people. This shift has made literature more accessible to a wider readership. Instead of considering the translator as merely a shadow of the original author, the expanding opportunities in the field have encouraged collaboration to make literary works available across global audiences. This positive change has motivated many scholars to engage in translation and opened numerous opportunities for them to translate and publish works of vernacular authors into other local or international languages, like English, allowing them to gain recognition for their efforts.

The short story and novella, originally titled *Garbhgatha*, is an experimental work of fiction that blends folklore with real-world issues such as gender inequality, exploitation, and female infanticide. It is narrated through a unique technique where a foetus communicates with her mother to save her life. The foetus, named Asti, tries to persuade her mother, Revati, not to abort her due to family pressure and encourages her to reconsider her decision by sharing heartfelt stories from Revati's past, which she was unaware of. These stories include the experiences of many close female relatives struggling for identity and self-esteem while facing exploitation and injustice within their families. They serve as eye-openers for Revati, who has been unsure about abortion from the outset but is too naive

to express her own thoughts and feelings. The stories make her seriously reflect on the issue and take her own stand. The story was written by prominent Gujarati author Himanshi Shelat, who is also a dedicated social worker advocating for women's rights. Through this work, she creates another remarkable literary piece that highlights the timeless theme of gender equality with a captivating narration style. What makes this work special is Shelat's approach to addressing the issue, her subtle yet powerful hints about the need for reform, and her fusion of folklore elements with fiction, making it more engaging for readers.

I have chosen the title "Stories from the Womb" for the English translation to capture the essence of the entire narration. As a translator, I have strived to remain as faithful as possible to the original. However, in several places, I have deliberately selected a meaning that would resonate more with contemporary readers. Often, a translator faces the dilemma of interpreting what the original author implied, how to interpret it, and meeting the expectations of the readers. In such moments, the translator must utilise her own creative ability (in P. Lal's words, 'transcreation') to edit and reconcile, thereby adapting the work to suit the tastes of the audience she is translating for. While the translated work may sometimes suffer losses at linguistic and cultural levels when transferred to another language and culture, it also compensates through gains—such as adding new connotations to old terms or presenting alternative perspectives on the same event or character. Therefore, rather than focusing on what is lost, it is more fruitful to concentrate on what is gained through this process. In some cases, where the original word or term lacked an equivalent in the target language, I have used the original Gujarati word (in italics) instead of forcefully replacing it with an out-of-context connotation.

This was a very enriching and fulfilling journey for me as a translator, despite the challenges. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the original author Hemanshi Shelat, who very generously granted permission to translate this story. My sincere thanks also go to Prof Sachin Ketkar, Professor, Department of English, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, Gujarat, for agreeing to write a preface for my translation. As an ardent translator and erudite academician himself, he has always been a source of profound inspiration to me.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the esteemed members of the Rupkatha Translation Project Board for accepting this work for publication. I also acknowledge the valuable contribution of Dr Tarun Tapas Mukherjee, the founder of the *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, whose vision and support inspired me to contribute to this project and reach a wider audience. I am equally thankful to Ms Pragati Das, in charge of Academic Relations and Research at the *Rupkatha Journal* for her encouragement.

I hope this work reflects the vision of the Rupkatha Translation Project and inspires joy in readers eager to explore Gujarati literature. Personally, translation holds great significance for me, as Gujarati (my mother tongue) literature has not garnered much international recognition due to the limited availability of its works in translation into other Indian or global languages, including English. This is my humble effort to bridge that gap and enable Gujarati authors and their exceptional literature to reach a worldwide audience.

With hope and love,

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Stories from the Womb

Once upon a time, there was a great emperor.

And it so happened that this emperor was betrayed by his own wife. After discovering that the queen was unfaithful, he refused to remain silent and decided to take revenge. He believed that all women shared the same nature; one could not trust them, as they were utterly unfaithful. Beyond the pain caused by his wife's infidelity, he felt humiliated because he had been deceived by the very person he loved. There was a solution – he would once and for all teach them a lesson. Every day he married a beautiful lady, spent a night with her, and in the morning beheaded her. No regret, no complaints; he decided not to diverge from this judgement.

May this emperor rule the world for eternity! Every day, a new bride was available for him. Girls would quietly get beheaded the next morning, without any protest. This tradition continued for some time until he was suddenly confronted by an intelligent girl. She was full of *joie de vivre*; she admired all aspects of nature – the beauty of flowers and the chirping of birds. She loved to laugh and dance. An innovative plan to resist the emperor's verdict occurred to her. She was a master storyteller. She narrated stories in such a manner that the listener would become completely engrossed in the tales, forgetting their entire existence. Only the story remained; everything else became immaterial. The princess knew well that as soon as her story finished, the emperor would behead her. She couldn't afford to take any risks. She decided to heighten the excitement of her tale and leave it unfinished, promising to complete it the next day. The emperor was so captivated by the stories that he had no choice but to wait for the following night to hear the concluding part. The tales almost had a hypnotic effect.

So this way, the princess could live another day, and her beheading would be postponed. This way, she could extend the course of her life.

Inside the darkness of the womb, the foetus of Asti lay curled up, contemplating the form and style of the stories narrated by the princess to the emperor. All the tales contained an element of surprise; one had to traverse dense forests, navigate seas full of high tides, climb tall mountain ranges, and encounter a variety of winged creatures that shrieked loudly, requiring one to fight them bravely. It was an imaginary world. Asti had to think like the princess and play her role, as it was a matter of life and death for her. She knew that if she wished to survive, she had to master the art of storytelling. The stories had to be so compelling that even the wind would halt, and the flowers would stop falling from the trees. If her tales were not captivating enough, many would be ready to throttle her; any excuse would be enough to behead her.

And in this instance, the excuse was quite useful. The family already had two daughters before Asti, and a third daughter was seen as undesirable. She would be an extra burden for them.

One of her family members commented, “Revatiben, it is very common to have abortions these days. Once you decide, it is so easy to abort the foetus. Not much legal hassle is involved. Otherwise, who cares for all the rules and regulations these days?”

A sex determination test was conducted illegally, revealing Asti’s existence. It was only a matter of time before she would be born prematurely, without even a chance to cry or protest. Ultimately, Asti’s existence would be erased from the world.

But nobody had been aware of Asti’s willpower so far. Asti had acquired some miraculous power in the womb, which made her aware of both the past and the future. She understood how

crucial it was for her to be born. Only if she could persuade her mother...

Asti watched as her mother was busy all day. She had no time for herself. The cycle of daily chores took up the entire day at its own pace, and the mother was completely caught up in it. Whenever she could find a moment of leisure, she would hum a few lines from her favourite song.

Father had different sorts of worries. He insisted, "Instead of prolonging the situation, we should take an appointment with the doctor and get rid of the foetus as early as possible."

Foiba was saying that the puja was to be performed soon so..." mother tried to intervene.

"Everybody will have their own say. We should not pay attention to them. There is hardly any link between this matter and the puja," said father, trying to be dismissive.

"The pest control people were called by our elder brother but were sent back by Foiba because there is a puja in the factory, and during this time, any kind of killing should be prohibited," mother said, trying to justify the postponement of the act.

"So what?" said the father.

"But abortion is also a kind of killing," insisted the mother.

"This is your opinion. Hope Foiba doesn't have any idea about this. Make sure she does not get to know anything."

"No, she has no clue about it. She was only talking about the pest control," said Ma.

"It's okay. I might have to go out of station," interrupted father.

"But the *puja* is around," insisted Ma.

“That is why I need to go. A few things need to be delivered so perhaps I may have to make a trip to Puna,” father reinforced.

“When will you leave?”

“Most probably tomorrow. If I start from here by afternoon, I should reach on time.”

Revati closed her eyes. She cursed herself for having got pregnant for the third time. Why did she take this chance? Is it because of Amar? Or perhaps she was also hoping for a son...?

Asti found her mother all by herself.

She took this opportunity to narrate her tales. Asti was not sure whether her voice would be heard. She knew that when it was a question of life and death, voices would come out even from the underworld, overcoming all obstacles and reach the target audience.

“Ma! Mamma!”

Revati got up quickly. It could not be Bela or Sapana as she had seen them both in their rooms a little while ago. It must be some kind of an illusion.

“Ma!”

Someone was certainly calling, but who could it be?

“It's me, Asti.”

Revati started looking here and there restlessly. She didn't know anyone called Asti. She was hearing this name for the first time.

“I am within you, so don't look for me outside. If you listen carefully, you would know that the voice comes from inside you.”

Revati was surprised. Was it an illusion or a wave of madness?

“I am Asti. Can I talk to you for a while? I mean... I want to tell you some tales, real stories. Would you like to listen to my narratives?”

Revati put her head down. A smooth lock of hair fell on her eyes. She put her hand on her stomach softly, as if putting her hand on Asti’s head.

And Asti started narrating her tale, carefully.

Ma, do you remember your grandmother’s mother and my great-grandmother? Her name was actually Saraswati, but she was called Sarasti. My grandmother said that Sarasti had committed suicide. Today, I am going to narrate the events that occurred on the day of her suicide.

In the village of Umreth, in one of the houses, there were three rooms built in the backyard under a common roof. The roof was designed with a gap between it and the walls, allowing anyone to move from one room to another using a ladder. Sarasti locked the rooms from outside and hid the keys beneath the *tulsi* plant before arranging a ladder against the wall and stepping onto a wooden stand inside the room. After climbing the wall, she kicked the ladder with her foot. She had already prepared a tin of kerosene. The time for the act had been decided – it was noon.

At 12 noon during summer, everybody would be resting inside their houses. She lit the lamp in front of the altar of God. Indeed, everything was done according to the scheduled time. Can you hear me...?

Revati was deep in thought, struggling to remember how her grandmother had died. Now, she was trying to recall the details of her great grandmother’s death! It was truly confusing for her. When her grandmother passed away, her grandfather

was in Banaras. He had left home and had been staying there for the past year. Revati was quite naive then, and when she asked about the reason, she was scolded. After that, she stopped asking questions. People seldom bother to explain things to little children. She tried to understand what she could, but the rest kept swirling in her mind – the whole picture was very blurry, but she couldn't forget the event altogether. Asti paused when she noticed her mother wasn't paying attention to her story. She wondered – was the story not interesting enough? Maybe her choice of the first story wasn't right. The story should be told in a way that her mother would be completely immersed in it, unable to lose focus for even a moment. Recalling all the loose ends, Asti tried to bring her mother back to the present.

Asti asked, “Ma, are you sad? What happened?”

Revati tried to relax her tensed face. She could not afford to let go of this gripping tale of her great-grandmother.

So should I proceed...? Thus, my great grandmother slowly descended from the wooden stand to the floor. She stood still, trying to recall all her ancestors, but it was in vain. Whom should she remember? Her husband, who died at the age of forty or forty-two, leaving her behind, or her son, who died at the tender age of fifteen due to some illness, or her daughter, who led the life of a widow even though her husband was very much alive? There were no photographs on the wall to trigger memories for her. These rooms had been built to generate some income through rentals but had remained unused so far.

Revati remembered the three rooms. She liked them because they faced the backyard of the house, where there was a neem tree and one of its branches nearly touched the rooms. She thought to herself – Asti was giving too many unnecessary details. She should get straight to the point.

She said in a tone of complaint to Asti, “You are absorbed in such minute details that the story cannot proceed further.”

Asti was aware that she was dwelling too much on details, but an atmosphere needed to be created to reach the real point. Such stories about someone’s life and death could not be told quickly or in a straightforward manner.

Asti agreed to take the story further quickly. Her great-grandmother Sarasti stood with a matchstick in her hand. It was afternoon, so there was hardly any commotion. The sound of the door latch closing seemed to come from a distant place. Footsteps of children playing outside on the muddy roads could be heard. At other times, the children used to knock on the door and run away. When Sarasti opened the door, leaving her work behind, and found no one outside, she would scold them: the mothers were terrible for leaving their notorious children outside. They should be locked inside the house... And the naughty kids used to enjoy these scenes.

Sarasti, while holding a matchstick in her hand, thought: what if someone knocked on the door? She would not come out of the room at any cost. She had locked the door from outside; otherwise, if someone knocked, the neighbours would call her name and it would create a scene unnecessarily. She had kept the leftover food on the porch for the cows. She had not bothered to cook anything that day. But considering the fact that it was not proper to die on an empty stomach, as the soul would suffer from unfulfilled desires, she had eaten half a roti with a cup of tea. Earlier, she had thought of making a flour pancake by adding salt, turmeric, green chillies, garlic, sugar, and sour curd, so that she would have a tasty and satisfying meal. But she discarded the idea as she did not want to take so much trouble. What was the need of satisfying her taste buds at a moment when life itself was about to end?

Revati thought to herself, “How could great granny possibly eat at the verge of death? Had she been in her place, she would

never have been able to eat. Sarasti must have been a strong woman.”

“What happened then?”

Then she lit a matchstick and kept staring at it, but the match went out. As soon as she struck another match, she heard the loud sound of vessels falling in the kitchen. Out of sheer habit, she wanted to rush to the scene but restrained herself, thinking it might be that wretched cat or a rat. It is very difficult to break a habit. Soon, she managed to relax and think that it was unnecessary to worry about such petty matters when death was so near. She tried to detach herself from mundane daily concerns, believing that whoever came after her would take care of such everyday affairs.

The next person to succeed her would clearly be Revati's grandmother. When she thought of her daughter, Sarasti's eyes filled with tears. Poor Narbada! She wished to leave this house to her daughter so that it might serve as some support, as her in-laws and husband were useless. Her husband was completely inept and had a bad temper to boot. She feared she would die, but if the fire unexpectedly spread, the entire house could be destroyed. The lanes were so narrow that even the fire brigade might struggle to reach in time. There was also the risk of the fire spreading to the neighbouring house where Shivganga lived. She was a kind lady who had never caused trouble, so why should she be harmed? If her house caught fire, it would create serious problems for her.

Revati grew restless. If someone wished to commit suicide, there was no need to overthink; they should do it immediately. Yet, it remained a fact that Sarasti had taken her own life by setting herself on fire. Revati placed her hand on her stomach as if trying to remind Asti about the rest of the story: What did Sarasti do in the end?

Asti reassured her that she would tell her the rest of the story. Sarasti lit the eleventh matchstick. She didn't have the courage to douse herself in kerosene, so the eleventh stick was also wasted. She now thought that the courtyard would have been a better place to set herself ablaze so there would be less harm to the house. But now it was too late. It was 12:30 noon. The great grandmother then drenched herself with kerosene, imagining it was rose water. She forcefully pushed all thoughts from her mind, as if plucking bed bugs from a mattress. She lit the twelfth matchstick and set her pallu on fire. The clothes already soaked with kerosene caught fire instantly. She felt an intense burning sensation on her body and wanted to throw herself into the water tank. Smoke began to escape from the cracks of the closed door. A guest at Shivganga's house, standing outside, saw the smoke billowing out. The streets surrounding the house were filled with chaos; people ran here and there in panic—someone rushing to call the fire brigade and another trying to inform others. It was almost a stampede through the narrow lanes. Later, everything became quiet; the door was broken open, and the charred body of Sarasti was carried out.

Revati, in her imagination, saw her great granny being burnt to death all alone. Did her granny get the news immediately or after a while? When would the train have reached such a remote village? There were no transportation facilities like today during those days. Only God can tell what her granny must have felt when she looked at the charred body of her mother.

Revati inquired, "Asti, when did granny reach there?"

She arrived there late in the afternoon, alone. Her husband did not accompany her. All the distant relatives came one by one. Readings from the Bhagavad Gita were held in the house, as it was a common belief that the soul might return to haunt the house. The police arrived as it was a case of suicide. The

charred body was taken for a post-mortem. All the neighbours had come during the Gitapath. Bhajans were sung so that Sarasti's soul could rest in peace. The granny returned to her in-laws' place. Sarasti's house remained uninhabited, so street dogs, pigeons, and crows inhabited it. The house became known as a haunted place. People talked about having seen fire, some even reported hearing sounds of falling vessels and someone falling into the water tank. After neighbour Shivganga's death, the entire area became deserted. Asti asked her mother when she last visited the house, especially after marriage.

Revati had no direct answer to Asti's simple, straightforward questions. She must have seen the house once or twice, but she didn't remember exactly when. She couldn't find much material for further narration in the story, which perhaps was why Asti had fallen silent. Suddenly, at this moment, Asti asked Revati, "Do you know, Ma, why the great granny committed suicide?"

Revati answered: How would you possibly know when nobody has any clue about great granny's suicide?

Asti said, "I know the answer but won't tell you today. I shall continue tomorrow. I can't speak any more as I am too tired. So much for today... I am only a foetus of three months, so I cannot exert myself. I hope you agree with this."

Revati, though curious, did not insist and let her go. She closed her eyes and lay down in a half-inclined position with the help of a pillow.

In a trance-like state, between sleep and waking, she heard someone say, "Arrey! It seems Ravati has fallen asleep while leaning against the pillow. She should lie down properly; otherwise, she would suffer from back ache."

After the visitor left the room, Revati closed the door. From outside the room, she could hear whispered discussions about her abortion:

“What have they decided?” someone asked with a gesture of the hand.

“Don’t know,” came the instant reply, also in gesture.

“We have told Amar that they already have two daughters but could go in for a third one if they so desired. It is their problem. We don’t want to interfere.” Hushed voices reached Revati through closed doors.

In her dreams, Revati saw her great grandmother holding a matchstick. She also visualised the abandoned house. After her great grandmother’s death, her grandmother didn’t have the courage to revisit that house.

In the morning, when Revati opened her eyes, she was in a trance-like state. She thought of Asti first. Did she really talk to Asti during the night or was it a figment of her imagination? She vividly remembered the details of the story narrated by Asti. She was impatiently looking forward to the concluding part of the story to be narrated by her. She had to spend the entire day in anticipation of the story's completion.

The Ratrani vine was in full bloom near the window, spreading its fragrance around. The branches, laden with tender buds, touched the ground effortlessly. As Revati entered the room, she could smell the fresh scent of flowers. She couldn’t call Asti, so she decided to wait for her to speak. Why did Sarasti decide to commit suicide by setting fire to herself? How did Asti know this? Amar had called in the morning and was asking about her health. She was perfectly fine, but her condition might worsen after the abortion.

Ma! Are you tired? I was watching you working tirelessly today. Why do you spend so much time in the kitchen? Don't you guys have any other work besides cooking and eating?

"This is nothing Asti. Amar's father - your grandfather - was very fussy about food. For example, cardamom was to be pounded in a particular manner, the right amount of *kesar* should be used in certain food and sugar syrup should be of a particular consistency, ginger-garlic was also to be used in right proportion - he had such specifications and would refuse to compromise. But leave aside all these things and tell me : Why did great granny commit suicide. I was thinking of all these things the whole night."

"Mummy! Do you know how old was Sarasti when she committed suicide? Any clue?"

Revati was confused because she did not know at what age her great-granny had passed away. Although her grandmother was born through that lady, and her mother was born through her grandmother, she still knew nothing about the woman who burnt herself, including her cause or her age. She only learned her name quite late.

Look, Asti! Nobody used to keep track of birth dates in those days. People would guess and believe. Even the great granny wouldn't be sure of her exact age.

I know, Ma. Sarasti was forty-two at that time. She used to live in a small village as a widow, doing odd jobs, or sometimes she would visit temples or attend satsang. Her son had passed away, and her daughter was with her in-laws. She had brothers, but they were completely useless and did nothing worthwhile for her. Once, a businessman who was involved in selling bed sheets and other knick-knacks visited the village. He was only going to stay there briefly, so, on someone's suggestion, he rented a room in the backyard of Sarasti's house. He didn't like the room, but he got to know Sarasti better.

Whenever he had free time, he would come to the satsang. Being a devotee of Goddess Amba, he visited the temple daily and communicated with her regularly. Sometimes, he would also come home. During festivals, she would prepare good food for him, thinking he was all alone without anyone to look after him.

Revati suddenly straightened up. She could sense a burst in Asti's narration and realised in which direction the narrative was heading. Her mind refused to accept such details. The great-grandmother was not interested in family life. She was not foolish enough to get so closely attached to a stranger. What would Asti know of such things? No, one could not believe it; it's not true, only predictions.

Asti quickly realised what Revati was thinking and said: Don't be surprised, mother! We are not here to decide whether what I say is right or wrong. But it is a fact that Sarasti could not bear the burden of pregnancy. That man was not bad. He was prepared to take the responsibility, but the great-grandmother was in a dilemma. She thought that if she eloped with the man, it would add to her daughter's miseries. Her life was already miserable. If this unpredictable event occurred, her daughter would have to endure torture, and people would not spare her. Sarasti was frightened: she did not have anyone to care for, but she was tense about how she would reveal her truth to the villagers. She lost her courage and regretted the circumstances leading to her pregnancy. She cursed herself, hated her body, which she saw as the dwelling of evil. Once, she tried to burn parts of her body. At that moment, she thought to herself, wasn't it better if she set herself aflame and died? Once she turned to ashes, all her suffering would end.

Revati was surprised and said that she had heard people say that Sarasti was a true devotee of God and had become averse to family life, wishing to renounce, which led her to set herself ablaze. Social and family life was a source of distress to her.

Asti commented that it was true family life was agonising for her, not because of her devotion to God. What we see or hear may not always be true. For example, if Revati were to undergo an abortion, what could she tell people? Could she openly confess that she did not want a daughter and therefore had an abortion? Perhaps she would say the child was disabled, which was why she made that decision.

Revati was stunned at the comments of the foetus and questioned her about what she would have done had she been in her place.

Asti replied: I would have taken the risk of giving birth to the gild child even if it was the third one. Even though her mother was greedy for a son, nature had a different plan, so Asti came into her womb, but was it her fault? You should tell everyone: It is my daughter, I want to keep her. Nobody has any right over her, not even her father. Only the mother has the right over the child.

Revati said: "Not even of her father?"

Asti: No, you nurture me, so I am yours. Only the one who nurtures the foetus has the right over it. Will you do it?

Revati: I don't know. Beta, I have been put into fix from all sides.

Asti thought to herself that her mother was a soft-hearted person unable to decide on her own. But would you like to live, Asti? Asti was confusing herself by asking such critical questions. In front of her, Revati was sitting on the bed, touching the wings of the flying bird printed on the bed sheet. She thought to herself that Asti did not know anything about the mindset of people here. She did not know anything about the critical situation Revati had been facing. She did not want to get pregnant for the third time, but Amar had been quite hopeful. It was a mistake, a terrible mistake, and she alone had to bear the consequences. Asti's wounded body parts would

flow away from her womb, and she only had to bear the pain. Who else would bother? The abortion was quite simple, and then it would be over. Again she would be back to normalcy and felt cleansed.

Revati inquired: But later did the real reason for Sarasti's suicide reach grandma?

It did reach. It started a real fire in the grandmother's in-laws' house. The entire house was burning, and smoke filled the air. Grandmother would cry continuously and listen to the taunts. Who would she fight against? The doctor alone discovered the fact during the post-mortem, but he was also human. He might have mentioned it to someone, and thus the news spread. In that small village, such exciting incidents were a rare spectacle, so everyone enjoyed the show. People were shameless, as they always dragged Sarasti into situations and used her as an example even in petty matters. The granny had nearly gone mad out of shame.

Revati: It is not Granny's fault. She should have answered back once courageously instead of bearing with it..

Asti: Ma, don't get upset. It's a simple thing – people try to spit fire with harsh words at you, and you get burnt! But granny was suffering from a greater pain than this, and you have no idea about it. No one knows anything about it, not even your mother.

Revati: How can granny be unhappy? She was married into a well-to-do family. My mother used to say, 'Grandmother had a wonderful wedding.' She was given a lot of jewellery and clothes, along with plenty of silverware. People praised the taste and quality of her wedding feast for a long time. What sorrow could she possibly have? She was treated like a queen in her house, where she would always walk on a soft carpet.

Asti: The wealthy family only appeared in public during weddings. But no one knew what granny had endured behind closed doors. Did anyone know how to read faces within the family? Granny's father-in-law was an excellent palmist, capable of predicting the future accurately from the lines on the palm but unable to read the sorrow behind a woman's eyes. People would notice if you told them, but granny tended to speak less. Her condition was such, especially after the death of the great-grandmother, that she learned to find solace in silence.

Revati: Will you first tell me about her sorrow, quickly?

Asti: The reason for her sorrow was the grandfather himself.

Revati: Grandfather? Don't tell me this. He was such a noble man, very kind and humble. I have seen him. I don't remember my granny, but I certainly recall staying with my grandfather for a few days. He could never hurt anyone. He was a very kind being, full of compassion.

Asti: You can't judge a book by its cover, Ma! Do you agree that grandfather might not behave the same way with granny as he does with you? He was a good person but quite inquisitive and impatient, and granny was a lively lady. She could enjoy life to the fullest and was very sweet by nature. Everyone used to respect her – the milkman, the vegetable vendor, and the shopkeeper. She was quite clever and able to understand her husband's attitude. She was very conscious of her behaviour, but how could she be aware of it twenty-four hours a day? Grandfather used to question her on every matter, like why was there a need to take extra care of that particular guest, why did she keep smiling while serving food to him, you need not buy anything from that shop as the shopkeeper was not trustworthy, not to allow a certain person into the house as he behaved as if he had never seen a woman, why did she loiter here and there all day, didn't she have any work at home? This

was the real face of the grandfather. He was restless himself and would not let his wife be at peace.

Revati was taken aback. She thought to herself: How strange the grandfather actually was! But when and how did Asti find out about this? I can ask her: 'How did you come to know about this, Asti?' I cannot believe any of this. It seems you have made up a story!

Asti: It is a story, but a true one. It has no magic element. It is simply a fact. I know everything because I am like a clear pond without any ripples. As such, I have nothing to do with events happening outside. I understand why I am still alive! I heard what Foiba said. The day for pest control had already been decided, but Foiba opposed any kind of killing because of the puja in the factory. The factory will be expanded, papa has many business schemes in mind that will bring a lot of profit. If killing is forbidden, then abortion is also a form of killing – your logic, am I right? The killing has been postponed for a while due to the puja. But how many days are left for the puja? Afterwards, what will you do, Mamma? One day, someone will tell you to visit the doctor's clinic. Will you go there or not? What is going to happen?

Amar's arrival was delayed because the necessary items for the factory did not arrive on time. There was a formal inauguration of the factory along with the puja, and a party was also organised. Everything had to be done properly. Amar would now arrive only a day before the puja. Revati could relax thanks to Asti's company, her stories, and an unusual but wonderful event happening in her life called 'Asti'.

What would happen if it's too late? Won't the doctor deny?

Nothing could be hidden from the elder sister-in-law. She was the one who said, while discussing the abortion, that you should do it if you want to and not cause a fuss. Only nine days remained until the puja, and they were passing quickly. A day is just a day – only twenty-four hours – and then it's over. You can't extend it, multiply it, or deduct it.

Revati thought to herself that Bela was seven years old and Sapana was ten. Both were very obedient and rarely bothered anyone. It was difficult for Revati to justify why she was pregnant for the third time. Amar wanted a boy because he believed that a boy could complete the family. His friend sometimes visited them with his son, and Amar often played with him, taking him out for rides. Amar felt very happy when he saw the naughty boys playing, laughing, and running around. He wanted a son so that he could take pride in being a father. Daughters could also be considered, at least you wouldn't be seen as childless, but you couldn't take pride in them. Everything seemed incomplete and uninteresting without a son. It was Amar's dream, which he had nurtured with great excitement, to see his son reach the peak of success, to befriend him, and to enjoy some manly talk over drinks.

So he decided to try his luck. His only idea about sex determination came unexpectedly; otherwise, he was mainly concerned with legal and illegal matters. Only God knew where he had got this idea from, and he inquired about where the sex determination test could be conducted. When he discovered it was a girl, he felt a deep regret. Revati thought: Had Asti already known about this? She could not imagine what kind of relationship Asti would have with such a father who regretted her very existence. Revati did not even want to think about it. Amar said: "It was a big mistake." His tone clearly carried a hint of accusation towards Revati, as if she was responsible for everything. And if it was a mistake, then it must be accepted. Still, when Amar suggested the idea of abortion, Revati did not oppose much. Was it because she did not want

to bear the burden of a child again for nine months? Or the fear of unbearable labour pains? Or the hesitation of spending the next five years raising a child? She thought: What if Asti finds out about her dilemma?

Today, the flowers bloomed for the first time on the Nag Champa plant. Their fragrance was very delicate. The scent of the ripe fruits had spread everywhere. Revati went and sat very close to the plant. The whole house was filled with noise and activity due to the big occasion of the puja. A terrible event was to follow. What Asti had said could not be shared with Amar. She wouldn't be surprised if Amar declared that a foetus would not know so much and it might be dangerous to give birth to such an unusual child. Amar had always been like this – cautious of the unknown. He preferred familiar paths, familiar surroundings, safe investments, and careful, planned decisions. What would Bela do if she became a doctor? Did Sapana know how much hard work it took to become an architect before she decided to pursue it? A daughter should study as much as needed and then be married off. Amar had no time to watch girls reaching new heights of success and shining brightly in various professions. For him, everything was linked to the share market – his business, shares, phone, and computer; the market's fluctuations; profits and losses; and the origins and destructions of the world.

He won't be able to cope with Asti. He would be furious if even the mention of the incident involving Asti arose. He would take Revati to his trusted psychiatrist, who might conclude that Revati has been psychologically affected by the stress of the abortion. How could they risk a pregnancy under such conditions? It is not wise to have a child at this moment. They are already blessed with two brilliant daughters! Moreover, it is not appropriate to expand the family for the sake of our nation...

Revati struggled to hear Asti's slow, soothing voice amid the hustle and bustle of the event. She had no one to share the exciting news that she carried a sensitive being inside her, with whom she could converse. She often touched her belly to ensure Asti was okay. She thought:

What if I wanted to call her?

And what would happen if one day she suddenly stopped talking altogether?

She panicked and stumbled due to giddiness. She had to hold a chair nearby and sit on it immediately.

Someone said: Are you tired? How often have we been told not to take unnecessary stress? But you people these days don't listen to the advice of elders.

Someone else replied: She is not exhausted due to the burden of work. There is another reason for this.

To avoid any further blunder, the person sitting beside her elbowed her to signal her to keep mum. There were many tasks to be completed without letting the world know, or else one might have to endure the taunts of others. Meanwhile, Foiba entered the room, saying: Revati! How could you manage this event if you get tired every now and then? Two more families are arriving tomorrow.

Who is going to come?

Mohan, Dasbhai's son, with family? And Dayaben is also arriving along with her daughters.

Please decide in advance where they should be accommodated – here or at the factory's guest house. Ensure there won't be any problems at the last minute.

Have you decided on the menu?

Please ask Foiba. She has an entire army of helpers.

Please check whether there are enough mattresses.

I have checked it all. There is nothing to worry about.

Revati heard a slow voice. Everyone around could see her sitting on a chair, but she was not truly present. She had gone inside her own womb, lying beside Asti and embracing her, wondering which story you would be telling now, Asti?

Revati's in-laws' ancestral house had been vacant for many years. No one had lived there, nor did the family see the need to sell it. All the furniture collected by the great-great-grandfathers was still inside. The children built new houses and chose their own interior and furniture, so no one liked the old-fashioned items like the marble table, two large armchairs that could easily seat any stout person, and a royal bed with heavy feet. You could easily get a good price for such antique furniture, but no one had the time to deal with it.

A large, sturdy wooden staircase was situated on the right-hand side of the living room. It hardly moved or creaked, even when Motakaki, who was quite heavily built, tried to climb it. The stairs had strips painted on them – yellow in the middle and red on the sides – giving the impression of a carpet laid down. Motakaki, who enjoyed painting, had painted these stairs. For his own pleasure, he had framed pictures of Radha-Krishna and Raas-Leela on the living room walls, which still hung there. Over time, however, the paintings had become strained by dust, and only upon close inspection could one see Lord Krishna, who looked somewhat feminine, playing the flute. The hands of Radha and the Gopis appeared quite strong, seeming more suited for some labour than for playing dandiya. If one could overlook such minor flaws, the paintings still deserve appreciation.

On the wall opposite the painting, there was a chain of photographs hung on nails. All the ancestors who had ever

stayed in this house or even those who could not stay were all seen in the photos along with their wives. The photo next to Revati's father-in-law was that of Dasbhai and Parvatimasi. Dasbhai was Revati's father-in-law's cousin, but he was dearer to him than his own brother. They got along well. Dasbhai had participated in the freedom struggle. He used to work in a firm, and the day he found out that the firm was British, he resigned from his job. Parvatimasi was skilled in performing all social customs. She used to look at her husband with a look of surprise, often teasing him by saying: "Dasbhai is Dasbhai." The day he realised that the whole world had become English, he would not hesitate for a moment to...

The sentence never used to be complete as the person listening would start laughing out loud, but Dasbhai used to get serious on such occasions.

Dasbhai decided to practise celibacy under Gandhiji's influence. He did not have the opportunity to consult Parvatimasi about this matter. The vow had been taken even before their marriage. Parvatimasi was very fond of children, but her affection gradually waned over time. Later in life, she would become very furious with Dasbhai for depriving her of the joy of motherhood. She kept her distance from him. They rarely spoke to each other. But one rainy day, Parvatimasi's life changed forever.

Asti thought to tell the tale of Parvatimasi.

She asked Revati: Do you remember Dasbhai and Parvatimasi?

Revati replied: Of course, I do. Their photograph is in the old house. Dasbhai was standing upright in the photo, wearing a khadi cap and waistcoat, while Parvatimasi was looking at him with a quizzical expression. Masi used to become quite sensitive about matters concerning children when the elders taunted her for being barren.

Asti: How could anyone know why Parvatimasi was childless? But I want to tell you a different tale. That monsoon season, it had rained heavily – like cats and dogs. The sun was hidden for many days. The land became soft and muddy. The air was humid and excessively chilly because of the rain. One evening, it poured down very heavily. Parvatimasi went to the kitchen for a moment when she heard a voice coming from the back door. At first, she thought a child was crying, but upon listening carefully, she realised it was a cat. She quickly opened the door. The cat, soaked through and very frightened, was trying to seek shelter near the door, with a ball in her mouth. The cat was milk white with a golden brown stripe on her forehead. Parvatimasi felt pity for her and took her inside, holding her gently to her bosom. She affectionately named her Godavari. If Parvati had a daughter, she would have named her Godavari too. Godavari grew very attached to Parvatimasi, as if she had known her for ages. Parvatimasi took out a silver plate, a wedding gift, to serve milk to the cat. She used to feed her milk, roti smeared with ghee, butter, and cream. Over time, Godavari became healthier, stronger, and more beautiful.

While sitting on Parvati's lap, Godavari used to look at her endearingly, as if gazing at her own mother. When she became more emotional, she would give a peck on her cheek. Godavari never disturbed the house; she used the backyard for urinating and defecating and later covered it with dust. She could not tolerate even the faintest foul smell and carefully licked her paw to ensure there was no dust on it.

Parvatimasi praised Godavari whenever she got an opportunity: "She is surprisingly neat and clean!" The neighbours used to mock her, but at the same time, they also sympathised with her by saying: "She has no kids of her own, so she showered her affection towards a pet. It is a kind of madness. The same thing one finds in the mythical story of Bharatmuni."

All these taunts, however, had no effect on Parvati. Godavari had almost become an inseparable part of her entire existence. She never used to let Godavari go away from her. Dasbhai had become quite impatient with his wife's obsession and often said that it was a nocturnal creature, meant for roaming about in the wild, with hunter instincts. Not meant to be confined within the four walls of the house. Parvatimasi ignored him. She would put the cat on her lap, pat her affectionately, and say: "Who will understand the depth of the relationship between a mother and a daughter? Only they two can understand their love and affection." Those well-versed in animal nature knew that the cat would not stay in the house for long. One day she would go away. So why give her so much love and affection?

But Godavari stayed with Parvatimasi for two years and proved everyone wrong. Then suddenly, one day, she disappeared. Parvatimasi became anxious and restless, looking for her here and there with impatience. Godavari had never done this before. She desperately called out her name and searched everywhere. She thought that perhaps some dog had attacked her and she had run away, but she should have returned by night or at the latest by morning. Maybe she was hungry. Where would she be without food and water? She asked every passerby if they had seen her, Godavari.

On the third day, when Godavari had not returned, she could neither sleep nor eat. Whenever she picked up any food, she would remember Godavari. She imagined hearing the cat's voice and would run towards the door, hoping for her to arrive. Dasbhai tried to comfort her, but he could not persuade her on this matter. He also felt guilty for being unable to help her in any way. The gap between the husband and wife grew wider. Parvatimasi felt as depressed as if her own young daughter had eloped from the house. She would sigh and think: it was not her fate to have children. Finally, she found solace in the company of a lovely pet like Godavari. But even that was taken away from her. Neighbours would often comfort her, saying

her cat would surely return within a week or ten days, as she would find no one to give her such love and affection. Hearing these words, she sometimes felt a bit consoled. Nonetheless, fear, doubts, and uncertainties haunted her. She refused to accept that Godavari could stay away from her for so long, and tears would often fill her eyes.

After narrating this much, Asti paused as Revati had fallen asleep. She thought that perhaps Revati did not find the tale interesting; she might not have understood the relationship between Godavari and Parvatimasi.

Asti: Mama! Ma! Are you sleeping?

Revati had actually fallen asleep, as was evident from her rhythmic breathing. Asti felt disappointed. What if mother lost interest in her story? Her survival might be at risk. However, Asti was not narrating the stories to extend her life by a night or two, but she wanted to forge a bond with her mother – one that Revati would find difficult to break. She must be able to declare to the world with all her heart that Asti is mine, and I will not let anyone touch her. Asti will live for me, and it is nobody else's concern. Will Revati be able to say this to the world?

Revati asked: 'What happened last night, Asti? Did I fall asleep while listening to your story?'

Asti must adhere to the rule of not leaving any story incomplete. As soon as she found Revati alone, she cleared her voice. Revati felt that Asti was trying to pick up the thread of the previous night's story.

Asti: Perhaps you did not like the story of Godavari and Parvatimasi.

Revati: No, it was not like that. I was a bit upset because, on one hand, a woman can intensely desire a daughter, but on the

other hand, I know of at least three women who have undergone abortion of female foetuses. As I thought about all this, I grew tired and fell asleep.

Asti: Shall I complete the story I started yesterday?

Revati: Yes, we had reached a point where Godavari was missing.

After ten days of the event, while Parvatimasi had been sitting on the porch in a regretful mood, she heard Godavari's mewing. She stood upright and saw Godavari perching on Parvatimasi's feet, a little shy as if asking for forgiveness. Parvatimasi was overwhelmed with joy and forgot the past events. Godavari was back, and nothing else mattered to Parvati.

Happiness returned once again to the household, and Dasbhai felt somewhat relieved. As Parvatimasi was busy with Godavari, there would be peace in the house and he would not have to endure her scoffs. The next day, early in the morning, a handsome male cat arrived with Godavari. Parvatimasi was very pleased that Godavari had found a good match. While tending to the two cats, Parvatimasi was imagining a happy future for Godavari.

Godavari was about to give birth to kittens. She was fed a nutritious diet. She still used to sit on Parvatimasi's lap, and Parvati spoke to her while stroking her soft fur. As if Godavari understood everything and slowly responded. Seeing Godavari's protruding tummy, Parvati was filled with anxiety and prayed for her day and night.

Parvatimasi made all the preparations for Godavari's delivery, placing a soft bed for her so that she could give birth to the kittens without any difficulty. However, Godavari chose her own place and delivered on an empty drum. All three kittens resembled their mother—completely white, some with black spots, and others with saffron spots that enhanced their beauty.

The house came alive with the presence of the mother cat and her three kittens. As they grew a little older, Parvatimasi's whole day was spent watching their pranks and play. She had never before seen a cat's family so closely, and she was captivated by their tiny movements and the variety in their sounds, which she had never noticed before. Sometimes, Godavari would climb onto Parvatimasi's bed with her kittens and sleep peacefully there. Parvatimasi never removed any of them. She had never imagined that her life could be so fulfilling simply because of Godavari. If she had known this earlier, she would never have regretted being childless.

As the kittens grew older, their mischief increased. The household would be quite noisy. Dasbhai did not like it much but tolerated it because it kept Parvati happy. Dasbhai was unhappy with the commotion in the house at this age. He never allowed Godavari to come near him. Parvatimasi had given the kittens their names, and when she called them, anyone would think they were her children.

When the kittens were able to hunt, Godavari taught them the tricks of hunting. Their first kills were cockroaches and lizards. Later, they hunted sparrows and squirrels outside. Parvatimasi did not like this but she tried to justify that their food habits had been determined by the Creator, so who were they to interfere? But Dasbhai did not approve of all this because of his belief in non-violence. He first indicated it through some gestures and later verbally: "I also have to stay in this house. I don't like all these killings. Either they stop all this or leave the house." Initially, he protested and then gave an ultimatum: if no decision was made within a specified time, he would go on hunger strike.

Parvatimasi was in a dilemma; on one hand, she loved Godavari, and on the other hand, she was aware of her duties towards Dasbhai. As such, she hardly had any affection for him. However, the house belonged to him, and it was not

justified to throw him out. Similarly, it was also impossible to dispossess Godavari from the house. Godavari was not alone; she also had the kittens to care for. Where would she seek shelter? This caused so much disruption in the household that mistakes often occurred, such as milk overflowing while boiling or vegetables and rotis getting burnt. So Parvatimasi decided to solve the problem by keeping the doors and windows closed so that Godavari and the kittens could not enter. Parvati kept their food and bed on the porch, but the cat always tried to enter the house, as she was used to staying inside. Godavari was unhappy and would sit outside, wailing. Parvatimasi was often tempted to open the windows and let the cat in but resisted when she remembered her husband's angry face and tight lips. To persuade Dasbhai, Parvatimasi even mentioned that Gandhiji was also fond of cats.

The struggle continued for quite some time. Once, when a kitten entered through an open window, Dasbhai beat it with a stick and threw it outside the door. Two street dogs sitting under a tree attacked the kitten and dragged it away. Parvatimasi saw this pitiable sight with her own eyes while she was folding clothes. She felt a deep pain inside and wanted to give her husband a tight slap. Godavari's mewling to call her kitten caused her much agony.

Revati thought, "It was too much!" Dasbhai was quite weirdo!

Revati was very upset after hearing her story. Asti took a deep breath and continued with the concluding part. Parvatimasi was so distressed by this incident that she became mentally troubled. Dasbhai decided to admit her to a mental asylum.

Revati asked: Didn't Dasbhai take care of Parvati? Isn't she a part of his responsibilities?

The last information was unbearable for Ravati when Asti told her:

Dasbhai was not capable of taking responsibility for his wife; he was only suitable for participating in the freedom struggle.

For the next few days, a lot of discussion went on in the household regarding the abortion.

“The abortion must be done soon after the *puja* is over. A lot of complications can come up if there is a delay.”

“Amar must be convinced that he should stop hoping for a boy now. Whatever is destined will happen. He must educate the girls and get them married to suitable grooms.”

“Nowadays, it is very difficult to find suitable grooms.”

“It is true. You must have heard of that Minister’s son who was a drug addict, and so his wife had asked for a divorce. It is said that his wedding was celebrated with a lot of pomp and show. Almost half of Mumbai city was invited to the wedding.”

“Getting daughters married is an expensive affair, but it doesn’t end there, as later on you are supposed to give gifts on different occasions.”

Revati had heard the conversation on the balcony, but she pretended to overhear it. She had developed this new habit over the past few days with considerable effort. Revati thought to herself that Amar could be here any day. The *puja* was to be performed at the factory on Sunday, and there were three days left until then. After that... killing any being after the *puja* was probably alright, I suppose? Or perhaps if I protest and let the girl child live, stopping this abortion and still bringing up a daughter in this house would take ten years of labour, just like performing *panchagni tap*, especially when the girl was unwanted.

And even if there were no other pressures and it was her sole decision, was she ready for the third daughter?

Many doubts and uncertainties crowded Revati's mind. For the past few days, a tussle had been going on within her mind as she was torn between her emotional and practical self. She remembered the pain and discomfort she endured during the birth of her first daughter, Sapana. When she conceived her second child, the discomfort persisted – she was filled with nausea, and nothing remained in her stomach. During her labour, she endured a lot of pain; only those who have experienced it can truly understand. Not every woman wishes to endure this pain. Her own twin sister, Kaveri, chose a husband who did not want to follow the usual path of parenthood. She made it clear she would not bear the burden of childbirth, nor was she willing to carry a child for nine months. The children were a liability, and when one cannot care for oneself, how can one care for a child? They were both happy, and she felt she had unnecessarily taken on this burden.

Whatever it was, Asti was quite different. Revati had not seen her, but still, Asti was very close to her heart. If she encountered Asti, she would certainly recognise her. She could identify Asti even among millions of daughters. Asti would not be unhappy or cry after birth but would be happy, as if she was among familiar faces. She would hold her mother's hand with her soft, dainty hands. Perhaps by that time, circumstances would be more favourable. Asti would be a great support, so was it fair to willingly get rid of such a graceful blessing?

Revati sat with her lips pressed tightly together. She considered informing Foiba that she had conceived a female child and intended to give birth to her. She believed it was Asti's right to be born. She felt she had no right to prevent Asti from coming into the world. Foiba would surely support her, as she had never supported any act of killing. Once she secured Foiba's strong support, there would be no one to stop Asti from entering the earth.

Again, her practical sense overpowered her emotions – was she ready to sacrifice eight to ten years of her life for rearing up Asti?

Asti to Revati: You might not remember, but during the construction of the factory, a large settlement of labourers was established. The contractor built this settlement near the site for convenience. Some labourers were from Panchmahal, others from Nasik. One of them was Sukhram, who had come from Nasik. He was quite lean and excessively tall, with dishevelled hair mixed with grey strands. His lips had become black with bidi stains, and he spoke a dialect that was a mixture of colloquial Gujarati and Marathi. He was a stubborn man. However, his wife was a cultured lady; she appeared quite graceful, unlike a typical woman of labour class. Her beauty was such that when she wore a nine-yard sari and a large nose ring, one could not take one's eyes off her. It was hard to understand how such a lady married this rustic, rigid man. Was there a shortage of grooms?

The couple had a large family of five children – four boys and one girl. The girl was quite delicate as well as intelligent. The four boys would loiter around here and there without any worries. Sukhram worked as a labourer; he would take his wife with him if there was extra work to earn some additional wages. While at the kholi, his wife had her hands full; she was busy washing clothes, caring for the children, cooking, cleaning grains, going to the market, and so on. Their daughter Sunita was very hardworking. She was barely fifteen or sixteen years old, but she was sensible enough to understand the state of her household. The father would come home drunk once or twice a week and cause a ruckus; otherwise, he was a decent fellow who never gave any cause for complaints. He was not demanding, would eat whatever was served, and came home on time. Overall, he was not a bad guy.

The wife used to soothe herself by thinking that Sukhram did not cause trouble every day. Only when he was drunk, like other drunkards, would he bother her. She could tolerate that much. When he drank, the children would leave the house. The wife was clever enough to take the children away, and once the fuss died down, they would come back and sleep outside the kholi where they had made a temporary bed out of cow dung. Sukhram would lie inside, snoring loudly.

Though Sunita appeared like any other family member, she was quite different in one regard – she harboured lofty dreams. Her feet hardly stayed on the ground.

A short distance from the construction site, there were some bungalows. Jamanaben, the owner of the bungalow named 'Ishkrupa,' often called Sunita for household chores, especially when her maid was off duty. Jamanaben's daughter was of Sunita's age, so she used to give her clothes. Sunita was very clever and honest. Jamanaben was fond of her. Sukhram and his wife did not object to this arrangement. They felt relieved that they did not have to spend money on Sunita's clothes and other things. It was also a source of income for them. Sunita went to Jamanaben's house every day, helping with tasks like chopping vegetables, ironing clothes, fetching things from the market, etc. She also got to watch TV with Jamanaben when she had free time.

Sunita's visit to Jamanaben's house opened her eyes to a different kind of lifestyle, and she understood the difference between struggling to survive and living comfortably. She envisioned a luxurious life where she would sit comfortably under a fan, drinking rose sherbet from a glass with ice cubes, a delightful perfume scent coming from the cupboard the moment she opened it, and a soft bed to sleep on. Sunita realised it well that neither her mother nor her granny knew how to cherish dreams of any kind. She was also greatly influenced by the movies she watched on TV, where girls of her

age went to big hotels elegantly decorated with glass chandeliers, walked on expensive carpets, went to college by car, sat in front of large mirrors to comb their blonde hair, sang, danced, wrote love letters, and received bouquets of red flowers.

In her imagination, Sunita had almost flown out of her *kholi* on the wings of fantasy while Sukhram and his wife had no inkling of this.

It was obvious that her four brothers, who used to hang around aimlessly all the time, could never nurture any dreams. But Sunita was happy because she could entertain such a dream. Her smiling face and stylish gait attracted many people. One of them was the watchman of the bungalow, who had migrated from another state. He was handsome and single.

Sunita, while moving in and out of the bungalow, used to see him and exchange smiles. Sometime later, they started chatting with each other. The watchman, who was an outsider, spoke to her in exaggerated terms about his native place, often blending fact and fiction, and Sunita was highly impressed with his narrative. She used to listen in amazed wonder, never doubting the truth of his stories.

Asti's narrative was flowing in an even tone when suddenly the phone rang and interrupted it. As Revati got up to receive the call, she was wondering in which direction the story was heading.

Yes... then, Sunita became conscious of her appearance and enjoyed looking attractive. She also acquired some cosmetics. Whenever she went out, she always ensured to apply makeup. Whenever the opportunity arose, she would cross paths with that young man and exchange sweet smiles with him. Neither Sukhram nor his wife knew anything about this, as they were busy with their own affairs.

Behind the construction site, there was a barren, uneven patch of land full of wild bushes. For the labourers, it was often used as an open toilet. One side of the land was designated for women, while the other side was used by the men. The trees in between acted like a wall separating the two sides. The land was safe, even at night.

Once in the darkness of dawn, Sunita came out of the kholi with a water jug. Her mother noticed it, but since Sunita was carrying a tumbler, she did not inquire. The mother was so tired that she went back to sleep again. The four sons and the father were in deep sleep, sleeping like wooden planks and snoring loudly. When it was slightly light outside, the wife got up first as part of her daily routine. She did not see Sunita lying next to her and thought she might be outside brushing her teeth. After folding the mattress and bed sheets, she called out for Sunita. She received no answer. Also, she could not find Sunita's blue slippers, which surprised her. She shook Sukhram awake, but it was difficult to explain the situation to someone who had just woken up. First, he couldn't understand why his wife was making such a fuss, thinking that Sunita must have gone to the toilet and had not returned yet. He irritably said she would be back soon. However, he gradually realised the seriousness of the situation. He came out with a wooden stick in his hand, accompanied by some neighbouring labourers, to the open ground. Sukhram thought, with some irritation, that since it was winter and quite dark during the early morning hours, if Sunita wanted to go out so far, she should have woken someone. Thus, abusing Sunita, he would have crossed the bushes, had he not seen Sunita coming from the opposite direction.

Sukhram ran to her upon seeing her crying. There was some inquiry about what had happened and how it occurred. Sunita could not speak clearly as she was quite nervous. Sukhram thought it wise to take her back to the kholi since Sunita was overwhelmed. When they arrived at the kholi, Sunita cried a

lot, hugging her mother. According to her: a man came from behind her, tried to cover her mouth with a piece of cloth. She stood up in bewilderment; the man pushed her forcefully. She ran without knowing the direction and lost her way, heading in the wrong direction. She hid behind a small hill out of fear and due to the darkness, and when it was light enough, she started running towards the house. It was clear that her clothes had been torn by the thorns of the bushes, so there was no doubt that her account was true.

The mother informed everyone that her daughter was safe. She went to the temple and offered a coconut to God for her daughter's safe return. The news of this incident reached Jamnaben in Ishkrupa. All the neighbouring watchmen were instructed to keep a close watch and stay alert in case they saw any strangers wandering around. The handsome watchman who had come from another state asked many questions to Sunita about what the attacker looked like, but she kept repeating that his face was covered with a cloth, so she had no idea at all. There was no point in reporting to the police without any solid proof. Sukhram was, anyway, quite afraid of the police, knowing they might harass him without reason. He believed the attack on Sunita might have been carried out by someone of loose character, so, as if nothing serious had happened, he told everyone to resume their routine.

But after this event, Sukhram kept Sunita under close watch. Even when she went to Jamnaben's house, he inquired about her timings. His wife failed to understand who could suddenly be after her daughter, especially so early in the morning. After a few days of vigilance, everything returned to normal. Sunita's movements became unrestricted. There was no one to supervise her. Her brothers' restless eyes would sometimes notice Sunita alongside the watchman, but they were not particularly interested in such matters. They had no desire to inform Sukhram or their mother. Their lives continued steadily.

Suddenly, there was an explosion one evening when Sunita did not return from Jamnaben's place. Sukhram went out at nightfall to bring her back, thinking she might have been watching a movie and had got delayed. But Jamnaben's house was locked. From a neighbouring bungalow, he learned that she had been out since the afternoon. Sukhram felt dizzy as if his head had been battered. He ran to the kholi. His wife sat inside, holding her head in her hand, as Sunita had taken her clothes and a few silver jewellery pieces. Also, a container holding their savings could not be found.

She told Sukhram, "Please inform the police. There is no use wasting time. If she has run away, she will not stay here for long and will move away by train."

Sukhram reached the police station with his lamenting wife.

The policeman asked them, "Do you have her *photu* - photograph? Any special mark on her body? What colour cloth was she wearing? What is her height? Was she dark skinned or..."

Sukhram grew impatient answering all these questions and thought to himself that his daughter was a simple girl like any other girl. Find her if you can quickly. She might go far away if we waste so much time in inquiry.

All the four boys sat quietly inside the kholi. The eldest elbowed the younger one. They decided to tell their parents everything they knew. After listening to the boys, Sukhram went straight to find that watchman. He learned that the watchman had gone to his native place.

Now things became clear. In such a vast country, there were thousands of girls like Sunita. Where could they look for her? The police were also helpless. There might be unnecessary trouble. They had to visit the police station twice to identify the bodies of girls who had been brutally murdered after rape and their bodies half-burnt. Once, after one such visit, the mother

started crying, thinking that although it was not Sunita, the girl was, after all, someone's daughter.

Thinking that he must inform the police about this watchman, Sukhram began visiting the police station frequently. However, the police dismissed their judgements with remarks like : maybe the watchman was her boyfriend and she ran away with him; there was no point in lamenting. They suggested they would get married, etc. When Sukhram pointed out that Sunita was not of marriageable age, the police responded with statistics about child marriage cases in the country. There were some formalities under the pretext of inquiry, but ultimately nothing came of it and the matter was soon forgotten. Sukhram resumed his work as before. He started drinking again. The mother cooked and served food to everyone in the house. The boys went to school and pretended to study. They had no difficulties because they did not know how to dream. For them, a day's rise and fall, their hunger, and ways to overcome it – such things were enough to sustain life.

Sunita nearly vanished from their lives like a finger lifted from water. Only when her mother's hands suddenly paused in the middle of her work could she see Sunita's smiling face before her eyes.

The eldest boy finished his studies, and they could afford to build a proper room. He got a good job and a TV for their house. The mother, due to old age, started feeling pain in her legs. Sukhram also slowed down and now drinks less.

One day, there was a live telecast of a dance bar in Delhi on the news. A report was given about an incident. The family didn't understand much. But there was a woman dancing on the screen, and her face looked exactly like Sunita's. After confirming twice, the eldest son couldn't help but speak and said loudly, "Hey, is this our Suni?"

Sukhram got up from the corner and slapped him hard.

"How are you, mamma?" Asti's voice spread like the faint aroma of sandalwood incense. Revati thought that today Asti seemed to be in good spirits. With the same light-heartedness, Revati touched Asti's cheek in her imagination and then called her affectionately: "How come I keep thinking about you all day? Now it seems we should talk about ourselves instead of others! Shall we talk about us?" But this story of Sunita really upset me. Was Sunita ever found?

Asti replied, "No, she disappeared as if she never existed. She never tried to contact her family. Her mother always had this feeling that either Sunita might have been sold off to a brothel or had been killed. Otherwise, a daughter like Sunita could never forget her mother entirely, although her father seemed immaterial. So, what exactly had happened to her would never be known. Such mysterious things keep on happening in the matter of girls in this society."

Revati said, "You know so much, even about things others aren't aware of, so can't you find out where Sunita is?"

Asti: I only know the story I had to tell. I hardly know anything beyond it. Anyway, Mother, I don't even know what's going to happen to me. Why don't you say anything?

Revati felt as if her lips had been sealed. She could not understand how to reassure Asti in this matter. The only thing she could do was to change the topic by saying, "Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, your father will arrive." Asti said with hesitation, "It is nice to hear the word 'your father'."

Revati kept on shifting sides in bed, pondering at what inauspicious moment they decided on a sex-determination test. Such thoughts trembled in her heart like an earthquake. She felt an unbearable anxiety and sleep seemed beyond her reach. She

wondered: What had Amar got to do with this situation? He was in Pune, quite at ease, worrying about the factory and the project, working day and night for them. It was he who wished for a son, and that was why they had taken this risk. Revati thought that whenever she needed a little support, Amar was never around, always busy with something that would only bring material gains.

For the first time, Revati found Amar to be a stranger. She wondered if the true relationship between two people had broken down after life seemed to be settled. The monotonous existence continued at a steady pace, like a cart. Someone stepped into it, someone got off, someone fell down, or someone shouted to stop the cart, but it kept moving. She thought she should not have supported Amar in conceiving this time, but otherwise, Amar might have forced her. Such incidents had happened before. After such an event, Revati did not like to look at her face in the mirror the next morning. She hesitated to look into her own eyes. She dared not seek her own identity outside of being a woman who had been insulted, defeated, and physically assaulted against her will. And one could not commit suicide over such matters. One could only do so, like Sarasti, out of fear of society, when a relationship arises from an attraction of two bodies or hearts, and one has conceived as a result.

Revati felt anxious and got up. In her unconscious state, she saw Sarasti throwing a lit matchstick at her sari. The image of the flames and Sarasti's face, marked with the pain of burning, lingered before her eyes. She called out to her foetus with hope: Asti! Asti! Where are you, my child?

The child had seen the true faces of her parents. Asti must have understood her parents' real intentions, as they were all set to rid themselves of her. Being a mother herself, she gave her consent for the abortion. Death would be better than facing this situation, Revati thought.

“Why do you feel guilty, mother?” Asti’s silk-like voice enveloped Revati like a silk thread. “You are not the only one faced with this situation. Don’t you know about female fetuses being left alone in some barren corners, wells, dustbins, etc.? Doesn’t a girl child get abandoned on some heap of rubbish after birth when the abortion did not happen on time? Why do you bother yourself feeling guilty about it?”

Revati got up and splashed cold water on her face.

Asti: Now listen, I need to tell you one last story. After that, my work will be finished. But first, do promise me that you won't be shocked after hearing this story, and you won't feel guilty for too long. I understand you might feel bad about it for a while. It wasn't your fault, and it wasn't in your control. Do you promise?

Revati: I promise.

Asti: Let the *puja* get over first and try to be as happy as possible. Would you be able to do this?

Revati: I will try. Then things will turn as per destiny. Not everything is in my control, nor in yours.

During the period from 1970 to 75, there was a significant increase in abortion cases. Was this due to the rising population or a woman’s right to decide whether to give birth or not? Many places were easily accessible for abortions. Numerous advertisements on this matter could be seen everywhere – behind buses, inside trains, on roadside walls, and in newspapers and magazines- claiming that procedures could be done for just Rs. 500 or 700 without any difficulty. Come and get it done in a matter of minutes. The names and addresses of these clinics were highlighted in the ads, along with phone numbers. You just need to go there, and they will help you get rid of the unwanted pregnancy. You can return home much

relieved and cleansed, without worrying about the unwanted responsibility, much like animals mate happily without concerns.

But human beings were buried under a thousand and one worries. They were answerable to many around them, and they needed to be doubly sure that no stains remained. Meanwhile, the era of easy abortion arrived. If a mistake was made, these people were there to comfort others in their misery. The evidence of what had happened would be erased, and everything would be clean again. There was no need to fear or to overthink.

During this period, the lovelorn romantics felt at ease. Many amateur women, like Sarasti, also felt quite relieved. If their husbands or any lovelorn idlers had forcefully established a physical relationship, they only needed to hire an auto and reach such clinics to terminate the unwanted foetus. There was a heavy flow into these clinics, and initially, no one found anything wrong with these practices. After a while, a realisation set in: this was wrong. It was so easy for people to get rid of their unwanted responsibilities—just spend Rs. 500 to 1000, and it was done, paving the way for an easy game of sexual indulgence. Such a terrible misuse of a womb! Women's groups began an awareness campaign. Many articles were published, and public speeches delivered, but the impact was not as expected. Eventually, it was decided to target these clinics and organise processions there. A plan was devised to secretly attack such clinics, with extensive preparations to ensure its success. The aim was that the procession's impact would halt the entire city. The doctors working in these clinics would be compelled to apologise publicly for their misdeeds. No one should be able to enter these clinics, and those inside should be unable to come out.

Asti's story was directly related to a particular day during that period.

Asti: This story, mamma, is about a big and rapidly growing city. The city was exceptionally wealthy, and there was no custom of bargaining before shopping. You simply placed your hand on the item you liked and bought it without bothering to ask its price. Prosperity was evident everywhere, and its intoxicating effect could be seen in the eyes of the city dwellers. It was a thriving metropolis where people indulged in various pleasures, and anything they desired was easily accessible.

There was a clinic in a densely populated area of this city. A couple had arrived there since early morning. Only the receptionist had arrived, and the cleaner had just started cleaning when this couple entered the clinic. It was quite predictable that they were a married pair from the way they maintained eye contact while talking to each other. If the couple had avoided eye contact while talking, it could have been predicted that they were not married. The couple had already booked their appointment with the doctor, so they looked relaxed. There were expressions of relief on the face of the man. Compared to him, the woman looked a little tense. The husband started reading the newspaper, while the wife started looking at a fashion magazine. An article with pictures about how to decorate children's rooms attracted the wife's attention. The husband was called by the receptionist to ask something. After replying to her, he looked at his watch.

The doctor was expected to arrive shortly. The window was covered with a half curtain attached to a spring. From above and below the curtain, one could see the outer world. During the early morning hours, the entire city seemed to have crowded on the roads. The routine cycle was running continuously without pause. No one had the time to even look at the people around, yet it seemed as if everyone was linked

by a single chain, moving forward together. People were afraid to lose themselves if they got separated from the crowd.

The couple arrived at this decision after much contemplation. A loud debate took place within their inner consciousness: would they have made the same choice if there were twin boys instead of girls? Ultimately, they proceeded because they could not bear the responsibility of a child.

Then you should have been more careful. There are so many contraceptive options available these days. And you live in a city, not in some remote place.

Yes, we would have been careful, but we made a mistake. There was a chance to correct it, so why not seize it? However, it was wrong. You should only seek help for abortion when no other options are available. In your case, it was immaturity, negligence, and a blunder. Why did a twin foetus suffer because of that? It was an absolute offence.

The couple felt ashamed and restless because of these thoughts, and they sat with their heads down. They should have planned it carefully. They were still alert, yet this mistake happened. There were twins—double the responsibility. They could not afford the burden of twins at a time when they were struggling financially and dealing with some family issues. The family income was insufficient, and the wife wanted to find a job since she was educated. The elders in the house were not keeping well, the house needed renovation, and to make matters worse, they had twin girls! They had planned to have children only after five years of marriage, and this was only the second year, yet they were already burdened with twins.

The couple reassured each other with their eyes that whatever they had decided was right. They should not feel ashamed of it, as they were only making use of the available facility. The family must remain small.

The door opened, and a woman entered, immediately drawing everyone's attention. She had painted her lips a bright shade, applied kajal around her eyes, and lightly coloured her cheeks. Her padded blouse, visible beneath her transparent orange sari, evoked a sense of disgust. The couple swiftly averted their gaze from her. The woman approached the receptionist and said something to her. Later, she sat on the edge of a bench, adjusting her pallu, and in the process, almost exposed her upper body.

The wife made a good guess: even such a woman had come for the abortion. She must be a prostitute. She might not have any idea who the child belonged to, so she could not afford it! For a woman like her, it was a straightforward matter. The wife did not want to look at that woman, but she still couldn't help noticing her every movement carefully.

The husband looked out the window and noticed that the road was overcrowded. The crowd appeared to be heading towards the clinic. Traffic had come to a halt. The traffic police were not visible among the many people, but his sharp whistle blows could be heard. The husband thought it might be some kind of procession or a government official visiting a nearby place. At that moment, someone opened the door with a bang and said something to the receptionist, who immediately dialled a phone. Was it a doctor or someone else? In a hurry, she signalled to the couple to stand up. Meanwhile, the protest voices of 'hai hai' echoed into the clinic through the doors and windows. 'Close it from below!', 'Close it' – such loud slogans were heard from outside. The confused receptionist told the couple, "The doctor is not coming today. There is chaos downstairs. You may please leave!"

The husband and wife looked at the receptionist in bewilderment. The receptionist cut short the husband's arguments that they had made an appointment in advance and had confirmed it over the phone this morning, saying: "Do you

know what is happening near the staircase? These people downstairs won't leave so easily. Today, the doctor won't be coming. The procession is so large that it stretches up to the police gate. Please see for yourself from this window!"

The receptionist was right. The entire road was blocked, and everyone was holding banners with slogans: Stop Abortions! Punish the irresponsible! Down with such inhuman killing! Everything was clearly visible, yet the couple was surprised to see the other woman present there, as she was sitting quietly without showing any anxiety to leave. The wife couldn't hold back and, without any obvious reason, started speaking to that woman in Hindi: why don't you follow us out?

That woman smiled and replied in Hindi: No, I won't leave until my pregnancy is confirmed. These people down there will leave in an hour or two. How long will this commotion continue?

The wife was astonished to hear this. The receptionist showed them a way out via a staircase at the back of the building, saying: the exit might seem like a maze. You will need to cross through the property of a private company. Let me show you. You won't have any difficulty. Come, let's get moving, as you won't be able to leave through the front stairs since the protesters have surrounded it.

The wife grabbed her husband's hand. Her heart was pounding rapidly, and she was sweating profusely. One after another, the doors opened. The green curtains were moved aside, revealing a long corridor. The receptionist was guiding them: "Take a left from here. The private company's premises will appear. You can ask the owner, and he will allow you to pass through his property." Then, cross a straight passage and turn right to take the stairs. The stairs might be a bit dirty as they are unused, and it will be dark, so please be careful. The stairs will lead you to the back lane.

The husband wanted to ask when they could come again, but at that moment, such a question would have sounded inappropriate. Both started walking silently. They reached the stairs and descended. They did not even realise whether their hearts were pounding faster or the stairs were trembling beneath their weight.

In the lane, there was a shop selling kids' wear. Many dolls were displayed there, dressed in frilled frocks with their hands weaving and smiles on their pink faces, featuring big blue eyes showing surprise. They did not need to look at these dolls, yet they couldn't help noticing them. Later, they observed an open space across the lane. The 'hai hai' of the protesters still echoed in the air. They couldn't forget that woman's painted face. The wife wondered how 'that woman' could possibly take on all the responsibility by herself! She had no proper place to stay nor any fixed income, yet she was so happy just thinking about a child in her womb! But her life was different, and their lives couldn't be compared with hers. Those people could go to any extent...

The couple sat in a car. They thought it was not too late yet. They would postpone the doctor's appointment to another time. Was the doctor supposed to go anywhere? The wife was thinking differently – was nature trying to give them any hint? As they went to the clinic on a fixed day and protestors arrived on the same day, the doctor couldn't reach the clinic, and they both had to return home without the abortion.

They were not supposed to discuss whether it was a good or bad day with anyone regarding what had happened, as they lived completely alone in the city without their families. The wife, who had grown up hearing a famous proverb 'Whatever happens, happens for good', found what had occurred that day quite meaningful. Meanwhile, the husband was in a hurry to speak to the doctor and book another appointment as soon as

possible. He called the clinic a couple of times and was finally given an answer.

“The doctor is not available for a week.”

“For a week?”

“It might take longer than a week for the doctor to come back. He had to go out of town on some urgent affair.”

“Liars! They will keep the clinic closed for a few days due to this protest. Once everything calms down and the protestors get tired, then things will go back to normal. How can anyone shut down a profitable business?”

The wife said hesitantly: “Shall we reconsider our decision?” She was well aware of the danger behind these words, still, words came out on their own.

How is that possible? You are planning to take up a job, and so we have decided to look for vacancies. Who will give a job to a pregnant woman? The employers will hesitate because the lady needs to go on maternity leave soon. It is actually suicidal to expand a family instead of utilising one’s qualifications in the form of a career. What we have decided is practical. If this protest had not happened, you would have been rid of this burden without any tension.

The wife could not argue further. She had no idea how to present her reasons before a husband who was worried about the family’s finances. He was a little scared too. It would be hard to look after twin daughters. How could they accept this trouble meekly? He was not completely sure and felt hesitant to make any decision.

We will stick to our decision. I will inquire about some other clinics tomorrow. Or we can visit a clinic in another city. It is just a matter of one day. No one will find out about anything.

The husband began calling different clinics early the next morning. The wife was busy with household chores. She recalled the dolls they had seen in the shop the previous day amidst her daily tasks. She resolved to face the situation and stay practical rather than become emotional about it. However, in the afternoon her health declined. Her blood pressure dropped. They needed to see a lady doctor nearby. The doctor said:

Aren't you paying attention to your diet? How could the child in the womb survive without nourishment? Even illiterate women are aware of such basic facts, yet you are educated.

The lady doctor warned them strictly. The couple could not afford the risk of visiting the clinic for an abortion in their condition. The days passed quickly. The situation was far from favourable. The wife felt even more restless because of her poor health. Her mind was foggy. The husband was hurriedly balancing between his wife's worsening condition and his job in anxiety. Finally, after a few days, both could visit the clinic, but the doctor said: "Now it is too risky and I am not ready to take the risk."

The wife was constantly torn between feelings of restlessness and relief. Everything else faded into the background as she worried about her health. Gradually, her body began giving signs of pregnancy. The entire family learned of the good news. They received many letters asking them to take care of the would-be mother's health. Several pieces of advice were given on how to stay active during this period. Now, they had no choice but to welcome the twins into the world.

The husband also wavered between the emotions of 'if and but'. He constantly regretted what had happened. The wife was prepared to take responsibility for this unavoidable matter. The days went by, and the twin daughters were born. Even after their birth, the husband continued to regret: "It was a big mistake due to a little mismanagement."

Asti paused after saying this much. Revati had beads of sweat on her forehead, and her hands were icy cold. She said:

You told me everything, but you haven't revealed the names of the couple. Nor have you given any hint of their identity. Now tell me who they were.

As you have asked and I know the facts, I cannot deny telling you. I am supposed to tell the truth, an entire truth. The husband's name is Narendra, and the wife is Mangala.

As if falling into a deep valley, Ravati could recall the names written in her school notebook – Ravati Narendra Mehta and Kaveri Narendra Mehta. The reason she remembered her school notebook even in such a condition was that she recalled a squabble at her house during her childhood.

Once, upon seeing the number of notebooks used by the girls, her father said in a furious tone: "How many notebooks do you girls need? Do you study or devour the pages?"

The teachers are useless. Why would they bother to teach you properly? You hardly study anything and there is a high price we parents need to pay for your education...

Later, like a blazing fire that can consume everything around, the father said:

"Instead of all these, it would have been better if that day..."

Revati previously failed to understand the unspoken words. She was more anxious about whether she would get a new notebook or not. Kaveri also could not make any sense of the incomplete sentence. Now, those unspoken words make complete sense. There was a different plan for those two sisters. They were not supposed to be born into this world. Their parents were supposed to run and close the doors for them, but they could not run and close the doors in time. Many obstacles

were present on their path to the door, and so these two children arrived on this planet, and the parents had to take their responsibility unwillingly. They hardly remember their mother taunting them directly or noticing any contempt on her face. Only once in a while, their mother used to let the milk overflow out of contempt, but that's all they could remember.

Today, Asti's story clearly depicted an entire episode from the past, yet Revati remained relatively unbothered, feeling as if it belonged to a stranger's tale. However, it was a fact that when Asti mentioned the names of the husband and wife, Revati's head began to spin. She was terrified, as if someone had pushed her from the top of a mountain, and she felt suffocated. Her head continued spinning, but once she regained her composure, there was no regret.

Revati was neither happy about living by mistake nor was she sad about the fact that her parents were eager to kill her.

Asti asked, "So should I take your leave?"

Whether Asti asked a question or made a statement was still unclear. Revati did not feel like saying anything. Asti disappeared deep within herself. Her story was being told. There was no need for a reference or epilogue to add to that. When she suddenly started talking one day, she quickly went silent again.

Amar was expected to arrive soon. There was a puja to be performed at the factory, which kept the entire household busy. She was to participate in it with eagerness. The Gods were to be welcomed with proper rituals. There was no abortion to take place just before the ceremony. Revati was struggling to come to terms with this reality, knowing that someday the ceremony would end and the guests would leave satisfied. Later, the puzzle would remain for them to solve: "What to do about Asti?"

Her jeth and jethani performed the puja. The entire family gathered for the ceremony, creating an atmosphere of joy and excitement. New voices, new routines, unexpected reactions, and chit-chat on various topics filled the air. On one hand, there was a promising young man from jethani's family, busy describing his adventures working in Gulf countries. On the other hand, the artist son of the factory manager was engrossed in elaborating vivid details of his experience learning painting in France. Both young men had small groups of audience around them. Amar looked completely worry-free and pleased. His firm decision-making skills were praised earlier that morning. His trip to Pune to gather all necessary items, his ability to complete all tasks during his stay, and later, his capacity to take on the factory responsibilities and the ceremony soon after his return – all these details were admired. It did not take long for those gathered to conclude that all this was possible only because of Amar. They repeatedly mentioned how fortunate Revati was to have a husband like him.

The recitation of benedictory incantation began in a loud voice: may the family be showered with an abundance of fortune, may all of you be blessed with good health, may the family and the children be happy forever! May the family wealth double! May we be able to serve all other living beings! May all the sins committed unknowingly be washed away! May God shower His mercy upon us!

Revati was seeking forgiveness. Her eyes were closed, yet tears were visible on her eyelashes. She was standing in front of Asti, joining her hands and asking for forgiveness.

Someone said, "Amar, look at Revati. It seems she is feeling restless. It must be due to the pressure of work. Tell her to go inside and rest. The ceremony is almost over. Everything will be taken care of by all the others here."

Someone took Revati inside the room.

The curtains in the room were drawn. The room cooled as the fan was switched on. Revati's hand moved towards her stomach and rested there.

She heard two women talking nearby:

"Do you know she is carrying? I think it's been two months now!"

"No way, who told you?"

"I know for sure that the couple is planning to abort as it's a girl..."

"I don't believe! Does Foiba know about it?"

"No. No one seems to know about it. I came to know through their doctor."

"If they did not want the child, they should have been careful. Abortion is not a good decision."

This is their lookout. After all, they have to raise the kid. Deep down, Amar wanted a boy so they might have taken this chance.

So what? They should accept the child now regardless of its gender.

Revati appears to have fallen asleep. Please close the door and ensure you do not mention this to anyone. It is a very personal matter.

Asti was looking at Revati, who had been fast asleep. She had narrated these tales but couldn't determine what impact they might have had on Revati. As such, she had not made any firm decision yet. Perhaps she was not in a position to do so. She need not harass Revati with constant nagging over this matter. Asti narrated the tales of her great grandmother, her

grandmother Parvatimasi, and Sunita. Yet, one tale remained to be told. She did not know how to tell it. She arranged the words, formed sentences, gathered every fact and detail to set the mood, yet as soon as she brought this tale to her lips, it froze.

The untold story of Asti:

A well filled with female fetuses had gone unnoticed by anyone. There were several reasons for this. The building of a shrine was dilapidated. It had been neglected for a long time and appeared scary as a result. When it was at its peak, many worshippers probably performed pradakshina, and a high wall was constructed around its large compound. But now, the wall was in a shattered state. Prickly bushes had grown all over the area. Surrounding the bushes was wilderness with large, rough leaves emitting a bitter odour. On one side, very tall grass had grown. There were dens of snakes in that area, and mongooses were often seen loitering around. Many iguanas moved there, their thin, split tongues flicking out.

It was hard to determine whose shrine it was. Even when someone looked inside, it was nearly impossible to identify which deity had been worshipped there. At first, the place was seen as safe for hooligans. They used to stash their stolen goods there, cook meat, and drink liquor. These rascals would stay here without any disturbances.

Gradually, the bushes became so dense that it was nearly impossible to cross and approach the shrine. All the once-trodden paths vanished gradually. The thick vines, tangled together, began spreading out. If someone got trapped in them, it was almost impossible to escape without cutting the vines. The hooligans found better places to hide than this dilapidated shrine. There was even a time when these ruffians did not need

to meet in this hideout. They could easily gather under a bright light. The ruins now felt truly lonely.

There was a rumour that religious assemblies used to be held in the vast compound of the shrine. The learned pundits would travel from distant places to discuss the scriptures. The water from that well was used for washing the feet of respected men and for the shrine's rituals. Many groups would come here to sing bhajans. The melodious sound of drums and cymbals was quite pleasing after midnight. Gradually, all these practices declined. The folklore about the disappearance of the presiding deity became quite famous: one morning, when the pujari arrived, the idol was nowhere to be seen. He was taken aback and ran towards the village, shouting loudly. Perhaps due to haste or his heart condition, he collapsed on the road and passed away. As there was no longer a deity in the shrine, devotees gradually stopped coming, and the place slowly withered away, overtaken by wild bushes and vines.

There are no specific historical records of when the well dried up. The well became dry and frightening. If anyone tried to look inside, they could only see darkness. It seemed as if anything thrown into the well would reach the underground. Even if someone tried to examine it by lowering a sun, they wouldn't be able to find anything. The well had been completely covered by bushes and was abandoned. No one would come searching for this well. It would be the ideal place to get rid of something.

Bhalo was searching for a place to dispose of the dead female foetus. He arrived at this well with a few others that night. The night was so dark and terrible that even ghosts and spirits would be frightened. The deserted area resembled a graveyard. Although Bhalo was the father of the dead girl, he and his companions showed no remorse. If questioned, he would have proudly said: what can we do? The girl child embarrasses us. What matters most in life are respect and goodwill. The person

who dishonours the family's name must be punished no less than death. The one who gives life can also take it.

The well devoured the dead body. Everyone expressed their relief at completing a task meant to do by smoking bidis. They reached the village chatting merrily. No one was expected to mourn the death of the girl child as no one had lost anything with this death. Even the mother, who had undergone painful labour while giving birth to the girl, was not grieving this loss. It was a punishment for their wrongdoing, so why remorse? The entire episode of the death of the girl child soon evaporated like a small particle of sand.

The well was magical because it would never be filled with any unwanted dead bodies. The news spread everywhere. Often, it happened that the respectable people from the village on the eastern side would return after discarding unwanted foetuses, while people from the western side were seen approaching the well with their own burdens. Their eyes would meet, and only through their gaze could they reveal that they had been there to complete an important task. The groups often competed – the eastern village discarded five foetuses, while the western village only four: why did we have one less to discard?

This flow continued ceaselessly. But on one rainy night, the calculation changed. It was pouring heavily that night with a thunderstorm. The trees swayed in the wind as if they had all come alive. Two strangers somehow reached the shrine after being lost for quite a while. As they approached the dilapidated place, they could hear the sounds of small girls at play, the clapping of their tiny hands, and the tinkling of their anklets. The sound was not just of a few girls but of thousands. At first, the sound was clear but gradually faded as if it had entered a well. Then the sound would reappear forcefully, spreading in all directions. Neither the thunderstorm nor the pouring rain could diminish the intensity of the sound.

Both strangers were frightened, but they did not lose courage or run away from there. They headed towards the source of the sound. When they saw the well, they were taken aback.

What they could decipher in the dark, the next day it all became clear in daylight in front of the police and senior officers. They searched the entire well. The divers were called for the task. Everything was brought out. What emerged was very filthy, muddy, and stinky.

The obvious questions were raised – how long had these illegal practices been going on? Who was responsible? Who was involved?

But there was no answer to these questions.

What followed was akin to a certain folklore where a woman was asked to fetch a mustard seed from a house where no one had ever died to save her son's life, but she was unable to find such a household. Similarly, no one was to be blamed, nobody was sentenced, and there was no remorse at all for these actions. The responsibility to determine how many female foetuses had been discarded from the surrounding villages was to be assigned to someone whose entire family and caste had never been involved in such a crime. The inquiry committee began gathering details of such a person, but they could not find even five individuals with a clean record. Ultimately, the entire operation was abandoned. As a result, those who had departed for their heavenly abode would not return. The pundits do not mourn the dead, according to the scriptures.

The entire well was cleaned, but the exact number of foetuses discarded remained unclear. The calculation was difficult because the foetuses had decayed over the years. They had to seek help from experts who were further instructed not to reveal the actual figures. The fewer the numbers disclosed, the less shocking it would be to society. For example, if you ask a person who used to eat seven to eight rotis and a hundred

grams of vegetables daily how much he had consumed over the years, he would likely be confused and shocked. What had happened was neglectful, but it could still be presented in a restrained manner. Maintaining restraint was considered a good quality.

The figures of the missing foetuses were released and printed. The protest did occur, but in a more controlled manner. That was expected. The reformist groups unanimously agreed: it was a difficult time. But now, the situation has changed. There are no differences between a boy and a girl. Our beautiful daughters now win beauty contests; the intelligent ones become writers or social workers. Both achievements bring great respect and pride to the nation. It's better to forget the past and look ahead to the future.

Each incident demanded deep reflection: the well was filled with soil and a bulldozer ran over it. The bushes were cleared away. Many sentimental individuals planted tulsi saplings there. The proposal to rebuild the shrine had already been made. Gradually, everything was forgotten as newer incidents, deemed more important, took centre stage. People tend to forget the past easily as new events are added to their memories. After all, how much weight can one head carry!

As the situation was beginning to return to normal, suddenly, some bad news started spreading like a volcano – another such well was discovered somewhere.

All the relatives have left. Everyone received special presents on the auspicious occasion of the factory's expansion. There was no need to keep any record of the expenses.

All the family members entered the house after bidding farewell to their last guests. Amar looked at Revati. She looked away as if she couldn't bear the weight of his gaze. If she had tried to speak to Asti in front of others, she might have been

deemed mad; so she thought the bathroom was a safe place. Once the door was closed, she was completely alone. The house had several bathrooms, so no one would rush her. She still wanted to maintain contact with Asti. She wasn't sure if Asti would respond when she called, and she was confused about what to say if she answered. But should she make the call first? And what if Asti didn't come? Should she dismiss all the stories Asti told? Those stories happened often—she would hear voices even when no one was around. What if they were all fabricated? What would happen if Asti appeared and asked about her decision on her matter? What should she tell her? Should she say that Amar was the final authority? Or should she plainly tell her that they could only afford two daughters and weren't prepared to take responsibility for a third?

But how could she let go of an omniscient daughter like Asti? Would the family be willing to let go of her if they had the slightest idea of the kind of daughter to be born in the house? Everyone in the household was foolish; they could hardly think outside the box. Following their instructions blindly was like jumping from a mountain peak.

Revati called out: Asti! Asti! Can you hear my voice? Look, your mother is calling you! If you hear my voice, do respond, my dear!

Revati's lips quivered. She felt restless and impatient to be with Asti. It was as if she was wandering inside her own womb, searching for Asti in some dark corner of a palace.

She called out again: Asti! O Asti!

She could finally hear a faint sound when she was at the height of restlessness: Ma! Mamma! Did you call me?

Revati hugged her stomach with both her hands in anxiety.

Asti spoke: No, Ma! Now you need to make a decision. When I started narrating the tales one by one, I was eager to be born. I

wanted to come to Earth at any cost then. I longed to experience love and family bonds. The desire was very strong.

But now my mind has withdrawn from these worldly concerns. It happened all of a sudden. I have realised that there is a truth beyond all relationships – the truth of delusion. It is steady and illuminating. I have just recognised this, and suddenly all my desires to be born again have disappeared. Now even if I have to go, you or papa is not responsible for it, not at all.

You only follow your instinct. The final decision should be yours. Asti now owes nothing; I dilute all my desires into you, completely. Now you are Asti. I and you are one, Ma!



Dr Himanshi Shelat (b. 1947, Surat) is a renowned Gujarati author and Sahitya Akademi Award recipient, celebrated for her psychologically nuanced and socially conscious fiction. Holding an M.A. and a PhD in English, she taught at M.T.B. Arts College, Surat, until 1994. Her literary journey began in 1978, and she gained nationwide recognition with *Andhari Galima Safed Tapakan* (1992). Influenced by Mahasweta Devi and Jane Austen, Shelat's writing delves into everyday realities, marginalised lives, and women's struggles, often inspired by her social welfare work. Her oeuvre includes acclaimed story collections (*Antaral, Ae Loko*) and novels (*Aathamo Rang, Saptadhara*), as well as essays, memoirs, and literary criticism. She has also edited numerous volumes and served on the Sahitya Akademi advisory board (2013–2017). In 2024, she was honoured with the Kuvempu Rashtriya Puraskar. Married to Vinod Meghani, son of poet Jhaverchand Meghani, Shelat remains a vital voice in post-modern Gujarati literature.



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