

# Sprout

A short story about women's hidden forms of resistance,  
written by Upendranath Ashk in 1938



FROM childhood, Senkari, the daughter of Pandit Jairam of Saggiyan, had developed a keen desire for one thing—gold jewellery. And of all jewels, her heart yearned most for a pair of gold bracelets.

The poor rural women of Sag-giyan did not even know of jewels other than silver earrings, bangles, anklets and necklaces, but when the daughter of the village money-lender Lala Shankardas was married to the son of a very wealthy man of Jalandhar, one among her jewels was highly extolled by all who saw it. This was a pair of gold bracelets. In those days, armlets too were worn, and girls used to sing to the drum, to the tune of "Star spangled shoes" these lines :

"Buy me an armlet, dear !

Buy me a golden armlet !

Even if you must sell your

turban to get it !" But the average middle class family, which could not afford to buy both items for a dowry, used to buy only bracelets.

The rural women of Saggiyan were dazzled by every one of the jewels, but when they saw the bracelets, their mouths too fell open. Each woman took them in her hands—they weighed over 16 tolas ! And cost more than Rs 500 ! Rarely would Saggiyan's rural poor women have glimpsed such costly jewels even in their dreams. How could they forgo the exquisite pleasure of taking them in their hands and looking at them ?

Senkari too stood in the crowd, clinging to her mother. How she longed to take those heavy brace-lets in her tiny hands and look at them—but she lacked the courage to express her desire to her mother.

Her mother looked at the jewels and then hastened back to her work. The bridegroom's party was about to arrive and she had plenty of tasks to complete. A poor Brah-man woman, wife of a priest, she had often to work as a maid-servant to eke out a livelihood. But Senkari did not accompany her mother. She stood apart from her mother and her own friends,

leaning against the wall, as if under a spell. Her eyes were fixed on the jewels. Each time one of the village women picked up and examined the jewels, she too did the same in her imagination, until she almost felt the jewels caressing her fingers.

When the bride was bathed and anointed, and decked with the jewels, Senkari's eyes were fixed on her wrists alone.

Just then, one of her friends came running up with a small piece of brick and said : "Look what I've got, let's go and play the drum."

But Senkari did not stir.

Outside, the instruments began to play and a cry went up that the groom's party had arrived. The women and children climbed up on the rooftops and the air was filled with the sweet melody of wedding songs.

Senkari did not stir, and when the bride was left alone, she shyly went and sat next to her. Her pretty face resting on her knees, the bride was silently scratching the earth

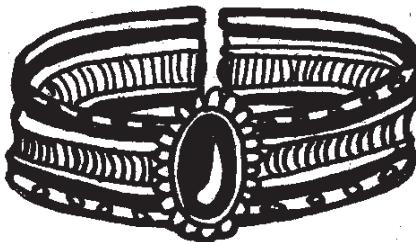
with one henna painted toe. What were her thoughts ? Perhaps of how, in the course of a day, she was to be transformed from a girl into a daughter-in-law. Seeing Senkari's gaze fixed on her wrist, and the eagerness of that gaze, she smiled. Senkari's fingers were as though unconsciously seeking to touch the bracelets. The bride let her hand hang free and Senkari gazed her fill at the bracelets and the bangles that went with them, and her heart's delight was mirror-ed in her face.

The bride laughed. She looked around and then said, smiling : "You too will have such bracelets when you get married."

It is said that at least once in every 24 hours, the goddess Sara-swati alights for a moment on each person's tongue. Perhaps Saraswati at that moment spoke through the bride, for at Senkari's wedding, when the gifts from the groom's side arrived, and the sheets of thin green paper were lifted off the trays, there, among the jewels in one tray, lay a pair of heavy gleaming bracelets. Senkari could barely contain her joy. After she had been bathed and anointed, when the bracelets were put on her slender wrists, they look-ed almost like a part of her body. Senkari was only 13, but her heal-thy, well made body was cast in the mould of youth's golden dawn. The bracelets fitted her wrists so exactly that in a few moments, she had to move one of them. It left a red mark on her wrist. For a long time, she gazed at the spot, as though enchanted, and then, care-fully supporting her heavy necklace and big nosering, she began to show her girlfriends each one of her jewels—their weight, their design and their craftsmanship. Again and again, she wished that that bride, the daughter of Shankardas, were here to witness the power of her prophecy !

The old women laughed to see

Senkari's joy, extolled her good for-tune, and blessed her. The daughter of that beggarly Brahman was going to such a great house, such a wealthy house ! Why should they not call her fortunate ? But the young girls of the village did not envy her good fortune. Even those who felt a twinge of jealousy at the sight of such



costly, beautiful jewels adorning the limbs of that poor Brahman's daughter, pulled a long face when they heard that a bed was being spread over a bed, that the 50 year old groom had a first wife, and they said : "Jewels and clothes are not everything in this world !"

Senkari's husband, Pandit Maheshwardayal, was a famous astrologer of Jalandhar. There were many stories told about how he had learnt the science of astrology; some said one thing and some another; but the most popular story was that he had started life in the textile trade, where his business was to rewind into skeins the silken threads that got entangled and discarded during the processes of dyeing and winding. But this famous trade of Jalandhar, like other cottage indu-stries, was destroyed by the advent of Japanese textiles. Other indu-strialists opened cloth shops or went into the jewellery trade, but Panditji had his ancestral business open to him. He awakened some sleeping patrons, dug up some buried ones, resurrected some dead ones, and with a flourish, set up as a priest. Not content with this, one fine day he had his head polished, knotted his long topknot, drew

long lines on his forehead with san-dal paste, and, wrapping a scarf with a *Ramnam* print around his neck, declared himself an astrologer.

In the ordinary way, it might have taken him a lifetime to estab-lish a reputation as an astrologer, but fate was on his side. Gambling was already something of a habit with him, and as the addiction to gamb-ling spread throughout Punjab, and took root in Jalandhar too, his own addiction grew. It so happened that around this time, he twice or thrice won Rs 2,000 in gambling. This was seen as proof of his skill as an astrologer. Now, he was sur-rounded night and day by gamblers. Panditji spoke to them in gestures alone. Those who won praised him and gave him gifts; those who lost concluded that they must have mis-read Panditji's gestures. They would give him gifts in the hope of winn-ing next time. Either way, Panditji had it made. In no time at all, he built himself a big house and two shops in Jalandhar, and also-accumulated plenty of money.

But despite all this wealth and prosperity, Panditji was unhappy because he had no heir. He had a wife but they were childless all though he was now over 50. Aroun-this time, he happened to accompa-ny a wedding party to Saggiyan. There he met the priest Jairam, and his mouth watered at the sight of the priest's gold complexioned dau-ghter. It was child's play for astro-loger Maheshwardayal to arrange-things to Ms satisfaction. Pandit Jairam and his wife were eaten ur> with anxiety as to how to get rid of this daughter of theirs who was growing apace like a bitter gourd creeper. How could they hesitate to grab such a splendid opportunity ? Especially when the astrologer, giving an account of his property, dwelt on the luxury that awaited his new bride in his home. He also promised to bear the wedding ex-penses

of both sides, and thus, having handed over their daughter to a worthy and wealthy groom, Pandit Jairam and his wife heaved a sigh of relief, while astrologer Maheshwardayal felt once more like a young man as his hope of acquiring an heir to his property resprouted.

Senkari's fascination with jewellry grew greater after her arrival at her in-laws' house. Apart from the very expensive wedding jewels, Panditji also got her a brow jewel, a hand ornament made of rings and chains, woven bracelets, head ornaments and a mirrorprk necklace. He got her several different kinds of *saris*. Aged lovers spontaneously learn how to compensate with devo-tion for what they lack. But, as a child who gets one toy begins to long for another, Senkari too, each time she got one thing, would ask for another, and Panditji would immediately get it for her.

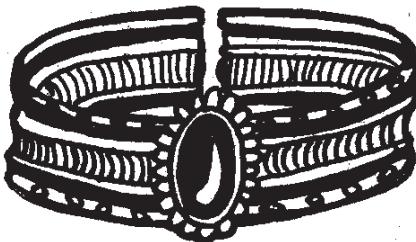
But there was a great gulf bet-ween their points of view. When a child gets a toy, it is more anxious to impress its playmates with this new piece of property and to excite their envy, than to please its parents by thanking them. So too, Senkari, decked in her jewels, longed to go and show them to her girlfriends rather than to sit beside Panditji. Running his hand over his polished head, Panditji would gaze at that charming form with hungry eyes, would say : "You are indeed a heavenly nymph !" and would try to draw her towards him.

But Senkari would be full of eagerness to visit her parents' house.

The truth was that whenever she decked herself in new clothes and jewels, she felt a strange stirring in her body, and unknown longings smouldered in her breast. But at such times a sort of fear of the astrologer dwelt in her mind and she felt like running away from his pre-sence, so she would somehow or the other, by crying and wheedling, obtain permission

to go off to her parents' house. When her girl-friends there greeted her with a mixture of delight and envy, admir-ed and tried on her jewels with laughter and jokes, she would feel quite satisfied.

Her friends would think—if only we could have even one of these jewels ! And their mothers, seeing that Brahman wench



decked out in costly clothes and jewels, would sigh deeply and wonder why their daughters had not been able to marry into such homes. So what if the husband was elderly—the girl would reign like a queen. But Senkari soon came face to face with the reality underlying her apparent reign. The fact was that despite this husband of hers being a king, Senkari still preferred her poor home in the village. Gradually, her periods of stay at her parental home increased in duration, until one day when Panditji went to fetch her, she flatly refused to go with him. She herself could not fully analyse why she did so, but she had begun to feel suffocated in his palace. Then Panditji promised to get her a choker of large gold beads. Her mother explained to her : "Daugh-ter, the husband alone is a woman's companion, her deity, even her god. However he keeps her, in whatever conditions, she should be content."

Her father first rebuked her, then promised that she would soon be called home again. Then, at last, Senkari agreed to go, but when she once again began to clamour to visit her parents' house, Panditji rebuked her. "Why are you always running off there ?" he said, bitter-ly. "With

whom are you carrying on there ?" Senkari was stunned. She did not cry or scream. She just stood there, dumb, pierced to the quick. She felt choked with anger. Then she threw off her finery, lock-ed her jewels into a trunk, leaving only two bangles on her wrist as signs of her married status, and re-solved that never again would she speak of her parents' home, even if it cost her her life.

As she stood there, the images of several of the innocent youths of her village whom she called "bro-ther" came before her eyes. Had she ever "carried on" with any of them ? Ever been, even fleetingly, in love ? She could find nothing in her heart, not even a ripple. Her innocent heart had not yet learnt to look at a man in that way. And then she burst into tears and sobbed aloud.

The astrologer saw that his arrow had overshot the mark. He realised that he had been unfair. He tried to pacify her. He laughed shamefacedly, tickled her, but Senkari did not bloom.

The next day, Panditji brought a beautiful choker of large gold beads from the jewellers' shop. Senkari looked at it. For a moment, a gleam appeared in her eyes, but the next instant it disappeared, as she remembered the astrologer's words. When Panditji gave her the box she quietly took it and put it away. He tried his best to per-suade her to try it on, to show him how it would look around her love-ly neck. But Senkari sat there sil-ent. Defeated, he cursed her to his heart's content, taunted her, and, disgusted, went off to the sitting room where he settled down amidst heaps of horoscopes.

Senkari did not try on the choker in Panditji's presence, but after he left, she grew restless to wear it. She even took it out of the box but then replaced it. Just then, the son of Parmeshwari, the Brahman woman who was given a meal in almt. daily

at their house, arrived with his plate. Cheerful looking, mischievous, about 22 or 23 years old, with an innocent and carefree air.

"Carrying on"—suddenly, the words resounded in Senkari's head.

She looked at the Brahman youth through lowered eyelashes, and immediately looked away.

The boy removed the cloth that covered the plate and took out the bowls.

"Why hasn't your mother come today?" Senkari asked.

"She is sick", the boy answered and then he came up, smiling, and said : "What a beautiful choker—how much did it cost?"

"I don't know. Panditji brought it", Senkari replied.

'And suddenly she felt like wearing the choker.

"Do put it on—does it fit you?" the youth said, and laughed lightly.

Senkari glanced upward at him. His laughter seemed beautiful to her, and a ripple ran through her body. "I haven't tried it yet," she said, smiling, and then, she put it round her neck, glancing sidelong at the Brahman youth.

The fastening of the choker was behind her neck. Since it was new and fitted exactly, she found it hard to fasten. Then the Brahman youth, laughing innocently, stepped forward and fastened it. As he did so, his fingers touched Senkari's tender neck.

Again, a sensation ran through Senkari's body.

Having done up the fastening, the Brahman youth looked with delight on Senkari and said, 'It looks very beautiful on you.' Just then, Panditji entered, with a horoscope in his hand. His eyes grew bloodshot, but he forced himself to smile and say : "Wonderful ! How lovely it looks!"

Senkari was happy and laughed aloud. After this, she stayed happy all day. When

the youth had taken the alms food and gone, she went into her room, shut the door and put on all her fine clothes and jewels, including the choker. Then she felt as if that Brahman youth's fingers were touching her neck. Immediately, the same sensation ran through every nerve in her body, a strange restlessness took possession of her, and the fire of an unknown longing that had lain buried in her heart, kindled again.

That night, the world of Senkari's dreams was richly inhabited. There was a king in that world and a queen too. The king and queen seemed to have been separated for an eternity, and now they met in a forest of pleasure. The queen said reproachfully : "My king, you never came and I find it hard to get through these mountainlike days while the nights..." and her eyes filled with tears. Then the king said, smiling: "Don't worry, my queen, you and I will meet every day in this forest of pleasure."

But the next day, when Senkari's heart was lighter than usual and when she was wearing—not all her finery and jewels but a skyblue *sari* with her beloved bracelets, eartops, bangles and that beautiful choker of fat gold beads, the king of her dreams did not come.

Panditji had appointed another Brahman woman, Devaki, to collect the alms food in Parmeshwari's place.

Senkari was listless all day. Depressed, she lay prone in her room, and was troubled more than ever by the memory of her parental home and her girlfriends. Panditji had stopped her from stepping out into the street, she could not visit her parents, and that sour, dried-up Devaki had taken the cheerful Parmeshwari's place. Senkari was confused and restless.

So she lay there, tossing and turning, and the day drew to its close. She began to feel choked in that room. She got up and went into the yard. A crow was

cawing on the parapet, and on the sill over a niche, a pigeon with puffed out feathers and bowed neck, was attempting to woo his beloved, but each time he approached her with swaying gait, cooing mellifluously, she would fly off. From one niche to another, from there to a third, then on to the swing and the string bed, and then to the wooden bars flew the female pigeon, yet the male did not give up his pursuit. Then she flapped her wings, sprang up and was lost in the depths of the endless blue sky. For a few seconds, the male still circled the bars, cooing, then he too flew off towards the sky.

Sighing deeply, Senkari stretch-ed her limbs, and then washed her hands and face with cold water from the earthen pitcher. Then, as if moved by some unknown inspiration, she went up on to the open roof.

Just opposite, on the outer edge of the neighbourhood, on the roof of his old house was Parmeshwari' & son, silent, absorbed in a book. A desire arose in her heart, to sing to him—some old ditty that is sung to the beat of a drum, but she stood, silent, looking that way with un-blinking eyes. The neighbourhood margosa tree swayed as though intoxicated by the caress of the cool breeze. In the depths of the sky eagles soared, elate, after one an-other. Senkari stretched her limbs and yawned. Just then, the youth looked towards her. The end of her *sari* had flown off her head and the large gold beads of the choker round her crystalline neck radiated beams as if from a hundred suns.

Senkari blushed to her ears. And the youth felt lightnings course through his limbs.

Just then, the slapping sound of Panditji's slippers was heard on the stairway below. She hastened down and welcomed him with a smile, and a jest about his day's collection from the homes of his.

patrons. But, as though he saw something written on her face, Panditji hastily thrust into her arms all that he had collected, and went up to the roof, on some pre-text. He glared at the youth reading on the distant roof of the opposite house. At that moment, the youth too raised his head, and their eyes met. Passing his hand over his topknot. Panditji grunted, and the youth, after a moment's perplexity, again buried his gaze in his book.

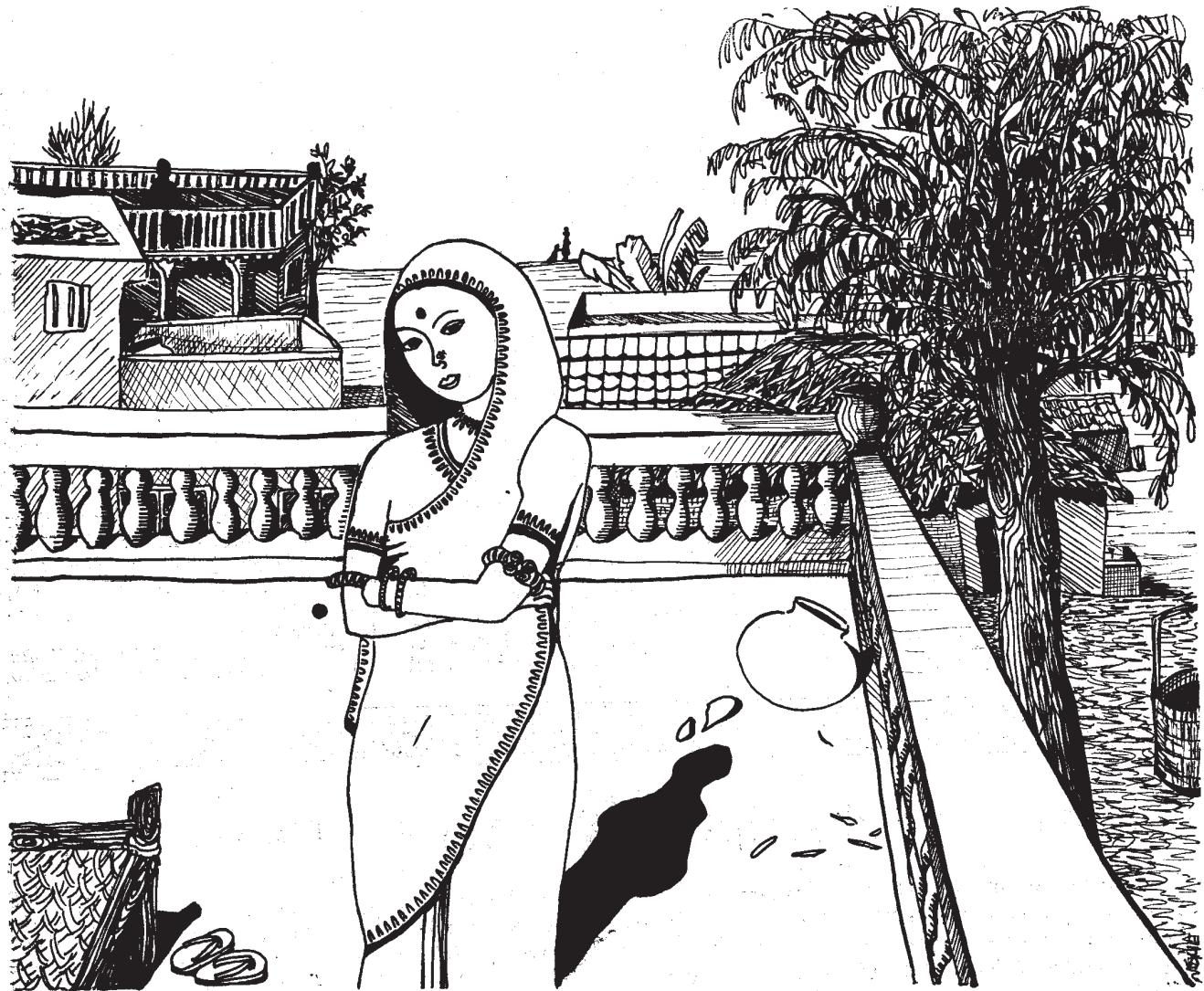
The next day, Senkari had not yet got out of bed when she saw construction labourers preparing to raise a five and a half foot high brick veil between their house and the opposite house.

This was the reality of her reign and Senkari knew that there was no difference between the king of this kingdom and the jailor of a prison. The fear of her husband

that lay dormant in her mind was transformed into a keen hatred, a revulsion which grew deeper with each passing day and which lasted until, despite her fear and disgust, a daughter was born to her and until, five years after her marriage, Panditji left for the other world, with his desire for a son still unfulfilled.

Senkari was unable to analyse her feelings on the death of her old, butcherlike husband. Her heart was light yet it also seemed to be crushed beneath a heavy burden. She felt like laughing out loud and also like weeping aloud. But, in the main, she wept. She took off each of her jewels and laid them in her trunk, and then, as was customary, she beat her breast, tore her hair and sat with swollen eyes, along with the women of the neighbourhood and relatives, both distant and close.

Then her mother came and consoled her, saying : "Daughter, what god ordains, must be. Not a leaf can stir without his command. One must live under the conditions decreed by him." And her mother cited the example of many women of their village who had been widowed around the age of 12. These goddesses had lived their lives, with their husbands' names as their sole support. But a million thanks be to god, the astrologer had left his house and two shops in Senkari's name, otherwise the co-wife and her relatives might well have grabbed everything. Thanking god in this fashion, Senkari's mother sagely advised her to call her younger brother to live with her. If he lived here in the town he would be able to study well. She would get a rent of Rs 30 from the two shops, and what did she want

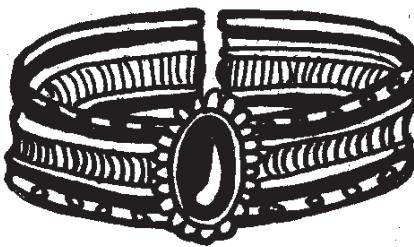


with such a big house—she could rent out half of it. Then she could occupy herself with pious works. Her mother also proposed that she would take all Senkari's jewels away with her. Here, they could easily be stolen by thieves or burglars. When the baby girl grew up the jewels could be brought back. And then, as if gazing into space, her mother said : "We have to get Ramu married and you know our condition at home." Senkari agreed to all this, as though she had not heard any of it.

When she lay down that night on the open roof, Senkari could not sleep. The baby girl had fallen asleep at her breast. Senkari shifted her away and turned on her side. In the sky above, the full moon shone with its clear white light. A cool breeze was blowing. A deep sigh arose from Senkari's heart. How well she had begun to understand life in the last couple of years ! Her eye fell on her mother lying like a bundle on a loose string bed to the right, and tears of regret rose to her eyes—had all this been decreed by god or by her parents ? A mother's love and a father's affection—what meaningless pretences these are. They cannot withstand even one buffet of the storm of circumstances. Else why should so many parents push their daughters into a furnace every single day? Some hing the astrologer had once said while glorifying the nobility of his race came to Senkari's mind. He had said that in earlier times, as soon as a girl was born in a noble family, she would be choked to death. Old grandmothers and great-grandmothers or where there were none, mothers themselves would strangle

newborn female infants, and if the mothers were unable to do it, the midwives would perform this pious deed with great ease and then tie the infant in a bundle and bury her. How many atrocities women perpetrate on women, she thought, and, as she lay there, she began to feel suffocated. An all

consuming fire seemed to blaze up with a roar inside her. Why had her mother not strangled her at birth ? Wiping the drenched corners of her eyes with the end of her *sari* she turned over once more. A pair of small owls hooted harshly from the neighbourhood margosa and in the sky



above, a large bat flew past, casting the shadow of its wings on the wall.

Each of her jewels swam before Senkari's eyes—earflowers, clips, eartops, necklace, choker, mirrored necklace, armlets, bracelets, woven bracelets, bangles...would she never again be able to wear even one of them ? Would she become a complete stranger to these beloved jewels of hers ? Her mind and body seemed to burn with an unbearable jealousy and she was seized by a strong desire to once more look her heart's fill on her beloved jewels. She did try to suppress this desire ; she thought of the duty of widows and of social restrictions; but her desire grew stronger by the minute. Finally,

she rose up, making no sound. She looked through lowered lashes at her mother, who, tired out with beating her breast all

day, was snoring loudly. Senkari tiptoed to her room. She took out all her most expensive clothes and when, beneath them, she saw the red sari she had worn on her wedding day, an unknown inspiration moved her to undress and to wear it on. Then, she took out her jewels and put them on, one by one. When she wore the bracelets she realised how weak she had become, and the red marks that had once appeared on these wrists swam before her eyes. She went to the mirror. Hollows had appeared in her round cheeks, her jawbones were visible beneath the skin—and she was only 18 years old.

Sighing deeply, she sat down on her trunk, and an incident that had occurred four years ago came before her eyes, when the Brahman woman Parmeshwari's cheerful looking son had fastened on her choker. A ripple of unknown joy ran through her body, as on that day.

Far away, in the Muslim colony, a cock crew. Senkari got up with a start. She took off all her jewels and locked them in the trunk, changed her clothes and stole up to the roof. The moon was now hidden behind the tall house to the right, and a light darkness lay over the string beds. Senkari quietly lay down on her bed.

The next day, when her mother was leaving and asked Senkari for her jewels, she gave an evasive answer. When her mother had left, she got rid of Devajci and reappointed Parmeshwari.

(translated from Hindi by Ruth Vanita.  
All illustrations by Sue Darlow)