

RIGHT OF WOMB – Garver odhikar

By

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Translated by Jhama Sanyal from Bengali from the Collection Chayanaira, The Shadow Women.

Summa went on crushing the huge pieces of granite :she was in this job since eight in the morning .She was not alone ;there were some more like her .The bare , rocky expanse was resplendent with the colours of their skirts ,blouses and ornaments .On the national highway that ran by the sides of the fields ,innumerable buses and cars zoomed past towards the famous temple of Mallikarjunswami , a popular place of pilgrimage .It was a Shiva temple –one of the few jyotilingas in India .But Summa and her friends cared little for such things .By the national caste denomination they belonged to the schedule tribes :in some distant past their forefathers had migrated from Rajasthan and settled in these areas .When the girls of the community grew old enough to earn a living their soft hands served the labour market .Initially their hands got bruised as they crushed the stones for construction work but eventually they got used to it .Their palms were hardened and there was nothing left to the so called feminine touch :they smelt of hard labour .

Tourist stopped on the way –particularly the foreigners , and shoot them at work .Their red skirts ,blue urni , and the silver ornaments dazzled under the sun .their white bangles ,spread from wrist to elbow , added a special dimension to their appearance .At times Summa and her friends looked at the cameras and at times they carried on with their work in utter indifference .By now , they were used to such attention

Most of the boys of the tanda or the village had migrated to the city .There was not enough work in such a dry land and the earning from the crushing was meagre .So they had shifted to the city and joined the construction works .The wives ,children and the old people stayed back in the village .The women put all efforts in stone crushing to earn for the upkeep of the children and the old folks .When the golden moon shines on the purple sky and looks like silver centrepiece of their necklaces, then , if they could afford ,summa and her friends sat in a circle and drank country liquor .it was from their own earnings and it was so relaxing .

Summa continued working, but since, the last few days she had no peace of mind .She looked around and found her sons busy playing in the dirt .The older one was five, the younger three. They had no problem arriving on this earth .their right to be born was most gladly accepted by her old in-laws and her husband ,Vittal Singh .It did not matter if they could afford to feed them or send them to school .

For the last few days after the crushing work for a little while Summa was out of breath .She could not resume work unless she had a little rest .She could feel that her belly was growing big.it was the time of arrival of another baby .The child was as if waiting in a prison cell to be born to see the light of the world .but would that be possible ?Would it be fortunate enough to enjoy the sun and air of this world ?Would it walk in tiny steps after its brothers ?All these , however depended on the sign between the thighs .Does it realize this ?At this precise point of time how does it feel ? As a female

or a male? Summa stiffened her jaws and promised to herself that this life within her will surely be born, and to save it she would walk an unending path and stake her life for it .But about two years back she did not get the time to take any step .before she could prepare for the war, it was all over .the moment the soft doll like girl was born, faces turned stiff. Her mother-in-law's wailing rent the sky .And how cruel was the old midwife! Was she there to help in the birth of the child or to murder her? She stifled the new-born to death without batting an eyelid and, in the darkness of the night buried her in the ground behind the house .Summa could do nothing but remained a stunned, helpless spectator .When she gained her voice and tried to protest Vittal Singh gagged her and tied her with a rope and left her behind in the dark room

In their kind of households a girl child is supposed to be a liability .they are of no use: they are born to serve others' households for free .yet to get them married off the family have to spend a huge amount of their hard earned money. So only the Vithal Singhs of the world have a right to live with authority .Girls are dead the moment they are born .At times Summa had a feeling that she was a good for nothing :she had no right to the life of the one whom she had in a natural process nurtured in her womb .

This time the plan of Vittal and her in-laws were different .In the two years they had watched carefully what was going on around and had also received a lot of counselling .The strangest thing of all was that it seemed that Vittal this time would be happier if it were a girl as that would bring in some extra money.

Agents were in the lookout for the fair complexioned daughters of their community. The neighbourhood many had handed over their new born daughters to these agents and that for a lot of money. Summa had heard that these procurers assured that the girls would be adopted by well to do families .They would wear expensive clothes, go to good schools, eat delicious food and play with dolls as beautiful as they themselves were .Some would fly to some dreamland and stay in some fairy land homes .But Summa had doubts where the girls actually landed up! Would any one bother to find out whether what they said was true! Would any one rescue these girls if they disappeared in a world of darkness?

A few days ago Vittal came to confess that he had already taken an advance of five thousand rupees cash from an agent .if it were a daughter Gopal Rao would come to collect her, and if it were a boy, the cash had to be refunded .Vittal was worried as he had already spent two thousand out of the sum to buy necessary and unnecessary things; and if it was not a daughter this time he would have to refund the whole amount.

According to Summa's calculation it would take two more months for the child to arrive .She does not know whether it would arrive to stay or given away as Vittal had planned .But she was sure that it was coming to stay and stay with her .She was not a girl-child producing machines which would manufacture dolls of flesh and blood to be sold in the market .As it was she was crushing stones to feed her two sons, couldn't she feed a daughter? She had already had a talk with her childhood friend Rumabai .Ruma stays alone .A month hence she would go to Ruma, with one child in her womb and holding the hands of the other two .She would deliver the baby out of the reach of the monster; Vittal won't find her or her daughter ever again.

One had become a part of the earth or the backyard garden. Summa herself had become as hard as granite –that was how life had moulded her .No longer would she stand still as a block of stone ,nor allow herself to be crushed like one ,She'll teach the one ye to arrive how to reach the sky .