

# Devadasi

For my dearest daughter

## Prologue

**I**t is a photograph typical of the Raj. Against the hazy sepia background of the bungalow, the foreground figures of the Smythes come into focus; on the lawn a young English boy sits on a pony, his proud parents stand on either side, holding its bridle. Their infant girl is carried on her ayah's hip, the servant an inadvertent and unwelcome inclusion in the family portrait.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I am the storyteller, Sutradhara, narrator in traditional Indian plays, whose role extended to stage manager and impresario. Sutra means string thread, or yarn – which is what I intend spinning you [the first of my puns – playing with words is part of my job]. Sutradhara, 'thread holder'. My job description probably comes from the fact that he once used puppets to tell his story, a string-puller, though *I* will not be *manipulating* my characters.

Another pun! Didn't you get that? Well, from now I'll ping\* to alert you to my puns.

Wait, I'm not done with the word: sutra is also to sew or stitch, yes the same root as suture, and therefore "a thread that runs through and holds things together". Sutras were aphoristic rules etched on palm leaves, held together with string.

My job often resembled a combination of rag picker and tailor: I collected scraps of information and sewed them into a crazy-quilt of a story, a security blanket that also caught my dreams. I'd snip and tack on improvisations; I'd add odds and ends needed to jog my memory so that my patchwork served to keep me on the narrative path, the backdrop against which my characters played out their parts. As Shakespeare said ... but why should I quote him, he too often has the last word in most matters. My collage also served as a picture book for illiterate villagers – not that you westernised intellectuals need any such visual aid.

I have been supplanted by television – the flying carpet has landed as the magic box – so that those yokels no longer gather under the largest peepul tree to hear my stories. But here's an irony: I find myself in demand once more because "Storytelling" has come full circle, being researched, recorded, analysed ... and my breed now goes on tour, narrating stories to urbanites like you.

I believe you lot are mostly "foreign-returned"? What a mixed bunch: sociologist, anthropologist, feminist, a researcher into story-telling, a psychologist examining ways of relating in Hindu myths – and hah, techies!

[Rishab: I am, but maybe not all the others?

Akhil: No, I'm not a techie, but yes, I think we're all probably i-Gen'ers.

SD: i-Genners? What's that?

Rishab: You can't be a wordsmith, dude, unless you update your vocab! i-Gen: internet-generation, Gen Z, those who have never lived without the internet.]

Well, we'll see how your virtual worlds compare with my maya of multiple realities, those I created for my old audiences. I overstep the lakshman rekha of time-space; I'm able to see past,

present and future simultaneously from my vantage point. The satellite is your eye in the sky but I am clairvoyant and clairaudient as well; god-like, though I don't descend\* to the mechanics of melodramatic reversals of fortune or to contrived endings.

My traditional listeners didn't question this stance, they took these abilities for granted. And you, my post-millennial audience, should have no problem with it; you are as gullible – in your i-Gen way! You readily accept your virtual reality, and those techi-toys give you similar powers: you range through cyberspace, see faces that are thousands of miles away, hear multiple voices, you can morph people or objects ... the same fairytale ingredients that we storytellers have been using for centuries! All is permitted the storyteller and I have the best

antecedent: my prototype, Vyasa, was not only narrator of a wondrous tale but also an actor in it. And, if you will not allow me these indulgences of omniscience and omnipresence, why then, the fabric that I am so carefully fashioning, will simply fall apart: no story, no leela, no maya, illusion.

Rending the veil of maya results in revelation.

[Sagarika: But that's exactly what apocalypse is!

Advik: What's doomsday got to do with ... ?

Sagarika: Absolutely nothing! No, the Greek word apokálypsis means "lifting the veil", "revelation": when something unknown can only be known when unveiled!

Christians came up with that end-of-the-world crap, as they gradually equated the word with Armageddon.]

Makes you wonder who borrowed from whom, doesn't it? As I was saying, it is only for mortals who have already reached great heights of spirituality and are knocking on sahasrar, like someone trying to push the attic trapdoor open. Lesser mortals are content with rupturing the veil at the crass level, the hymen. My story veers more towards this grosser plane.

[What's sahasrar? Looks like you've been out of India too long, Akhil]. The cranial region is an oubliette and sahasrar is its trapdoor to the Infinite. Sahasrar is the apex chakra, goal of the kundalini serpent that rises from the

lowest chakra in the urogenital region. It is the apple of supreme knowledge, forbidden to Adam and Eve, till the serpent puts it within (wo)man's reach: instant nirvana when sahasrar, the thousand-petalled lotus opens, bursting through the top of the head!

Which reminds me: that bump on Buddha's head was not sartorial. They say it was actually his sahasrar that broke through when he attained moksha, but he postponed his nirvana: he was not ready to leave the world, he still had much to accomplish, to make mortals understand his message. So he covered the half-emerged sahasrar with his hair. His top-knot is exactly at the spot where that reality-veil is rent at death, so that the spirit-soul can escape from the body – like a lap-dancer bursting out of a stag party cake!

One Hindu belief is that man's soul enters through the sutures of the skull, so at death it must also leave the body at that point. And if the skull doesn't burst open with the heat of the pyre, then the son performing the funeral rites has to crack it open, so the spirit doesn't remain trapped inside: 'puth' is hell and 'putra', son, is one who saves you from hell.

[Fiona: Oh, is that why it's so important for Hindus to have a son?

Sagarika: So they believed it was too gruesome an act for a daughter to perform?

Promila: No, the prejudice against daughters runs much deeper.