

Sheel Parekh

The Shift

I was a rich young woman, beautiful, well-loved, with a following... but also spiritual-minded. My favourite haunt was the temple on the edge of the sea, one with the deity in a sanctum sanctorum to which you had to climb deep down, not upwards! When I went to the temple, I often did not climb down, but sat outside, by the steps that led to the stormy sea below. A patch of sand barely four to five feet across formed the beach... and hardly a couple of feet further, the sand gave way, and it was deep sea!

I had often wondered about this bit of land with the temple, the steps to the sea, and the quarters of the priests and other temple officials, which had seemingly been built on the edge of a cliff. Until one day, a wizened old guard told me how, when he was little, the sea had risen up and taken away the beaches along this coast, and caused the temple to sink somewhat - this explained the stairs leading down, which had been added later! Nature herself, perhaps, wanted people to climb down their high horses before entering into the presence of the Highest of the High.

It was this temple that my old aunt had come to visit, bringing her daughter along. That daughter who had been spurned by her husband, beaten black and blue, for

no apparent reason at all. Many came to this temple asking for succour - so did she. The daughter, my cousin, a pure, happy soul, a boisterous teenager just three years ago, was now a silent young woman. Her peals of laughter were buried; sorrow had clouded her brow. She now kept in the shadows, and spoke only when spoken to. She was seeking something, but what?

It was a clear morning, and we walked slowly, barefoot, with our *arati* plates and our bags towards the temple. There were seven of us - the aunt and her daughter, four other women from my household, and myself. It was one of the most auspicious days of the year: the month of Karthika, dedicated to Rudra, Soma, Shiva, call him by whatever name you will; and the day was an *ekadashi*, falling on a *Somavaram*, Monday. A day when wishes were bound to be fulfilled, according to the tenets, if you took a dip in the sea and then sought your wish of the deity in the temple.

In half an hour, we reached our destination. The tide was high, spraying water not just on the beach but halfway up the stairs to the beach. On the wet beach stood several women and men, afraid to venture into the sea for a dip, contenting themselves instead with the flow and ebb and the spray. The sea understood their dilemma, apparently. Even as we watched, a huge wave began to form, sending them all scrambling up the steps. The wave followed, splashing water onto them, sending the spray right to our feet.

A smile crept up the lips of my cousin, "Shall we take a dip?" Dropping her bag by my feet, she followed the inviting wave down the steps.

Just within the precincts of the temple, and the silence was already being breached! Her mother gaped, then hurried after her. On the beach she stood, allowing wave after wave to drench her. The mother was murmuring, perhaps offering prayers of thanks.

The old ecstasy and zest for life shone upon the daughter's face as she took a step into the water. The mother followed her, attempting to get a hold of her arm. She only smiled and moved a step further. The mother laughed happily, and rushing, caught the girl's arm. They stood side by side, laughing for pure joy. The air, the very sea seemed to settle down around them.

Piety - that was what each one of us felt in that moment. We began to climb down too.

We were almost at the bottom when the girl took a sudden step forward, off the shelf of sand, still smiling, escaping the restraining hand. Swiftly the tide took her into the sea. We could see her bobbing about, oblivious that she was so far from shore. With a piercing scream, the mother followed her, beating at the water with all her strength.

None of us dared follow. From where we were, we could see their sarees, the red of the daughter's and the white of the mother's, floating in the sea. But for a few moments

only. Then both red and white began to sink, or be drawn under.

Even as we watched, another huge wave began to form, sending us scurrying for the stairs. By the time we arrived wet and shaken at the top, we were older by many years.



Sheel Parekh is a writer, freelance editor and researcher as well as an Art of Living teacher. Her short stories and articles have appeared in anthologies, 'The Masseur' in *Indian Homosexuality*, (ed. Hoshang Merchant), magazines such as *Teacher Plus* ('Mother') and *EduCare*, and various newspapers such as *Deccan Chronicle* ('The Fall of the Tooth', 1997), *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*. Her book *A Pot of Light* (Spark-India, 2003) is India's first Big Book.

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