

Chapter 1

It was mid-morning. The north-westerly winter breeze brought the familiar smell of drying fish with it. It quietly crept into the breeze and sailed over acres of white stretches of land, covered with salt pans. The air was hot, dry, and humid. The stench of the fish was unbearable to new comers, but not so much to natives. It was the one sign of familiarity which assured them that all was right with the weather. No sudden storms and the breeze blew in right.

Just ahead of the salt pan was dry land. This land had a few huts. Stretched across it were rows and rows of poles with strings of fish stretched across them. Catch from the ocean, hung out to dry. The fisher folk took advantage of the high tide, to catch the fish and dry it. A short distance away, several *khaatlaas*¹ were covered with supine bodies. Still asleep after the day's catch was dealt with. Occasionally one of them stirred to swat a fly. The drying fish attracted them in swarms at times. The humidity and sweat attracted them to human beings. An onlooker wondered at how they managed to sleep at all. Had it not been for the strong sea breeze, which cut through the humidity, they would not have slept at all.

Situated close to the mouth of peninsular Gujarat, their quiet sleepy town had a long shallow beach but few fishing folk. Their main income actually came from tiny farms and the saltpans.

There were many tradespeople here. Their town was also a stopover for pilgrims' en-route to a historic temple in the nearby village.

¹ Khaatlas: beds made with rope and wood.

As Rita shut the lid of the new solar cooker, she heard the phone squealing away inside. Solar cookers take so long to cook and have to be monitored.

Now, who could that be? It was rare to receive calls in this part of the world. People usually dropped in for all sorts of little things.

She hurriedly carried her portly self in, worried that the insistent ringing was going to wake up Somnath.

“Hello.”

“Hello...*Jai Shri Krishna*², Ritaji...it's Chandrabhabhi from Nathanagar.”

“*Jai Shri Krishna* Chandrabhabhi, how are you? How is everyone?”

“We are all fine. Your daughter has delivered a baby girl...”

“Praise the Lord. How are the mother and daughter?”

“They are both fine. We were hoping for a boy. But any child is His blessing.

“Yes. But this is only the first child. There will be more.”

“True, but the first child is a girl child. Of course, now we don't discriminate between boy and girl. Had it been a boy, Loknathji would have called himself.

“You are probably right. We will come and meet her next week. She should be with us after child's birth. That is the '*rivaj*'³.

“Come and give the child your blessings and call us before you come. We will send someone to meet you at the station.”

“Yes we will. *Jai shri krishna*.”

“*Jai shri krishna*”

² Jai shri Krishna: traditional form of greeting and farewell in the state of Gujarat, India.

³ Rivaj: custom

Rita went to the prayer room and thanked the lord. Rita was in her mid-fifties and had lived in this coastal town of Amligarh for as long as she could remember. Her folks had mentioned that they had moved here from Porbandar, when she was but a child. She had no recollection of that. Rita adjusted her saree as she went to wake up Somnath, her beloved husband. She paused before the mirror in the passage and contemplated the ravages that the salty breeze had wrought on her face. The lines around her cheek were deepening into shallow grooves almost like the tyre marks on a sandy beach. Her hair had lost its jet blackness and given way to an unusual mixture of silver grey and white. The news she had just received would soon turn the grey into a bright white. She was worried about Lehar, her daughter. Lehar's in-laws were still so old fashioned. The fact that their oldest daughter-in law had given birth to a girl would be a big disappointment for them. Now, Lehar might be treated badly.

Somnath was a moneylender and a landlord and was proud of his lineage. He was a descendent of powerful and rich people. His family had lived in Amligarh for generations and had the biggest house in the town. Or did, until the tourist trade brought in prosperity, and with it more bungalows and hotels.

Somnath was an early riser. He had a routine. He went for his walks, fed the birds, had a cup of tea in the town square, chatted with his old friends and finally came home to perform puja. Somnath was used to having a large breakfast, which included '*theplas*⁴' and '*farsan*⁵'. He would then go to his office in the market, where he would

⁴ Theplas:soft Indian flatbread typical of Gujarati cuisine

⁵ Farsan:Savoury snacks

read the paper and study his account books. By 2 p.m., he would retire for his afternoon siesta. Twenty-three odd years of marriage had taught Rita one thing. Somnath could not be disturbed during his siesta. Surely, this news would change their lives. Somnath had to be told. The last occasion he had been disturbed was when Lehar had declared that she wanted to marry Samar. She steeled herself as she went into the bedroom.

It was about 2:30 p.m. and Somnath was snoring. The '*desi ghee*' rotis⁶ that he consumed daily, reflected in his fat belly, which was heaving up and down in a rhythmic fashion. His face wore a frown and even in his sleep he looked quite stern. Perhaps the call had disturbed him. His face had fewer lines than hers. The little hair he had was tied into a ponytail at the back and was quite white. A few years older than her, he had turned fifty a few days ago. As she went towards him, she was filled with a sense of trepidation at how he would react. He had so badly wanted a grandson.

Somnath suddenly stirred and woke up only to find his wife peering down at him rather anxiously. "What do you want? Can't a man catch a few winks without being disturbed?" he muttered in an irritated tone.

"Chandrabhabhi, Lehar's mother in-law just called from Nathanagar. Our daughter has delivered a baby."

"Praise the Lord. A boy, I hope?"

⁶ Desi ghee rotis: Indian flatbread with clarified butter

“No, a girl has been born.”

“Oh, dear! Chandrabhabhi must have been upset...” Somnath’s brows furrowed and his pleasant smile was replaced with a look of anxiety.

“She did not say much...but she did mention that she was hoping for a boy and that in this day and age, youngsters do not deliver more than one child, anyway.”

“Our poor Lehar...what will happen to her now?”

“Yes, we must prepare to go to Nathanagar to bring her home for ‘*suvahad*’⁷. The child must stay with us for three months.”

“Isn’t it too soon for her to travel?”

“Probably, but Chandrabhabhi thinks she will be better off here.”

“Obviously. The child is a girl child. She may not be better off anywhere except with a boy child. Still, better that she listens to taunts here than in her *sasra*⁸. People will make nasty comments. Samar is their eldest son. And this is the first child born in the family after more than fifteen years and it is a girl. Of course, people will comment,” said Somnath.

“Don’t say such things. Do you know what our daughter will be subjected to now? Only women know what they have to go through. How is it her fault that a girl has been born? It is the boy’s genes which are defective,” Ritabhabhi replied crossly.

“True, but we will also have to listen to people’s remarks. There will be gossip. They are descendants of a royal family, after all,” sighed Somnath. He decided against completing his siesta and got out of the bed and put on his *pagdi*⁹.

⁷ Suvahvad: period of rest for mother and newly born which takes place at parents’ house.

⁸ Sasra: in-laws house

⁹ Pagdi: turban

“Yes, we will be treated badly too. Who can decide what will happen to our daughter? But the good lord above will take care of all his children. Now go and book our tickets for Nathanagar. And do not forget to book a jeep or car for our return journey.” Ritabhabhi had a way of handling her husband. While she was scared of him, she did treat him like a child at times.

She watched Somnath’s back as he made his way through the deserted mid-morning streets. Middle age had made him more chauvinistic in his thinking. He had acquired no wisdom. Dear lord, what will become of Lehar in that strange house?

Somnath and Rita had three children, Lehar, Neeta and Chetan. Her younger daughter, Neeta too was now married and settled in another town, while their son Chetan was in Ahmedabad for further studies.

Lehar was their eldest daughter and had been married over a year ago to Samar, the rich boy from Nathanagar. It was a love match. She had met him in Ahmedabad, where she along, with her younger brother and sister, were pursuing higher studies. Her love marriage had caused a lot of needless gossip in the town and their community. Luckily, the boy Samar was from the same community and from a good family. Rita could still recall the day that Lehar had called and said that she would be spending a weekend at her friend Roma’s house in Nathanagar. Rita could not refuse permission. After all, what harm could be done in two days. She was sure Roma was from a respectable family. She had talked to Roma’s mother on the phone. If she had known that her daughter was more interested in her friend Roma’s brother Samar, she would have thought twice before allowing Lehar to stay there. Her younger ones had also conspired with Lehar in keeping her secret. Luckily, Samar was a well-behaved

boy and proposed through proper channels. There had been some reluctance from the boy's family, but Samar's mother Chandrabhabhi, was keen that her son should be happy with the wife he chooses. That was important. As long as the mother-in-law was happy, there was not much reason to worry. However, Loknathji, the boy's father, was quite unhappy. They were related to the royal family of Nathanagar and wanted a better match for their eldest son. Somehow the marriage did go through. Chandrabhabhi must have persuaded Loknathji. After all, her Lehar was such a beautiful girl and well-mannered too. Somnath had been very happy with Lehar's choice. But Rita had been a little worried. Now, after the baby girl's birth, her anxiety had increased. There had been a lot of talk about some tradition where a girl child was not welcome if they were firstborn. However, those were stories from the past. No one really cared much these days, except make noises about how much better it would be had it been a boy.

Somnath reached the market place. A dog gave a low, lazy growl and lay down again. The hot air and the fish smell had made everyone drowsy. In this sleepy little town, the train and the bus determined their period of activity. And at 3 pm, the people were still deep in their afternoon snooze. Better now, than in the evening, when there would be more people and

more questions. He would have to stay away from the teashop for the next few days, until the word spread by itself and people adjusted to the news. Of course, they would soon start pouring in. A girl's birth is not good news and he could already see the

pitiful looks which would come with the well wishes. Well, at least now he would not need to distribute *mithai*¹⁰.

How would he face Lehar's in-laws? Maybe he should send Rita by herself. He could always say that he could not get two tickets. Then, they might have to go by road. As it is, they were returning by road. Jeeps were in great demand, and to hire one, usually cost the earth. They had never bought a car. Though his children had often urged them to buy one. They rarely travelled out of town and he never felt the need for unnecessary expenses. Somnath was quite a miser in his money management.

The stationmaster, Mehtaji, was snoozing as the fan whirred above. His thin figure was sprawled out on the cane recliner next to the window. His spectacles were still on his nose. His white coat was thrown over the back of his chair. Mehtaji's assigned desk was covered with dust. Somnath found the bell and slammed his hand over it.

"Trring..." the bell on the table resounded harshly! However, it was not enough to wake Mehtaji. He gave a low grunt and went back to sleep.

Somnath went nearer. After all, Somnath too had a standing in this community. He was a rich landlord and his daughter was married into a good family. And Mehtaji..., Mehtaji was just a government employee.

"Mehtaji..., wake up", he shook the stationmaster by the shoulders.

Mehtaji suddenly leaped up and growled, "Who's that? Who woke me up?"

He adjusted his specs to get a better view of the intruder. "Oh, it is you Somnathji. Jai Shri Krishna. Welcome, *Bhale Padharo*¹¹! What are you doing here? You are not

¹⁰ Mithai:sweets

¹¹ Bhale Padharo: welcome or come on in, as said to guests.

taking your nap today?" He reluctantly went back to his seat and indicated that Somnath should sit down in the visitor's chair.

"Jai Shri Krishna, Mehtaji." Somnath pulled out the chair and settled down.

"Excuse me Somnathji. This heat is making me drowsy. And then there are no trains at this time of the day and no travellers either. But we have to be on duty. The government should take the weather into consideration, before deciding on our time of duty. We should get time off during the hot hours. But what can we do? We have to be on duty. What brings you here? Planning to travel, huh?"

"Yes, Mehtaji! I want two tickets for Nathanagar."

"Nathanagar?" Mehtaji exclaimed with signs of excitement." Visiting the royals, huh? *Wah, wah*¹², Somnathji, you move around in exalted circles. Travelling by first class? Nathanagar is not far and you, being related to the royalty should travel in style.
"

"They are not royalty. The government has done away with all that. You should know that. They are just related to the descendants of the royal family."

"Same difference, Somnathji. Same difference. I am sure that they have traces of royal blood too. The royalty cannot hide, however hard they try."

"No, no. I am tired of repeating this." Somnath said, with obvious signs of exasperation. "They are very far relations of the royals."

"So you say. So you say." Mehtaji winked and gave him a knowing look.

¹² Wah,wah:wow

He glanced at the register in front of him. It was a huge ledger book with lots of red and green lines with all sorts of numbers entered in most of them. It reminded Somnath of his *khata chopdi*¹³.

“When do you want to leave? The next train leaves the day after tomorrow,” said Mehtaji.

Somnath fell into a deep thought. If he booked the ticket for the next train, which would be here on Wednesday, then he would have to be back by Saturday. Or maybe earlier. They were travelling back by road. On the other hand, if he delayed their departure by a week, then they would not have to face the immediate wrath of Lehar’s in-laws. Who knows what Loknathji would say? Chandrabhabhi had already been so cold towards his Rita. He was sure Lehar’s father-in-law would be absolutely furious. He had been against the marriage anyway.

“Somnathji, now you are snoozing, and with your eyes wide open,” Mehtaji’s voice interrupted his brooding thoughts.

“Should I book the tickets for the next train, the Gramini Express, which passes through the day after tomorrow?”

“No, Mehtaji, not so soon. We have to make preparations.”

“Then, on Saturday?”

“No...”

“Then, why have you come so early? It seems you don’t want to bless your grandchild. Excuse me for saying that,” said Mehtaji, irritated that his snooze had been unnecessarily interrupted. “Somnathji, these days no one travels first class to

¹³ Khata chopdi – accounts book

Nathanagar. The trains are always empty for next few stations till you reach Porbandar. You can book tickets anytime. I will give you reservations even on the same morning if you wish."

"I don't want to travel first class. And you know Lehar's mother well. She will not let me rest till she has the tickets booked."

"Yes, yes. So true. Ritabhabhi will feel better with tickets in her hand. Okay. Should I book them for Monday? It is an auspicious day for beginning a journey."

"Yes, do that."

"And the return tickets?"

Somnath was dreading this question all along. Now, he would have to tell him that he was returning by jeep with Lehar and his (he swallowed at the thought) granddaughter. Better not to say that it was a baby girl. Better to pretend that he did not know. But Rita would have already told people. What was the point of hiding it? They would find out sooner or later.

"Now you are dreaming again, Somnathji. Since when have you started thinking so much? And you look so morose, so unlike your usual self. Is something wrong? Your daughter, our Lehar is to be a mother soon, right? God forbid that something may be wrong there. She is in good health, isn't she?" Mehtaji gave him an inquiring look.

"Yes, yes she is in good health, and I hope she continues to be. In fact, she has delivered a very healthy baby."

"That is good news, Somnathji. Congratulations. You should be happy. Then why are you so sad?"

"It is a baby girl," said Somnath in a low dejected voice.

“Oh. I see. But even then, she is healthy, isn’t she? And she is just the first child. There will be many more. It is good for a girl to be born earlier. She will grow up and help her mother raise her younger brothers. Don’t worry, Somnathji. In this day and age, a girl and boy are equals. Why, the government even gives free education to girls. Come on Somnathji, never mind if you don’t distribute mithai. At least smile and pretend that you are happy. Otherwise what will people say?”

“Mehtaji, how can I smile? I am not happy. I have raised two daughters. I know how difficult it is to have a daughter in the family. And with Lehar, her first born is a daughter. Her in-laws are quite traditional and conservative in certain matters. Do you know what my Lehar will go through now? They may treat her badly, until she has a baby boy.”

“Somnathji, I am sure that Lehar’s in-laws are more progressive in their thinking. After all, they live in a big town and are all educated. Your son-in-law has even travelled out of this country, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, yes. Our sleepy little coastal town is very small and backward compared to Nathanagar. But they are still from our community and uphold traditional values. I know what they will think and say. I rue the day that I sent Lehar to Ahmedabad for higher studies, where she met this rich boy, Samar. Lehar’s mother says we made a mistake by agreeing to the marriage. But what could we do? Once a girl goes out with a boy, people start gossiping. That is our culture. Gossip travels fast. Faster than us,” he nodded his head sagely.

“Somnathji, lighten up. Now, don’t recriminate your past actions. Whatever has happened in the past is now over. Look towards the future. Are you planning to stay in Nathanagar for long? When do you want the return tickets for? Take my advice and travel first class. That might impress Lehar’s in-laws. Of course, if you travel by AC chair car, they will realise that you are no small fry. That they should take care when they talk to you or your daughter. Never mind if you have not descended from a royal family. Your grandfather was the village head once upon a time. And you are a property owner. You are a rich landlord,” said Mehtaji.

“Yes, yes. You are right. If Lehar’s in-laws think of me as a rich and powerful, then they might hesitate before treating her badly. They will treat her with respect too. I must take plenty of gifts for the family. And we will return by jeep. While going, you can book first class tickets for us. If I book tickets in AC chair car, they will expect me to book their tickets by the same in the future. That is not a good idea then, eh? Thank you, for your advice, Mehtaji. You are so wise. See, what difference a well-educated man like you can make to our Amligarh. After all, you have travelled all over India and you have so much experience with all kinds of people. Thank you, Mehtaji. I will always remember this.”

“Somnathji, you are embarrassing me now. I am just doing my duty. See, if you travel by first class, the railways get more money. And our town will also get noticed, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Somnath was feeling more settled, now that the travel arrangements seemed clearer.

“Okay, here are your tickets booked for Monday from Amligarh to Nathanagar via Gramini Express, for first class. See, they are green in colour. It’s all written here. And that is my signature. That will be Rs. 500/- for two tickets.”

“Rs. 500/-! Gone are the days when my father used to travel to Nathanagar in ten anna.”

“Those were the days of the British Raj, Somnathji. Things were cheap. The British looked after us. But they also looted us,” Mehtaji spoke with the importance of a learned man, swelling with some pride at his position in life. Even a rich landlord like Somnath was in awe of the railways.

“Yes, yes, now we have to take care of ourselves. True, true.”

“Jai shri krishna”

“Jai shri krishna”