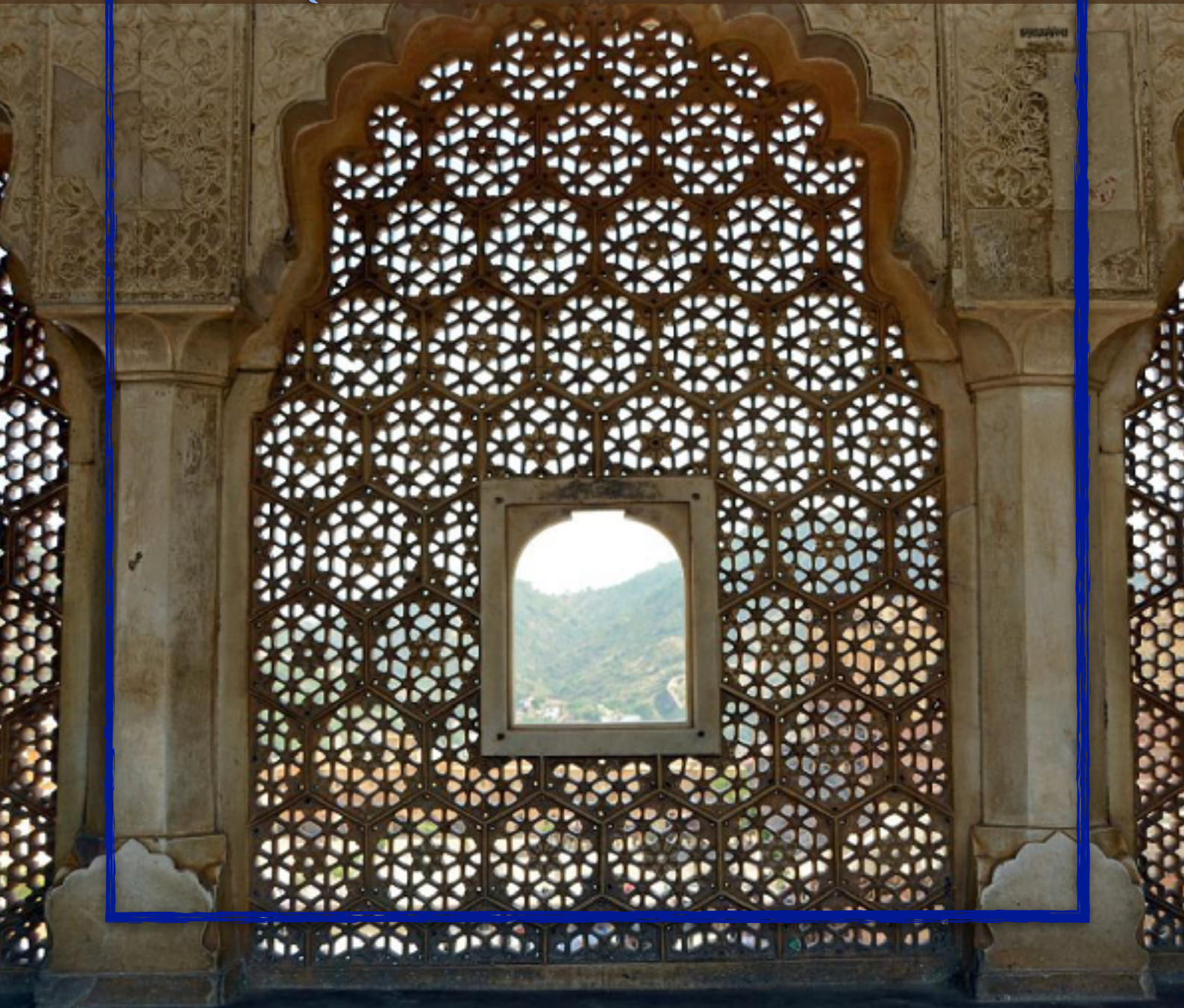




# Priceless Gem



# Anmol Mothi

(Priceless Gem)

A BritishRaj Adventure

The period - Sepoy Mutiny times (mid-19th century British India)



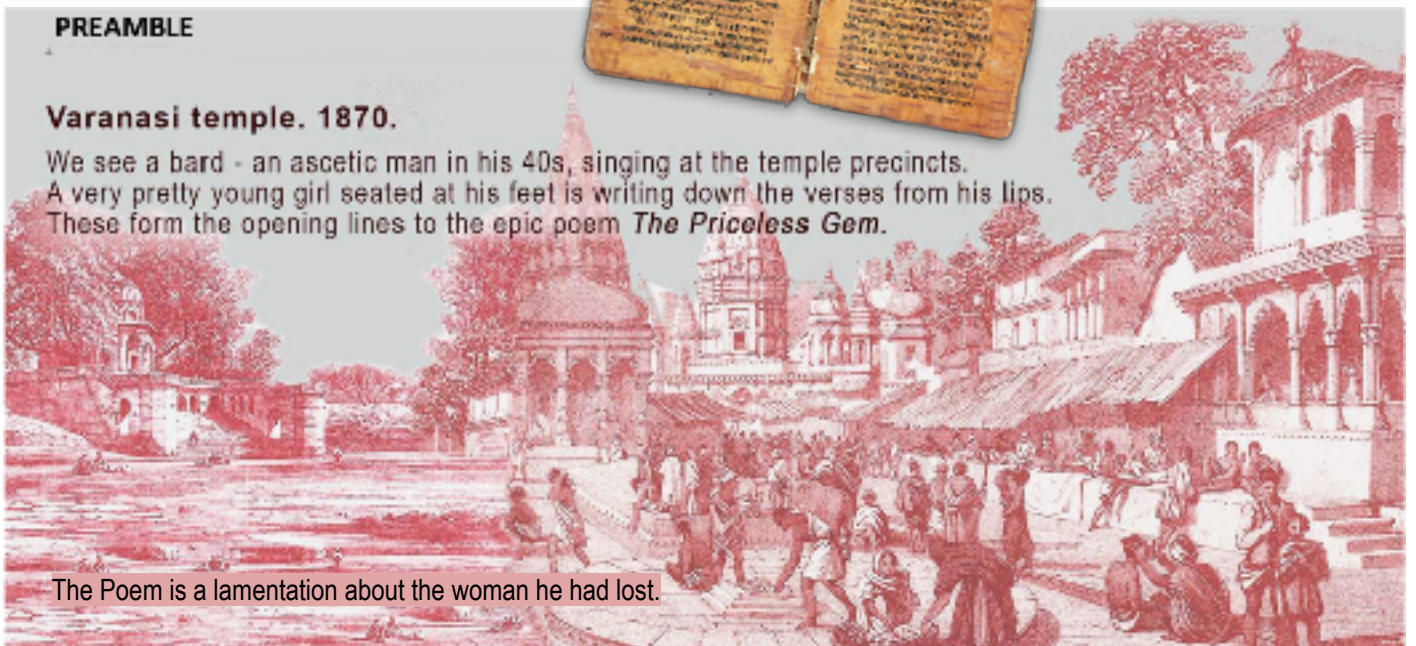
A Prince and his Bard meet a Queen and her Maid.  
The two Rascals are out to seduce the Queen.  
The Rascals — Prince Samir & Poet Durgdas.  
The Queen — Kingdom of Nawagh's disposed Princess Meera Bai.  
Chhoti — the Queen's maid, bound to protect her mistress.



## PREAMBLE

### Varanasi temple. 1870.

We see a bard - an ascetic man in his 40s, singing at the temple precincts.  
A very pretty young girl seated at his feet is writing down the verses from his lips.  
These form the opening lines to the epic poem *The Priceless Gem*.



The Poem is a lamentation about the woman he had lost.

# अनमोल मोती

Anmol Mothi - *Priceless Gem*

## A BritishRaj Adventure

### PART ONE

*the fort interiors, a queen imprisoned*

### PART TWO

*over the plains of ganges, a bird set free*

### PART THREE

*the romantic equations - a queen & her maid, a prince & his bard*

### PART FOUR

*the showdowns*



### APOLOGIES

This is based on a story kernel told to me in 1996 by B. R. Prasad.

This has been written 'just like that'.

While writing, I haven't referred to historical records, archaeology or sociological facts.

In fact, the last time I did those was in early 1990s during Bible Shooting Times.

With regards to British Raj & 19<sup>th</sup> century India, I haven't refreshed my knowledge in 2 decades.

I have set only the story plot & character interactions (shades of Kipling). Have left research and placement of events for experts in the field who at a latter date may work fresh on the topics.

I didn't want to complicate it for them with a half-baked research of mine.

No archaic/ period coloration has been done on the dialogues either.

Culture, Traditions, Literature & Art inputs of the era and the area is largely from the knowledge I had garnered during 1989 to 1992 from our *Bhooshanji* - Bhooshan Banmali - a great Urdu Pandit of Allahabad, who wrote the dialogs for my serial *Bible ki Kahaniyan*.

The princely state Nawagh is fictitious – an amalgamation of 'Nagpur' & 'Awadh'.

The character Queen Meera Bai, of course has political overtones of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

Teenaged Damodar Rao - adopted son of late Maharaj Gangadhar Rao and Rani Lakshmi Bai, was heir to the kingdom of Jhansi. The British rejected the claim that the boy was the successor to his adopted father's throne. Lord Dalhousie decided to annex the State of Jhansi under the Doctrine of Lapse. Rani Lakshmi Bai on 17 June 1858 died defending Jhansi against the East India Company troops.

Jijo. December 2012.

# ABSTRACTS

- avoidable for the first time reader

Q. Hey genius, name two of India's greatest '*Maha-Kavya*', *prem kahani* – (epic poems, of love)

A. *Meghasāndesa* by Kalidasa .. is that one?

Q. Yes! Right on track ... continue...

A. Written in 1<sup>st</sup> century at Takshasila, *Meghasāndesa* is the story of a Yaksha who was banished from his homeland. He is sending a love letter to his sweetheart using a cloud as his messenger.

Q. Now, the second ..?

A. Is there another?

Q. Yes, The answer being *Anmol Mothi* - Priceless Gem

A. Newer heard of it!

Q. It's relatively recent. Written by *an unknown poet* during the British Raj (circa 1870 A.D.) at Varanasi. The story is a lamentation about the woman he had lost. The poet's ambition to do another *Meghasāndesa* caused him this irreparable loss. How ironic!

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Logline:

Mid 19th Century India. (British raj)

The Kingdom of Nawagh.

Queen Meera Bai, imprisoned in a fortress plots to overthrow the East India Company and regain her father's kingdom, but is thwarted when she becomes embroiled in intrigue and falls in love.

Tagline:

Romance, war and Intrigue, on the eve of the 1857 Mutiny.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

1870. On the steps of a great temple in Varanasi leading to the Ganges, a despondent poet begins to recite the heart-rending epic poem that he has composed, Anmo/ Mothi (The Priceless Gem), the story of the woman he loved and lost. He begins narrating a story from a decade ago...

Queen Meera Bai of Nawagh - in solitude and isolated from the world, is imprisoned within a women's-only fortress in Sabalgarh, far from her homeland Nawagh. The East India Company is eager to gain more knowledge of the mind of the young Queen. John Blaker, who heads the Company's 'dirty works' (espionage) department, suspects she is plotting to overthrow English reign and regain her father's kingdom.



## ABSTRACTS

An adventurer - Prince Samir, and his companion - poet Durgdas, come at the behest of Blaker to inveigle Samir into the Queen's affections.

Prince Samir is more than just an informer. He has a more sinister purpose in mind — to get into the good graces of the Company, and to ascend to the throne of Nawagh himself.

But the Queen is clever and diplomatic. Hidden behind layers of muslin curtains and veils, she is inscrutable. Samir's companion - the poet Durgdas, finds himself in deep admiration of the mysterious Queen, and sympathises with her. For, the Queen has seen nothing of the world beyond the fortress. He senses in her a deep yearning to experience life outside the constraints of her position.

The women of the fortress win the admiration of Durgdas and Samir. Not only is the Queen skilled — but her bodyguard, Chhoti, is well-versed in martial arts. While the Queen and Durgdas engage in literary sparring, Samir and Chhoti also duel.

A complex situation ensues. While Samir attempts to secure the interest of Chhoti to further his own purposes, Durgdas finds his relationship with his friend and patron becoming increasingly strained. At the same time, while Durgdas begins to feel a chivalrous love for the Queen, he does find Chhoti intriguing, and comes into conflict when Samir, intent on his plans, contemplates seducing the bodyguard. Sexual tension simmers between Chhoti and Samir.

Soon, the Queen asks Samir and Durgdas to accompany Chhoti for the purpose of conducting her late father's last rites. This plan conceals another motive: to compensate those who were loyal and killed during her late father's patriotic war with the English, as the Queen sees herself as having a duty to care for those who had supported her father.

Samir and Durgdas suspect that the Queen is in fact funding a mutiny. They all too readily agree, in order to keep an eye on her in line with the instructions of the East India Company. But as they accompany Chhoti on her mission, both Samir and Durgdas find their affection for Chhoti deepening; mingling love, friendship, tenderness and romantic attraction.

Will Samir and Durgdas find themselves as rivals for Chhoti's love? Who will win Chhoti's hand? And will Samir's ambition triumph-over his feelings of love, and spur him to betray Chhoti and the Queen?



# ABSTRACTS

## MAIN CHARACTERS



CHHOTI (mid twenties), the queen's bodyguard.

Full of coiled tension, tight as a wound-up spring, Chhoti is an expert in martial arts rivalling Prince Samir in combat. She is lithe and muscular and possesses other surprising skills: sleight of hand and ventriloquism that give her an advantage in a skirmish. Chhoti is practical, easy to read, and, despite her skills, innocent. She takes pleasure in the simple acts of life and in experiencing the world. She observes and engages with the world outside the fortress of Sabalgarh with childlike joy and enthusiasm, which endears her to both Durgdas and Samir, who come to feel great affection and protective tenderness for her.

QUEEN MEERA BAI (mid twenties).

Orphaned when her father is killed in battle by the British, she is the sole heir to the kingdom of Nawagh. Since her father's death, she has been placed in Sabalgarh fort, completely run by women — and surrounded by a garrison of the East India Company. Queen Meera Bai has not left the fortress since her father's death. Taught by expert tutors, she has grown into a refined, erudite woman, of great intelligence and accomplishment, with a gift for diplomacy. Beloved of her people, and genuinely caring for them, she is an ideal ruler. It seems surprising to the East India Company that such a woman, so skilled in the arts of governance, has no desire to seek out her father's kingdom — so they suspect her of ulterior motives. The surprising truth, discovered by Samir and Durgdas at the end of the series, is that Queen Meera Bai and Chhoti *may in fact be the same person*. That Chhoti *could have been a guise* through which the Queen moved through the world. Queen Meera Bai is like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, fighting for her kingdom, upholding her duty to her people.

SAMIR, an adventurer, a prince, swaggering, brash and intelligent. A knave.

But Samir's first loyalty is to himself. Very ambitious and full of intrigue. He seeks the kingdom of Nawagh, and to gain the good graces of the British Governor General. But his ambitious nature is at war with his generosity of spirit.

## ABSTRACTS

**DURGDAS**, a poet seeking greatness.

In search of a royal patron, he attaches himself to Prince Samir. Durgdas desires an audience that can understand his craft, and discovers that in Queen Meera Bai. With a sensitive and poetic nature, Durgdas understands the Queen and empathises with her deeply — this puts him at odds with Samir, who seeks to displace the Queen. Durgas, while admiring the Queen, is also fond of Chhoti, who eventually becomes his wife. The poet, at times, seems to be caught between these two women, and till the end does not realise that *the two could be one and the same person*. When he does, he realises that he lost great love, and composes the epic, Anmol Mothi, lamenting his loss.

**JOHN BLAKER** A senior official in the East India Company.

Heading the Dirty Work's department and the Governor General's adjutant, Blaker is in charge of keeping an eye and spying on the Indian princely heirs. He knows Samir and proposes that he head to Sabalgarh Fort to insinuate himself into the Queen's company and find out what she is up to.

**CHARLES COKERBOOKE**

The Senior East India Company Official who is assigned to visiting Sabalgarh fort and liaising with the Queen.

**THOMAS "TOM" LANG**

Based on (the real life) John Lang, the Australian writer, journalist and lawyer who represented Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. As an Australian he has an irreverent attitude towards the British. His impudent defense of an Indian merchant who is fleeced by the Company brings him to the attention of Rani Lakshmibai, who asks him to argue her case against the British. Although he loses this case, he is noted for being critical of the Company, and it's 'despotic' ways, standing up for the rights of Indians. In Anmol Mothi, he is the lawyer employed by Queen Meera Bai to legally represent her and argue her case against the Company in London.



# The Preamble

## Calcutta.

Located on the north side of Dalhousie square (built in 1773 by Thomas Lyon), is the Government House of the East India Company.



The man may have been of low birth. But exuding a creative air he walks with an ambition-driven determination into *Belvedere Hue Tavern* behind the Government House Calcutta. Born Haridas, he is a poet. Apprenticed under *Pandit Neeraj Bhavani* of Benarus, he now assumes a nom de plume Durgdas. That much done well, he is now seeking the patronage of a wealthy lord or an affluent royal who would financially support his creative talents. This starving yet ambitious bard is unhesitant to introduce himself as “Great poet Durgdas, major disciple to the late Pandit Neeraj Bhavani ”. And to any prospective benefactor he would also add “I would become another Kalidasa, someday ”.

[Kālidāsa was a Classical Sanskrit author who is often considered ancient India's greatest playwright and dramatist. He wrote the epic poem MEGHA-SANDESA in the 4th century at Takshasila. It is the story of a Yaksha banished from his homeland sending a love letter to his sweetheart using a cloud as his messenger].

“Kali — who?” ... Now, that was a question in his inebriated state when Poet Durgdas was first introduced to Prince Samir. Samir was celebrating a duel in which he had vanquished an opponent. Durgdas didn't walk out at this demeaning question. By the science of cosmology, his meeting this person Samir surely held potential merits for poet Durgdas. Moreover, the poet found that there is a boyish charm about this person who calls himself ‘Prince’.

Since not a Kalidasa, yet, poet Durgdas was given an opportunity to sing a few Quawali (!) couplets by Prince Samir. At least it was a hit with the *nautch* (dancing) girls. At this, Samir realized that with Durgdas's talent around him, it would add esteem to his personal charisma which otherwise lacked any semblance of art or culture.

“Stick with me Durg, with you I can get more of food, wine and women at Palaces, Ballrooms and Durbars” declared Samir.

“Majesty Samir, Huzoor! .... What about a royal sponsorship for me to author an epic poem?” was Durgdas's concern.

“Yes that too ... Sure! As soon as I command a royal court” was the promise “You shall adore my court as the royal poet and then the commission to compose a national anthem shall also be yours. Till then, address me as ‘Sam’ .... dispense with the majesty” retorted Samir. That’s how the two principal characters in our story met.

## Cawnpore.

Our two rascals, Prince Samir - already an accomplished one; Poet Durgdas - yet to fully overcome the morals instilled in him by elders, are soon on a merry ride that takes them from Indian princely palaces to English ballrooms. [Staged at places of interest - value addition. Historicity. Production Number.]

# The Preamble

At Summerhouse Cawnpore, they were at the banquet of *Lady Susan Marchioness Dalhousie* [It could also be Countess Charlotte Canning]

While he was replenishing an Englishman's glass of port, among the gossip around the banquet table was a subject that tickled Samir's ears - Queen Meera Bai of Nawagh.

Samir's benefactor, a not-so-honorable John Blaker - the Governor General's adjutant assigned to 'dirty works', was having an informal discussion with the Senior Company Official - *Charles Cokerbrooke*, just back from a visit to a place called 'Sabalgarh Fort' in Scindia Kingdom - a British protectorate.

That was where Meera Bai of Nawagh was imprisoned.

It has been now 14 years since the rebellious king Raghoji II with most of his family members were killed in the battle of annexation of the kingdom of Nawagh. His sole surviving heir, little princess Meera Bai (a minor), was taken into captivity when her aunt Bakhra Bai offered to surrender. Along with the members of the harem and their female guards, they were taken six days journey south-west and put under house arrest in the palace at Sabalgarh Fort. It became a 'women-only' enclave.

The Company had given Bakhra Bai - a very pragmatic woman who negotiated the terms of surrender and thus got into the good books of the British, quite a few concessions. One of them was to take with them to Sabalgarh the fortune inherited by Meera Bai from her father's share of the Nawagh treasury.

It has been some time since Meera Bai's aunt Bakhra Bai had expired. Princess Meera Bai by now would have become *Her Majesty, Queen Meera Bai*. And today she could be anywhere between 27 to 32 years of age. She was always guarded by a loyal female-alone battalion. A concern today for The Company is that given the bloodline of the late King Raghoji - Meera Bai's father, it would be no wonder that a mutiny was already being brewed there.

"Oh, I do have ears in women's quarters of every princely state ... the Sabalgarh Queen's palace is no exception!" Our hero Prince Samir said this aloud so it shall fall on John Blaker's ears.

John Blaker heard the boast from behind him and suspected that the rascal was exaggerating. Because, The Company had a contingent posted around the prison fort at Sabalgarh. Though they were forbidden to enter beyond the women-guard-posts, they knew who went in and went out of the fort. And, for the last many years it was no more than servants with provisions (from the nearby township/ settlement) and messengers with official communication. If this fellow behind him had connection inside the Sabalgarh women's enclave, Blaker was not aware of it.

Now, princess Meera Bai of Nawagh has all the trappings of some of the women royals of Indian kingships who had caused headaches for foreign occupiers.

[Rani Chennamma, Rani Abbakka, Rani Avantibai ... so goes the list in history].

That makes the the John Company (East India Company) apprehensive.

The girl has never seen outside world after her childhood. Now that she has come of age and become 'Queen Meera Bai', The English Company would like to know about her plans - if she has any ambition, any rebellion in the works, to regain her kingdom.

## **Sabalgarh Fort.**

It is the first time after the demise of her aunt Bakhra Bai, an official of the Company was visiting Meera Bai in her prison palace enclave. Charles Cokerbrooke was

## The Preamble

making a periodic assessment visit to ascertain that all is well under the terms of Nawagh Surrender & Abdication, the treaty negotiated by the late Bakhra Bai. The princess, while growing up, was provided with esteemed male tutors who were commissioned from afar to teach the girl during her captivity. These tutors always resided outside the fort and were escorted everyday into the hall and supervised by the Company's guards while they taught her on a daytime schedule.

Company Officer Charles Cokerbrooke was received cordially by elegantly dressed women servants and made to sit in a durbar hall adjacent to the central courtyard of the Queen's palace. Beyond the large thin muslin curtains that segregated the visitor's space from that of the hostess, outline of a regal female was seen as she made her entrance to recline on a divan. That was Meera Bai.

Her facial features were further obscured by the veil she was wearing. But while she addresses her visitor, through the embroidered *Dhaka-muslin* drape came her voice clear as crystal. It communicated authority. Her body language, seen in silhouette against the hall's mughlai arched windows, confirmed the earnestness in her voice. In her talk, Meera Bai seemed to be well aware of what was happening in the outside world. In fact, she knew almost as much as The Company official himself! Really, her tutors had done a wonderful job during the past decade in imparting language skills, arts and statecraft to this young woman. Given the fact that when most legitimate royal heirs were either stupid or decadent, and yet destined to take-up kingship in many princely states of British India, here was Meera Bai - a surprising exception.

### Cawnpore.

Her conversations, reported by Cokerbrooke, is found to be wholly pleasant, courteous ... and diplomatic!! But that worries Blaker. Everything reported from Sabalgarh was too neat and clean. In a sub-continent awash with tales of daily royal debaucheries of its Rajahs & Ranis, here was a women-only-palace with no scandalous activity! It raised suspicion. Are the proceedings to a mutiny also being shielded from the eyes and ears of The Company ?

### Sabalgarh Fort.

The voice from beyond the thin muslin drape had assured Cokerbrooke that she has no ambition to win back her father's kingdom. This, without any disdain she expressed firmly, when the officer raised the topic of succession. Yet, one could have detected the sadness in voice when she talked about her desire to see the outside world.

On that, Cokerbrooke avowed her ...

"Ladyship, that's very much possible if you meet a stipulation. Signed by your late aunt, the terms of the 'Nawagh Abdication' decrees that The Company has final authority in ratifying your association with any consort you would choose".

For the first time the regal voice from beyond the muslin drape which sounded mature all along, gave out an amused girlish laughter before getting up - thus announcing the end of the audience she had granted him. It was the elderly Englishman who blushed.

### Cawnpore.

Poet Durgdas was hovering in the shadows during the banquet. Furtively sampling a few dishes now and then, he was keeping himself available if Samir suddenly wanted to impress the ladies with some authentic Indian couplet - praising Queen

# The Preamble

Victoria, of course. But today some English children were ushered in by their governess, and they were keeping everybody attentive with their sonnet recitations. Blaker says to Samir

“Why not try your charm on the Queen? She must be of prime age now ... for a nuptial bed. That ought to keep her out of mutinies and battlefields”.

John Blaker knew that Samir dallied with many members of Nawagh royalty who were either loyal, disloyal or in-between in their relationship with the English masters. Samir boldly takes the bait

“Can Blaker Sahib put in a good word for this prince to the Governor General?”

Blaker gives a snort that bordered on insult. And he says

“Sure Sam, I shall make a good recommendation. Just get us the information. Is the queen really passive as per the Nawagh Abdication? ... Just that much. No need for any sword fight or lady killing. Good luck”

This was just the opportunity Prince Rajohi Samir was waiting for.

Because, Samir also had not-quite-legitimate a stake in the Nawaghi kingdom's royal family lineage ... different from that of Meera Bai's though.

And, our 'prince' is tall, fair, athletic, skilled horse rider, marksman and a swordsman. His knowledge in English language & customs endears him to the foreign masters, while his aspiration to free his country from foreign dominion makes him rub shoulders with the native elite.

“He is our future! ... Here is a Chandragupt Maurya, a Shivaji Bhosale or a Ranjit Singh in the making. Just the right man to forge a native ‘Hindustani Empire’!” Those were the words of the person who first took Poet Durgdas to meet Prince Samir.

This aura around our ‘prince’ is one that is self promoted – nobody else subscribe much to this. Prince Rajohi Samir changes coat easily in the company of East India officialdom. There he doesn't mind admitting that he is of an (illegitimate) Irish lineage also. He has fantastic tales of himself growing up (a la Kipling's *Kim*) within an English army camp at Meerut. When he bumps into them, he strikes companionship with English soldiers who were his colleagues during a supposedly short stint in the British Army. He becomes ‘Sam’ to his English benefactors. Being a ladies man, a loveable and charming rouge is our Prince Samir.



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*Anmol Mothi*  
**PART ONE**

**the fort interiors**  
**a queen imprisoned**

Poet Durgdas had overheard bits and pieces of Blaker-Samir conversation. Wow, some recommendation was about to be made to top man Dalhousie! As soon as he caught Samir alone, naïve as he was, Durgdas broaches the subject of putting his ‘literary commission’ also to the ear of the Governor General!

“Nonsense!”

An irritated Samir chides Durgdas by reminding him that the English scarcely understood Sanskrit. Even on communications in native Devanagiri scripts, it needed people like Prince Samir who made their living as Duo-Bhashees (translators) to interpret the nuances to the English rulers.

“..... now Drug, be patient my chela, ... I have plans to acquire a royal court for myself ... and give you the chance to realize the dream of your lifetime ....”

Then Prince Samir with a sly smile and an expansive gesture states “Listen, I am going to seduce Queen Meera Bai ... and you are my Trojan horse”

In observing Durgdas’s puzzled expression Samir says “Oh, ... you haven’t heard of .. (snap, snap) what was that Greek crap? ah.. *Yiliad* ?” he added “*Trojan horse* is an expression for deception ... to storm a fort”.

“No Huzoor”, Durgdas shook his head “... not a *HORSE* ... but a *SWAN*!

Uh ...uh? You haven’t heard *Nala-charita*?”

With a romantic air Durgdas says “I would rather be a swan - the love facilitator, as in the poem of *Prince Nala courting Princess Damayanti*”

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That night over a rum cask of the *English Company* issue, Prince Samir outlines his plan. The first milestone was in Samir getting an audience with Meera Bai. Samir was confident that she won’t be able to resist his charm.

“Once that happens, in no time I shall win the Queen’s heart and *The Company*’s attention” ascertained Samir. “Keep the Queen in check, then *The Company* shall reward me with a slice of native Nawagh. If she has mutiny in mind, she shall lose ... and I shall get the fortune she has inherited” The Prince winks at his Poet.

Durgdas, a songsmith, found himself out of place in the world of Machiavellian statecraft and political skullduggery. He voices his genuine concern ... “What is my role in this *kapat natak* (sinister drama)?”

That evokes an amused “Ha! .. haah!” from Samir.

“My dear poet, you - *the next Kalidasa*, go in there first!”



The plan was as follows ... Durgdas is to go to Sabalgarh Fort in guise of a ... *hmmm? .. poet indeed!* ... requesting the queen for a patronage. What patronage can an imprisoned queen offer? Well, ... Durgdas would assume not only the role of an authority in literature, but also that of a genius in astrology.

He shall make a prediction that ***Meera Bai in the near future would ascend her father's throne!!***

As Samir chuckle, Durgdas blinks.

“My friend, you see the ploy?” Samir asks in a hoarse whisper “If she takes the bait, her aspiration to challenge *The Company*’s dominion is out in the open!”

With half the cask empty, Samir was becoming animated. But Durgdas doesn’t seem to relish the drama. With a face expression that resemble a lamb readied for slaughter, he asks “Suppose it is true ... that she has no such ambitions .. to get back her throne?”

With heartfelt sympathy for his friend, Samir answers “Oh, Drug, Drug, ... a celebrated poet of love, which you may become one day. A laureate in romantic verses, which even today you surely are. But I say Durgdas, you have no knowledge on human weakness ... especially that of a female when subjected to the art of seduction.” Prince Samir continued ... “If nothing else, you will plant the seed of desire for a throne in her mind ... when that grows, I shall step in. That shall help me to the keys of Nawagh Kingdom”

After a pause Samir asks “Well ... the question is, do you see a Kalidasa tomorrow in Nawagh’s court?”

That was an offer the poet couldn’t refuse. He consents to become part of any *kapat natak*.

“Still huzoor”, Durgdas observes “I think you need a *Chanakya* instead of a Durgdas. It took Chanakya to anoint a minor prince and establish the 200 year-long *Maurya* dynasty”.

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rooster fight/ peacock mating dance in the background

Continuing with his ‘Strategy to Seduce a Queen’, for the next few days Samir outlines the plan for Durgdas to enter Sabalgarh Fort. Durgdas had to do it without Samir accompanying or the English helping. The two friends repeatedly went step-by-step through all available information and drawings of the fort.

The fort comprised of an outer wall, the entry to which was guarded by the Company garrison. An inner wall had its entry gate with a women-guards’ house attached to it. Inside this were the Queen’s palace premises. The fort held a total of about 60 inmates including the royalty imprisoned there. All women guards and servants were from Nawagh. These women’s men-folk had ‘*once-a-year visitation and conjugal rights*’ at the staying quarters between the outside wall and the inner wall of the fort.

Samir briefs Durgdas as to all possible eventualities once he got inside the premises. The strategy was brilliant. The battle plans were iron clad. But, what Sam may have missed during his alleged stint in The Company’s army was a

dictum which states -- *‘As soon as the first shot of the battle is fired, all battle plans though carefully laid goes out of the window. From thence, the battle narrative would be written afresh later - as history’*. In this story too, that was what happened.

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**Sabalgarh Fort.** Hearing altercations at the gate of the outer wall, a 24 year old inmate [later we shall find her being addressed as ‘*Chhoti*’] looked up from the *rangoli* (ornamental drawing with color powder) she was making on the floor of the women-guards’ house. The commotion was that of Durgdas being stopped at the outer gate by The Company’s soldiers. On not being allowed in, Durgdas under his breath cursed Samir’s hush-hush strategy that didn’t take The Company into confidence. He announces that he is “Great poet Durgdas, seeking Princess Meera Bai’s audience”. Ridiculed by the soldiers, the resultant hubbub was being noticed by the members of the women-guards’ house at the inner fort entrance. To establish his credentials, as it happens every time, great poet Durgdas ends up signing some bawdy couplets at the request of the soldiers - who in their merriment sing along to create a bigger tumult than what the women-folk inside could bear. It was interfering with their morning martial arts practice session. Some of the ladies (now dressed in military garb and wearing armaments) come out to put a stop to the furore. The Company soldiers oblige by throwing out the poet.

At the verge of being driven away, he once again shouts aloud his impeccable credentials and the purpose of his visit. “Great poet Durgdas, major disciple to the late Pandit Neeraj Bhavani ... I tell you, I demand an audience with Princess Meera Bai”.

At this, somebody from among the female guards comes forward and tells the soldiers that she would take him to the Queen. It was that 24 year old maid, now wearing armaments of her practice session.

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**The durbar hall inside the palace.** The poet is given no less a reverential treatment than that extended to Charles Cokerbrooke, the Company official. The 24 year old maid is also one among a dozen ladies-in-attendance who seat him, serve water (as in traditional desert hospitality) and lay out all amenities to make the visitor comfortable. There are 2 ladies operating the *pankha* (fan) on the ceiling. He notices musical instruments in a corner. They were played by a couple of teenage girls. Suddenly everybody stiffen, bow and recede to the background. It was only then he noticed that as if an apparition an elegant figure on the other side of the muslin curtain had made her appearance. In a trance



Durgdas stood up to gape at the woman beyond the muslin. She was in silhouette, and her face further veiled.

“Be seated *great* poet” said the queen as she reclined on her divan.

In preparation to this momentous meeting with Meera Bai, a brilliant introductory salutation was there on Durgdas’s lips. Samir had composed it.

[Majestic Princess of Nawagh, Offspring to Magnificent Raghoji, ... blah, blah .. here I arrive at your footsteps, a lowly subject whose only prowess is the utmost devotion for you ... blah, blah and blah.... 12 lines].

This, Prince Samir had done with his flair for charming the English nobility, and his experience acquired by flattering Indian royalty in public assemblies. It was written out neatly on a scroll and wrapped along with spices & gems carefully selected by Samir & Durgdas at the street markets of Calcutta, for being presented to her majesty. Samir had Durgdas memorise the flow of words well. But now, no words came out of his mouth and Durgdas quickly sat down tongue-tied. What struck him was the quality of the voice that addressed him ... very commanding and mature. Now, why did she stress upon the word ‘*great*’ when addressing him? He wondered.

It was Meera Bai who broke the silence “I heard someone mention ‘Pandit Neeraj Bhavani’. What do you know about him, poet?”

At the mention of his guru – more dearly to him than both his parents, he couldn’t understand why whatever happened next, did really happen!

[Visual first divulged here. Devised for efficient narration].

Suddenly he found emanating from his lips ‘**The Magnificent भोर Bhoar** (dawn/daybreak)’. It was considered the greatest (yet, a very very difficult) composition in *Raga Lalith* by Pandit Bhavani. He sang out the first lines with such passion that it occurred to him that the walls of the hall were vibrating. At the corners of his eyes he could sense the female attendants in the hall, though now receded to the backdrops, were enthralled. He found his confidence rising ... and rising! For, he knew for sure that nobody could render this composition as magnificently as he did ... this was a testimony once given to him by guruji himself! [Visual first divulged here.]

After a few lines he realized that the girls, though unseen, were giving musical accompaniment (sruti/ tonal key) to his rendition. Then suddenly a miracle occurred ... a voice took up his song and completed the singing for him. His eyes were remaining closed in concentration. He opened them in wonder to seek the source of the voice which was resonating from all around. His gaze narrowed down on the curtain in front.

For a few moments a pattern in the embroidery fooled his eyes to suggest that a feminine image on it was the source.

[An architectural feature of the hall was the pools of water maintained outside for cooling purposes. The reflected sun light from the pools and the incense smoke inside the hall were enhancing the dreamy effect].



Then he suddenly realized it came from *behind* the Dhaka muslin curtains.  
It was the Queen!

There was a silence after the song ended. Our poet saw Meera Bai giving an appreciative clapping with her hands. The first act in the battle plan – which was to impress her, had taken place – unwittingly though.

Now, he found the confidence to ask her “Your majesty, how have you come to learn भोर ?”

“Your guruji was mine too, ... here on assignment ... for one year” came the voice from beyond the muslin.

“Just one year! But you sing so well!” While commending her, Durgdas was aware that he was getting into the second act ... of flattering her – just as Samir had coached him [\[Visual first divulged here. A device for efficient narration\]](#).

The battle was on!

“No, not really, poet” Meera Bai was stating a matter of fact. “You would have noticed that my ‘*meends*’ (portamentos) between the ‘*komal rishabds & tara-shadjs*’ (musical notes D# & C’) couldn’t take the stipulated glides. Your rendition was perfect. Obviously, those 12 years with guruji ought to have done a lot better than one year of mine. For sure, you are his best disciple.”

That jolted our poet.

“How did you know of my 12 years? .... Majesty?”

“A **major disciple** to Pandit Bhavani! That was your shouting I heard ...wasn’t it? ... which means at least **12 years** with him”. Meera Bai continued “Also, guruji has gifted you his ancestral pennant ... which I notice you now wear around your neck ... that makes you his most favourite student. My salutations, poet”

This made Durgdas realize that there were more things than just poetry going inside the head of the owner of that voice. Her observations from beyond the muslin were even sharper than anybody unrestricted by a veil. As he meddled with his pennant and frantically tried to remember Samir’s next set of instructions to him [\[Visual first divulged here\]](#), suddenly Meera Bai put in a new topic “Poet, tell me what’s new in *Khari Boli & Padmakar Bhatt*? Enlighten me!”

This put Durgdas in his true elements. The next one hour saw a vibrant conversation between the talented visitor and his royal hostess. It was punctuated with spontaneous poems and song renditions. With a flair for lofty prose, Durgdas rendered them well in rhymes and rhythms. Impressed, Meera Bai was full of gaiety and laughter. She supported his masterful verses with mime, puppetry, and shadow play (she utilized her silhouetted bodyline very creatively). Here was Durgdas - who for the past many months was pandering his noble talents to tasteless women at banquets and bawdy men at the taverns, now suddenly in front of an appreciative audience. For him it was a creative and



emotional high. He was dead certain that on the topics of music & literature he was much ahead to his royal hostess. After keeping up discussion with him, she always had to stop and allow him to expand the world for her with his unique knowledge on the topics. Maybe it was for the first time in his life he could relish his true genius ... because there was a person of culture who could really understand him behind that muslin.

The climax of this royal audience granted to our poet occurred when out of sheer exuberance Meera Bai couldn't help jumping up and start dancing to a wonderful couplet sung by Durgdas! [\[Background. women subjects, also clapping\]](#)

Bless Goddess Saraswati! .... He made the Queen dance to his tune!!

As she stopped and stood panting in exhaustion, Durgdas clapped with an '*arey wah!*' politely and murmured to himself "Wow, friend Samir, wont you be surprised!"

The voice from behind the muslin came "Poet, in your faculties you are excellent ..... in all disciplines trained, you are masterful" then it became cold and sharp "But, ... your discomfiture as to the purpose of coming here shows. Tell me the truth. WHO SENT YOU? ... and WHY?"

The carefully laid battle plans went straight out of the window at the firing of the first shot of the battle.

The new battle narrative in variation to Samir's script was being written afresh. It started with a *not-very-eloquent* mumbling by Durgdas "errrrr .. But, I .. here, ... your majesty ... errr ... a patronage ... like Kalidasa .."

"Poet! ..." Meera Bai repeated "The truth". It was like a whip lash.

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"**You told her WHAT?!!**" that was a bellow from Prince Samir.

It was a sullen poet who answered .... "The truth".

"Goddam \*@\*% & also %!! ... You told her? ... every single thing?!!" screamed Samir.

"You see .. I was .." started Durgdas

It was cut off by Samir yelling "You idiot! .. you spilled everything ... the gossip at Lady Dalhousie's ... what I told to Blaker at the banquet ... what I did to that governess under the banquet table .... everything!! ... my scheme to seduce Queen Meera Bai ... Oh!..My God! ... ***now she knows that The Company suspects a mutiny!!*** ...have you gone mad? .. The English shall blow you up ... as a spy ... tied to cannon muzzle!! .. like that *Baniyasahib*, ... for divulging official secrets".

A furious Samir was at Durgdas's throat to strangle him. "That damn Blaker will surely recommend me now to Lord Dalhousie ... *for a firing squad!!*"

"No .. wait, wait ..NO!!" cried out Durgdas "She never gave me the time to say all that!" That stopped Samir.

"Oh? ...whew!!" exhaled Samir.



While they composed themselves, measuring out every word Durgdas said “Huzoor, I am a poet ... *a poet!* Mutiny & official secrets are beyond my aesthetic pursuits. Your mission for me to Sabalgarh Fort was romance, not conspiracy! I was there as your Swan. This I had told you ... the story of *Prince Nala & Princess Damayanti*.”

With dreamy eyes and phrases laced with poetry Durgdas summed it up .... “I just told her majesty that I am there because a gallant admirer of the Queen, a certain Prince Samir, has sent me with a request that she marry him!!”

Samir blurted “Come again?” It was a whisper.

Durgdas knelt dramatically to hold Samir’s hands and said “Your majesty, this poet Durgdas is here from gallant Prince Samir with a request that your majesty marry him”

“That was all you said?” asked an incredulous Samir.

“That was all!” affirmed Durgdas.

Samir - “Nothing about *The Company*?”

Durgdas – “Not a word”

Samir – “Nothing about our seduction strategy?”

Durgdas – “How *unromantic!*”

Samir – “Say; Yes or No!”

Durgdas – “No, Huzoor!”

Samir – “You mean ... you told her that I just wanted to meet her?”

Durgdas, kneeling – “I told you twice, the precise words were ... ‘*A-gallant-prince-Samir wants*’ ...”

Samir – “... ‘*-gallant-prince-Samir-wants-to-marry-you-dear-majesty!*’ ...”

Durgdas – “Teekh bola aap! (Exactly, Sir)”

After digesting this information, Samir asked in a soft voice “And what did she say?”

Durgdas – “Ummm.. After a very long pause she said ... ‘*If this prince is so gallant, ask him to come and win my hand*’ ... and, my audience was over!!”

[Visual first divulged here. A device for efficient narration]

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rooster fight/ peacock mating dance in the background

Revising their battle plan and devising the next strategy of storming Sabalgarh Fort, Samir had Durgdas go over every bit of his conversation with Meera Bai over and over again. ... especially lingering fondly on her final words ‘*ask the gallant prince to come and win my hand*’.

“Don’t try to match her wits my friend. I am telling you .. she has brains all over her body\*!! Durgdas cautioned Samir. [*a native expression to denote high intelligence*]

“How old is she?” asked Samir suddenly.

“Ooh! I never considered that Huzoor! Good question”. Here, Durgdas mused ... “Well, she stood quite tall behind that thin drape ... but, that part of the hall



where she stood, was about 25 arms length (50 feet) away and one arm length (2 feet) higher than my place of sitting ... so she must be almost as tall as myself .... looked a bit buxom than every other women I saw there ... maybe royal garb is thicker ...and a facial veil always make a young girl look older and an older woman look younger! .... so, what could be her age? ... no idea ... but well, .... Ah!... from her voice she should be close to 32, ..definitely not less than 30 .. not young I would say ... except when she laughs! .. suddenly you think it is somebody else laughing ... a girl of 20 or 22 years” With a puzzled expression Durgdas asked Samir “what do you make out of that?”

“She is hiding her true self .... and takes much pain for doing that” answered Samir. “And what do you feel about her, Drug?”

After a deep introspection Durgdas answered “***Meera Bai the woman ... she is such a charm!!*** ... I felt sheer joy to behold her exuberance when we conversed. .... That was then. .... Looking back now, ***her majesty the Queen .. is altogether a different woman*** .... makes me shudder ... I would rather not go back there”.

“But then you have to” said Samir with a boyish grin. “You must come with me. I have to go there to win her hand”

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**Sabalgarh Fort.** Even without Queen’s permission from inside the palace, merely by flashing his charming smile Prince Samir could have breezed past The Company soldiers at the Sabalgarh Fort’s outer guard posts. But that day it helped when from the inner gate 3 women guards arrived to receive Prince Samir & Poet Durgdas and escort them in. Wearing minimal body armaments, the lady-soldiers were very businesslike as they walked along with our two friends. That was when Samir noticed Durgdas acknowledging with a smile his familiarity with one of their escorts. It was that 24 year old maid [Chhoti] who took Durgdas to the Queen last time. With his eye that was much experienced in assessing all categories of the fairer sex, Prince Samir did a keen study of the lass. This plain looking girl because of her thin frame appeared taller than the other two. Like all the other women guards there, her body structure clearly showed muscles toned with intense exercise in martial arts. But there were some other specialties about this particular girl. From her gait, her calf muscles and calloused heels, Samir could see she was an excellent horse rider. Unsmiling - even when Durgdas smiled at her, she held within her some latent energy like a wound-up spring. ‘Or is it bottled-up frustration?’ wondered Samir. Her stride suggested that she could pounce quickly. And that was what her sharp eyes did when it landed suddenly on Samir for his intruding gaze upon her person. Our flamboyant Prince who had thought that he could face the most voluptuous of women head on, found himself averting gaze from this otherwise unremarkable girl. And his eyes landed on more interesting things. They were walking through



the vast central courtyard in the building where a female battalion was engaged in martial arts practice session. Suddenly Samir noticed glints! .. somewhere, glass pieces were reflecting sunlight .... could mean spy glasses.. (telescopes?) Everything around here is under observation! He also noticed the palace architecture. He became aware that many facets of the building were designed to camouflage gun/ cannon muzzles – in defence of any attempt to storm the palace. The English Company should have every reason to be apprehensive of this Queen who hides her capabilities well.

When stepping into the visitor's hall from the courtyard, as part of the protocol, Samir found his sword and fire armament taken away. Durgadas of course as always was unarmed.

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**The Queen's durbar hall.** For our two friends, the scene opens here as a repeat performance of the first time Durgdas was ushered in. The glasses of drinking water, *pankah* (fanning), *tambura sruthi* by the musicians .... so on. As they crossed the visitors to take up positions, the two young *tambura* girls bowed at Durgadas with smiles of recognition and adoration. That was the only lighthearted touch they found in this hall of otherwise tense settings. A difference from the previous meeting occurred the moment Queen made her entry beyond the muslin drape - to which the two friends reverentially arose from their long pillowed seat. Before a well-prepared Samir could offer salutation, there came a recitation from Meera Bai ... it was a 'welcome address' made to the visitors.

[Majestic Princess of Nawagh, Offspring to Magnificent Raghoji, ... blah, blah .. here I arrive at your footsteps, a lowly subject whose only prowess is the utmost devotion for you ... blah, blah and blah.... 12 lines].

She stood elegantly poised as her rich voice came through to the two friends. ... and, for a moment they were puzzled. Was this some kind of a practical joke that made a dramatic reversal of roles between ordinary visitors and a majestic hostess! Soon Samir connected the significance ... her majesty was replying to the address Samir had prepared for Durgdas on the first visit. She was holding the scroll on which the text was written and presented to her – that much he could make out from her silhouetted figure seen through the muslin. He smiled to himself. She had deduced that it was he who wrote it ... and, by this odd gesture at replying it, the woman was being either ridiculously humorous or caustically sarcastic .... or both!

Finishing her address she reclined. "Please sit down". Holding up the scroll she says "... hmm, this piece of salutation you had sent through your bard is very impressive, Prince Samir. Now, are you sure with this you were not seeking audience with her Majesty Empress Queen Victoria, but me Meera Bai? "



In answer, Samir laughed out heartily. Such an opening was enough to land him sure-footed in his favourite arena of charm wrestling.

“Quite justified in your asking so ‘Royal *Nawaghi Mahila*’ (a phrase he just-then coined to evoke native familial sentiments) ... But your majesty the words there, if you disregard the phrasing, sings out a different devotion which would be lost on an English Sovereign”.

Meera Bai – “Meaning ...?”

“Meaning, ... hope you won’t find my simile offensive ...” with a boyish grin that would disarm even the strictest of matrons, Samir continued “Your highness, the Swan in *Nala-charita* will not find Queen Victoria worthy. It would rather come here to you”.

After a few seconds, bursting from behind the muslin curtain came that mirthful girlish laughter Durgdas had heard before. He was not too happy that Samir had scored at his expense. Yet, he smiled and nodded his approval at his friend as Samir joined in the Queen’s laughter. Suddenly, the tense air within the hall was gone.

Meera Bai – “Delightful! ...no, I am not offended ... rather, ... as you would see, all women like to be flattered. Victoria or Meera Bai is no exemption”. After a pause she asked enthusiastically “Tell me more about yourself Prince Samir ... what else are you good at .... other than charming imprisoned Queens?”

Now Samir was on familiar territory. To him on a platter was given his best topic for discussion – himself! A well practiced narrative of ‘*The Adventures and Exploits of Prince Samir*’ told by its author kept Meera Bai fascinated for quite some time. (He kept out the indecent chapters since it would have made even a most proficient *devadasi* blush). With refreshments of fruits and light-wine served occasionally in the assembly, Samir was cruising smoothly. As she got absorbed in his narratives, a totally disregarded poet Durgdas was feeling envious of the charm wielded over the Queen by Samir. And, Durgdas observed a different Meera Bai from that of the previous meeting. .... not commanding at all. But with laughter and mirthful giggle, today she was being a young woman who can be delighted with adventure stories and travel-tales. And Prince Samir had quite a few of those in which he escaped near-death - swordfight with a thuggee bandit, rifle-shot at a pouncing tiger, infantry charge at Hindukush .... so on.

A quagmire came up unexpectedly during the next narrative - *Adventure at the Harem of Junagadh*, in which he was saving the life of a *houri* (beauty) by beating the Nawab in a game chess! As if it were the most natural thing to occur, a chessboard suddenly came in front of the Prince to help him demonstrate the moves, and before he could realize what was happening, our hero found himself engaged in a game of chess with a lady behind a muslin drape!

That would be the strangest way he has seen anybody play chess.

But, the arrangement in that hall made it look as if it is the very method a Queen under captivity would play the game with an outsider. One could gather that somewhere behind the muslin curtain Meera Bai was having an identical chess board and set of pieces in front of her. The moves she did on her board were duplicated on the one before Samir, and vice versa. It was the 24 year old girl [Chhoti] who kept moving back and forth - in and out of the muslin curtain, transferring the moves. In about 16 moves Samir was defeated! What was shocking to Samir was that he was sitting pretty relaxed and confident. His eyes were more devoted to the 24 year old girl's back and forth walking - a ritual which seemed humorous in his observation. His eyes had locked with the girl's occasionally. But when she suddenly looked at him sharply, made a move with her (mistress's) piece and toppled his king, saying "checkmate", for sometime Samir didn't understand what hit him! Durgdas, illiterate in chess, was startled by a curious variation in her cycle of walk that occurred just before the checkmate. As Samir was left looking in wonder at the chessboard, she suddenly walked back.

There was a second game offered by the Queen. Her voice came with the sounds of the chess pieces being rearranged inside by the girl and the Queen.

[The activity of the Queen and the girl could be differentiated. The Queen wore bangles and anklets, while the girl moved catlike. There were other movements too behind the curtain as ladies-in-waiting moved across while attending to Meera Bai]

On the second game, Samir devoted his full attention on the chessboard. And Durgdas noted that the girl's eyes were absorbed in studying his friend. In about 25 moves, Samir won the second game! The girl seemed disappointed and angry as she walked back to duplicate Samir's 'checkmating move' inside to her mistress.

[That was when Samir noted something about the space in which the Queen's movements took place. Some of the objects – properties, statues, batiks and artifacts, behind the muslin gave false illusion about persons there. This was the reason that made her sudden entries and exits seem like 'apparition'].

To Durgdas, joyous on his friend's victory, Samir muttered "The Queen lost this match .... **on purpose!** The girl saw it coming ... and was not happy about it".

Then came the sound of clapping of her hands, and congratulations made to Samir from Meera Bai..... and following this, there seemed to be a brief discussion - *some sort of an argument*, going on inside between the girl and her mistress.

Samir was meanwhile trying to make sense out of the occurring.

[As he watched, the inside seems to become dark and more obscure to his prying eyes. Somebody had opened the window drapes on their side of the hall].

"If she lost on purpose, that is good news Huzoor!" whispered Durgdas "That would mean, the Queen ... she wants you to win! I mean, ... *win her hand*".

"Careful, you idiot" cautioned Samir "We are being had! No more whispering ... I won't be surprised if somebody around here is good at lip-reading".

“I am convinced of your valour at *Junagadh*, Prince” came Meer Bai’s assuring voice “... and I consider it noble to have saved a hapless lady’s life under such circumstances ... But, a certain person here disagrees with me and dismisses the armed encounters you have had as humbug!”

Samir exchanged a quick look with Durgdas.

In exasperation the Queen added “... how do you convince this person who also happens to be an expert combatant?”

“May I ask, who is this person that doubts my integrity?” asked Samir, while trying to figure out what this new dramatic turn in conversation truly meant.

Meera Bai “You have met her. She is to become my next chief-of-guards. For everybody here in this palace ... she has always been our darling little ‘Chhoti’ [\[this would be first time her name is mentioned\]](#) ... and, if anybody here can challenge your skills in duel, Prince ... it is she... here she comes .... convince her.”

From beyond the muslin drape segregation, came out the 24 year old ‘female warrior’ unmindful of the way her mistress had introduced her. She was all business, ready to challenge Samir.

Prince Samir got up and took in the situation for a moment “Ladyship, you are assigned with the protection of her majesty ... your Queen as well as mine ... So, I would consider it my bounden duty to convince you of my fair credentials before even I dare gain her majesty’s confidence”.

The expression on Chhoti’s face changed into a ‘*don’t con me*’ look.

Hence Samir added “Yes, truly, since it involves her majesty’s safety, your approval is more important than hers!” and with a mock-helplessness Samir said “... but how am I to defend *my truthfulness* without my weapons?”

At a sign from Chhoti, on a round brass plate his flint-fired handgun was ceremoniously brought by a female attendant to Prince Samir. As he took up his weapon and inspected it, the empty round plate was handed over to Chhoti. They now faced each other at a distance of about 40 feet – Samir near the visitors’ seating, Chhoti near the muslin drape. As he gazed at her with a ‘what’s next?’ look, Chhoti turned away from him towards her Queen and bowed - as if seeking approval.

Everything next happened at lightning speed ...

“Watch out! There comes the tiger!!” the voice seemed to be that of the Queen from behind the muslin, and suddenly Chhoti whirled around to fling the plate high over the hall towards Samir. Though taken by surprise, reacting quickly before it hit him, the Prince fired at the plate. It clattered down on the floor between the contestants with a bullet mark on it.

Before reactions could sink in, there was brought another platter to Samir with his sword. He put away his spent firearm, took up and inspected his sword ...



and addressed Chhoti with a wry grin “the infantry charge ... I presume is next ... Where?”

Chhoti snapped her fingers and pointed with a sign behind to him. The wall behind him at both sides of the hall doorway - which one would expect to be made of masonry, suddenly started disappearing ... ‘*clack, clack, clack*’ .. those were wooden panels being folded up by many hands. When entire wall was removed, the hall opened out to the central courtyard, and the combined space became a large stadium. Samir turned around and before he could orient himself to the changed environ, there in the openness of the courtyard he saw a line of Queen’s soldiers brandishing swords. The next instant they came charging at him with an orchestrated scream. Just before they reached him, Samir leaned onto Durgadas’s shoulder, leaped onto the seat, sprung above to hang on to the *punkah*, swung, pivoted and flipped over the women, to land behind them safely in the courtyard on his feet.

With his bravado now at its zenith he asked “Next, the thuggee bandit?”

Completing the tying of a black cloth mask below her eyes Chhoti affirmed ‘yes’ with a nod, applied a ‘*tilak*’ on her forehead, grabbed a dagger and leaped to land in front of him. With the red *tilak*, the black mask and the short dagger to slit throats, she was epitomizing the dreaded thuggee image. The contest between Chhoti and Samir was sleek and fast. Obviously she was at a disadvantage with her short dagger. With his long sword lashes Samir warded her off. At a point when Chhoti lost her dagger, Samir gallantly discarded his sword and it became to a hand-to-hand fight between the combatants. Now, he with his superior physical strength had a definite advantage. He was confident. With methodic blows he brought her down and almost pinned her to the floor. That’s when a surprise occurred! In the sword-versus-dagger duel, they had fought Indian style. With him supplementing the native skills with his knowledge on musketeers’ fencing tactics, Samir emerged superior. In hand-to-hand combat they were wrestling Indian style. At the stage of being pinned down, Chhoti did some martial-arts flips around (which reminded Samir of a Tibetan acrobat he had met long ago), retrieving the thuggee knife and ending with her holding it at Samir’s throat!

When the rapid actions ended, suddenly Durgdas was seeing his friend the Prince kneeling on the floor with Chhoti standing behind him holding his hair locked tight with one hand and the dagger held in her other hand close to Samir’s throat. With the blade poised close to his windpipe for slitting, grinning like a boy who narrowly failed his kindergarten test, Samir slowly raised both his arms in surrender.

As Chhoti released him and he got up, he made an attempt to salvage his ego “Your majesty” he called out aloud to the royal observer “ ... I still affirm the incident to be true” rubbing his throat he said “ ... for, *that thuggee was not a girl* ... and surely not one so talented as this, really!”



There was no response heard from Meera Bai. But it made Chhoti smile *for the first time*.

She said “Now, time for some *new* adventures. Choose your weapon from among them on display”

*Oh! This one can speak too!* thought Durgdas. For, those were the very first words he heard her utter - except when she said ‘checkmate’. Her voice, like her face was plain. The diction was not sophisticated, but of the countryside.

They dueled with sticks (Chhoti with her lithe body could pole-vault on it). They raced in the courtyard on horses (while shooting arrows). Chhoti besting Samir in both! There was a crowd of silent women who were cheering inside their heart for their Chhoti – that much Durgadas could sense. He would be the only one wishing Sameer to win .... and, what about the Queen? *‘Would she like to see her gallant admirer win?’* He wondered. There were some interactions amidst this contest. Between events they had a break to quench thirst. They were helped when ankles were twisted or muscled sprained. They sometimes helped each other in retrieving weapons or adjusting targets – thus making the contest somewhat light, friendly and humorous at moments.

In the next contest with spears, Chhoti lost badly to Samir. Suddenly her spear flew out of her hand and there was Chhoti helpless in front of Samir’s pointed spear - just like he was helpless earlier at the edge of her dagger blade. She admitted defeat – her open palms raised .. .. but, she seemed to be fuming inside as she got up and bowed towards her mistress ... and then *she just disappeared from the courtyard!*

*‘Strange!’* wondered Durgdas, *‘is she so vain that after all the victories she can’t bear a single loss?’*

*‘Strange!’* wondered Samir, *‘isn’t what happened now an encore of the second chess match?’*

Samir was trying his best to keep a gallant demeanour when he re-entered the hall with Durgdas to face the Queen. Her request to him was simple “Wait till tomorrow. I think I have a mission for you ... to prove your gallantry”

*‘Which means, it has not been gallant enough today’* surmised Durgdas in his mind.

“I am constrained in being a good hostess and offer nighttime lodging for you .... As you know, this palace ... is not like a regular one, ..... or myself a real Queen!” stated Meera Bai with a touch of bitterness.

“It is very kind of you majesty, but I do have an entourage outside the fort. They would set up sleeping facilities” answered Samir “I shall be back here tomorrow morning” in retreating, he bowed down deeply “Your Majesty!”

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That night, Prince Samir and poet Durgdas were staring up into the star filled sky as they tried to catch some sleep. They were lying on two mattresses on plain ground some distance away from the fort. The so called ‘entourage’ of the pauper prince consisted of just four horses - two for them to ride and two for carrying supplies. A laborer hired from the nearby settlement was tending the night time bonfire lit to warm them.

Just as Durgdas finished humming a romantic couplet, Samir said

“The Queen, I would say is, well .. impressive. But I tell you, that girl is something else” Samir was nursing his bruised ego

“I would never have believed a woman could fight like that unless I had seen her today”. Prince Samir appeared completely stripped off his characteristic bravado.

“Cheer up, Huzoor” Durgdas was trying to prevent his boss from sliding into a depression “”You did save the situation, in the last duel”

On the bed, Samir tuned to face his chela “She dropped the spear on purpose ... I tell you! ... upon signal from the Queen ..... Chhoti didn’t like that .... that was why she went off morose”

Durgdas – “*Of what purpose* would that serve the Queen?!”

Samir – “That, I am not quite sure ...

... as you said, maybe Meera Bai desires that I win her .....

... but, I see that there is a tension ... between Meera Bai and Chhoti ...

... maybe it is female rivalry ... maybe Chhoti doesn’t like me ....

... You saw how she kept looking at me ... and maybe she is so possessive about her Queen that she wants to cut me off from being a suitor to her majesty ... and, she resents every attempt by the Queen to humor me”.

Durgdas – “Or, is it envy? .. maybe Chhoti fancies you Prince - for herself”

Samir – “Hah! Thank you for trying to make me feel good, I appreciate your effort” with a sly grin he added “For that matter, ..... from what you told me, the Queen fancies the poet more than the prince. After all, you bested her!”

Durgdas sat up bolt upright on the cot.

“Don’t jest Prince! Though a poet, I am a man of low birth. Such talk would be in bad taste. How can a lowly poet aspire for a princess!”

Still upset, he continued

“ .... and, by all poetic conventions, it needs a Prince to win a Queen’s hand”.

Samir became serious

“... the matter is not about romantic fancies ... It is that girl ... now I am more intrigued about her relationship with the Queen ....”

Getting up to take a pull at the hookah Samir continued

“While the chess game was in progress, .... you remember her walking up-and-down?” Samir makes a poor attempt to mime her strides

“Of what purpose was that? ... the girl was there to study me. ... its part of a surveillance technique here” Samir paused .....



“Then, I think you too did notice a curious variation in Chhoti’s cycle of walk, before she did that checkmate .... the girl didn’t go back inside to her mistress after the very last move I made. That means, *she by herself had done that checkmate* ... without her mistress’s hand in it!”

Durgdas was wondering whether for the first time he was seeing an emotionally distressed Samir. “So, Huzoor, what are you suggesting? How does it affect your plans?” asked Durgdas.

Irritated at being interrupted in his chain of thoughts Samir cut in

“I haven’t finished yet Drug, ... I am trying to connect a sepoy rumour I had heard once ... that Bakhra Bai, Meera Bai’s aunt, the sister to King Raghoji had an infant daughter .... or she had adopted an illegitimate offspring of King Raghoji .... If it is true, it must be Chhoti – making her almost the Queen’s sister. If true, it would also explain her clout in the palace, her power over Meera Bai ... her envy ... her desires .. (snap!) Yes! What we were seeing ought to be sibling rivalry!! ”

Samir continued “So, my poet, what were you asking? ... *‘how it does affect my plans’?*” With a grabbing action with his hand and a wicked smile exaggerated for its impact, he said “I must have Chhoti ..... either on my side .... or out of my way .... before I can capture Meera Bai’s heart”.

Durgdas is baffled. “You talk of another seduction plot, Huzoor ... even at the near-impossibility of the primary one!” lamented Durgdas “You believe that Chhoti would sell-out her Queen!”

Samir with a sneer says “When it comes to relationship between royal siblings, loyalty is limited by one’s personal interests. .... I just need to inflame Chhoti’s self-interest ... I yearn for an opportunity”.

Durgdas was disturbed by the frame of mind Samir had gotten into.

To pacify him Durgdas lapses into his poetic phrases and says

“There is a saying *‘to a jaundiced man everything would look yellow’* ...

My brother and friend, maybe **you are that man.** ...

If for a moment you would put aside *‘The suspicion of a Nawaghi mutiny’* as jaundice .... your jaundice, .... you would notice that all those yellows in front of your eyes – the Queen’s duplicity, the girl’s disloyalty, the lip-reading, ... the spy-glasses, the purposeful spear dropping, a Sepoy rumour ... everything ... just disappears!”

Durgdas pauses for the words to sink in and continues ...

“Like me, poet Durgdas, you would then come to behold two real women ..... women of flesh & blood.

One - a solitary and insecure Meera Bai with no ambition, but the desire for a life in freedom.

Two - an innocent and ardent Chhoti with no self-interest other than a passionate duty protecting her mistress ....”



Samir smirked “The problem Huzoor, with that scenario is that ..... there is no role for Prince Samir to play in it!”

Realising that there was no point in arguing further, Durgdas changed subject “Why do you think the Queen requested time till tomorrow? What does she mean by a plan by tomorrow?”

Samir looked up to study the stars, points with his hand and make sweeping patterns. “Tonight the Queen shall have a showdown with her chief-of-guards. Tomorrow her majesty Meera Bai shall announce that Chhoti is being banished from the palace. She would be sent away ... along with you poet ..... while Prince Samir shall stay appointed here in her place as the Queen’s chief-of-guards .... That’s what I see written in the stars – yours and mine!”

Both Samir and Durgdas have a good laugh as they crash to sleep.

“Don’t be surprised Drug” said Samir with a yawn “my wishful thinking sometimes do come true”.

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Next day at her ‘durbar’ the Queen welcomes both friends.

Chhoti was nowhere around.

The suspense heightens when her majesty orders everybody in the hall - including Durgdas, to move back so that she could converse with Prince Samir in complete privacy.

She asks Samir to come closer while she too comes nearer to sit just beyond the muslin partition that separated them.

Durgdas was bewildered. Is his Prince about to win the queen’s coveted hand?

Moving closer to the muslin veils, Samir gives his friend a ‘See! I told you’ smile. He was about to take the victory stand!!

[While sitting down close to the muslin, Samir observes a variation in illumination occurring between the two sides of the curtain. By controlling the lighting on both sides of the curtain, the opacity could be manipulated].

With a veil worn, her face he couldn’t see any better ... but when Meera Bai started speaking to him in a low voice, Samir could feel more of her intimacy.

**\* HERE FOR THE FIRST TIME MEERA BAI’S EYES ARE SEEN - VEILED, BUT IN CLOSEUP.**

“I have had a desire ... a duty rather, planted in my heart long ago by Bakhra *chachi* (aunt). Being a Prince and a Nawaghi, my dear comrade, you will appreciate the sentiments fully ... that which I am about to divulge to you. Can I take you into confidence?”

“Even if you rule Nawagh or not, the fact is ... majesty, you are my sovereign. I am your loyal subject” answered Samir with all sincerity he could muster.

“Good, delightfully good” Meera Bai continues ...



“My father King Raghoji and my family members .... all of us are indebted to seven lords .... They were *mukhiya* - local leaders ... And those seven noble persons were the gems in the Nawaghi provinces of Rampur, Sanghvi, ....., Lockgaum & Aman. In their act of patriotism - fighting and resisting the English Company, they died for my father .... for us”.

[\[Visuals shown here. Devised for efficient narration\]](#)

“For their sacrifice, I wish to compensate their surviving family members financially, giving a share out of my inheritance. It is such a considerable sum, a fortune any highwayman may waylay, that I wish to deliver it through a personal messenger. I want you to escort this person – of course, without anybody .. even *The John Company* being aware of this. You have to guard the valuable gems and gold casings in this delivery mission”.

“A noble gesture indeed, your majesty. You can trust me on this” answers the prince.

Meera Bai - “I shall bear the expenses, and compensate for your efforts”.

Samir – “Very kind of you ... that would be the least of my concerns .... who are you sending?”

Meera Bai – “Of course, Chhoti! ... *our darling Chhoti*. She would know how to find those people. She would convey my *khandan*’s (family’s) gratitude - more valuable than all the money, to the beneficiaries. On my behalf she also has to perform the long-pending *shashti-karmam* (post-funeral rite) for my father’s soul at Prayaga temple. [\[located adjacent to the Allahabad English Fort, incidentally\]](#). With your help she should be able to complete the tasks and be back in about ... 4 ... 5 weeks time”.

While Samir’s mind was frantically considering the implications of this mission, he calmly puts in a question “You want to send her with me ... alone?”

Meera Bai “*Along* with your entourage, Prince. But I would caution that members be kept to the barest minimum ... a matter of discretion”.

With a smile which could be detected in her voice she continues “As you have seen, Chhoti can take care of herself .... But, *it is the first time she is going out to the plains of Ganges - into the outside world* .... The girl would need ... emotional support .... guidance towards the indented destinations and advice on how to behave with people. Once the deliveries are completed, she can find her way back on her own”.

Samir was so taken aback he didn’t even know how to react.

Taking his silence as affirmation, Meera Bai concludes “Well then, she shall meet you outside the fort ..... today evening she shall come ..... in disguise, of course”



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*Anmol Mothi*  
**PART TWO**

over the plains of ganges  
**a bird set free**

This part is out-and-out a BritishRaj Adventure *staged at places of interest\**  
The story flow, journey, fight sequences, gags ... have to be conceived after a research and factual verification (weapons, sociology, geography). Only the characters' interactions have been addressed.

*\* Production Numbers @ rail carriage roof, ellora caves, ...*

This part is written as '*oneline narratives*' - a film industry parlance.

Scenes have not been formulated. Awaiting research inputs.

- Beyond the pathway that led to its main entrance, Samir & Durgdas were waiting outside the fort. It was evening time. The 'day-servants' belonging to the nearby settlements were coming out from the fort and walking past them. The two friends don't recognize Chhoti till with a small sack on her back in a servant maid's garb she tapped them from behind. After breaking ice with a very silent Chhoti, Samir helps her onto a horse and they are on their way.
- No flouting of treaty with *The English Company* has occurred by the departure of Chhoti – a nonentity. But since it is clandestine and the fact that a fortune in gems (sewn into her clothe) was being taken out without approval, technically it is a violation.
- The trio becomes a team and a strong bond develops between them. They travel like ordinary people. It was pilgrimage season - the time when caravans and convoys moved across the Ganges delta which has thousands of temples, shines, gurudwars and mosques, dotted on its banks.
- The two male members give due regard to the sensitivity of their female companion. But there are instances of embarrassment during delicate situations. Such as bathing (in open ponds/ streams) and the difficulty in getting privacy during toilets in the open. During sojourns, they discover Chhoti is a fabulous cook. During halts, she is provided with private quarters. (sleeping on terraces). But while on the road, Chhoti has to sleep with Samir & Durgdas reclining on both sides. Only once she is left unprotected when our two friends go into a tavern for a drink [Chhoti comes to their aid when a brawl develops. Evidently, she is ignorant about the seedy functionings within a tavern or ... a brothel]. Chhoti, not groomed in social niceties for interacting in public, has to be assisted by the two friends on decorums and etiquettes. Such occasions become humorous.



- In situations where they have to pair-up, the relationship between the three becomes asymmetric.

When fighting-off the dacoits and during street brawls, Samir & Chhoti join up while Durgdas finds himself out of place.

When conducting rituals, performances & being Good Samaritans, Durgadas and Chhoti join up while Samir finds himself out of place.

Both Samir & Durgdas are baffled when Chhoti, taciturn by nature, suddenly freaks-out in full abandon ...

[The scene starts with mirage in distant the hot plains and birds fluttering in the vicinity. With many travellers about to cross a ferry, some baddies jump the que, and a skirmish breaks out.]

While a heated discussion was in progress, Chhoti sees an unearthly vision. Chhoti cries out, drops her weapons and runs off towards it. What had attracted her attention was a field of flamingo birds on the dry river bed. She forgets herself and frolics through the pack of birds in bliss. It is an irritated Samir and a touched Durgdas who pursue to bring her to her senses. Observing a different girl - a joyous Chhoti for the first time, makes Samir fascinated and Durgdas emotional. After chasing the flamingoes she breaks down in sheer ecstasy. When she calms down, an emotional Durgdas has her face held cradled in both his palms, and sings sort-of-a-lullaby. In response, eyes closed in bliss and tears streaming down her cheeks, she sways to the rhythm and hums back the melody he sings.

- Another instance when Chhoti drops her guard and lets slip her ice-maiden/wound-up-spring demeanour. While meeting the 1<sup>st</sup> provincial at a *haveli* in Lockgaum, to amuse the children around her, she performs puppet mime and shadow play.

[The tone of her girlish laughter makes Durgdas remind him of Meera Bai].

Durgdas comments to Samir “Ever heard of the saying ‘*the pillars in Akbar’s Court start singing*’? .... Well, it seems some of Meera Bai’s talents have rubbed off Chhoti”.

“Not really, it must be in the blood” counters Samir.

“Remember the last meeting ... when I was at the closest proximity to the Queen? I recollect her facial features ..... Chhoti shares them for sure. In particular... *the eyes!* And something else ... you realize that *shashti-karma* is a ritual usually done by blood relations. It is no coincidence that Chhoti is deputed for King Raghoji’s *post-funeral rite*. Hmmmm .... as I said; they are related .. either legitimately or otherwise”.

But, what baffles Samir is her talents in *sleight of hand* and *throwing of voice* (ventriloquism). The first she uses at a near-death situation to pass a weapon furtively to Samir. The second she uses to divert the attention of some assailants (as in when she threw the plate at Samir - “Here comes the Tiger!”). To deploy



such tactics in combat was unconventional for martial-arts. He wondered how and where she had learned those!

- A 'girlish' occasion for Chhoti occurs during a dance event. On a festival day at Sanghvi, while other girls are celebrating, *she is shy to dance!* To make her confidant, Samir gets her an ornate dress. Durgdas completes the adornment by putting bangles and anklets on her.

Shyly she asks her two male companions

"Do I look like *deedi* (elder sister) ... like, like... highness Meera Bai?"

"Yes, you are a princess!" exclaims Samir.

[Chhoti's body language remains that of a soldier's even when wearing the traditional garb ... awkward! She realises this as onlookers gape. With Durgdas and Samir demonstrating, she practices on how to act coy like the native women]

Yet another is an occasion when it comes for her to tie *rakhee* ... (which doesn't get fulfilled either on Samir or on Durgdas).

- In their teaming-up, there is always warmth between Durgdas and Chhoti. But there is also awkwardness - since Chhoti excels in chivalry while Durgdas in sublimity. It is Chhoti who has to come to Durgdas's rescue and swing him on her shoulder while leaping (along with Samir) across closely stacked building tops in the heart of Allahabad. Clinging to her, Durgdas definitely doesn't look manly.

[This occurs as they are chased by English soldiers. Chhoti had ventured into the Allahabad Fort from the Temple of Prayaga. This raises Samir's suspicion about the very purpose of the mission].

- In their teaming-up, there always is sexual-tension between Samir and Chhoti. They have to hold hands and lock bodies while encountering the baddies. And when their eyes meet each other's, it holds for a few seconds more than what is necessary. Once Samir gets a slash on his shoulder and Chhoti has to tend the wound. For stemming the blood-flow, she has to bite with her teeth and close the gash. She stitches and applies medication. Every time the tension (and suspicion) between them peak, it is suddenly brought down by an unexpected turn towards tenderness and warmth (as in her dash through the flock of flamingoes). At one point he tells her "I know you dropped that spear to let me win ... but, I don't know why". She feigns surprise.

- Towards the end of their mission, noticing a building up of ardor in Samir's eyes towards Chhoti, Durgdas remarks "Once upon a time, a rich lady with her maid was walking past two poets. Then a dialogue transpired between the poets - a question and an answer - which was as innocuous as the enquiry of the weather condition. But the pun in the phrases was understood by the two poets

**Question – who is fairer among the two? Answer – the handmaid for sure!"**

Then Durgdas asks Samir "Huzoor, do you fancy the maid than her mistress?"



“But, I am no poet ... *definitely not the second poet* in your story. So my eyes are still set on the mistress” answers Samir “Now, is it that the first poet fancies the mistress?”

Durgdas exclaims in agony “No, my Prince! ... no sacrilegious talk! .. please mind that!!”

Samir – “Well, I don’t mind keeping the maid ..... to control her mistress. But, this maid is a tougher nut than the mistress. I don’t yet know what is in her mind. The mistress, I can read well”

They stop their conversation seeing Chhoti approaching.

- At the province of Aman while enquiring the whereabouts of ‘*the patriotic noble martyred fighting for King Raghoji*’ they get into a fight due to some misunderstandings. The trio sort things out and identify themselves. Samir hears the foe-turned-friend now saying “Oh, you are our people ... from Meera Bai! ... ***yes, you have come to those who are preparing for ‘the Queen’s cause’*** ...”

[**EMPHASISE - THE CITIZENS ARE WAITING FOR THEIR QUEEN’S RETURN TO RISE UP AGAINST THE ENGLISH.**]

They are received at a settlement of palatial enclaves and given quarters for an overnight stay (festive day whence Chhoti is made to wear the ornate dress). As always, in the presence of Samir & Durgdas, she takes out the precious stones hidden in the clothe linings, places them in an ornate gold case and takes it down to the *mukhiya* (elder). From atop, a hidden Samir observes the transaction. To him the *haveli* seems more like an armoury than a residential enclave.

- While at the Prayaga temple for the funeral rites, Samir secretly goes to Allahabad fort and there he keeps a prearranged appointment with John Blaker. Blaker is on his way to Lucknow to deal with ‘the situation at Oudh’.

[**The annexation of Awadh kingdom.**]

Baker asks Samir whether ‘all is quiet in Sabalgarh’.

Samir smiles and jokes that he is now part of a plot to fund an uprising by Queen Meera Bai. Blaker doesn’t find it humorous.

“Sam, make sure that your loyalties are with *our Empress* and not with *your Queen*” warns Blaker.

Samir answers “You shall be sure of my loyalty when I bring you a full report after the last stop at my own hometown - Rampur”.

[Looking up the calendar, Blakes says “Coming January 20th”. That is when Chhoti ‘strays’ into the fort. A chase by the English soldiers occurs as Samir, then Durgdas, tries to save her. The incident increases Samir’s suspicion].

- Samir announces “final destination Rampur”.

Chhoti declares “no need”.

To a surprised Samir she says “My mission is complete and I can return home. You both go ahead”.



Chhoti then gives the last of the gems package to Samir and tells him in an intimate way “This is yours! You are the destined person of Rampur. So I am giving this to you. With this, may your love towards the Queen be assured ... and at Rampur, also please ensure the love of those who owe you allegiance”

Chhoti’s gesture and the question of his loyalty leave Samir shaken.

“This is a big fortune” he admits.

He suspects that Chhoti did this on her own without her mistress’s knowledge.

“So, off you go” said Chhoti “Mistress had instructed me to find my way back alone”.

“Are you sure?” asks Samir “How would you get back into Sabalgarh Fort?”

“The same way I came out ... as a servant maid” answers Chhoti

“Now, can I borrow a horse?”

“Sure, I’ll also get you a few things for your journey back” says Samir, as he goes out.

While she is bidding farewell to Durgdas, Samir returns with a surprise for her. Now, she won’t have to travel alone like a nonentity.

With money from the ‘gift’ Samir has hired an ‘entourage’ that would escort her to Sabalgarh. Horses, tents, supplies, guards, load haulers and a woman’s doli (small palanquin) with bearers.

In short, it is **a noble lady’s cavalcade**.

“You shall return home like a princess with ladies-in-waiting attending to you” says Samir as he helps her into the palanquin. She is touched by his gesture.

Her parting words to Samir & Durgdas are ...

“Thank you, *my most favorite friends!*”

With an affectionate hug each to Durgdas & Samir she says

“The last 40 days were the most beautiful of my life!! In case we won’t meet again, please don’t forget ... that the happiness you have given me ... is infinitely more than .... even what a reigning Queen can get!”

- Samir & Durgdas are on their onward journey. They remain silent. There is something that they seem to miss. A sense of loss, a sudden void. What could be that? They come across in a field large herds of ducks driven by nomads. A group of village children appear and run merrily through the herd scattering them. At this sight the two friends stop their horses and watch. Durgdas sings a verse from his ‘flamingo composition’. They look at each other, exchange smiles of mutual understanding. They realize what they are missing.

- Chhoti sitting alone in her *doli* is lost in thoughts. There is something that she also seems to miss. On seeing a flight of migratory birds through the palanquin window, her memories go back to the flamingoes and the lullaby. Suddenly, she senses a horse moving on her right window side. She gets sort of a sixth sense, and becomes puzzled. The same thing happens at her left side



window. Though she can't fully believe it, realizing that she has found what she had missed, she shouts "Halt!"

With orders of 'halt'! 'halt'! conveyed along the entourage, the cavalcade comes to a stop and the palanquin is lowered to the ground. She jumps out and starts searching through the personnel now dismounted from their horses. At the hindmost she finds Samir & Durgdas standing. With an expression of surprise, happiness and incredulity, she gesticulates '*what happened?*'

Durgdas looked at Samir for an answer. With nothing coming forth from his master's mouth, he says to her "On way to Rampur, we realized we lost a priceless gem. ... We have come seeking that".

Hearing this Chhoti runs towards to her friends, and embraces Durgdas first and then Samir. (Rub noses). With a tenderness uncharacteristic of him, Samir adds "Actually ... we thought we should take you home ..... everything else can wait". She laughs mirthfully.

- A musical montage (a la Durgdas's lullaby) as the entourage journey back towards Sabalgarh. We see many previous situations during the onward journey now repeated in pomp with 'the princess cavalcade' in accompaniment.

[For instance; Chhoti lying on bed between Samir & Durgdas, turning from one side to the other to listen to them singing her to sleep]

The montage continues ...

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*Anmol Mothi*  
**PART THREE**

the romantic equations  
**a queen & her maid. a prince & his bard**

The scene opens midway at **Queen Meera Bai's durbar hall.**

Sitting at close proximity to the Queen, with just the muslin curtain separating them, is Durgdas. The previous musical montage with its visuals is cascading into this scene and slowly closing out. It would seem that Durgdas is making a recount of the incidences in their journey to the Queen. Samir is sitting comfortably relaxed far behind near to the hall entrance. Durgdas is now singing the 'lullaby' he had composed for Chhoti. Meera Bai tries to sing along with him. It was reminiscent of their first meeting, and *the intellectual chemistry between the Queen and the poet* is rekindled – this Samir notes with a touch of envy. At the finishing line of the song, once again Meera Bai can't help arising and do a dance of sensuous movements. This makes Samir sit up to watch in fascination. The effect of Durgdas's artistic prowess on Meera Bai is obvious ... Samir notices with alarm.

"Marvelous!" exclaims the Queen as she sits down

"Chhoti told me this as her most cherished! .. No wonder the lullaby has put her to sleep .. ha! ha!"

Aside, Meera Bai instructs somebody "Wake her up! .. she has now been one full day in bed" the Queen was being quite informal.

Observes Meera Bai "... now, the melody ... very poignant ... sounds sort of *mishr-sarang*".

Suddenly she notices Durgadas. He is emotionally overwhelmed.

Meera Bai exclaims ".... Poet, you seem to be on the verge of breaking down!! .... is it because of ... Chhoti? ... or the *sarang*? What's happening to you?"

Completing the singing he answers in a choked voice "... no, ... not *sarang* ... I mean, yes the raga is *sudh-sarang* ... but she ... Your Highness, there we saw her suddenly drop everything and start screaming ... the next moment we see her running through that flock of birds ... trying to hug the small ones ... kiss the larger ones" Durgdas laughs dementedly and chokes "And there we are ... *Huzoor* Samir and myself, chasing after her ... such an embarrassment ... with a full crowd watching ... both of us trying to prevent her from flying off with those birds!"

Durgdas laughs again at the absurdity of the situation and says

"Majesty, those birds, is an everyday sight there. .... But to realize that for a girl born and raised in captivity ..... to behold for the first time, the outside world is so overwhelming!! ....."



Gathering from the tone of her voice, the Queen also seemed emotionally moved when she says “Ah! Our darling Chhoti touches every heart .... despite her fierce attributes!”

Durgdas composes himself and shakes his head in negation.

“No, .... it is neither Chhoti nor the *sarang* that overwhelms me ... but, you *Meera Bai*, ... *you my majesty!*”

Durgdas was opening his heart

“Whenever I saw Chhoti shriek with joy, my thoughts were on you. ....

.... A Queen you are ... but, you are also a woman not much different from that girl. Given the opportunity, wouldn’t you like to laugh like her ... out there under the vast open skies?”

He paused to search for movements on the veil covering her face.

“Wouldn’t you like to chase flamingoes and attempt flying with them? ....

“ .... Jostle and fight with packs of shrieking children .... while picking flowers in a field of hyacinth? .... [\[Chhoti’s visual is divulged here. For narrative efficiency\]](#) .... jump hurdles over woolly lambs? ... streak screaming through misty mountainsides?” [\[Those visuals first divulged here\]](#)

He felt her tremble. [\[rarely, view from queen’s suggestion\]](#)

“Dear majesty, don’t you desire to jump up and down like crazy on freshly winnowed stacks of hay?” [\[Chhoti’s visuals here\]](#)

[\[Here, a recap of Chhoti saying “The last 40 days were the most beautiful of my life!! In case we won’t meet again, please don’t forget that the happiness you have given me is infinitely more than .... even what a reigning Queen can get!”\]](#)

Moved with self pity, Meera Bai’s words fails her when she tries to answer him.

After a glance back at Samir who was reclining far behind on his seat, Durgdas turns to Meera Bai and ask “Forgive me for this affront... is there anything this poor poet here or that prince over there can help in giving you the same happiness ... as Chhoti?”

After a pause, composing herself Meera Bai answers “Your words are sincere ... and, coming from a poet it shows sensitivity ... so no offence taken poet ... I mean, dear Durgdas ...” she sighs “I realize that you have returned to your original theme – *The proposal made by Swan to Damayanti* ....”

Time stood still for the poet as he waits for her to comment on the topic.

With a determination the Queen says “Hmmmm ..... It is time I answered your proposal with another. Can you call your master and friend Prince Samir? It is better I talk to him ... *in private*”.

Samir was impressed that a ‘un-coached’ Durgdas had laid the ground for his talking with the Queen. He winks at his Chela while they cross each other. Samir senses that it is to be on the subject of winning her hand. At last!



As he takes the seat Durgdas has vacated for him, Meera Bai comes straight to the point “Dear Prince ... Chhoti informs me of your gallantry in glorious terms and Durgdas brings up the topic of my marriage in a poignant way ... and, you have come ready with a *dulhan ki baraat* (bridal procession) I gather!”

Matter assured, without being circumspect Samir ventured ahead with his charm “Majesty, how soon can we converse without a barrier between us ... we can understand each other better if we talk face-to-face” while saying that, he was drawing figures on the muslin’s embroidery.

[note - IF MEERA BAI SELECTS A CONSORT THAT MEETS THE JOHN COMPANY’S APPROVAL AND SETTLES DOWN RELINQUISHING HER CLAIM TO THE NAWAGH THRONE, SHE COULD COME OUT A WOMAN FREED FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF THIS IMPRISONMENT].

Says Meera Bai “I am not ... ready for that ... yet”.

She adds in broken words “ ... not yet, .. since I have been used to this cloister .... for almost as long as my life .... while talking with men ... It may take some more time ... some more of this type of interactions ... before I can dispense with this ... *barrier*”.

Samir relaxed, sat back, smiling sympathetically.

Meera Bai continues “Meanwhile, I have a marriage proposal to make .... a proposal different from the one your bard has been facilitating ....”

Samir, leaning back on the pillows, becomes very alert.

Meera Bai – “It is for Chhoti .... now, *I am playing the Swan!*”

Samir sits bolt upright.

Meera Bai – “I desire to wed her to Durgdas, ... your poet”

Samir even with his uncanny presence of mind found his jaw dropping.

Meera Bai – “I seek your approval ... and find it proper telling you first ... so that you can propose it to him, Prince”.

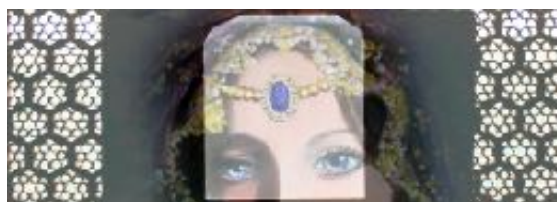
There is absolute bewilderment in Samir’s eyes, and without thinking he blurts “Whose idea is this? .... Chhoti’s? ... or, your majesty ... your suggestion? ... of course, of course, ... you said, *it is you who desire it* ... but, does she ... Chhoti know of this?”

Samir was in conflict. For, if the request had come from Chhoti, it was his machismo being challenged.

A very calm Meera Bai answers “I thought this ... a good idea, while you were away. On her return, I suggested it to her ... *actually, I insisted*. And she approved”.

Samir, now recovered from shock forces a smile and retorts “A good idea! Yes, but why, ... Your Majesty?”

Meera Bai – “The same reason Durgdas voiced just now. .... Being your confidant, I am sure he had your approval before he brought up the topic while narrating the journey details to me” After a pause she says “.... I would like Chhoti to be free ... to have a free life ... outside this prison. And this would be a good chance for her ... a good match too”.



Samir, unsurely, nods in approval and without thinking asks “When do you want this to happen?”

Meera Bai – “Today”.

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**The Marriage.** Performed in the open courtyard inside the palace premises, it is an intimate low-key affair. The friendly gathering consisted of mostly women - the fellow inmates of the bride at the prison fort. Invited into the fort for this auspicious ceremony, there also stood at the courtyard entrance the Company’s men guarding the fort. Along with the garrison’s Anglo-Indian chief, in front of the Company soldiers sat Prince Samir presiding the function. On the opposite side to them from the durbar stage emerged Chhoti with a group of ladies accompanying her. She was wearing her best dress – the ornate one which her two friends had brought her at Aman. After receiving blessings from her Queen, she came down to the courtyard centre.

[Women inmates did voice trilling while the company soldiers sang ‘Here comes the Bride’.]

There, at the ceremonial fire Durgdas was waiting. With an exchange of garlands & a walk around the fire, the ceremony was over. Chhoti gave one last parting look towards the durbar hall before she took leave of the palace and followed *her new relations* out of the prison fort.

=====

**The nuptial chamber** inside a tent. Pitched just outside Sabalgarh Fort, this is Prince Samir’s camp.

Hostility in the air! Facing away from each other, Durgadas and Chhoti are sitting on a predicament that seems to have arisen out of some terrible misunderstanding.

Durgdas is morose that he was forced by Prince Samir into this matrimony.

He complains “At many a weddings, I have composed verses to make the groom laugh, ... sang farewell poems to make the bride weep, ..... On my own wedding,.... I feel like cursing!”

Chhoti retorts “... for that matter, even I was also forced into this by my mistress. But, she had my best interests in her mind”.

Durgdas counters “Good for you. My master had only self-interest in his mind”. Arguments follow.

In bitterness Durgdas says “My great dream .... my only desire ... is to compose *A Masterpiece*. Everything else can wait. It is because of my dream that I am here! Why did this happen to me? This upsets everything!”

Chhoti says “I’m sorry .... you said it. I am of no use to you. I can’t appreciate poems ... couplets. You are right .... Unintellectual, I am a mere soldier.”



Durgdas says “But a great and accomplished one! You would prefer somebody like Samir. I would be deadweight for you while jumping across rooftops”.

That was the last straw! Piqued, Chhoti volunteers to save the situation by doing ‘a disappearing act’. She has to merely walk back into the fort. ***Forget the marriage had ever happened.***

That statement shocks the poet. Realising the consequences, he about-faces to become a proper bridegroom.

Durgdas says “Wait! .....” and she stops to turn and face him.

He tells her “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Chhoti”.

Chhoti - “.....” she just stood there, gazing at him.

Durgdas, feeling abashed to concede that his resentment in getting married was false, says apologetically “... The truth is, .... I was waiting to hear something from your lips .... one single thing, ..... the only thing that could make all the difference ... but I didn’t hear that from my *patni*”.

Chhoti - “.....??”

Durgdas - “... *that you love me*”

Answers Chhoti “ ... I, ... I, ... poems are beyond me ... But, earlier when I said ‘*with my face cradled in your palms, I would always cherish your couplets*’, I meant that!” .... eyes downcast with a shy smile she adds “ ..... how can a *dulhan* convey it better to her man?”

Durgdas - “.....” He blinked.

Now raising her eyes to gaze at him Chhoti with a jubilant smile says “You never told me as much, *my pati* ... ”

From her expression, Durgdas realizes that she had all along been determined in her getting hitched with him. Her line of ‘*being forced into marriage*’ was only to taunt his indetermination.

[Durgdas had behaved as if he been smarting for the inconvenience thrust on him. Meanwhile, Chhoti had behaved like the traditional Hindu bride – speaking softly and patiently. The fact was, recognizing Durgdas’s inferiority and his prejudices on being subservient to Samir, Chhoti had handled the talk with much subtlety].

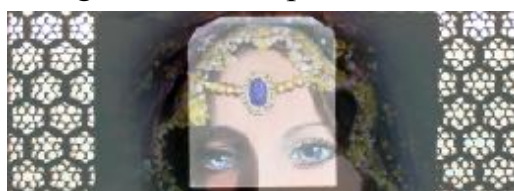
Sitting in lotus position upon the nuptial bed laid on the tent ground, Durgdas folds his hands to her as in homage.

Thus in a romantic fashion he admits defeat.

“My name is Durgdas. It means *a devotee of goddess Durga - the fierce one who protects!* By hauling me off from danger, you have become my goddess, and me your devotee .... and from today, you are always welcome to do that” with a sheepish smile he adds “..... what more can a man say, *my patni*?”

With a triumphant laugh, the bride jumps on the groom pushing him flat under her on the nuptial bed. She starts kissing him aggressively. For the rest of the night, the poet was held pinned down by the soldier.

The tumult was heard throughout the camp.



Listening outside during the first watch of the night, the lady servants - who as per a bawdy custom had hidden *papads* (crackers) under the nuptial bedcovers, were horrified to hear altercations instead of cracking coming from the tent. As the talks softened within the tent, there was some respite during the second watch of the night. The ladies once again sharpened their ears for the cracking. During the third watch what started as the bride's laughter erupted into gasps, moans, hiss, howls, shrieks and screams, drowning out any *papad* cracking sound for the remaining of the night. While the lady-servants ran away closing their ears, Samir saw guardsmen standing blushed at their posts.

=====

“So, she was a virgin ... !”

At Samir's crude remark Durgdas was jolted from his deep thoughts. He became conscious that on the very next day after the wedding, they are traveling to his native place to complete the matrimonial tradition.

[A *Kashi Yathra* ceremony of some other marriage is seen taking place in the background]

Durgdas was riding silently with Samir in the front. Behind them, Chhoti's bridal *doli* was being carried in the middle of the convoy. It was suggested that to make good-speed, the *doli* and the maids-in-waiting be dispensed with and everybody ride horseback. But Samir stuck to the convention that a bride be carried royally till she reached her *sasural* (groom's abode).

“I would not have believed it” Samir was continuing his muse “.... by morning, the maids brought me the evidence ....”

Durgdas was momentarily puzzled as to what he meant by that.

Samir - “...the soiled sheets.... blood stains... bridesmaids are meant to ascertain that”.

In embarrassment, Durgdas kept silent.

But Samir kept going “... quite rare ... for an athletic girl!”

Durgdas's face reddened.

“With all that noise she made Drug ..... boy, I thought I was at that cathouse in Calcutta! .... What a hot night! ..... Wish we had invited Meera Bai to our camp, I could have sired a new royal Nawagh dynasty with her last night itself!” Samir started laughing loudly at his joke.

“Enough of that, Huzoor!” Durgdas spoke out “ ... it's in bad taste”.

“Arey, arey, chela,... arey!” teased Samir as he spurred his horse in front of Durgdas's, to block and stop the trot.

“What happened to you my poet? ... till yesterday you were complimenting my ‘*kaama leelas*’ with erotic couplets!”

Suddenly Samir became serious. Throwing a glance towards the bridal cavalcade following them, Samir asks.

“Has something changed now .... with her coming between us?”

Durgdas stares at Samir for a moment.



There seemed to be some soul-searching going in him. Finding no answers, Durgdas sidesteps and attempts to trot his horse beyond Samir.

Looking out from behind the veils of her palanquin, Chhoti could sense a tussle in the distance ... with Durgdas evading to proceed ahead but Samir blocking his advance.

Changing the topic, Sam whispers “Now listen, **Chela**, ...this is serious. On the next new-moon day, that’s January 20th ... Blaker has told me to meet him in Allahabad fort. I am to bring him the answer ... about the Queen’s dynastic intentions. But, she has hoodwinked me ... by dumping her maid on you. Some fool I am ... for I thought I would by now be taking the Queen along. Well, at least we have something to show John Blaker ... The Maid!”

Samir turned to gallop ahead. Durgdas looks back at the palanquin and follows, shaken.

=====

Seen from high above is the Allahabad fort, into the garrison yard comes the bridal convoy. From the palanquin, helped by Durgdas, the puzzled bride steps out.

Chhoti speaks “Tradition necessitates that the bride should reach her *sasural* (in-law’s abode) on leaving her home. Why am I brought here, dear *Pati* ?”

A flustered Durgdas manages to utter “ ... you see, Chhoti ... this matter so ... grave ... of national importance ... I .. we shall leave as soon ...”

Chhoti in earnest tells him “*Pati*, I have come prepared to take over house duties as soon as I reach my *sasural*, your home. It is *sankranthi* festival season now ...I need just divest this bridal garbs, ... and I am ... ready to sing ballads - your couplets, *mere naye rishtedarom ke saath* (along with my new household) ... I am eager to dance with my *natedaar* (kinswomen) to the villagers *dolak* beats. Now, ... what could be more important than that?”

Durgdas “Huzoor Samir ... he has a few questions. We shall leave ... all this behind, once you answer those ...”

Seeing Samir waiting for them at the portico of the large colonial building, Chhoti mutters “... Samir!” It came out as a hiss from between her lips.

=====

In the huge hall at the other end of the long table stood Baker. While at this end Chhotti, with Durgdas standing besides her, is being questioned by two John Company (military) officials. Samir sat some distance behind them.

The situation is as follows.

Brought to the assembly was a ‘Nawaghi’ *Sarpanch* (village chief) who was caught with some gems Chhoti had distributed the last time. On interrogation, it



was found that a *mukhiya* (clan elder) had distributed these as funds towards an uprising for Queen Meera Bai.

With eyes fixed on Samir, Chhoti admits that she is the one who had dispersed it - as largesse from her queen. The mutiny angle she shoots down by exposing the *Sarpanch*'s false credentials and motives to earn favour for himself.

At this, the man starts whining and proclaims that the *mukhiya* at seven provinces of Nawagh are waiting for their Queen to come down so as to rouse the citizens against the English Masters.

This, Chhoti unequivocally terms a canard.

When the conflict reaches nowhere, John Baker comes forward.

[Blaker asks Chhoti to be seated. She declines, saying that a wife wouldn't sit before her husband].

Blaker asks the *Sarpanch*

"Can you vouch, at the cost of your life, that if the Queen comes out of her confinement, these elders of the provinces shall swear allegiance to her in public?"

He answers "Yes, my Sahib. They are eagerly awaiting the day of her return!"

Fixing his gaze on Chhoti, Baker instructs Samir now standing behind him

"There is but one way to make sure ... Make her write a letter to Meera Bai informing that the elders are ready to receive their queen. Request her mistress to come here during the last day of Kumbh Mela. The festival would serve as an adequate cover".

Turning to the *Sarpanch*, Blaker says "Spread the message among all secret loyalists ... to await the Queen".

Turning to the officials, Blaker says

"If she comes, we shall be ready for her ...

Also, if such be the case, be ready for an uprising to occur".

Chhoti stands silently watching Blaker walk away.

While everybody start dispersing, Samir is behind Chhoti advising her the wisdom behind such a gesture. If her sovereign has no plans to establish a reign, Mira Bai wouldn't turn up. "Then, I would be the lucky one to carry the Company's olive branch to your queen".

Chhoti gives him her '*don't con me*' look.

An embarrassed Samir gesticulates to Durgdas 'you talk her into it' and leaves.

Durgdas "Chhoti my *Patni*, .. for our sake ... for you and me, do this ... please .."

Chhoti "Dear *Pati*, you ask me to betray my Queen?"

Taken aback, Durgdas opens his mouth to protest ... but words fail him.

Chhoti adds "You know the consequences if she is found outside her fort prison"?

Her mind made up, Chhoti (by herself, regally) sits down on the chair at the long table.



Chhoti “Ask them to give me the writing materials .. and ask Samir for a fast rider from my bridal convoy to deliver the message to my queen”.

To a surprised Durgdas she adds

“Yes, I am doing this for us ... for you and me, ... my *Pati*”

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[Chhoti writing, the scrutiny and the mode of delivery. Possibly in the backdrop, a Durgdas couplet]



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*Anmol Mothi*  
**PART FOUR**

**the  
showdowns**

Portions of this section are written as '*online narrative*' - a film industry parlance.  
Scenes have not been formulated. Awaiting research inputs.

- **Kumbh Mela.** At the conclusion of the massive festival, a trap had been set for Meera Bai. They wait to see whether the queen takes the bait. Mingling with the thousands of attendees, masqueraded as pilgrims and temple functionaries, there was a contingent from the Company. The *Sarpanch* is one among them. Company officials deputed by Baker were monitoring the developments, their eyes always upon our trio - Samir, Durgdas and Chhoti.

As Durgdas scans the milling multitudes on the sandy plain, he wonders 'would she?' .. and if then, 'how and where would the queen make her presence'?

Durgdas's eyes falls on Chhoti .. and then on Samir. Samir's eyes were constantly upon Chhoti, watching her every movement. Chhoti, a warrior trained to hide emotions, seemed oblivious of the gazes constantly falling on her. Today she is most anxious as her eyes dart from one vendor group to another, one litter carriage to another. Masses of people were moving back and forth in the vast riverbank.

Realising his wife's disquiet and feeling pity, Durgdas reaches out to squeeze her hand and express companionship. But instead of acknowledging the gesture, Durgdas finds her stiffening. Her gaze was fixed ahead of them on some activity that was developing.

- The *Sarpanch* was gesticulating animatedly to draw the Company Official's attention. He was pointing to a group of fighters coalescing. They were being shepherded by distinguishably dressed *akharas* (Kumbh Mela convenors) ... and to our trio, the men looked like the *mukhiya* (Nawaghi provincials/ elders) to whom they had distributed Queen Meera Bai's largesse about a month back. Suddenly catching everybody's attention there was a chanting heard "Mahadeo Bolo" ... "Bolo, Bolo". From a distance there came a palanquin carried by the chanting bearers. Though there were many such carriages moving around, this one was special since the *akhara* elders and their followers were seen moving towards the palanquin expectantly.

- The mob assembling around the solitary palanquin got increasing .. making it difficult to see. And the group was getting obscured in the tide of humanity. Samir looks towards the Officials ... they too seem to have sensed a conspiracy. "The palanquin! The palanquin! Surround it!!" Shouts Samir as he leaps forward. "Dont let anyone escape!!"

It was a mad rush.

Company soldiers appearing from among the pilgrims attempt to surround the palanquin and the group around it. But, like a charging elephant rampaging helter-skelter to shake off its hunter, the group move through the mela crowd ... occasionally disappearing from view.

When Samir and the contingent finally had them surrounded and stopped, a fight ensued. It was a furious skirmish - shouting, brawl, sword and fistfights. The defenders furiously denying the attackers from getting to the carriage. The Company soldiers ferociously trying to uncover whatever was in there. Women warriors jump out from the palanquin and ward the Company soldiers off.

Closely following Samir, Durgdas (still holding hands with Chhoti) find themselves too under attack. Reminiscent of the trio's past adventures, Samir and Chhoti rush to Durgdas's defence when the poet's life is on the line. Chhoti with her bare palms (and soles), Samir with his sword and pistols.

Bloodshed ensues.

Slashing madly and firing furiously to shake off assailants, Samir screams "Chhoti ... the palanquin! Get it open. Get the one inside ... Quick!!"

Chhoti smashes the carriage's side and enters ... but she goes down under a multitude of defenders. Dust and fury fly all around ... obscuring vision.

- With the Company soldiers warding off the diminishing number of defenders, Samir and Durgdas forcefully cut open the palanquin.

There they find Chhoti lying bound and writhing amidst ornate chests and precious items stacked within the palanquin. Tied-up with shreds of what possibly could have been the Queen's vestment (gold embroidered dupatta), she was struggling violently to free herself.

When freed of bonds, Chhoti jumps out as if seeking the one/s who escaped.

“कहाँ गये वह/ वो” (Where did she/they go?) Chhoti shouts.

On this, many among the defenders stop fighting with the Company soldiers and take flight. Chhoti, as if identifying someone among the fleeing warrior women, gives chase. Samir and Durgdas closely follow her.

A chase through the mela tumult.

Suddenly the chase opens out from the crowds ... ending at the riverbank.

The ones whom they were chasing, hath apparently disappeared!

- By the time the trio return to the palanquin, it is a changed scenario.

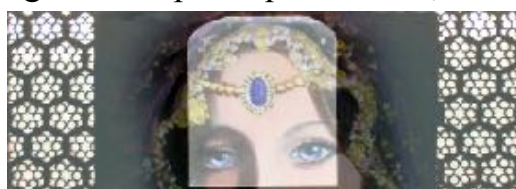
Dusk was falling. Pan-fires were being lit on the sandbank.

The *mukhiya* (Nawagh provincials) and their followers had been subdued.

The Company soldiers were removing their pilgrim attires.

Blaker's officer explains the version (rather, the alibi) told by those whom they have apprehended.

“They claim that, as *akhara* elders they are here to receive a precious trade consignment being brought in the palanquin ... and, we have interfered!”.



Apparently, no amount of intimidation or blows could make them change their story.

The Official turns to Chhoti and asks

“Inside the palanquin ... who did you see?”

Chhoti, seemingly unsure, remains silent. Samir further asks, point blank ...

“It was Meera Bai? ... wasn't it?”

Chhoti shakes her head in denial.

But nobody is convinced of her reply ... neither Samir nor the Official. She looks enquiringly at her husband ... searching his face, looking for support. Durgdas averts his eyes and looks down.

The Official calls Samir aside to whisper. Then Samir calls Durgdas aside to whisper. Watching Samir and Durgdas conversing, fear starts to brood in Chhoti's heart. She is losing her love.

### ● The Estrangement.

Dusk.

It started with Samir. After the whispered conversation with Durgdas, Samir comes towards Chhoti. He first commends Chhoti on her spunk in inviting her mistress. But then, Samir enquires ... Since she has left her queen and joined her husband, shouldn't Chhoti's loyalty now be with her new relatives? She ought to be cultivating new relationships!

Chhoti nonchalantly replies that it is personal ... a matter of her household. She moves past Samir towards Durgdas who was watching them from a distance.

Piqued by the causticity in her words, Samir stops her saying that he has not finished, yet. At this Chhoti emphatically adds that Samir has no say in this ... she shall discuss it with her husband ... and, he shall let Samir know. Belittled, an angry Samir grabs her by her shoulders and establishes on her face that he is her husband's master. [both retorts overlapping] The infringement on her person and the insinuation that he has ownership over her (body?), makes Chhoti slap him ... hard. Alarmed, Durgdas rushes in between them. Samir has unsheathed his sword. Chhoti in defensive posture held Samir's pistol [grabbed when she slapped].

Durgdas admonishes Chhoti to calm down. By then Samir, smiling and rubbing his stinging cheek, has regained his bravado. He humorously urge both *patni* & *pati* to sort things out. While walking away, Samir turns around to yell “My *Chela*, ... remember what I told you”. This is not lost on Chhoti.

After an explosive silence, Durgdas started

“Listen Chhoti, I have to tell you ...”

Chhoti interrupts “... dear *pati*, ... do you love me?”

Durgdas “Why Chhoti, I ...”

Chhoti “Yes, or No?”

Durgdas “Yes, ... ardently!”



Chhoti “Then ... first, please cradle my face in your palms ... (*overcome with emotions she continues*) ... and sing that lullaby ...once again, please ...”

Durgdas, touched, complies.

By the time he finishes the couplet, there are tears in her eyes.

Chhoti “Now ... dear *pati*, ... both of us ... let us free ourselves of all these. Let us go far ... far, far away ... to a place of our own ... a life of our own ... (*almost desperately*) Please! ”

Tears were rolling down her cheek. She first held his palm within hers and pressed them close to her heart ... then, caressing downwards on her person.

Durgdas, flustered, finds himself searching for words.

“... well, Chhoti, I am ... to go west towards Meerut, Gwalior ... I have to compose fervour *slokas* and arouse Company Seypoys ... and ...”

Wiping away tears, Chhoti sighs “Oh ! ... so, that was what your Huzoor reminded you ...”

She made that statement half to herself, disillusionment clouding her voice.

“You know *pati*, I cant accompany you”

She says that with his hand now pressed to her belly.

“Still, ... can I stop you?” For her it was still hope against hope.

Taken aback, Durgdas says almost protestingly “You know Chhoti, how important this is to me”

Chhoti “Yes, my *pati* ... I may be no appreciator of art. But I know how precious for my beloved, his poetry is. I know you will compose a celebrated *Maha Kavya* one day. And I would be the one besides you to achieve your ambition”.

Durgdas, enamoured, grabs Chhoti’s hand and looks passionately at her.

Chhoti now renders the punch line ...

In a husky voice looking intently at him she asks

“Can I convince you that your master and friend is not a person to be relied on ... for fulfilling your ambition?”

Chhoti felt all of Durgdas suddenly going cold. He let go her hand, broodingly. After a soul searching, his gaze turned to her with suspicion in his eyes.

Chhoti “... *Pati?*”

After a long pause, Durgdas retorted

“Actually, this was what Huzoor Samir reminded. He had warned ... that you would cause a rupture between us.”

Chhoti realized that she had gambled and lost. She had lost him.

Yet Chhoti pressed ahead “Maybe ... he is right. And if you were to choose between your master and your wife, ... who would you?”

Durgdas face turns sullen.

He shakes his head “That’s exactly what Huzoor Samir also had asked me”.

Chhoti held her breath for Durgdas to continue.



Durgdas “ ... and I had answered ... [recites a couplet]

न दुनिया था हमारी दोस्ती से पहले

परी की हुस्न कुछ नहीं मेरी शाइरी से पहले ”

(There was no world, before our friendship.

An angel’s beauty is nothing, before my poetry.)

It was plain that he had answered the question even before Chhoti had framed it. Biting down a whimper, Chhoti raises her eyes high. Along with a flamingo bird that rose to the skies, a long wail emanates from her mouth to pierce the thunderclouds. [this visual is metaphorical]

- It had started to rain.

Finding Durgdas returning alone, Samir is concerned “Chhoti ...?”

Durgdas “She has left. Back to her mistress, the Queen”.

“What happened?” Asks Samir, alarmed.

[As answer, here we see the visuals of what had taken place.

It is drizzling along the expanses of the sandy plains. Chhoti is approaching, her things packed and the bundle slung behind her back. She comes to Durgdas, touches his feet in obeisance, turns around to mount a steed and faces her husband. She quickly turns around and rides off.]

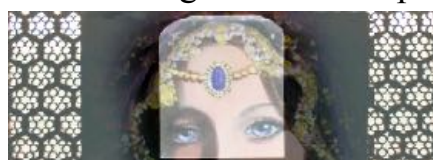
Before galloping away Chhoti says “I am going back home”

Once again she turns the horse around to yell “I ... *We* shall be waiting for you”

- **The Mutiny.** The sequence starts with clarion calls at major barracks of the East India Company to rise up against the English Masters [Enfield Rifle Cartridges]. It then transcends to the long been simmering political [Awadh], cultural and national [Nana Sahib, Tanya Tope] caldrons behind the revolt. The docudrama style narrative moves from Lucknow to Cawnpore to Meerut to Allahabad, giving the disorienting situation of a land fast degenerating into turmoil and chaos.

- Samir and Durgdas are caught up in the events. On instruction from Blaker, they travel from one place to the other mentioned above. Samir is a witness to the *Bibighar Massacre* of English women and children. Durgdas finds himself traumatised when he can’t help a woman and her child at the battle for Gwalior ... and he realises that similar fate awaits Meera Bai. He is concerned about his wife Chhoti ... and recollects her caressing his palm over her womb. This, as well as her parting words “I ... *WE* shall be waiting for you” haunts him. Who did she mean by *We* ? She & her Queen? ... or in her womb ... ? Suddenly, the ill fated woman of Gwalior clutching her child comes to his mind.

- Samir is at the forefront during the storming and ransacking of rebel stronghold Lucknow. Rape and plunder ensued. While this was happening, there came the news that the Fort of Sabalgarh was occupied by a group of Nawaghi



Sepoys. The rebels have sworn allegiance to Queen Meera Bai. A revolt was expected. Instructions came from Blaker for Samir to accompany the Company battalion meant to re-capture Sabalgarh Fort and subdue its occupants ... before the people of Nawagh rallied for their Queen's cause.

It would take Samir another day before the brawls were over, claims as to which royal was loyal to the Company settled, the adversaries' fortunes confiscated, the loot apportioned and order established. But Durgdas's conscience would not allow him to tarry. Chhoti's parting lines filled his mind. After an argument with Samir, yet again on the subject of loyalty, he once and for ever severs the friendship with his master and benefactor.

- Before long, Durgdas is on his way to Sabalgarh Fort. Riding horseback, he sees carriages getting ahead of him on a newly laid rail track! [\[A strange chugging sound. Children, despite the eeriness and stench of death, come to wave at the passing steam-spitting-iron horse.\]](#) The train is carrying an armed force. Is that a battalion bound for Sabalgarh Fort? Anxious, Durgdas spurs his steed.

- When Durgdas reach the hilltop at Sabalgarh Fort, the siege is on. Samir was also there with the assault force. Occasional cannon booms were heard. As he desperately sought ways to enter, Durgdas hears Colonel George Smith's shrill announcement urging the fort inhabitants to surrender. As a gesture of goodwill, food and medicine is allowed to be carried inside ... while women, children and the injured are allowed to leave. As the transactions start, the situation suddenly goes out of control [\[à la Siege of Cawnpore\]](#). On suspicion that ammunition was being furtively taken in, some Company soldiers fires upon the provision



CAPTURE OF DELHI 1957. Coloured lithograph by Bequet Freres.

carriers. Return fire from the besieged rebels breaks out from the fort. Pandemonium ensues.

Women and children start screaming and fleeing the fort.

Company's sepoys charge towards it.

The long awaited assault by the besiegers has started.

- Durgdas, seeking his wife, finds his way into the fort amidst the commotion. But there is more fury inside Sabalgarh Fort than what was happening outside. From outside the fort, an announcement was being made now by Samir.

Samir declares himself a newly anointed prince, and extends olive branch to all Nawaghi citizens. He urges them to put their weapons down and swear allegiance to the English.

Shouts of "Traitor, traitor ... imposter!" are heard from battlements above. Cannons once again start booming.

Durgdas finds the female battalion getting assembled in the courtyard. On a war cry, upon horses they charge outwards.

Durgdas is not sure whether it is Chhoti who was leading the charge. He hesitates before moving inwards ... or ... should he follow the female warriors? The fort door closes as soon as the charging horsewomen exit.

- Rushing along the courtyard, Durgdas manages to enter the durbar hall.

This is the place where he had last conversed with queen Meera Bai ... the place where she had proposed to Samir that Chhoti be married to Durgdas.

The place is now empty, lifeless.

The only movement is that of the ornately embroidered Dhaka muslin veils that obscure vision into the Queen's private space ... gently swaying.

Durgdas slowly nears it.

He hears a child whimper.

Quickly he slashes with his sword and tears open the veil.

There he sees Chhoti on the Queen's throne.

No, .... not Chhoti ... it is Meera Bai herself ... as always, veiled below her eyes. But now dressed as queen, ready for battle.

Meera Bai's eyes, having a striking similarity with Chhoti's, looks down ... as the infant on her lap whimpers.

In the regal voice Durgdas had always heard, the queen says ... emotionless

"Welcome back poet Durgdas. Not the best of times for a reunion. I have to lead the battle ... it is my duty ... queen Meera Bai's duty"

Still in disbelief Durgdas asks "Chh .. Chhoti?"

Arising, she kisses the infant and extends it into his arms

"Oh, here is your child. Chhoti desires her darling be entrusted to your care".

From outside is heard the last battle cries of the defenders as they prepare to charge towards the enemy.



On this, the queen repeats after them her kingdom's battle cry "Jai Matha, Jai Nawagh!"

She jumps onto her steed at the courtyard. Before riding off she turns around to face Durgdas and say "It was Chhoti's desire ... to have been always ... always with you. She would have preferred that".

As she exits the fort gate, a deafening roar could be heard from outside ... cries of "Meera Bai ... Meera Bai" resonates around Durgdas.

Above those cries, Durgdas hears a trumpet call.

It has shades of the melody of The Magnificent Bhoar (भोर).

The opening 'aalaap' of the celebrated song emanates from Durgdas's throat ... and with the infant held close to his chest, he rushes up the fort towers to see what was happening beyond ... to view the battle outside.

He sees the queen leading a battle charge with the last of her soldiers ... towards an array of rifles poised to fire.

"Fire!" George Smith's command is heard.

The volley from the besiegers' fire brings many of the queen's soldiers down.

Yet she manages to reach Samir's position and engage with him.

[The clash between Samir and Meera Bai is so violent and full of pyrotechnics, every combatant on both sides stop their engagement ... to stare in awe.]

After a short and fierce combat, Meera Bai kills Samir.

[There was a pause, a short respite, at the height of their combat. It happened when Samir's sword slashed Meera Bai's veil. He forgets himself and gapes at her face, now revealed. That was enough for her to strike a mortal blow.]



All this time Durgdas's song was resonating from atop the fort battlements to the battle field below.

Enthralled, they are appreciating the great composition.



