Letter from India

SERVING THE GODDESS

The dangerous life of a sacred sex worker.

by William Dalrymple - The New Yorker August 4, 2008

The devadasi system is centuries old, and the women once enjoyed lives of great privilege. Photograph by Ima Garmendia.

"Of course, there are times when there is pleasure," Rani Bai said. "Who does not like to make love? A handsome young man, one who is gentle . . ."
She paused for a moment, looking out over the lake, smiling to herself. Then her face clouded over. "But mostly it is horrible. The farmers here, they are not like the boys of Bombay."
"And eight of them every day," her friend Kaveri said. "Sometimes ten. Unknown people. What kind of life is that?"
"We have a song," Rani said. " 'Everyone sleeps with us, but no one marries us. Many embrace us, but no one protects.' "
"Every day, my children ask, 'Who is my father?' They do not like having a mother who is in this business."
"Once, I tried to open a bank account with my son," Rani said. "We went to fill in the form, and the manager asked, 'Father's name?' After that, my son was angry. He said I should not have brought him into the world like this."
"We are sorry we have to do this work. But what is the alternative?"
"Who will give us jobs? We are all illiterate."
"And the future," Kaveri said. "What have we to look forward to?"
"When we are not beautiful, when our bodies become ugly, then we will be all alone."
"If we live long enough to be old and to be ugly," Kaveri said. "So many are dying."
"One of our community died last week. Two others last month."
"In my village, four younger girls have died," Kaveri said. "My own brother has the disease. He used to be a truck driver, and knew all the girls along the roads. Now he just lies at home drinking, saying, 'What difference does it make? I will die anyway.' "
She turned to face me. "He drinks anything he can get," she said. "If someone told him his own urine had alcohol in it, he would drink that, too." She laughed, but harshly. "If I were to sit under a tree and tell you the sadness we have to suffer, the leaves of that tree would fall like tears. My brother is totally bedridden now. He has fevers and diarrhea." She paused. "He used to be such a handsome man, with a fine face and large eyes. Now those eyes are closed, and his face is covered with boils and lesions."
"Yellamma never wanted it to be like this," Rani said.
"The goddess is sitting silently," Kaveri said. "We don't know what feelings she has about us. Who really knows what she is thinking?"
"No," Rani said, firmly shaking her head. "The goddess looks after us. When we are in distress, she comes to us. Sometimes in our dreams. Sometimes in the form of one of her children."
"It is not the goddess's doing."
"The world has made it like this."
"The world, and the disease."
"The goddess dries our tears," Rani said. "If you come to her with a pure heart, she will take away your sadness and your sorrows. What more can she do?"
We had come to Saundatti, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, to see the goddess Yellamma—Rani Bai, Kaveri, and I. (The names of the two women have been changed.) We had driven over that morning from the town of Belgaum, through the rolling green plains of cotton country. The women, who had been dedicated to Yellamma when they were children, normally took the old slow bus to visit her temple, so they had jumped at the chance to make the journey in the comfort of a taxi.

It was hot and muggy, not long after the end of the rains, and the sky was bright and cloudless. The road led through long avenues of ancient banyan trees, each with an intricate lattice of aerial roots. As we neared Saundatti, however, the green tunnel came to an end, and the fields on either side gave way to drier, poorer country. Trees, cane breaks, and cotton fields were replaced by strips of sunflowers. Goats picked through dusty stubble. Women in ragged clothing sold onions laid out on palm-weave mats set along the side of the road. After some time, a long red stone ridge appeared out of the heat haze. The ridge resolved itself into the great hogback of Saundatti, and at the top, rising from near-vertical cliffs, was the silhouette of the temple of Yellamma. Below, and to one side, stretched a lake of almost unearthly blue.

It was here, according to legend, that the story had begun. Yellamma was the wife of the powerful rishi Jamadagni. The couple and their four sons lived in a simple wooden hermitage by the lake. Here the sage punished his body and performed great feats of austerity. After the birth of his fourth child, these included a vow of chastity. Every day, Yellamma served her husband, and fetched water from the river for her husband's rituals. She used a pot made of sand, and carried it home in the coils of a live snake.

One day, as Yellamma was fetching water, she saw a heavenly being, a gandharva, making love to his consort by the banks of the river. It was many years since Yellamma had enjoyed the pleasures of love, and the sight attracted her. Watching from behind a rock, and hearing the lovers' cries of pleasure, she found herself longing to take the place of the beloved.

This sudden rush of desire destroyed her composure. When she crept away to get water for her husband, she found, to her horror, that she could no longer create a pot from sand, and that her yogic powers of concentration had vanished. When she returned home without the water, Jamadagni guessed what had happened, and in his rage he cursed his wife. According to Rani and Kaveri, within seconds Yellamma had become sickly and ugly, covered with boils and festering sores. She was turned out of her home, cursed to wander the roads of the Deccan, begging for alms.

Jamadagni belongs to that class of irascible holy men who fill Sanskrit literature with their fiery and unforgiving anger. In contrast, the goddess Yellamma, like Sita in the Ramayana, is a victim, suspected of infidelities she never committed, rejected by all. Though the story is full of sadness and injustice, devadasis—as those who have been dedicated, or "married," to a god or a goddess are known—believe that the tale shows how the goddess is uniquely sympathetic to their fate. After all, their lives often resemble hers: they are cursed for crimes of love outside the bonds of marriage, rejected by their children, condemned like Yellamma to live on the roads, begging for favors, disfigured by sadness, and without the protection of a husband.

I got a glimpse of the tensions in the devadasi's life when we arrived in Saundatti. We had gone to a tea shop near the lake, at my suggestion. Devadasis are a common sight in Saundatti, where they often beg in the bazaars on Yellamma's holy days of Tuesday and Friday. But they don't usually brave the tea shops on the main street.

Long before the glasses of hot sweet chai arrived, the farmers at the other tables had started pointing at Rani Bai, and gossiping. They had come from their villages to sell cotton at the market, and, having got a good price, were now in a boisterous mood. Although Kaveri and Rani Bai had the red tikka of a married woman on their foreheads, Rani Bai's muttu—the necklace of red and white beads that a devadasi wears—and her jewelry, her painted face, and her overly dressy silk sari had given her away.

Kaveri had once been beautiful, but the difficulties of her life, and the suffering she had endured, had aged her prematurely, and she no longer attracted attention. Rani Bai was different. She was in her late thirties, at least ten years younger than Kaveri, and was still, undeniably, lovely. She was tall and long-limbed, and had a large mouth, full lips, a firm brown body, and a lively manner. She did not keep her gaze down, as Hindu women generally do in the villages; instead, she spoke in a loud voice, and every time she gesticulated about something—and her hands were constantly dancing about as she talked—her bracelets rattled. She wore a bright-lavender silk sari, and had rings sparkling on each of her toes and up the curve of each ear. The farmers sat there as we sipped our tea, looking at her greedily. Before long, they were noisily speculating about the relationship she might have with me, the firangi, and her cost, what she would and would not do, and wondering where she worked and whether she gave discounts.

Rani had been telling me in the car about the privileges of being a devadasi, about the way people respected her, how she was regarded as auspicious and was called even to upper-caste weddings to give her blessings. So when we finally fled the chai shop, to a chorus of laughter and bawdy remarks, her mood changed. As we sat under a banyan tree beside the lake at the edge of the town, she became melancholy, and she told me how she had come to this life.

"I was only six when my parents dedicated me," she said. "I had no feelings at the time, except wondering: why have they done this? We were very poor and had many debts. My father was desperate for money, as he had drunk and gambled away all that he had earned and more, and he said, 'This thing will make us rich, it will make us live decently.'

"At that age, I had no devotional feelings for the goddess, and dreamed only of having more money and living a luxurious life in a pucca house with a tile roof and concrete walls. So I was happy with this idea, though I still didn't understand where the money would come from, or what I would have to do to get it.

"Soon after I had had my first period, my father sold me to a shepherd in a neighboring village for five hundred rupees"—about thirty-eight dollars at the time—"a silk sari, and a bag of millet. By that stage, I knew a little of what might lie ahead, for I had seen other neighbors who had done this to their daughters, and saw people coming and going from their houses. I had asked my parents all these questions, and repeated over and over again that I did not want to do sex work. They nodded, and I thought they had agreed. But, one day, they took me to another village on the pretext of looking after my sister's newborn baby, and there I was forcibly offered to the shepherd. I was only fourteen years old.

"It happened like this. The night we arrived with my sister, they killed a chicken and we had a great feast with rotis and rice—all the luxuries even the rich could dream of. Then my mother went home to her village, and I went to sleep with my aunt. I was asleep when the man came, around nine.

"I realized something was going to happen and started crying. But my aunt, who was also a devadasi, said, 'You should not cry. This is your dharma—your duty, your work. It is inauspicious to cry.' The man was about twenty-two, and very strong. My aunt left the house, and I tried to kick him and scratch him, but he took me by force. After that, he cheated me and never gave the full five hundred rupees he had promised my father. Though I had given my body to him, he used me, and then cheated me.

"The next morning, I shouted at my aunt. I said, 'You are a whore and you have made me into a whore.' She just laughed at me. Often, I still curse my mother. Because of that woman, my life has been wrecked. For two years, I was very upset, and we did not talk. During that time, I refused to do any sex work. Instead, I worked in the onion fields here, earning fifty paise"—thirty-seven cents—"a day.

"Eventually, I went to Bombay with my devadasi aunt, who had promised to show me the city. We went by train, and I was very excited, as it was my first visit. I did not know that I would be tricked again. But when we arrived she took me straight in a rickshaw to a brothel. There she handed me over to the gharwalli—the madam—who was a friend of hers.

"The gharwalli was very sly. She gave me lots of sweets and chocolates, and introduced me to all the other girls. They were all dressed up in fine clothes and good saris with amazing jewelry on their wrists: I had never seen so much gold or so much silk! In fact, I had never seen anything like this on any woman in Belgaum. I thought this was the good life. The gharwalli offered my aunt two thousand rupees for me, as I was very good-looking, but she did not ask me to do any dhanda"—sex work—"at first, and let me take my own time. That first month, all I had to do was help cook and clean the house, and I was happy with that. I liked Bombay. I ate fabulous biryani at the Sagar Hotel, and once when I was in the streets I saw Amitabh Bachchan"—the Bollywood matinée idol—"pass by in his car.

"Before long, a rich man came and saw me at my duties, cleaning the house. He refused all the other girls and just demanded to have me. I was scared, as he was very hefty, very fat. So, instead, the gharwalli, who was very clever, sent some younger boys to me. They were lean and good-looking, and a nice match for me. Eventually, I agreed to sleep with one of them. They were very sensitive with me, not like the men here. We didn't use a condom—I didn't know about them in those days.

"Eventually, I agreed to take the big man. He offered five thousand rupees for me, and the gharwalli gave me half. Two thousand five hundred rupees! It would have taken me twenty years to earn that picking

onions in my village, and I wasn't even a virgin—I was already used goods. So I stayed, and even though I got some diseases that first year, I remained in that house for four years.
"By that time, I had had my first two children—a daughter and a son—and it was partly for them that I went back to my village. I lived with my mother, and for the last eighteen years I have done dhanda in our house in the village. After some time, I got a lover—a big man locally. He has a family—a wife, two sons, and two daughters—and used to give me money. With him, I had a second daughter. He wanted more children by me, and I didn't. That was how we eventually parted, even though we had been happy together.
"I have been lucky and I've made good money. I can still earn two hundred to three hundred rupees from a single client. It's true that I sometimes feel this is not dignified work. There is a lot of insecurity. But I have looked after and married off my sister, I feed my mother and my son, and I now have eight acres of land with the money I have earned. On it, we keep four buffalo and four bullocks. Thanks to the generosity of the goddess, I will escape this work when I have saved some more, and live by selling the milk and curd from the animals."
I asked what had happened to her daughters.
"One was a singer. She eloped when she was fourteen. She came back a year later, but no one would marry her. So she became a devadasi."
"And the other?"
"The other had some skin disease and had white patches on her thighs. We went to many doctors, but they could not cure it. Like her sister, she found it hard to get married, so I had to dedicate her, too."
"But how could you do that when you were so angry with your own mother for dedicating you? You just said yourself this is undignified work."
"My daughters scolded me," Rani Bai admitted, "just as I scolded my mother."
"Didn't you feel guilty?"
"I didn't like it," Rani said. "But there was no alternative."
"Where are they now?" I asked. "Here? Or in Bombay?"
There was a long pause when I asked this. Then Rani said, simply, "I have lost them."
"What do you mean?"
"Both have passed away. Maybe it was because of some sins in a past life that the goddess cursed me in this way. One lost weight and died of a stomach disease. The other had fevers."
I later learned that Rani's daughters had had AIDS. One died less than a year ago, aged fifteen. The other was seventeen, and died six months later.
The devadasis stand in the direct line of one of the oldest institutions in India. The word comes from Sanskrit: deva means "god" and dasi means "a female servant." At the heart of the institution lies the idea of a woman entering for life the service of a deity. The nature of that service and the name given to it have wide regional variations and have changed through time; only recently have most devadasis come to be working in the sex trade.
Some experts trace the institution to the ninth century; others maintain that it is far older, and claim that what is arguably one of the most ancient extant pieces of Indian art, a small bronze of a naked dancing girl from Mohenjo-daro, dating to around 2500 B.C., could depict a devadasi. By the time of Asoka, in the third century B.C., a piece of graffiti in a cave in the Vindhya hills, in central India, recalls the love of Devadinna, an artist, who had fallen for "Sutanuka, a devadasi." There are large numbers of images of temple dancing girls and a few textual references to devadasis from the early centuries A.D. onward, including some in the area immediately around Saundatti. The largest collection of inscriptions, however, comes from the Chola temples, around Tanjore, in Tamil Nadu, where the great Chola kings of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries boast of giving hundreds of devadasis, or tevaratiyars, to the temples they founded. These royal temples were conceived as palaces of the gods, and just as the king was attended by ten thousand dancing girls so the gods also had their share of devoted attendants. The vast entourages added to the status of rulers, whether heavenly or terrestrial, and were believed to surround them with an auspicious female presence.

Not all the "temple women" referred to in such inscriptions were necessarily dancing girls, courtesans, or concubines. Some seem to have been more like nuns, busy with devotions and temple-cleaning duties. Some had honored and important roles in the temple rituals.
In the sixteenth century, Portuguese traders from Goa began to visit the Hindu capital of Vijayanagar, in southern India, and they left fuller and more explicitly sensual descriptions of temple women. One Portuguese traveller wrote that women who belonged to the pagoda danced before the idol. The traveller went on:

They give him food and all that is necessary, and all girls born of these women belong to the temple. These women are of loose character, and live in the best streets that there are in the city; it is the same in all their cities, their streets have the best rows of houses. They are very much esteemed, and are classed amongst those honoured ones who are the mistresses of the captains; any respectable man may go to their houses without any blame attaching thereto.
This partially sexualized nature of the temple women is similarly evident in the profusion of images of voluptuous temple dancing girls that cover the pillars of so many temples in the south. There is, moreover, a body of explicitly sexual poetry from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in southern India in which the love of a devotee for the deity is sometimes envisaged as being akin to the love of a temple dancing girl for her client. Some of the most famous of these poems were discovered carved, in an early form of Telugu, on copper plates and kept in a locked room in the temple of Tirupati; it is only in the past decade that they have been translated into English, and included in the collection "When God Is a Customer." In most, the god is usually a form of Krishna; he is good-looking and desirable but a thoroughly unreliable lover who plays games that drive his devotees to despair. In other Telugu poems, however, the devadasi or courtesan sometimes dominates the relationship:

I'm not like the others.
You may enter my house,
but only if you have the money.

If you don't have as much as I ask,
a little less would do.
But I'll not accept very little,
Lord Kŏṅkaneśvara.

To step across the threshold
of my main door,
it'll cost you a hundred in gold.
For two hundred you can see my bedroom,
my bed of silk,
and climb into it.

Only if you have the money

To sit by my side
and to put your hand
boldly into my sari:
that will cost ten thousand.

And seventy thousand
will get you a touch

of my full round breasts.

Only if you have the money

Three crores to bring
your mouth close to mine,
touch my lips and kiss.
To hug me tight,
to touch my place of love,
and get to total union,
listen well,
you must bathe me
in a shower of gold.

But only if you have the money

These poems of union and separation may be read partly as metaphors for the longing of the soul for the divine, and of the devotee for God. Yet they are also clearly an expression of unembarrassed joy in sexuality, part of a complex cultural tradition in pre-colonial India where the devotional or metaphysical and the sexual are not regarded as being opposed; on the contrary, they are seen to be closely linked. The temple girls were auspicious, and the devadasis retain this auspiciousness in Karnataka today.

There is, however, an almost unimaginable gulf separating the devadasis of ancient poems and inscriptions and the lives lived by women like Rani Bai. In the Middle Ages, the devadasis were drawn from the grandest families in the realm—among them princesses of the Chola royal family—and possibly from slaves captured in war. Many were literate, and some were highly accomplished poets; indeed, at the time they seem to have been among the few literate women in the region. Today, the devadasis are drawn exclusively from the lowest castes—usually from the Dalit Madar caste—and are almost entirely illiterate. The majority of modern devadasis in Karnataka are straightforward sex workers; the devadasis I talked to estimated that only about one out of twenty of those dedicated as children manage to escape into other careers—not least because almost all of them leave school and begin work soon after puberty. They usually work from home rather than in brothels or on the streets, and tend to start younger than commercial sex workers. Nevertheless, the main outlines of their working lives are in reality little different from those of others in the sex trade. This does not, however, stop the devadasis from drawing elaborate distinctions between their sacred vocation and the work of their commercial sisters, which they take great pleasure in looking down upon.

Ironically, it was partly well-meaning social reformers who contributed to this marked drop in status. In the nineteenth century, Hindu reformers, reacting to the taunts of Victorian missionaries, began to attack the institution of temple dancers and sacred prostitution. Successive waves of colonial and postcolonial legislation slowly broke the ancient links between the devadasis and the temples, driving the women out of the temple precincts and eroding their social, economic, and spiritual position. In 1982, the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act forced the practice completely underground, threatening any priest who assisted in ceremonies with years of harsh imprisonment. Around the lake, and on the road to the temple, the government has put up huge warning signs: “Do Not Dedicate Your Daughter. There Are Other Ways of Showing Your Devotion” and “Dedicating Your Daughter Is Uncivilized Behavior.”

For all their efforts, the reformers have not succeeded in ending the institution. They have only demeaned and criminalized it. There are estimated to be around a quarter of a million devadasis in Maharashtra and Karnataka, about half of them living around Belgaum. For the very poor, and the very pious, the devadasi system can still be seen as providing a way out of poverty while gaining access to the blessings of the gods, the two things that the most impoverished crave.

This is why more than a thousand girls, usually between the ages of five and ten years, continue to be dedicated to the goddess annually. If the girls are dedicated when they are very young, they return to a normal childhood. When they reach puberty, they are wrenched from their lives and offered to the highest bidder to be deflowered.

Later that day, I visited the Yellamma temple with Rani Bai and Kaveri. It is a fine eleventh-century building, and was packed with pilgrims from across the state; we had to stand in line for some time to get a glimpse of the goddess. Ahead of us was a party of excitable eunuchs from Bijapur. The women had recovered their spirits and chatted with the eunuchs as they waited.

"I feel very devotional whenever I am here," Rani said.

"You feel her presence so strongly in her temple," Kaveri said.

"She is very near," Rani said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"It's like electricity," she replied. "You can't see it, but you know it's there, and you can see its effects."

When we arrived before the idol, the priests blessed us with a camphor lamp, and Kaveri explained that the image of the goddess had emerged from the hillside. "No one made it," she whispered.

I asked one of the Brahmans whether they still performed devadasi dedications. The priest looked uneasy.

"What do we know of these women?" he said, glancing around for support from his fellow-pundits.

"We used to bless their necklaces," one of the older priests said. "Then give them back to them. But now that is illegal."

"That was our only role."

"What they do is their own business," the first said. "This is nothing to do with us."

That evening, after we dropped off Kaveri in Belgaum, I took Rani Bai back to her house, in a nearby town where many devadasis have settled. More than a hundred worked in a small warren of streets off the main highway heading to Bangalore.

Rani Bai's house was in a dark lane, lit by a single, dim street light. Dogs sat next to open gutters, and half-naked children played in the side alleys. It was perhaps the depressing nature of her surroundings that led Rani—always the optimist—to emphasize the positive side of her career.

"We still have many privileges," Rani said as we approached her house on foot—the lanes were too narrow here for the car. "If a buffalo has a calf, the first milk after the birth is brought to the devadasis to say thank you to the goddess. During the festival of Yellamma, the people bring five new saris to us as gifts. Every full moon, we are called to the houses of Brahmans and they feed us. They touch our feet and pray to us because they believe we are the incarnation of the goddess."

"This still goes on?" I asked, thinking of the attitude of the Brahmans at the temple.

"Still," Rani said. "When we are called for pujas like this, we feel very proud.

"There are so many things like this," she continued. "When a child is born, they make a cap for the baby from one of our old saris. They hope then that the love of Yellamma will be on that child.

"Also," she added, "unlike other women, we can inherit our father's property. No one ever dares curse us. And when we die the Brahmans give us a special cremation ceremony."

We stepped over a dog, sleeping half in, half out of an open sewer.

"You see, we are not like the ordinary whores," Rani said, as we finally got to her house. "We have some dignity. We don't pick people up from the side of a road. We don't go behind bushes or anything like that. We spend time with our clients and talk to them. We are always decently dressed—always wear good silk saris. Never T-shirts or those miniskirts the other women wear in Bombay."

We had arrived at Rani's door. Outside, suspended on the wall, was a cubbyhole stall selling cigarettes and paan. Her younger sister was sitting here, handing out individual bidis and other cigarettes to passersby. As Rani led the way in, she continued, "You see, we live together as a community, and all this gives us some protection. If any client tries to burn us with a cigarette or to force himself on us without wearing a condom, we can shout and everyone comes running."

Inside, everything was immaculate. The space was divided in two by a large cupboard that almost touched the shack's roof. The front half of the room was dominated by the large bed where Rani plied her trade.

To one side, on a shelf, were several calendar pictures of the goddess. In the back of the room was a second bed—the one Rani slept in. Here were pots and pans, stacked neatly in racks, and below was a kerosene burner for cooking. On a cupboard was a large mirror and Rani's family photographs: pictures of her son and her old boyfriend—a handsome man with a Bollywood-film-star mustache and dark glasses—and beside that were passport-size shots of her dead daughters. Both were pretty girls, captured smiling when they were around twelve or thirteen.

Rani took the photographs from my hand, and replaced them on the cupboard. Then she led me back to the front half of the room and indicated that I should sit on the bed. I asked her whether her auspicious status made any difference to her clients when they came to be entertained.

"No," she said. "There is no devotional feeling in bed. Fucking is fucking. There I am just another woman. Just another whore."

"And do you feel safe from the disease here?" I asked. "Are you confident that the condoms can protect you?"

"No," she said. "There is always fear. We know that even if you persuade all your clients to wear a condom, one broken one can infect us. And once we are infected there is no cure. We will die—if not today, then tomorrow."

She paused. "You see, I know what it's like. I watched both my daughters die, as well as at least six of my friends. I nursed many of them. Some lost their hair. Some had skin diseases. Some just became very, very thin and wasted away. One or two of the most beautiful girls became so repulsive that even I did not want to touch them."

She shivered slightly. "Of course we feel very scared," she said. "But we must continue this work if we are to eat. We have a lot of misery to bear. But that is our tradition. That is our karma. We try to show our happy side to the clients to keep attracting them, and put all our efforts into doing a good job."

"Do you have any hopes for the future?"

"I am saving," she said. "As I told you, I have bought a little land, and one day, I hope, if I can get some more buffalo and a few goats, maybe I can save enough to retire there and live by selling the milk and curds. Yellamma will look after me."

"You know that?"

"Of course. If it wasn't for her, how could an illiterate woman like me earn two thousand rupees in a day? Yellamma is a very practical goddess. I feel she is very near. She is with us in good times and bad."

Later, I asked one of the project managers of an N.G.O. working in Belgaum about AIDS and how the devadasis' families reacted.

"It's terrible," she said. "The families are happy to live off them and use the money they earn. But as soon as they become infected, or at least become bedridden and sick, they are dumped in a ditch—sometimes literally. Just abandoned. We had a case before Christmas. One girl was taken to a private hospital in Bijapur after she complained of severe headaches. The hospital ran some tests and found that she was H.I.V.-positive and, on top of that, had a brain tumor. She began treatment, but her family checked her out because of the expense and took her home. We found her in a semi-comatose state, completely untended by the same family members she had been supporting for years. She wasn't even being given water. We took her straight back to the hospital ourselves, but it was too late. She died two weeks later."

"Then it's good that Rani will be retiring before too long," I said.

"That is what she told you?"

"She said she would get some land and some buffalo and try and make a living from that."

"Rani Bai?"

"Yes."

"I shouldn't really be telling you this," she said. "But Rani is infected—she's been H.I.V.-positive for eighteen months now. I've seen the tests."

"Does she know this?"

"Of course," she said. "It's not full-blown AIDS—at least, not yet. The medicines can delay the onset of the worst symptoms. But they can't cure her."

She shrugged. “Either way, it’s highly unlikely she’ll ever retire to that farm,” she said. “It’s the same as her daughters. It’s too late to save her.” ♦