

Editorial – Musafir



Women Are Angels!

There are no road signs or markers leading to *Kothia* in that forgotten and forlorn part of rural India near the Indo-Nepal border. On a silent night, one can hear the droning sound of incessant melody reciting the life of *Sita*. If you do, you have unmistakably arrived in *Kothia*. That is the distinctive trait of my village – the women of *Kothia* singing songs in praise of *Sita* in eloquent *Maithili* (a local dialect).

I grew up in *Kothia* and lived there until the age of seven. *Sita*, the wife of *Lord Rama* was born fifteen miles away from my village. She personified the image of an ideal wife married to *Lord Rama*. *Sita* decided to accompany her husband *Rama* to the forest who was exiled by his father and step-mother and was ordered to lead the life of a hermit for fourteen years. While living in exile, *Sita* was abducted by a demon named *Ravana* and later was abandoned by her own husband, *Rama* because one of *Rama's* subjects doubted *Sita's* chastity because she lived in *Ravana's* custody. *Sita* suffered and led a miserable life despite her piousness and good deeds. *Sita* was an angel. Her legacy still lives among the women of *Kothia* who continue to suffer until this day despite their virtues and sacrifices. Women are angels!

My mother died when I was six months old. My responsibility was given to my aunt who lives in the remote village, *Kothia*. She took care of me until I was seven. She would never let me out of her sight and had an inseparable attachment towards me. I never knew that she was not my real mother until the day my father wanted to take me with him to a more sophisticated environment for my education and overall development. At that point, my aunt did not resist. She made this sacrifice for my betterment. Today at the age of eighty, she lives alone in the same remote village of India without any expectations from me.

While living in the village, I was the darling of all the women of *Kothia*. They all loved me and cared for me despite their own horrific and pathetic life. They brought joy and security to my life by adoring me. I owe my life, success and well being to my aunt and all those women of the village who came in my life as angels.

Sukhia was our maid. She was very pretty, but belonged to a lower caste and was very poor. Her mother used to lament, “Beauty is a reward for the rich but it is a curse for the poor.” Several male members of the village made passes at her and flirted with her. Her brother-in-law was a drunkard and tried to rape her several times. Despite all that, *Sukhia* always met me with a smile and took care of me with utmost love and care. *Sukhia* is still alive. She lives in the same mud house in my old village. She cannot see anymore. Last time I saw her, it was in 1999. As soon as I stepped inside her door, she asked, “Is this Anil?” She could still tell me by my footsteps.

Ghulab Devi, a widow and a social worker used to play peek-a-boo with me. She was regarded as inauspicious because she was a widow. People in the village used to hate her because her mission in life was the upliftment of other widows. She was raped by one of the upper caste males. *Ghulab Devi* committed suicide when she found out that she was pregnant. I remember witnessing her dead body which lay untouched for days. No one would cremate her because she was considered to be an evil spirit.

Everyone thought that *Ragho's* wife was too beautiful to belong to her husband's family, but she got what her parents' dowry could afford. *Ragho's* wife was tortured by her mother-in-law while her husband lived in a far-away city to earn money for the family. *Ragho* died of cholera and his mother blamed it all on *Ragho's* wife who, according to the mother-in-law, had brought bad luck to the family. The mother-in-law

tried to burn her alive and then asked her to leave home. *Rago's* wife, disfigured, ended up as a beggar in a nearby town. How can I forget her smile? I was the reason for it.

I always hated *Kamli* until I became old enough to understand her circumstances. She was the wife of *Siddhu*, a poor laborer and mistress of Mohan Singh, the landlord. Mohan Singh kept her as collateral for a loan of money to her husband. *Kamli* always considered me as a role model for other children in the village and took pride in my academic achievements. Upon the death of Mohan Singh, she ran a school in Mohan Singh's old house and placed a plaque with my name engraved on it at the entrance of the school. I regret that I always misunderstood her and never paid attention to her.

Not much has changed in *Kothia*. Women there still live in a perpetual cycle of misery and abuse. I plan to write about them in my upcoming book, '*Women Are Angels*' in an effort to bring awareness to the plight of women in rural India. Books may come and books may go, but the women of *Kothia* will always stay in my heart and mind. Soaring in an instant over rolling fields of my childhood places, my imagination flies then lands beneath my favorite banyan tree where I find the women of *Kothia* still playing hide and seek with me and chanting hymns in praise of *Sita*. Women are angels!