This is a translation of a short story by a noted Indian woman writer, Jyotirmoyee Devi. Born Jyotirmoyee Sen at the turn of the previous century, she grew up in the kingdom of Jaipur in western India where her family worked.

Her stories, written in the Bengali language, are based on her personal observations and experiences and deal with the timeless challenges faced by men and women in all walks of life. Indeed, kingdoms and harems still exist in certain parts of the world today. This story deals with issues of caste and mixed parentage which also existed in varying forms in the American South and Latin America mirroring the class and caste distinctions of Europe. It also discusses generational conflict as well as colonial rule and differing cultural mores.

Throughout her writing career Jyotirmoyee Devi won numerous awards, including the prestigious Rabindra Puraskar Award in 1973. Her work is part of the curriculum at the Department of Women’s Studies in Jadavpur University in Calcutta.

The young boy had been the king’s son but not a prince; his mother, Surupa Rai, was the bewitching courtesan who had sung and danced her way into the maharaja’s heart. She had been given the coveted title, pashowanji, and the lavishness of her apartments rivaled that of the maharani’s. Although her rank in the nuanced palace hierarchy was below that of the principal consort, it was almost on par with that of the three wedded queens. She was indeed a star in the harem firmament and her looks, talent and grace outshone all other women.

Today was the child’s funeral. At his sudden death the anguished father ordered obsequies fit for a prince. It was not the custom to grieve thus for a concubine’s offspring, but Sujan Singh, like his beautiful mama, had been a particular favorite of the king.

A special durbar was held to mourn his passing. Men from the nobility and aristocracy and all ranking courtiers arrived to pay their respects. Wearing white tunics, trousers and turbans, their heads bowed, they sat in silence in the hall decorated with tubs of pale blossoms. The wives of the noblemen and prosperous businessmen came in shrouded carriages, stepped out heavily veiled and were guided into the harem by the eunuchs. This

Editor’s Note: The translator has obtained the rights to, and has translated, a selection of Devi’s stories, having grown up in India and being fluent in both Bengali and English. In addition, Apala Egan has traveled to Jaipur, Rajasthan, to immerse herself in the history and culture of that region.
section of the palace by contrast, was not soundless. Groups of women had been hired for a continuous display of sorrow with repeated beatings of the breast and high-pitched wailings. The maids and ladies-in-waiting were in tears as the youngster had been a loveable child. By both tradition and custom, the mother remained in seclusion.

News of the untimely demise came to the ears of the British Resident in the kingdom. As the chargé d’affaires of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, he was thrown into a quandary. According to English custom one did not mourn the passing of a royal bastard at a state funeral. The maharaja’s sorrow was real, no doubt, but as representative of the Hanoverian ruler, overlord to the Rajputs, he pondered the correct course of action. Nevertheless, he ordered his horse-drawn carriage and made his way to the palace. He entered the hall that was shrouded in pearl-white silk and approached the sovereign who sat at the far end clasping his surviving son, Samar Singh, by the same courtesan. The dewan, or prime minister, stood beside them.

The envoy duly bowed before the king, then reached out and shook his hand. He sat on the chair pulled out for him by an aide and stared straight ahead. Discomfited by the display of grief but outwardly unperturbed, he fixed his eyes on the middle distance and talked of the weather, news from Whitehall and sundry affairs of state, but not once did he commiserate with his host on his recent loss.

The king drew the ten-year-old closer to him. “This is my son Samar, and it was his younger brother who died a few days ago.”

The youngster, his dark eyes bright with curiosity, gazed at the diplomat who had hair the color of freshly-harvested sheaves of wheat and eyes as transparent as marbles. At an imperceptible signal from the premier, the boy stepped forward and bowed.

The British Resident sat in silence: he did not acknowledge the presence of the child with even a word or gesture.

Samar had been taught that European greetings differed from those of Rajputs, and that if an Englishman extended his hand, he too, must extend his own. Eager to display his new-found knowledge, he shyly proffered his right arm to the guest, who sat immobile. Only after a vigorous shaking of the dewan’s head did the boy realize his folly, and stumbled back and stood between his all-powerful father and the learned prime minister, puzzled that, although adored by all in the palace, he did not even merit a glance from this foreign visitor.

The years slid by. The old king passed away; among his offspring there were many still living, while others had been felled by disease. The crown prince ascended the throne, and the children the maharaja had fathered with his courtesans had been apportioned property and gifts and their marriages arranged with sons and daughters of concubines from neighboring kingdoms. A huge, spreading family tree ran almost on parallel tracks as the direct royal lineages, the branches and tendrils well-interlaced, but all claiming descent from a paternal regal ancestor. Petty rivalries, jealousies and intrigues were rife among them and childlessness was resolved by either second or third marriages, or by adoption. Property could pass only through the male heir, so families with all daughters frenziedly sought baby boys of similar background to adopt. The first-born son inherited all the
assets, while the younger brothers remained, to a greater or less extent, dependent on their eldest’s largesse. Their lives mirrored that of the maharajas and they too, were inculcated in the manly virtues and were schooled in the traditional pursuits of riding, hunting and siring heirs in their harems.

Upon the death of the old king young Samar Singh, titled Lalji Saheb, received his share of land, and as the son of the favorite courtesan, his acreage was somewhat more than that of his half-brothers’. His marriage had been arranged with a concubine’s daughter from a nearby kingdom, and in his mansion and grounds there was room not only for his extended family and servants, but also for his mistresses—skilled dancers from the village who were housed in a separate area.

He led the leisured life of a man of property and over the course of years his wife bore him four sons and two daughters. He named his male offspring after the sun, moon, stars and ocean: Surya Singh, Chandra Singh, Tara Singh and Samudra Singh. A doting father, he saw his girls twice a day, as they would greet him and run back to their nannies in the women’s quarters. His boys he saw rather more, as he liked to gather them around him at mealtimes and they all ate in convivial silence broken by an occasional remark while the servants ladled out pilaf and piquant curries onto a myriad silver bowls on their large brass platters. From time to time guests would be invited to lavish dinners as the dancers performed their intricate routines to entertain them.

One evening as dinner came to a close Lalji Saheb, his face careworn, drew his oldest son aside. “How is the baby?”

Surya, married to a daughter of a royal concubine, had recently become a father. His eyes widened. He had observed of late that at times heavy frowns creased his father’s brow but if anyone approached, the lines would vanish. The debonair dad he had known as a child who could shoot deer with ease, was now a man well past his prime given to absent-minded stares and ponderous ruminations.

The servants came in to clear up, and stacking the plates and dishes on a tray, departed in a clatter.

Lalji Saheb turned to his younger sons and then faced Surya again. “I am getting on in years. My days are coming to a close. I am concerned about the future of your brothers. Your two sisters I was able to marry off well, the dowries paid were generous.”

All the boys looked at their father, their faces alert. The eldest, an astute young man, sat with his head bent and glanced at his parent through half-closed eyes.

“How about if I carve out some acreage from our large holdings for your brothers? Perhaps I can build a small dwelling for each of them?”

“Please feel free to do as you wish,” Surya said.

The old man sank back on his seat relieved. “I will make the necessary arrangements tomorrow.”

At daybreak Lalji Saheb thought otherwise. How could he, a mere mortal, even contemplate changing the laws of inheritance that had remained intact for centuries, when the kings themselves who claimed descent from the heavens honored the same rules?
Cocooned in wealth, cloistered in his walled gardens, surrounded by servants and syco-
phants, he knew little of the workaday world, but concern for his sons’ well-being gnawed
at his heart.

The following week he called out to his boys to join him in the jasmine-scented
garden to discuss an equitable distribution of assets, his eyes resting on each of them in
turn. Although he loved them all, he was fondest of his youngest, Samudra. The eldest
among them, heir to all property, cleverly remained silent during the conversation. The
patriarch’s voice tailed off after a while. He sighed in despair, lapsed into gloom and dis-

One summer evening an elated Samudra returned from school and informed his fa-
ther that he had not only passed his matriculation examination, he had done rather well.
Lalji Saheb rose and embraced him. In their entire clan no one had yet passed the test,
let alone excel. All the boys in their extended family were schooled in the proper pursuits
befitting young gentlemen of leisure: riding, hunting, shooting, and at a later age, of host-
ing extravagant parties where food was ample, drink flowed freely and talented dancers
charmed the guests. They learned their mother tongue, Hindi, and a smattering of Urdu,
but no serious effort was expected of them as their secretaries were there to do all the work
necessary to manage their estates.

“I want to throw a grand feast to celebrate the good news, but times are a little hard
now. There has been some shortfall in crops this year and the taxes have risen as the Eng-
lish have levied additional fees on our kingdom,” the father said.

“It does not matter,” Samudra said.

His brothers and cousins streamed into the courtyard from their rooms and offered
their congratulations tinged with envy.

“You are the youngest, yet you are the first in our family to pass,” said one.

“Only the Thakur Saheb’s sons go in for higher education. Some of them even learn
English,” remarked another.

Conversation continued until the stars appeared in the evening sky and the aroma of
dinner in the final stages of preparation wafted into the courtyard. The relatives left and
father and son were alone once again.

“Have you given your mother the good news?” asked Lalji Saheb.

“No, not yet. The Thakur Saheb of Shivgarh’s third son, the Thakur Saheb of Ama-
rpur’s nephew, the grandsons of Têjgarh’s Rao Saheb have all passed the matriculation
exam, and are planning on attending Mayo College in Ajmer. Please, father, let me go
there.”

“You want more education? Of what use will it be to you?”

His son sat with head bowed, his chin in his palm. “None of us is a first-born, we are
all younger siblings, and we have to fend for ourselves. If we do not get an education, we
will never be able to obtain a well-paying position. With training we might be able to get
a job, if not in our kingdom, then certainly elsewhere.”
The old man was astonished. Samudra had always been an introspective child, but he had on his own been exploring various future options. Unfamiliar with the world of academia he asked, “What exactly is it that you wish to study at Ajmer?”

“I want to go there for the Intermediate Arts program, and if I pass, then on to a bachelor’s degree.”

“Hmm. Your friends from Tejgarh, Shivgarh and Amarpur are all going there? Well, let me make inquiries.”

July was soon upon them. The torrential monsoons bathed the parched fields and transformed them into sheets of green and term was due to begin. In haste, Lalji Saheb sent his secretary to the local college for the requisite papers.

One morning when Samudra approached his father he learned that he had been admitted to the institution in their own town after all.

“Let us see how you fare over here, we can discuss where you will pursue your bachelor’s degree later.”

In the courtyard, the brothers, cousins and uncles conversed among themselves, weighing the relative merits of various programs. The student walked past them, quickly turning his head away to hide tears of anger and disappointment.

Samudra passed all the qualifying tests to the bemused wonder and delight of his father who obtained application forms from the local college once again. When the paperwork arrived Lalji Saheb presented them to his son with some diffidence fearing an outright refusal, for was it not the youth’s ardent wish to attend the institution in Ajmer? To his surprise, the teenager acquiesced and duly filled out the required documents. Perhaps the boy has forgotten all about Mayo, thought the elder man with relief.

The young man began his educational pursuits. A quiet reflective boy, he excelled in his work, but almost overnight all his childhood friends had vanished, some to Ajmer and others to colleges elsewhere. He was left with classmates but no friends.

A spectacular celebration at Lalji Saheb’s mansion marked the day the youth received his bachelor’s degree. A feast was held to which virtually all the townsfolk were invited. Troupes of dancers and their accompanying musicians were hired for day-long performances. The large kitchen was abustle with frenetic activity from dawn to well past midnight, the cooks preparing mounds of fragrant pilaf, curries and rose-scented rice puddings. Huge earthenware vessels brimming with gulab-jamuns, jalebis and other delectable sweetmeats arrived from the confectioners in town. The entire house resounded to the laughter of the assembled guests. The ladies, dressed in crimson, blue and yellow silks which shimmered as they moved, thronged to the secluded inner courtyard, whilst the men congregated and conversed in the outer. Purdah was maintained in Lalji Saheb’s house, the food being served women and children in an enclosure separate and distinct from where the men enjoyed their meal. A special ceremony was also held and propitious offerings were made to the temple.

Word spread to the neighboring kingdoms about the scholar’s laurels. Marriage proposals poured in on behalf of daughters of kings and their concubines. To the joy of Lalji Saheb, these teenaged girls were not mere descendants of long-dead rulers, but children
of royal blood. The old man breathed a sigh of relief; his son would be freed from the
dependent status assigned to younger sons, and his dowry would go a long way to keep
him from want.

Bursting with pride, the father began marriage negotiations in earnest. Weddings and
funerals were the stuff of life, and he was duty-bound to see that his children’s futures were
assured. The question of consulting his son about the impending nuptials did not arise.
He had heard that in some distant parts young people had some say in choosing their
lifelong companions, but that custom was not prevalent in his town, and besides, he as a
parent with the wisdom of years, knew what was best.

One winter night Samudra came to his father’s room. It was late and all the servants
had gone to bed. Lalji Saheb reclined on his bed wrapped in a silk quilt reading aloud
to himself from the Hindi version of the Bhagavad Gita. His children, the domestic help
and other members of his large household often gathered around him, sitting on woven
mats to hear words of wisdom from the Gita. At this late hour he was alone. Seeing his
son at the doorway he closed his book and motioned the boy to come inside, away from
the icy chill.

Samudra, with a golden complexion and curling hair, resembled his grandmother the
most. The courtesan, a woman of stunning beauty, a dancer of rare talent and the maharaja’s darling, had bequeathed her looks to her youngest grandchild. The old man glanced
at the visitor in mild surprise as it was rather late, even for members of their extended
family. The boy had his grandma’s smile, but it was his dark, expressive eyes that reminded
Lalji Saheb of his own mother.

The youth came in and sat at his father’s bedside, asked after his health and made a
few desultory remarks. “I have found a job,” he said at last. “I was not able to seek your
permission earlier since you had been unwell. Indeed, I had thought that I might not be
able to accept the job after all.”

His father, recumbent on his divan, sat up. “You have found work? Where? In this
town I hope. Who gave it to you?”

The Second World War had entered its second year.

“No, not here, I have found a position in the military. I sent in my application some
time ago.”

The old man, his face grey and lined, stared at his son. “What’s that? A job, fighting?
What kind of work? Is it transportation or the mess? Or, are you a captain? Those are
all very good commissions, but you can get them here in our own city, why not try our
maharaja’s forces?”

“No, those kinds of prestigious positions are not given us. Only the Rajput chieftains
and their sons are entitled to them,” his son said. “You know that too, father.” He paused
for a moment. “I am getting a job in the army in British India. They are actively enlisting.
A number of young men from our kingdom have already left.” He looked away and stared
at the floor.
His father gazed at his son’s averted face, wondering whether to be pleased or fearful. What exactly did fighting entail nowadays? Would his offspring be able to shoulder his responsibilities? Where would he be sent? These thoughts raced through his brain.

“Is it a job like Comedanjee’s?” he asked. He had known a warrior who had cut an impressive figure astride his horse, sporting his magnificent spear and later a rifle, and had seen service not only in the kingdom, but also had fought in the Boer Wars. As a boy, Lalji Saheb had listened wide-eyed to the vivid tales of Africa, till the acrid smell of gun smoke, the roars of lions in the veldt and the whinnying shrieks of chargers locked in mortal combat seemed more real to him than the rolling hills of Rajputana.

His son laughed. “No, commander-in-chief is a very high position. Nowadays, people don’t fight with swords, spears or trishuls. Upon old Comedanjee’s retirement, there were many changes in the army. My position is very modest, I have joined the infantry.”

“Which country will you be fighting in, then?”

“At first they are sending us to a training camp in Mhow. After that, they could send us anywhere, Assam, Burma, or somewhere else.”

A man of moderate learning but of immense wealth, Lalji Saheb sat upright on his divan and stared at his son. His knowledge of geography was akin to that of the royal concubines, so minuscule was his information about the world outside.

“When will you return?” he said.

“Whenever I manage to get leave.”

The father frowned. “I will make every effort to find you something locally. Please don’t make any hasty decisions.”

Samudra glanced at the far wall. A fresco of vines and flowers met his gaze where birds of brilliant plumage nested in the verdant foliage. His eyes slid to the painted surface of a low table where kings and princes perched on elephants’ brocaded backs sallied forth on an eternal royal hunt, the striped, tawny beasts fleeing ahead. On one wall hung a portrait of his august grandfather in ceremonial robes, the picture adjacent to one of the present ruler, his father’s half-brother. A photograph of King George V and Queen Mary posing with their brood, and a small framed picture of the current English emperor and his bride occupied a smaller, less prominent section of the wall. A few European landscapes were also scattered around the room.

He turned his head and saw his face in the gilt-edged mirror of beveled glass, and saw too, the reflection of a portrait of his father as a young man attired in riding clothes, a silver-handled whip in his hand as though venturing out on a hunt, his proud eyes flashing beneath a bejeweled turban. Two imported clocks chimed the hour.

Samudra turned around and faced his father. “No, not here.”

“Why not? Let me try to get you a job, if not in this town, at least in our own country.”

“You will not be able to get me anything decent here, and you know well enough why. It is for that reason alone I was not able to go to Mayo, and that is also why I will never be able to get a remunerative position here.” The young man paced the room.

His father bowed his head and remained silent for a while. “How did you know? Did you ask someone?”

The youth stared once again at the far wall, recalling a long-ago conversation he had had with a friend.
"It will be wonderful when we all go to Ajmer, won’t it?” young Samudra had said.
“You will never be able to attend the college there.”
“Why not? I have done so well in my entrance exams, and my dad has promised to send me to Mayo.”

His friend had given him a furtive glance, pursed his lips and had said no more.

He recounted this conversation to his father.

A deep flush rose from the back of Lalji Saheb’s neck, mottled his cheeks and crept up to the temples. Tiny droplets appeared above his upper lip. The book slipped and lay half open on the bed. He grabbed one end of the coverlet in his fist and frowned. His voice had a metallic timbre. "Then what else did you learn?"

“When he returned from Ajmer during his holidays after his Intermediate Arts finals, and I too had passed the very same exam at our local college, I went to him to get information about entering Mayo for my bachelor’s degree. He told me that I would never be able to gain admission there.

“This time I pressed him for an answer. He was embarrassed at first and then he told me that Mayo College at Ajmer was for the children of kings and nobility, not for half-bloods like me. His grandfather, a prince at Tejgarh, had told him that the place was only for royalty and their rightful descendants and heirs. In fact, his own beloved concubine’s sons, who were raised and educated in the same household and were my friend’s playmates, were forever barred from that place. It is also an institution founded by the English in our kingdom, so even if Rajputs can be flexible, British custom prevails over there.

“My grandfather, your father, was a king, but I descend from his concubine, not his queen.”

Lalji Saheb listened in silence, while a shard of memory splintered through his brain. A boy, enveloped in the fond embrace of his papa, approaching the British Resident Saheb; his hurt and bewilderment at being so utterly ignored, he who was adored by the king as well as the courtiers. Something else stirred in his mind too, a memory of a conversation with a friend who was the son of one of the many palace functionaries. When just out of their teens his companion had told him that although an adored child of the king, he was not on par with the princes. It had come as a shock to him to learn that his mother, a dancer of renown who had stolen the maharaja’s heart and ranked just below the queens, was nothing more than a mere concubine. According to Rajput custom they would be well-provided for, but the English were spreading their net far and wide over India, and they did not recognize royal courtesans. That alone had accounted for his reluctance in pursuing Mayo on his son’s behalf as he had wished to spare him disappointment and heartache.

The night wore on, a thick mist pressed against the windowpanes, the minutes ticked by and the clocks struck the hour.

“I have arranged a most wonderful match for you. The bridal trousseau alone is worth a king’s ransom, not to speak of the dowry. Cases of gold mohurs have been promised, you will never experience want. If you must go, why don’t you get married and then leave?” Lalji Saheb said.

Custom decreed that the first-born male inherit all property, but he as a father could help assure his younger sons’ futures by arranging advantageous marriages. Besides, he couldn’t bear the thought of his children not being near him. The brothers and their
families, though their fortunes dwindled, all remained to a greater or lesser extent dependent on their oldest male sibling as part of a vast extended family, performing familial roles and various duties.

The young man’s eyes wandered around the room. He saw an indolent man but an affectionate father shrouded in a silk quilt, sitting on his cushioned bed living a life of great ease on inherited wealth that he could not bequeath.

“Even if the dowry was worth countless rupees, my wife, though a king’s daughter would still be the child of a concubine. Our children will be Darogas, not Rajputs, and will remain forever removed from any position of power, even if our eldest son manages to live in fair comfort from his inheritance,” Samudra said.

He fixed his father with a look. “I think you know that too.” He paused. “If I had not received an education, I probably would not feel it so keenly. But when I passed my Intermediate Arts exam with flying colors, and then was prevented from attending Mayo College, my only desire now is to achieve what I can.”

“But the girl’s dowry is worth a solid fortune. You can live in undreamed of luxury all your life. I have also heard that she is very beautiful, and a beguiling dancer, too. Why can’t you just be happy about it? So what if you cannot get a challenging position in the royal army like a Rajput, you will still be amply provided for. This is the way it has always been; it is our tradition.”

Scattered thoughts scurried around in the old man’s brain. If only I had not allowed him an education, he would have been content with his lot in life. The money alone would tempt any young man, what can he be thinking of? Having tasted from the tree of knowledge, the youth has developed an unseemly desire for forbidden fruit. He dared not voice his feelings but sat still and searched his son’s face.

“At this point in time, father, I cannot accept this girl’s hand. With your permission, I plan on accepting a job in the army in British India.”

Lalji Saheb jerked up his head. “What? But you cannot simply leave—I am arranging your marriage—her family—their wealth—.” His eyes glistened. Then he dropped his head in his hands.

Outside, the fog eddied and swirled, shrouding the mansion in widow’s white; indoors, sat father and son in frozen silence, both blessed and tainted by their royal blood.

Samudra rose, bowed to his parent and took his leave, then vanished into the misty night.