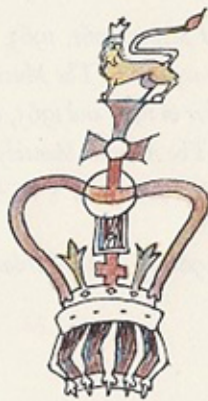


THREE STORIES
OF
THE RAJ

By VED MEHTA



Illustrations by Zahid Sardar

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SUNSET

I imagined that from the beginning of time all mothers and fathers had been brought up on the bedtime stories of our paternal grandmother, Mataji. The stories' truths had certainly been tested over centuries of telling. Even after the family elders said I was too old to go and sit with Mataji and listen to her bedtime stories, I found myself going back to her room every evening, like a bird to its nest.

Sometimes I would linger outside Mataji's window before going in, and take in the room, which looked like an extension of the lane I was standing in. There was her familiar bed, covered with the familiar handwoven green sheet and sagging under

the weight of cousin-brothers and cousin-sisters of mine who were sitting, kneeling, and sprawling on it. Nearby was the familiar straw mat, with other cousin-brothers and cousin-sisters crowded onto it, many of them with their hands and chins resting on the bed. And there in the middle of everyone was Mataji, her strong back erect at the spinning wheel, her beautiful hands rising from the spindle in her lap, her fingers trailing lengths of yarn. Her body gently swayed to the turn of the wheel, which buzzed and whirred rhythmically, like some primitive clock with no striking mechanism. Aside from the bed, a sandalwood chest was the only piece of furniture in the room.