He confirmed the first opinion many times in the days that followed. It was not just her, he saw the other younger women of the village helping their menfolk plough the soil for indigo and wheat, while older women hoed and raked for the lighter millets and vegetables. Most of their fields were of the second type, and they seemed far too full of bossy and opinionated women, all wearing tunics and those manly turbans.

He couldn't leave, not that day nor for many more, thanks to his broken leg, and needed to divert their attention from his identity and past, so he asked questions and made them talk about themselves instead of him. It was not difficult, for he was genuinely appalled by them. How can you plough, he asked; are all your elders dead? And aren't you frightened of the curse of the earth goddess? There were certain things that were intended only for men, others for women. How would they feel if a man was to give birth?

They laughed at him. They had been doing this for 15 years and there was no sign of any curse so far.

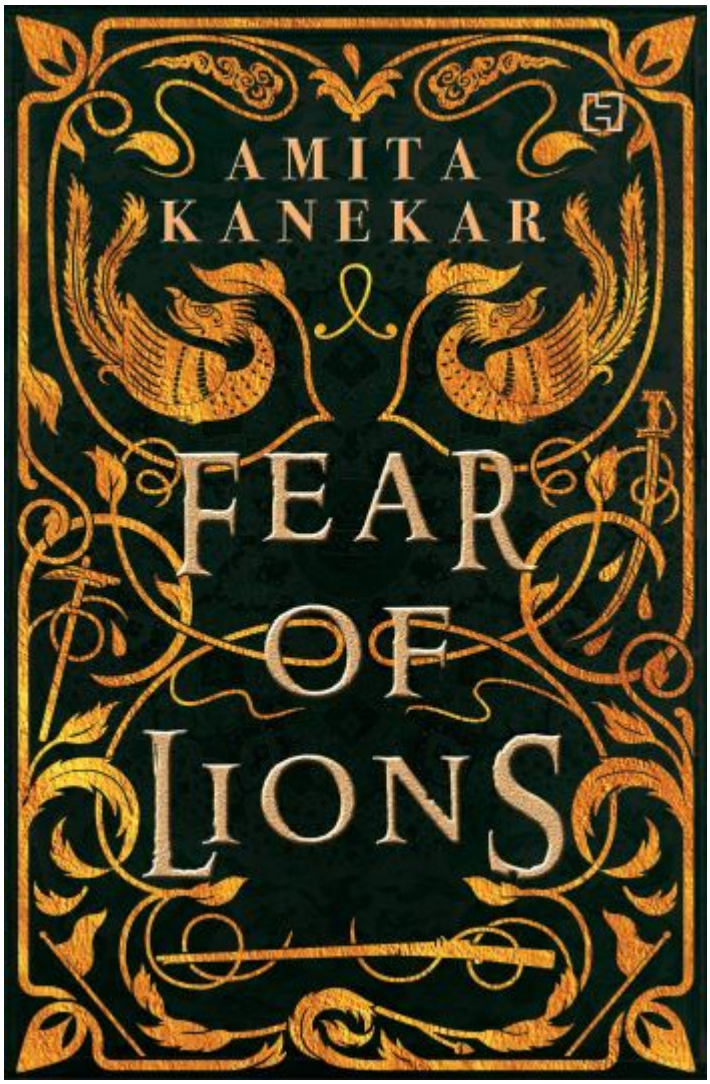
They actually had only three ploughs, for the soil was recently of the jungle, not clayey at all, and could do without much uplifting; they managed well enough with rakes and hoes. The ploughs were owned by the whole village and usually used by the men and the younger women.

Some of the villagers themselves had been nervous at the start, especially those from landholding backgrounds – they were the most scared of the land! But those fears were long gone, not least thanks to the good harvests. There was indigo, also cotton, wheat, pineapples, melons and mangoes. All to sell. The yields were excellent because the soil was still full of the richness of the wild.

Not that they earned well, of course, but that was because of men, not any gods. The traders in Narnaul did not like them. Even the firangis and Turks who bought their goods offered lower prices than normal because they knew they had the upper hand. But the villagers managed somehow. And they also planted millets and mung beans for food, onion, garlic and cucumber. No, the gods did not seem unhappy.

And, added the girl, there was nothing morally wrong in a man giving birth.

But he would need the body for it – besides the strength and courage, which might well be the bigger challenge – and since the male and female bodies were different, she doubted the possibility. But ploughing did not need the maleness of the male body, it just needed a strong back and arms.



The other women laughed, but he was outraged. How could she, an unmarried girl, know about men's bodies? He didn't want to find out. But how dare she talk so openly, and before him, a man she hardly knew? He didn't know where to look, he wanted to get up and leave, but was scared of provoking her into 287 saying something worse. He had never been so embarrassed, or furious. Were these people crazy? This was the result of keeping girls unmarried to such an age.

They actually agreed with him, except that they didn't see it as a problem. It had come about, so one old woman told him, because nobody from other villages would marry their

children in the early days, so many had to marry late, if at all. And then they heard from the firangis that later marriage resulted in healthier mothers and stronger children. And it certainly didn't seem to cause any problem. So they had taken a decision to marry their children only when fully grown.

The girl had, however, crossed twenty and was still unmarried, for only one proposal had come her way, and she had rejected that for some reason the thief had not bothered to listen to.

All he had heard was that it was she who had rejected! Who was she to reject a proposal? Even if her parents were dead, didn't she have other family or community elders? She had never got a second offer, which was not surprising, for word would be out about both her age and her attitude. He was, in fact, surprised that she'd got even one.

The older woman who spoke to him was named Biba. She was a ved and the girl was her daughter. Not her real daughter. Her real daughter was long gone, in another village, in another life. She had been found dead one day on the fields there, but Biba had refused to believe her eyes, even wiping the memory from her mind so that she could continue to search for her, for years, till she came here, to a new home where she could remember the past and accept her grief.

So this was a new village? Of runaways, clearly. But from what? Taxes or debt or other responsibilities? How had they succeeded? Surely their original villages wouldn't have taken it quietly? How had they avoided being caught and taken back?

They wouldn't reveal the details. Some of them were from other villages, some from the jungle. Yes, it was difficult at first, there were many struggles within and without. Somehow, though, they survived, and others joined. So many, that there 288 were now three villages like this. And other villages – or bastis in them – had started imitating them. Why? Well, Biba supposed, they probably liked our ways.

What was there to like?

So they were all one community – going by the fact that they had no separate bastis, no huts outside the walled village? Yes. One community.

Of those who believe in the truth. Which means? That's what it means. Oh? And originally? Originally, they were from different communities. Like which? Any and all, said Biba. She himself had been a midwife in a village not so far away, she finally admitted, a menial, an outsider. Here, however, things were different; all were insiders. Anybody could join. No outsiders, no menials, no village servants, no begaar.

"As the sant Raidas had described. He called it Begumpura, a place without pain, without taxes or property or torture, where a tanner can walk where he likes, surrounded by friends."

His mind was suddenly in a whirl, but she was waiting for a response. '"Sant?"

"A firangi word. Those of god."

"Raidas talks of heaven," he managed.

"Perhaps. But heaven is inspired by this world. A better world. Where all are equal before god, as the firangis also preach."

Equal before god. But surely not before man?

He just muttered about his leg though and turned away. Now he knew who these people were. Mundas. He had heard of them in Narnaul. The lowest of slaves, who had had the temerity to set up their own village, and who had survived and grown under lax administrations. Who had made connections with the firangis, listening to firangi preachers, selling to firangi traders.

Untouchables and unseeables, walking around as if they owned the place! He had presumed, since they were all farming, that they were of farming castes. Now he wanted to run away, to bathe, to scrape his skin a million times, to tear it off! He must leave, at once. But his leg was still bad. He was trapped.

One evening he found the entire village gathered in the open space at the centre of the village. Four or five of them had spent 289 half the day there, cooking in large pots, and the first part of the programme was food, everybody sitting down together to eat millet porridge

and a meat curry. After that, they sang songs, of which he recognised only two, by Kabir. And they took vows.

To respect all people, earn an honest living, abjure violence, never covet anything, either of body or wealth, to live for and by the truth. To fight injustice, and in this a mention was made of the annual
tax and how the village should not take excessive taxation lying down. It was while he was watching all this that he remembered something that had struck him on his first day in the village.

Everybody rose at the end of the programme and the girl approached him where he sat by himself, watching from a distance. “Why are you sitting here? You should have joined us.

“I am new here.”

With her was her usual companion, a very dark-skinned young man. Smiling. “Did you like our prayers?”

Too dark to be of good family, to be respected, or even to be looked at, really. But the thief couldn’t ignore his words. “Prayers? Those were prayers? Why here? Where’s your temple?”

They didn’t have one, said the girl.

“You don’t have a temple here? Where is it then?”

“No temple at all.”