

The long, long wait

By "Mini"

RAM loosened the tie knot and ran his fingers through the wilted collar to release it from his clammy neck. He pushed back his tousled hair for the umpteenth time as he paced up and down the waiting room adjoining the row of maternity wards. He was restless and didn't like to be tied down to the chair. He thought, perhaps, that by pacing the room, time would fly faster. But his watch moved laggingly. Has it stopped, he wondered, as he put the watch to his ear. It was ticking away as usual, but not as fast as Ram would have liked it to.

He lit one more cigarette and drew the smoke in, only to let it out with more force. The smoke seemed to fill the room. "Thank God, they permit smoking here", he muttered to himself as he went and took his position under the fan. Being in the centre of the room, he quickly sensed a dozen pair of penetrating eyes X-raying him. There was an old lady and her teen-aged son in one corner. Expectancy was writ large on the lady's face. Perhaps her daughter was in the throes of delivery, Ram thought to himself. Every time there was a wail or whimper from inside the ward, her ears would cock up like a spaniel's and she would clasp her hands and mumble a prayer.

Expectancy

At another corner was a young lady whose expectancy too was obvious for all to see. And then, there was an assortment of people of different ages, all waiting for the cry of the newborn.

Ram felt that he was becoming an object of unwelcome attention by his show of restlessness. In an effort to appear normal he took a seat, but for a few seconds only. He was back on his feet to pace the floor again.

There was a slight bustle as a shapely nurse with a delectable smile opened the glass door. Almost everyone got up and before they could gherao her, she ran her eyes over them and signalled to the old woman, who responded with alacrity. There was a stir in the air as the nurse whispered something into her ear and disappeared.

"It is a girl, it seems", said the old lady in a voice that barely hid her disappointment. She dug into the cloth bag and took out a small plastic container from which she started distributing sugar crystals to all around, including the rotund ward boy.

"Don't worry", she said as she came to Ram, "Everything is going to be all right". Ram took the sugar and moved aside in an unmistakable effort to stifle further conversation. He had enough worries, but didn't need a shoulder to cry on, just then. Baulked in her attempt to strike up a friendly conversation, the old lady went over to the enceinte lady, presumably to cheer her up and generally spread sweetness and light.

"I was hoping for a grandson", she started off in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. Quickly she added, "But I have no regrets. Girls are more affectionate and more responsible than boys". The old lady's words came floating in the air and reached Ram's ears like echoes from a distant drum. They did not register anything in his mind which was preoccupied with the door and the watch.

Every now and then, Ram would look in the direction of the glass door and for a change at his watch. It was nearing six. He fished out a cigarette packet and found there were no cigarettes in it. In disgust, he threw the empty packet in the

direction of the overflowing bin in the corner and missed it by a clear three feet. The ward boy smiled a knowing smile and offered to get a packet from the nearby 'bidi shop'. Ram gave a two-rupee note to him and resumed his pacing. There was a lull in the proceedings save for the noise made by one of the small boys playing with a top.

The face of the nurse appeared. Again, the whole congregation stood up in unison. Ram missed a heart beat as she threw a smile at him and before he could walk up to her in four long strides, she was gone. Perhaps she had come for the ward boy, Ram said to himself.

Like a Gir lion

The old lady gave him a commiserating look, but Ram turned away and looked out of the nearby window for want of anything else to do. A minute took an hour to pass and Ram with a look of determination took his position near the glass door. The show of restlessness on his face and in his actions were in marked contrast to the quiet air of expectancy that prevailed in the room.

The old lady was irrepresible. "Is this your first?", she asked and Ram did not deign to reply. Then, an old gargoye of a nurse in white starched uniform walked in with the majesty of a Gir lion. She imperiously signalled Ram to move aside and went into the ward.

In a few minutes, the glass door opened and the young nurse came out hurrying. Ram took her arm and literally dragged her to the scooter and together they headed towards the nurses quarters.

"I give you just ten minutes to get dressed. Otherwise, we are going to be late for the pictures", said Ram.