

The dread of Elina

Scholarly sources:

Chopra, Pran Nath (1963). Some aspects of society & culture during the Mughal age (1526-1707). Agra, India: Shiva Lal Hgarwala Co.

Asher, Catherine B. (2006). India before Europe. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press.

Meet Elina

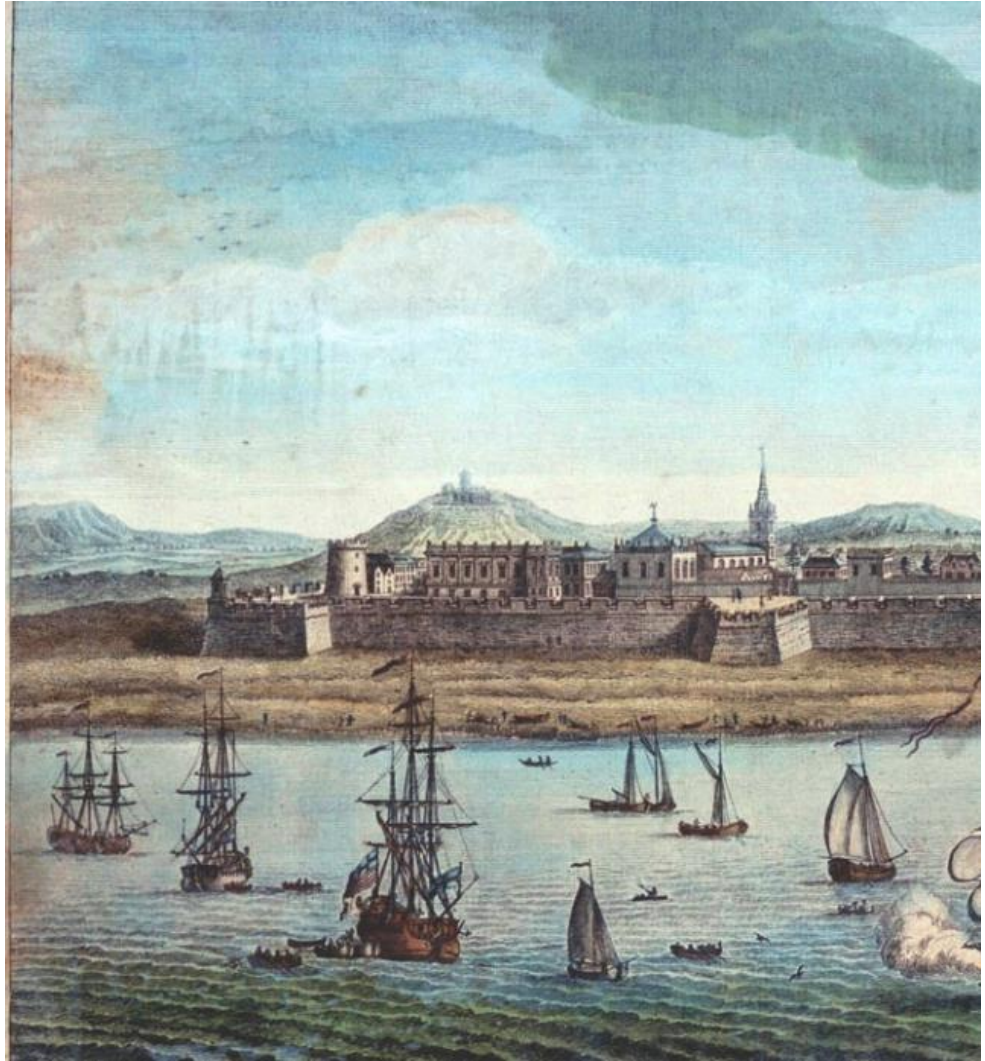
Elina Desai was an eight-year-old girl living in India in 1635. The life she lived as a young girl was filled with warmth and wonder, but this was all about to change. Elina was not at all happy about what was to come.

But we'll get to that in a minute. Let's first learn about her wonder-filled world.



Elina's world

Elina lived in the city of Suryapur (today called Sarat) on the western coast of India. It was a very large and very progressive city for its time.



Elina lived during the reign of the Mughals in India. The Mughal empire extended from eastern Afghanistan through India. The rulers were Muslims, but were very tolerant of other religions.



Elina's family was Hindu. Hindus believed in a supreme being of many forms and natures. They also believed in reincarnation. If a person lived a good life and accepted their proper roles, they would be reborn into a better life the next time around. This would continue until they became one with the supreme being.



Elina lived in a compound with all of her father's relatives. There was always much to do in the household.



Elina's father was a trader with a fine reputation. The women helped him by weighing and packaging some the spices he sold.



In Elina's grandparents' time, most of the traders had come from other Asian countries like Persia and Burma.



But much changed in 1608, when ships from the English East India Company started docking in the city's port.

This meant that India now had a new and very wealthy trading partner in the English. And Suryapur had suddenly become the center of the world.



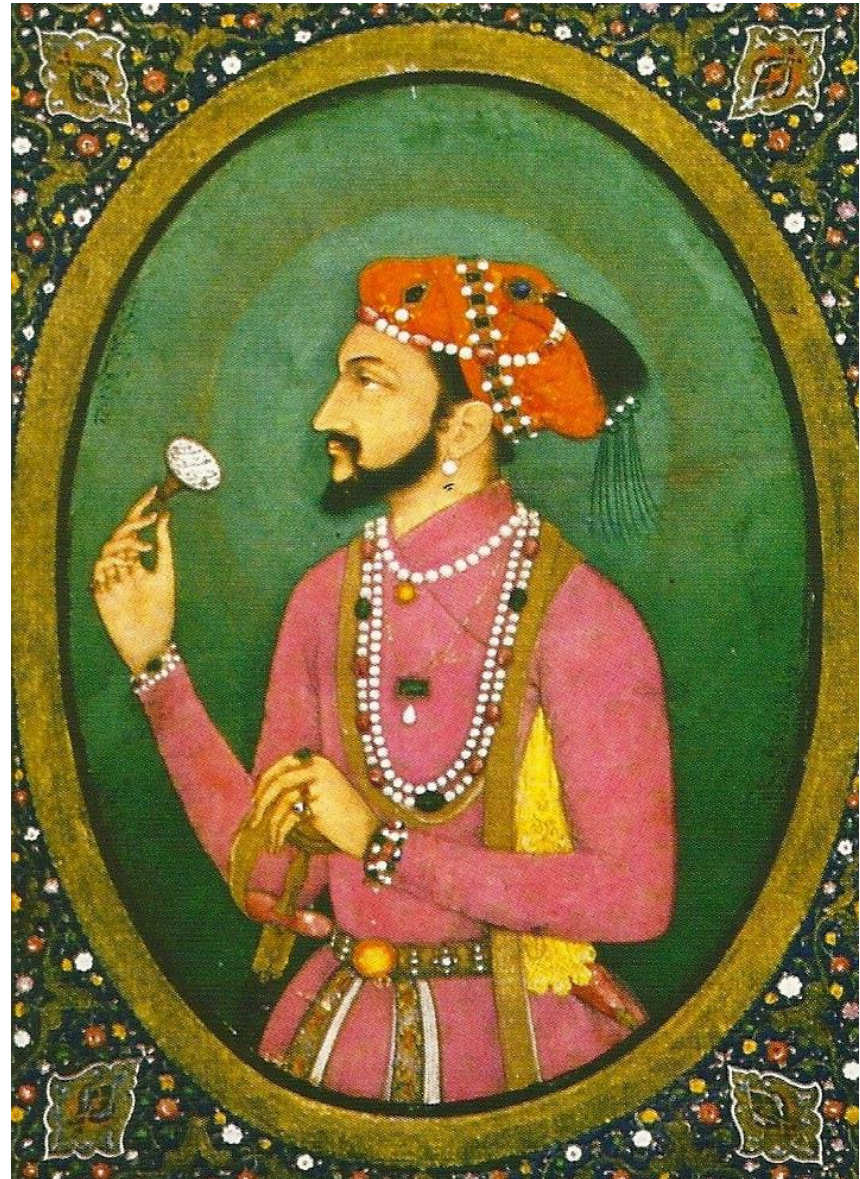
The people of the city were so excited. They held great processions and ceremonies for the East India Company.

From that time on, most Indians spoke at least a little English. Elina was no exception.



Elina and her family were fortunate to live under the great leader Shah Jahan. Under him, Mughal art and architecture reached its highest level.

And Elina's parents were about to take her on a journey of a lifetime.



They knew, and Elina knew, that this would be the last year she'd spend with her birth family.



Before the Desai family began the journey, they'd made friends with a family of English traders. The family had a seventeen-year-old daughter named Jane, who instantly became interested in Elina.



Elina practiced her English skills on Jane and even took her to an Indian archery game.

Elina's parents were anxious to spoil their young daughter in their last year with her, so they invited the English girl Jane to come on the trip as a companion to Elina. See, all Elina's other sisters were married and living away from home.

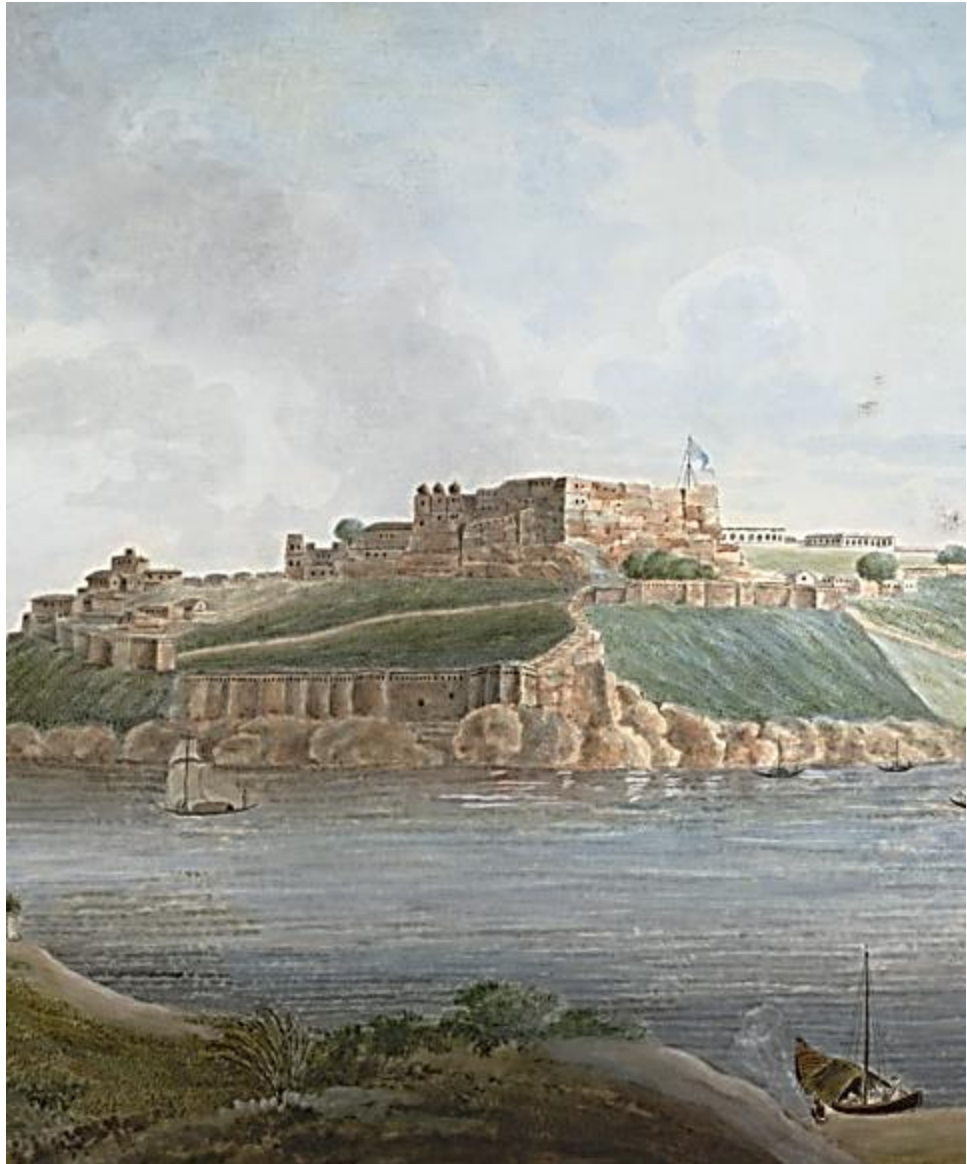
Elina's parents took the idea to Jane's parents and they consented.



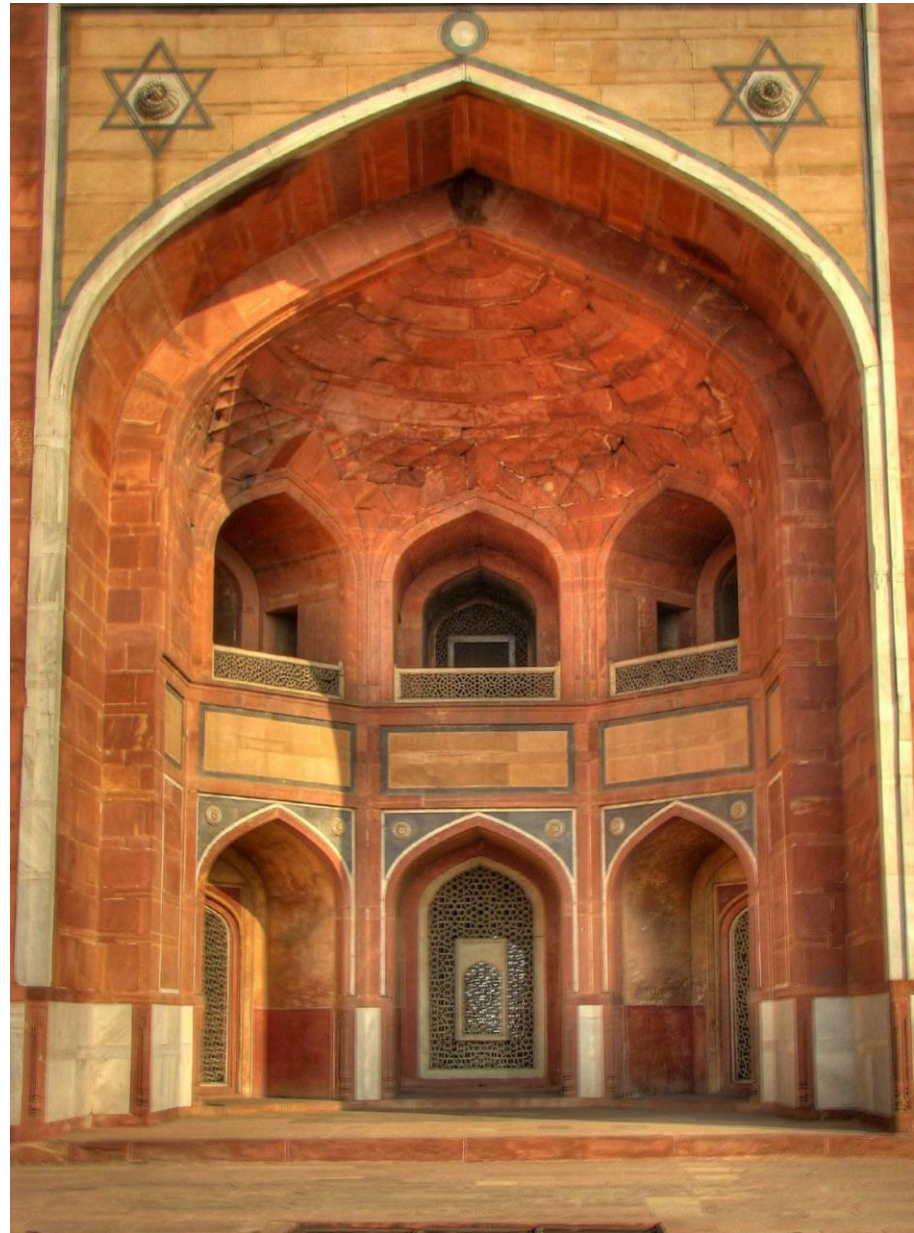
The group left on the journey. They headed northeast to the grand city of Delhi.



All along the way they were dazzled by the beautiful Indian landscape. Near Delhi, they stopped to take a ritual bath in the holy Ganges River.



In Dehli they stopped at the tomb of Humayun and gasped at the ornate architecture.



From Delhi, they traveled a few short miles to Agra. There they saw the glorious Red Fort. They got to go inside.



And they went to Moti Masjid
at Agra and toured the
grounds.



And their final stop before heading home was the magnificent Taj Mahal that had just been completed at the order of Shah Jahan. Elina and Jane simply could not believe their eyes.

What a sight!



Elina's dread

But Elina knew that when the journey ended, her life would take a drastic turn. By the trip home, Elina's English had improved. She and Jane began to share personal information about themselves.

One night at an inn, Elina asked Jane if she had any children.



"Oh my, no," exclaimed Jane. "I am only *promised* to my future husband. We will not marry for several years yet. I only met him a year ago."



"But I don't understand," said Elina shyly. "Won't you be too old to marry? I am eight and will be married before I'm nine. My parents arranged the marriage with a family in Mumbai when I was four. I've never met him."



Jane was aghast. "That is shocking to have to marry at eight-years-old! I heard such things were customary in India, but I didn't believe the stories."



Jane's rebuke made Elina's dread much worse.

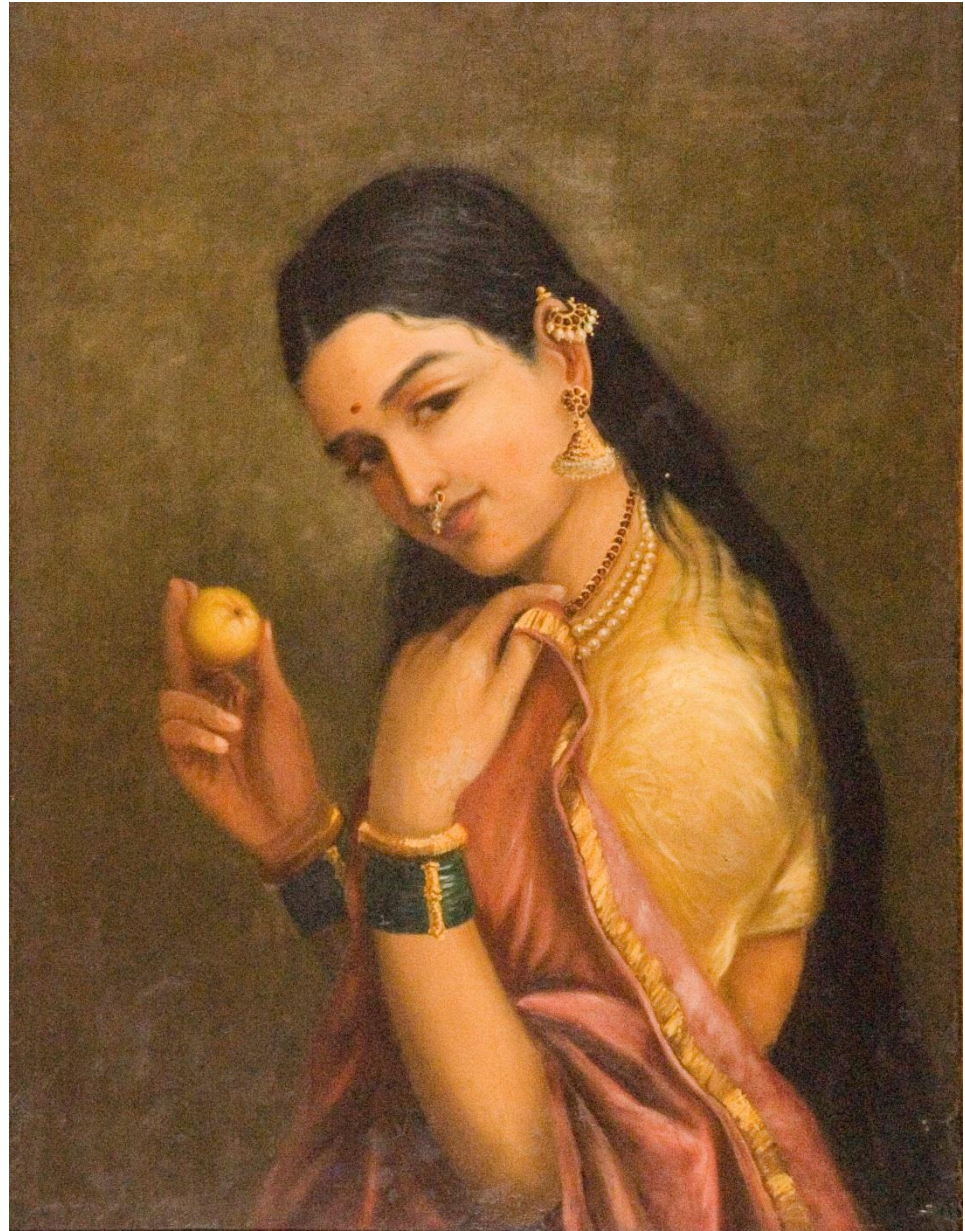
She was only slightly comforted in knowing that she'd be greeted by her married sisters when she got home. Two times a year they were allowed to leave the families of their husbands in Mumbai and return to their childhood home for a long visit.



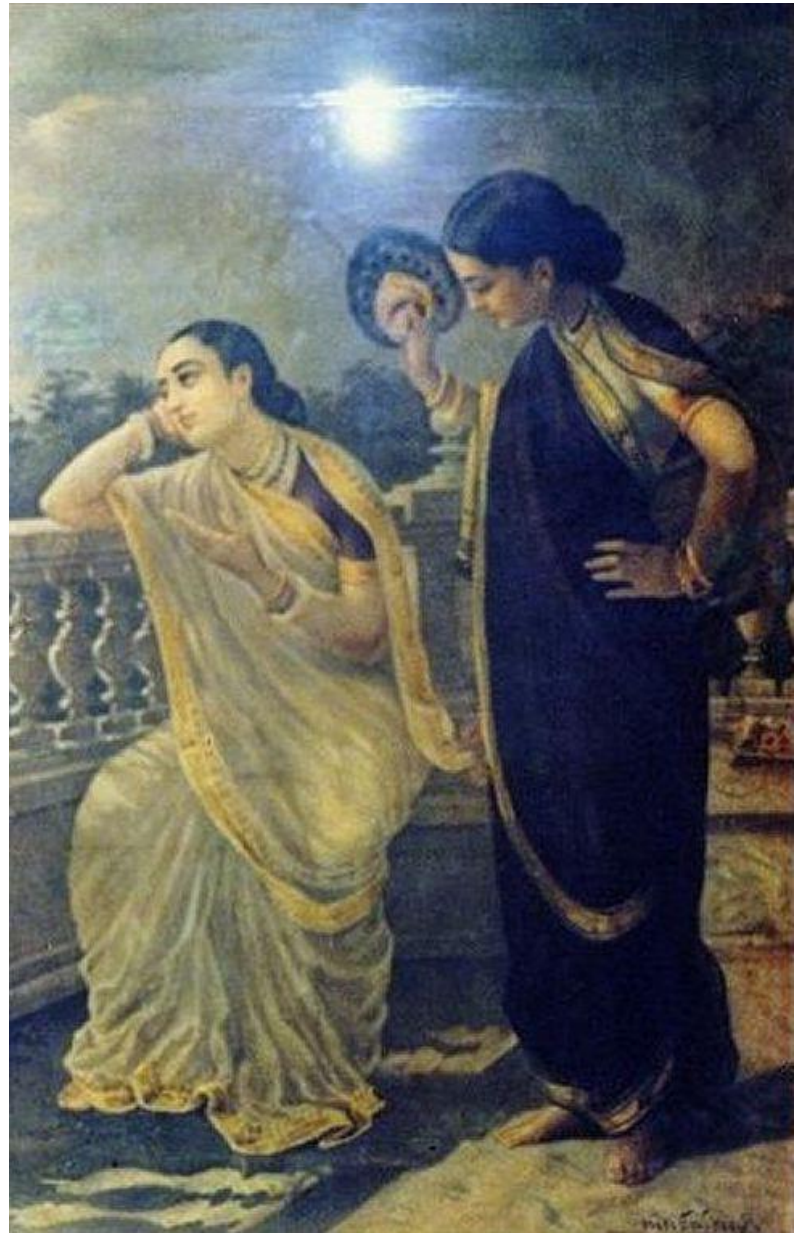
When she arrived home she saw her sister Mira picking fruit at her family compound.

Elina told her about the wonderful trip. But she also told her that her English friend did not have to marry until she was about twenty."

"Kaasni will be here this evening," Mira said. "Why don't the three of us have a nice talk tomorrow. We need to discuss all of this."



That evening Elina's sisters went out on the balcony and discussed what they needed to tell her younger sister.



The next day the sisters tried to cheer Elina up. They told her about the wonders of Mumbai that she'd get to see after her wedding.

"It will be every bit as glorious as the life you live in Suryapur and everything you saw in Delhi and Agra," Mira insisted.



"Not only that," added Kaasni "But it is now the headquarters of the East India Company. You will be where all the exciting trading activity takes place."

"But will I even be able to get out and shop?" asked Elina. "You both told me years ago that your mothers-in-law made you work all the time in the house."



"Oh that changes," responded Mira. "When you are old enough that your husband pays attention to you and you have your first child, then you gain more freedom in the house."

Elina would not be consoled. "Still it is an unfair situation for girls. It really is."



"I realize that we women have our burdens," Mira said. "But this is the role we play in this life."

Kaasni agreed. "And if we follow our paths and please our parents, our husbands, and their families, then we will be reborn in a better situation."

"We must not behave as if all we care about is ourselves, little sister," admonished Mira. "This is not the way to have a better rebirth."

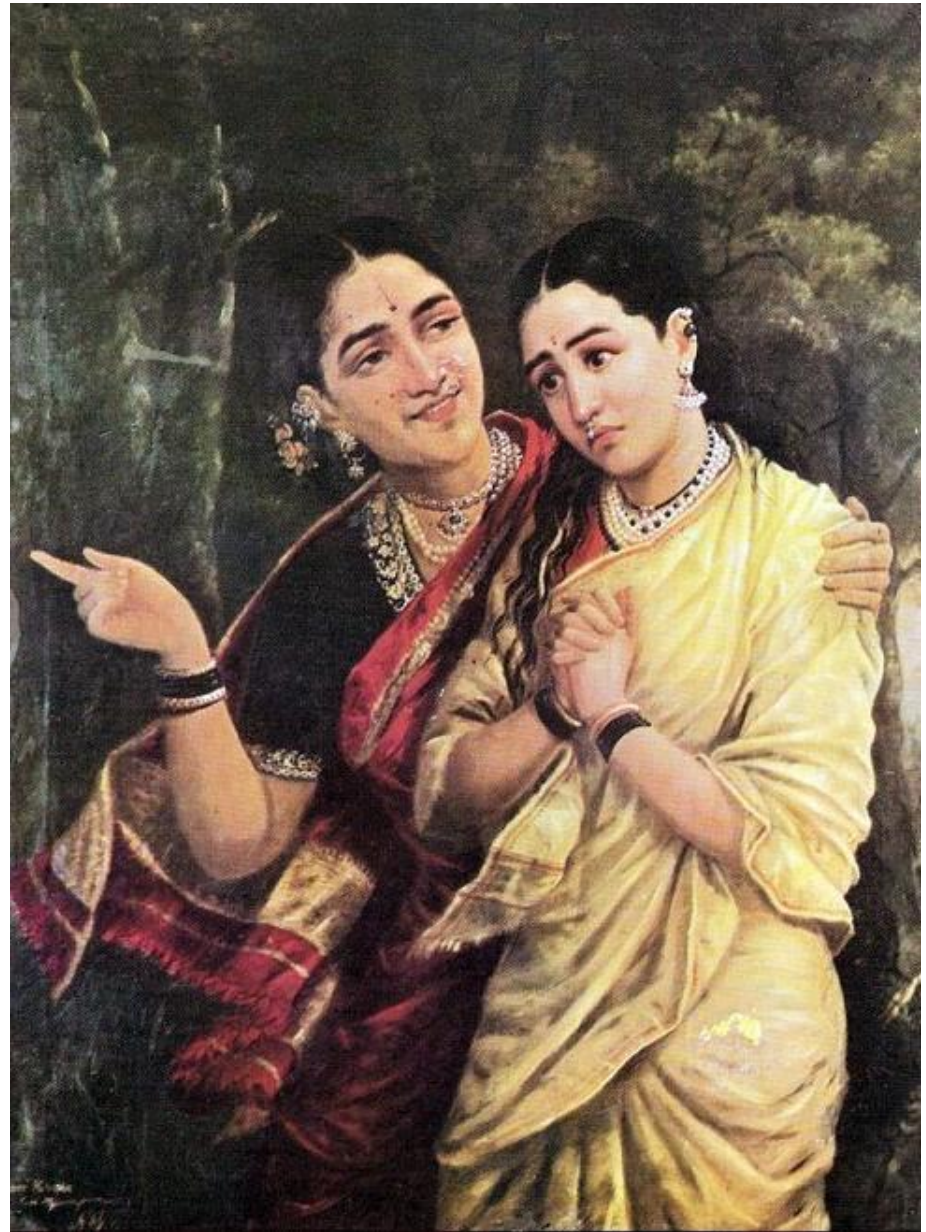
Elina gave everything some thought. She contemplated every word her sisters had said.



The next morning, her sister Kaasni came to her room. "Do you feel better about this now?"

Elina was still worried, but she nodded. She'd thought through everything. She had her own vision now—a strong, helpful vision.

And one of hope.



And a month later, Elina was the center of the village when she was married to the young man from Mumbai. She played her role perfectly. She was anointed in the Hindu way. All through the wedding and after she settled in the home of her husband's family in Mumbai, she only thought about pleasing those around her.

She knew that this was the best way. *And she thought that when she got old and died she would be reborn into a better situation.*



This time she would be a man!



The end

Let's talk!!!