



SONABAI

ANOTHER WAY OF SEEING

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PREFACE



SONABAI IS ALONE. In overpopulated, noisy India, solitude is rare. She has never experienced it before. Sonabai grew up in a home full of relatives. Her father and mother, brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all lived in the same farmhouse in the middle of a village of similar houses brimming with people. She was always surrounded by activity and the demands of life. Children ran through the house, neighbors came and went, and her grandmother cared for the babies, while her mother and aunt sorted vegetables and cooked. When her father and uncles were not out in the fields working, they were inside mending tools, spinning rope or caring for the livestock that lived with the family.

Now, as a young wife married for ten years, all that has changed. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Sonabai has been thrust into a new home that is unlike anything she has ever imagined. No one else is there at all, only Holi Ram, her husband, and their little son, Babu. Like her father, Holi Ram is a rice farmer; he is a widower whose first wife died without having any children some years earlier. He is forty-six; through Sonabai's young twenty-five-year-old eyes, he already seems elderly. Since they have been married, Holi Ram has proved to be jealous and obsessively protective of her. For the first decade of their marriage, they lived in his village with his parents, and brothers and sisters-in-law like most other Hindu families. During all those long years while Sonabai did not get pregnant, Holi Ram became increasingly difficult, fighting with his family and neighbors and finally insisting they move out just after Babu was born.

Holi Ram decided that he didn't want to live near other people and began to build their new house in the middle of his farm far outside his community's boundaries. As is common in a rural Indian village, Sonabai helped him construct their home, aiding in carrying the timbers for the doorframes, columns and beams, packing the walls with mud, straw and cow dung, and surfacing the roof with terracotta tiles. The interior of the house is a pressed dirt courtyard surrounded by a columned verandah, off which radiates a kitchen, bedroom/storage room, and a barn. There is only one door to the outside and no windows.

Except when he lets her out to go to the well on the opposite side of the house from the village—or to the fields to help him plant, irrigate, weed or harvest—Holi Ram has made it clear that he does not want Sonabai to leave their home. He has asked her not to talk to anyone. He invites no one to visit. Her own village is only a few miles away, but Sonabai has seen none of her family since their move. She doesn't know how to read and neither does Holi Ram, and they have no books, papers or magazines anyway. They have no electricity, no radio and no outside entertainment. As they live in such a remote spot, Sonabai sees other people only at a great distance. She feels very isolated.

One particularly hot afternoon when she is nursing Babu in their quiet, contained courtyard, Sonabai observes the way light reflects into the passageways under the eaves of the overhanging verandahs. Wouldn't there be a way to soften that light and lessen its intensity? A pile of leftover bamboo rods that had been used as construction platforms gives her an idea. Hoisting Babu into a cotton sling on her shoulder, she takes an old sari and



Sonabai Rajawar lived in almost total isolation for the first fifteen years of her marriage. Now elderly, she reminisces about the hardship of her young married years and her unusual solution to her loneliness.