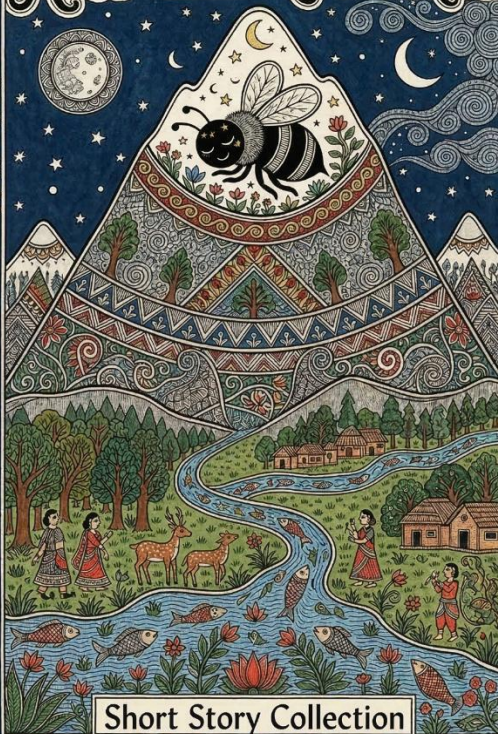


THE BLACK BEE IS SLEEPING ATOP THE MOUNTAIN



Short Story Collection

Maithili Stories translated into English by the author GAJENDRA THAKUR himself

**THE BLACK BEE IS
SLEEPING ATOP THE
MOUNTAIN**

GAJENDRA THAKUR

© 2026; **THE BLACK BEE IS
SLEEPING ATOP THE
MOUNTAIN(SHORT, LONG,
AND SEED STORIES/ MICRO/
FLASH-FICTIONS)** [“Parvat

Oopar Bhamra Je Sootal” by
Gajendra Thakur, translated into
English by the author himself]

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Gajendra Thakur is the editor of the Maithili e-magazine Videha (<http://videha.co.in/> ISSN 2229-547X), and he currently resides in Delhi.

INSTRUCTIONS OR SUGGESTIONS FOR THE READER

Some instructions or suggestions are being provided for reading this book, which will assist you in reading and analyzing these stories, allowing you to fully understand and enjoy this collection.

Four translated stories from this book into English have been showcased at International Film Festival and published/e-published in various magazines. Some of my works are also published in Nepal's *Gorkhapatra*, *Aangan*, *Dhua Dhaja*, *Mithila.com*, and other Maithili journals/columns. Almost all of my original works are e-published in *Videha*, the Maithili e-journal (<http://videha.co.in/> ISSN 2229-547X).

Certain stories in this book are expanded versions of stories published/e-published before 2023; the versions in this book are hereby declared the **authentic editions** (this applies to anyone wishing to collect, cite, or translate these stories in any anthology). In some previously published works, names

have been changed along with the expansions.

Short Story Section (Laghu Katha)

- **Siddha Mahavir:** This story was read at the "Sagar Raati Deep Jaray" event in Kabilpur and published in *Antika*. Its English translation appeared in *Muse India* [www.museindia.com (Issue 63 September-October 2015 under Highlight- Indian Short Stories in Translation)] and was showcased at an International Film Festival. It is the story of a restless widowed sister Anmana, where two sides describe an event from both devotional and scientific perspectives. The story has been revised, and its title has also been changed.
- **Navi Mumbai:** Here, the social system and Corona have become intertwined.
- **New Delhi:** Features migration, economics, and a death. And then, the wait...
- **Taskar (The Smuggler):** Originally published in Purvottar Maithil love story special issue; this is the expanded version. It is based on a true event mentioned in the *Panji-Prabandh* (genealogical records). Was it the abduction of a bride intended for the

King, or it was a love affair? Who is the smuggler? (English translation showcased at International Film Festival).

- **Sangharsh (The Struggle):** Another story of a widow who receives a compassionate appointment (job) after her son's murder or suicide. It highlights the complexities of the justice system.
- **Letterbox-me Ayal Chitthi:** Drugs, terrorism, and the protagonist's victory, loss, or perhaps nothing at all...
- **Doma, Budhan aa...:** The initial form changed several times; it has now evolved from a "Seed Story" into a "Short Story." It covers meaningful government intervention in caste and the political history behind Dalit discourse. But the story continues...
- **Atmahatya (Suicide):** The psychology of suicide.
- **Gandharva Leterbam:** Previously published in *Ankur* and collected in *Galpguchhh* (2009); the name and content have been expanded.

Long Story Section (Deergh Katha)

- **Madhubani Module:** Originally a short story in *Antika*, now expanded into a long story with a title change.

- **Sabdashastram**—Gangesha Upadhyaya, the progenitor of Mithila's Navya-Nyaya, was born five years after his father's death. After completing his education, he married a woman from the leather-working community (Charmakarini). However, his history was suppressed, remaining alive only within the "Black Book," known as the Dushan Panji (Record of Blemishes). Ramanath Jha told Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya—falsely—that Gangesha's family had vanished from Mithila and that there was no need for him to know the names of his father or ancestors (see History of Navya Nyaya in Mithila). This love story, extracted from the Dushan Panji, was published in the "Love Story Special Issue" of Jakhan Takhan. Its English translation was published in the Sahitya Akademi journal, Indian Literature [Vol. 58, No. 2 (280) (March/April 2014), pp. 78-93] and was screened at an international film festival. All the songs for this story were obtained via digital recordings from the leather-workers' quarter (Charmakar Tola) by Mr. Umesh Mandal, which are available at https://www.videha.co.in/Audio_Video.htm; thus, this story is dedicated to him. In the collected songs, the word 'barren' (baajhin) has been changed to 'tigress' (baaghin), keeping feminist discourse in mind (within the story, not the recording). Authorial liberty has been taken in the narrative.

- **Mahisbar Brahmanak Gaam [(The Village of Buffalo-grazer Brahmins)]** is a village of Brahmins—not only of humans; but a story of a village. English translation of this has been done, the translation has been crafted with an eye toward ease of access for a global readership.

Seed Story Section (Beehani Katha)

39 Seed Stories including: *The Rickshaw Ride and Fear of Looting, Fake Notes, Watery Road, Yes Sir, Two Prisoners, One's Own Fate, The Sermon, The Promised Word, Brown Hair, Self-Pride, Shadow, Water Cooler, You Aren't That Big Yet Boy, The Tale of the Mechanic at Ambience Mall Campus, Sniffer Dog Narrative, Traffic Rules Vol 0-3, Casteist Marathi, The Obstinate Man, Polygamy and Eunuchs, Woman-Daughter, Marriage and Greeting, Talent, Casteism, Compassionate Appointment, Recommendation and the Boss, New Media, Mithila's Industry, Flood, Hunger and Migration 1-4, New-Feudal, Fourth Place, Vote, Fish-eating, Siberia Camp, Meet Bhai Series 1-12, Bihari, Fielding, Skill, Discipline and Science 1-3.*

Some of these have been published or e-published under this name or under other

names. All of these are stories connected with society—very short pieces ranging from one or two lines to about one or one-and-a-half pages. The story “Fourth Place” comments on how the mainstream keeps deceiving others by offering the lure of the “fourth place.” Stories such as ‘Bahupatni Vivah’ and ‘Hijra’ engage with women’s discourse, while ‘Jati-Pati’ addresses issues of caste hierarchy and Dalit discourse. “Compassionate Appointment” portrays a person with unstable ideology. “New Media” comments on the yellow journalism of the present time, where breaking news has become a new norm. “Industry of Mithila” describes the difficulties involved in creating one’s own employment. In “Flood, Hunger and Migration,” humor is interwoven with the experiences of flood and migration. “Pairvi-Paigam” and “Hakim” show that there is no excuse for not performing one’s duty; the same idea appears in another form in “Atma-Gaurav.” “Panibala Road” describes, through the people of a non-flooded region, how those from flood-affected areas search for new ways to live in new circumstances. It shows how, after the embankments were built on the Kosi River and the Kusheshwar Sthan area became waterlogged in the 1970s, the local people adapted themselves. This story is part of environmental discourse. “Rickshaw Ride,” “Fear of Loot,” and “Fake Note” comment on law and order and currency fraud. “Ji Sir”

comments on sycophancy; “Two Prisoners” on prison administration; “One’s Own Fate” and “Sniffer Dog Narrative” on corruption. “Sermon” exposes hypocritical preachers, and “Idle Talk” criticizes the harsh system. “Grey Hair” humorously comments on caste and social attitudes. “Shadow” narrates an incident or a mirror-image type of event. “Water Cooler” describes the sometimes-humorous results of social-welfare activities. “You Haven’t Grown That Much Yet, Son” humorously portrays the mentality of the mainstream. “Ambience Mall Campus” tells the story of a mason and highlights the duality between bookish knowledge and job-based practical knowledge. “Traffic Rules” discusses people’s attitudes toward law; “Casteist Marathi” exposes people’s duplicity; and “Shameless Man” reflects on human destiny. “New Feudal Lord” depicts the arrogance of the mainstream. “Vote” describes the deceit and manipulation of elections. “Masuai” shows cultural differences in food habits across regions and raises questions about morality that are often unnecessarily imposed. “Siberia Camp” tells a story about trade and industry in Siberia. In the “Meet-Brother” series, the laughter, tricks, deceptions, and innocence of village friendship bonds are depicted. The word “Bihari” has become synonymous with labor migration; there is also commentary on the system of science education. In Kota, the coaching hub, twenty-two students committed suicide in 2022. ‘Fielding’

comments on perspectives toward sports; ‘Skill’ deals with the plight of skilled workers; and ‘Discipline’ critiques the colonial mindset within the brown-sahib (black-English) bureaucracy.

In this collection, some new “Beehani” stories and some revised ones have been included.

— **Gajendra Thakur**

SHORT STORY SECTION

SIDDHA MAHAVIR

1

By the side of the embankment stood the house of *Anmana Didi* (the Distracted Sister).

"House" would be an overstatement; let's call it a single-room shed (*Ekchari*). In almost every courtyard of the village, there resides a widow's hut. However, as families expand, someone turns the face of their house away, or someone builds a partition. Occasionally, the very location of that widow's dwelling is shifted—such was the state of Anmana Didi's home.

Yet, Anmana Didi's hut was by the embankment. Originally from the *Majkothia* ward, she had gradually shifted toward our house. She was a woman of self-respect.

The young girls of the neighborhood would visit her during the day or afternoon to help comb her hair and pick out lice. To whom she truly belonged would only be known after her death. At the time of the funeral rites, whoever is closest will light the pyre and inherit the homestead. But even that possibility seemed bleak now. Anmana Didi's in-laws were in Jhanjharpur. There,

she had adopted her sister's son as her own. Yet, her attachment to her paternal village (*Naihar*) remained unbroken.

She would come to her single-room hut at least once a month. She managed everything herself—cooking and chores. Despite having a large house and a proper courtyard in Jhanjharpur, she never brought her son or daughter-in-law here.

In the village, a widow is called "Didi" if she stays in her paternal home, and "Kaki" (Aunt) of such-and-such village if she stays with her in-laws. Thus, the entire village knew her as *Anmana Didi*.

Beside her hut, she had built a temple for the Lord—Mahavir Bajrangbali. Initially, it wasn't a concrete structure, but she eventually turned it into a small room by selling her grain and savings. Earlier, it too was just a shed. Whenever Anmana Didi went to Jhanjharpur, she would pull the shutter of her hut close. Later, she began securing it with a chain and padlock. But the temple of Bajrangbali always remained open—day and night—for the people. The village girls would clean and sweep it regularly.

The temple eventually became a brick structure with a stone-slab roof. She wanted to plaster the floor, but the estimate exceeded her budget. Could the Lord's house be left to

leak? But where would the money for the concrete casting and plastering come from?

Today, I feel as though we all work incredibly hard. we have no concern for others. "Oh, there's just no time," we say. But look at Anmana Didi's routine—from dawn to dusk, dedicated to the Lord. Yet, she still found time for her adopted son. She would occasionally visit her village near the Jhanjharpur market to manage affairs there, then return to her paternal village.

Consider our own struggles to become 'Sthitaprajna' (equanimous) by reading the Gita. And then, look at Anmana Didi. "I bow to you, Didi." "Be well," she would reply. No visible joy, no apparent sorrow. No desire for hospitality, and no aspiration for assistance of any kind.

She would go to *Dhanuktol* or *Dusadhtol* to find laborers. The people there respected her; after all, she wasn't there to take away their land. I would even see her laughing there. She strictly avoided asking the people of her own neighborhood for any work. If one did a task for her, he would go home and tell his wife, and then for the next ten years, that wife would never let her hear the end of it.

"Didi, this is Hanuman Ji's work, and he is right by the road. We all bow our heads in prayer whenever we pass by. So, I will do this

work without taking any wages," a local once offered.

"No, sir," she replied. "One should not perform or solicit acts for pilgrimages or God for free. I am no Queen or Great Lady that I would build a temple or dig a pond by forced unpaid labor (*Begari*)."

But the concrete casting and the plastering... how?

2

Adjacent to the temple by the road lay one *Bigha* (unit of land), all belonging to Anmana Didi. She intended to transfer the land to the Lord's name once the concrete casting was completed. Whatever grain was harvested from it would then fund the whitewashing, repair, and maintenance of the Lord's house.

For days, a neighbor—her nephew—had been persistently cornering her.

"Didi, I am your closest nephew. This land is right next to my house. In the old days, people used to let the marginalized or widows build huts by the embankments and roads. But times have changed. Now, land by the roadside is gold. You will pass away today or tomorrow. After that, this land will only become a bone of contention among us kinsmen."

"You will pass away today or tomorrow"—imagine saying this to a woman whose husband is alive. But one feels entitled to say it to a widow, regardless of her having an adopted son, daughter-in-law, or grandchildren. *Fine, son*, she thought.

"This land is dedicated to the Lord. It's what I live on. Whatever I save by cutting back on my own meals is for the Lord's house—for the casting and the plaster. The property in Jhanjharpur belongs to my son and daughter-in-law. How can I...?"

"Again, Didi, you miss the point. Keep it as long as you live. Use it for your livelihood. I'm just saying—will you like it if the kinsmen fight over this after you're gone? And I am your most devoted nephew..."

See how he talks! This nephew works away from the village. Those who stay in the village usually avoid her, fearing they might have to give her something. But whenever this one visits the village while I am there, he makes sure to meet me. This time, he even tracked me down in Jhanjharpur. I wondered how he had suddenly become so mindful; now I understand.

But how will the casting be done? The plastering can wait, but the leakage is unbearable. It's leaking even more this year. The thatched roof didn't even last two years. Only when Karim Mian and Lakhmi Mistri

strip it off and do the concrete casting will it be fixed. Let's see.

The nephew's visits have become more frequent lately.

"Fine, Didi, just give me half the land. Ten *Katthas* are enough for your nephew's home, and you'll still have land left for the Lord."

"But it's not enough for a proper homestead on the embankment. What will you gain from it?"

"Don't worry about that. I still have to come through the ward anyway. My homestead isn't exactly by the road; it's the land behind it. Building houses at crossroads and by embankments is a new trend. And at such a junction, only a House of God looks graceful. I will give you ten thousand for the ten *Katthas* whenever you say. The registry can happen later."

"Fine. I will think about it. Let me ask my son and daughter-in-law once."

There seemed no other way. Moss had started covering the temple walls. Not just the walls—even the idol of Bajrangbali was turning green with moss. Anmana Didi kept thinking. She thought until the break of dawn.

I'll give him the land. What other choice is there? No!

The son and daughter-in-law said, "Mother, that land belongs to the Lord; we have known that from the start. But be careful. See if he is playing some trick."

"What trick? He is actually paying a bit more than the market rate."

Ten *Katthas* aren't exactly a small piece for a temple. *I've exhausted myself trying to gather the funds. Will this half-finished temple remain like this forever? I should talk to Lakhmi Mistri and Karim Mian.*

With ten thousand, the casting, plastering, and even a boundary wall could be built. The estimate was ready. Work would begin the day after the registry. And it would be finished before the month of *Bhadav* (monsoon peak).

3

Well, the registration was completed. Das Ji is a man highly skilled in paperwork. No need to even question it! Rest assured, the documents must be solid.

"This is the first time I've had the opportunity to prepare documents for the Lord, Didi," Das Ji said, his words leaving Anmana Didi deeply moved and grateful.

People wrongly claim that faith in God is declining. Look at this man, Das Ji. No prior

meetings, no prior acquaintance. Two sets of registration papers—one for the ten *Katthas* in the nephew's name and the other in the name of the Lord—yet he charged for only one. He said clearly, "Didi, I will absolutely not take a single penny for registering the Lord's land. After all, those who stand by you in your hour of need are your true kin." Truly, the elders were right; they must have witnessed such kindness to have said those words.

Anmana Didi was overwhelmed with emotion. She returned to the village on foot. Her mind was a blur of joy. She cleared the temple; the work was to begin tomorrow. Lakhmi Mistri had already left his trowel, measuring cord, and tools there. Anmana Didi had already ensured the water troughs were ready to be filled. The pond was nearby; though filled with weeds, the villagers had cleared a small patch at the edge for the buffaloes to drink.

But the next morning brought a sudden storm. Karim Mian was stopped from working. Who stopped him? "Inform the nephew!" someone shouted. But the nephew had left for his job straight from Jhanjharpur yesterday. Although Anmana Didi held a copy of the registration papers, it was the nephew's brother-in-law who was obstructing the work. He wouldn't allow the boundary wall to be built.

"But he was present yesterday during the registration! Then why now?"

He claimed that the land by the embankment belonged to the 'Guest' (the brother-in-law/nephew's kin). "Wait, if that's the case, then doesn't the temple fall into his portion too?" Could there be a mistake in understanding the boundaries? The nephew wouldn't return until the start of next month after collecting his salary. For a whole month, Anmana Didi shuttled between her village and Jhanjharpur. Her son and daughter-in-law asked, "Mother, could this be a ploy by the nephew himself?"

"No, don't say that," she replied. "Das Ji seemed like such a good man."

We shall see.

4

"Didi, you are under some kind of delusion."

"Then I suppose this temple belongs to you now as well?"

"No, Didi. The temple belongs to the Lord. It will remain His. And the land behind it—the Lord is its owner too."

"In that case, I suppose this hut of mine is yours now as well?"

"No, Didi. You may stay here as long as you live. Who would stop you?"

"That is a great kindness of yours, son. But there is no access to the land at the back—neither from the embankment nor from the village side."

"Didi, you are free to walk across my land; who is stopping you? Everyone walks along the ridges of the fields. Just because someone's field isn't by the embankment doesn't mean they can't reach their land. You are talking like those modern people who create walls over every little division."

"But you never mentioned any of this before."

"Didi, I told you everything. But it seems you are confused. If you don't believe me, let's call Das Ji. He is an outsider; he has no stake in this."

"I see... so he is in on this too."

"That poor man prepared two registration documents and charged you for only one, and here you are accusing him of being 'in on it!'" The nephew's voice rose sharply. He began to pant with feigned indignation and walked away, grumbling loudly.

For Anmana Didi, this morning in her paternal village felt exactly like that morning in her in-laws' house when she had become a widow. Today, the village girls did not come to help her pick lice from her hair. Her night-long conversation with Lord Bajrangbali had only just ceased with the break of dawn. In the courtyards nearby, people were patting their children to sleep. Some had come by earlier, suggesting a *Panchayati* (village council meeting) to settle the matter. But Anmana Didi's resentment was directed entirely at Bajrangbali.

"I thought I would sell half of the Lord's land to build the Lord's house. But he (the nephew) got the land adjacent to the temple registered in his name, and the land that remains has no access left for the temple. Forget the access; he has blocked the very path leading to it. And this Bajrangbali... Mahavir! What power does he truly possess? For forty years, I stinted on my own food to move him from a thatched hut into a brick house. My only wish was to see the concrete casting done and a boundary wall built—and that too, was for him alone. Ha..."

6

That morning, Anmana Didi stood at her nephew's doorstep. People expected a fierce confrontation to break out. But what was happening instead? Lakhmi's brother had brought a rickshaw. Anmana Didi was

leaving for Jhanjharpur with her nephew. Who told them? No one had even spoken to her. I had suggested holding a *Panchayati*, but she had silently declined. Ah, it was Lakhmi's brother who told us; he was the one sent to fetch the rickshaw, and he mentioned they were headed for Jhanjharpur.

Das Ji had to prepare yet another set of registration papers. Upon seeing Anmana Didi, he turned cold with apprehension, wondering what earful the old woman might give him. But Anmana Didi was possessed by such a silent, towering rage that she uttered not a single word. She swallowed her fury. She registered the remaining back-lot of the land to the nephew as well. Then, turning away from Jhanjharpur station, she set off on foot toward Jhanjharpur market, toward her son and daughter-in-law.

Lakhmi's brother returned. He had taken two passengers but returned with only one. He brought back a message—a message for Lakhmi Mistri and Karim Mian. The work was to begin tomorrow morning.

Again?

The boundary wall was built. It enclosed both the temple and Anmana Didi's hut. The nephew had assured her—as long as she lived, no one would touch her home.

The home—or rather, the shack—began to crumble within a year. By the following monsoon, its wooden pillars rotted and collapsed.

But Anmana Didi did not return. Someone from her paternal village had sent word. The concrete casting for Bajrangbali's roof was never done. Anmana Didi returned from Haridwar. People asked her, "What did you ask of Mother Ganga?"

"That she remove this superstition from my mind," she replied.

"And what did you offer to Mother Ganga?"

"I gave her my rage."

Anmana Didi would only say this: "What would He do anyway? There is no power in Bajrangbali. Let the shack collapse. How long can a house plagued by white ants and decay stand?"

8

Several years passed. To be precise, it was the fifth year. The nephew had come to the village after collecting his salary. He sat by

the handpump near the pond with his brass water-pot when a sharp pain gripped his chest. He could not be saved.

The villagers began to whisper, "Look, it's Anmana Didi's curse. She had wept bitterly that day. Before this, perhaps there was no power in the idol of Bajrangbali, but a curse delivered from the depths of the heart always strikes. Bajrangbali became 'awakened' (active) that very day, and today, He has shown His power."

However, Anmana Didi said to the messenger, "Do you really think stones have life? It must have been a heart attack. Just the day before yesterday, a Marwari gentleman here suffered an attack. These attacks are caused by worry and stress. Since there are doctors nearby, the Marwari man survived. In the village, delays cost lives. That is exactly why, in my old age, I choose to live here in Jhanjharpur with my son and daughter-in-law."

9

The village is Mahisbar, a village of Brahmins. After witnessing the game of *Huda-Hudi* (bull-baiting/chasing) played by these Mahisbar Brahmins on the day of Sukhratri, one would lose all interest in a game of Polo. It involves a buffalo, intoxicated with bhang and goaded into a

frenzy by a pig bought from the Dom community of Samiya.

The artistry of the herder, perched skillfully while holding the buffalo's tail, was extraordinary. The role of the Dom community is indispensable during festivals—from making wicker baskets (*Petar*) to winnowing fans (*Sup*) and hand-fans (*Biani*). And for the goats slaughtered to welcome guests and wedding parties, the services of the Mian-toli (Muslim quarter) are essential.

But I digress.

During the sacrifices of Durga Puja, the committee takes the goat's head. The Mian who slaughters the goat performs the *Halal*; the neck hangs halfway, but while dressing the meat, he takes the neck and the hide as well. Then, those Mahisbar Brahmins who sing hymns and perform *Ashtajam* at the Hanuman temple buy drums (*Dholak*) made from that very hide. And a kirtan was indeed underway.

Right in front of the Siddha Mahaveer temple. A massive pennant (*Dhuja*) hoisted on Ramnavami. The rhythmic clanging of bells and gongs. The flag of Hanuman Ji flutters in the evening breeze. The Mahisbars have gathered. Whatever the festival—be it *Huda-Hudi* or Ramnavami—kirtans are always held before Siddha Hanuman. It's a

matter of the villagers' faith, sir. And it continues even today.

The smoke from the communal fire (*Ghur*) attempts to drive the mosquitoes away from the cattle. One man has come with another to take an oath. The villagers have finally plastered the Hanuman temple. The concrete casting is also done. The number of people who touch the temple veranda to swear off their debts is negligible, yet there is an exception—one who says, "Oaths are taken only to be broken." Indeed, if a single oath could liberate one from debt, where is the harm? But he is the only exception.

The people now refer to Anmana Didi as *Anmana Baba*. It has been several years since her passing. She never returned. To ward off the "evil eye" from the nephew's homestead, a priest suggested tying a cow to a post. Passers-by always see it grazing there, ensuring the site remains protected from ill omens.

Hanuman Ji's flag flutters. It is evening. Gonar Bhai is striking the drum in the kirtan, beat after beat.

People have now begun to accept *Anmana Baba's* perspective. True. Two groups of devotees have formed before the idol of Hanuman Ji. One group holds a somewhat scientific view—that Anmana Didi's registration of the remaining ten *Katthas* (to

the nephew) was the very thing that triggered the fatal stress in the nephew's chest. He simply couldn't withstand her psychological counter-attack. They believe stones possess no inherent power.

However, the second group believes in the "proven" (*Siddha*) and "awakened" nature of Mahaveer Hanuman. They argue, "Sir, if you bury an ant under the soil, it will die, but it won't die without first biting you with all its might. And Anmana Didi gave this very soil (the land) to Mahaveer Ji—so how could He let it go?"

Gonar Bhai continues to strike the drum with relentless rhythm; it seems he won't stop until he has moved Siddha Mahaveer. The ball of bhang is taking effect; his eyes are glazed, his hands refuse to tire. And if you look through his eyes, the stone idol of Siddha Mahaveer will appear awakened—as if life has suddenly breathed into it!

(Translation into English of the Maithili Short Story, 'Siddha Mahaveer', by the author himself. Gajendra Thakur: e-published as 'The Proven Mahavir,' Sep-Oct 2015 www.museindia.com)

NAVI MUMBAI

1

There was a search operation in Navi Mumbai. In the middle of it, I received a phone call. Hearing me speak in Maithili, a security guard there later approached me in private and asked, "Which village are you from?"

"Garh Narikel." "Which ward?"
"Thakurtoli." "Do you know Phudo?" "Yes, he is my kinsman."

I learned that Phudo Bhai was his neighbor in Navi Mumbai. This man was a guard, and Phudo ran a vegetable stall. Many other people from our village were there as well.

Later, during Durga Puja in the village, I met a sister-in-law (*Bhouji*) who lives in Navi Mumbai—Gongu Bhai's wife. Seeing her, I teased, "You've grown old, Bhouji!"

She shot back instantly, "You are the one who has grown old, and yet..."

"Can't you even take a joke, Bhouji? You, old? I'm meeting you after four years, and while people usually age four years in that time, you look four years younger!"

"You came to Bombay and didn't even visit! That Phudo told me you had come to some 'Seth's' place and there was a huge commotion. I scolded him—I said, 'You rascal, the younger master came and you didn't even bring him home?' He said a friend of yours lived there, so he didn't insist. When you told him Phudo Bhai was your kinsman, his chest swelled with pride. Why didn't you take some time out? Hari Bhai has opened 'Shivshankar Sweets' there. The Shiv Sena folks are pleased with the name, so they don't harass him. Nowadays his staff handles the work, but he said if the younger brother came, he would fry jalebis with his own hands for him."

"It was official work; from there to Tarapur and then straight back to Delhi, so I couldn't make it."

Phudo Bhai had also come to the village. His daughter was getting married. I went to his house to offer the ceremonial *Durvaksht* (rice and grass). He showed me his new house.

Being with Phudo Bhai brought back old memories. *Bauaa-Chauri*—where he used to take the buffaloes to graze. Long ago, he took me along one day. The joy of the herders (*Mahisbars*) there was extraordinary. On one side, cows and buffaloes grazed in the vast plains of *Bauaa-Chauri*, and on the other, the herders, clad in loincloths, dove into the Kamala-Balan river. Avadh Bhai would

swim against the current. Phudo Bhai would slide into the river like it was a springboard—not a springboard, but a park slider. It was a world apart.

Once, at a wedding party, someone asked Phudo Bhai, "Which school do you attend?" Phudo Bhai replied instantly, "Bauaa-Chauri High School!" The outsiders thought it was an actual school, while we couldn't stop laughing.

I remember walking through the eastern ward with Phudo Bhai one day. Suddenly, he started hurling curses at Lukhi's ancestors—seven generations back. The ward people wondered if he had gone mad. But when he grew tired of cursing, he shouted at a relative sitting on the porch, "You scoundrel, don't you dare pretend your name isn't Lukhi!" The relative ran after him, laughing and cursing in return, ready for a mock-brawl.

"I remember it all, son," Phudo Bhai said, but his voice lacked its old playfulness. I have turned from serious to playful, and he from playful to serious.

Hari Bhai had once opened a shop in the village. He was extremely hardworking, but banks don't give loans to people like him. Loans are reserved for those who siphon off government money or wait for the next election's debt waiver. They pay commissions but never actually run a shop.

Hari Bhai was diligent, but so what? He wasn't dishonest enough to manipulate accounts or cheat with the scales. While others' shops thrived through deceit, Hari Bhai's debts were never repaid by his customers. Ultimately, he sold his homestead to clear his debts and moved to Bombay. There, he opened a sweet shop, earned enough to buy back his land from his kinsmen, and now he too had a new house.

Hari Bhai's son has kidney issues, but his grandson is very energetic. He scored a double century in a local cricket championship and received a trophy from a Shiv Sena MLA. However, in his absence, Gongu Bhai remarked, "Rubbish! It wasn't a real leather-ball championship; it was just tennis-ball cricket. No pads, no helmets—he didn't mention that part, did he?"

Phudo Bhai's son generally speaks sensibly, but he seemed a bit hot-headed. He wasn't necessarily wrong, but he would stubbornly stick to his point. For instance, he would insist, "I saw Neelu Didi in Bombay; this is her brother." Neelu Didi had never been to Bombay by then, but he swore he had seen her.

Hari Bhai's father-in-law is a gardener in a residential society in Delhi. Hari Bhai is from Misertoli, next to Thakurtoli. During the plague, almost the entire western ward and half of Misertoli were wiped out; otherwise,

this would have been a massive settlement today.

His son, Sarvan, had his kidney surgery in Delhi. All of Hari Bhai's relatives are capable and strong. Only Hari Bhai is in Bombay; the rest of the ward is in Delhi. There is a strong unity in Misertoli. Whether it's work or a celebration, in Delhi or the village, everyone shows up.

"Are they all old-fashioned? Not 'advanced' yet? Look at my ward—it's advanced. No one cares about anyone else; everyone is for themselves," the elder clerk says, loud enough for the ward people to hear.

Many days passed. I met them in the village once more—it was his daughter's wedding, and I had gone for my aunt's funeral rites.

2

I had been to Navi Mumbai several times before, but this time was different. The shadow of the pandemic was just beginning to loom when I arrived.

Upon landing, the checks at the airport began—not by the police, but by doctors. Where are you coming from? Delhi? And before that? Only Delhi? "Go to the left, fill out the form; you must undergo seven days of self-quarantine." "You, from Dubai? Dubai to Delhi, then Mumbai? Go to the

right, fill the form; you will be in government quarantine at the state's expense. But first, take him for testing, Sister." Since I was from the "left" group, I headed to my guest house for self-quarantine. On the taxi's FM radio, an RJ was mentioning how the First World War ended in 1918, and just as people thought one calamity had ended, another struck—the Spanish Flu. It killed 100 million people globally and 8 million in India. The world's population was much smaller back then.

My quarantine ended exactly when the nationwide lockdown began. Schools, colleges, shops, and markets—all shut down. Turning on the TV in the guest house was a one-way ticket to depression.

Eventually, the lockdown eased, and after completing some official work, I returned.

But this recent trip was something else entirely. This wasn't just a journey; it was a forced departure for Navi Mumbai in the thick of COVID-19. I had been transferred there unexpectedly. And just as unexpectedly, lockdown hit the moment I reached. The roads looked as if a permanent curfew had been imposed.

The streets were mostly empty, save for the vehicles with wailing sirens. Not the sirens of the police, but of ambulances. This sound echoed incessantly on both sides of the road.

There were long queues for oxygen. Even then, the condition was: bring your own cylinder, and they would fill it for you. But cylinders were nowhere to be found.

Distrust was everywhere. People claimed that hospitals were raising false alarms at night. "Oxygen is out, bring Remdesivir injections or the patient won't survive." A five-thousand-rupee Remdesivir injection was being sold on the black market for twenty-five to thirty thousand.

That was when we realized that masks weren't even being manufactured in India. There were various types, but N-95 was considered the best.

"First, they admitted him to the hospital but said treatment wouldn't start until the COVID test results arrived—citing Medical Council guidelines. It took four days for the results to come. Just a day later, they said the administration had declared this a 'COVID Hospital,' so we had to leave. We went to another hospital. They said the same—treatment starts in three days after the results. After three days, the result was positive. Then *that* hospital said they weren't a COVID hospital anymore—'Please leave.' We went back to the first hospital, and finally, treatment began. While people couldn't find a single cylinder, I managed eight. While people couldn't find one Remdesivir, I provided six. On the fourteenth

day, he passed away. Neither money nor influence worked."

"My oxygen dropped below 60 on the oximeter. No one could find a hospital bed. Even the Health Secretary wouldn't pick up the hospital's calls. My wife, a housewife who had never stepped out of the house alone, I don't know where she found the strength. Somehow, she arranged a bed, somehow she got the Remdesivir. She brought me back home alive. After a month, I suggested going back to the office just to check in. Earlier, I never cared about my diet, but now my wife has given me a chart—this for the morning, this for the afternoon, this for the day, and this for the night. How can I not listen to her now? My maternal uncle called her; he couldn't come because of the lockdown, but he forcibly deposited fifty thousand rupees into our account. Meanwhile, the company docked a month's salary."

In the guest house, voices of despair and hope mingled—a microcosm of India. Sometimes news would come that Mahinder Bhaiya's son-in-law passed away on the 14th day in a Greater Noida hospital; then, Ghanekar, an office colleague, also passed away on the 14th day.

"If the fever doesn't break by the seventh day, consider that Corona has won and your body has lost. After that, the oxygen cylinder and

Remdesivir are only for psychological consolation. Now, instead of cylinders, there's an 'Oxygen Concentrator' for eighty thousand rupees. In a way, this disease is better—within fourteen days, it's either this side or that. In diseases like cancer or kidney failure, death comes only after you've sold your house and property. But we hear the vaccine is in the final stages. Still, there are agents in the WHO and the Medical Council; they'll try to fail the Indian vaccine. Don't you see? When masks weren't available, they said wrap a 'Gamchha' (towel) around your face; now they say wear two or three masks. On TV, they say Remdesivir isn't necessary—then why don't they tell the hospital doctors who make everyone run around for it? First, they said wash hands with soap; now they say use sanitizer. Sometimes they say steroids aren't necessary, but as soon as the supply arrives, they become essential."

A third man, wearing a mask, supported both the voices of hope and despair.

"And what if the fever doesn't break on the seventh day?" I asked. "Then understand that death has won."

3

It is the sixth day; my son's fever hasn't dropped below 102-103 degrees. He is COVID positive. They are in New Delhi, and

I am here in Navi Mumbai. Meanwhile, Dinesh Ji's son passed away in Delhi. An employee who accompanied a high-ranking official from the office got into an argument with a doctor at Batra Hospital; as a result, the promised bed was denied. Later, he had to be admitted to Bahadurgarh, on the outskirts of Delhi.

"He died. He had actually turned COVID negative. The fever didn't break on the seventh day; it finally came down on the twelfth. He was recovering, but his lungs were destroyed. I've seen an X-ray—just as a rat gnaws things into tiny bits, Corona shreds the lungs into pieces. Even if you test negative, you might not survive. Sir, my younger brother works at the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, but even he has said he cannot arrange a bed. I had already arranged a bed in a hospital on the way to Dehradun; I decided that if my sister's fever didn't break by the seventh day, I'd take her out of Delhi and head there. She is the same sister whose tenant was refusing to vacate; I had to slap him a few times and keep a revolver on the table to warn him that he'd have to kill me before grabbing my sister's house—I told you that story, didn't I? Thankfully, her fever broke on the sixth day." — A call came from an acquaintance in Delhi.

My wife is anxious. She arranged an online consultation with Medanta. She shared the

prescription on WhatsApp with me and our extended family. It reached me too. Hari Bhai, Phudo Bhai, and others asked for it. I sent it to everyone. Aseen Bhai later told me that this very prescription proved life-saving; he shared it with many in the village and outside.

In Jhanjharpur, New Delhi, and Navi Mumbai, the positivity rate was 33 percent—meaning out of every three people tested, one was positive. One-third of the population was infected. In the village, everyone was struck down by fever; the entire village was in distress. And by "village," I don't just mean the physical village, but also the people from there living in Navi Mumbai, Delhi, Noida, and Greater Noida.

In the actual village, people recovered within four to five days. But in Navi Mumbai, Delhi, Noida, and Greater Noida—those "villages" built by migrants—news of death arrived every single day. More of our village people now live in these cities than in the village itself. People in the Navi Mumbai settlement gave up hope on transport and set off on foot toward their original village. The Radio Jockey is saying that this is the largest migration since the Partition of India in 1947.

Phudo Bhai recovered. Hari Bhai's son had been suffering from kidney ailments for 15 years—it was always a matter of today or tomorrow. He survived this wave, but Hari

Bhai himself contracted Corona and passed away before him.

—How did everyone in the village get better in just four or five days? Six days at most? By the seventh day, not a single person had a fever. Did not a single casualty occur there? Perhaps the air there is pure, and thus their lungs are strong.

I am here in Navi Mumbai, under lockdown, and there in New Delhi, this is... The night of the seventh day. Today is the seventh day, and my son's fever has still not broken.

NEW DELHI

1

New Delhi. The night of December 31st. It is now the 1st of January. I am on the night shift.

A woman from Korea asks me, "Is this a new airport?" "Yes," I reply, and then ask, "Why do you ask?" "No reason," she says, "I just felt so, because I was here six months ago." "Ah, you must have arrived at Terminal 2 earlier. This is the new Terminal 3. Do you like it?" I ask. "It's wonderful. It doesn't look like an airport; it feels like a hotel. India is becoming strong now," she remarks.

I am on the night shift. Just then, my mobile rings—a call from the village. My female colleague teases me: "A call from home! Now he'll start talking in Maithili again. We don't understand the language, but it sounds sweet. He might even be making fun of us, and we wouldn't even know."

It is the night of December 31st. It is now the 1st of January. But the accident had occurred before midnight. There was a mobile phone in the pocket of the corpse. The police used that same phone to call the last three or four dialed numbers and delivered the news: the

person to whom this phone belongs is no longer in this world.

Midnight. Leaving the X-ray machines and sniffer dogs behind, I take my leave from the office. From the outside, the airport looks like a newlywed bride, adorned and shimmering. Even I hadn't seen this 'bride' from the outside at night. The Korean woman was right; in the glowing lights, it truly looks like a luxury hotel.

the car moves forward. How did the roads of New Delhi become so wide? During the day, the pace on this road is barely three minutes per kilometer. But at night, being empty, it feels cavernous.

Then comes the crossing over the Yamuna—from New Delhi into 'Delhi.' The roads begin to narrow. Bhajanpura, Khajuri Khas. During the day, a car wouldn't even be able to enter here. The electricity is out. Filth is spread on both sides of the road.

I park the car at the corner of an alley and walk ahead. Crossing the lane, I climb the shaky stairs and enter Amar's house. Wailing and cries of mourning fill the air.

This too is an area of Delhi... of New Delhi, the capital of 'Strong India.' The Korean woman could never come here—to Bhajanpura or Khajuri Khas. Yet, it is the people of Bhajanpura and Khajuri Khas who

stand behind the gleaming houses, offices, and trade of New Delhi. They have staked their lives on the hope that being at the frontline of this progress might eventually yield some benefit.

I learn that the body is kept at Guru Teg Bahadur (GTB) Hospital. I set off from there. The situation is beyond the reach of mere words of consolation.

At the mortuary of GTB Hospital, the body of Mohit Babu's son will be handed over to a blood relative only after the post-mortem. The police were clear: "Since the father is alive, there is no question of handing it over to anyone else. Had he not been alive, it could have been considered—these are High Court orders." Last time, a body was handed over to someone else, and when the real blood relative filed a case, three policemen were suspended. And even if we assume the police would agree, the doctors wouldn't perform the post-mortem without the legal guardian.

I return home.

2

A storm of chaos broke out in Amod's house. A phone call had arrived from Delhi at one in the morning—Mohit Babu's son, Amar, was dead. He had died in a road accident in Delhi.

Amod's phone wouldn't stop ringing. How could he break this news to Mohit Babu? Amar was the only son, born after four daughters, raised with immense struggle and sacrifices. He had just been married last year.

Amod reached Mohit Kaka's doorstep. He called out. Kaka's wife (Kaki) came out. Mohit Babu wasn't even in the village; he had gone to attend his brother-in-law's funeral rites. Kaki shared this information with Amod.

"What happened so late at night?" Kaki asked, her voice laced with worry. "Nothing... I'll come back in the morning. I had some work," Amod replied.

Amod exited the house and moved forward. He went to Sarvan's doorstep. *Yes, I'll tell him; he can inform Kaki in the morning.*

Sarvan was asleep on a wooden cot. Amod woke him up and told him everything. Sarvan would tell Kaki in the morning and call Kaka immediately.

By morning, the entire village was in mourning. Kaki was losing her mind with grief. A message was sent to Mohit Babu: "Come home exactly as you are; Kaki's health has taken a turn for the worse."

When Mohit Babu reached the village, the reality was different. There were many

people from their neighborhood in Delhi, but the police would not hand over the body to anyone except a blood relative.

Mohit Babu did not want to go to Delhi; he did not want to go to witness his own devastation. But the police would not release the body to anyone else.

The village priest (*Panditji*) offered him support and reassurance. He would accompany Mohit Babu to ensure the last rites were performed correctly.

By evening, a reservation would be made on the train from Patna to New Delhi. Amod had spoken to the local MLA; Amod's nephew would meet them at Patna Junction with the tickets and confirmed reservation. In New Delhi, the son of 'Piyar Baccha' would come to the station with a car; he owned several shops in Karol Bagh. He would drive Mohit Babu straight to the mortuary...

Panditji and Mohit Babu boarded the bus to Patna. The train to New Delhi was in the evening. By tomorrow morning, Mohit Babu would reach New Delhi and receive the body of his son—who was alive until yesterday, but today lies as a corpse in a mortuary in New Delhi.

3

The train was about to reach the city of hope—New Delhi. The sight of chimneys and factory smoke faded away, replaced by massive stadiums, Pragati Maidan, and other grand structures. Mohit Babu used to admire these things. At Delhi Haat, he used to watch people in expensive cars stop to buy rustic, village-made goods. It used to make him laugh; in the village, these things lie around for free, with no one to buy them. He felt the village folk were clever to sell these trifles to city dwellers for a high price.

But today, this New Delhi had become nothing more than the address of a mortuary. At the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital mortuary, the body of his son would be handed over only to a blood relative.

The father was arriving to claim that title. Mohit Babu reached the mortuary—he had never even imagined that there could be a mortuary in this city of shimmering lights, in this New Delhi...

New Delhi. Who built it, and how? When the British decided to move the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, perhaps not a single person from his village was here. And now...

I reached the hospital directly. Mohit Babu and Panditji arrived at the hospital. I held Mohit Babu in a firm embrace as we sat

down. The doctor took his signature on the papers. The post-mortem began. Mohit Babu broke down into agonizing sobs.

"Forget the village—which ward, which house doesn't have people here? Road accidents have happened before. But people usually survived. If only Amar had survived, it would have been enough. Even if he had been disabled, at least I could have looked at him. Piya Baccha's son said the daughter-in-law has also arrived in Delhi from Calcutta. Oh, I won't let her light the funeral pyre; she has a month-and-a-half-old baby. The child will be traumatized. No, I will light the fire myself... even if someone else does, eventually the burden of the final rituals will fall on her. So, I will do it. She's only twenty-one, she has a body like a child herself. She has four brothers, all in Calcutta, all older than her. How will she spend her life? How will I raise the baby with this old body? No matter how rich someone is, they still send their children away for jobs... even Piya Baccha sent his son. Who is richer than him in the village? I don't even own ten *Katthas* of land... Oh God... I kept saying I wouldn't go to New Delhi... why go to witness my own devastation? But they said they wouldn't release the body, they wouldn't even perform the post-mortem. Now that I am here, I will light the fire."

"No, that cannot happen. Since when does a father light his son's pyre? You shouldn't

even go to the cremation ground. Forget all the old disputes... your disagreement is with his father; let the cousin light the fire... forget old grudges in this situation."

"No, I have no such ill-will toward my nephew. Fine... let Sumanji light the fire."

By the time the post-mortem was finished, it was late afternoon. From there, the body, now autopsied and wrapped in bandages, was sent toward the courtyard under Panditji's instructions.

4

The events of the final night of the first decade of the twenty-first century, followed by two days of dawn and dusk.

The twenty-first century—yet, there is no difference. Set aside the clothing and the outward appearance of men. The condition of women remains the same, more brittle and wounded than the biting cold wind.

The chill pierces the very marrow. This is not the banks of the Kamala; it is the banks of the Yamuna. A thousand miles away from the village. The white garments of the mourning aunts (*Kharaḍkhavali Kaki*) blur into the mist. It is the same tale from sixty years ago, the same society—only the attire has changed, only the river has shifted.

The body, autopsied and bound in bandages, was brought from the hospital to the courtyard. Panditji, arriving with the family, remains equanimous (*Sthitaprajna*) amidst the wailing, performing his duties with a detached spirit. Sandalwood paste, sacred clay, garlands, fresh white cloth, Tulsi leaves in the mouth, a fragment of gold, Ganges water, and a bed of Kusha grass spread on the ground—there, in the courtyard by the Tulsi plant, the autopsied body was laid facing north. Then, from there, it set off for the Katihari ghat on the banks of the Yamuna.

The wind is freezing, a chill that enters the bones. The autopsied body now rests on seven thick logs of wood by the Yamuna. Soon it will burn. Sumanji brought the fire kindled from cow-dung cakes and placed it below.

Dipping into the freezing water, Sumanji donned fresh white clothes and the sacred thread. With a clay pot of water and a blade of Kusha grass, he faced east, chanting mantras to consecrate the deceased. Holding a torch of fire in his left hand, he kindled the pyre. After circling the deceased three times, the fire was offered to the mouth—to grant the soul its final passage. The body was surrendered to the flames, amidst straw, wood, and clarified butter (*Ghee*).

On those seven logs, the fire would soon consume the body completely.

Two men began to argue over how the wood was stacked. It seemed a fight might break out. The first one said, "You don't cover the wood like this; no matter how much Ghee or camphor you use, the fire won't catch." Panditji calmed them both. Just a little longer.

On those seven logs, the fire is swallowing the body, reducing it to ashes.

A family will be rebuilt, and thirty years from now, we shall see the result. Until then, this cold will remain buried in the bones—a chill far more frigid than this wintry wind. Everyone will stay right here in Delhi—to fight with Delhi, to turn it into 'New Delhi.' And to make India a superpower, in the hope of their own progress, thinking that such sacrifices must be made for the sake of the next generation.

Cotton, wood, Ghee, resin, camphor, sandalwood—the deceased now looks like a grey dove. Everyone offers five sticks of wood to the pyre.

Once the body was reduced to a charred mass resembling a burnt dove, they circled it seven times with a long staff (*Satkathiya*). With an axe, the torch was struck seven times and broken; the seven bonds of the body were severed, and the staffs were thrown into the fire. Leading the young and the old, they hurried away without looking back to bathe.

Offering the final libation of water and sesame seeds (*Tilanjali*), without even wiping their bodies dry, they all headed back to the courtyard of the deceased.

Finally, at the doorstep, they touched iron, stone, fire, and water in sequence before returning home—leaving behind a mother with a month-and-a-half-old baby in her arms, on the second evening of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

THE SMUGGLER (TASKAR)

1

Shaligrams (sacred stones) have natural perforations; black stones are only found in the Narmada river. In the village of Jamsam, everything has changed—from the shrine of the village deity (*Dihbar Sthan*) to every other corner—yet, I still see a few tell-tale signs. However, there is no trace of my own saga here.

The orchards and the fields have all turned into wild scrub. A hundred years... that orchard of seedling mangoes, once teeming with beehives. Diverse birds and creatures, big and small. We were children then. From the month of *Jeth* to *Agahan*, Malati and I would talk near the creeping vines of the *Khurchaniya*. Sometimes, if we visited in *Phagun-Chait*, we'd talk near the *Lavang-lata* vines.

Wandering through mud and water in search of *Malkoka*, *Kumud*, *Bhet*, lotus-seeds, and red water-lilies—barefoot, leaping over thorns and sharp grass. Playing *Satghariya* in the mango groves. Malati and I. Building our imaginary homes surrounded by Karveer flowers. Malati, who would carefully collect seeds of single, double, and 'Jatadhari'

varieties all year round. She must have been my age. My mother used to say she was six months older than me, but my father insisted she was six months younger. Why my father said that—I only realized much later.

During the mango season, the responsibility of guarding the orchard throughout the day fell on the two of us. But before dusk, my maternal uncle Bachru and Malati's father Khagnath Ji would arrive at the grove for the night watch. Yet, there is no trace of our saga even there. By "ours," I mean Keshav and Malati's.

And yet, near that concrete shrine of the *Dihbar*, I am searching for a black Shaligram. A perforated Shaligram. I had hidden one right around here somewhere.

The villagers have spent a fortune building the pavilion for this *Dihbar Sthan*. Earlier, there was nothing. Only the pond embankment built by the King and the concrete temple beside it existed. But the poor King could never even offer his prayers there. Out of sheer shame, he could never even set foot in this village again.

2

I am Keshav, from the village of Mangrauni, of the Naraune Sulhani branch, Parashar

lineage (*Gotra*), the son of the poet Madhurapati. And she was Malati—daughter of Khagnath Jha of Jamsam, from the Mandar Sihaul branch and Kashyap lineage.

Khagnath Ji and my maternal uncle, Bachru, were thick as thieves—best of friends. My maternal home in Jamsam was quite well-off, while we were struggling with poverty. Thus, I would spend a month of my summer vacation and fifteen days from Durga Puja to Chhath at my uncle's house. During the summer, I'd guard the orchards from the ripening of the *Sapeta* mangoes right until the *Kalkatiya* variety was ready. During Durga Puja, I'd watch the festivities from the sixth day (*Shashti*) to the immersion of the idol. Then, during Diwali, I'd light the *Kansupati* lamps, and after Chhath, I'd return to my own village. Of course, I kept visiting back and forth in between as well.

I used to fight a lot with Malati too. I was probably in the fourth grade then. I had gone to the orchard in my uncle's village during the summer break. Over some trivial matter, Malati and I had a falling out. It was Malati who eventually gave in. And how did she do it?

"I admit I was wrong about that matter," she said. "Which matter?" I asked. "The matter we fought over."

As it turned out, neither I nor Malati could remember what the issue was. But after that, I never fought with her again. Whenever she would pout or act upset, I would be the one to ask, "You probably don't even remember why you're upset, so why fight for no reason?"

After the summer vacation, I'd long for Durga Puja, and once that was over, I'd start counting the days until the next summer. Since when did this cycle begin? Do I even remember?

3

My father used to work as a sharecropper in the village. After middle school, there were no other schools in the vicinity. The Sanskrit *Pathshalas* (traditional schools), too, had mostly shut down.

Because of this, the very concept of "vacations" ceased to exist for me. Throughout the year, it was either all work or one long, indefinite holiday. My maternal grandparents were still alive. Someone or the other would always come from the maternal village to escort my mother back for a visit. On one pretext or another, I too would find myself at my uncle's house every few months.

Back in the village, there were several problems. I don't know what the exact

technicalities were, but I often heard my father talk about "protecting the lineage records" (*Panji*). He would often mutter that this would only be possible if I were to marry Malati.

Malati was my friend, but these talks of marriage created a strange distance between us. The effortless ease we once shared began to fade. It was as if the moment I looked at her, the image of a 'wife' would flash in my mind—and surely, the same must have been happening to her as well.

4

My maternal uncle, Bachru, had come to our village.

Madhurapati (Father): "Bachru, now all my honor is in your hands. Khagnath's daughter is perfectly suitable for Keshav. She is beautiful and virtuous, and Keshav is equally impressive. They are of the same age-set, though Malati is a few days younger. You know well that my father protected our lineage by paying seven hundred rupees to the bride's side to arrange my marriage. But now, we have no land or wealth left. Yesterday, the *Panjikar* (genealogist) arrived, puffing on his chillum while mounted on his mare. He stated clearly that only with Khagnath's daughter does the *Adhikarmala* (legal/genealogical right for marriage) align. If this doesn't happen, we

will fall from the *Shrotriya* rank in the Pubaripar region."

Bachru: "I will ask Khagnath. He is my friend, but only he knows what is in his mind."

And I don't know why, but my heart suddenly overflowed with a strange kind of love. I set off immediately, accompanying him back to Jamsam.

5

Malati: "Keshav, if you get married somewhere else, how will we ever meet again?"

Keshav: "And if you are married off to someone else, to whom will you address such absurd questions?"

Malati: "But did you hear? Yesterday, your uncle was discussing our marriage with my father."

Keshav: "And then?"

Malati: "Everything was going fine, but right then, someone arrived acting as a messenger from the Maharaja of Darbhanga. He said he had a message from the King."

Keshav: "What message could the King have?"

Malati: "I didn't go in to listen. But the messenger told my father to halt any discussions regarding his daughter's marriage for a few days."

Keshav: "Well, your beauty is such that perhaps the King has a particular groom in mind for you?"

Malati: "Who knows!"

6

The minister's palanquin at Khagnath's doorstep! Within just two days, everything had turned upside down. Had that messenger gone back and reported that Khagnath was in a hurry to marry off his daughter? Look at the sheer audacity! The villagers were in a frenzy of gossip, everyone busy welcoming the guests. I, too, kept an eye on everything. By dusk, my father had arrived. As the minister's procession departed, my father sat there, stunned, his head in his hands. Khagnath, too, remained silent.

The King had sent a proposal to marry Malati himself. Maharaja Birishwar Singh. Imagine! He must have been well over forty, and here he was, proposing to a girl of thirteen or fourteen. What power did Khagnath have to refuse him?

My father was distraught, thinking that now the sanctity of the *Panji* (lineage records) would be lost forever.

That evening, I met Malati near the corner of the house. Her eyes were red and swollen, as if she had been weeping uncontrollably. I don't even remember the details of our conversation. I only remember saying at the end—"Everything will be alright."

7

A girl was "selected" from Jamsam for Birishwar Singh!

A pond was excavated in the village, and a temple was built because—how could a King offer prayers in someone else's temple? But I, too, was Keshav, the son of the poet Madhurapati.

The wedding day was close, and there was no other auspicious date for a long time. By then, everything had been settled between Malati and me. In a *Katahi* (wooden bullock) cart, the balance is everything—too much weight in the front, and it tips; too much in the back, and it overturns. I kept the cart intentionally tilted toward the back as I waited for Malati near the bamboo grove.

She arrived and climbed onto the cart. Anyone who saw us on the road refrained from intercepting us, fearing that the

slightest interference might cause the precarious cart to flip. When Malati, excited by the sight of a *Patrangi* (green bee-eater) bird, started to speak, I placed a finger on her lips to silence her.

I brought her to my village; the wedding dhotis were already being dyed. We caught the man who had been sent to track her down and kept him in custody. When the dilemma arose as to who would perform the *Kanyadan* (the ritual of giving away the bride), I brought that very man forward and declared, "He shall perform the *Kanyadan*."

Taking off my *Salamshahi* leather shoes and donning the sacred dhoti, I completed all the wedding rituals. It was written in destiny that the vermilion in the parting of Malati's hair would be placed by my hand alone.

8

And what could Maharaja Birishwar Singh do after that?

He summoned the *Panjikar* (genealogist) and had the title '**Taskar**' (The Smuggler/Abductor) officially attached to my name in the records. But Madhurapati was brimming with pride for his son. A tiger's cub is, after all, a tiger. Lineage and water usually flow downward, but the records of Khagnath Jha and Shrikant Jha stated—even after marrying the 'Smuggler'

Keshav, their *Shrotriya* rank remained intact and prestigious.

And now, a hundred years later, a play called *Sultana Daku* (Sultana the Bandit) is to be performed in this village.

And I, Keshav 'The Smuggler'—of the Mangrauni Naraune Sulhani branch, Parashar lineage, and son of the poet Madhurapati—search for a single trace of my saga here in Jamsam. All I see is Maharaja Birishwar Singh's pond and that now-crumbling temple. The poor King, out of sheer shame, never dared to return to this village. And here, near the concrete shrine of the *Dihbar*, lies that black, perforated *Shaligram* stone. This pond and that dilapidated temple are the only surviving remains of my love.

(‘The Robber’- English translation of this short story by the author himself was displayed in Diorama International Film Festival along with other two translated short stories of this collection viz. The Science of Words and The Proven Mahavir <https://watch.diorama.in/story/the-science-of-words/>.)

STRUGGLE (SANGHARSH)

1

A knot of files, covered in thick dust. I am pulling out papers one by one, shaking off the grime with a handkerchief held over my face. Some useful documents emerge; others are mere clutter. The case files of the widow Sohago. A ledger of honor and insult. A chronicle of accusations and counter-accusations. The tales of an old woman's youth—some truths, some false allegations. The life of her husband and son. A mirror reflecting the naked reality of our civilization. Why does this old woman still wear a sandalwood mark on her forehead? Such immense faith in God? Even at this age, she is obsessed with building a memorial for her son? Amidst the rhythm of loss and victory, here she is with yet another petition. What an extraordinary passion she has for winning! She has been losing all her life, and yet!

Initially, I took up this work out of a sense of obligation when Mandal Sir asked. But now, I feel a personal urge—an urge to file her petition as soon as possible. An urge to see her win. Despite my dust allergy, I am buried

in these grimy files and papers. Compared to the long list of this old woman's defeats, my own failures seem insignificant. In her stubborn quest for victory, I see a reflection of my own indirect triumph. If not a direct victory, then a potential one through her petition. If she loses, it is she who loses; but if she wins, I win.

This old woman is notoriously difficult. She has quarreled with everyone in the office. No one in the department is willing to move her petition forward. Only Mandal Sir tolerates her tantrums. Her son was his batchmate. He is a good man, a gentleman. I have never felt any competition with the junior members of the office, but there is always some friction with the higher officials, over files or otherwise. But Mandal Sir is different. Kind. And he has left the responsibility of this petition entirely to me. He knows that the officials will try to find loopholes or create hurdles, and anyone else would abandon the petition midway. But he believes that if anyone can persist and ensure it gets filed, it is me.

"I have lost faith in you. You've been making false promises for a month. The petition hasn't been filed yet,"—the old woman said this for the third time today before walking away. The first time, I even told Mandal Sir what a mess we had gotten into. We are putting our heart and soul into this, and look, she just walks in, insults us, and leaves. But

Mandal Sir replied, "No, my friend. She is a victim of time. She judges us based on the kind of people she has encountered all her life."

But I have now thoroughly absorbed these dust-covered files; I've practically inhaled them. Today again, the woman left after throwing those words at us. Mandal Sir and I looked at each other, without a smile. The shadow of defeat was visible on both our faces.

"It's done, Sir. The petition will be filed by this Friday." "But you've been transferred; you're supposed to leave by Friday." "I told you, it will be done by Friday. I will file it before I go. The results will be known later."

I walk out, my face devoid of either a smile or anger. I will file her petition. If she loses, it is her loss. If she wins, I will be the one who wins.

2

Sohago. Her family hailed from Garh Balirajpur. They were prosperous farmers who had acquired significant land by selling vegetables. Sohago was born after six brothers.

She was the darling of her father, her mother, and all her brothers. But that affection lasted only ten years. Then, she was married off.

Whether she loved her husband or not is a detail the dust-covered court files do not record.

The history of her paternal home is dismissed in just a single paragraph. The only relevant detail is that her husband passed away when she was barely eighteen.

However, by God's grace, her husband had left her with a son before his death. Eighteen years old. A widow with a child.

But in those dusty files, I found no testimony or trace of any in-laws, nor any support from her brothers or paternal kin. It seemed her brothers had become absorbed in their own families. Yet, Sohago claimed she was the darling of her home! Of her parents and six brothers? One can accept that the parents grew old and died, but what about the brothers?

Sohago endured immense hardships to educate her son, Aphel. When he turned twenty, he too met his death. He had just secured a good government job. Matchmakers were already visiting with marriage proposals. After eight years of marriage and twenty years of widowhood, she had hoped a daughter-in-law would arrive, and she would finally play with her grandchildren. But then, this thunderbolt struck.

I probably wasn't even born then. Right? Truly. As it turns out, the very year this old woman's son died was the year I was born. And twenty-two years have passed since then. Now, the old woman stands before me. Her son's batchmate is my Mandal Sir. And I hold the same position that her son had started twenty-two years ago. He had only been in service for six months when...

I have time until Friday. What should I do? This old woman arrives, huffing and puffing with rage. For years, she has been pleading with people to install a statue of her son at the gate of the government colony. But because of her abrasive temperament and behavior, people lose their patience with her. She has been declared "half-mad."

But this time, her request is of a different nature. I must do something this week. Let's see.

3

"If Aphel wanted to die, why would he use your revolver to shoot himself? He had his own service revolver with him."

"Your Honor, Jatashankar murdered my son. He turned my life into hell. He wiped out twenty years of my penance. He must be punished!"

"But Judge Sahab, no one else was in that house except Jatashankar and Aphel. Our law says that ten guilty men may go free, but one innocent person must not be punished. Who will testify when there was no third person present?"

"But Your Honor, you yourself are asking—why would Aphel use someone else's revolver to shoot himself? Shooting oneself means suicide. Would my son commit suicide and leave me all alone? Why would he ever do that?"

"Take Jatashankar into custody... next hearing..."

I was still engrossed in reading the file when the old woman burst in like a storm.

"So your protégé has been transferred, Mandal Sir! You are all cut from the same cloth. What disaster would have occurred if my son's statue were installed at the colony gate? But everyone is only concerned with their own homes and families! Those who are gone are gone. Why blame others? Look at my own brothers—six of them, they say..."

Fuming and muttering, she stomped out.

Mandal Sir tried to call after her, "Listen! He is transferred, but he is here until Friday..." but she didn't care to listen. Why would she?

"What happened? Let it be. Once the petition is filed on Friday, her anger will cool down on its own."

4

"Tell me, Jatashankar. I fail to see any reason for Aphel's suicide. It is true that there are no witnesses to that death. But only two people were in that room: Aphel and Jatashankar. And it was the bullet from your revolver that pierced Aphel's head."

"But Your Honor," the lawyer interjected, "I have come across some information that has left me reeling. I wasn't in favor of making this information public because it would cause an upheaval. But since my client is facing the threat of the death penalty, I have no choice but to reveal it."

"This 'Black Coat' has come up with another excuse! I am a poor person, My Lord," Sohago cried. "I incur huge expenses just to attend these court dates. Punishing him won't bring my son back, but I just want to ensure he never does this again."

"But Sohago Devi Ji," the lawyer continued, "this case has been going on for months, yet why hasn't anyone from your paternal family or your in-laws ever shown up?"

In the subsequent barrage of accusations and counter-accusations, Sohago was accused of

being "characterless." An attempt was made to prove that her son had committed suicide because he was disgusted by his mother's alleged lovers.

If one goes by the National Litigation Policy, the average time for a court verdict is fifteen years. Sohago's verdict, too, arrived exactly in the fifteenth year—neither a year less, nor a year more. Jatashankar was acquitted. Today, he is retired and living off a government pension.

5

After gathering some documents from the school in Biharsharif and the Patna School Board, I finally filed the old woman's petition on Friday.

After her son's death, the office staff, in the absence of a proper certificate, had reduced his birth year by five years—meaning they had increased his age—just by guessing from his worn-out appearance. It wasn't intentional malice; it's just how the pension office functions.

I remember another case where a man's pension was halted for a year because he failed to submit his life certificate. When he finally submitted it, his pension resumed, but he didn't receive the arrears because the certificate for the previous year wasn't on file. I told the clerk, "Look, if he is alive this

year, he must have been alive last year too!" The clerk replied, "I know that, and you know that, but what's the harm in getting the doctor to write it down?" But the matter was different; that pensioner was demanding fifty thousand rupees in damages along with the arrears. The Board simply said, "Go to court then." That case, too, would probably drag on for fifteen years.

However, Sohago's son had cleared his Matriculation in those days. According to the date of birth on his Matriculation certificate, he was entitled to five more years of service. The certificate was in the file, but the entry wasn't made in the Service Book. The file was with one person; the Service Book was with another. No one bothered to cross-check. It was a matter from two decades ago—who those employees were or where those files went, no one knew. What could the Pension Officer do? Retirement is processed according to the Service Book. He wasn't at fault either; he had to save his own job rather than run a charity. If the Board took a decision like the life-certificate case, the Pension Officer would be in trouble. He has to decide based on the Service Book, not the file.

But if Sohago were to fight a legal case again, it would take another fifteen years. That's why Mandal Sir had her submit a petition to the Board. Let's see what happens

now. His retirement was due next year; if it gets extended by five years, it would be wonderful. Since my transfer was already finalized, I packed my bags and belongings and set off for my new destination. As I was leaving the office, I encountered the old woman. She stood there with her hands folded, as if saying—"Thank you." I replied to that imaginary thanks in my mind—"Wait until the work is actually done, then thank me."

6

Several years passed. Partly due to my own hectic schedule and partly due to the nagging fear that the petition might have been rejected, I hadn't stayed curious about the outcome. But then, one day, I ran into Mandal Sir.

"The department accepted her petition. The order arrived just before his scheduled retirement date. Now, she will fight for another five years—perhaps to install her son's statue at the gate of the government colony... or for some other struggle."

Ah! After this old woman's victory, the long list of my own defeats no longer seems to matter. Now, I too feel a desire. A desire to win. A longing for a direct victory, born from the indirect victory achieved through her.

LETTER IN THE LETTERBOX (LETTERBOX ME AYAL CHITHI)

1

Mutalif's large, haunting eyes... seen from the barred window of the bus taking him from court to prison.

I am running toward the court lock-up. There, I handed over a food packet for Mutalif to the constable. This was necessary; the officer who arrests is responsible for the first night's meal, while the jailer takes over from the next day. ...But I had already provided one, and then another staff member brought a packed diet for the prisoner as well. The constable ran and handed both food packets to Mutalif inside the bus.

He was stunned. In this vast city, he has no one. He doesn't understand anyone's language, nor does anyone understand his. He is Tamil. He will be kept in Delhi's Tihar Jail. There is a contingent of Tamil Nadu Police posted there—they were brought in after Charles Sobhraj's prison break, specifically because they didn't know the local language and therefore wouldn't mingle or conspire with the criminals. Irony had it

that they learned the local language within two months anyway.

In Tihar, Mutalif might be able to speak with them. He might find a way to arrange a lawyer for himself. Stunned, he turned and looked at me, as if asking—"Did you provide this second food packet?" I signaled to him with my hands—"Keep it." He folded both hands and bowed to me in respect.

The real criminal is someone else... How can someone who gives thanks for a food packet—thanks with his eyes—be a master player?

Where have I gotten stuck? He isn't even a criminal; some drug mafia trapped him. My colleague, Mutulakshmi Madam, takes information from Mutalif and translates it for me. Mutalif was playing cricket on Chennai beach. A man approached him and asked if he was employed. "If I had a job, would I be playing cricket on Chennai beach during the day?" Mutalif had replied. "Do you want a job?" the man asked. To Mutalif, that man seemed like God, an incarnation sent to save him.

I knew the main culprit was someone else. That "divine" figure was Habibullah. He is the one who meets him, asks him... Are you unemployed? And he gives him work—a bag containing a pressure cooker and some spices! The pressure cooker was made by

joining two metal sheets, and in the hollow space between them, he used to hide drug powder. Flying back and forth on airplanes, earning ten thousand rupees just for one trip—all while sitting comfortably. He knew nothing. He had no idea what he was carrying inside those cookers. And the real mastermind is Habibullah.

Habibullah. Based on Mutalif's information, a raid was conducted at his house in Chennai, but nothing was found. Likely, the information was leaked. And so, Habibullah goes free. The drugs seized from Mutalif are just the tip of the iceberg. If Habibullah is Mutalif's boss, who is Habibullah's boss?

In the court lock-up, a public prosecutor came running. He asked me if this was the Tamil prisoner. He asked if the prisoner had hired a lawyer. I said—no. I requested him, "He is not the main culprit; find a Tamil lawyer and ask him to fight his case for bail." That lawyer was Tamil himself and had fought many such cases. Especially for those Tamils who get stuck in Delhi and face a language crisis; he roams from office to office for such cases. But in this case, he is the government prosecutor and cannot speak for the defense. However, he would set up his junior lawyer to stand for him. There are plenty of such lawyers roaming the courts and offices. Once, I had even narrated a story

plot to one such lawyer, and he had pointed out numerous flaws in the plot itself.

But this is a Narcotics case; a lawyer can do very little. The recovery was made from Mutalif himself. He is just a pawn on the chessboard—a foot soldier. This is a Narcotic Drugs case. Mutalif will only walk out of prison after twenty years. This is the "employment" Habibullah gave him.

2

On foot. The disabled man (*Lulha*) from my village goes to Babadham on foot every year. In the same village, Piyar Baccha goes to Babadham by car every year. Both have been making this pilgrimage consistently for twenty years. For twenty years, the disabled man has been herding buffaloes, while on Piyar Baccha's estate, multi-storied buildings have been rising one after another. But my younger brother insists, "Father, the real fruit of the pilgrimage comes only from going on foot."

Praveen Bhai teases him, "Sure, that's why Lulha has been herding buffaloes for twenty years!" My younger brother doesn't back down. Last year, he too went to Babadham. Prafulla Bhai is the 'Jamadar' (leader) of the village's *Bol-bam* group; he goes on foot every year. His father was a leader too. Bhola Bhai is a *Dak-bam* (the swiftest pilgrims); he carries the holy water from Sultanpur and

offers it to Lord Shiva within three days. Prafulla Bhai leads everyone, and if anyone breaks the rules, he penalizes them.

"Piyar Baccha is so fat, he wouldn't be able to walk even a mile! Hey, don't say that— isn't Prafulla Bhai equally fat? But Father, a person doesn't walk on their own; it's the Lord who makes them walk."

"Brother, you are stretching the argument too far. In these twenty years, Piyar Baccha has built mansion after mansion, while Lulha is still herding buffaloes. Yet you claim the real fruit comes from walking? Piyar Baccha never went on foot, so why is he prospering? Lulha goes on foot every year, so why is he still a buffalo herder?"

My younger brother continues the tale: "Sir, I am telling you what I saw. Anyone can build a mansion, but Father, it is Lulha whom Lord Shiva truly acknowledges." "How so?"

And then comes the story. Lulha had lagged behind on the road. Prafulla Bhai was worried about the disgrace—he searched every rest-house (*Dharamshala*). How could Lulha arrive before them? He was far behind. How would they face the villagers back home? But in the morning, they found Lulha snoring peacefully in a room at the rest-house.

Lulha shared his experience: "It was forest all around. I was sobbing in despair. Suddenly, an old man with a beard appeared and comforted me. He asked a few questions and placed his hand on my head. He was God, he came like a divine incarnation. And then, I fell asleep. When I woke up, I found myself in the rest-house with my fellow villagers."

Habibullah is not the nation; Piyyar Baccha is not the nation. The nation is Mutalif. The nation is Lulha.

3

After that case, I was transferred. I have been assigned the duty of wandering through the deep forests in search of those who go "on foot."

My job is to reach out to the *Lulhas* and the *Mutalifs*. As for people like *Piyyar Baccha*, I simply pass their information to the Income Tax department. That's not my primary concern. My real task is to track down the *Habibullahs* and those beyond him, using the likes of *Lulha* and *Mutalif* as leads.

Conquer the hearts of these simple, "on-foot" travelers—the *Lulhas*, the *Mutalifs*—with kind words. Make them understand that the "Government" is not the nation. *They* are the

nation. The foot soldiers on the chessboard. The Kings and Queens of the deck are not the nation; the nation is the Ace and the Jack.

An insurgent had been captured. "You've been trained in rhetoric as well; use it not just against me, but against your own system," I challenged him.

"How do you get information about our activities?" he asked. "No, you are on the wrong side. You've picked up arms. How many children's futures have you destroyed?"

"What 'future' are you talking about?" he retorted. "If you open a factory, the child will become a watchman. If you build a road, he'll get a job sweeping it! Your system hunts for unemployed youth on seashores, in jungles, in deserts—you trap and exploit those who have no work."

"In your system, the weak are never heard," he continued. "Yet you stake your life for that very system. What has it given you? Those in your system who work for us don't even have to leave the city, while you've been banished to a forest posting. Injustice has been done to you. And when you cannot stop the injustice done to yourself, how can you ever bring justice to us?"

"That is a delusion of your mind; no injustice has been done to me. I have been *chosen* for this task."

"Your system is misusing you. Join us. Keep your job there if you must, but be with us in spirit. Think about it... take your time..."

My temper flared. "Have you lost your mind? I've been trying to reason with you for a week, and you're still singing the same tune. Do you think this is a joke?"

He began to laugh. "You're getting angry, aren't you? For a week you've been 'explaining' things to me without losing your cool, and I've been doing the same to you. You would be given a high rank in our organization!"

"Some people in my department might work for you out of fear; that has emboldened you."

"Those bought by fear or money—I don't trust them to deliver. But your heart is with the cause; that's why the decision has been taken to induct you into our core group."

Losing my patience, I grabbed the insurgent by his throat. "Decision has been taken? Decision... has been taken? I've been speaking calmly, so you thought..."

"You are a rebel too—a government rebel. But one with principles... just like us... those

who are forced to become stubborn... and that is why this decision was made..."

Coughing, he pried my hand from his throat and slumped from the chair.

It's not just us who receive training; they do too. But his training wasn't that of a foot soldier, limited to violence. He had received leadership training. He had an answer for every question of ours; he had rendered our entire questionnaire irrelevant! Could he be the one...?

4

"Where are you from? Not from Delhi, I assume." "No, I come from the borders of India." "The borders of China, Tibet, Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Myanmar?" "No, from the border of Nepal. From the land of Sita." "Ah, from the land of mythical tales and lies." "No, it's not mythical; it could be historical. Stories might have been distorted over time, but the history is ancient. Those whose own history isn't as deep might find it hard to comprehend."

"Debate, always debate," he smirked. "You've received weapons training—revolvers, pistols, all the way to sten guns. I have information from your office. Not through any Right to Information Act, but all details of your activities reach me here. If

your people are among us, then our people are among you as well."

"That is a known fact," I replied.

"And yet, you don't carry a weapon. Laldenga of Mizoram used to carry arms, but Paresh Barua of Assam never does. Your country made agreements with both." "No, an agreement with Paresh Barua hasn't been possible yet."

"But most members of his organization are ready for a settlement. Yet, this Paresh Barua, who doesn't carry a weapon, is the one who refuses to yield. Doesn't that make the unarmed man more dangerous than the armed one? You, too, are more dangerous to us for the same reason."

"Listen," I said, "a Mizo student used to study engineering with me. He used to tell me that Laldenga was a great leader. At that time, Laldenga was underground and had fled abroad. The country branded him a terrorist. But he returned and signed a peace accord with the government. He surrendered all arms. Both sides honored the agreement with integrity, and today, the Mizoram Accord is the only one in the Northeast that is a complete success. Before his death, Laldenga left his state on the path of peace. That engineering student was right—Laldenga is a great leader. Laldenga proved him right. A great leader never leaves his

people in the lurch. Like the captain of a sinking ship, he stays until the very last moment. Once he has evacuated everyone safely, if he must go down with the mast into the sea, he does—but he never deserts his ship or his people. If Laldenga signed the accord, it was in line with the will of his people who revered him. Had he not established peace before his death, perhaps that student wouldn't have been so proud of him today. Whenever he meets me now, he says—"See, I told you, Laldenga is a great leader."

"I have no desire to be a 'great leader,'" the insurgent spat back. "What if we surrender our arms and the government betrays us?"

"If Laldenga had thought that way, would peace have been possible? And what is 'Government'? The faces you see on television? Do you think they are the government? No, many of them don't even know who is doing what for the country. Every department is filled with patriots—even if they are only ten percent—and the country survives because of them. These ministers and politicians on TV—what do they know? You can change, these politicians can change, but the Nation doesn't change, the System doesn't change. It will honor the agreement."

Suddenly, a heavy baton strikes the back of my head and....

5

When I wake up, it feels as if I have just regained consciousness. Some fragments of memory return, making me realize I had been knocked out and have only now come to.

From the common "on-foot" foot soldiers to high-level leadership—a whole hierarchy has suddenly manifested before me. It seems even within this organization, there is a chain of command: first the small players, then the bigger ones, and then the top bosses. Over the past month, this chain hasn't shown any sign of ending.

Mutalif is standing right in front of me. I had almost forgotten about him.

Ah, so this is his empire. He is speaking to me through an interpreter. How could the court have granted him bail? In Narcotic Drug cases, there is practically no provision for bail.

He explains that terrorism is impossible without the drug trade; all the massive funding required for terror activities comes from drugs. So, is there a direct link between terror and the drug business? Has Mutalif been promoted? Is he no longer a mere drug courier but a major player in the world of terror?

"So, are you the mastermind?" I ask. "I used to think you were framed."

"What difference does it make?" he replies. "What is the difference between a player who was framed and a mastermind? If you look closely, eighty percent of the people in such organizations are 'framed,' but they have been trapped in such a way that they are now more dangerous than the masterminds themselves. You've ended up here; it's a coincidence that I am here, otherwise, imagine what would have happened to you. Now, you must do exactly what I say. A letter arrives in your letterbox, and you set off without a weapon. In the future, letters will come again, just like this time; stay alert. And then..."

6

I have regained consciousness once again.

I am in a police station.

I request permission to make a phone call to reveal my identity code to the local station. The officer doesn't quite understand, yet he grants permission. A short while later, he receives a call from his superior. He stares at me with a fixed, intense gaze.

I have returned home.

Fragments of memory are resurfacing. Mutalif was speaking through the interpreter, and the interpreter was relaying it to me. Mutalif said that my journey had not gone to waste; since I write stories, I should consider that I found a plot during this trip. But Mutalif insisted that he should be the protagonist of that story. What has he done that would deserve me making him a hero?

Mutalif said that after his release from prison, he wanted to become like one of us, but the police station and the journalists wouldn't let him. Mutalif said that the "System" needs to be fixed, otherwise...

Something is coming back to me now.

For the first time, my journey has proven futile.

Mutalif defeated me; by sparing my life, he defeated me.

After a routine check-up at the hospital, I am back in my house.

The defeat of a soldier without a weapon—this is a lesson everyone is learning.

But why did Mutalif say that terrorism is impossible without the drug trade, and that all the necessary funds come from drugs?

I had gone there thinking only of a drug case. But this is a thread linked to terrorism.

Did Mutalif give me this signal in coded language?

And if he is the mastermind, why did he say—"What is the difference between a player who was framed and a mastermind?"

Why should I make him the hero of my story? Even he knows that he cannot become a hero simply by sparing my life.

Does Mutalif seek redemption?

"In the future, letters will come again, just like this time; stay alert."—Why did Mutalif say this?

7

I go to the office. That insurgent leader is in jail. To interrogate him there, court permission is required. The government prosecutor will secure that permission; he is quite shrewd and efficient in such matters—that is his forte.

"Cameras are installed here," the leader says. "This isn't your office where you can just grab someone by the throat; this is the prison administration. There are arrangements for everything here—from reading and writing to sports and exercise for the inmates."

"That's only for murderers and terrorists," I counter. "Go look at the state of petty thieves."

"But this isn't Delhi's Tihar Jail. This is a small town, surrounded by forests on all sides, and even the jailer has to step out for his daily errands."

"So, you are threatening him?"

"That is the fault of your 'System' for which you are risking your life. I am not responsible for that, am I? Just like you, he has been transferred to this remote region. Or perhaps he was *chosen*! But he isn't as stubborn as you."

"So, will you induct him into your organization too? Have you made that decision as well?"

"No," he smiles. "He is mediocre. You won't find a single mediocre person in my organization."

"An engineering student from Mizoram used to study with me," I begin. "He told me that Laldenga was a great leader..."

"I've heard this story; you tell it to everyone. I have no desire to be a 'great leader.' But you think just like us—you're just on the wrong side."

"Who told you this story?" I ask, startled.

"You've returned after a month; didn't you see for yourself? You must have felt as if every member of the organization was pulsing with electricity. There is no place for the mediocre. That is why the decision was made to induct you. But you flared up at that information. And that is why that letter arrived in your letterbox."

"I see. So that was your organization? Is that your domain? Is Mutalif above you or below you?"

"In my organization, no one is above or below. Everyone's pay is the same; no task is big or small. Therefore, no one works more or less than the other."

"I will have to take you into remand. Your voice will only open up at the office; there are CCTV cameras here, so..." I stand up to leave.

"This evening, another letter will arrive in your letterbox."

I try to ignore him, but he shouts out again—"This time, the letter won't be like the last one, through which you glimpsed the philosophy of my organization. That letter was a trap, but *this* letter will be your appointment letter."

8

Athena and Percy, my two cats, have been shot; both are dead. My son is crying. There is a letter in the letterbox, and I am reading it.

I had an accident once, just when I was about to go on paternity leave. People said the accident was orchestrated, but I remember nothing. When I regained consciousness, I heard people saying there was another passenger in the car, still alive. They pulled us out and admitted us to Tata Main Hospital. Here I was undergoing surgery, and there was my wife's delivery date—two different events in two different cities. My wife was told it was a minor accident, but eventually, she found out I needed surgery to have a steel rod inserted in my leg. She began to cry. The next day, my brother-in-law arranged a call. I told her, "Amitabh Bachchan had steel in his hand in the film *Shahenshah*; I'll have it in my leg." She became calm. Later, my brother-in-law told me on the phone, "What did you say to her? She actually smiled and started eating again." The delivery was due that week. My surgery was scheduled for tomorrow, but I told my brother-in-law to tell her it was the day after, so she would remain at peace. The next evening, as I came out of anesthesia, I called her to say the surgery was done and there was no need to worry. By the weekend, the baby was born. This is the same

son who is now weeping for Athena and Percy.

But this stream of blood?

I was bedridden for a year. I used crutches to reach the bathroom. During that time, my son developed a sore on his head. Lying on the bed made it painful for him. I would make him sleep on my stomach, face down. He would fall asleep in a minute and stay that way for hours; I wouldn't move an inch. Only when his sleep was complete and he woke up would I allow myself to move. This stream of blood... it's not just Athena and Percy's. Two people are fleeing; a single shot fired from a silenced gun, and my son...

A colleague's son never returned from school. A week later, someone left his school uniform and bag in a park. Five years have passed. Neither the child nor his body was ever found.

When my son grew a little older, he had a friend named Mansa—a beautiful girl, a Sardarji's daughter—who studied with him in playschool. Another child once called my son a "dirty boy." Mansa flared up, "How dare you call my friend dirty?" I asked my son, "What happened? Why didn't you get angry at that child?" But my son was my 'Bal-Guru' (child-teacher). He replied, "That boy didn't know me, that's why he called me dirty."

The blood from my son's body and the blood of Athena and Percy have merged into one. Just a moment ago, I was wondering how my son would live without Athena and Percy. Now, I am wondering how I will live without my son. My wife has turned into stone—expressionless. She is taking Athena and Percy to the veterinary hospital, while I am taking my son to the human hospital—to collect a 'Brought Dead' certificate.

Three corpses consigned to the flames.

9

"Did you receive the appointment letter?"

"I did."

"What is your decision? I can buy you two new cats. This time, the bullet only grazed your son—that was the order. What happens next time depends entirely on your decision."

"I accept the appointment. But nothing should happen to my son."

"Nothing will happen. You have my word of protection."

"What must I do?"

"You must come with me. You'll have to pretend that I snatched your weapon and kidnapped you."

"Will you show me your hideout?"

"I will. After all, you are one of us now."

I never used to carry a weapon, but today, I had a pistol issued. The insurgent leader took the pistol from me and held it to my head. The jailer and the guards were ordered not to interfere. Outside, his men were waiting with a vehicle.

We reached the heart of the forest. Me, him, and Mutalif.

Is he the mastermind? If so, why did he say—"What is the difference between a player who was framed and a mastermind?"

Does Mutalif seek redemption?

Whether he seeks it or not, *I* do.

Why should I make him the hero of my story? Only if he does something worthy of it. He must have received the news of my son's "death" (the near-miss); his men didn't aim correctly.

And now, what he does next will determine whether he becomes the hero of my story or not. I stand there, unarmed, waiting for his decision.

DOMA, BUDHAN, AND...

1

Budhan's younger brothers used to die almost immediately after birth. To save the next newborn, Budhan's parents performed a ritual: they symbolically "sold" the infant to a member of the *Dom* community (traditionally associated with crematoriums and basket weaving) and then "bought" him back with some money. This ritual was meant to ward off the evil eye or planetary ill-effects. The child, who was twelve years younger than Budhan Paswan, survived.

Because of this ritual, everyone started calling him **Doma**.

Budhan worked as a sharecropper (*Harwaha*) alongside his parents, but he nurtured a deep desire to educate his younger brother. "I've heard that in our community, even a little education can get you a job. I will definitely make him study, even if I have to starve or beg for it," Budhan resolved.

He didn't resort to begging, but instead, he took the road to Chandigarh. "I want to educate Doma and make him someone important," Budhan whispered to himself.

In Chandigarh, Budhan now pulled a rickshaw. Back in the village, farming no longer provided a livelihood. He would pull the rickshaw all day, and in the evening, when his companions went to the local country-liquor shops to ease their exhaustion, Budhan would make excuses and head home.

"Hey mate, what's wrong? You look restless. Can't you sleep?" "No, brother. I've been pulling the rickshaw in the wind all day, and now every joint in my body is aching." "Listen, come to the liquor shop. You always make excuses. Look at us—we drink and snore all night. One sound sleep and all the tiredness vanishes by morning."

Budhan would listen to Koraila's words and remain silent. A doubt often gnawed at him—would Doma actually study? If he told his friends today that he was sacrificing his comforts for Doma's education, and if Doma failed to become something, what then? These same companions would mock his sacrifice tomorrow. So, he kept his secret to himself, saved every penny he could, and sent it back home. And with that, Doma continued his studies.

However, in the village school, not a single child from the Dalit or poor communities was studying. The government launched a scheme to distribute free books to Dalit children. Master Sahab, a Yadav Ji, went

door-to-door to summon the children to school. He enrolled them without any fees. For a week or ten days, children from the Dusadh, Chamar, and Dhobi colonies attended. Doma was among them. Everyone received books, but after ten days, they all vanished from the school. Seeing this, children from the Kumhar (potter) and Hajam (barber) colonies also came, hoping for free books. But they were told, "You belong to 'upper' castes; this free book scheme isn't for rich people like you."

"Is 'caste' something that stays small or grows big, sir? To date, the best Chief Minister of the state has been Karpoori Thakur, hasn't he, Asin Jha?" Jayram Thakur asked, peering through his tattered roof as he cut Asin Ji's hair in the sunlight. "You're right about that, sir."

Eventually, apart from the Brahmins and Bhumihars, no one else was left in the school. The local 'upper' castes started buying those free books from the Dalit children at half-price. "I won't give you more than half. Granted, the books are new, but you got them for free anyway, didn't you?"

And so, the books were swept out of the Dusadh, Chamar, and Dhobi colonies. And no one knew whether Doma actually studied or not.

But Doma stayed in the village and eventually became a Teacher. And Budhan's son received his education in Chandigarh. And finally, Budhan returned to his village.

3

I met Budhan's son in Gurugram, where he serves as the Head of the Northern Region for Amazon's logistics team. He had heard about my condition, and I had heard of his success. He had come specifically to ignite my fading memory; he knew that only a story could reconnect the frayed wires of my mind.

Everything was hazy—like twilight. I knew I had heard of him, but... let it be. My memory failed me once more.

"My father told me a story about your father," he began. I looked at him expectantly, wondering which fragment of the past he would revive. "My father passed away in 1995," I noted.

"At a community feast in Kahandan, my father was serving rice. Jagannath from Mishratoli sneered, 'No one will eat what you touch!' But then, you stepped in and embraced him—who speaks of such things now?"

"Yes," I recalled faintly, "I was the one who asked him to serve because I couldn't manage it alone."

"And when my uncle offered water to your maternal uncle, and your uncle asked, 'Have *you* brought this?' my uncle firmly told him to drink it quietly. He pointed at you and said, 'It was his father who started the tradition of us sharing water.'"

"Yes! I remember now. My maternal uncle had said, 'Give it to me, I never refused. My brother-in-law established this path, I know.' Both of them are gone now, but that act remains."

"Do you remember now?" "Yes. Old memories return when nudged; it's the recent ones that trouble me."

The new generation of India. "Is the village still the same, or has it changed?" I asked him. "It has changed a lot—for better and for worse." "Better and worse?"

"Look," he explained, "in all three village schools, Dalit and backward-class children now study and eat together. Earlier, they only got books; now they get meals too." "That's good. But what's the 'worse' part?"

"Earlier, 'Caste' existed, but I feel it had a socio-cultural and economic base. Everyone had their own heroes and elders. But now, it is being hardened into a rigid 'Caste System.' I had an inter-caste marriage; my wife is a Brahmin. But the opposition came more from my own community than from hers or

mine. Then there's the complication of government reservations. Politicians tell people to marry within their caste to save the reservation, but the new generation doesn't care for it."

Caste and the Caste System are two different things!

"In the Rigveda, there was the *Hota*; in Samaveda, the *Udgatri*; in Yajurveda, the *Adhvaryu*; and in Atharvaveda, the *Brahmin*. Counting their assistants, there were seventeen types of priests in the Vedic period. Even among your people, there are priests. How did it all shrink into just one 'Brahmin' priest? In Odisha, the title 'Hota' still exists, and those Rigvedic or Samavedic Brahmins do not intermarry with the Atharvavedic Brahmins of the Pippalada school. In Dalit discourse, the killing of Shambuka from the *Uttara Kanda* of the Valmiki Ramayana is often cited—how he was killed by Rama for performing penance. In *Purusha-Pariksha*, Vidyapati writes that Rajput women are characterless. Both these instances are like the statement in the Atharvaveda claiming that anyone can take a Shudra's wife without consent—a statement you'll find on social media but never in the original text. The slanderer lights a fire and vanishes, leaving the burden of proof on you."

"Vidyapati was a court poet; would he dare write such things about the caste of the king he served? It was likely a later scribe with a polluted mind who altered the text. Did Rama kill Shambuka, or did the scribe who hated Shambuka kill him in the text? Now, look at the Atharvaveda. It says, 'O woman, I am the Samaveda and you are the Rigveda; O bride, I take your hand for prosperity.' The Atharvaveda also mentions the *Vratya* tradition—those who didn't chant the Gayatri and became forest-dwellers. There was even a ritual called *Vratyastoma* for their 'homecoming.' Some texts describe them as violent, but in the Atharvaveda, they are seen as Yogis, protectors of truth, and devotees of Shiva. Scribes inserted these distortions, which linguists are only now uncovering."

"You mean even the Vedas were tampered with? Aren't they divine?" "In foreign translations, the names of the Rishis were removed, but they remain in the original." "But Rishis are called *Drashta* (Seers), meaning the words are divine." "But then, there are Shudra and female Rishis too. If the Shudra Rishi Kavasha Ailusha or the woman Rishi Apala saw those Vedic hymns, why would they be marginalized? In the Vedas, you find the Rishi, the Deity, and the Meter. We call them 'Seers,' but the Vedic Rishis called themselves 'Poets.' The entire Vedic literature is the embodiment of a poetic consciousness. Even then, those who spent the year chanting were sometimes mocked in

the Atharvaveda as 'frogs croaking for rain'—meaning even then, dissent was allowed."

"I am in Amazon now," Budhan's son said. "We even launch rockets from America. Soon, there will be tourism. You fly up and see the green planet, Earth. The further you go, the dearer your people seem. The closer you get, the more a small embankment on a stream looks larger than a mountain. From a distance, Earth is one. We are a tiny existence in this universe. Come closer, and you see water and land. Closer still, and you see people of different colors, just like colorful birds and animals. Those who lived in the cold for ages became white; those in the heat became black. But from a rocket, they are all just humans. All have the same DNA. Sometimes, truth is revealed only from a distance. A thousand years of slavery and imperialism turned your community into a 'Caste System.' They needed a theoretical basis to rule. But when people from your village went to Mauritius or the Caribbean to work in sugar fields, there was no Dalit or 'Backward' there. They broke the chains. It is not impossible to change; sometimes, moving away is necessary. Please, introduce yourself again... I am starting to forget things lately."

He fell silent. I tried to recognize him. I thought about my own dreams. My wife's

cousin passed away; her son became an engineer—had he married... I get stressed now if the car's fuel hits reserve. There are no petrol pumps on the way, only under the flyovers. In Delhi, pollution had spiked, and 'Stage 3' restrictions meant my diesel car was banned for a week. I had come by Uber. Two-wheelers cause 34% of pollution, but they are the government's voters, so they aren't banned. We car owners are fewer and don't even go to vote, so the burden of reducing pollution falls on us.

"Introduce yourself again," I said. "I am Budhan's son." "Yes."

"The problems you see are being resolved," I told him. "I wasn't happy with the solutions either—free meals in school, housing, cheap rice. But look deeper. Self-respect has arrived. Train a fisherman for the Olympics; give the leatherworker a company like Bata; make the blacksmith the owner of a plywood factory. Just as you took your rights, no one can stop a blacksmith from owning a furniture factory."

"How much longer?" "When my daughter was ten, she didn't even know her caste. She always had a Kindle in her hand. One day, watching a serial, she saw men in dhotis with long tufts of hair and said, 'These are Brahmins.' When her mother asked if she knew her own caste, she didn't. When told her father is a Brahmin, she said, 'No way!'

She thought her mother was joking. Then there is Barbareek from the Mahabharata. Everyone loves Arjuna or Karna, but I love Barbareek. He vowed to always fight for the side that is losing. I gave my soul's word to Barbareek. Janaka set a prize of a thousand cows for a debate. Yajnavalkya was about to take them when Gargi began her questions. She asked, 'Under whose power is Time and Space?' Yajnavalkya replied, 'Under the *Akshara* (the Imperishable Word).' In my mind, the debate between Yajnavalkya and Gargi continues. You asked the same question my inner Gargi asks. Between the 'Word' and Barbareek's vow, my mind has become forgetful. If I were satisfied like Gargi, why would I forget? Introduce yourself once more... I am starting to forget."

SUICIDE (AATMATYA)

1

After the wedding, a crowd of people came to my in-laws' house to meet me. Among them was Arya, a student of class nine, accompanied by her grandmother and mother.

Initially, she hadn't come with them but had arrived alone. Thin, exceptionally disciplined, polite, and very measured in her speech—she was the exact opposite of me in every way. My wife introduced me to Arya and praised her highly; she was as good at her studies as she was at painting. A little while later, her grandmother and mother also came to meet me.

I noticed that while the grandmother was treated with respect, my wife and mother-in-law seemed to snub Arya's mother. Despite that, she was pleasant to talk to and said as she was leaving, "We are your father-in-law's tenants; we live on the upper floor. Once the crowd thins out, you must visit us."

My mother-in-law overheard this as she was leaving and told my wife, in a quiet but commanding tone—"There is no need to go upstairs." When I asked my wife why, since she had invited us so warmly, she simply

brushed it off saying, "Didn't you hear? Mother has forbidden it." When I pressed for a reason, she ignored the question.

A few days later, in the twilight, there was a loud rattling at the gate. It sounded like someone was drunk and mumbling. Everyone except me ignored the sound, pretending not to hear. I went outside and saw a middle-aged man swaying as he walked. Seeing me, he waved a trembling hand and said, "Greetings, son-in-law!" He explained to my wife why he hadn't met me until then and then staggered up the stairs. My wife grabbed my hand, pulled me inside, and informed me—"This is Arya's father." It suddenly occurred to me that Arya had inherited her father's complexion, though her features were very fine.

Later, my mother-in-law went upstairs and delivered a stern lecture, giving Arya's family a one-month ultimatum to vacate the house. My brother-in-law remarked that this was the tenth such ultimatum, but my mother-in-law remained adamant. She didn't want the new son-in-law (me) to think they kept such disreputable tenants.

Upon inquiry, I discovered that Arya's father was a doctor—and not just any doctor, but an M.B.B.S., not homeopathic, ayurvedic, or a dentist. But look at his behavior! My mother-in-law admitted that even when drunk, he never uttered a single vulgar word, unlike

other drunkards. "He is a good man," she said, "but this one flaw is a heavy burden. He is quite handsome too, and his wife is very beautiful."

The next day, after the intoxication had worn off, the husband and wife came downstairs. They pleaded with my mother-in-law to let them stay until Arya finished her Board exams, after which they would move to Patna. They asked this not for themselves, but for Arya's sake. After much grumbling, the extension was granted. When his wife's eyes met mine, she simply said, "Now you really shouldn't come upstairs." This time, she didn't even extend an invitation.

2

One of my sisters-in-law mentioned something that I now recall. She told me about a young man Arya used to talk about. Her friend believed the boy was in love with her (the friend), but Arya was convinced that he loved her instead. At the time, I dismissed it, telling my sister-in-law that Arya was just a child and must have been joking.

But she insisted, "No, brother. Arya is very emotional. She says she would do anything to have that boy."

It turned out the young man was the grandson of a former local queen. His mother was a teacher, and his father served in the Merchant

Navy. The father would return home once every six months or a year, and whatever time he spent there—be it a fortnight or a month—he spent it fighting and beating his family. He was notorious in the neighborhood. While the mother was soft-spoken and graceful, the father was barely known to people except for the sounds of his violent outbursts.

That boy was his son. Once, when Arya's friend was being harassed while getting off the school bus, this boy had fought off the bullies and chased them away. I hadn't paid much attention to this story back then.

"Arya is emotional—how can you say that just based on one story?" I had asked. "No, it's not just one thing. She talks about very heavy, serious matters." "Like what?" "Like how she can't bear to see her father unhappy. She says she would never do anything that might hurt him." "And what else?" "Well, she says she doesn't feel any connection or affection toward her mother."

3

Some time passed, and I had another chance to visit my in-laws. I learned that the tenants had changed. My family simply said that Arya's father had passed away and her mother had secured a job on compassionate grounds. They had all moved to Patna.

My family didn't say much else, but a cousin of my wife's visited and revealed that the medical report mentioned suicide by poisoning. Then followed the talk about the tumultuous fights between the husband and wife. The doctor's wife used to claim the fights happened because he drank too much; the doctor countered that he drank because of the constant fighting. Nevertheless, after his death, his wife's demeanor suggested she felt liberated, a sentiment everyone seemed to agree with. Arya moved far away from the city. She had begged her mother to let her stay until her exams were over, but the mother, once freed, didn't want to spend another moment surrounded by those bitter memories.

4

Days continued to pass.

And then, news came over the phone that Arya, too, had committed suicide.

So many things flashed through my mind. Arya was emotional, always under deep stress. She took everything to heart. I remembered what my sister-in-law had said about that young man.

I called back. Making a calculated guess, I asked over the phone—"The wedding of that young man, the one that happened before Arya's death... where did it take place?" My

in-laws asked in surprise, "Who? Oh, him!" "His wedding did happen, but how did you know?"

It turned out the girl was from somewhere near Siliguri. And that young man had decided to become a *Ghar-Jamay* (a son-in-law who lives with his wife's family), just like his father. No one in this city was even invited to the wedding.

5

And who bears the guilt for her suicide? Was it the father who drank? Or the mother who grew tired of the father? Or was it the lover?

As far as I know, the real cause lies with Arya's extended family and relatives, who in a way, had ostracized them. It was that society which took sadistic pleasure in gossiping about her family's plight. Those incidents related to her father's death—the stories of him banging on the gate and other such tales. She was an emotional girl; how could she have endured it? In the name of suicide, society effectively handed her a death sentence. I used to think of Arya as a strong girl. But only now do I understand the true meaning of her words: "I will do whatever it takes." My guess about that young man's marriage was just a hunch, one that hit me only after hearing about Arya's death.

6

"How did you like my story 'Arya'? And what about the *Dushan Panji* (the record of flaws)?"

"The *Dushan Panji* contains absolute falsehoods. No uncle from Purnia ever ran away with his niece; the details are wrong. A story isn't history; you can write anything in fiction, but a *Panji* (genealogical record)?"

"Then who are these two living in Delhi? Isn't it the same 'falsehood' mentioned in the Black Book, the *Dushan Panji*? Anyway, let that be. Arya is known to you and to me; Arya is a reality. She committed suicide. I need to meet her lover. I need his address in Siliguri. Only he can tell us why Arya really killed herself."

7

I went to Siliguri on some official work. After finishing my task, I had some time left, so I reached the address of Arya's lover. He began to sob.

"Look, this is Arya's painting." I could see both her creative and destructive sides reflected in it. I felt a sense of dread. And he, too, looked terrified.

"She had started committing 'minor suicides'," he said. "'Minor suicides'?" "Yes,

like ignoring conversations, or avoiding any accountability toward her responsibilities."

8

"Arya had an illness. But no one bothered to understand her condition. There are medicines for mental health issues. If you don't treat the illness, the result is death."

"But some suicide attempts are merely attempts to scare others; they say 'I'll do something to myself,' and sometimes they even do something minor. Do not assume such a person will never take the final step. If you keep provoking them, saying 'Go on then, show me, do it,' they will eventually show you."

"So, we must do something against suicide, like giving motivational talks."

"Didn't you see yesterday's news? D. Sankaran, the founder of Shankar IAS Academy—the man whose book on environment everyone reads to become an IAS officer—committed suicide yesterday. He used to give speeches on how not to get discouraged by failure and how not to take the step of suicide. After his talks, the applause would never stop. And yet..."

9

"Why didn't Arya have a good relationship with her mother?"

"Arya was exceptionally disciplined, polite, and very measured in her speech. But for some reason, she was always irritable with her mother. Arya and her grandmother were both very cultured; looking at the grandmother, one could never guess that the drunkard doctor was her son. However, Arya was very close to her father. They spoke well together, and he adored her."

"If the father hadn't committed suicide, would Arya have done it?"

"I don't know."

"If the lover had left her while the father was still alive, would Arya have committed suicide then?"

"No. She would never have caused her father such pain."

"I ask again: if the father hadn't committed suicide, would Arya have done it?"

"No, she wouldn't have."

"So, who did she want to hurt now? Her mother and her lover?"

"The mother has already been hurt, but the lover might not even realize it. This burden now rests on you."

"Actually, I believe the lover understands it now."

GANDHARVA LETERBAM

1

"To respect another is to respect their thoughts and emotions. From this flows respect for the individual and the 'sky' they have built and defined for themselves..."

2

Next to buffalo grazer Brahmin Village of Garh Narikel lies Gar Araraneba, where yellow-ochre looking Brahmins reside, and where yellow-ochre monkeys are also plentiful. A most wretched village, monkeys and men equally untamed.

Letra was from that very village.

His height was somewhere between three-and-a-half and four feet. Everyone said his mother used to call other people's children bhutta-bhutta — stumpy. No one knows what happened one day, but after that, Letra simply stopped growing. His height ceased increasing altogether.

"Bah! Parents' evil eye falls on their own children."

"No, no — a mother's eye does fall, just look at Letra."

The villagers would gossip among themselves. All the other children grew up, kept growing. But Letra remained crouched and stunted. Everyone began calling him Letra behind his back and Leterbam to his face.

Leterbam's parents had little land to speak of.

So be it. Leterbam came from a family of singers.

"A family of singers, they are. Once the pitch rises, it won't come down."

"Every last one of them a poet-wit, no one in the family falls short when it comes to repartee."

"What are you saying? Never mind the family — the entire neighbourhood is full of such poet-wits."

So be it. All across the village, Leterbam's harmonium had become the subject of discussion.

Leterbam's father and uncle were both great singers. Hereditary talent for singing and

playing music ran in their blood. Leterbam had begun learning music at the age of five. The natural rise and fall of his voice left his father enchanted. But the village people's knowledge of music was limited to playing the mridanga, cymbals and harmonium during the eight daily watches, and to singing prescribed verses — which nearly everyone managed easily enough. It was the reign of the English, and Macaulay was determined to replace Sanskrit education with the English language. Leterbam's father would tell a story about this. When Macaulay first came to India, he stayed at a guesthouse. Looking out of the window, he saw the guesthouse manager entering the premises, and after entering, touching the feet of the ordinary doorman in greeting. Later, when Macaulay asked him why a manager would touch the feet of a common doorman, the reply he received was that the man was no ordinary doorman — he was also a Sanskrit scholar. That day Macaulay resolved that to defeat India, India's culture must be destroyed. And for that, Sanskrit must be destroyed — for without it, Indians would turn away from their art, music and culture. So be it.

But farming was not much to speak of. He would go to sharecrop one bigha, and even then had to hear: "What farming would a singer manage? There is a world of difference between singing with your mouth and working with your hands." But singing

alone would not put food on the table, so their lives depended entirely on the buffalo. Letra would be busy with the buffalo's service from early morning — scrubbing the animal down by the early-morning bank, making it sleek and smooth. While cleaning it with a straw-brush, he would pick out ticks one by one. In the afternoons, while the buffalo grazed in the meadows, he would lie sound asleep on its back without a care in the world. But morning and evening his music lessons continued, so people would joke that Leterbam was studying at the Baua-Chowri High School. The buffalo too was a blessing for him. While others' cattle would be horns-locked in fights, Leterbam's buffalo would keep grazing peacefully, and Leterbam's throat would keep producing music. There was no magic in it, but it seemed as though by the grace of that very music, Leterbam's buffalo ate abundantly. So when others returned home in the evenings with their buffaloes' stomachs sunken at the ribs, Letra's buffalo's belly on both sides would be swollen and drooping. The animal fattened without effort.

Yet could Letra truly make his parents happy? They both kept worrying — how would Letra get by, who would marry him.

"My mother thought that because she used to call other children bhutta-bhutta, I became a dwarf. But she never called Banavir bhutta. Did those she called bhutta become dwarfs? No. A child who is slow to speak gets named 'the mute boy' or 'mute girl' — but is that child truly mute? No. But if you called Banavir a dwarf and the mute child 'idiot' — would they like it? No. Did my mother ever call Banavir a dwarf or the mute child an idiot? No. Then she is blameless. The fault lies with those who call the mute mutta, the crippled lulha, the armless nengra, and the dwarf a dwarf."

4

So be it — Leterbam continued moving forward in this kind of world. Leterbam's young mind burned with the question: why could the fitting response given by Paluskar, Bhatkhande and Ramamatya against the English attempt to introduce Western music not be replicated in the field of education? Leterbam took Bhatkhande — the great restorer of music — as his ideal and pressed on. Let people call him a mere singer, it did not matter. One day would come when all of undivided India would bow in reverence before this singer.

Under the guardianship of his uncle and father, Leterbam also took part in the plays

staged by the village Ramlila troupe. The songs he sang came to rest on everyone's lips in the village. The chariot of life kept moving forward, but even that was scarcely possible under foreign rule. Cholera one time, plague another, malaria yet another. And so once, plague spread through the village. People would return from cremating one person only to find another dead body lying in the village. Leterbam's mother too began suffering — stomach and nose running, her body burning like fire — but she would not let her son come near, lest he too catch the plague. Two days later, the poor woman left this world. Even as she lay dying, her thoughts went to her son: talented, yes — but why isn't he growing taller?

Father and son returned after the last rites. The tears in both their eyes seemed to have dried up. The father fell silent. No voice came from his throat, but with gestures of his hands he would make his son practise.

5

"In the village, my mother sent me to school. But if I asked a question, people would start laughing. If I gave an answer, the other children would laugh. When I walked on the road, my mother would hide me in her sari so no one would see me and laugh at me. But my parents suffered more than I did. As

though I were the consequence of some sin.
As though some force, through me, was
punishing them both."

6

Two or three years passed. The plague ended.

Leterbam must have been about ten or eleven.

The village drama troupe had also closed down, because the lead organiser Harkhit Narayan had gone to Banaras to join some drama company.

A Baitarani play had come to the village — puppeteers enacting the scene of crossing the Baitarani river after death, a scene terrifying in every way, performed wonderfully by those puppets.

Leterbam also went and watched the play. And from that point, Letra's life took a direction. The owner of the Baitarani Drama Company had spotted Letra.

And the owner began pursuing Leterbam's father. He made a down-payment offer and started appearing at their home morning and evening.

Letra was absorbed in his music and his buffalo-keeping. But he began to sense that

lately his father was showing him rather more affection than usual.

Everyone kept saying how would Letra get by — but Letra felt, why would that weigh upon his father?

Yet the Baitarani Drama Company owner kept after Leterbam's father. He began saying he was arranging a good livelihood for Letra. Leterbam's father asked everyone: what should I do? Everyone said the same thing — he is buying Letra, not giving him a job. These drama companies search village to village for dwarfs and sell them to city circus companies. Once the boy goes, will he ever return? A son is wealth — even if he is a dwarf!

Wavering and unsettled, one day the father asked Letra: "God's will is supreme. When God gives a stomach, He also arranges to fill it. People kept saying how Letra would manage, I never paid their words any mind. But this Baitarani Drama Company man has been at my heels. People say these people go village to village looking for dwarfs for city circus companies and sell them there. But he says that's not the case. It is day-to-day work. They travel city to city. When the troupe's play is not running somewhere, they get leave too. In the plays there is Ramlila and there is music. Who else will give employment to someone of such small height? So I ask you — what should be

done?"

Tears began pouring from Letra's eyes. The villagers had been right all along. It seemed his father had already decided.

"Baba. I know I will not be married off. But at least I fill my stomach somehow here in the village. I manage to get by. Will people be right in saying that your father has sold you off?"

Now there arose a wail of weeping. Father and son crying together filled the courtyard with commotion. The father kept saying he had not yet said yes to anyone.

As some matters — important when you go to sleep — seem less important or not quite so significant when you wake up, so too did Letra, as the days passed, make peace with his mind. Let me see what the outside world is like. If father has sold me, would he have done so if he truly loved me? Then why should I hold on to half-hearted love?

7

"I wanted to become something, and behind the decision to go to the Baitarani plays lay that hidden wish too. All my life I have borne insults because of my appearance. But what fault is mine in this? It is a genetic condition — dwarfism. The government even gave me

a sixty per cent disability certificate. But no one was ready to accept it. 'You are not crippled, not mute, not blind, not armless — how are you disabled?' That is what they think."

8

Just then, malaria seized the father.

Sleep would not come to him at night. He had Bhatkhande's notation under his pillow, and on the basis of it he would ask his son to sing something. Leterbam sensed that, like his mother, his father too would soon be far away. Thinking this, his heart would split. Even quinine no longer had any effect on the father. At night the shivering would set in. Leterbam would pile all the quilts and blankets upon him, but still the shivering would not cease. During the day people would come and enquire.

When the Baitarani Drama Company owner heard that Leterbam's father was unwell, he came again to enquire.

"I am going now. Leterbam is a child. Rather than becoming a burden on his uncle, it is better he stand on his own feet and pursue his musical practice. It is God's design that you have come to the village at this time. It is as though germs of disease have entered the

very air of this place. Here death alone is certain, nothing else. In such a situation, rather than let music die, it is better that Leterbam go with you to the drama troupe. But his height is less — do not sell him to a circus."

"Leterbam is your son, but now he is my son too. Will the talent of a connoisseur of music not be stifled in a circus troupe? In a drama troupe his talent will not be stifled — for the circus there are plenty of dwarfs to be had."

"Very well. There, Leterbam will receive the blessings of Hanuman and Rama. Music has so many dimensions. He will overcome challenge after challenge and music will blossom for him in short time. His practice will advance from there."

Just then Letra came there.

It was as though the father had been waiting for him alone. Even as he was speaking, the life seemed to be pulling loose from him.

He placed his trembling hand on his son's head. The Baitarani Drama Company owner rushed to bring Gangajal and poured it into the father's mouth from one side — but the water trickled out from the other side of the mouth.

"When I was a child I too wished to have companions like other children — and even now I keep searching for that. When I am with someone else and a third person comes, you ask the third person what you should be asking me. If you would just lean down a little and ask me directly, how good I would feel. If you wish to help me, do so from the heart — not out of pity. I request all of you: do not laugh at me, do not stare fixedly at me."

10

The Baitarani Company man took Letra to Banaras.

At the mere age of eleven, Leterbam went to Kashi — and because of that many became customers of his voice and music. Customers? No, call them exploiters. They would extract all the labour from him and claim the credit for themselves. But Leterbam was cutting time on the hope of age and a true teacher. When days pass with difficulty, they feel long — but when they fall into a single rut, years slip by.

But only for a while. A little while later, the Baitarani Company owner took Leterbam to a circus owner and left him there before returning.

There it seemed as though every dwarf in the world had his livelihood arranged there. The world's every dwarf had a permanent post with him. Letra had arrived, it seemed, in the land of dwarfs. Moustached, clean-shaven, thin, fat, young and old — but all of them dwarfs.

Letra began living among them. For some days he felt he was some special person and thus more unfortunate, while the other dwarfs deserved no better. But gradually, as he began to converse with his companions, he understood that everyone's tale was the same. His training began, and he learned a great many skills — all the circus acts.

"Hey brother, come. The bell is about to ring for preparation. Let's eat something before that."

Then in that prison-like place, with laughter and joy, small quarrels and making-up, he moved forward. This form of his life seemed to him like that of any hired worker. He too would go home to the village and return to work.

He would watch the other workers from the village. As elated as they were while coming home, their faces would droop when returning to work.

But who is there in the village for him to return to now?

What better job than this could someone like me — a dwarf — get? When I perform in the circus, how children hold their bellies and laugh. What applause falls! The sound of applause intoxicates. Yesterday that girl with two braids — she seemed like one's own people. In the village, when Badka Kakka's daughter was married to a man in Naugachia, people spread rumours that he had sold off his daughter, that he had married her so far away!

These people — they are frogs in a well. Let them go around Delhi and Mumbai, then they will understand that Bhagalpur and Naugachia are not so far at all. My father sold me? The memory of his father's death began to dance before him, and thinking this, Letra's throat dried up and his eyes filled with tears.

11

"If you respect me, then you will come to realise that your relationship with other people too has deepened. Whether a body is dark or fair, fat or thin, short or tall — none of this has any connection with a person's character. If you laugh at another for these things, you diminish your own character — it means you have a famine of humility, feeling, regard and love within you."

12

When the Baitarani Drama Company's circus troupe returned to Banaras after two or three years of touring Delhi, Mumbai and many other cities, Leterbam happened to meet Harkhit quite by chance — on the banks of Kashi. And then Harkhit brought him back into his drama company with great affection.

On the banks of Kashi, Leterbam would compose and sing melodies — from Vidyapati's *Bada sukha sar paol tua tire* to various devotional and folk songs. The acrobatic skills he had learned in the circus served him well in the role of the child Hanuman.

And for this, Leterbam earned much praise. Sometimes limited stature too can block the path to achievement. From the age of fourteen to twenty-six, Leterbam worked in the drama company.

"Shastri Ji — I composed this melody myself, but my mind is a little unsettled, which is why I cannot compose another. Let me call Leterbam. He has also learned something from me, he will find a solution," — Harkhit was saying in the presence of the great music devotee Bhatt Ji.

"Yes, yes, certainly call him," said Bhatt Ji.

When Leterbam came and rendered the music with such ease and mastery, Bhatt Ji had no doubt remaining — the real artist was not Harkhit but Leterbam. Bhatt Ji had been searching for a disciple who was talented and a true seeker — someone to whom he could entrust all his knowledge without worry. Today that disciple had been found. When he invited Leterbam to come to his ashram, Leterbam rushed to his room and took out his father's photograph — and the weeping that began then broke fifteen years' worth of a restrained river, which came flooding out.

13

"You have begun to regard the circus clown as an artist — but what of the circus dwarf? You have designed this world, and in the land of Brobdingnag, nothing is convenient for the people of Lilliput. But we wish to adjust. It is as though we have come from the land of Lilliput into your land — we are suffering many problems, and on top of that you laugh at us."

14

So be it. In contrast to the uniformity of the drama company, the guru's ashram had variety. Every day Leterbam would rise

before sunrise and immerse himself in musical practice. The disciple was blessed to have found the guru, and the guru to have found the disciple. Days began to pass — but the revival of music accomplished by Bhatkhande and Paluskar Maharaj on the foundations of Sanskrit literature was as clear and eternal as the current of the Ganges. The deeper Leterbam dove into that current, the more he wanted to go deeper still. Leterbam remained in the guru's ashram for twenty-five years. When he turned fifty-one, the guru bade him farewell with these words: "Leterbam, now you should take on the role of guru, not disciple. The restoration of musicology is complete. The English attempt to import Western music has already failed, and now India is free too. Go and become a warrior of music's second renaissance, as the scriptures have ordained."

At the age of fifty-one, in independent India, Leterbam began seeking employment. A music school in Kashi accepted him gladly. But his voice — honed by forty-six years of musical practice — reached all the way to Banaras Hindu University. Rows of disciples formed. A symbol of reverence — but in India's new form, many also began commercially exploiting classical music. But Leterbam, far from self-promotion, continued advancing on the sole foundation of the guru-disciple tradition. His disciples began making names for themselves in India and abroad. The university then appointed

him as a teacher. But there was a rule that no one could be made head of department without a Ph.D. Yet in the department, there was no one more excellent than Leterbam. As the English had set up a tradition where those educated in the gurukul received no degree and were thus ineligible for government service — Leterbam too had no such formal degree. A senate meeting of the university was held, in which the university relaxed its own rule, and Leterbam was made Head of the Music Department. There until retirement, Leterbam demonstrated his administrative capability. In the spirit of Bhatkhande, he produced a multi-volume introduction to the science of music. Audio-visual recordings of Leterbam's disciples had been released, but Leterbam would not break his practice by performing in studios or before the public. Practice in the morning and practice in the evening. From the morning's practice came the evening's notes; from the evening's practice, the morning's. So be it.

15

"That is why I have to jump up to sit in a bus seat — or rather, I must jump up to sit. In shops I have to look up from below the counter and call out. Buses and public places have not been designed for us. When I sit in a bus seat, people think I am jumping up to

sit — and it seems to them that the struggle I have to undergo to sit in that seat is not their failure to design it properly, but some circus act or drama being performed by me. And they find it funny, as though I did this to make them laugh. And I have to endure such mockery every single day. I too, for one moment, felt that my father had sold me to the Baitarani drama people."

16

His disciples organised a felicitation ceremony for Leterbam. Without asking him, they had arranged for recording at the event, so that the Guru's CD could be made too — and that recording could be heard by the world. Leterbam came to the felicitation. He was seventy-five years of age. In the audience were the finest classical musicians of the country and Leterbam's circle of disciples. When Leterbam began, his disciples looked around in all directions. The voice of their guru — until then only they had heard it; no one else. But after hearing the disciples, all had wondered: if the disciples are thus, how must the guru be? Today they saw and heard. As they listened to this seventy-five-year-old warrior, the great masters of music laughed and wept with all nine rasas — but the disciples, overwhelmed, only wept.

17

And as he speaks, his throat becomes exhausted. But after a short while, he begins to speak again.

"I am Gandharva Leterbam. I am now seventy-five years old. Lest everyone forget again in a few days, I say this: in honouring my dwarf community, there is benefit for you yourselves. No two people are the same — yes, the difference between you and me is very great. Some things I can do, you cannot. Because our bodies did not grow, we dwarfs make greater use of our minds — just as the blind can hear what you cannot. This honour is for my mother. This honour is for my father. This honour is for my dwarf community."

LONG STORY / NOVELLA SECTION

THE MADHUBANI MODULE

0

Ahmad, father's name Wakeel, district Madhubani. Primary education at the Jamia primary and middle school. Later, class ten through open school. Business of buying and selling on OLX, internet surfing of ISI-related sites. Member of several ISI Telegram groups, and through that medium — brainwashed. Member of the sleeper cell of a terrorist organisation. Training in country-made pistols received from the terrorist organisation in the jungle...

— He's been under questioning in the office for three days. Hasn't said anything.

— Bring him to me.

I asked him whether he wanted tea or coffee, had him fed — but he wouldn't speak.

— Everyone's worn out beating him. You'll tire yourself out too, but I won't say a thing.

— Have I asked you anything besides what you'd like to eat and drink?

— Sweet talk won't work. You're from Madhubani, aren't you — I could tell from your accent. From my own area. I already told those Punjabis that no one speaks sweeter than someone from Madhubani district. They too were all sweetness at first, then the abuse and beatings started. You'll do the same.

— It's not my job to abuse anyone. Eat, drink — if you need anything else, just say so.

— I am a fidayeen, always ready to die — not suicide, mind you, but like *sallekhana* in the Jain faith, a religious death. Except that is achieved by giving up food and water, and this is achieved by killing and being killed.

— I too carry cyanide — not to eat but to administer. See, it's right here in my pocket. Just a touch on your tongue and the one sitting across from you would be gone in a moment.

— This is jihad, and I am a mujahid. But the one who struggles when he has difficulty remembering the Quran — he too is a mujahid. Just not the kind I am. Against whatever is evil — in every time and every place.

— What has been made to seem right to you — that is what I am up against. What has been planted in your head. I have no concern with your actions or their consequences.

— The inner struggle is tawhid. That I have already done. Ijtihad, khutba and dawah are accomplished through the pen, through writing and speaking — the maulanas are doing that. At the political level there are organisations, and qital fi sabilillah — fighting in the way of God — will come with the sword.

— It would not be wise to give your commanders only a light punishment. I have information about each and every step all of you have taken. And don't think you can play legal games with me. The power of the pen I wield — I leave no loopholes in it. I have every kind of modern equipment and weapon at my disposal, and trained personnel as well. This internet, Telegram and WhatsApp — all of it is under my control. You all try to prevent the government from functioning, you want to spread the illusion among the people that the government is not all-powerful. That the government is incapable of protecting its people. Because you all know you cannot fight face to face.

— The government tells a mentally ill man: here, put on some jewellery. Is that the government's job? That is precisely what the forest-dweller says to Yudhishtira in the first canto of the Kiratarjuniyam. Duryodhana was developing the kingdom — the farmers there were no longer dependent on rainfall, he had built wells and canals and

reservoirs. Then why did Yudhishtira not simply sit quiet? The people were happy with Duryodhana. That is what Bharavi writes.

I rang the bell and two constables took him out of my chamber. The steno placed his files in front of me. He knows how I work.

My own area...

Nabi Baks came to mind.

The sociology of terror — that had been the very subject in my training in which I had scored highest.

He has no fear of beatings and abuse. My colleagues wasted three days for nothing.

Nabi Baks...?

1

— One plumber, one painter and three masons will do. I'll have the house shining in seven days. I don't want to make money off your place. So many people come to your home — when they see the work, they'll ask who did it. From that alone I'll get four more jobs. Where else in Delhi would you find someone from your own area — his name was Nabi Baks.

— You're from my area, are you? Where's home?

— Madhubani. I'd say get the bathroom and kitchen done too.

— You do whitewash and painting — do you do masonry as well?

— I don't, but a fellow villager of mine does. He keeps saying: ask the sahab about work. His work is very solid. I'll call him — just meet him once. Otherwise he'll say I never even asked the sahab.

He dialled his mobile and called someone named Sarfuddin.

Sarfuddin inspected the kitchen and bathrooms, struck the wall with a trowel, and the plaster crumbled and fell. He turned the tap and it snapped off in his hand. Then he said:

— Government construction, this. The foundation's solid but the finishing is poor. And it's been twenty years now, look at the state of these walls. All the underground pipes have rotted and corroded. The leakage from them has done this to the walls. All the pipes need replacing — of course the cement will have to be stripped. Not that there's any life left in the cement anyway. You should get stone laid on the walls as well. Look at the sand in that brickwork the Bombay mason

Ganeshi did on your veranda — see how it's crumbling. I'll scrape off some of this cement to test it and apply fresh cement. If it doesn't set like stone, I won't say another word. Then if you feel like it, give us the work — if not, don't.

Saying this, he scraped the cement off a portion of the veranda, applied black cement, and left.

Khalil. Khalil was from Haryana, and it was he, you could say, who had introduced Nabi Baks to me. A small patch of repairs had been needed, so I had called him. Khalil had brought a mason called Ganeshi — whom everyone called Bombaiya — and got the work done. Ganeshi was a Bombay-returnee, his stories of Bombay never ended, and Khalil loved listening to them. Khalil's dream was Bombay. Then Nabi Baks the whitewasher-painter was brought in by Khalil. Now this Nabi Baks had summoned that Sarfuddin the mason. Sarfuddin passed the pipe work on to Khalil the plumber, so Khalil got work without even asking. And introducing one another around, soon the carpenter and the electrician had also entered the house.

— This is Nabi Baks's younger brother. Very hardworking. Busy all day long. His name is Wakeel. Nabi Baks is now a contractor — he barely lifts a trowel himself. Wakeel is practically a labourer under his own brother.

And being the contractor's brother he also keeps an eye on the other labourers. — Then the plumber — the one called Khalil — fell silent for a moment.

— But Nabi Baks does painting and whitewash — why would he touch a trowel?

— Both of them — Nabi Baks and Sarfuddin — were masons together once. But Nabi Baks switched tracks. Now they keep getting each other work.

Then Khalil looked at me and said:

— People from your side are very united.

Between their work, Wakeel and Khalil would chat.

— Our ancestors were Rajputs before converting to Islam, but they were masons — in Haryana masons are called dhiman. — Khalil said, gesturing towards Wakeel while speaking to me.

— Whether we were dhiman or what, you seem to know our entire history in such detail — how? — Wakeel had been working in silence for a long time. But this was the first time I heard him answer back. Between all of them there was ongoing chatter and laughter.

2

One day Sarfuddin arrived with a long face. He said he'd had a falling out with Ganeshi.

— How so?

— He says I snatched the sahab's job from him, using the pretext of being from the same area. Mind you, he only gave me the work after seeing how I worked. And leave that aside — he also said...

— What? Go on.

— He was saying one should never trust a Muslim.

My blood boiled. I said: go and bring him here right now. But Sarfuddin held me back. Later, I called Ganeshi in myself and explained: in this city, Sarfuddin and I speak the same language — that's mere coincidence. Look at his work and look at yours, and then you'll understand why you fall behind Sarfuddin.

Meanwhile, someone suggested wooden flooring, and Sarfuddin argued with him that stone would be better for the floor. The bathroom and kitchen have stone, so it should be the same everywhere. Why wooden flooring in rooms? But the wooden flooring man said he'd get it done in a single day and quoted a cheaper price, so I said yes to him.

The whole day there was commotion. The son of the people on the floor below had his class twelve exams coming up, and when he saw the masons going in and out he started worrying — would stone be laid in the rooms too? I told him no, the wooden flooring would be done by tomorrow — and he breathed again.

— Laying stone would have taken them over a month. My son has exams, I was getting worried seeing all that stone spread around.

— No — the stone is only for the bathroom and kitchen.

With Sarfuddin, Khalil and Nabi Baks, conversation beyond the work itself began to happen — about home, about life. Nabi Baks had come to Delhi from Madhubani, the eldest of six brothers, and there was a sister too. He would speak with great affection about his sister, her husband and her in-laws' family. He had learned masonry as Sarfuddin's apprentice. Gradually he brought four brothers to Delhi. Wakeel lived with him; the other three married one by one and set up separately. But they all lived nearby. Wakeel had also married, but he remained steadfast. The other brothers kept saying: Nabi Baks is working you to the bone for free, go separate — but he is devoted to his brother. Does he ever utter a single word in front of his brother?

3

One day Wakeel had a fever, and his other brothers had told him not to come to work. But he wouldn't listen. Seeing his dedication, my mother, wife and children all became very fond of him. That day, in the middle of work, he asked for something to eat and lay down on the balcony to rest. He resumed work in the afternoon. When evening came and I told him it was time to go home, he said: no, I started late today so I'll finish the work first. And he muttered softly: let's see if anyone comes to fetch me today.

Around eight o'clock, two people arrived on a motorcycle. Wakeel said they were his two younger brothers. Both came up to my flat on the third floor and called Wakeel out to talk. There was a mix of concern and anger in their voices. Wakeel kept telling them there was nothing the matter — he'd rested half the day, so he thought he'd finish the work. Meanwhile Nabi Baks also arrived and took Wakeel away.

The next morning Nabi Baks came early.

— Look at these brothers of mine... I treated them like sons, and they accuse me of double-dealing. All three came last night and fought with me — said I keep Wakeel like a servant. I ask you! This Wakeel — he's a

straightforward, decent man. I keep telling him: wear proper clothes — and he still goes about in those loose rags. Yesterday I didn't even meet Wakeel. Sarfu's work is running at another site — I'd gone there to see if there might be some scheme that could give us work after this job here is finished. The builder with Ansals had made an offer to come work for him, but I turned it down because of the brothers. And these people... though all of this is the doing of that Patna brother of mine, Mandal.

— Mandal?! Something from long ago stirred in my memory. — Is there someone called Jayashankar in your village?

— Yes! Yes! How do you know him? Though his real name is Salim — my brother's. His office name is Mandal, his home name is Salim. He's a government driver. When he's called Salim at home, his wife gets very flustered.

— I know the whole story.

4

A memory from my student days came back to me.

I was studying in Patna. Our neighbour was someone called Jayashankar — I used to call

him bhai. He had married twice. His son from the first marriage had run away. The second marriage had taken place after the first wife passed. After some time roaming Delhi and Bombay, that son from the first marriage returned. Everyone asked what he intended to do. He said he'd do anything except study. So everyone together urged him to try driving. He too had wanted to learn. One morning Jayashankar said: we need to go somewhere today.

— The boy says he wants to learn driving. Driving school is very expensive. There's a fellow villager called Salim — he's a driver in a government office. He was on leave in the village last time I was there. It was their Eid festival, so he'd come home. He said his office gives him Sundays off and on other days he can teach from five in the morning. I've bought the boy a second-hand bicycle for two hundred rupees — Salim's place is far. His quarters are near the office. The office asked him to come — he'll show us the house from there.

— You've been to the office before?

— Yes, many times.

We arrived at the office — a court-like building beside Gandhi Maidan — just at office hours.

— Is Mandalji the driver sahab here? —
Jayashankar asked a peon standing outside
an officer's room.

— Yes, he's in there.

I asked Jayashankar: haven't we come to
meet Salim? Who is this Mandal?

He gestured for me to keep quiet and said
quietly that there was something to it, he'd
explain later.

When Mandalji and he began to talk,
Jayashankar kept addressing him in between
as Salim bhai, Salim bhai. Then we all went
to his quarters together. As we were leaving,
Salim bhai gestured towards me and asked
Jayashankar: did you tell him? Jayashankar
said he would.

After we came out, Jayashankar explained.
His village was near Madhubani. Salim had
many brothers and sisters. Salim was his
childhood friend — they had studied
together. Then the two of them drifted apart
in search of work. Salim had begun working
at some officer's home. How and when he
had learned driving — someone with that
kind of skill has no difficulty finding work.
Later, seeing his character, the officer had
registered him temporarily under the name of
another man called Mandal who had died
somewhere and been forgotten. In time, he
became permanent.

Jayashankar said to me: neither at his office nor to any of his companions — and in any case, when would you meet him again — don't ever mention this, even by accident. He's been made permanent, but you never know what people are like. If someone writes something down, the poor man could be in serious trouble.

I told Nabi Baks this story that had been turning in my mind. He said:

— I'm the one who found out about that scheme too. If I filed one complaint, that job he's so smug about would be gone in no time. But I think to myself — if his job goes, he'll land on my head. So I've left it all to Allah.

5

Nabi Baks was usually very busy, but that day it seemed he had made time especially to talk to me. When a person is in mental distress, they want to tell their troubles to someone else. But finding a listener is difficult. However, because of the influence of my college-days study of psychology, I instinctively set aside everything and become a listener — Nabi knew this. The monsoon had set in and I was in no hurry to go anywhere. So he began his story.

— What hardships I have been through — what can I say. And who helped? One khalukhala — a maternal uncle and aunt — and my cousins come to mind. No one else. After Abbu died, my elder uncle, my younger uncle — all became strangers. After the husband's death, what my mother's condition was — these brothers, what would they understand? My khala lived in Delhi. After Ammi's death my studies stopped. I was studying in Madhubani — my father's side cousins kept saying you can study as much as you like, but would they have had me lifting bricks in the village before their eyes? And I haven't even let them know that much. And these same people say I'm not paying attention to them, that I'm caught up in my wife and her family? Double-dealing? When I came to Delhi from the village, I first worked cleaning brass utensils with Brasso in a utensil shop in Noida. By the grace of Allah I found Sarfu. He was a friend of my mother's side cousin. I learned everything from him. But let me say this much — I never once betrayed him. Sarfu's nature you know yourself — not an ounce of injustice or dishonesty does he tolerate, he's had fallings-out with everyone, but with me not a single quarrel to this day. If that had been my intention, our friendship would have broken too. And in this city, he — a stranger — treated me as his own, while these people, my own kin? And Khalil — ask him too. He is my fellow villager. But Khalil? Ask him as

well. I often think of Ammi when the monsoon sets in. I don't want to think of her — that's why I stay busy. But today her death is breaking through, over and over.

Nabi Baks's voice grew thick as he spoke. He drank some water, and then began to recall his mother.

— Nabi, sahebzade — move that bucket closer to the post, will you. Water is dripping heavily there. Every monsoon brings sorrow. I kept thinking I'd get the thatching redone. But it couldn't be done. The house needed a bit of repair too, but that also couldn't happen. Holes everywhere. A thatched house — is that even a house? Dripping everywhere, and not enough buckets. How will the food be cooked, I don't know. There's a heavy stream of water falling on the stove on the veranda. There's one more stove inside, but if that one breaks too, we'd have to manage on beaten rice and jaggery. Weather like this — if you make a new stove, it won't even dry. All the firewood has got soaked too. We'll have to cook on rice husks.

— Paidhiya — my mother Karima Begum in her white sari, its hem wrapped around her — trembling, fourteen-year-old me beside her, sometimes straightening a hole in the thatch, sometimes shifting a bucket from here to there. Wherever the drip was less, she'd move it there; where it was heavier, she'd put the bucket under it. The whole

house had become waterlogged. There was one corner where water wasn't dripping — she went and stood there.

— There was so much straw piled up uselessly nearby. I hadn't told my educated uncle. He could have got the roof re-thatched.

— Baba, you can't get thatching done — straw is not easy to come by. And who would retatch the house of a poor widow?

— I didn't know then the difference in cost between a straw roof and a paddy-straw one.

— That's true, Ammi — but a house with a proper straw roof, it's a sight to see. Look at the educated uncle's house. How beautiful it looks, and no matter how much it rains, not a drop leaks.

— Oh, those mud-and-brick houses — nothing beats them.

— Eh, what are you saying? You lay bricks with lime mortar and rubble and call it a brick house? And the armless man's house is built with cement, but last year it leaked so much you wouldn't believe.

— Really?

— Yes, Ammi. If you get the thatching done every year, is there any house finer?

— The fourth time I'd had it done, the very first monsoon it dripped quite a lot.

— That first monsoon it leaked, didn't it — but then all the layers must have settled into place. After that it didn't leak again.

— Yes, for three years after that there was no leaking.

— Just then the aunt came calling —

— She's barely learned to stand on her own feet and look what she's teaching you. I thought since things had eased a little, I'd come and enquire after my sister.

— Bunni had quietened down. I went towards uncle's house and the two sisters-in-law began talking. The evening dusk came, the monsoon darkness — and as the aunt was leaving she called out:

— Sister, if you need fire, come and take it from our house.

— No, sister. There are two or three matchsticks in the box. But the striking surface has worn away. Here — take this matchbox, keep it by your stove for a little while so it dries out enough to work. Send Nabi with it.

— I'll tell him. Don't you go without food — I'm saying so now, the children can eat at our place. — The sister-in-law said as she left.

— Karima Begum — my mother — sat down on the veranda, back against the post.

— What are you thinking, Ammi? Tell me?

— These same foolish matters — your Abbu's wrestling feats. What your uncle used to say to him.

— He was a wrestler, this post.

— Don't say that, uncle. I never fought without being challenged — that's why you're saying this.

— Rahman uncle and Humayun nephew. Those two got on like close friends, not like uncle and nephew. In the wrestling ring, whenever Humayun threw everyone else, in the end Rahman would come to wrestle him. Uncle never once let him win. Humayun's wife — that is, me — I had just come to the house, newly wed. Kohbar rituals were still done in those days. I don't know why mullahs now oppose it — people still do it anyway! If you began following the mullahs everywhere — God help us! And seeing that kind of warmth in the house, my heart was so happy. I had been the cherished one in my parents' home, and I found the same in my in-laws'. Time began to pass. But I didn't know then that I would so soon come to be called Humayun's widow. Now I am accustomed to every kind of epithet. In the midst of quarrels, someone even says — varkhaukee,

the witch who learned how to kill a husband! When Humayun was alive, I was everyone's darling — after that I became the thorn in everyone's eye. After the waiting period, my brothers also came to arrange another marriage, but I only wanted to keep seeing your faces.

Nabi Baks spoke: the white sari, the widowed face of my mother without bangles or sindoor — it is still before me. Then in that monsoon night my mother spoke on.

— When Rahman uncle once took my side and said something, my in-laws started saying he was trying to separate them from their daughter-in-law. And this too — that what happens in a muddiba's house, when it does, then they'll understand. Now neither Rahman uncle is here nor my in-laws — why speak ill of the dead. But there is not a single false word in all of this. People say happy days pass quickly, but my unhappy days passed quickly — my happy days, I can see them still, with wide-open eyes on an empty stomach, one-per-day, not ending. Beyond becoming a widow, the rest of life moved on in its own time. My parents died, my in-laws and the elder uncle Rahman uncle had already passed before. When the division of the household began, the property and fields were to be shared among four brothers — but it was divided only three ways. Humayun's share was divided among the three living brothers. When I protested, asking how I

would manage with six sons and a daughter — the blame for Humayun's death was placed on my head and my mouth was shut. Before Humayun's face, none of the three brothers could open their mouths, but after his death all three tried every means to deny the widow her share. I went to my parents' home and brought my brother. A panchayat was called, and then in a corner of the courtyard the three brothers built a small hut separately for me and my children. It was decided that rice and crops would also be given for our sustenance. I began spinning on the charkha. Cloth and clothing came from that.

— Here, take the matchbox. — The sister-in-law came and said.

— Yes. — Karima Begum — my mother — snapped out of her thoughts. The sister-in-law handed over the matchbox and left.

— This year flood news keeps coming again and again. Roads and paths were submerged everywhere, the fields had already gone under first. Your educated aunt already warned that this year there would be cuts in the annual expenses. Yesterday she was saying — daughter-in-law, all the crops are flooded, this year the annual expenses will be reduced. I said: well then. When the harvest is good, do you ever give me extra? Your educated uncle was listening to this. He said: the widow has become a bull. On your

educated aunt's signal, he slid away towards the veranda, and I swallowed my tears. Now that it's all come out...

In the middle of telling his mother's story, Nabi stopped again. Eyes and throat were both abandoning him. After a moment's silence he spoke.

— This story I haven't told even my brothers. I thought if I did, it would kindle pointless resentment. What needed to be done was left undone. And I've heard that that Mandal-brother of mine has fallen under that educated uncle's sway.

Nabi Baks was quiet for a while longer. His love for his brothers held him back from saying too much about them. Then he resumed his mother's story.

— Mother went on speaking.

— Bah — we'd eaten in the day, how do I cook now at this hour? I was young and newly wed when I became a widow, and even at this age everyone calls me kaniya-kaki — young bride and aunt. How Humayun respected his brothers. He cut his own food to keep the youngest studying in Bhagalpur, and now that educated son says such things.

— Thinking all this, tears filled mother's eyes.

— I had gone on the Haj with my mother once. Bless the Indian government — that even my poor mother could make the Haj. And she used to tell her elder sister-in-law stories: sister, there was such a crowd in the carriage, so stuffy. Mostly widowed women were in the carriage. One said: I didn't suffer as much when I first became a widow as I did today. Ammi called both the train and the aeroplane gaadi.

— Then in that monsoon night, amid the roaring water from the garden and the dripping drops from the roof and pitch-black darkness, a slight smile came to my mother Karima Begum's face. She asked me to go to uncle's veranda, where the other brothers and sisters were.

— Then, lost in thought, Karima Begum — my mother — slipped from the cot. By morning the garden water had come over the embankment towards the courtyard. All three brothers had channelled water towards their own portions of the courtyard, and all of it had shifted and flowed through our sunken courtyard towards the hut. Four fingers of water filled the house. In the morning there was a sound, and when I got up there was water under the cot — one earthen jar had toppled over the other, spilling whatever food and water there was. What to do now — the elder sister-in-law's son came first to enquire, the noise had carried far. All the

food and water was ruined. What food and water was there anyway? Two small earthen jars — my mother used to reinforce them constantly with clay and silt. But by morning they had tumbled with a crash, scattering whatever remained of a poor widow's monthly provisions. Karima Begum — my mother — took up the winnowing fan to gather the grain — I saw it with my own eyes. But with the floodwater had come a layer of silt into the house. All across the neighbourhood, word spread: look at these brothers-in-law, each channelled water into their own courtyard, and pushed more than half the widow's courtyard away too — what little was left of her courtyard has become a pit. The elder sister-in-law came over because people from the brothers' side of the neighbourhood were starting to arrive. People began whispering from one corner of the courtyard to the other, from this house to that. The water had barely entered when slowly the wall on one side of my house collapsed. The neighbourhood raised an alarm: has Karima Begum got caught inside? The elder sister-in-law, seeing the fallen house, was horrified. She said: Allah protected us — I had a thought and brought Nabi's brothers and sisters over, otherwise who would have known about this family rivalry? Everyone would have blamed me right then and there.

— But the sister-in-law!?

— The brothers-in-law, understanding everything, each went back to their own house. I came to Ammi. I had Marxist leanings, I was studying in Madhubani. On the points of widow remarriage and the caste system, I held views different from my educated uncle's. At home my name was Nabi, but at school and college I was Nabi Baks. In the village, seeing the feast lines at the threshing ground and on the embankment, I was troubled. The day labourers were made to eat on the embankment, the landowners ate at the threshing ground. Fine sweets and snacks were brought to the threshing ground several times over; to the embankment line — once, or not at all. But at home my voice carried no weight. I was told: first study, then do something. How much I received from Ammi — towels and scarves — from the earnings of her spinning wheel. Jai Gandhi baba — at least he went this far for widows.

— But my Ammi? What happened to her? The brothers and sisters are all over there!

— Ammi!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

— My cry went through the entire neighbourhood like a shudder. People said: Nabi never weeps — if he has wept, something has happened.

— No, Ammi. This is not right. Why did you give up your trust in me? My name is Nabi

Baks. I am father as much as brother to all five brothers and the youngest sister. But you gave up your trust in me and went away. Ya Allah!!!!!!!!!!!!

— The whole neighbourhood gathered around the bier. Who did what, I couldn't tell. Ammi was given the ghushl, the ritual washing. The shroud was put on. The funeral bier arrived. Over it was spread the cloth my mother had woven on her Gandhi charkha. All three uncles and I shouldered the bier. We stood beside the graveyard, performed the funeral prayer, and buried Ammi.

Nabi Baks fell silent again. I didn't want to interrupt him. For ten minutes he stayed quiet, and I sat still. Then he spoke.

— I mourned for forty days after Ammi's death. And those forty days of rest made me fit enough that my feet found their wheels again. After Ammi's death, I bid goodbye to my studies and came to my aunt in Delhi, in this city of Delhi.

Nabi Baks was wiping his eyes. Then for another ten minutes he was silent.

— The day of Ammi's passing, people saw Nabi Baks weep for the first and last time. But all of this today has brought tears from my eyes again. Wakeel — his marriage wasn't even happening. Everyone said he was a fool. But just as Bhishma Pitamah got

Dhritarashtra married, I got this one married — and now they're all saying I keep him like a servant.

Just then the doorbell rang. Wakeel came and stood before Nabi Baks.

— Bhaiya, everyone says I'm a fool. Yesterday the wife told me all of this. She said: no one cares about you. But I didn't believe it. So I was a little late yesterday. I told the sir too: let's see whether they come or not. The sensible ones came, and you — what can be said. Even the wife is as decent as they come. Today she also held on to the sister-in-law and wept a great deal. The sensible ones may have left you, but this fool will never leave you, brother.

Wakeel had one son. Sometimes he'd bring him along. The boy was a rascal, not as straightforward and well-behaved as his parents. He had passed the entrance exam for the Jamia school — Jamia was affordable. But that child — he didn't seem like a child at all, but like a form of God, as all children do.

— Given his schooling, let's open a fixed deposit in his name. Who knows how long Wakeel's brother will keep paying for his education, or whether he will at all. Does he even give Wakeel his wages, or is he just feeding his family? — my wife asked.

— Ask him. It's not a bad thing to ask. — I went back to my work; my wife never does anything without asking — she needs a yes in answer to a yes. So understand that she announces a decision made.

For Diwali gifts of blankets and sweets, the vegetable seller, electrician, mason, plumber and guard all lined up with my wife. In summer no one else gives cold water — only our house freely gives it. Everyone except the vegetable seller came and went only at those times. But the vegetable seller was permanent — she had set up her vegetable cart in our block from the day she was married and came here. Now her son comes with her too. She takes Sundays off. When my wife's sister and her husband came from Dubai and asked for our address, the vegetable seller brought them to our house herself, and also said: the daughter-in-law has been watching the road since morning — was the flight delayed?

In the evening the son-in-law said: mamiji is very popular.

6

So many storms came and went, and ten years passed before I even realised. When I had just started the job, I'd asked a senior colleague: time doesn't move — how will it

pass? He said: when the children start growing up, when their careers are about to begin — then you won't even notice how time went. Though once, to distract from worry, he had also suggested everyone form an extramarital attachment — and roughly the same logic applied: your attention would be so caught up that time would pass and nothing would trouble you.

I told my wife about Ahmad son-of-Wakeel. She gathered some of the old acquaintances, and one of them said that Wakeel had died. His brother had become a big contractor, had got Ansals' work in Noida and gone there — beyond that, no one knew anything. About Wakeel's wife and child, he had no information.

Ganeshi the mason said of Khalil: he kept going on about Bombay — where he went, no one knows, may well have gone to Bombay. Some people, sir, you live with day and night, close as anything — and then they leave without warning and you never meet them again. Khalil was like that. He was alone — thirty-five, forty years old, no marriage, no nothing. Don't know what became of him, where he went.

Khalil...?

I called the steno on the way and told him to bring Ahmad to my chamber by the time I arrived.

And his same theatrics again.

— Again you'll play the good person act. Tea, coffee, dosa.

Crack — a stone-sharp slap landed on his ear and it rang.

— Now you'll tell the steno: don't hit him, he's been beaten down by circumstance, he became a terrorist because of systemic failure. Then you'll send him out. You'll be the good person, capable and clever, and we're all donkeys. Then you'll ask everything gently. And seeing your graciousness, I'll tell you everything. — And then he started laughing.

I told the steno: he who speaks after a slap is no hard nut. I have his full file and complete dossier. Hitting will only hurt your hand and waste another three or four days. Go get the pliers.

The steno brought the pliers, held his hand flat on the table, and I began pressing the pliers against the nail of one finger.

He spoke up: you're such a good man, you're only trying to scare me, you're from my area—

And then snap — one nail out.

Sweat began to pour from every inch of his body.

By the time I was positioning the pliers on his second finger, he started screaming: I'll tell you everything, I'll tell you everything. I handed the pliers to the steno. The steno called someone with a first aid kit, who came and applied oil on the finger and bandaged it. Then both left.

And in the room — just Ahmad and me.

Then he began to speak softly.

— I didn't expect this from you. I had training for beatings and torture.

— That wastes a lot of time. I come on time and leave on time. You people have all the time in the world — no stories to write, no family. My main business is writing stories. So time is very precious to me.

— So would you have pulled out the next nail too?

— Not just the next — all ten, on both hands, and then all ten on both feet, in turns — at an average of 15 seconds each, the whole job done in 5 minutes.

— You're this cruel — how do you write stories?

— You've understood me wrong again. I was doing that for you. After all twenty nails were out, I'd have passed you in your terrorist school's examination. Then you could have carried out your attack openly. You'd have had plastic surgery, and then your fingerprints — even the CIA of America couldn't have matched them. There's an advantage to removed nails. Shall I start, or shall I ask the steno for the pliers again?

And he began.

— My online buying and selling business on OLX had started going so well. When the work grew, I took an office in a basement in Abul Fazl Enclave. But wireless internet wouldn't catch there. So I got hold of a cable internet man. He gave me high-speed internet — and from there, all of this began.

And then he started recounting how the internet had brainwashed him — through ISI groups on Telegram.

— I know. Tell me more.

— So tell me about your family.

I told him a little about Wakeel, Nabi Baks, Mandal.

— I know more about your family than you think... Go on.

Now he started talking about a love affair — and the moment he began this story, my patience snapped:

— Who is Khalil and what is the Madhubani Module? I leave the office at six — don't you know that?

My voice sharpened, and he looked at his oil-and-bandage finger.

— I am Wakeel's son. I've seen you before. I've grown up, so you didn't recognise me. But I recognised you the moment I saw you. You have been kind to us. To protect you is my duty — don't think I'm scared. And he began his story.

After hearing the whole story, I called the steno in, gave instructions to have Ahmad's finger washed with Dettol or Savlon and properly bandaged, and told him to make sure he got a tetanus injection.

8

Some operations, some violence, some arrests. And then everything went quiet. The intelligence was complete.

— So what did you find? — the journalist asked.

— Madhubani will be known for its Madhubani paintings — not for the Madhubani Module. And you journalists are being officially informed that the Madhubani Module has been dismantled.

Over the next few days, The Super Indian Express and The Super Hindu carried full-page stories about the bravery of two of my colleagues. They came to me: let us print your story too — it won't cost much, one Black Label and they'll print whatever you say. You did the work and the glory goes to all of us.

I smile. I stay silent.

— But what do you need that for? You're the real hero.

9

— Mandal, where has the conversation reached. You need to rise higher in the organisation. This Naxalism at least has one virtue — it doesn't want to break India like terrorism does, it only wants to change the system of governance.

— That's old news, sir. All of this now — they're busy spreading a carpet of

development over tribal areas, extorting money from businessmen. And the one running it all is Mutallif.

— But where does that money go? They have no head for business. I've seen the account books of every factory in this area.

— Some businessman whose ledgers show transactions with everyone. Mutallif doesn't even take money himself — each person gives his cut to one single businessman, and in exchange Mutallif provides him protection.

— Manorama Agrawal!!! Very well, Mandal — drop me off right here.

— Not Mandal — Ahmad. Sir, even when we're alone — use my real name!

SHABDASHASTRAM [THE SCIENCE OF WORDS]

The sun in Leo — *Simha Rashi* — roughly from the sixteenth of August to the sixteenth of September. If anything is to be dried, this is the fiercest sun of the year. In Leo, the palm-leaf manuscripts of Mitu's father would be spread out — an annual preservation ritual, breathing life back into those leaves. Ananda would carry out this preservation of Mitu's father's manuscripts with devoted care. Ananda spreading the manuscripts in the blazing sun — Mitu can picture it still. Ananda's whole life passed alongside Mitu. But this year, before Leo had even arrived, Ananda was gone... And now that she is no more, how will life itself be preserved. Mitu's life, and the life within those palm-leaf manuscripts...

Illusion. The illusion of words. We ourselves construct the meanings of words. And then the illusion begins.

*In the courtyard of Lukesari stands a dense
grove of sandalwood*

Beneath it, a cuckoo has made her nest

*I shall cut the sandalwood, I shall fence the
courtyard*

The cuckoo will lose her nesting place

*She wept, she grew restless, that forest
cuckoo*

Broken now is the cuckoo's nest

Weep then, weep — O cuckoo of youth

She will go to the forest, the cuckoo

Whatever forest you go to, cuckoo

A mark will remain

Let not your eyes shed tears

*With gold I will bind your two wings,
cuckoo*

With silver I will adorn your two lips

*Whatever forest you go to, cuckoo, O
beloved*

The mark of the blood-garland will remain

A young woman's voice seemed to come from the Cobbler's Quarter — Ananda's voice.

But Ananda is gone. Bachhlu had just come from seeing her body. He told Mitu the news and returned to the *Domasi* quarter. And Ananda — she died in old age. Then this voice, a young Ananda's voice. Illusion. The illusion of words. Mitu's father Shrikar Mimansak would say so many things about *Shabdashastram*. We ourselves construct the meanings of words. And then the illusion begins.

I

Shabdashastram

There was a great commotion.

Uproar had broken out. A body was floating down the Balan river. It had caught against the bank near the washermen's ghat.

How far it had come, no one knew. It was the body of an elderly woman. The washerwoman recognised the body. She told

the villager the name and address. Which villager? Bachhlu of the *Domasi* quarter of that village. Word had reached the dead woman's house. Only one old man lived in that house alone — Mitu.

Mitu's fellow villagers had brought the body to the village ground, and then Mitu himself had performed the last rites.

This was the talk of the village. Old Bachhlu knows more. He knew the person whose body that was. The newer generation does not know many things.

Ananda's body.

— Ananda was a very good person. Wise. Her daughters are all settled in comfortable homes — her son too is learned. Mitu, Ananda's husband, was also extraordinary — the son of Shrikar Mimansak. Yet never once did Mitu or Ananda stretch their hand before anyone in a time of need.

Bachhlu too has grown old now — a stooped, shrunken old man. Only Mitu is older than him. People address both of them simply as *old men*.

And this old Bachhlu knows a great many things.

Conversations between Mitu and Shrikar. Some I understood, some I did not.

— Mitu. In the *Bhamati*, Vachaspati says that *avidya* depends upon the individual self and has become its object. What method will you accept for self-realisation? How can something non-existent be the cause of anything? How can the mere existence of a thing make it true — how can its presence be proved across the three times? That which is neither true nor untrue, nor a combination of both — that is the *anirvachya*, the inexpressible. Without some thing and a knower of it, how can the concept of void be understood?

— Mitu. Kumarila says that the self is conscious matter — aware when awake, without awareness in sleep.

— Mitu. Vachaspati in the *Bhamati* says that a person learned in scripture but lacking self-realisation behaves with the people around them like an animal — they run from the one approaching with a stick, they draw close to the one approaching with grass. That is to say, they are governed purely by fear.

"A person learned in scripture but lacking self-realisation behaves with the people around them like an animal — they run from the one approaching with a stick, they draw close to the one approaching with grass." — This thought, however, came to me with clear understanding.

It was the mango season.

Monkeys and wild donkeys were ravaging the fields and orchards all around.

— They've destroyed everything, Bachhlu. You can't see a thing at night. I go and check the orchard first thing in the morning. The wild donkeys have eaten all the crops, now the monkeys are after the mangoes.

I knew that in the mango season, the monkeys and wild donkeys had both come that year simultaneously.

It was the mango season. Mitu would be busy guarding the orchard now. The raw mangoes were growing larger. A watchtower had to be built. I was with him. I was returning after cutting bamboo.

We were coming along by the side of the pond. It was early dawn. The red streak in the sky seemed to have turned slightly pale.

— Keep to the ridge path, Bachhlu.

We walked forward along the field's boundary ridge.

Just then I saw blood. My body went cold at the sight of it.

But I breathed again. A sharp bamboo leaf had scraped along a young girl's hand and

face. Mitu's bamboo had cut her.

Mitu threw down the bamboo from his hand and went to that girl.

He wiped the blood from that tearful girl's eyes and rubbed earth on her cuts.

— What are you doing?

— The bleeding will stop.

The girl ran forward along the ridge.

— What is your name?

— Ananda.

— Which village are you from?

— This very village.

— This very village?

The two of us asked together.

Yes — her name was Ananda. And that was Mitu's first meeting with her.

The watchtower had been built too. But Ananda did not appear again.

Mitu kept asking.

— Which quarter is she from? Not from Misar-Toli, not from Pachimha-Toli, not from Thakur-Toli.

— If she were from the *Domasi* quarter, I would have known her.

— Then how is she from this very village? And if she's from this village, why have we never seen her until now?

But a coincidence occurred in the meanwhile. There was an *upanayana* ceremony for the son of Fude-bhai in Mitu's quarter. On the bamboo-cutting day, I had gone to the Cobbler's Quarter at the edge of the village to summon the *pipahi* player.

— Hiru-bhai, Hiruwa-bhai.

— He's coming.

A girl's voice. A familiar-sounding voice.

— Who are you?

— I am Hiru's daughter. What is the matter?

— Your father hasn't arrived yet with the *pipahi*. I've come to call him.

— He's busy getting ready for that.

— What is your name?

Just then, pushing aside the creeper on the wicker screen, that same girl stepped forward into view.

— I am Ananda. I recognised you. What is

your name?

I was going quite cold. But an answer had to be given.

— Bachhlu.

— And your companion?

— Mitu — the son of Pandit Shrikar.

I told Ananda Mitu's father's name as well. She hadn't asked for it — but I don't know why — I told her.

Just then Hiruwa came out carrying his *pipahi*. Together with him I came back to the quarter.

On the way I asked Hiruwa: Is Ananda your daughter? I've never seen her before.

— She used to live mostly at her maternal uncle's village. But now she's grown up. I've brought her home.

— Will she go back to her uncle's village again?

— No, she's grown up now. She'll stay with us.

Pandit's son Mitu, my friend Mitu — what would go through his mind hearing this? He'd been asking about her for many days. I had been thinking: let Ananda stay at her

uncle's village — then after a few days Mitu's questioning would give me some peace.

But now Ananda would be in the village, and Pandit Shrikar's son Mitu —

Bah — I'm thinking it all upside down. After all, Mitu has asked about Ananda only two or three times. That doesn't necessarily mean —

But what if it does mean exactly that?

A Brahmin's son and a cobbler's daughter.

Would Pandit Shrikar accept it? Would the village and household accept it?

Bah. I'm thinking upside down again. The *pipahi* had begun to play, and keeping to the ridge, Mitu and I, along with all the men and women of the quarter, had reached the bamboo grove. On the way I kept glancing at that spot — listening near the place of Mitu and Ananda's first meeting — some sound seemed to be coming — only music — no voice.

The elder had marked the bamboo stalks and everyone had begun cutting. The *marabthattha* feast was today. Sweating and weary, the mind found some contentment. With bamboo on our shoulders, Mitu and I set off back by the same path — the same ridge.

But Mitu began nudging me constantly now. Because there was no task I had ever delayed so long in doing. He was my Ram and I his Hanuman.

So one day on the watchtower I told Mitu plainly:

— Mitu, forget her. Why would you bring dishonour upon her? Ananda is Hiruwa's daughter. Mind you, when she asked your name from me, I told her your name and your father's name as well.

— She asked for my father's name?

— She didn't ask. But —

— Then why did you tell her?

— Sooner or later she would have found out-

— Whenever that had happened would have been the time — now she'll keep her distance from me — you've only added to my difficulty —

— What difficulty? You're the son of Pandit Shrikar and she's the daughter of Hiruwa the cobbler. Why would you bring dishonour upon her?

— I'll marry her, man. Why would I dishonour her?

— Who are you fooling?

— Nobody, man.

Mitu always made his decisions like this — without warning. Mitu, the logician, son of Shrikar Mimansak. I had seen the palm-leaf manuscripts spread about in his house. I couldn't quite believe it.

— You've never seen her in the village?

— When have you ever been in the village? You've only just come back from the teacher's school.

— But you — had you seen her?

— She used to be at her uncle's village.

— She won't go back to her uncle's village then?

— No — I asked. She'll stay in the village now.

The previous year, Mitu's mother had passed away right here in the village.

Shrikar Mimansak had become somewhat distracted and absent — the neighbours in the quarter were saying this. How will the palm-leaf manuscripts be preserved in this Leo season? This was Shrikar's worry, and because of it he had become distracted and absent — this too the neighbours were saying.

Hirr... hirr... hirr...

From the *Domasi* quarter, chasing a pig, Mitu and I arrive at the Cobbler's Quarter crying *hirr-hirr*. But Ananda appears right before us. I move ahead with the pig. When I turn around, I strain my ears to hear Ananda and Mitu's conversation.

Hirr... hirr...

This time Ananda cries *hirr* and I walk on ahead with a smile, following the pig.

This happened several times and word spread everywhere. Hiru came to me many times.

Hiru had grown agitated. Hiru's wife began to pray for her daughter's fortune.

How many miles, O mother of Mandilba

How many miles, O Lukesari of Mandilba

How many miles has the plea fallen

Look upon us even briefly, O Mother

Two miles to Mandilba

Four miles to Lukesari of Mandilba

Five miles has the plea fallen

Look upon us even briefly, O Mother

What flower, O mother of Mandilba

What flower of Bandi Mandilba

Upon what flower has the plea fallen

Look upon us even briefly, O Mother

*The *aili* flower, O mother of Mandilba*

The jasmine flower, O Lukesari of Mandilba

Upon the marigold has the plea fallen

Look upon us even briefly, O Mother

Hiru began coming to the *Domasi* quarter.

— What will happen, how will it happen?

— It's all false hope —

I agreed to go with Hiru to Pandit Shrikar.

And I took Hiru to Shrikar Mimansak. Shrikar's wife had died after the Leo season of the previous year. And after that Shrikar Mimansak had become distracted — people were saying. Which people? Those same neighbours of the quarter. The learned people of the village, the scholars of the surrounding region, all held him in very high regard. I speak only of what I have seen with my own eyes.

— Come in, Bachhlu. Hiru — come, sit. — Shrikar falls silent. After his wife's death, he would be like this — present one moment, then gone into silence.

— Uncle, the house feels empty. How long will it be like this? Why don't you arrange Mitu's marriage?

— Mitu has already arranged his marriage.

— Where? — I asked, alarmed. Hiru looked at me with a composed expression.

— With Ananda. The prospective father-in-law Hiru has come with you himself.

Oh, Pandit Shrikar.

And oh, Mitu. He had already won his father over beforehand. But some neighbour passing on the embankment had caught wind of this.

We were all still sitting when he gathered a few more people and assembled on the veranda. The debate with Shrikar Mimansak began. Word cutting word.

— Shrikar, what base act are you committing?

— What base act?

— Have you lost all sense of high and low, Mimansak?

— Learned ones. What is this high and low? Merely words. Having heard these words, their meaning has entered your minds in one way or another. Having formed a compound expression, you have mixed your own self-interest into it —

— So high and low is merely word-meaning. And the analysis you made by forming that compound — that has become self-serving.

— If you don't believe it, surrender the self-interest from within that compound and see. All illusion will flee.

— So you are determined to get Mitu and Ananda married?

— Learned ones. The reason I see a rope as a snake is that both have a separate existence. When I squint and see two moons, I still project those two moons onto two actual portions of the sky. The cause of illusion is not the object but the conjunction — though both the subject and predicate are true. And here, the knowledge of any object cannot give knowledge of the self. From contemplation of the self arises **ahamvritti** — awareness of the truth of one's own being. The self is both the doer and the object of knowledge. The meaning of substance is obtained through conjunction. After a word is heard, its meaning is approximated through inference.

— You are generating an illusion of words. We all see in this your wish to marry Mitu and Ananda.

— A resolve is desire, and its non-fulfilment is enmity.

— So it is from enmity that we are saying all this? In your view does caste have no importance?

— Look — Ananda is endowed with every quality, and her caste and mine are one and the same — and this is continuous and evident to all. She can protect my heritage — this is my conviction. And this is my decision.

"And this is my decision."* — These words did not enter my and Hiru's ears at the same moment. I knew Shrikar and Mitu — I had grown accustomed to hearing such sudden decisions from them. But Hiru seemed to hear the echo of these words a moment later. His astonished eyes turned towards me.

Then Shrikar Mimansak pointed a finger at one of the debaters — the astrologer:

— Jyotishi-ji, find an auspicious day. Let this sacred marriage be solemnised in this very pure period — before Leo arrives. Does anyone have any objection?

All bowed their heads and stood. Who would stand in opposition to Shrikar Mimansak?

— We had come to advise you. But since you have already made your decision —

Mimansak-ji raised his hand and all fell quiet again.

Hiru and I also took our leave from there.

I had sensed Hiru breathe a deep sigh of relief.

It was not that no more obstacles came.

But he was a determined scholar. And so Ananda became his daughter-in-law. And the water touched by her hand began to be accepted not only in my quarter or Mitu's quarter but among the scholars of the entire surrounding region.

The wedding was solemnised in Ananda's parents' home. The songs I heard there — full of joy — I remember them still:

On the mountain the bumblebee slept

The gardener's daughter slept in the flower garden

Rise, gardener — weave the mountain-jasmine garland

With what flower will the Lukesari be adorned

What flower for adornment

With what flower will the ornament be made

Rise, gardener — weave the mountain-jasmine garland

*With jasmine flower the *bandi* will be adorned*

With chameli the adornment

*The *arhul* flower is Lukesari's ornament*

Rise, gardener — weave the mountain-jasmine garland

Shrikar Mimansak, having entrusted to Ananda the responsibility of preserving the palm-leaf manuscripts, had grown at peace. After his wife's death, the poor man had been anxious.

Divine intervention — Ananda had come to that house as if for the preservation of those very manuscripts. Unexpectedly.

Mitu told me how he had won Pandit Shrikar over. A Brahmin girl would spend her days making clay saucers and clay idols of Mahadev, and the palm-leaf manuscripts would get eaten by insects —

Let no insect eat the manuscripts — Ananda will come to this house. Shrikar Mimansak had made his decision.

Mitu seemed grateful his whole life for this decision made on his behalf.

Shrikar's life seemed to lengthen. There was always conversation between Shrikar and Ananda in that house.

Ananda kept talking, and kept singing.

When twelve years had passed, the thirteenth was upon her

When twelve years had passed, the thirteenth had spread

My mother-in-law calls me a tigress, dear one

A tigress she says she'll drive from the house

She who was your creditor in the outer courtyard

*Bring me ground *aak* and *dhatura* berries — I shall drink the poison*

My beloved has returned and sits upon the bed

Tell me the desire of your heart — then I shall drink the poison

When twelve years had passed, the thirteenth had spread

My mother-in-law calls me a tigress, dear one

A tigress she says she'll drive from the house

My mother-in-law strikes me with Anoop, sister-in-law pokes with a finger

Let all the family go home in happiness — all the wealth shall be mine

Hush now, hush — my dear, you are the great wealth itself

Hush now, hush — my dear, you are the great wealth itself

Beloved, I shall perform the Tulsi-worship — and scatter all wealth

Beloved, I shall perform the pond-worship — and scatter all wealth

Shrikar Mimansak laughed: — Ananda, you have no mother-in-law — then how would the poor woman call you a tigress?

— That is exactly why I sing it — everything else is complete and full, but —

Ananda's eyes had filled with tears. I remember it still.

— I have pained you by saying this.

— What pain? If there is no mother-in-law,
there is a father-in-law.

Seeing Shrikar happy, Mitu felt a deep
contentment.

And even after Shrikar Mimansak's death,
Ananda kept breathing life into the palm-leaf
manuscripts.

Then Mitu had two daughters — Vallabha
and Medha.

I saw Ananda's happiness. She had gone to
her parents' home. Both the twin daughters
were born there —

Red fairy, rose fairy

Red fairy, rose fairy

In the sky dances the celestial nymph

On the rose dances the celestial nymph

And then came a son. When he grew older,
Mitu sent the son Megh to Banaras for his
studies.

And the days passed, the daughters grew up,
and Mitu saw both daughters — Medha and
Vallabha — married off and felt at peace.

He brought up his son and saw him married
too. Megh began teaching in Banaras. Megh,
Medha and Vallabha — all three would come

for at least one month every year.

People forgot many, many things.

II

Bhamati Prasthanam

Ananda was carrying out the preservation of Mitu's father's palm-leaf manuscripts with devoted care. The blazing sun — Mitu remembers it still.

Ananda's whole life passed alongside Mitu. And now that she is no more, how will Mitu's life be preserved... Mitu drifts away somewhere in the middle of the discourse.

The discourse is going on. Mitu will not listen to the *Garuda Purana*. Mitu will listen to Mandan's *Brahmasiddhi*, to Vachaspati's *Bhamati* — if he listens at all. If his daughters insist, he will listen to Kumarila's philosophy on the subject of the self. And that discourse is now going on.

Illusion. The illusion of words. Shrikar would say so much about *Shabdashastram*. About *Bhamati Prasthanam*. We construct the meanings of words ourselves. And then the illusion begins.

— Teacher. After my wife's death I am in profound despair. What is this life? Where will Ananda be?

— Mitu. Be patient. This reading of mine from the **Brahmasiddhi** will dispel all your illusions. The **Brahmasiddhi** has four sections: **Brahma**, **Tarka**, **Niyoga** and **Siddhi**. The **Brahma Khanda** discusses the nature of Brahman, the **Tarka Khanda** discusses proof and epistemology, the **Niyoga Khanda** discusses the liberation of the individual self, and the **Siddhi Khanda** discusses the evidence of Upanishadic statements.

— Mitu. Liberation is not something separate from knowledge. Liberation **is** knowledge itself. Mandan never dismisses human limited intelligence anywhere. He understands the importance of action. But liberation cannot be obtained through that alone. Mandan saw the **sphota** as giving meaning in the form of sound-word. He differs from Shankara in this respect — he establishes an identity with this **sphota** while Shankara accepts no identity short of Brahman itself. Thus Mandan is a purer non-dualist than Shankara. Mitu — Mandan does not regard the simultaneous presence of capacity and incapacity as opposing elements. This is sometimes a difference created by **arthakriya** — purposive action — but how did that difference become a

foundational principle? Therefore Brahman, even while present in all differences, can perform all functions. Consider — the thought in Vachaspati's *Bhamati Prasthanam* corresponds with Mandan Mishra's thinking. Vachaspati wrote the *Tattvasamiksha* on Mandan Mishra's *Brahmasiddhi*. Though the *Tattvasamiksha* is no longer available.

— Then how is the *Tattvasamiksha* discussed at all?

— It is mentioned in Vachaspati's *Bhamati*.

— But before I understand Mandan's thought, there comes to my mind — when he was defeated by Shankaracharya, how will recitation of his defeated doctrine bring peace to my mind?

— Look — there is no evidence in Mandan's own writings that he was defeated. Mandan supports *sphotavada*, while Shankaracharya refutes *sphotavada*. Mandan, unlike Kumarila Bhatta, supports *khyativada* — the doctrine of recognition — but Suresvara, the disciple of Shankaracharya whom people identify with Mandan Mishra, refutes this.

— That is right. If Mandan had truly been defeated, his philosophy would have followed Shankaracharya's.

— Now consider — Suresvara, whom Shankaracharya appointed as the head of the Sringeri Matha, is opposed to the idea that *avidya* can be of two kinds, but in his work *Brahmasiddhi*, Mandan names two forms of *avidya* — *agrahana* and *anyathaagrahana*. Mandan calls the individual self the locus of *avidya* and Brahman the object of *avidya*, but Suresvara does not accept this. Mandan opposes Shankaracharya's thought, but Suresvara is in support of his position.

Monkeys and wild donkeys were ravaging the fields and the orchards. Now because of me, the villagers won't stop keeping buffaloes. The monkeys and wild donkeys are causing great damage.

— Four monkeys in the orchard. They've grabbed and shaken all the mangoes. I went there. By the time evening came, all the monkeys had taken hold of the branches. Father and I guarded the orchard all day, chased them off with a scare, but then they moved towards your orchard. — I tell Mitu.

— They've destroyed everything, Bachhlu. You can't see at night. I go check the orchard first thing in the morning. The wild donkeys ate all the crops, now the monkeys are after the mangoes. Let them —

— The wild donkeys had cleared out completely. Don't know where they've come

from again. There was a celebration in Gajpatha village and they swam the river across overnight from there.

— That's not it. These wild donkeys came floating down from the Nepal direction. Let them come —

— I'd told you about the monkeys.

— It will happen.

— It will happen, brother — I'll be going then. — I know that in the mango season, the monkeys and the wild donkeys had both disappeared that year — the year Ananda and Mitu had first met. And after Ananda's going, the monkeys and wild donkeys have come again from somewhere unknown — not even fifteen days have passed since Ananda's death.

Bachhlu left, and on Mitu's forehead several thick lines of worry began to move up and down — like waves in a surge, overlapping one another, old waves becoming new and growing. He calls out in the courtyard.

— Buchchi, Buchiya. Jayakar and Vishwanath went to the orchard today. Have they both come back on foot? Didn't you hear — there's been trouble with the monkeys. Tell them not to go to the orchard from tomorrow. The monkeys came to the orchard today and I didn't even say a word. What use

is saying anything when —

— I was telling you, Babujee, but you're lost in your own thoughts — my mouth got tired of speaking so I fell silent.

Yes, Mitu is indeed lost in his thoughts. These mangoes too have begun to ripen after Ananda's death. And after so many years, what memory have these monkeys and wild donkeys come to revive?

Jayakar's mother is Vallabha and Vishwanath's mother is Medha. Both sisters have come home after so long. They are meeting each other after so long. Ananda's two daughters and both sons-in-law have come. Vallabha's husband Visho and Medha's husband Kanh. Megh has come with his wife and children.

Mitu is calling out for his wife, calling her by name — Ananda. Then he remembers — where will she be found now. Then — where are you Vallabha, where are you Medha, where are Jayakar and Vishwanath — he begins to call out.

Vallabha and Medha come and Mitu begins to sing. Ananda's song. What Ananda used to sing for Vallabha and Medha —

Red fairy, rose fairy

Red fairy, rose fairy

In the sky dances the celestial nymph

On the rose dances the celestial nymph

The Raktamala stands poor at the threshold

The Raktamala stands poor at the threshold

O Mother — give wealth to the poor, celestial one

O Mother — give wealth to the poor, celestial one

Red fairy, rose fairy

O Mother — the Raktamala stands blind at the threshold

O Mother — give the blind their sight quickly

O Mother — give the blind their sight quickly

Father and both daughters break into weeping.

— Mitu. Ananda's death has come upon you as a calamity. You are of Brahmin caste and Ananda was a cobbler woman. But the love between you both is beyond measure. Do not grieve for her death. Brahman is without sorrow. The form of Brahman is *ananda* —

bliss. Therefore it is improper for you to grieve for Ananda. Brahman is the witness. That which is witnessed — the visible — keeps changing; what does the witness have to do with it? This worldly illusion is not mere illusion — it does have a pragmatic reality. But this pragmatic reality is not ultimate truth. Mitu — there is a difference between the conscious and the unconscious, but that is not ultimately true either. There are many kinds of individual selves, and there are many kinds of **avidya**. **Avidya** is a deficiency — but how can its locus be Brahman, how can it be a complete self? Its locus will be an incomplete self. **Avidya** then is not true but it is not altogether untrue either. Mitu — remove this **avidya**, and that is what is called **moksha**. The same **moksha** that Ananda has attained.

And peace seems to spread across Mitu's face.

Mitu is as if going to meet someone.

He remembers the tender conversations with Ananda.

— Ananda. Even as we talk, a small fear has come into my mind. Father's greatest weakness is the preservation of his palm-leaf manuscripts. So keep this in mind. When Father asks how the palm-leaf manuscripts are to be preserved, tell him — protect the books from water, oil and coarse binding.

Dry them in the shade. Books of five or six hundred leaves. I'll show you one day. Each leaf is a *hath* long and four fingers wide. Wooden boards are fixed above and below. On the left side a hole is made and it is bound with thread.

— Will Father accept it?

— Why wouldn't he? Does he have the means to arrange a Brahmin girl's marriage? I had given someone two rupees as an advance to buy agricultural land. But Father went and returned the advance. He is saving up one-one, two-two rupees. He plans to give seven hundred rupees to a girl's family — then his son can be married and a daughter-in-law will come. And would a Brahmin woman protect the palm-leaf manuscripts?

After Mitu's mother's death, Shrikar had become distracted. The neighbours were saying this.

And then illness came — plague. Two quarters of the village were entirely wiped out — Misar-Toli and Pachimha-Toli. In the surrounding villages, how many people died, no one knew.

Mitu introduced his father to Ananda. Shrikar Mimansak saw something in Ananda — full of knowledge about preserving palm-leaf manuscripts — that he could not quite name.

Mitu had won. Mitu the logician had won over Shrikar the Mimansak, and Shrikar the Mimansak had defeated his own neighbours.

And Ananda and Mitu's marriage was solemnised.

He remembers the tender conversations with Ananda. Mitu is as if going to meet someone. Ananda's death has come. On the Balan, Ananda's feet had slipped on the bank. The same marks of slipping can be seen still.

Mitu looks at those marks and his heart surges — he slips back into the wave of emotion.

Ananda and Mitu had begun meeting more and more — at the fields, the mango orchard, the *chauri* meadow, and by the riverside. And both of them would slip — in the fields, in the mango orchard, in the *chauri* meadow, and at the riverside too.

Mitu did not jump across the river. This sloping muddy bank that today's young people use — it was Mitu who made it. He would plant his pole here and with a swift rush Mitu would cut through the water and move ahead.

— Hey — come on, slip in and let me see.

— What great thing is that?

— Show me — then you'll understand.

Ananda would try to move forward
uncertainly but — *he, he, he* —

She could not stop herself — not in the fields,
not in the mango orchard, not in the *chauri*
meadow, and not here at the riverside either.

And why would Ananda have come here —
only to slip and drown?

She must have come to remember some
memory.

Yes — Ananda has come, Bachhlu. Look —
hear this song:

*In the back garden stands an arhul flower
tree*

The tree laden with fruit and flower

A parrot came from the northern direction

The parrot perched on the arhul flower tree

*Neither eating the fruit, parrot, nor eating
the flower*

He stripped away the branches and leaves

*Neither eating the flower, parrot, nor eating
the fruit*

He stripped away the branches and leaves

*In the back garden lives a female
mongoose*

Give the perched parrot a fright

One snare has been set

Two snares have been set

At the third snare the parrot flies away

He's not a devotee-parrot

Nor a partridge

This one's just a sparrow's alibi

— Brother, can you not hear this song?

— Brother, I hear it. I see it too. Ananda is
our *bhauji* — our elder brother's wife.

Even when she died I had heard — it was she
— she was singing —

*In the courtyard of Lukesari stands a dense
grove of sandalwood*

Beneath it, a cuckoo has made her nest

— That was no illusion of words.

It is the day after the fish-feast and the
Satyanarayan *puja*. Ananda had neither
had the sandalwood tree cut, nor had she
fenced the courtyard.

The next day, in the Cobbler's Quarter, beneath that sandalwood tree, the villagers saw two bodies. And these words too spread into the sky — all the villagers heard them — in Ananda's voice:

Whatever forest you go to, cuckoo, O beloved

The mark of the blood-garland will remain

That was no illusion of words.

[Translation of the Maithili Short Story, 'Shabdashastram', by the author himself. Gajendra Thakur: published as 'The Science of Words'

(https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=the+science+of+words+gajendra+thakur&btnG=

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THE VILLAGE OF THE MAHISBAR [BUFFALO-GRAZER] BRAHMINS

Trees and groves all around, and ponds. In the village — one, two, three, and one more — four ponds.

Though there are three more besides. One, to the north of the northern pond, is the great Dakahi pond. People say some dacoit dug it out in a single night. But if you ask for proof, you will learn that there is no other evidence except that while digging, morning came upon him, and for that reason the dacoit could not plant a boundary post in the pond. In his haste, a sandal — or call it a slipper — eight hands long, belonging to that dacoit — or call him a demon — was also left behind on the bank of the pond. It stayed there on the bank for a long time, but then that too was washed away in a flood. So the one piece of evidence that existed did not survive either. This pond is far from the village, and on that account no connection between it and the *Chhath* festival has been established to this day. Yes, it is certainly used in the rituals accompanying the sacred thread ceremony.

All manner of fish are to be found in this pond. There is no shortage of fish. There has never been a need to stock the Dakahi pond with fingerlings. The annual fishing festival takes place, and on every day of the festival, all the quarters of the village — excepting the southern quarter, which is to say Garh Arar-Neba — are given their respective shares of the catch.

To the south of the southern quarter lies the Buchiya pond.

It is distant from the village but has a landing-post right in the middle. When this wooden post was being planted, the yellow-child — the now ancient great-great-grandfather of today's zamindar — had organised a grand ceremony. Because it is far from the settlement and sits in the middle of the fields, people come here for bathing rather rarely. The fishing festival is also held here, but that is exclusively for the southern quarter. This pond has one more distinction. When, at the time of the Durga Puja, Durga-ji departs once more from her parents' home to her husband's on the tenth day — which is also called *jatra* — her idol is immersed in this very pond. Not the men — but the women weep and wail at the immersion of Durga-ji. Who in this quarter would ask after

Durga-ji — she is not even made in this village. She is made in the neighbouring Garh Tol. The people of this village are altogether beyond-the-pale. Until the sixth day the idol of Durga is kept covered; only the sculptor can uncover and look at her — for if he does not look, how will Durga-ji get made? If anyone else looks, they will go blind. Yes, after the *belnouti* on the sixth day, following the unveiling of the idol, people may take her *darshan*. And from that day the fair also begins. If Durga were made in this village, how many people would go blind even before the sixth day! And is the neighbouring village any less beyond-the-pale? But in the name of a *puja*, watch how everyone becomes perfectly solemn and proper. The name has *Tol* attached to it — Garh Tol — but it is actually a village. A village just like this one, the village of the Mahisbar Brahmins. In being beyond-the-pale, am I ahead or are you — this kind of competition goes on constantly between the two villages. Pass by Garh Tol's village and the young men sitting on the veranda by the embankment will make sure to say something or other to you. But the troublesome young men of this village will stubbornly take the route through that very village. Yes, the sensible and cautious all consider it wiser to go by way of the Buchiya pond, even if the road is a little out of the way — so what of it?

There is one more pond in the village. But on both sides of the village are the Kamala-Balan and the Kosi — the talk of building two embankments on each to control both rivers keeps coming up sooner or later. Tucked close to the village on the west, running north to south, will be one embankment, then will come the Balan river — brother of the Kamala Maharani — then Kamala Maharani herself, and then further to the west another embankment running north to south — such discussions go on. But that is not the Kamala river, that is the Chharan; further ahead it meets the Kamala-Balan river, and that is not the Balan alone but the Kamala-Balan. Very sharp fellows, the villagers — you won't find this level of geographical knowledge even in books, father. Between the embankments will lie Balli pond. How the government will fill in this pond is not known. This pond is connected to the Balan by a drain; when the river rises, the people open the mouth of the drain and the pond fills with the silt-laden water from above the river — the sand stays lower in the river, so it cannot enter. And in any case, the Balan carries more silt than sand. Irrigation is done from this pond. Around the *Baisakh-Sakrainti* season the villagers form work-parties and clean out and dredge all the ponds. And the fair on the full moon of *Pus*. Fish and *makhana* are plentiful.

At the very entrance to the village, two old wells. Some people developed goitres from the well water, so people mock and nickname it the Goitre Village, the Fat-Headed Village.

Right beside the river and the vast Balli pond there was once a football ground — a vast *ramna*. Through the machinations of the zamindar, this *ramna* was subsumed into the yellow-child's fields — that is to say, it was absorbed. The big zamindar Barbariya Roy had also at some point, for reasons unknown, insisted that a cultivator's land should all be in one consolidated plot. Surju Bhai's field fertilised with cow-dung was also in this process absorbed into the yellow-child's fields — or rather, made to be absorbed.

Between the Kamala and the Balan lies the *bauwa-chauri* — the meadow where the Mahisbar families bring their buffalo to graze and feed. The buffalo-herders come here, play, and swim in the Kamala. Sometimes they let themselves float downstream in the Kamala without resistance, and sometimes they swim against the river's current. These are the graduates of the Bauwa-Chauri school.

Between the two rivers lies the Guar Toli.

On the embankment too there are four houses of Baudha Malik and other Doms. These two quarters also fall within the boundaries of this village. The Doms call themselves Malik or Sopach. Baudha Malik tells stories...

Four Brahmins were going to the pond to bathe when they saw a dead cow. Who would remove a dead cow? The burden was placed upon the youngest brother, and when he returned he was excommunicated from his caste.

The work of every caste is needed at festivals, rites and ceremonies.

The dancer Bakhkho asks for this gift at the courtyard: dance and movement

*The Pamriya asks for this gift: the toy of
*chilka**

*The Dagareen asks for this gift: stripping
the *naar**

The Nau-ani asks for this gift: the lighting of lamps

*The Dhobiya asks for this gift: the dissolving of the *khir**

The work of every caste is needed at festivals, rites and ceremonies.

The Dom's work too is needed at festivals and rites.

From making baskets to making winnowing fans and fans of all kinds — this is the Dom's work. And for the goat to be slaughtered for honoured guests and for the wedding party, the work goes to the Mian Toli.

The head of the goat at the Durga Puja sacrifice is taken by the committee. But Jainul Mian who slaughters the goat does so in the *halal* manner. The neck is left half hanging, but he takes away the neck — made golden — and the hide as well.

Then, from among the Mahisbar Brahmins, those who perform devotional singing and the eight-watch *ashtajam* worship buy drums made from that very hide.

In Kunja Toli, Mohammad Shamsul. On the embankment. He tells stories...

Dilari Nagar. There was a Sayyid there. He had a wife and several sons. Warriors, all of them.

The battle of Nunjagarh. But this time the Sayyid and all his sons were killed. But his widow was with child. Some time later a child was born. He was named Miran.

He too was a warrior — but the mother did not like this. He was married off young, thinking it might turn his mind away from war. But...

The mother and wife pleaded with him greatly, but Miran went to Nunjagarh alone, avenged his father and brothers, and returned to Dilari Nagar.

By the power of his soul, long after his death, peace prevailed in Dilari Nagar.

The sight when they return to Garh Narikel after the *daha* — the mourning procession — is remarkable. At the *daha* they play with the *jharni* — a bamboo sieve.

Listening to the *marsia*, the men break into weeping and wailing just as the women weep and wail on the day of Durga-ji's immersion.

At this the bamboo grove of the Sayyid was cut, O hai hai

That bamboo grove too has become a place of remembrance, O hai hai

The people of Garh Narikel are all singers, all storytellers. Listen on...

During the *bhav-khelai* performance, Miran Saheb comes and grants boons.

How many times will you tell the same story?

Keep listening — it is Garh Narikel. However many times you hear it, it will seem new.

In Dilari Nagar there lived Harphool Sayyid.

Isn't it Dilari Nagar they call Delhi?

What would I know of that?

Harphool's wife was Aatam.

In the battle of Nunjagarh, Harphool was killed, and Aatam was with child.

A child was born — he was named Miran.

Aatam arranged Miran's marriage while he was still a child, but Miran came to know sooner or later of the battle of Nunjagarh and of his father Harphool's death there. And he attacked Nunjagarh, defeated it, and returned to Dilari Nagar.

Falling and tumbling in the procession the war-drum sounds, O brother, the war-drum

Brother, the sound of the war-drum cannot be told in words

Hacking and cutting, in the procession the battle-horn calls

Brother, the battle-horn calls

Brother, the whirling sword flashes

*The black, the bay horse in the procession
stamps and snorts*

O brother, the horse

*Brother, on the horse's back sits the fire-like
rider*

Then there is yet another quarter.

Cobblers — Mukhadev Ram and Dayaram Ram. Earlier this quarter was outside the village, beyond the bamboo grove. But now all the bamboo has been cut down and finished, and with the spread of habitation this cobbler's quarter has been reached. Thatched roofs and brick kilns keep falling side by side. Their cooperation is expected for everything from providing the drum-skin to playing the drum and *pipahi*. Until they come and carry away a dead animal, the house where it died remains in a state of ritual pollution. Mukhadev is a companion of Jageshwar Jha.

Lala Maharaj — the community deity of the cobblers. He used to catch fish from the *chauri* marsh. Everyone has rights over the fish of the *chauri*. Anyone can fish there.

But Sonayamani used to say that only he could fish from that *chauri*. Lala Maharaj was powerful and would not accept this. One day he was returning after catching fish when Sonayamani found out. Earlier there used to be tigers in these parts. Sonayamani had several tigers. He sent a tiger to kill Lala Maharaj. But Lala Maharaj killed it with his staff. Sonayamani was greatly enraged — he worshipped the *Gahil Devi*. The *Gahil Devi* sent a tigress and had Lala Maharaj killed.

*At the foot of the *khashiya* tree, mother is wandering*

O hai — no one is searching for Lala

If you search for Lala and come

Weeping, weeping, she says — I cannot understand

Nowhere is he to be seen, O Lord, go now

Nowhere is Lala, O now

Whom shall I ask, whom shall I console

To whom shall I tell my grief, O

Lala Maharaj's friend Nath Mishra stopped giving milk to Lala Maharaj's parents.

Scolding and reproving, he began to speak

Rupa-mai cannot understand Mishra

By whose grace are you Nath Mishra

*A body like a washed piece of *pat* cloth*

Like a plantain trunk you are, Mishra

You have no strength even in your thighs

Thin and spindly arms, Nath Mishra

It is by Lala's grace alone that you are what you are

Lala Maharaj's soul grew wrathful, killed Nath Mishra, and killed Sonayamani and his family too. Then Lala Maharaj was appeased through worship and prayer, and only then did he become calm.

The people of Garh Narikel are all singers, all storytellers. Listen on...

Mansaram Chamar and Chhechhanmal Dom. Both brave — Mansaram was the commander-in-chief of the Raja of Morang, and Chhechhanmal was the commander-in-chief of the Raja of Siri Rajkhand.

The Raja of Morang knew that no one could defeat Chhechhanmal, commander of Siri Rajkhand — not even Mansaram.

The Raja of Morang summoned Chhechhanmal to his court and tempted him. But he would not be moved. Betray Siri Rajkhand? Never.

The Raja of Morang had him seized and bound. But Chhechhanmal broke all his bonds in a single moment. The Raja of Morang was frightened — where Chhechhanmal was such a commander, the army would be equally powerful. He abandoned any thought of attacking Siri Rajkhand.

Nothing will happen to you, Mansaram

Even if the head were to come off

Still I will not let you cross

Into my king's territory

If you still have any fear for your life

Then go back home

I will not leave a single duty undone

I will be the guardian of this frontier

If you take even one step forward

I will take your head in an instant

Keep listening to the stories of Garh Narikel... One story has many forms. From wherever the brides came, they brought their stories with them.

Lukesari was the daughter of a cobbler. She fasted on *Ekadashi* to obtain Chhechhanmal as her husband. But she had a dream that Chhechhan had become a monk. And when Chhechhan and Lukesari met, Chhechhan regarded her as a goddess, received teachings from her, and made Lukesari a goddess. Lukesari became a goddess.

Then the Dhanuk Toli. Bhagwandatt Mandal and Adhikalal Mandal — Dhanuk. Earlier these people used to carry loads, but later the people of Dusadh Toli also began carrying loads. Farming is the traditional occupation of both the Dhanuk Toli and the Dusadh Toli. Yes, earlier they only worked for wages, now they work on sharecropping. Raising goats and selling them for sacrifice at Durga Puja — that you can count as livestock-keeping for both these quarters. A few people have also begun keeping bullocks, and in pairs they use them for farming.

Whenever there is a quarrel, you will not find a month in the year when you cannot see a woman from some quarter of the Mahisbar Brahmin families breaking a tile with her black *khapar* shard. If you ask her reason, they will say that these people are shameless, and that is why when they are born a jet of spittle is shot at them from behind, so that no part of the body will retain any shame.

In Garh Narikel, if someone has caused harm to society, no mourning is observed when they die; on the contrary, when such a person dies, the women break a tile and throw it on the embankment.

Though it has only three houses, the Dhobi Toli has become a quarter in its own right. The Marwari merchants' clothes all the way from Jhanjharpur are washed here. The Mahisbar Brahmins who go off to weddings with bell-bottoms pressed and spick-and-span — do they wear their own clothes? Those very expensive borrowed clothes — the Marwaris'. Safi Bhai lends these Marwari clothes to them for two days on hire. Korail, Budhan and Domi Safi — the washermen. Domi Safi is now Domi Das, for he has taken to ploughing, being a follower of the Kabir Panth. When the *Guru Gosain* comes, Domi Das's *Saraswati* — his learning — goes quiet. He has a treasury of Maithili Kabir-vani.

*At first I was with the primal man, and then
I remained a virgin*

*Brother, when the husband was born I
became joined in marriage*

*With whom did I savour, with whom did I
dwell, with whom did I make my vow*

*With whom did I roam from land to land,
whose woman am I*

*With five I savoured, with twenty-five I
dwelt, with three I made my vow*

*Together did I roam from land to land —
one man, one woman*

*In the form of a serpent I settled in the city
and bit all four Vedas*

*Father-in-law and elder brother-in-law,
combined in one mind — a wonder that
cannot be told*

*One *Aadya*, taking three forms —
intelligence, wisdom, expansion*

*Says Kabir — one who enchants all minds,
a saint alone can cross over*

Domi Das holds a gathering of saints in Garh Narikel once a year. He travels all year round. Wherever he goes — the Sahaj Yoga Satsang Centre in Madhubani, Ared Barahi Tol, Ared Haat, Kabir Jaago Ashram in Andhrathadi, Kabir Ashram in Brahmottara, Sadguru Kabir Ashram in Suratganj; the Kabir Math in Samastipur, Satmalpur, Kabir Ashram in Ladaura; the Kabir Ashram in Turki in Muzaffarpur, Kabir Math in Krishna Toli, Brahmpura; the Kabir Ashram in Bharwara, the village of Gonu Jha; and the Kabir Dharma Sthan, Duhabi, Nepal — not one of these places has been left unvisited by him. At the ceremonies in which many a *gurugaddi* confers the *chadar* and

installs a *mahant* at a monastery, his presence is considered indispensable.

The memory of every person in Garh Narikel is very sharp — ask one thing and then just keep listening...

The Nau Toli too has three houses. Jairam Thakur, Laxmi Thakur and Male Thakur — barbers. Great talkers.

Jogindar Thakur — from the most prosperous family among the carpenters and blacksmiths of Garh Narikel's *Kamarsari*. Jogindar Thakur is a *chharidaar* — a staff-bearer. But when the *Maain-jan* or his *diwan* comes for a feast, it seems Chharidaar Jogindar Babu's *Saraswati* goes quiet and he produces only *haan* — yes — in response to both good sense and nonsense alike. Jogindar has three children — Bihari, Arjun and Shivnaren. All are engaged in the timber trade, but Bihari also does ironwork alongside, and Arjun has become a bicycle mechanic too — from minor repairs to patching punctures on rickshaws and bicycles, he does everything. For children, from rubber balls to the iron-ring-and-stick game where a bent wire is

used to roll a wooden wheel, and many other inventions of play — Shivnaren has devised them all. So people say: look, it's the notion that only a job comes from education — change that idea. Look at Shivnaren. What things keep coming to his mind, what he makes from scraps of wood. But Bihari's skill with his hands is unmatched by anyone — in *aaraakat* straight-cutting, diagonal cutting, standing cut, *phentakaati* — he is ahead of Shivnaren. Shivnaren invents something, and after that, seeing it, Bihari makes the same thing better. Now in a village, will the inventor get any copyright? On *pattharauti* wood, Shivnaren's saw and adze give up, but Bihari somehow manages it in ways no one understands. From knotted wood too he makes things and sells them at fairs and markets. When a long saw is not at hand for splitting a plank, he splits it with even a small saw. At separating the usable part of wood from the waste, Bihari has no equal.

For the thick-threaded *anchari* — the cloth offering for Bhagwati — the weaver Jagdish Mail is sought out; the *patmini* is very industrious.

Bhola Pandit the potter — the arrangements are in place for everything from earthen

water-pots to little birds and sparrows for children. None can match him in clay work.

Basu Choupal — *Khatawe* by caste. He used to carry loads; he carries fish too, becomes a *kahar* when needed. And he has also taken to selling fish.

Chailttar Sahu and Laddulal Sahu — confectioners — they set up shop during Durga Puja. In their enterprise they have also begun taking contracts for preparing vegetables and curries.

Shivnarayan Mahato — *Suri*. Lachhmi Das — *Tatma*. Lal Kumar Ray — *Kurmi*.

Bhola Paswan and Mukesh Paswan — *Dusadh*. Relatives of Gena Hazari of the lower *khadhi*. The same Gena Hazari who, seeing a cow come and give milk on a *kush* blade at Kusheshwar Sthan, began to dig at that spot. Mahadev kept going deeper and deeper, and was finally found. This Mahadev, established by Kush — Lav's

brother, son of Sita — was discovered by Gena Hazari.

Now listen to a story... in Garh Narikel there is a story for every single thing... not stories — history...

In Puhpi Nagar, in a ploughed field, Kirti Paswan found a child. The name given was Joti.

— Found in the ploughed field, and so named accordingly, right?

He raised and nurtured the child into adulthood.

Joti's companion was Hariya. The two were always together. One day when Hariya went with Joti to tend the pigs, Joti began to dance. The world of Indra trembled. Kalidasa met Joti, and Kalidasa gave him great powers and asked him to spread the message of dharma and truth. In Puhpi Nagar, Joti began to propagate dharma. He would give children lumps of clay in their hands, and those lumps would become Shankar-chura sweets.

Live, O innocent child Joti

Become immortal in this world

Every day perform acts of power

O, conduct the affairs of dharma

Whatever you desire, O child

Dharmaraj the giver will fulfil it

Amrita's son Kalidasa came in the guise of a Brahmin to meet Joti, but for some reason Joti did not meet him. Kalidasa cursed him, and Joti was afflicted with leprosy.

Kalidasa disguised himself as an astrologer and told Joti to remain in the forest for twelve years, hungry and thirsty. Joti was ultimately successful.

Satyanarayan Kamat — *Kiot*, he lived on the estate of the Darbhanga zamindar as a *kamat*.

Ramdev Bhandari. A type of *Kiot*, a *Bhandari* — one who managed the kitchens of the Darbhanga zamindars.

Satyanarayan Kamat was also a mahout — for Barbariya Roy. In constructing a howdah for an elephant, none in the region could match him. The vocabulary of the elephant — *agatt*, *pichhu*, *thait*, *mail-biri* — all of these words he had practiced so much that he would use them in other contexts too, out of habit.

Kapileshwar Raut and Ramavatar Raut — *Barai*. Paan-selling is their ancestral profession.

Jibachh Mukhi — fisherman. Once a year at the Dakahi pond, the fishing festival — for fifteen days to a month the fishermen cast the great net here. The fishermen's quarter assembles together.

For a month an outside fishermen's village settles on the bank of the pond. Earlier this annual fishing festival used to run for over a month, but now it has been pulled tight to twenty days. Then the fishermen's head announces: the fish are now exhausted. If we cast the great net now, not a single large fish will come in. If we use a gill net, all the small fish will die, and next year we will have to stock fingerlings. During those fifteen to twenty days the atmosphere in the village is festive. On the occasion, the cleaning and clearing of the pond also gets done. From four in the morning until midday the fishing goes on. Then by the afternoon all the quarters of the village — excepting the southern quarter — are given their respective shares. Everyone takes their share and comes back to the village. There the families of each quarter divide up their respective portions among themselves. How many lots the quarter's fish will make — sometimes disputes arise on this very matter. While she was alive, one might not have had a cross word with Widow Aunt; one might have strangled her dying wish to give her daughter something from her share; and one might have gotten her dead body's thumbprint on a stamp paper. Her memory may not come to

you at other times, but at the time of claiming one's share of the Dakahi pond fish, everyone's Widow Aunt comes to mind. Protest is also expressed on this score. And no one gets this kind of extra share except the wrestler — whom everyone affectionately calls *Khaliffa* — even if Khaliffa's Widow Aunt in his courtyard died twenty years before.

The Dakahi pond has one more distinction. In it, fish and turtles multiply on their own. On the banks, wild *malkoka* and innumerable varieties of leeches and shed skins. At the banks, the water-kand bulb — food for the Mahisbar children.

The Kamala's boatmen, in exchange for ferrying the villagers, take grain from them. From outsiders — yes, for ferrying across the river, they take money.

Listen to a story...

Dulra Dayal Mallah of Bharaura. From the village of Gonu Jha.

Now that Gonu Jha has come up, first the story of that great master of trickery, Gonu Jha...

A terrible drought fell upon the kingdom of Mithila. The king had the drum beaten out announcing that whoever could offer a solution would receive a reward.

A huge old man, with ten or more *tilak*-marks on his forehead, came to the king's court saying he had performed tapasya for a hundred years in the Himalayas and could bring rain through a *yajna*. By evening he had been given a place and the necessary materials. Gonu Jha had gone somewhere to stay as a guest. When he returned in the evening and heard everything from his wife, he was astonished and set out to meet the man.

Meanwhile, before dawn, word had spread all over that another *baba* with twenty or more *tilak*-marks had also arrived.

Now when the twenty-*tilak* baba met the ten-*tilak* baba, the ten-*tilak* baba said: you are a twenty-*tilak* baba — then I am Sri Sri 108 twenty-*tilak* baba. Tell me, by what method will you bring rain?

— I have a bamboo by which I will poke the clouds and rain will fall.

— Where do you keep such a long bamboo?

— In the mouth of a fraud like you.

Now the ten-*tilak* baba made an excuse of going to relieve himself and departed.

— Hoi. At least take your *kharama* sandals and *kamandal*!

But he had run, and people chased him trying to grab his beard. But that beard was false and so it was torn off. And the fraud seized his chance and escaped. Then Gonu Jha too removed his false moustache and beard and returned to his own form. The king honoured his cleverness.

Now that story — of Dulra Dayal Mallah of Bharaura. From that same village of Gonu Jha.

Now hear the real story...

Son of Dukhharan Sahni. As a child, his marriage was arranged with Dhanias Marauti, daughter of Bahuara Gaurheen of Bakhari. But something happened — all the wedding party was locked up by the bride's side, and Dukhharan took his son and fled back to the village. Dulra Dayal was accomplished in song and dance, so people called him Natua Dayal too. When he grew up, he asked his father why his *gauna* — the ceremony of bringing home the bride — had not yet taken place. When he found out everything, he set out for Bakhari. And at the boundary of Bakhari, by a well, he meets his bride. After many obstacles, he brings his bride home.

Bichkun Sadaay — Musahar. The small ponds and marshy, quaking bog-ground beside the Dakahi pond — in these the Musahars dig and eat water-roots. In times of famine when all other ponds and small water-

bodies dry up, the Dakahi pond alone does not dry.

Bhumihars — Radhamohan Ray. *Koir* — Dukhan Mahato. *Sonar* — Ashok Thakur. *Teli* — Ramchandra Sav, Bawku Sav and Kari Sav.

The village's mango orchards — several. The great orchard. The new-orchard of *Kharhauri*. The morning-side orchard. The orchards on the ridges of the ponds. In grafting mangoes from discarded seeds, these villagers are very skilled.

Bambai, *Doma Bambai*, *Sobhja* (*Sobja Bambai*), *Najara Bambai*, *Nengra Bambai*. Bambai mango of so many kinds. *Baramasiya* — twelve months a year. *Kalami Bhadaiya*, *Bathua* (*Bhadaiya*). *Rair* is very sweet. *Kariamamma* is poor in both appearance and taste. *Dhumnaha* grows large but is a rotter. *Rohniya* is also a rotter — it falls off the branch in the rains, it ripens earliest of all mangoes in Mithila. Throw away a Bambai seed and a *Tipiya* will grow. The *Kalami* does not grow from a thrown seed — it is grafted. The *Kalami* has flesh — it is heavy on the stomach; the *sarahi* has juice and is easily digestible, and is also slightly tart — for that reason the tart *ammat* pickle is made from the *sarahi*. Wedding parties are given *Bambai* in the early season and *sapeta*

in the late season — these two mangoes are considered the finest. Pickles and *amail* are made from the *Kalkattiya*, though they are made from other mangoes too. From the unshelled mango — *kachua* pickle, and from the shelled mango — sliced pickle. People tire of cabbage and *parhaud* eventually but never of mango. Every taste from every mango.

In *Kharhauri* too there used to be fields. But one person who planted a new orchard found that its shade suppressed the paddy crop of the neighbouring fields. So he too, muttering something at the crossroads, planted a mango orchard there.

There is a *jamuni* grove too. Tall, spreading trees — the *jom* — and slender, fine-leaved *jomni*. And the small, small *gulab-jamun* berries.

Peepal trees are scattered here and there from the *Dihari* shrine all the way to the school grounds. The roots of the peepal reaching out in all directions. Cacti, *pakari*, bel, *tetair* trees are also here and there.

On the embankments — wild betel-nut trees, thickets of *sahar datmani*, bamboo groves and countless flowers and thorns. *Lajbijji* — the sensitive plant — in every orchard. On the broad-canopied mango trees, watchmen have spread out their bedding and sleep. Banyan trees — but only one, near the

peech, close to Mian Toli. *Duddhi* banana is very beautiful to look at, *Gauriya* banana is very sweet, *Bagnar* banana is large and thick but not that flavorful. If the buffalo does not get its fodder-leaves on time, *menagobhi* leaves are fed to warm it up. *Kharahi* is used for thatch and fence-making; the betel vine creeps along *kharahi*, and its use is seen in *baraib* ritual.

In Garh Narikel, the varieties of trees, fruits, grains and vegetables outnumber the human castes.

Vegetables are plentiful — *jhingli*, *sim*, *bhatta*, *muninga*, wild *arar*, *ol*, *kachu*, *chhatail*, *kaita*, *kamalkakri*, *khajba* jackfruit, *khambharu*, *barhar*, *parhaud*. *Ghera* — its flower is fried in batter. Greens of yet more kinds — *genhari* white and red, *aktaa*, *misiya*, *raja rani*. *Muninga* (*sahjan*) greens. Wild *palakki*.

In *Chait*, neem's new spring leaves are used together with *bhatta*.

In lentils: *kurthi*, *masuri*, *kherahi*, *rahari*, *rahariya*, *aktaa*, *misiya*, *bhatpurni*, *ramjhumni*, *sim*.

Rahari dal is eaten by the wealthy,
rahariya dal by the poor.

Dabra, *Dasariya*, *Malida*, *Belour*
— these varieties of paddy, even when
submerged, do not become hollow-kernelled.

Bori paddy has a creeper — this creeper
trails over the water's surface and a plant
grows from every node; barely ten plants fit
in a *katha* of land, and from those the
whole field fills up.

Many types of paddy grow in the *chauri*
marsh — at the time of transplanting there is
no water, but later knee-deep, thigh-deep
water is always in the *chauri*. The rice
grains are somewhat thicker, that's all.
Hapsa is fragrant. Among the paddy
grown in Garh Narikel's *chhaapi* land —
the *chauri* — there is *sattokhari*,
padabapankhi, *tatto*, *kasaham*,
umatth. In medium-level fields: *satriya*,
panijhali. Paddy for the higher fields:
jasba, *kamalkaathi* — with these, good
paddy cultivation is possible even with less
water.

Paddy is ready in *Agahan*.

The paddy is harvested bit by bit, carefully,
by everyone.

Seed-paddy is kept aside for the seed-bed.

The seed is scattered in the *biraar* seed-bed and the seedlings are readied.

From the *Ardra* festival day, transplanting begins.

Curd, day-old rice, jaggery-molasses, *kajal* — all mixed together and fashioned into three or five balls on a *kanchu* leaf — are placed in the field as an offering by everyone. If the Brahmin farmer has three *pravara* lineages, he calls the farmer and the farm-labourers — three cows, three *paan*; and three balls are placed in the field. If the Brahmin farmer has five *pravara* lineages, he calls — five cows, five *paan*; and five balls are placed in the field. These are recited in the field, and the day-labourers set the seedlings uprooted from the seed-bed into the paddy field.

*In *Jeth* the seed-ball fell, in *Ashadh* it was born*

*In *Sawan* we transplanted, in *Bhadon* the tillering was done*

*In *Asin* the paddy flowered, in *Kartik* the grain formed*

*In *Agahan* the paddy was cut and threshed*

Having threshed, poured into the granary — pounding and eating we shall

When half the transplanting is done and the rest remains, people pause to catch their breath.

Bhadai is sown broadcast; the villagers are skilled in this *chhituaa* paddy cultivation.

Bhadai too of many kinds — *Lakkhhi*, *Jalli*, *Jharha*, *Bachchiya*, *Rangba*, *Gamhari Ujra*, *Gamhari Kariya*. This is ready in *Bhadon*.

Chilli seed-bed. *Biraar*.

Banana rootstock-garden.

In fruits: lychee, banana, jackfruit, *latam*, *mahua*, *jilebi*, *buniya*, *bair*, *aata*, *shariffa*, *sapota*, *barhar*, *jom*, mulberry, pomegranate, coconut, *tabhnebo*, bel, *kadam* — trees of all these are all around. Banana too of many kinds — *Marichmaan*, *Gauria Malbhog*, *Jhurkutiya*, *Dudhi*, *Banshicat*, *Anupan*, *Dudhmungar*, *Batisa*, *Malbhog*, *Singapori*, *Baghnar*, *Barhari*, *Chiniya*, *Malbhog*, *Kapuriya*.

Forests of *kaas*, *pater*, *jhauna* grass. *Khagraa* grass.

Oil from *kera* lentil, mustard, *tori*, *reinchi* and castor. *Til* plants are abundant everywhere — the stalk is used for

making *bareri* and the stem for burning *bajrakraai*. *Aam baanji* makes fine charcoal. *Jamain* tree is useful in the *Dhoen Dhekar* purification rite. *Mangrel* increases the milk yield of cows and also of women. *Suwa*, *jamain-ajmain*, *mangrel* are used as spices. *Mothi*, *mohali-saunf*, *dhoni*, *pudina*, *lahsun-rasun*, *piyauj* and *methi* plants. *Kagji* and *Jamiri* lemon. *Tetair*.

Birds — such as *kachbachiya*, *vanchar* (forest starling), *tithi* (lapwing), *gachhkhodahi* (woodpecker), *chamgadar* (bat), *munhdussi* (owl), *chilhoriya*, *lalsar*, *dighaunch*, *deshi kawa*, *kar kawa* (crow, obstinate crow), *khanjnichirayya* (wagtail, autumn season), *chakeba*, *chaaha-cheha*, *chilhori*, *chuhchuiya*, *dakhar*, *tittir*, partridge with red stripe on the throat, *dhanes*, *dhobiniya* bird, *parba*, *panidubi*, *banmurga*, hill *myna* (red on the face), *paudki*, *phuddi*, *bagra*, *badar* (red-tailed), *baajh*, *maini* (white patch on black, red tongue), *munhdussa*, *laalmuniya*, *nilkanth*, *hariyal* — the green pigeon, which is hunted and eaten. The *fatinga* that strikes the eye (*ankh-phora*); butterfly (two-winged, colourful, without a tail); *tukili* (four-winged, with a tail). The green praying mantis — God Hanuman's horse; another one also exists —

like an English machine, it seems the English saw this and made the JCB machine from it.

Khariya, deer, blue bull, green turtle, green conch, *bijji* badger, *khikhir*, *shahi* porcupine — also in abundance.

The meat of snails is made into a side-dish and eaten; it is also drunk as a hot broth; placed in a vessel, the water released after five or seven hours is given to children to drink in a *mamrakha* earthen bowl, and it is beneficial for urinary problems as well, cools the stomach.

Fish too of many kinds — *rekha*, *tengra*, *kawa*, *garai*, *garchunni*, *gaincha*, *chenga*, *singhi*, *bhunna*, *rauh*. Even rotten *bhunna* fetches double the price of fresh *rauh*.

Chichor — the most abundant species of useless grass in Garh Narikel — notable by name. *Paainik keshour*. Trees with dreadlock flowers. *Hardi* tree. *Agiya grah* tree — to prevent the evil eye and *guzri*, its branch is tied on the arm.

Bread of many kinds — *marua*, rice, *khuddi*, *jao*, almond, *khesari*, *kaun*, *cheen*, maize, millet, *janer*, *alhua*, *aktaa*, *misiya*, *masuri*, *phakua*, *kherahi*, *gura*, *singhar*, *makhaan*, *bhaint*.

On a *katha* or so, the well-off also cultivate wheat, and *sohary* flatbread is also made from it.

The same things keep coming round again and again...

Don't interrupt — the people of this village speak in a rhythm... the same thing comes round many times, but how many new things also come in that rhythm.

Games too of many kinds — the Sanskrit *atkan-matkan* and *kabaddi*. *Champa-Champa* is played with *kanaial* berries; *kariya-jhumri khele chhi dhil patapat mare chhi, samachakeba khele chhi chugla dhoti phare chhi, chugla kothi chhaar bhayya kothi chaaur, chugla rau tohar e kon baani...* from *salau nichhai paani*. Let's go play *jharni*. Come let's play *bansi*. *Amman chhu amman chhu, Chait kabaddi aaba de*. *Bhagavatlila* — the *hathiyasur* and *ujji-ujji*, *Lal Chhadi* — *jakere naam lal chhadi saahi chali aabay thokar maari parray*. *Jhijhia*, *Jat-Jatin*, *Jharni*, *Huriyaha-Huriyahi*, *Hura-Huri*, *Chhutiya*, *Koili Daud*, *Chor Police*, *Hukka-Loli*, *Kansupti*, *Singi-Patahi*, *Jhijhirkona* — *jhijhir kona jhijhir kona... kon kona*, *Gadha-Gurkhan*, *Chausa*, *Satghariya*, *Dolpatta*, *Hathi-Chukka*, *Guri Kabaddi*, *Ghoda Kabaddi*, *Juaa*, *Kauri-Kauri*, *Kit-Kit*, *Dori Kud*, *Gharba-Duarba*, *Kho-Kho* — this is

local *Kho-Kho*, not Bombay's —
 Choranukki, *Gulli-Danda*, *Pingla*,
 Lathmaar, *Lukka-Chhippi*, *Sona-
 Dubbi*, *Kushti* wrestling, *Pachisi*,
 Ghaas-Ghaas, *Pachgotba*, *Pitto*,
 Ghoghorani, *Aankh Michhouni*,
 Kaniya-Putra — dolls — *Marua-
 Maruaini*, *Marua Dheri*, *Banrphaan*,
 Maaldari, football, chess, cards,
 Antakshari, *Pithiyathok*,
 Gobarkanna, *Jhilam Jhaar*,
 Solhgotiya, *Jhilhari*, *Chhuli-Chhuli*,
 Dhengapaani, *Chikka Kabaddi*, *Akro-
 Makro*, *Goli-Goli*. And: *Rau chhora
 rabrhakna, Raja beti ka byaah heta ekta
 kathar maangai chhi, abhin ta ropba kailain
 hain... abhin ta khijja chhai...*

Good heavens...

The chutneys and *sanna* of Garh Narikel
 too are of countless kinds. Raw *latam*,
 arikauncha, *ol*, garlic, onion, *tetari*,
 kadam, *methi*, coriander, mint, sesame,
 tisi, *amadi*, tomato, *kutrum*,
 dhaatri (*dhaatriy*), mango piece,
 mustard, poppy seed, *chatail*, *pirar*,
 bhaata brinjal, *ghera*, *jhumni*,
 ramjhumni, *karaila* bitter gourd, potato
 (*sanna*/mash), *parhaud*, *kurli*
 (*madhkurmi*), *murai* radish, spinach
 patauara, banana (*sanna*), *barhar*,
 karona, *amarora*, *amra*, ginger,
 tuuit, mango blossom (*baur*),

muninga flower, *ghorjaur* — buttermilk dregs — *sarifa*, *khamhrua*, *penchi*, *aurbi*, coconut, salt-chilli-*kasauni* mixed, fish (*sanna*), *kaankor* (*sanna*), *doka* (*sanna*), *mochhi* — of jackfruit — *poro*, jackfruit pod.

In oils: mustard (*karu tel*), *tori*, sunflower, *reinchi*, *tor*, castor, *kushum*, *murai*, sesame, soybean, coconut, groundnut, *mahua*, *kataiya*, *tissi*.

Fields and farmland too of many kinds. The fields between the two rivers — everyone calls them *oi-par* — the fields across. Sandy fields and silt-laden ones too. The Kamala brings sand and the Balan brings silt. *Paror*, watermelon, *fuit* and *alhua* cultivation — the cheapest land available for purchase anywhere. But after a flood, the field's ridges and boundaries will be found changed. If some year after a flood a field's area has shrunk, don't stand arguing. In the next flood, Kamala Maharani may well increase its area back. Farming is of paddy too, but that depends on luck. Some years, even after planting three times over, each time it will be washed away in floods; some years Kamala Maharani will fill the field with so much silt that if you think in terms of two *mon* per *katha*, you will get even more than that.

To buy slightly more expensive land, buy the land by the *mor* — the curve — or where the *gambhari* tree grows, or by the fig tree. Here people are buying land more for habitation than for farming.

The fields beside the Dakahi pond are called *Badhmaotar*. Earlier they may have been given as *Brahmottara* — a gift to Brahmins — by some king. Earlier one heard that good farming was done there but these days water stands in them. In this region, the *chhituua* paddy cultivation all happens in this *baadh*.

On the death of a buffalo, wailing will also be heard once every month or two. And *jaadoo-tona* — a *puja*-flower thrown at someone's doorstep at night — is also seen once or twice a year. But now people have understood too that this is some youngster's mischief.

Agriculture-fishery-cattle-rearing-based, this village overwhelmingly inhabited by Mahisbar Brahmins is surrounded by educated, not-so-educated and taciturn villages all around — but there is also one village of thieves nearby. Pure thieves — of objects, things and beings. But that they will steal in Garh Narikel — that is not usual. But in this village there is an orchard — *Channa Gaachi*. Even in daytime it is dark. Ghosts, demons and corpses all play *kabaddi* at night — the clear sound of thighs being

slapped in the game reaches as far as the road at night; many people have listened to that sound — but they do not accost passers-by; they are absorbed in their own game. Bah, how would a corpse play *kabaddi* — it would just fall flat. Better to have seen for yourself — why go so deep into hearsay? The thieves too, in this very *Channa Gaachi* where even in daytime people are afraid to go, divide up their stolen goods at night. How do I know that? Father — the Mahisbar Brahmins of this village are themselves demons. They go to the *Channa Gaachi* in daytime and bring back whatever stolen goods have been left behind in the dark by the thieves. Once, some relative's belongings were stolen and found here — whose relative and what belongings, don't ask. I hear that one Mahisbar Brahmin's grandfather, when he was young, had gone there to search for stolen goods and found six corpses of thieves — they must have quarrelled over the division and all killed each other. All the stolen goods were scattered everywhere, and everything came to him. In search of another such windfall, they have been going to the *Channa Gaachi* by three different marsh routes — but such a windfall has not come again.

In other villages, every kind of thief — of literature, of conduct, of thought, of publicity.

The neighbouring thieves do not have the courage to steal in any household of any caste in Garh Narikel. Whoever's marriage takes place in this village has all their troublesome land disputes settled. Becoming a kinsman of this village makes a person prosperous. From here, the *haseri* — the work-party — goes far and wide. The *haseri* comes out for everything from settling disputes over a kinsman's land to many other occasions. Land that costs a thousand rupees per *katha* in this village costs only a hundred rupees per *katha* in the neighbouring *Banaraha* village. High-lying land is cheap in the village because the rain-water cannot irrigate the elevated land. In *Banaraha* village, on high-lying land, these *Banaraha* people grow paddy varieties *jasba*, *kamalkaathi*, *doodhraj*, *bhalsari*, *mansuri*, *bhola mansuri*, *kankshimansuri*; and maize, *kurthi*, *rahari*, *madua*, *kodo*, *kheri* and mustard.

Banaraha — you wouldn't know, that village's orchards are full of monkeys and the people are also yellow-ochre like monkeys!

But you will certainly find a *baari* — kitchen garden — behind every house in Garh Narikel; *bhatta*, lemon, leafy greens, radish — all these are found in the *baari*, and many other kinds of herbs and medicinal plants too.

Until now Durga Puja has not started in this village. It has started in the taciturn village and in *Banaraha* village too — but here! If one wanted it, why wouldn't it happen? Didn't we do the *Ramlila* for a full month? Bah — the embankment clique made everyone fed up. Better that Durga Puja doesn't happen. First there will be the trouble of arranging *liyaun* for the daughters-in-law; and what harmony remains will be destroyed by party politics.

With a *khurpi* the Brahmin of this village can fill many sacks of grass in a single breath, half a mile's worth. The Brahmin of this village keeps all the finest breeds of buffalo. If even the cattle of this village's quarters are touched by someone from another village, the *haseri* comes out — knowingly or unknowingly, an outsider does not have the daring to raise a staff against this village's cattle.

Garh Narikel does not lack for artists. The *khurd* player Jangal Ram, the cornet player Jitan Ram, the devotional singer *Bhagait* — Ruplal Yadav; storytellers — Chhutaharu Yadav and Tahal Mukhi. Dance company opened by Khushilal Sahu, manager Phusan Yadav. Better than the dance companies of both Simraha-Saptari and Simraha-Supaul. *Alha Rudul*, *Lachhiya Rani* — *Sati Lachhiya*, *Sheet Basant*, *Gugli Ghatma*, *Raja Kunwar Brijbhan*, *Dhul ka Phool*, *Sultana Daku*, *Raja

Harishchandra*, *Raja Nal*, *Raja Salahas*, *Kaanch Taag*, *Andhar Kanoon*, *Loha Singh*, *Maai ka Kaleja*, *Chudi aur Sinoor*, *Jangal Badshah*, *Vansh Ujaaran*, *Piya Deshaaantar* — Jyotirishwar's *Videshiya*, preceding Vidyapati — *Lorik Maniyar*, *Baap ki Hatya*, *Damaad Vadh*, *Nishad Vadh*, *Gopichan*, *Shankar Shosila* / *Utimchan* / *Sundar Van ka Sundar Phool*, *Vijay Singh*, *Pita Hatya*, *Jangli Badshah*, *Ras Lila*, *Runa-Jhuna*, *Kabir Lila*, *Kalyug Prem* — and countless other ballads. *Naagarchi* (*nengera* — large drum player) Guneshwar Ram; *khaujri* player Sukdev Safi. *Ghunaamunaa* (*sarangi*) player Khattar Mallik — far better than the Dom-Malliks of his maternal village Kamaraail on the *ghunaamuunaa*. *Jhalibah* (*jhaal* player) Asharphi Mandal. *Kathajhaal* / *Ramjhaal* / *kartaal* player Chhedi Mandal. *Bausli* player Gullab Paswan / Jhotan Mandal. Horse dance and labourer's dance performers — Mahadeo Baniya from the line, Dasain Thakur, Durgalal Thakur, Ghuran Pandit. *Jhunjhunna* (*majira*) player Arjun Mandal. *Jhaalar* player Ramjani Paswan; *jaltarang* player Malabhogi Das; *kathtarang* player Bhayalal Das; *mridang* player Chhotakani Das; *been* player Dukhharan Yadav; *tanpura* — Gangaay Sahu; *tarsa* (*taasa*) — played at *Huriyahi* and at the

daha procession by Kallar Mallik and Mo. Aajam. *Jhaalar* — Bachcha Mandal. *Bipta* is made by Sitaram Ram. The *Digri* player is often also a *Bhariya* — he carries loads on his head, a *digri*-sunder; Satan Mukhi plays the *digri* and Jhotan Mandal sounds the *digri* and also does the work of *bhariya*. From the *digri* comes a small thin sound. From the *nengera* comes a thick sound — when it strikes, you know the dance has begun. *Gumgumiyan* (bass drum), *Babaji's dhuthu* (trumpet) — Domi Das plays it. *Singhariya*, *dhudhubaja* — the big variety, you have to spit while playing it, so much breath is required. *Benjo*. Dancer (Raghunath Sadaay); female roles (Ashok Singh). Male roles, acting, singer, lead, *theakaaita* (tabla player). Organ — Dubbi Mukhi; *naal* — Sunar Choupal; cornet — Phusan Ram; *nengera* — Asharphi Gosain; *dholak* — Hiyalal; *mridang* player — Jharilal Sadaay. *Alha / Maharai*. *Jogira*, *paraati* (*prabhaati*) singer — Lelhu Das. *Jharni* — Mo. Aakuf. *Naal* player — Khattar Mandal. Drum set, harmonium — you may say everyone in Garh Narikel plays these. *Danka* / *dhol* / *tabla* — Chunaai Ram. On the *dampha* at *Holi*, no one can match Biku Ram.

Bhagait singer Bichkun Sadaay — the *Bhagait* party of Rasuaar is nothing before him; he sings *Bhagait* and plays the *khajuri* alongside.

The mat-weavers of Deepgaon, craftsmen of *mota* mat-weaving, have also taught some people here their art.

The *aripan* and Mithila painting of the Sahebganjwali and Balatwali; the folk songs of the Belmohanwali and Belahiwal; needlework and embroidery of the Macchhdhiwali. Clay saucers and thousands of tiny clay Mahadeva idols — a one-handed game for the girls and women of this place. Thousands upon thousands of clay Mahadev idols immersed in the garden will be found here and there. The courtyard and house properly cleaned and plastered — from husking and grinding to transplanting and irrigation, the women of Garh Narikel are not behind in anything. Whether it is the *Saptadora* story or *Madhusvavani* — the women of this place tell every story in a single breath, and when the daughters of this place are married off to other villages, they spread their gifts there too.

The Mahisbar Brahmins of Garh Narikel call the Bhumihars *pachhima*. Those people call themselves Bhumihars Brahmins, but the Mahisbar Brahmins don't consider them Brahmins. They were Brahmins once but became Buddhist, out of greed for land. Wherever there is land near a Buddhist monastery, Bhumihars will be found — in Bihar, in the Terai of Nepal, and in eastern

Uttar Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh there is the Sanchi Stupa, but there was no land near Buddhist monasteries there, hence Bhumihars are not found there. The Buddhist *siddha* Mehtapa was from Garh Narikel itself. Both his birthplace and place of work were here — he was a *siddha*, he had travelled everywhere, as far as Tibet, and come back. And when Buddhism ended, the Brahmins who had become Buddhist returned to the Sanatan Dharma — but the Mahisbar Brahmins do not consider them Brahmins. The Mahisbar Brahmins — educated or not — will give you knowledge of history and culture that will shake you. But as to why they call the Bhumihars *pachhima*, at that moment they will only say: must have come from the west.

But the *pachhima* people are hurt when called *pachhima* — they call themselves the *dihi* — the original settlers — of this village. But one particular community among the Mahisbar Brahmins also calls itself the *dihi* of this village, and they have reason too — the largest population belongs to the *dihi*, and so it is theirs. But Misartoli's *bhaginmaan* Suryanarayan Thakur says: no, how can the *pachhima* have a larger number? In the plague, their entire quarter was wiped out, one or two survived; half of Misartoli too was wiped out, and then the plague ended, so the *ekaharey* ones all survived. The *dihi* could be either the *pachhima* or the

ekaharey community of the Mahisbar Brahmins. But this village is known as the village of the Mahisbar Brahmins alone. There is a *Tikulhara Tol* too — that too of Mahisbar Brahmins — in the evenings, like *tikulhara* they all buzz and hum, that's why.

These are the ones who call this village their own.

And the village is Garh Narikel — the village of the Mahisbar Brahmins.

39 SEED-STORIES/ MICRO-FICTIONS

The Rickshaw Ride and the Fear of Being Robbed

The bus had got a puncture, so at midnight both companions alighted at Harding Park bus stand in Patna.

"Will you go to Punaichak? We have no luggage to speak of — just two of us and two handbags." My companion appealed to the rickshaw puller.

"That's fine enough, but in that neighbourhood, whatever fare you give me, those pickpockets will snatch it on my way back."

"Bah, never mind that — we're the ones who do the snatching around here, and since we ourselves are going, who's going to rob you?" My companion's appeal had turned into self-assurance.

And the rickshaw puller agreed to go.

The Counterfeit Note

A very old story. When a thousand-rupee note existed, but genuine ones were fewer and counterfeit ones more plentiful.

The moment I stepped out at Patna airport, a taxi driver latched on, picked up my luggage, put it in the car, and said the fare was six hundred rupees — but the parking charge of eighty rupees would be extra. I had only that one thousand-rupee note on me, genuine or counterfeit I didn't know. So I asked: can the parking man give change? He said confidently: it'll be done.

The car stopped, I handed the note to the parking attendant, and he began turning it over and examining it — meanwhile I went cold, thinking there's no other note with me, and if this turns out to be counterfeit, I've heard that's a crime too. The taxi driver launched a running commentary.

"Don't you know the man — can't you see what he arrived in — that he'd hand you a counterfeit note?"

And the parking attendant, worn down,
began counting out change, and my life
returned to me.

The Road with Water

My Patna companion was posted at Mansaghat Block, Kusheshwar Sthan — a flood-prone area he had never seen. He knew that during the rains getting around would be difficult. Simple man.

A friend of mine had his maternal uncle's village at Manseghat, so I had a letter written and gave it to him.

My companion was a devotee of Kali-Bhagwati. At the block office itself, people told him about the maternal uncle being an important man — that he had two boats, one for household use and one for guests and relatives. And Ugratara Bhagwati — the district is different, Supaul or Saharsa, but it's close by.

The companion reached the maternal uncle, and began planning a trip to Ugratara.

"There's no flood yet — so is there some route by road or vehicle by which one could have darshan of Ma Ugratara?"

"You're thinking in terms of Patna. It's the other way round here. Right now there's no water on the road, but the road is broken and damaged — it'll take five or six hours by bus. A boat can't run now. Let the flood come — by boat it's a twenty-minute journey, thirty at most."

Yes Sir

"Yadavji, why do you say *ji sir* to everything?"

"*Ji sir*. Yes — this *ji sir, ji sir* has got so twisted from saying it at the office that now when my son says bring me this thing, *ji sir* comes out of my mouth."

Two Prisoners

"This bastard jailer beats people terribly — any excuse will do for this fellow, just wants to beat someone."

"Now when you've got a case of theft and snatching filed against you, what should he do — perform an **aarti** for you? Look at the swagger of Udna over there — the jailer is enquiring after his welfare, asking if the staff is giving him any trouble. Father, it's not a theft and snatching case on Udna — it's a murder case."

Each One's Fate

A son of one of my companions and the wife of another companion were talking, and I sat listening like R.K. Laxman's Common Man. Let me tell you that both companions were BDOs — the first, whose son is one of the parties, was posted in Uttar Pradesh, and the second, whose wife is the other party, was posted in Bihar. It's an old story — from the time when Jharkhand was still part of Bihar and Uttarakhand still part of Uttar Pradesh. In UP, officers were sent to the hills as punishment postings — that part now belongs to Uttarakhand; in Bihar, flood or drought postings were always considered plum postings.

Companion's son: At that time it was the communal government of Kalyan Singh. My father was given a punishment posting to Tehri, up in the hills — dry as a bone. But, father, it was written in fate that money would come — an earthquake arrived and there was money to be made.

Companion's wife: That's exactly it — look at this one, they posted him at Kusheshwar Sthan. I'd heard it stays submerged. But since

he went there, not a flood, not a drought.
Each one's own fate.

The Discourse

In Delhi, at a discourse, Gonar Bhai was listening to a famous Swamiji who was saying:

"I am giving a discourse after many days, because I had gone to Patna. There is a neighbourhood there called Rajendra Nagar, where admirers of India's first President Rajendra Prasad reside. At a discourse there, a question arose..."

Afterwards I asked Gonar Bhai: "Gonar Bhai, I lived in Patna for twenty years but even I didn't know that Rajendra Nagar's residents were admirers of Rajendra Prasad. And you had gone to the village for the paddy harvest — so when did this Patna discourse episode happen?"

"Arre, understand — if I don't say all this, will these Punjabi fellows give a single paisa?"

The Promised Thing

"Gonar Bhai, Baragat was saying you didn't give him anything you'd promised. I was the matchmaker — now whenever he sees me he goes for me." The matchmaker addressed Gonar Bhai reproachfully.

"I say — whatever I promised and whatever I didn't promise in that intoxicated state, do you think I remember any of it? He kept saying things and I kept going *haan-haan*."

Bhuura Baal

Search on Google and you'll find the full details of this acronym for an upper-caste group. If you want to understand it broken down, search "Bhuura Baal Jaati."

There were four companions. But one of them was from outside this *Bhuura Baal* group. He was speaking:

"Among the first you'll rarely find a gentleman, among the second a man of sense, and among the fourth an honest man."

"You didn't say anything about the third, and didn't tell us your own caste's saying either."

"The puranas and epics have been writing about the third all along. And my caste was behind, so no saying got made. Now it's moved a little ahead. Now it'll get made. And as soon as it does, I'll tell you first."

Self-Respect

The companion crossed on a yellow light and in the middle of it the light turned red. The companion was a senior officer of the vigilance department — but a constable had the car pulled over to the side. When the havildar came, the companion showed him a five-hundred-rupee note and asked him to let them go. The havildar said:

"I am the only government employee from my village. I have a great deal of honour back home. Keep this money. I'm letting you go. And when you moved forward, it was still a yellow light — that's why I'm letting you go. If you had moved on a red light, I wouldn't have let you go either."

My companion never tires of telling the story of that havildar's self-respect, especially in places where senior officials go on lamenting that under *pressure* they cannot perform their duty.

The Shadow

"Why did you get so many photographs of yourself made?"

I give my companion no answer and walk on ahead to the frame shop.

"Why are you getting your photograph framed?"

I give my companion no answer again and walk on ahead to the next shop.

"Give me a garland of this frame's size."

"Oh — now I understand. It's the photograph of your late father!"

The Water Cooler

Sardar Gurmeet went to the thieves' market, saw a new water filter, was quoted seven thousand. He said he wanted to install it outside his house on the road in Ganganagar — people have to go here and there looking for water. It's a work of dharma.

Come, take five hundred less. After much back and forth he bought it for three thousand. Installed it outside the house.

But when he came back after a month, his mother told him that all the drinkers are the ones drawing water, and they leave the plastic glasses right there. Earlier I swept only inside the house — now I have to sweep outside the gate too.

You Haven't Become That Big Yet, Friend

The IPL cricket league had just begun — the first match was between Delhi Daredevils and Chennai Super Kings, in Delhi. I too had got two passes, so I went to watch with an office colleague. Security arrangements were tight, constables and havildars deployed in plain clothes.

There was a group from Rajasthan — tribal, in printed colourful churidar-kurta, turbans, earrings, regal in bearing.

More than the match, a running commentary from a spectator in trousers and shirt sitting beside me — who had come from outside the stadium having had his cheek painted in tricolour by a painter — was holding my attention. His manner and bearing were of a piece, his physique compact and broad. Everyone laughed at his remarks but his face carried that same detached expression of a professional commentator.

Chennai Super Kings' Suresh Raina, a senior player, came to the boundary for fielding. The fellow started calling out *Raina Bhai, Raina Bhai* — but why would Suresh Raina turn and look? A havildar in plain clothes told him not to hoot at the players. At that he became emotional.

"Havildar sahab, this is my childhood friend — we used to drink tea together at a tea stall in Muradabad, play *gulli-danda* together, and today he's become such a big man he won't even turn and look."

Even the havildar had to laugh.

In the next over, a new player Vidyut Ramachandran came to the boundary for fielding. Now the spectator came back into his mood and began shouting *Vidyut, Vidyut* — but Vidyut too didn't turn to look at him.

"You haven't become that big a player yet, friend." He said — and everyone except him held their stomachs and laughed.

The Story of the Ambience Mall Campus Electrician

"Sir, this is my fellow-villager — a very good electrician. Has done his ITI but can't get settled anywhere. Put in a word somewhere and get him a job here."

"Where did you work before — why did they let you go?"

"I was the electrician here at Ambience Mall in Gurugram. The Leela Hotel and many other properties — they all belong to Ambience, in the same campus. The basement had got flooded. While fixing an electrical connection repair there, I stripped the wires with my teeth, joined them, and fixed everything standing right there in the water. But someone complained to the manager that he's fixing wires standing in water — if he gets electrocuted and dies, you'll be in trouble. So the manager let me go. I even explained to him that until the circuit is complete, how would electricity flow — I explained about earthing. But he

said: scientifically you're correct, but if something happens who will listen to me? People will say that knowing full well I let him die."

"He's an excellent electrician, sir, but his general knowledge is weak. In an interview somewhere they asked him how long it takes for electricity to come from Meerut to Delhi. He got confused — said that a bus takes 2-3 hours, so keep a little less for electricity, meaning it'll arrive in an hour or an hour and a half. Not a single accident has ever happened with him in his electrical work, sir. But when people see him working like this on a scientific basis and then his general knowledge is weak — it makes them nervous."

The Sniffer Dog Episode

"Sir, there might be drugs in this — I'll call the sniffer dog."

The havildar brought the sniffer dog. It had been trained to sniff out drugs.

The moment it arrived it began sniffing at the baggage and looked as if it would tear the bag apart. It seemed a major drug consignment had been caught. By the time we could restrain the dog it had torn the bag open.

And what was this — instead of drugs, the dog had torn the bag apart, pulled out meat, and started eating it.

"Everyone has become dishonest. Even the money that comes for the dog's meat — he eats that too. Look how hungry the poor thing was." The havildar said.

Traffic Rules

****Part 0****

When I was in Patna, a teacher was saying that in Delhi there's a Connaught Place, where the outer circle has such a traffic-light system that if you drive at forty kilometres per hour, you'll never hit a red light — you'll get green all the way. And also that in the Lutyens zone, the roundabout system is such that there was never any need for traffic lights. After my transfer to Delhi, I was pleased — since I drive at exactly forty kilometres per hour, Delhi would be heaven for me. That was the time when Jharkhand hadn't yet been formed, and in Jamshedpur there were traffic lights at every roundabout, while in Patna there were traffic lights only at the Dak Bungalow crossing.

When I came to Delhi, within a little while traffic lights appeared at Connaught Place's middle circle, and gradually one by one at all the roundabouts of the Lutyens zone. The inner circle at Connaught Place was closed to traffic by the traffic police — now it's used

for parking. But on the outer circle, by the science that the teacher had explained — you'll never hit a red light — first the speed was reduced to thirty, then twenty, then ten kilometres per hour, but now that question has been dropped altogether. I still drive at forty kilometres per hour.

****Part 1****

I had just arrived in Delhi in 2003. I learned that a *route* had been laid — meaning some VIP movement was underway on a designated road. So the plan was made to go to Noida on Ranjit's motorcycle. He gave me a helmet.

"This is not Patna — here the person sitting behind also has to wear a helmet."

Half an hour later he stopped the motorcycle. Took off his own helmet and hung it on the handlebar, took mine and locked it in the carrier.

"Won't there be a police check now?"

"Kaka, Delhi is over now — UP has begun. It's not required here."

****Part 2****

2022 — on some search I went from Delhi to Noida, in my own car. I took along a local inspector from there as per the rules. At the crossroads I had to turn — I put on the side indicator and began turning the car. A cyclist barely avoided crashing into me and went on grumbling.

"Haan haan, sir. This is not Delhi — here if you put on the indicator, no one will give you space. First open the car window, then signal with your hand, and honking all the while — then turn the car!"

****Part 3****

Parking was full in South Ex — I had a one-minute job, so I parked the car on the road,

finished the work quickly, and came back — the car was gone.

I saw a havildar in front and asked what happened to my car. Hear his reply:

"If a thief took it, then I have no idea where your car has gone. But if the traffic police took it away for wrong parking, then go to Defence Colony police station."

I took a rickshaw and went to Defence Colony police station. My car was there — meaning no thief had taken it, so life returned to me.

The Casteist Marathi

"Hey, look at this — in the office the officers are all from Mithila and Bihar, and the rickshaw pullers and cooks are also all from Mithila and Bihar. What kind of thing is that?" A Marathi gentleman asked Singh-ji in Pune.

The observation was fair enough, but an outsider wouldn't understand.

Singh Sahab was in the Indian Police Service, and his sibling was joining *ka* and *ta* letters at a printing press in Bhikhna-Pahari — so none of it seemed at all unnatural to him.

Whether the rickshaw puller was from Darbhanga or Katihar, the cook was almost always from Jhaui.

Why these Marathi people find it unpleasant — no one knows.

Very casteist, all these Marathi people.

A Resilient Man

For two days the *parwa* bird had been sitting alone. Its mate had flown away somewhere. The children had come several times and put water and grain in its cage. But this morning it too emptied the cage and left.

"But why, Nani? Why didn't he too just get married again? Did he love his mate so much?"

"You are a child. This is not some ordinary resilient man who — let the wife die, let the parents die, let the son and daughter-in-law die, let all of society die — will mope for four days and on the fifth day become resilient again."

Polygamy and the Impotent

"Such-and-such Babu has cut the throat of his third wife."

"That's quite right. When the first wife had no child he married again. But when the second too had no child he should have understood."

"Yes — and instead he says to the third wife that she doesn't respect his nephews and that's why God hasn't given children. Can you imagine?"

"But Chilna Babu too has taken a second wife. And Fuchuk Babu as well."

"Chilna Babu had a child in the second marriage, and Fuchuk Babu — when there was no child in the second marriage either, he understood and didn't take a third wife. But this Falana Babu — eunuch, the bastard."

Daughter

"I'll eat with Baba." Buchiya said.

"Hey, you're not a child anymore — sit over here." Mother said.

Then the brothers ate, and now came the turn of Buchiya and Buchiya's mother.

The vegetables had gone cold and dry. Milk had been given only to Baba and the brothers.

Mother scraped out the dried vegetables from the pot with the ladle and gave it to Buchiya, and herself took rice with only salt and oil. She scraped the milk-vessel with her finger and only then did Buchiya drink.

Recounting this story, Manohar said: can we do this now?

Earlier, from food and drink all the way to education, injustice was done to daughters. The time of Apala, Gargi and Maitreyi has come back again now, after all this time.

Marriage and the Touching of Feet

The son-in-law touched the father-in-law's feet in greeting, and the father-in-law pulled out a hundred-rupee note and called to the daughter for a one-rupee coin.

He had spent lavishly on the daughter's wedding, had set aside money separately, and had also registered four *kattha* of town-land in the daughter's name.

"No, Babujee — what need is there for this *gorlagai*?"

By then the daughter had already arrived, with the one-rupee coin.

Placing one hundred and one rupees in the son-in-law's hand, the father-in-law said:

"Keep it, keep it. This I had thought of even before."

Talent

A drinks party of IAS and IPS probationers was going on in Mussoorie.

"We are so sharp — we made a set of a hundred questions and prepared from them and only then succeeded. Who is sharper than us?"

"Hey Dineswa. In seventh standard you didn't pass; in eighth standard too you didn't pass in one go. In tenth you were in second division and the school expelled you. We and you practised the question patterns and succeeded — where does sharpness come into this?"

Caste

A drinks party was going on at Hyderabad Police Academy.

"No one will say anything — only I will speak."

Beating his chest: "This is a Rajput's chest — no one will say a word."

"Brother, that's exactly the difference. Both of us are IPS, both of us have been drinking. But can I beat my chest and say — I am a Dom, let no one say a word!"

The Compassionate Job

"It's hurting terribly, son — I can't bear it anymore."

I don't know what the wound was. He was moaning and crying out. The father had been a freedom fighter — when the doctor and compounder refused to touch the wound, he himself was attending to it with his own hands. Mixing white powder in coconut oil, removing the scabs from the wound and applying it. Cleaning the pus. Father and younger brother both engaged in nursing.

The previous year the eldest son had passed in first division, the Satyanarayana puja had been performed.

The old father's great hope was his elder son. The younger son was good for nothing — needlessly troubled his father, saying: just give me a letter and I'll get a job at the Khadi Bhandar. Quarrels in the house.

But the elder son's illness was such that one day it took his life.

He had gone joyfully to jail fighting the British — but he was young then. In old age this grief broke him. He became quiet and withdrawn, lost in himself. Somehow managed the house on the freedom fighter's pension.

The younger son's quarrels apart.

One day he gave the younger son the elder son's certificates.

The younger son took the elder brother's certificates, went to Calcutta, and on the basis of those certificates got a good job in a private company. That is to say, only the name had changed.

People get jobs on the compassionate grounds of a father's death — he got it on a brother's death.

The Recommendation and the Officer

A brand-new SP sahab had arrived in the city — genuinely honest. Not the kind who stays honest for a while just to raise his market rate.

His relatives came to meet him. Great admiration for SP sahab.

The relatives had two daughters-in-law — if SP sahab said a word to the principal, both could get admission to B.Ed. somehow or other.

But SP sahab simply couldn't understand why something he said to a principal would make the education department comply — and why he should needlessly phone someone in another department. Simple man, no connection with the workings of the world.

But the relatives insisted — close relatives too, what could he do? But why would an education department person come to him —

on what business? And if they didn't come, he wouldn't phone them.

"Then do this — burst two bombs at the gate of the B.Ed. training college — then the principal will come to me himself, and I'll ask him for two admissions."

The relatives left deflated and never insisted again.

The New Media

A robbery took place in the city.

The new media on their respective channels — *this channel is the first to bring you this information* — provide details; two days without a single arrest, footage everywhere of police's exposed incompetence.

A meeting was held at police headquarters. All TV channels were saying four people together had committed the robbery but not one had been arrested yet.

An encounter specialist was called. As happened every time, this time too he caught one person and brought him. Under the fear of the encounter specialist, after just four blows the person confessed to being a robber. Then the officers had their photos taken with the encounter specialist for the cameras.

Four more hours passed. That alleged robber kept getting beaten.

I arrived in the evening, asked: "Tell me the names of your three companions with whom you committed the robbery."

"Sarkar — I confessed to being a robber after just four blows. Would I have done that if I were a robber? But where do I bring the names of three other companions from — and who do I falsely implicate?"

Mithila's Industry

In the village Chaudhary-ji had great influence — everyone stayed subdued out of fear. Who has the nerve to go and cut his ripened paddy or...

He opened a bus service.

"It'll run from Darbhanga to the village. Got it secondhand. The previous owner's licence will serve. Along with the bus the previous owner has also given his driver and conductor for three months — after that I'll find my own."

While performing the puja of the bus at the temple, Chaudhary-ji spoke to the villagers.

"I hear there's a lot of rowdyism at the bus stand." One villager said.

"Bah — Chaudhary-ji's bus and driver — who has the nerve to touch them?" Another said while taking the *prasad*.

The bus's route was convenient for passengers, so the bus filled up. The other bus operators — Shah-ji and Mishra-ji — were powerful men. Their staff were a fierce lot. They roughed up Chaudhary-ji's staff and threw them out of the bus stand.

Chaudhary-ji's bus began from the edge of the Hadahi pond, and passengers started arriving there too.

Now the bus-stand bosses got really angry.

The driver and conductor were given a solid beating, and were also told that if they ran on this route again the bus would be made to meet with an accident. Shah and Mishra-ji have fifty vehicles each — one sitting in a police station after an accident is nothing to them. But Chaudhary-ji has only one?

The domineering Chaudhary-ji became like a goat before the bus-stand bosses.

In the village the vehicle stands at the temple — a *kadima* vine has climbed over it, enormous gourds have covered the bus. A fine crop.

The same person who had said "Bah — Chaudhary-ji's bus and driver — who has the nerve to touch them?" is now saying: "The proceeds from this season's gourds on Chaudhary-ji's bus might just cover his costs."

And the one who had said "I hear there's a lot of rowdyism at the bus stand" is now saying with concern: "In the industrial estate of Darbhanga too, factories stand closed like this and their walls are covered with vegetable vines."

Flood, Hunger and Migration

1. Hunger (1)

"Hey give it to him. Fine, give me a little too."

Pappu Bhai is sitting with me at a wedding feast. Having washed his hands, he says to me in a grave tone: "From today I will not go to any wedding feast."

"Why, Pappu Bhai?" I am surprised — did the bride's side make some lapse that I couldn't catch?

"What's the point of going — can't eat even a morsel!" Pappu Bhai's gravity didn't diminish in the least, and as for how I managed to suppress my laughter looking at the tallest pile of the pile of bones from all the meat Pappu Bhai had eaten — I cannot say.

2. Hunger (2)

Pappu Bhai's youngest sister's in-laws' buffalo had given birth, giving a great deal of milk. Pappu Bhai set out for his sister's in-laws carrying *tonala* sugarcane and picked *khesari* greens as *sanes*, thinking he'd enjoy a feast of milk.

His sister was overjoyed the moment she saw him. The conversation didn't end while cooking. The wooden seat-plank was set out, Pappu Bhai began eating. What was mother like, what was *bhouji* like, what were the neighbourhood people like, how many chicks did the black hen have, how had the *bhalsari* tree dried up in the flood, what a hollow there was in it.

The meal was nearly over — the milk was simmering on the stove in front, and the sister forgot to give milk. Pappu Bhai had come specifically to drink milk.

"You know, *dai*, on the way here I met a huge snake — how big would you say?"

"How big, *bhaiyya*?"

"From here — " pointing one way — "all the way to that stove where the milk is simmering — that big."

"*Bhaiyya* — I completely forgot to give you the milk."

And the sister began pouring milk into the bowl from the ladle.

3. Flood

This year's flood was not like last time's. It cleaned out everything faster than a fire. Fields and farmland left with only sand — sweet potato cultivation all that's possible. Pappu Bhai has grown sick of eating sweet potato every morning and evening. A Vedic scholar, but in this region of Kosi misery...

But look at fate!

A letter arrives from the nephew at Haridwar: "Come, Kaka — Vedic scholars are in great demand here. Chant the Vedas all day with hand gestures and the rising and falling of *udaatta-anudaatta-svarita* tones, and in the evening enjoy fine sweets, *kheer-puri*."

4. The Thunderbolt in Migration

Pappu Bhai caught the train and reached Haridwar. Having arrived, after ablutions and meditation he chanted Vedic mantras all day, throwing his arms about and straining his throat. In the evening he sat down to eat, having planned that after so many days he would finally get the chance to eat *kheer-puri*.

But here, before he had even arrived at Haridwar, the other pandits had been discussing among themselves. They had grown sick of eating *kheer-puri*. So by consensus it was decided that the menu

would change for a few days. It was resolved that for a few days after the Vedic recitation, sweet potatoes and milk would be given.

The Vedic gentleman sat ready to eat, having planned that whatever food came, he would show it his regards.

But then the thunderbolt struck — sweet potato Maharaj was present before him.

The Vedic gentleman joined his hands and asked sweet potato Maharaj: "Your Highness — I came by train, but by what conveyance did you come that you were already seated here before me?"

The New Feudal Lord

My companion's younger brother used to live in the village. He made trouble and fights there, so he was called to Delhi. Here too he picked fights with everyone over every matter.

Right before my eyes he was threatening someone: "Be there in ten minutes or I'll shoot you. Whether you're twenty kilometres away or forty kilometres — that's none of my concern."

I'd been hearing about him but today I saw him.

My companion began to explain: "Fine, I'm not saying don't beat him. But tell me one thing — from twenty kilometres away in Delhi, at three minutes per kilometre, it'll take sixty minutes — how will he get there in ten minutes?"

The younger brother went inside.

I asked my companion: "The student was working in Gurugram, wasn't he?"

"Yes — I'd arranged a job for him for ten thousand. But he left it. Said this job is not of my level. Now as for his level — despite how much I tried, he couldn't pass matriculation, couldn't pass even in third division."

Fourth Place

Pahalwan-ji was greatly in demand. If someone's house wasn't being vacated, people would tell Pahalwan-ji — he would send two of his *akhara* wrestlers along. Those two wrestlers didn't do any rowdyism or harsh words — but just seeing their physical presence, the encroachers' wits would fly and the job would get done.

Wrestlers are powerful, but they're not so agile at running. But Pahalwan-ji wouldn't accept this, and so he entered his name for the half marathon — a twenty-kilometre race that would end at the city stadium. He trained well and took part.

First three places would get gold, silver and bronze medals.

In a short race you can see your competitors, but in a half marathon you can't tell who's where. Pahalwan-ji was running alone towards the stadium, sweating heavily — no

one visible ahead, no one behind. Just then two people going on a moped, one of them called out to Pahalwan-ji while moving ahead:

"Pahalwan-ji — give it a push, put in the effort — you're currently in fourth place."

Pahalwan-ji had been feeling he was far behind — that's why no one was visible ahead or behind — and had been running at a leisurely pace. But now that he was in fourth place, a medal was possible.

Pahalwan-ji put in everything he had. A little further ahead he spotted one runner and with greater effort overtook him. Good — bronze medal is assured. A little more effort and near the stadium gate he overtook another runner. Then he entered the stadium and crossed the finish line and collapsed in a heap. Fine — silver medal is guaranteed.

But what was this — the announcement of winners in the stadium began. First, second, third... Aaahi re baba... Pahalwan-ji was in eighth place.

His body was shattered, not a word came out. Somehow he made his way towards the spectators' gallery, looking for those two boys, and asked someone:

"Where did those two moped riders go?"

The Vote

There's a *mukhiya* election in Garh Narikel Panchayat. This time the *mukhiya-pati* isn't standing — the women's reservation was last time. Better he's not standing — everyone was fed up with him, he'd have lost anyway. The *mukhiya* of Garh Narikel Panchayat includes Garh Araraneba too. Both are Mahisbar Brahmin villages. Garh Narikel is a large village and Garh Araraneba is a small one — about the size of one quarter of Garh Narikel.

By that reckoning the *mukhiya* should be from Garh Narikel itself. People spend ten-ten lakhs in a *mukhiya* election, so outside income will be proportional, no? Where are you — the era of ten lakhs has gone, people spent fifty-fifty lakhs last time they say, and even then lost — earnings in five years if not more then two crore.

And so from Garh Narikel seven candidates stood. And Garh Araraneba put up just one. Hey, if you fight among yourselves like this, that candidate from the taciturn village will become *mukhiya*. Let him become — it'll

be good if a candidate from a taciturn village wins, he'll listen too, he's from our own village after all. Hey, settle disputes afterwards — it's a matter of the village's honour. Hey, by that reckoning the most populous household is the Pandiji's — they're united among themselves too — so what, should we let the Pandiji household that never used to speak become *mukhiya*? Then should we let the *Ekaharey* lot have it? Father, you can trust anyone but not the *Ekaharey*. And Sarisbe-Khangur? And why has that *phool* stood for no reason — even the quarter won't vote for him, and when he loses he'll abuse the quarter people for the next five years.

Hey, none of that will happen. Among ourselves, one vote from Garh Narikel — whoever among these seven candidates gets the most votes, the whole village will vote for that one.

The ballot boxes have arrived — Satyanarayan Master Sahab, who understands no funny business, a good man — under his direction this internal election or survey will happen. And meanwhile Indrakhand Master Sahab of Sarisby-Khangur is worried — his defeat in this Garh

Narikel internal election is certain. So he reached Satyanarayan Master Sahab.

"Master Sahab, you have retired from a government school, not a private one. Your pension could also be stopped."

"Why would that be?"

"This internal election of Garh Narikel that you're conducting — do you know this is a violation of the model code of conduct?"

Satyanarayan Master Sahab got scared. Father — I stay far from all this.

So Garh Narikel's internal election did not happen.

Tomorrow is the election — the *mukhiya* election of Garh Narikel Panchayat. Seven candidates from Garh Narikel, one from Garh Araraneba. It seems this time Garh

Araraneba's candidate will become
mukhiya. Let's see what happens.

Longing

Dokaak curry, *kaankor* chutney, partridge and rabbit meat — it's been a long time. Never since coming from the village to Delhi. Ranjit said Delhi people are very good — they feed grain to the partridges — no, Kaka, in our parts everyone would kill and eat everything.

My companion's son was studying at a play school. Two rabbits were kept there. He told his ma'am: give me both these rabbits. Ma'am was pleased that the child wanted to keep the rabbits. But asked anyway: what will you do with the rabbits?

Companion's son said: I'll cook them into *masua'i* and eat them.

Ma'am grew worried, took time to meet the companion. She was worried about the child's wrong upbringing, also worried about the safety of the other children at school.

With great difficulty the companion explained that in our community rabbit meat is eaten, the other children have no danger from her child. She explained the cultural difference — but ma'am grew even more worried.

The Siberia Camp

Sardarji was displaced from Afghanistan, is now a German citizen, has a shop in Novosibirsk in Siberia, and has come to Delhi in the course of business.

"You opened a shop so far away?"

"If I don't open it, someone else will!"

"Why is this thumb cut — did you give it to the Guru?"

"No, no. In Siberia it's not only Stalin's camp — there's trade too. There they don't trouble shopkeepers much — in fact they welcome you. And you'll find many people with cut fingers there. The temperature stays at minus fifteen to minus twenty degrees. Without gloves you can't even walk. But after drinking beer at a bar at night, warmth comes to the body, and when you step outside you feel like pulling off the gloves — and then

before you know it, your hand has frozen, movement stopped. When the intoxication wears off go to a doctor — if gangrene has set in, a finger or two may have to be cut."

The Meet Bhai Series

1. The Matchmaker

Meet Bhai is a *chanasgar* — a connoisseur and dispenser of good things. Meet Bhai's father was speaking to the matchmaker. The matchmaker asked for a lemon — he said: the *kagji* lemons have all been used up making sherbet for the matchmakers, let me see whether any *jamiri* lemon has survived on the tree. Then he gave the *jamiri* lemon, and after a little while following the fried snacks and vegetables, brought up a sweet. Said: "Hey, have a sweet won't you." The matchmaker couldn't resist and said: give it. Your daughter-in-law queue will form. Don't rush. If not this one, then another.

A little later one house-viewer brought by the matchmaker arrived. They took the matchmaker to the fields, told him: the whole field belongs to Meet's share.

"But there are ridges everywhere in the field. Then how is it all Meet Bhai's?"

"You don't understand — it's a flood-prone area with sloping land. Water comes and slides off, so even in their own fields people in this village put up ridges."

2. The Features

Meet's face — people don't see what's in it. Meet Bhai is a flickering, ghost-black darkness — how dark, look at that tile and you'll know. Deep charcoal black, not dull black. Mohan Bhai too used to say: Ram Ram — dark people are bad, who said that — where would you find those *garrhni* features in fair people.

His marriage took place.

"Meet, how is the bride — you liked her, didn't you?"

"Very beautiful. Have you seen Hema Malini? Exactly like her. But in colour she's a shade deeper than me."

3. Selection

"Look at this, Meet Bhai — such a vast India and we keep losing to smaller countries. Sometimes we win too. Not just cricket. Look at other sports too."

"Father. Cricket, football — a country being large doesn't mean anything. The whole country doesn't play together. Only eleven players play, no? Whether the country is large or small."

4. Meet Bhai and the Thieves' Market

I asked Meet Bhai about the manufacturer, brand and price of his gleaming shoes. But instead of satisfying my curiosity, he became overcome with emotion and recounted in elaborate detail how they had been purchased.

What happened was — Meet Bhai reached the Sunday morning thieves' market behind

Lal Qila in Delhi to test his fortune. He'd been hearing from everyone about getting imported goods cheaply there and had felt inferior, that he lacked the skill to buy good things cheaply from this market. The moment he arrived, someone began hiding something concealed from his eyes and then disappeared. Meet Bhai's attention went there, he gave chase, and with great difficulty found him. He asked what he'd been hiding.

"This is beyond your means." The thief-king of the thieves' market said. "Tell me what is so rare that's in your lap?"

The seller dusted off and produced a pair of shoes — but also said that a man in a big car was on his way, who upon stepping out of the car could properly assess the shoes and pay the right price.

Meet Bhai pleaded a great deal, and the seller quoted four hundred rupees — also because Meet Bhai from his speech sounded like someone from the Purvanchal region — but also added that in Delhi everyone is one's own people, even when you spit here it falls on your own people.

My friend had only three hundred and sixty rupees on him, and the seller's repeated claim that it was beyond his means was proving true. The seller had even ascertained that the buyer had only three hundred and sixty rupees and would keep ten rupees for the DTC bus fare. So with a drooping face, keeping the rural person's compulsion in mind, for three hundred and fifty rupees — which according to him was giving away the flesh from his heart — he transferred the shoes all the way to Meet Bhai's heart.

Now hear Meet Bhai's account.

"From the day these shoes arrived, I haven't let water touch them. Wherever I see water I put the foot down first — the skin will come back, but the shoes... And I used to pick these shoes up with my hands. It had only been four days — going down the stairs one day, the entire sole, like a dear one, right before my eyes, came out. What can I say? When anyone praises these shoes, my heart breaks. By some means I'm getting them sewn and patched and getting my money's worth. I had such high self-regard — being a Maithil with no equal in sharpness. But this cheating that happened to me in Delhi — now I feel like

prostrating before everyone here. The people of this Lal Qila thieves' market could grind the wits of any number of *mahaamahopadhyayas* into the ground. You give out Bharat Ratnas, and then controversies happen over them. The real Bharat Ratnas are behind Lal Qila — not one or two of them, but in quantity."

Now I wondered whether to laugh or not. Then days passed and we kept making plans to visit the thieves' market or Meena Bazaar the following Sunday. But I heard that Delhi Police had closed down that market.

5. Teaching

"Hey, what am I lacking? I'm a teacher. The salary is six thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine rupees. Adding one rupee to that I deposit seven thousand rupees in the bank every month. And have been doing this for twenty years. I manage from farming. Not my father's son if I've taken even one new rupee out of those savings. I go to the girl's side — *kanyadan* is on my forehead — they don't even make me sit. What, you're a teacher, where will the money come from. Hey, speak up — how much money is

needed?" Meet Bhai left with a stamp of his foot towards the courtyard, and I stood there dumbfounded.

6. The *Pasijha* Thorn

When Meet Bhai used to live in the village, he would put the juice of the *pasijha* thorn in the pond and kill all the fish.

Once a child from Pubaari Tol had an upset stomach and came to ask what medicine to give. Meet Bhai told them to make the child drink the juice of the *pasijha* thorn. Then he went towards the *Dih* to graze his buffalo. He spotted another buffalo-herder coming from the village and asked: hey father, did you hear any wailing as you were coming from the Pubaari Tol direction? Understand.

It was fortunate that the sick child's father had met someone on the road who asked him — otherwise he was going to lose his child. This Meet Bhai is very bad. Last year he had put *pasijha* thorn juice in the pond and killed all the fish. If he'd had the child drink this poison, instead of curing the stomach,

the child's life would have departed directly. He was made to understand, and Meet Bhai had to take the *kanthi* — the devotee's necklace.

But at home everyone used to eat fish a great deal. Once early in the morning Meet Bhai set out towards the field with a *kodari* and a basket. There was a light drizzle. Seeing a big *rohu* writhing on the ridge, he swung the *kodari* and the rohu split in two. Taking both pieces on his head he set off towards the village. Seeing him, Gonar Bhai stopped at the Baba-Dogi intersection, wondering how to take the rohu from a *Vaishnav*.

And *Baba Dogi* was what the neighbours called Meet Bhai's quarter — because whoever was born in that quarter, even a child, was addressed as grandfather by all the villagers.

"Hey Meet Bhai. What is this. You've become a Vaishnav and you're carrying fish."

"Hey — I haven't given up eating fish, only killing. Just not killing."

Gonar Bhai left with a sheepish expression.

7. The Telephone Directory

One day Gonar Jha was looking at a telephone directory, and seeing him, Meet Bhai asked: "What are you looking at?"

Gonar Bhai said: "I've written down telephone numbers — I'm looking for one among them."

"And if the police stops you somewhere on the road and asks what you're carrying?"

"Hey, what are you saying. Can't people even keep telephone numbers?"

"That's fine — but if asked why you have so many numbers and you don't give a satisfactory answer — won't they put you in jail thinking you're a terrorist?"

"How would they do that? Right now I'll tear this directory into pieces and throw it away."

And so saying, Gonar Bhai tore the directory into pieces and threw it away.

8. Removing the Dung

One day early in the morning Meet Bhai was going towards the pond when he met Jagannath, who was removing dung. He asked: "Hey Meet Bhai, do you all also have to remove dung early in the morning?"

Meet Bhai saw that his wife was standing there too, so if he said anything now it would be embarrassing. So without saying anything he moved on. When he returned and found Jagannath alone, he asked: "Brother, earlier marriages required paying money — which must have applied to you too. That's why the marriage happened at an older age."

"Yes, money was needed."

"But we didn't have to pay money — and that's why we don't have to remove dung either, because the wife is not that pampered."

9. More Fruit, Drowning

Once Meet Bhai went to Bachchha Babu's place. He was a big man, and therefore very miserly. First came a discussion of the benefits of jaggery in winter — that it dissolves phlegm — and then an invitation to drink jaggery tea. But Meet Bhai said that he too loves jaggery tea, but last year when he had gone to Jagannath Puri he had given up one fruit — he gave up sugarcane — and that's what jaggery is made from. But then Bachchha Babu asked: shall I make lemon tea or milk tea? Meet Bhai asked: why, is there no milk? Bachchha Babu said there is, but in summer lemon tea is beneficial. But Meet Bhai said: if there's milk then let the tea be of that — if not, then *barni*...

At that time thin Russian beet sugar was available, so Bachchha Babu had to force himself to make tea with milk and that sugar.

A few days earlier Bachchha Babu had mentioned that he had given up *jomni* at a pilgrimage site and so ate *jom* berries. What was the harm in that. Meet Bhai gave him quite an answer this time. More fruit leads to drowning.

10. Meet Bhai's Son

Meet Bhai's son had run away. When asked, his heart would break.

"Lal Kaka arranged the marriage — but he didn't tell me then that after marriage, sons also happen."

Now Meet Bhai took the road to Delhi to look for his son and for himself a job too.

But this time Meet Bhai got into trouble. The moment the train moved forward from Darbhanga his *Saraswati* began to desert him. A little further the train moved and an old woman arrived. Seeing Meet Bhai with a

clueless expression she began: "Son, won't you give up your seat a little?"

Meet Bhai replied: "Ma. This is not a son. A son's three sons."

And the old woman didn't ask for the seat again.

Meet Bhai grew weary reaching Mughal Sarai. Just then the police came into the compartment and began examining Meet Bhai's bags. Nothing was found. Yes — *khesari* greens had been shaped into balls by the wife as *sanas* for Lal Kaki. But the policemen picked them up.

"What is this?"

"This, Sarkar, is a *khesari* ball."

"I see — think I'm a fool? Mohan Singh, tell me what this is."

"*Ganja*, Sarkar. Looks like a *ganjeri* ball."

"Now tell me, passenger — I didn't tell Mohan Singh that it was *ganja*. But since it is *ganja*, Mohan Singh said so."

"Sarkar, it is indeed a ball, my wife has packed it as *sanies* for Lal Kaki..."

"Take him to jail — he'll tell everything." Mohan Singh snapped.

Tears began pouring from Meet Bhai's eyes. But the constable was sensible. Asked: "How much money is with you?"

Calculating everything — changing two buses from the Delhi station to Lal Kaka's house — the police took everything except twenty rupees. Yes, they left the *khesari* balls.

Somehow Meet Bhai reached Lal Kaka's house.

But as he stayed on and on, everything came to mind and his heart would break. Meanwhile word came from the village that his son had arrived home. Meet Bhai swore to Lal Kaki that he would never again do the *pasijha*-thorn kind of joke.

"No job or anything will happen for me, Kaki." Saying this, Meet Bhai got ready to go back to the village.

11. IAS

"If there's any work to be done, tell me. Morning and evening I sit in sessions at the Collector's place. I sit there hour after hour — when I try to leave, he stops me and makes me sit again, starts a whole new conversation."

"Fine, brother. If there's something urgent I'll tell you. What is his name?"

"A very long name — IAS Prashant. Now who would ask the full form of IAS from him — so he calls himself just Prashant."

"Indian Administrative Service's abbreviation is IAS — it's not part of his name."

"Ah, so that's how it is. That's why it's written below the name on the nameplate."

"Fine, brother. If there's something urgent I'll tell you."

12. The Miracle of Shiva Drinking Milk

First Meet Bhai told a story from Haryana-Delhi. There were three black dogs, all of the same colour and appearance. They felt like going to the sweetshop and eating freshly fried *jalebis*. So one by one they began going there. First one dog reached the shop. The owner saw a dog entering the shop and threw a weight at it and hit it. The poor thing

got badly hurt. But when it returned to the village and was asked, it said: great hospitality was given. Got weighed-out *jalebis* to eat. The second dog couldn't restrain itself and reached the sweetshop to get its hospitality. They looked the same, so the owner thought the same dog had come back. He was heating water. He threw a whole bucket of scalding water on that dog. The poor dog fled saving its life. Back in the village again it was asked: how was the hospitality? "What can I tell you — he fried *jalebis* and fed me. A very good man, the sweetshop owner." Said the poor thing, saving its own face. Both dogs had eaten *jalebis* and come back — one got them weighed and given, and the other got them fried fresh without even weighing. The third dog set out with this in mind. It was evening. The sweetshop owner was preparing to close. When he spotted the black dog again, his bile rose. He thought this same dog, despite receiving such fine hospitality three times, keeps coming back. So he resolved to give it a special reception. The moment the dog entered the shop, the owner shut the door from inside and soundly thrashed the dog with a stick. Then tied it with a rope, left it inside the shop, locked the shop from outside and went home. The poor dog with great effort broke free and limped home. When the friends asked about the hospitality, it said: what can I say — he kept feeding and feeding, wouldn't let me leave. When I said let me go home, he'd say eat more, eat more.

Wouldn't let me come. He fed me so much I can't even walk.

Then Meet Bhai continued: this was like that time there was news of Shiva drinking milk. Whoever came out after offering milk to the Shivalinga — when asked — would say that Mahadev drank milk from their hand. I too had gone. On the lane outside the temple I had seen a stream of milk. If God is drinking milk, where did this stream come from? But when I came out after offering milk on the Shivalinga, people began asking me: is God drinking milk? Now if I said no he isn't, everyone would say this is a sinner — God drank milk from everyone's hand but refused from his. Those dogs had faced the same predicament.

The Bihari

The office campus looked like a junk dealer's shop. I told a fidgety staff member to get the campus cleaned over Saturday and Sunday.

"Ji sir, it'll shine like glass. I'll call four Biharis and get it done."

"Call only three — I myself am one."

"Sir, what I meant was..."

Fielding

"Why did you give up playing cricket?"

"Always fielding — when batting came, out on the very next ball."

"Wasn't fielding also playing?"

"If bowling itself wasn't happening, how would fielding count?"

That's why India's fielding and bowling are weak, and batting strong.

Skill

"There are two kinds — one is smart work, and the other is slog away like a donkey."

The staff spread out all the sensor cards, sorted them, got them digitally signed, and took them away — didn't take five minutes. Earlier another staff member would take twenty minutes for the same thing. So I praised him.

"That's all fine, sir — everyone says to him: look how he stays on the job, and says to us: you're always on your phones."

Discipline

"The boss loses his temper so much, even abuses — don't you feel anger?"

"I abuse too."

"I've never heard it."

"I abuse a great deal — saying: this so-and-so must have come after a quarrel with his wife in the morning, that's why he's like this, and what not. I abuse a great deal — in my mind!"

Science

1. Science Education

Last day of class twelve. Now the children wouldn't have to wear school uniforms — everyone was writing on each other's shirt backs with sketch pens, donkeys and what not.

But my son's shirt was clean. When I asked, he said: the humanities students do this — in the science class there's no mischief. All year they sit silently killing their spark, without joy. Stress.

2. Chemistry

A thief went to the Mahisbar Brahmin village to steal — got caught. He'd heard that once a thief had tried his luck in this village, had covered himself in oil to slip away and run — but got caught, and these villagers had beaten him to death. So he was ready to be

beaten to death. But the villagers decided that this time the thief should be let go, but *aak* milk should be put in both eyes so he'd go blind and be no longer fit for thieving. In the Mahisbar Brahmin village, even without much education courtesy has come, even in jest. One person's relative was in the neighbouring village — had gone to enquire, because Sibala and Bawka Dusadh gang's thieves had taken things piece by piece, given solid beatings apart, and tied him to a chair so he couldn't even move. Yet had said nothing disrespectful about the thief: *"Choor Maharaj came, I told him: take whatever you want to take, just don't touch the body — but he didn't listen to that either."*

The Mahisbar Brahmins put *aak* milk in both the thief's eyes. The thief was a science student, a chemistry graduate. He knew everything about how Roman concrete, even two thousand years later, after cracking, can repair itself because of the presence of quicklime when water falls on it, while modern concrete cracks in twenty-five years and once cracked permanently deteriorates. He muttered unsteadily: "They've put the *aak* milk — if they also put *karu* oil there'll be no hope left of saving even what little of the eye remains."

The Mahisbar Brahmins thought: let's put *karu* oil too, finish the game. So they went ahead and put *karu* oil in both the thief's eyes too, and then let the thief go.

One eye could not be saved — but the chemistry of *karu* oil and *aak* milk saved his other eye.

3. Physics

On the train came a magistrate's check — the sole physics graduate of the Mahisbar Brahmin village, Maharaj, had not bought a ticket. He pulled the chain and fled through the fields — the police threw a *jhataha* from behind. He fell, got up, ran again — but a sandal came off in the ploughed field. He took the second sandal from his foot into his hand and disappeared. The village is the Mahisbar Brahmin village, where there is no regard for the educated. Everyone laughed at him saying: what will you do with one sandal. He said he'd bring the other sandal from the ploughed field tomorrow. Everyone laughed: will the other sandal still be there?

Next day the physics graduate Maharaj went to the ploughed field and brought back the other sandal.

The Mahisbar Brahmins held a meeting: just as we laughed at him saying what will you do with one sandal, similarly whoever saw one sandal in the ploughed field would also have thought — what to do with one sandal — and not picked it up. If he had left the second sandal in the ploughed field too, both would have been gone.

And now in the Mahisbar Brahmin village an unprecedented enthusiasm has awakened for science education.

