

A WATER BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

A CHILDREN'S NOVEL



GAJENDRA THAKUR

मैथिलीक आइ धरिक सभसँ पैघ उपन्यास

न्याय दर्शन आ समकालीन अपराध-गाथा
मैथिली कादम्बरी

गोहि सभक बीच जलसमाधि

गजेन्द्र ठाकुर

A Water Burial Among the Crocodiles

A Children's Novel

Translated from original Maithili by the author himself

Gajendra Thakur

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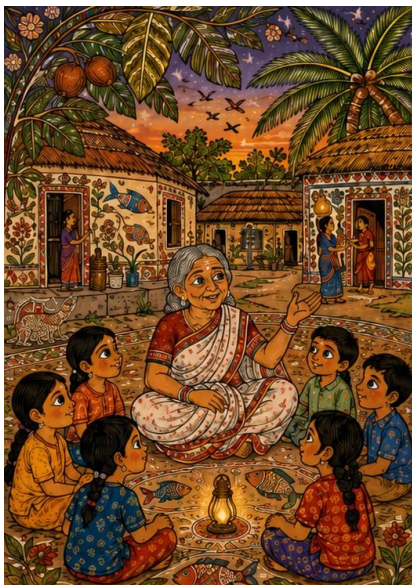
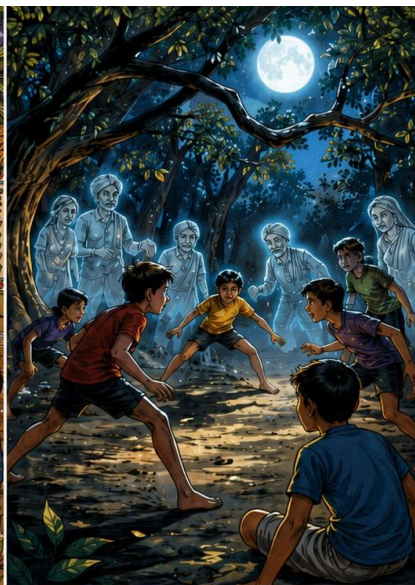
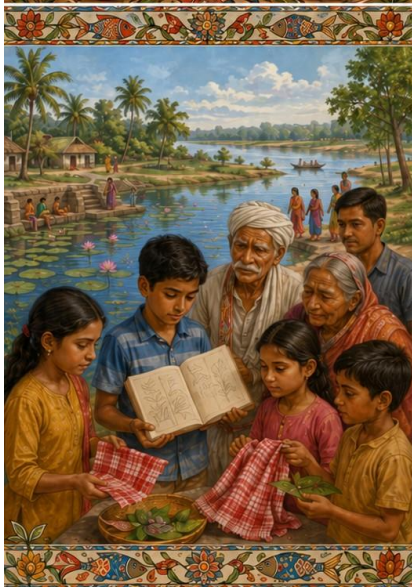
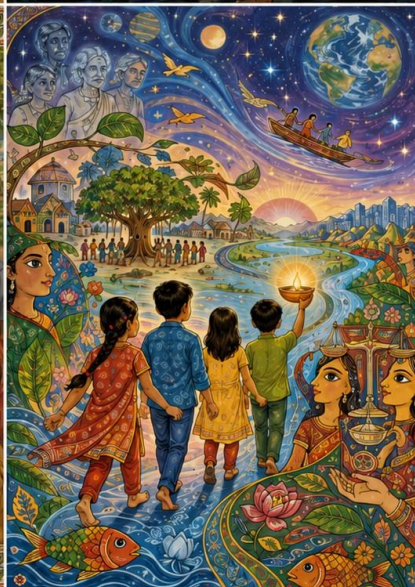
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Prologue

The Village Spoke for Itself





There was once a village called Garh Narikel. It was made of earth, breathed through water, and kept all its old stories safe among its trees and leaves.

On the evening before the story was to begin, Grandmother sat upon a coconut leaf. The children asked, “Will you start telling us the story tomorrow?”

Grandmother laughed. “Before you listen to the story, listen to the village. Anyone who has never listened to a village will understand only half its tale.”

And that night Garh Narikel began to speak for itself—in the language of its soil, its water, and its songs.

In this village, knowledge did not live only in books. It lived in hands, ears, and eyes. A grandmother told her granddaughter stories; a mother taught her daughter songs; one woman taught another to plant rice in the fields. No one read just a single book—the whole of life was a book.

A river flowed past Garh Narikel: the Kamala-Balan. Sometimes it brought life; sometimes it brought danger. It watered the fields and gave the village fish, but now and then it swept houses away. So when the villagers sang of the river, their songs held joy on one side and fear on the other.

There was a pond in the heart of the village. Fish swam in it, lotuses blossomed there, and children bathed in its waters. There was also a grove called Channa Gachhi, where the children played morning and evening.

The people of Garh Narikel had a saying: “A crocodile may devour a body, but never a name.” It meant that a person might die, or someone might rub a name from a sheet of paper; but if the village remembered that person, the name could never truly be erased.

Grandmother taught the children that those who walked slowly had time to look deeply. The old people, whose feet had grown slow, remembered more stories than anyone else.

Garh Narikel had one rule: no hungry person would be sent away empty-handed. The household’s god was not some enormous statue. It lived in that simple rule.

There were Mithila paintings in the village: fish painted upon the walls, their eyes never closing, for they were believed to keep watch over the house.

The village children loved riddles. “No body, no wings, yet it flies from village to village. What is it?” The answer was a song.

And now the story of that village begins—a place with an ancient grove where even ghosts play, a river that remembers everything, and children who, together, will uncover a great mystery.

Come, let the story begin.





Part Zero

Before the Story Began · Chapters –100 to –1

Chapter –100

The Conch Shell and the Silver



Long ago, in a corner of Mithila, there was a village called Garh Narikel. In its heart stood an ancient tree known as Channa Gachhi.

One day a child noticed something shining in the distance. The child ran towards it, crying, "Silver! Silver!" But up close, the glittering object turned out to be a white conch shell. Old Baba laughed. "Not everything that shines is silver, little one. First look, then ask, and only then believe."

From that day on, the village children learned to keep their eyes open and never believe something they did not understand.

Chapter –99

Knowing That I Am Myself



One day a child asked Old Baba, “How do I know that I am really me?”

Old Baba smiled. "You breathe. You remember. You laugh and you cry. All that is you. Just as the pond does not ask anyone how deep it is, you need not ask anyone whether you are yourself."

The child understood: one's own name and one's own thoughts were the greatest truths of all.

Chapter –98

Who Made This World?



One evening the children sat beneath a peepal tree. One of them looked up at the sky and asked, “These trees, this river, these stars—who made them?”

Someone said, “The earth.” Someone else said, “God.” Old Baba said, “The tree itself once asked, ‘Who planted me?’ But the earth laughed and answered, ‘The one who planted you does not ask.’”

The children learned that the best thing was to keep asking questions, because those who ask are the ones who move forward.

Chapter –97

The Chintamani Jewel



The villagers told a story about a Chintamani jewel that could grant every wish of the heart. One child set out to search for it, but could not find it anywhere.

Tired from the search, the child returned to Old Baba. “When your mind is still,” he said, “even a lump of earth can look like a diamond. When your mind is restless, even a diamond can look like a lump of earth. The jewel is not outside you. It lies in the eyes that know how to recognise it.”

The child understood: the real jewel was a peaceful mind and the ability to see goodness.

Chapter –96

Keeping Memory Safe



One day an elderly villager died. The children were sad. “Where has he gone now?” they asked.

Grandmother said, “The body returns to the earth, little ones. But a name stays upon the leaves. No one can erase someone whom the village remembers.”

From then on, the children began remembering the names of those who had passed away. As long as a name lived on, something of the person lived on too.

Chapter –95

The Manuscript Beneath the Water



One year a terrible flood came. Water rushed into the village and soaked a very old manuscript. Everyone was miserable. “Now all that knowledge will be lost!” they cried.

But a girl named Jivanti smiled. She had learned every word of the manuscript by heart. “A flood can drown a book,” she said, “but it cannot drown the voice that remembers it. Words written in the heart do not get wet.”

The village understood: what is held in memory can never be drowned.

Chapter -94

The Silence of Four Voices



One day a great gathering was held in the village. Four learned scholars came and answered every question. But Old Baba noticed that, although all four had spoken, something remained hidden.

“Behind every answer,” he said, “there stands a silence. However much you learn, there is always more to know.”

The children understood that questions never truly come to an end. The best thing was to go on learning.

Chapter –93

The Conch Shell's Last Question



There was an elderly challenger who had spent his life wandering from village to village, questioning everyone. One day he returned and asked, "Is what you understood yesterday still true today?"

Udayanacharya replied calmly, "Yes, each morning asks every question anew. But when an answer is firmly understood, it need not fear another question."

The children learned that asking again and again was a good thing. If they truly understood something, they had no reason to fear questions.

Chapter –92

The Prisoner of the Water Clock



This happened a very long time ago. In those days people called Garh Narikel by another name: Narikel Ghat. At the village centre lay a large

pond called Jori Pokhari. Beside it stood a water clock. Water fell from it drop by drop, marking the passing of time.

An elderly caretaker named Budhua lived there. He had grown so old that the villagers had stopped counting his years. Yet he had never abandoned his promise to protect the names and memories of the village.

Time passed, drop by drop. His promise remained unbroken.

Chapter –91

Light in the Leatherworkers' Quarter



At the western edge of the village was the leatherworkers' quarter. There lived a bright-eyed teenage girl named Malati. Her father, Somar, made the finest drums in the village.

The powerful people of the village rarely even looked towards that quarter. But Old Baba said, "The person whose hands stitch leather has a name upon the leaves too. The lamp in a poor home and the lamp in a palace burn with the same oil."

From that day onwards, the village understood that every name shone just as brightly, whether its bearer was rich or poor.

Chapter –90

Budhua's Water Burial



Budhua had grown so old that his body was weary. One day he went to Jori Pokhari and quietly disappeared beneath its water. The villagers began to weep.

But Old Baba said, "The crocodile took his body, not his name. Someone who takes a final resting place in the water lives not on the pond's floor but in the heart of the village."

From that day, the villagers understood that anyone who left behind a faithful promise and a remembered name never entirely died.

Chapter –89

The First Night, the First Flood



It was the middle of the night when the sky seemed to split apart. Fierce winds, lightning, and sheets of rain brought the first great flood. Many houses were swept away.

But the villagers held one another's hands, gathered on higher ground, and made it through the night. At dawn, their village was still alive.

Old Baba said, "A flood can carry away houses, but not the village itself. A night survived together becomes the seed of a new morning."

Chapter –88

Accused of Being a Witch



In the leatherworkers' quarter lived a woman named Gauri, who knew how to use herbs to help the sick. Once, some villagers began accusing her of being a "witch."

Yet no one asked who she was or listened to what she had to say. Old Baba said, "An accusation can burn a body, but the truth remains upon the leaves. Never call anyone guilty without first asking questions and understanding what happened."

Chapter –87

At the Quarter's Gate



One night some angry people came carrying torches to the entrance of the leatherworkers' quarter. Gauri sat with folded hands beside the roots of the peepal tree. "Old Baba, protect us," she pleaded.

For a moment the wind stopped; the peepal leaves trembled. Everyone in the quarter awoke and stood together. Old Baba said, "Torches may reach your gate, but they cannot burn the names within. When a whole community stays watchful, its walls rise higher than the flames."

The torchbearers turned back, defeated.

Chapter -86

The Crocodile of Time



Many years passed. The old generation departed and a new one arrived. One day Gauri sat beneath the peepal tree, wondering, "Where have so many people gone?"

Old Baba said, "Time is a crocodile too, Gauri. It swallows one generation after another. But it cannot swallow the names that a village remembers."

Gauri understood that she must remember every name, so the crocodile of time could not devour it.

Chapter –85

The Amil's Order



One morning, Jaysingh, an amil—an officer of the king—rode into the village on an elephant, accompanied by ten soldiers and Yashpati. At the meeting place he posted an order: Gauri was to be punished. Yashpati pointed at her with delight.

But the village was not afraid. Old Baba said, “An officer’s order is written on paper, but the village’s justice lives upon the leaves. An order may be erased, but not the village’s truth.”

Chapter –84

The Silence of the Forest



Yashpati fled. The village headman and several young men crossed the Kamala-Balan and went into the thick forest to look for him. Gauri did not go. She had to stay home to care for her daughter, Savitri.

That morning she went to Old Baba for his blessing. He said, “The forest is silent, yet it hears everything. Learn to understand silence, and even the forest will begin to speak to you.”

Chapter –83

Sonma the Fisherwoman



A few days later a new fear spread through the village. First a goat vanished, then a buffalo calf disappeared near Jori Pokhari. Everyone was frightened. Gauri took Savitri to Old Baba. “What is happening?” she asked.

Sonma, a fisherwoman, fished in that pond. “A net catches fish,” she said, “but I will not keep their names trapped.” She spoke the name of every creature that was lost and held it in her memory, for the river was mother to them all.

Chapter –82

The First Game of Kabaddi



Within three years things grew worse. Now and then people, too, vanished near the river after dark. Savitri, now sixteen, could hear Old Baba's voice every day.

To drive away their fear, the villagers began playing a new game: kabaddi. "Go out on one breath, touch, and return on that same breath." The game taught them not to cling to what they touched, but to meet danger bravely and stand together.

Chapter –81

The Shadow of an Attack



Twenty years passed. Kabaddi on the night of the new moon had become part of village life; the children played it as naturally as any other game.

But one evening a fresh cloud of dust rose along the village boundary. It came from the pounding hooves of horses, with crowds of fleeing people close behind. Danger was drawing near. Old Baba said, “A long shadow does not mean a greater fear. Those who know their own names need not be afraid of their shadows.”

Chapter –80

The First Line of a Song



Around that time a young wandering poet named Haripati came to Garh Narikel. One evening he sang the opening line of a song.

Then, one after another, the villagers began adding their own lines until the song was complete. Old Baba laughed. “One voice begins the first line, but the whole village carries the rest. The maker of the song is not one person—the village itself is its poet.”

Chapter –79

The Turn of Forgiveness



Many years later, one evening, a very old man appeared at the gate of the leatherworkers' quarter, leaning upon a stick. His clothes had once been expensive, but now they were torn and dirty. He was the very man who had wronged the village long ago.

The villagers could have taken their revenge if they had wished. But Old Baba said, "In kabaddi, even the player you have touched is given a turn to return. Forgiveness is a turn as well, not revenge." And the village forgave him.

Chapter –78

Beyond the Family Register



In Mithila there was an old system called the panji, a register in which family names were written down. But only certain families were included. A young keeper of the register, Yadavanand Jha, arrived and discovered that the names of many good people were missing from its pages.

Old Baba said, “Someone whose name is missing from the panji is not an outsider to the village. Those whom paper leaves out, the earth takes in.” From that day onwards, Yadavanand began recording everyone’s name.

Chapter –77

Old Baba's Silence



One moonless night, the game of kabaddi began, but Old Baba did not come to act as referee. The children waited. Then they began whispering among themselves. “Why hasn’t Old Baba come?”

Little by little, they understood. Old Baba wanted the children to learn to make decisions for themselves. He had once told them, “When I am silent, I speak the most. Silence, too, can be an answer.”

Chapter –76

The First Lesson Beneath the Coconut Leaves



A little girl named Mandakini longed to learn to read and write. But the village's old school admitted only boys from the higher castes. No girls or poor children were allowed to attend.

So the village opened a new school beneath a coconut tree, where every child could learn to write their name. Old Baba said, "The first lesson begins upon a leaf: how to write a name. A leaf that holds a name helps the tree hold history."

Chapter –75

The First Rebellion of Reason



Mandakini's school flourished for three generations. Now every child in the village—whether from a leatherworking family, a Brahmin family, or a Kayastha family—could read letters and work out sums.

One day the brightest pupil in the school, Vishwanath, asked his teacher a difficult question. The teacher did not grow angry. He smiled. Old Baba said, "The child who asks a question does not defeat the teacher; he awakens him. That is reason's first rebellion, the first dawn of knowledge."

Chapter –74

The Sickness of the Tree



Kedar had become the village's guardian of ceremonies, for this tradition was now entrusted to women and men alike, according to their abilities. One day he noticed that the old witness-tree seemed to be unwell.

Worried, he asked, "Old Baba, is this tree sick?" Old Baba replied, "Care for the sickness of one leaf before it spreads through the whole tree. A village falls ill in just the same way: it begins with one small silence."

Chapter –73

Mohan's Melody



In Shilavati's time, the leatherworkers' quarter made the finest drums and mridangas. Its most gifted musician was Mohan. He had a little daughter named Radhika, only four years old, whom he loved more than life itself.

One winter, Radhika fell terribly ill and passed away. Mohan was heartbroken. One evening he sat beneath the peepal tree and played a melody of sorrow upon his flute. The tune was so sweet and full of feeling that the whole village held it in its ears.

Old Baba said, "A flute's tune fades into the air, yet our ears keep it. A melody that touches the heart is never forgotten." From that day on, the village began every gathering with a song. That was how the tradition of opening each chapter with a folk song was born.

Chapter –72

Witnesses to a Wedding



Anuradha and Gopinath had been friends since childhood. They had studied together at the Coconut Leaf School. They wished to marry, but they belonged to different castes, and some of the older villagers still believed in caste divisions.

Anuradha's mother was worried. But the entire village came together to witness the wedding: the sacred fire was a witness, the village was a witness, and their names were witnesses. Old Baba said, "When a village witnesses a marriage, its promises are written upon the leaves."

Chapter –71

The Night of the Epidemic



Ten years after Anuradha and Gopinath were married, an unseen danger arrived from the east: an epidemic. It was a very difficult time, and many families suffered.

But the village did not lose heart. Every night lamps burned from house to house. People asked after one another, and they sang together to keep their courage alive. Old Baba said, “The epidemic could take bodies, but it could not take our songs. The night we stayed awake together was the night that saved the morning.”

Chapter –70

Planting Channa Gachhi



After the epidemic, Vimala and the village elders had a beautiful idea. “Old Baba,” Vimala said, “I wish we could remember every great sorrow and every great hope of our village not only in our hearts, but also by planting a tree.”

Old Baba was delighted. The villagers planted a new grove: Channa Gachhi. Old Baba said, “A tree does not give shade the day it is planted. Be patient. First the roots take hold; the leaves come later.”

Chapter –69

The Elephant and the Crocodile



In Suryanath's time, the village temple had an elephant named Gajraj. One day, while Gajraj was bathing in the pond, an enormous crocodile seized his leg. Gajraj struggled for a long time, until he was exhausted.

But when at last he cried out for help, help came. Old Baba said, "The elephant is in the water, the crocodile is in the water, and their struggle goes on for years. Yet when someone calls out, a helping hand comes to set them free."

Chapter –68

The Court's First Hearing



In Kamalini's time, the king established a formal court for the villages. At first, everyone welcomed it, for the written law promised equal rights to people of every caste.

But gradually the villagers noticed that the court kept giving them one hearing date after another. It asked only about bodies and documents, while the village itself continued to preserve its people's names. Old Baba said, "In the court, there are dates upon dates; but true justice still lives upon the leaves."

Chapter –67

The Call of Distant Lands



In Janaki's time, a new sort of stranger came to the village gate. He spoke sweetly, wore shining clothes, and carried papers. He tempted poor families with promises of earnings in faraway lands. Ramsevak, the grandson of Bhola, was tempted when he thought of his family's troubles.

Old Baba warned him, "A foreign land may bring wealth, but it may carry away your name. Yet anyone whom the village remembers will not be lost, even far from home. Take your name with you."

Chapter –66

The Women’s Night Assembly



In Sulochana’s time, a serious failing of the new court became clear: it did not properly hear the suffering of women. A woman named Padma, whose husband had mistreated her for years, went to the court seeking justice, but no one there would listen to her.

So the women of the village began holding their own meetings at night. There, their voices came together and they helped one another. Old Baba said, “Where women raise their voices together, the darkness grows thin. A night assembly can break the darkness even without a lamp.”

Chapter –65

The Parade of False Ghosts



In Harinandan's time, a wandering trickster named Kalicharan travelled from village to village, proclaiming that he was "Old Baba's

true spirit.” At night he led parades of supposed ghosts to frighten people and swindle them.

But Garh Narikel was not afraid. The villagers demanded, “Who are you, really?” And the trickster ran away. Old Baba said, “A false ghost frightens only those who have forgotten their names. Those who know who they are can laugh at a parade of ghosts.”

Chapter –64

Sukhdev's Revenge



In Champavati's time, a new survey of the land once again frightened poor families. A man named Sukhdev had suffered a terrible injustice, and his heart burned with the desire for revenge.

But Champavati and Old Baba spoke to him. "Revenge is a fire, Sukhdev," they said. "It burns your own hands first. Someone who chooses forgiveness can save an entire village." Sukhdev let go of his anger, and the village was spared the fire of hatred.

Chapter –63

The First Page from the Printing Press

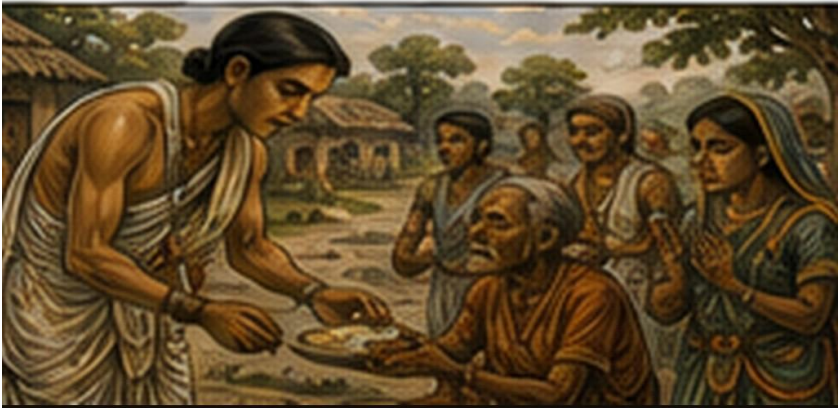


In Devakinandan's time, the first printing press opened in a nearby town. Haripati Gangadhar, a descendant of the poet Haripati of long ago, grew up to become a young writer and publisher.

Now the village's names and stories could be printed. Everyone could read them, and they would be harder to erase. Old Baba said, "The first printed page! Now it will be difficult to wipe away our names. What is printed can be read throughout the village."

Chapter –62

Waiting for Relief



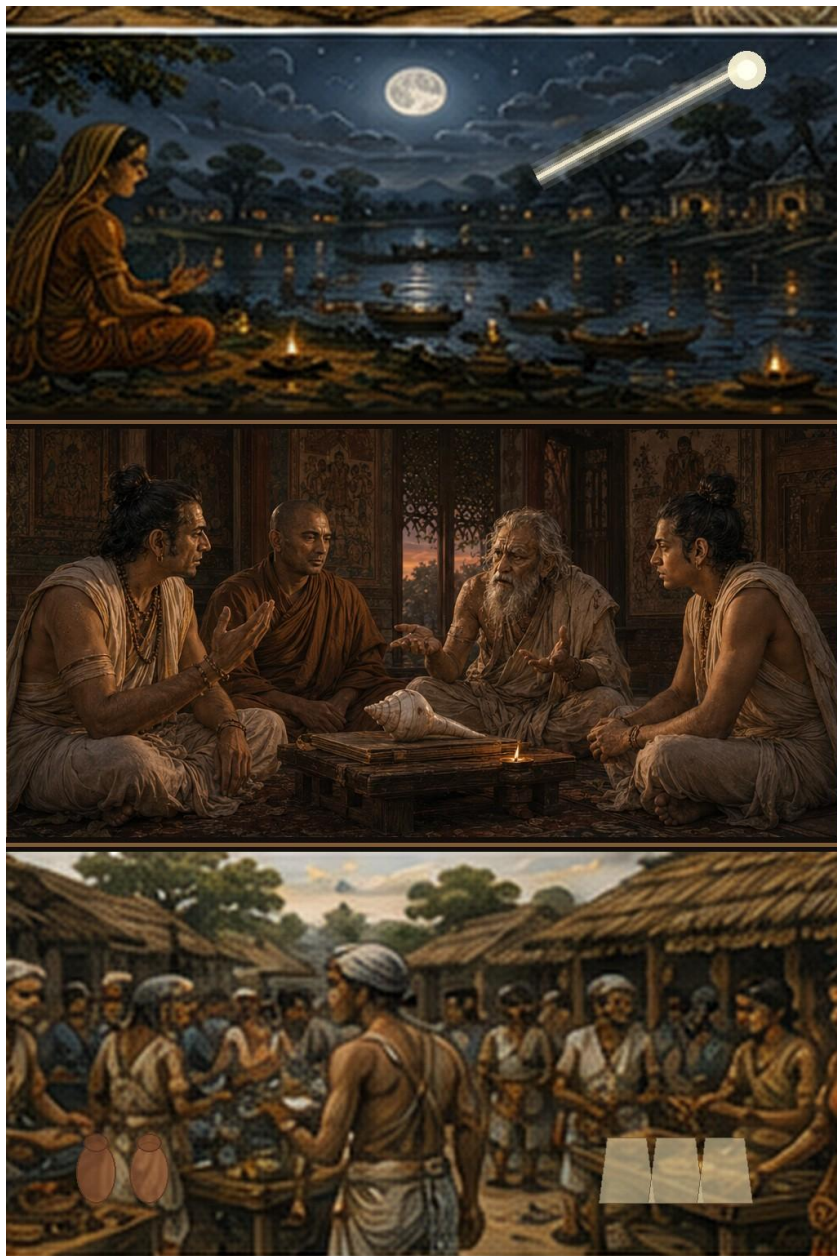
In Savitri Devi's time, the region came under British rule. One year a terrible famine struck. Officials announced relief: food centres, grain in

return for work, and medical care. But much of it existed only on paper, and what did come arrived slowly.

The villagers grew weary from waiting. Still, they pooled and shared the little they had and waited together. Old Baba said, “Eyes grow tired watching for relief, yet the village remains standing. When people wait together, even waiting becomes a little easier.”

Chapter –61

The Comet in the Sky



In Rudranath's time, an extraordinary sight appeared in the sky one autumn night: a bright star trailing a long, shining tail. An elderly

astrologer shouted, "This is a bad omen! A comet foretells the death of a king, war, famine, or an epidemic!" The village was frightened.

But Old Baba remained calm. "Comets come and go, but the village stays where it is. What shines above cannot change the names here below. Do not fear the sky. Keep your roots in the earth."

Chapter –60

The Night of Fire



On a fiercely hot night in the month of Jeth, a lamp near the village grain store toppled in a strong gust of wind. Flames leapt up. Indrani, Rudranath's daughter and now the guardian of ceremonies, saw the red glow from her window and cried, "Fire! Fire!"

She ran to every door in the village. The whole village woke and stood together against the flames. Houses burned, but no one's name was lost. Old Baba said, "The fire took our houses, not our names. From the ashes of that night, new hearths were lit."

Chapter –59

The Second Flood



Three months after the fire, rain fell without stopping, and the Kamala-Balan River flooded once again. Indrani, who had saved the village from fire, now found herself facing the water.

But the village had learned from earlier floods. The people “read” the water, strengthened the embankments, and moved to higher ground at just the right time. Old Baba said, “The second flood remembers its old paths, yet it leaves new wounds. But a village that has lived through a flood learns how to read the water.”

Chapter –58

The Third Calamity



After the floodwaters went down, a new illness spread through the foul, stagnant water. People suffered from stomach aches and diarrhoea. Indrani had already fought fire and flood, and now she faced a third test. Exhausted, she said, “Old Baba, the comet was right after all—three calamities: fire, flood, and sickness.”

Old Baba replied, “One calamity teaches us; the third makes us stronger and wiser. Someone who has fallen three times can rise steady on the fourth. Boil the water, keep things clean, and look after one another.” The village came through the ordeal stronger than before.

Chapter –57

The Sahib's Notebook



In Nandkishore's time, an English scholar came to the village to study Indian folk traditions. His name was Mr Henry Thompson, though the villagers called him Thompson Sahib. Carrying a notebook and pen, he questioned all the elders. Who was Old Baba? What did kabaddi mean? What was Channa Gachhi? He wrote down everything they told him.

Old Baba said, "What the sahib writes is his account. What the village keeps in its heart is the village's truth. Both may exist, but do not let an outsider's pages take the place of your own memories."

Chapter –56

The Call for Freedom



In Lakshmi Devi's time, the movement for India's freedom had grown strong across the country. A young freedom fighter named Ramashray travelled from the town to Garh Narikel and called out, "Brothers and sisters, join the struggle for freedom!"

The village, which had always honoured every name and every person, understood the meaning of freedom. Old Baba said, "A call that reaches village after village does not belong to one voice alone. Freedom, too, is a song we share—and everyone must sing it together."

Chapter –55

The Dawn of Independence



In Vishwambharnath's time, on the morning of 15 August, a new sun seemed to rise over all of India, including Garh Narikel. For the first time, the tricolour flag was raised in the village square.

The children of the Coconut Leaf School had learned to sing "Jana Gana Mana", and that morning the song rose from every voice. Old Baba said, "Dawn has come, but it does not reach every courtyard at the same moment. The first true dawn is for the name that is free. Real independence will come when every name is free."

Chapter –54

The End of the Zamindars



In Kamala Devi's time, the government of the newly independent India abolished the zamindari system of landlord rule. The village's last zamindar family, descendants of Pratapsen Thakur, was obliged to hand over most of its land to the government.

Much of that land went to landless farmers and families in the leatherworkers' quarter. Old Baba said, "The owners of the land have changed, but the earth has not. The fields know the names of the hands that till them."

Chapter –53

The First Electric Light



In Harivansh's time, one evening, the first electric light suddenly shone in the village square. Everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest elder, stopped and stared in amazement. The bulb's yellow glow trembled upon the waters of Dakahi Pond.

Old Baba said, "The electric lamp is shining, but do not forget the oil of the old lamps. Let the new light come—only do not let it erase the old names."

Chapter –52

The Call from the Border



In Harivansh's time, the drums of war sounded along the distant borders—first towards China, then towards Pakistan. News reached the village through the faint voices of the radio. Many families sent their sons to the border.

Even amid the fear, life in the village went on. Babies were born, and the songs of their birth, the sohars, were still sung. Old Baba said, "Cannons sounded at the border, but birth songs sounded in the village too. Even through war, the village did not let go of its names."

Chapter –51

The Seeds of the Green Revolution

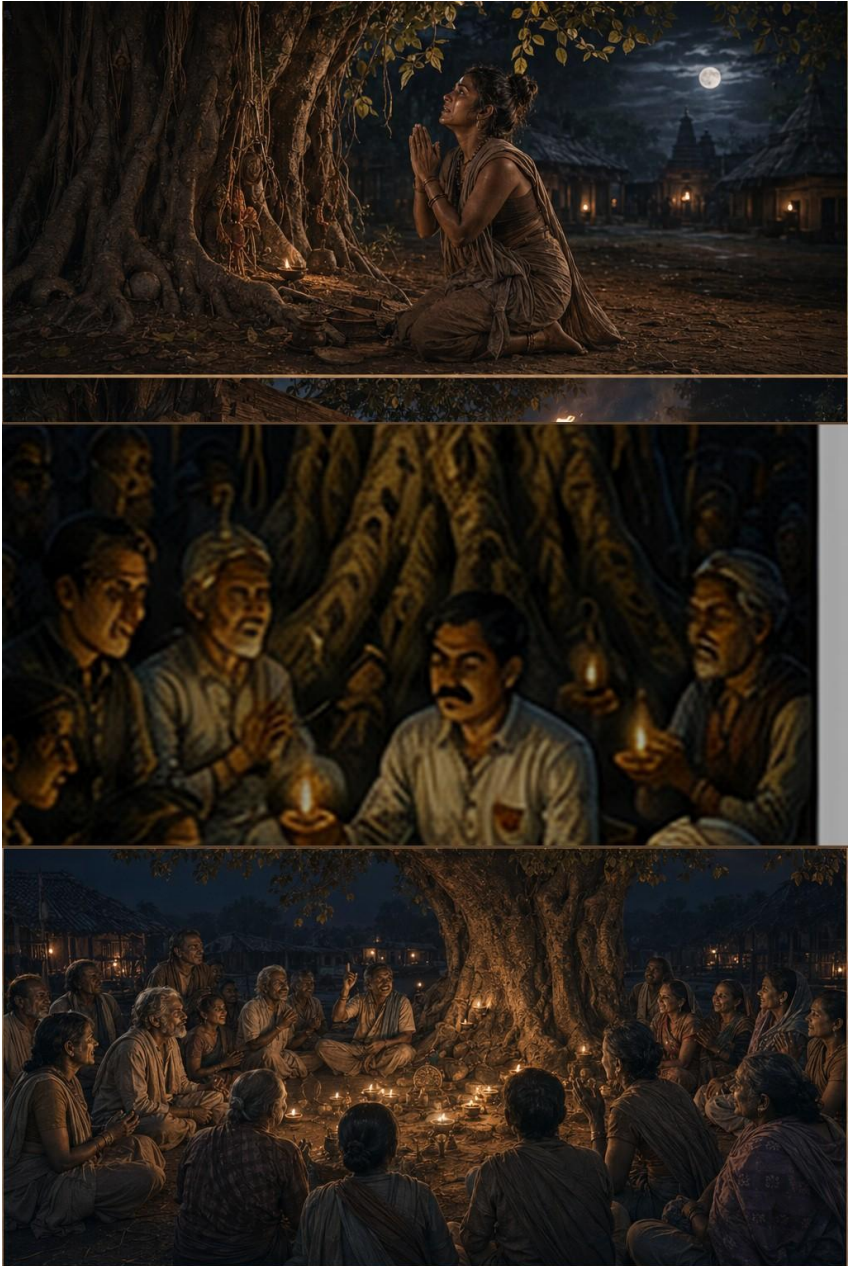


When the Green Revolution reached Garh Narikel, the fields began to change. New seeds that yielded more grain arrived, along with sack after sack of chemical fertiliser. For the first time, the rice harvest was so plentiful.

But Harivansh's daughter Sunayana asked, "Old Baba, these new seeds will give us more food, but our old seeds are disappearing. Is that a good thing?" Old Baba replied, "New seeds may give a bigger harvest, but old seeds know the soil. Keep both. Seeds that save a village plant not only food, but names."

Chapter –50

The Darkness of the Emergency



In 1975, when a national Emergency was declared, its shadow spread from Delhi to village squares across the country. Public gatherings and meetings were forbidden. Frightened, Sunayana went to the peepal tree. “Old Baba, all our meetings have been stopped. Must we close our women’s night assembly too?”

Old Baba said, “Times of darkness do not last forever. But once a lamp goes out, it takes time to light it again. So quietly keep the little flame of our names alive, and watch for the dawn. Morning will surely come.”

Chapter –49

The Year of Drought



One year the monsoon failed again. The sky remained bare for months. The ponds grew shallow, and cracks opened in the thirsty earth of the fields. But this time the government relief workers and the villagers' own organisation acted in time.

Gopal, Sunayana's son and the village's young headman, worked with the officials to bring help. Together, the villagers dug a well. Old Baba said, "A year without rain may dry up the ponds, but it cannot dry up our names. A village that digs a well together finds water again."

Chapter –48

The Voices of Radio and Television



In Gopal's time, the first radio arrived in the village square. On its first night, a voice from Delhi came out of the little box, and the whole village gathered around to listen.

But with this new light came a new kind of silence. The children who had once come to the peepal tree in the evenings to hear Old Baba's stories now began sitting in front of screens. Old Baba said, "A machine brings voices from far away, but a village's songs come from within. Anyone who keeps listening to that inner voice will not be lost in the noise outside."

Chapter -47

The Markets of the Gulf



During the 1980s, the oil boom in the Gulf countries drew young men from the village to construction jobs in Dubai, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Kusum's husband, Ramesh, went to Dubai on a three-year contract. This time, however, he regularly sent letters and money home, and now and then his voice could even be heard over the telephone.

Old Baba said, "Markets in foreign lands may give you money, but the hearth at home gives you a name. Someone who earns a fortune and forgets that name returns a stranger. Wherever you go, take your name and your people with you."

Chapter –46

A Test of Harmony



Towards the end of the 1980s, a wave of tension between religious communities spread through the surrounding region. Rumours carried it as far as Garh Narikel. Some outsiders came to the village and tried to set Hindus and Muslims against one another.

But the Muslim families of Garh Narikel had been part of village life for generations. Their ancestors had drawn water from the same pond, worked in the same fields, and saved one another during the same floods. So the villagers stood together and sent the troublemakers away. Old Baba said, “When fire threatened us, the village stood as one. Harmony is tested not at festivals, but in times of trouble.”

Chapter –45

The Winds of Liberalisation

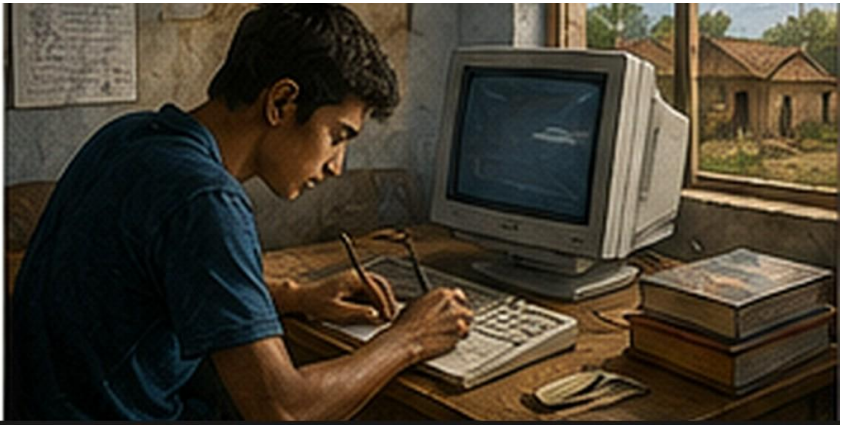
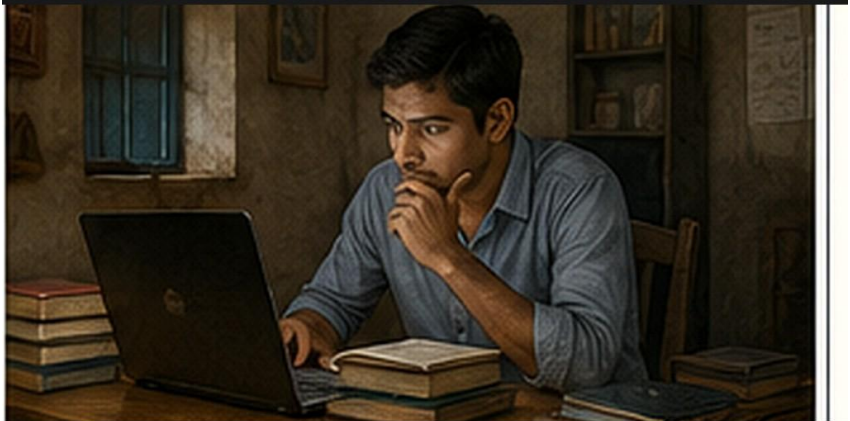


After the economic reforms of 1991, the village marketplace began to change. Brightly coloured plastic goods appeared, along with smooth new fabrics, and later the first cable television arrived. Kusum's son, Dinesh, found a job with a private company in town—something that had once seemed impossible.

There was a bright excitement in this new pace of life. But Old Baba said, "The new wind has opened the doors without shaking the roots. A village that remains joined to its roots will not be carried away by the wind."

Chapter –44

The First Computer



In Pratima's time, the first computer arrived at the Coconut Leaf School through a government programme. It was a large, grey machine. The children stared at it, wide-eyed. Letters that had once taken years to learn to write by hand could now appear on a screen in a moment.

But an elderly teacher smiled and repeated Old Baba's words: "A new machine can teach us to count, but it cannot count the worth of our names. The names a village remembers are greater than any number inside a machine."

Chapter –43

The Thinning River



In Pratima's time, the village elders noticed a new kind of danger, one that came slowly: the water level of the Kamala-Balan River was falling year after year. The current that had once swept away houses was growing thinner. The old people sat in the shade of the peepal tree, worried.

Old Baba said, "The current has grown thin, but it still knows its old course. A river that runs dry has not forgotten the floods. Protect the water, so that it will not forget you either."

Chapter –42

The Wonder of the Mobile Phone

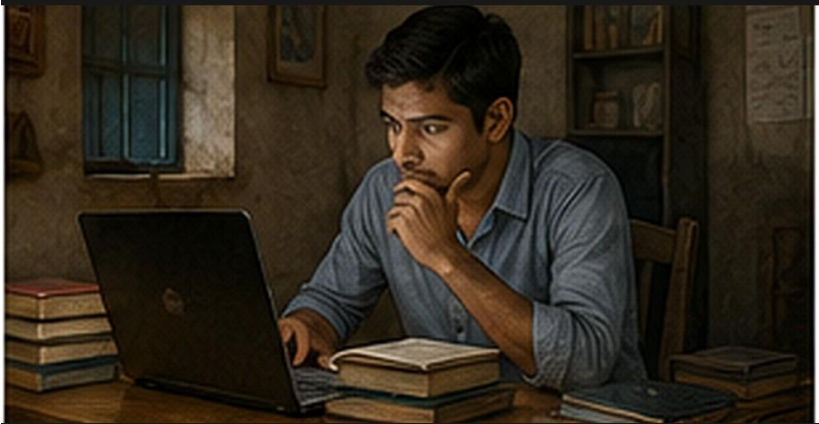


In Satyanarayan's time, the first mobile phone reached the village. At first there was only one, in the headman's hand. When the voice of his son, who had gone to a distant city, came out of the little device, the entire village gathered around in amazement.

Little by little, phones reached many homes. Sons working far away could speak to their parents at once, and news could travel in moments. Old Baba said, "A machine in the hand has brought faraway places near. But do not forget to ask the name of the person sitting beside you."

Chapter –41

The Marketplaces of the City



In Anjali's time, as India's information-technology industry boomed, educated young people from the village began leaving for software jobs in cities such as Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Delhi. Children who had once learned to write their names on leaves were now writing computer code.

But these new opportunities also brought distance. Many village houses stood locked for the whole year while the young people of the families were away. Old Baba said, "The city may buy your labour, but the village will never sell your name. Anyone who sells a name in the marketplace comes home empty-handed. Fly high—but keep your name and your village in your heart."

Chapter –40

The Right to Information



In Karunakar's time, India passed the Right to Information law, giving ordinary citizens the right to ask government offices for documents concerning them.

Following the old tradition of Yadavanand, the village's young people began requesting papers about the village's land and history from government archives—documents that had once remained locked away in officials' cupboards. Old Baba said, "Those who have a right to know can now ask questions. Information is a lamp that shows us names in the darkness."

Chapter –39

The Guarantee of Work

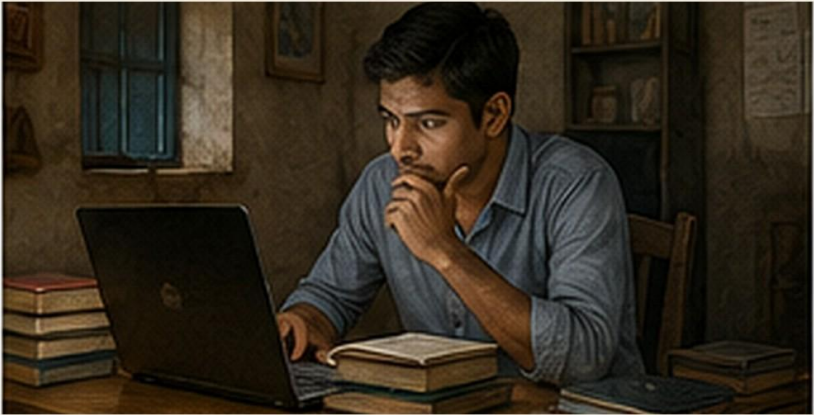


In Vibha's time, the central government's rural employment guarantee scheme reached the village. It gave every family the right to one hundred days of assured work in the village itself. Digging ponds, building embankments, making roads—the village's work began to be done by its own people. Hands that had once stood idle now found work to do.

Attendance for every job was entered in a register. Old Baba said, "When someone finds work, their hands can stand proud. Work gives a person a name, not alms."

Chapter –38

The Web of the Internet



In Suresh's time, smartphones and inexpensive internet connections reached the village. Children who had once learned their letters on coconut leaves now walked about with the whole world in the palms of their hands.

But this new web brought new troubles too. False news spread as though it were true. People looked at other people's glittering lives and felt unhappy with their own. Strangers could reach anyone. Old Baba said, "The new web brings faraway people near, but it turns names into numbers. Those who become tangled in it may lose sight of their own faces. Use the web, but do not let the web use you."

Chapter –37

The First Shadow on the Screen

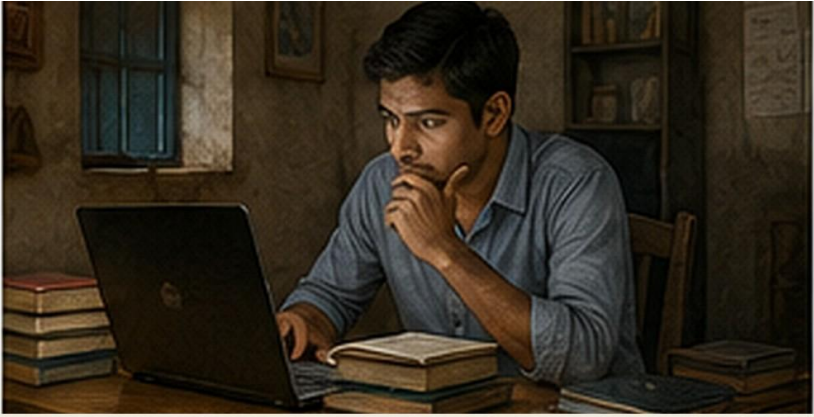


In Neeraj's time, Facebook and WhatsApp reached nearly every hand in the village. Relatives who lived far away seemed close again. Old friends found one another, and news of every joy and sorrow in the village travelled in moments.

But stories of rumours, fraud and online bullying began to be heard as well. Someone would take another person's photograph; someone else would hide in the darkness and spread lies, making another person's life miserable. Old Baba said, "A face first shines on the screen, while behind it a name may sink into darkness. Anyone looking at a screen must not let their eyes forget the real village."

Chapter –36

The First Signs of an Unseen Swindler



In Sapna's time, a young man from the village lost all his savings to a fake online company that had promised him a job. The company looked real. It had a website and even an office address. But it was being run by unseen hands in a distant country.

A report was made to the police. But how could they catch someone they could not even see? Old Baba spoke gravely. "The swindler you cannot see may be the most dangerous of all. This is a new kind of crocodile. It lives not in the pond but in the web. Listen for its approach. Ask for names. Trust what you have checked with your own eyes, not merely what is written on paper."

Chapter –35

The Market for Human Lives Opens



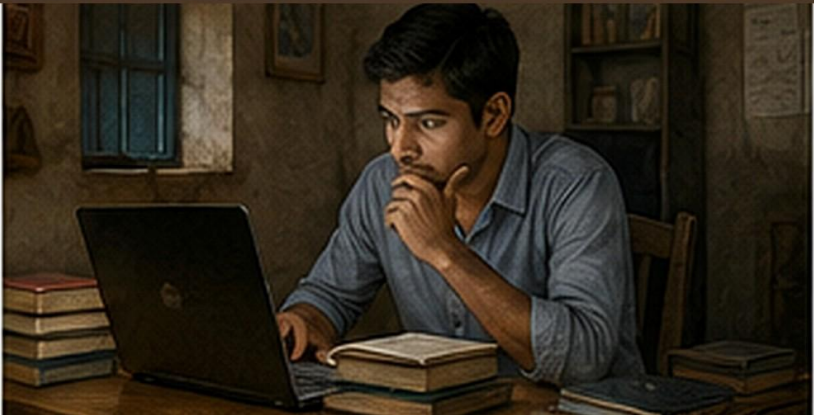
In Rajiv's time, the fraud carried out with false promises of jobs grew even more frightening. At first the swindlers had only taken people's

money. Now they began tempting people to go far away with promises of “good work”. Some of those who went never returned.

A son from one village household left after just such a promise, and for years no news of him came. His mother kept watching every road, hoping to see him return. Old Baba was deeply troubled. “Where people are treated as things to be sold, their names become cheap. But a village that remembers its people will not let them be turned into goods for a market. Ask questions. Check carefully. Never send your children away on a stranger’s promise.”

Chapter –34

Ujjwal's Dream



In Rajiv's time, a child was born into a poor family in the village. There was the simple happiness of a new birth. A sohar, a song to

welcome a baby, was sung. Jaggery was shared, and the child was named Ujjwal Jha.

Yet no one in the village had ever seen Old Baba so restless. Again and again, he looked towards that poor home, tried to say something, and fell silent. At last he spoke gently. “Dream great dreams, little one, but keep your roots in the earth. A dream that forgets its own name wakes to find itself alone.”

Chapter –33

The Shadow of the Lawyer's Coat



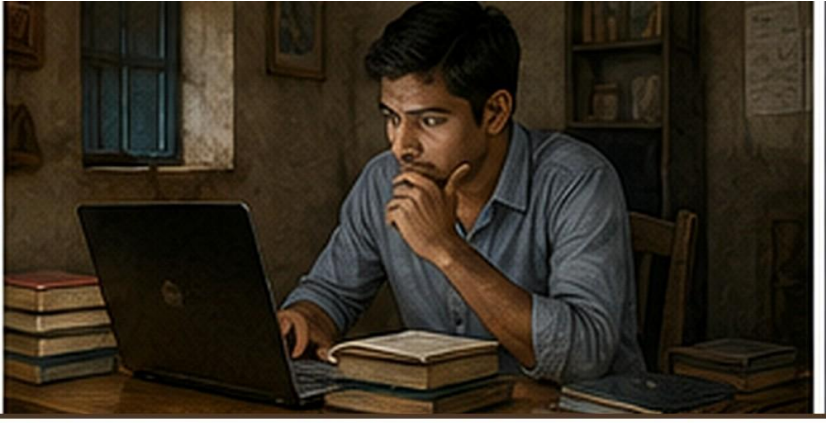
In Dipali's time, a sharp-witted young man from the village named Batuknath studied law and began practising as a lawyer in the city. The

village was proud of him. A boy who had once written his name on a coconut leaf was now arguing cases in court.

But as he began working for powerful clients, his path started to change. The taste of victory, the glitter of money and the excitement of power drew him, step by step, away from the path he had known. Old Baba said sadly, "Justice may hide in the shadow of a lawyer's coat, but it keeps speaking in the village. A lawyer reads the sections of the law; a village reads names. Let him never forget which side the truth is on."

Chapter –32

Shadows from Across the Sea



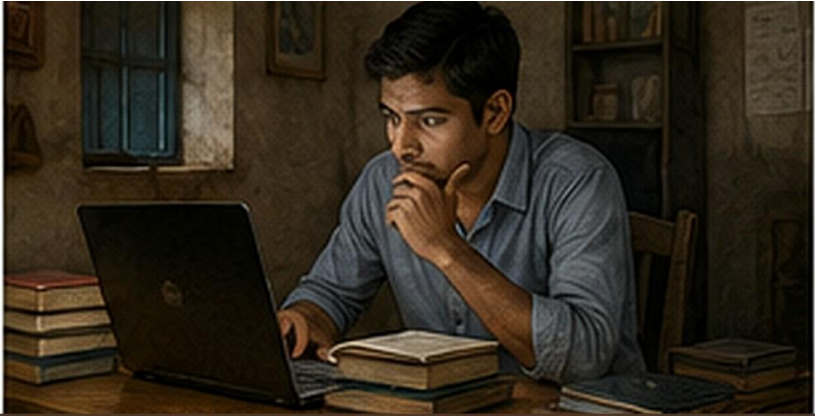
In Dipali's time, the village's stories of fraud began to lead across the seas, through networks of world trade and digital finance. Money taken

from the hands of poor villagers had travelled all the way to distant countries.

One report showed a photograph of a tall glass tower in a faraway city. It spoke of an unseen power operating inside that tower, cheating thousands of people from thousands of miles away. Old Baba said, “A shadow may come from across seven seas, but it cannot carry away a name. Even someone who cheats from far away leaves a mark upon the leaves. Keep a record. The leaves remember when our eyes cannot see.”

Chapter –31

Satyavrat's Silence



In Abhinav's time, a quiet, honest young man from the village named Satyavrat Mehta found a job in a bank in town. He was the sort of person who spoke little but noticed everything.

Gradually, he began to notice suspicious accounts. Money arrived and was immediately sent onwards for no clear reason. Hundreds of thousands came in and disappeared in an instant. He stayed quiet, watched carefully and gathered evidence of the truth. Old Baba said, "When someone has been silent for a long time, a single word from them can carry the greatest weight. Satyavrat's silence was a kind of testimony too."

Chapter –30

Gop Kumar's Documents

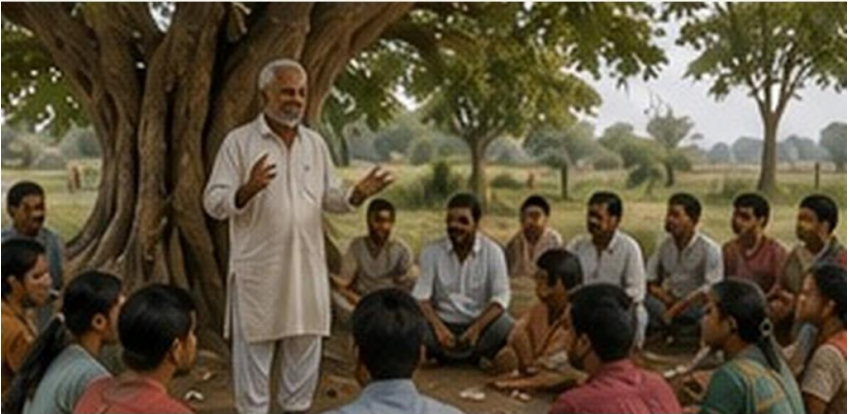


In Satyavrat's time, another young man from the village, Gop Kumar, carried forward the traditions of Yadavanand and Vibha. He devoted his life to collecting records and doing research. The boy who had once written his name on a coconut leaf began bringing old maps, ancient registers and new digital records together in one place.

The names Yadavanand had written in the darkness of night, the papers Vibha had obtained through the Right to Information—Gop Kumar joined them all into a single record. Old Baba said, “The one who keeps things written down saves them from time. Documents do not save bodies; they save names.”

Chapter –29

Chandrapal's Dream

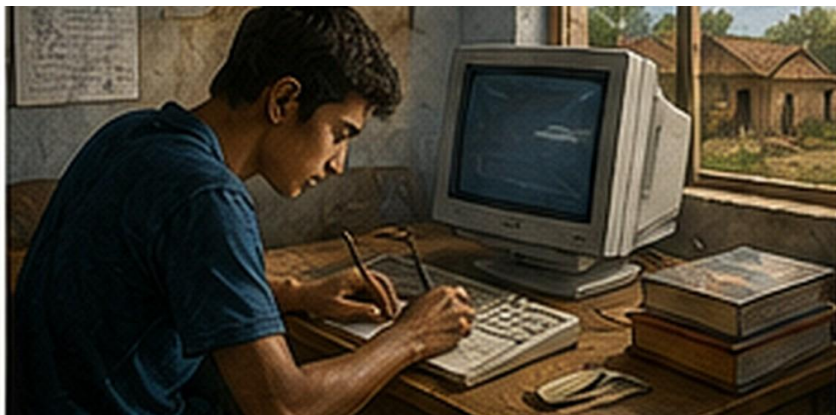


In Gop Kumar's time, a child was born in Meerut into a family distantly related to the village. His name was Chandrapal Batra. The family had left the village many years before and had wandered from town to town.

The villagers were surprised. Why was Old Baba so worried about a child born hundreds of miles away? Old Baba said, "There are dreams in his eyes, but there may be deception at his feet. Someone who signs a paper without understanding it can be caught in a trap. May someone teach him to read before he ever signs his name."

Chapter –28

Raghav's Code



In a branch of Abhinav's family living in the city, a child named Raghav was born. He had an extraordinary gift for computer code and machines. Even when he was very young, he learned the language of computers with ease.

As a teenager, he did things that amazed people. He could repair a complicated machine or find a fault that had been hidden away. But his talent could take him in either direction, towards good or towards harm. Old Baba said, "A language understood by machines does not necessarily understand a village. Yet even inside computer code, a name lies hidden. May he use his skill to reveal names, not conceal them."

Chapter –27

Aruni Builds

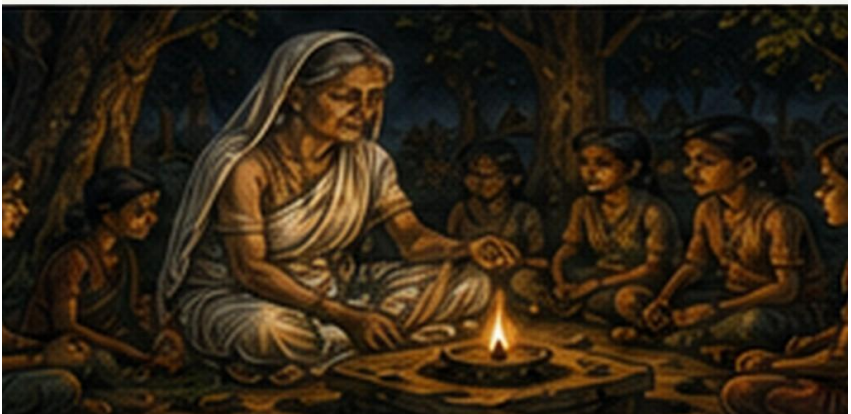


In Gop Kumar's time, a young man from the village named Aruni studied engineering and began working on bridges and embankments. Remembering the stories of floods he had heard as a child, and Indrani's early warnings, he gave the village's old embankment a new form. In place of an earthen barrier, he built a stronger, permanent one and brought in new instruments to warn of floods.

But he also knew that the strongest protection of all was a watchful, honest pair of eyes. Old Baba said, "Anyone who builds something must first build the strength within himself. Before the first splash, Aruni trained his eyes to see."

Chapter –26

Devika's Song

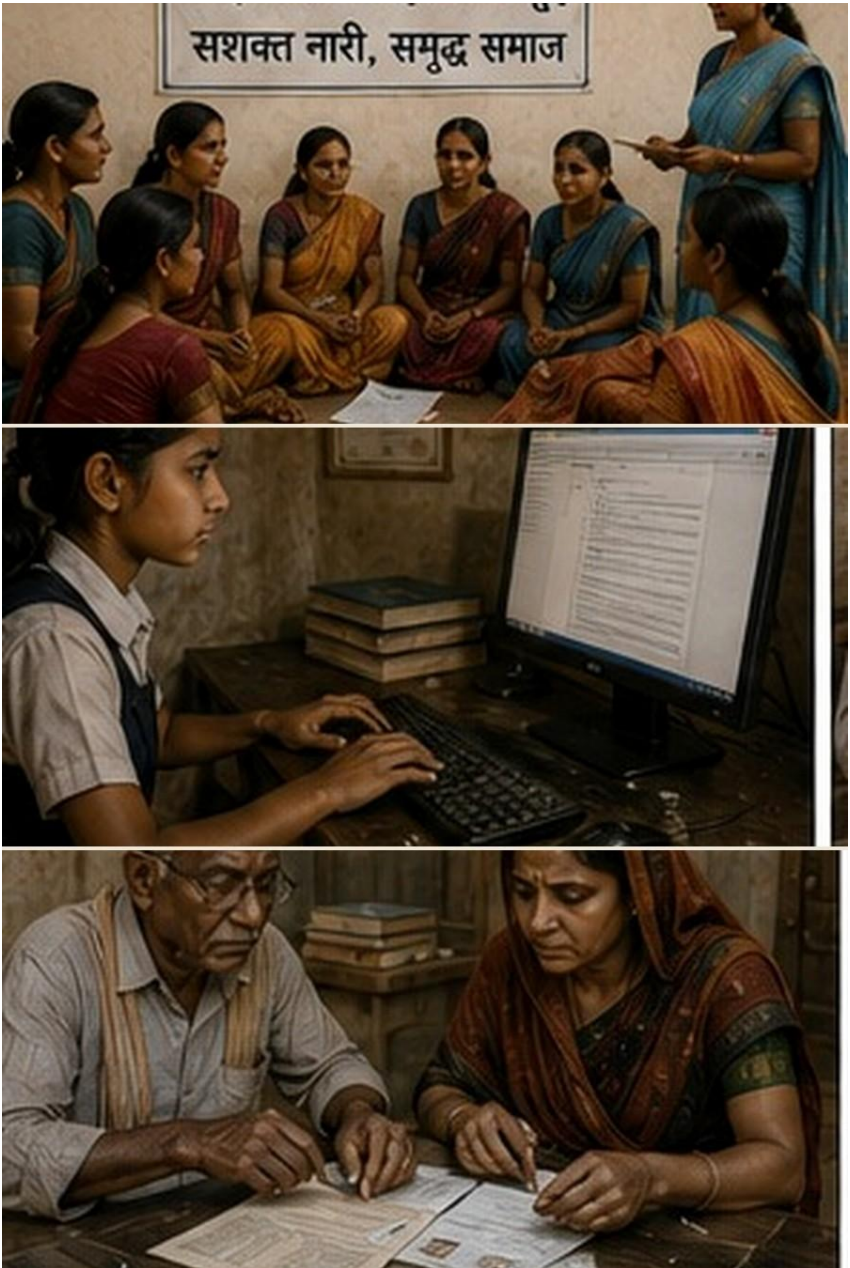


In Aruni's time, a young woman from the village named Devika carried on the musical tradition begun by Mohan. She gave new tunes and new instruments to the village's old folk songs—the songs of Hulasa, Jivanti and Gangesh.

She sat with the village's elderly women and listened to the songs that very few people still knew: a song about a flood, a sohar sung at a birth, a samdaun sung at a farewell. She kept them all alive in her own voice. Old Baba said, "The voice that holds a song can also speak for justice. A name sung aloud in a song echoes throughout the village."

Chapter –25

Meera's Right to Privacy



In Devika's time, a bright, determined young woman named Meera studied in the city and began working for digital privacy and women's safety. She carried forward Sapna's "digital night assembly".

Meera saw new forms of injustice appearing: someone stealing a woman's photograph, someone selling her personal information, someone using her name without permission. She stood up to protect the women affected. Old Baba said, "The story belongs to the person who lives it, and so does the right to give permission. A name is not a sample to be taken away. Meera's story belongs to Meera."

Chapter –24

Nishant's Bank



In Meera's time, a young man from the village named Nishant studied banking and began working to make financial services available to rural families. He wanted every family to have access to a bank account, insurance and loans. Nishant did not want the injustices of the past to happen again.

But he found that the language and paperwork of banks seemed strange and difficult to villagers who had never learned to read. So he patiently taught them how it all worked. Old Baba said, "When accounts are clear, the mind can be at peace. But anyone who sells a name for an entry in an account has lost the true reckoning."

Chapter –23

The Birth of Nand



In Nishant's time, a son was born in Aruni's home. They named him Nand. On the night of his birth, the ancient peepal tree that bore witness to the village was unusually calm and still, as though it were watching something with its own eyes.

There was the familiar happiness of a birth in the house. Sohar songs were sung, people danced and sang, and jaggery was shared. But those who knew Old Baba noticed that he offered a special blessing for this child. He said softly, "Every child who is born brings a new name into the world. Nand's birth has given the village a new witness."

Chapter –22

Approaching Twelve Hundred Years

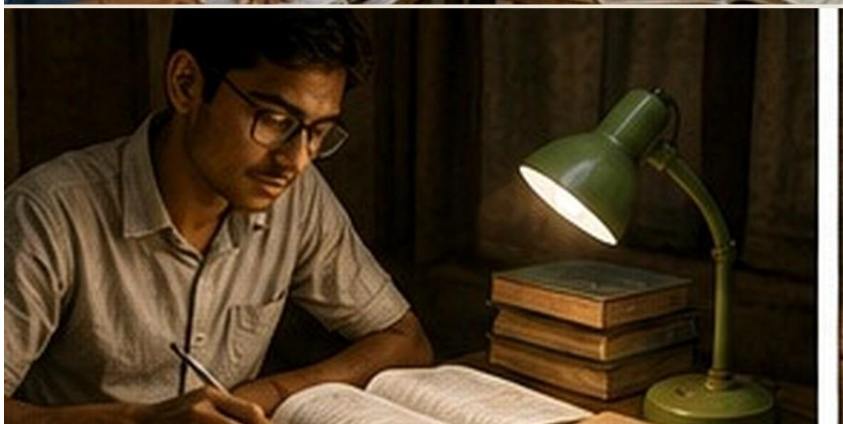


One evening after Nand's birth, Gop Kumar sat down to put together Old Baba's entire history, from the time of Vachaspati Mishra to the present day. The record contained hundreds of names: Hulasa, Jivanti, Sukhdev, Ratna, Malati, Savitri and countless generations after them.

Amid all those names, one name remained through every generation: the village itself, with its memories and its witness. Gop Kumar understood that the village was approaching twelve hundred years of history. Old Baba said, "Twelve hundred years did not pass in a single breath. A village that has endured so much is still standing at the end of it all—and even an ending can be a new beginning."

Chapter –21

Ananya's Question

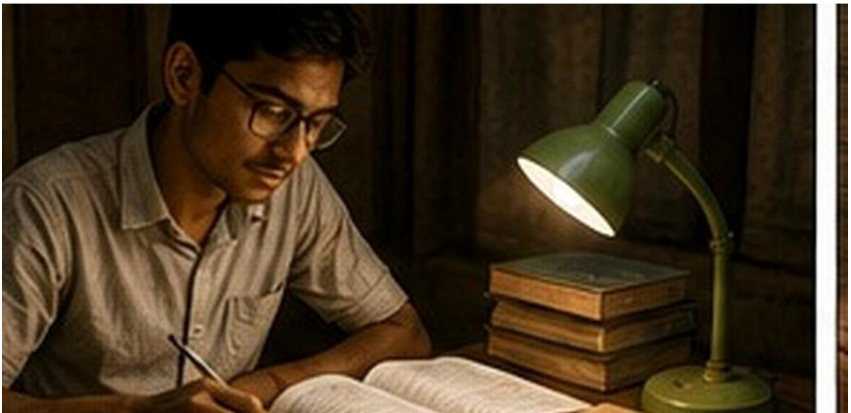


While Nand was still a child, a young teacher named Ananya came to teach at the modern branch of the Coconut Leaf School. She was the sort of teacher who did not make children learn answers by heart. Instead, she taught them how to ask questions.

At first the elders of the village were astonished. But little by little they saw that Ananya's pupils never accepted anything with their eyes closed. They asked, "Why?" and "How do we know?" Old Baba was delighted. "A small question can make a crack in a great dome. Anyone who learns to ask questions helps to keep names alive."

Chapter –20

The First Reckoning of a Splash

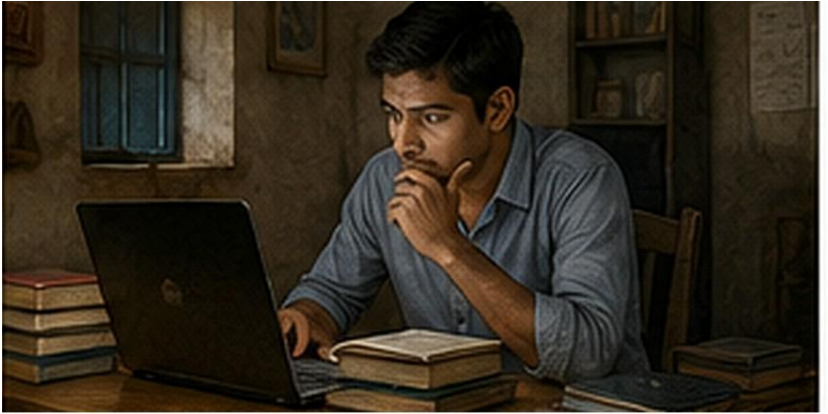


After learning from Ananya, Nand grew up, studied engineering, and followed in the footsteps of his father, Aruni, taking a job at a bridge-building site. There he saw how the workers lived: in broken huts, on low wages, without proper protection from danger.

One day he heard a story that shook him to the depths of his heart. A worker had fallen into the water while working on a bridge, but in the register his name had simply been marked “Absent”. From that day onwards, Nand began keeping his own record of every name. Old Baba said, “The first splash—the first name lost in the water. Whoever keeps the record can make even the crocodile a witness.”

Chapter –19

Satyavrat's Decision

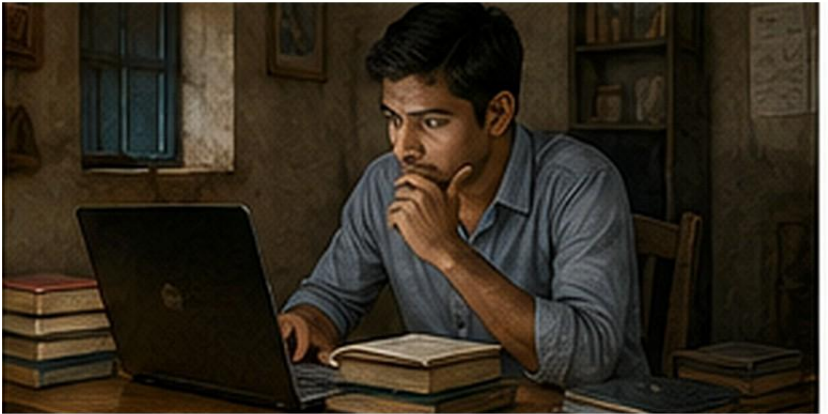


While Nand was still studying, Satyavrat Mehta, now holding a senior position at the bank, opened his old notebook once again. In it he had written down the details of suspicious transactions many years before. The same pattern appeared again and again: money moved from one account to another, then to a third, and finally to some distant account across the sea. Certain names kept turning up.

Satyavrat had remained silent for a long time, gathering the truth. Now he made up his mind to act. Old Baba said, “The decision that comes after a long wait is the steadiest of all. Satyavrat kept silent, but in the end he stood up for the names.”

Chapter –18

Ananya and Nand Meet

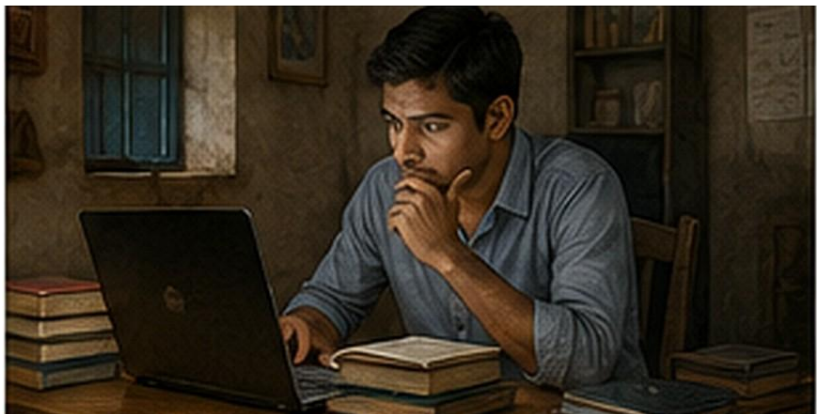


After completing his engineering studies, Nand returned to the village. He began working with Ananya on a project to modernise the Coconut Leaf School and preserve the village's heritage in digital form.

Ananya knew every old village tale, every folk song and every family register. Nand knew how to preserve them in a lasting digital form. Each one's work completed the other's, like a leaf and a pen. Old Baba smiled and said, "Two paths have met, and a new journey has begun. When people share one purpose, their feet walk together."

Chapter –17

The Trap in the Glass Tower



In Nand's time, the news repeatedly carried reports of a vast network of digital fraud run from Hong Kong. It was linked to a man named Lau Kin-hung. The network was so cleverly arranged that no one could see its whole shape.

On one side, a young person was promised a "good job"; on another, an investor was tempted with the promise of "double your money". Between them, countless people were caught in the net. Old Baba said, "A glass tower shines when seen from far away, but inside it lies a trap. Anyone dazzled by the glitter may be caught. Do not let the shine deceive you. Ask whose names lie behind it."

Chapter –16

Batuknath's Final Turning

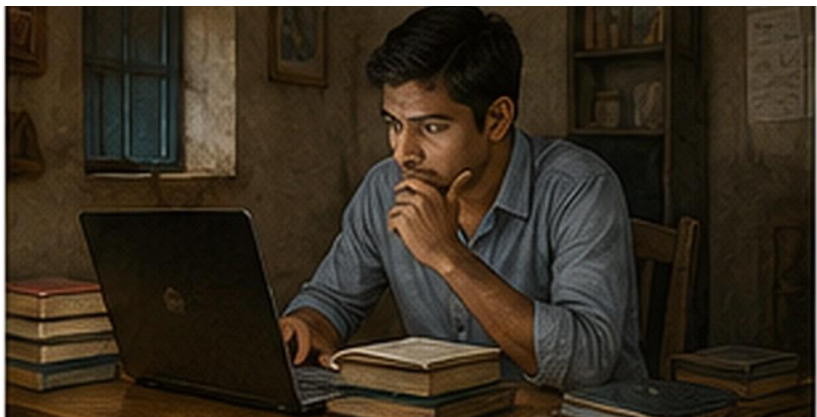


Several months after Ananya's warning, news came that Batuknath Hariharan, now a respected but questionable lawyer, had begun defending people accused in a number of major fraud cases. His name was counted among the city lawyers whom powerful defendants sought out to fight their cases.

He kept winning, and he kept growing richer. Yet after each victory, something within him seemed to grow heavier. Old Baba said, "Even a wrong road must turn somewhere before it ends." And at last Batuknath turned back towards his own name.

Chapter –15

Chandrapal's Account



In Nand's time, word came that Chandrapal Batra, the distant relative whose name Old Baba had spoken so many years before, had fallen deeply into debt through gambling. Overwhelmed by what he owed, he was drawn into the network of fraud.

Chandrapal did not fully understand what he was doing. He had been told that it was only "commission work". He did not realise that he was becoming one of the knots in a great net. Old Baba said sadly, "Even when you do not understand an account, your signature carries weight. Ignorance too can become a knot in the net. Understand before you sign."

Chapter –14

Building the Bridge



Because of his skill, Nand was appointed assistant to the chief engineer at a new bridge construction site over the Kamala-Balan, close to the village. After so many years, this bridge would connect the village to the land on the other side of the river.

Nand had learned how to build bridges, but his questioning eyes noticed things that troubled him: workers without proper protection, people working high above the ground without helmets, and a careless contractor. Old Baba said, “A bridge joins two banks, but it must never forget the water. Whoever builds a bridge must remember both the floods and the names of those who built it.”

Chapter –13

Gop Kumar's Collection



Gop Kumar, now an old man, sat down to bring together everything he had collected throughout his life: Yadavanand's shadow register, the manuscripts of the poet Haripati, Gangadhar's efforts with the printing press, and the modern digital archives.

As he gathered the pages, he saw that every thread was coming together: the confusion between the conch shell and silver, Hulasa's water burial, Sukhdev's nameless death, Batuknath's change of path. Every name was a thread in one enormous weaving. Old Baba said, "Whoever joins name to name makes history. A collection cannot save bodies, but it can save memory."

Chapter –12

The Trembling of Channa Grove



One evening, for no clear reason, all the trees in Channa Grove—from the peepal to every channa tree—shivered softly at the same moment, although the air was perfectly still. Not a breath of wind was blowing. The villagers felt the strange trembling and gathered around the peepal tree in fear.

The elders remembered that they had seen such a trembling only two or three times before, and each time something important had happened afterwards. Old Baba said nothing, but his old words echoed in their minds: “The grove trembled, and the village listened. Something is going to happen. When the grove speaks, the village must learn to understand.”

Chapter –11

Old Baba's Final Blessing

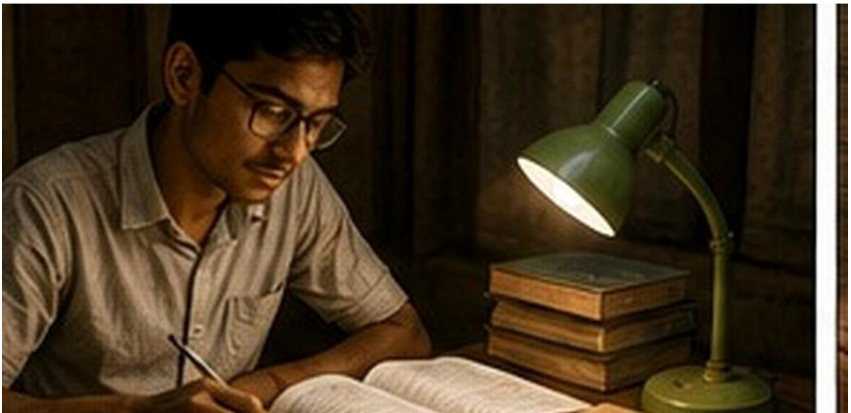


On the night after Channa Grove trembled, Old Baba called Nand to the peepal tree, alone. Only one little lamp was burning beneath it. In its gentle light, Old Baba's face held a deep and solemn tenderness.

Nand stayed silent. He had known Old Baba since childhood, but what he heard in Old Baba's voice tonight was more than a story. It sounded almost like a farewell, like the handing over of something precious. Old Baba blessed him: "A blessing gives not a body, but a name. Remember every name, Nand. Be a witness." Those last words became a seed for the next generation.

Chapter –10

The First Splash at the Bridge

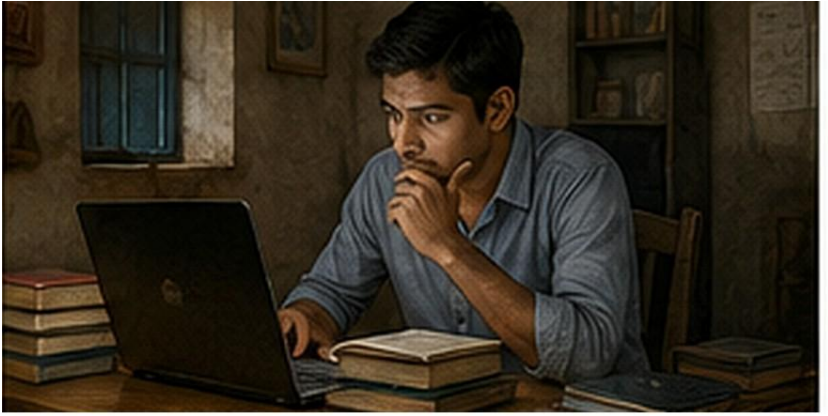


One night at the bridge construction site, there was no moon in the sky. After the rains, the river was rushing with all its strength. Tired workers were still working in the dark, without enough light to see properly.

Suddenly, a worker whose name was not yet clear fell into the river. The sound of the splash carried all the way to the hamlet nearest the village. It was that same single sound the village had heard again and again through the years. Nand made up his mind: this name would not be lost. Old Baba's words echoed: "The first splash at the bridge—the first name in the water. The name of the one who sank there rose again upon the leaves."

Chapter –9

The Investigation Begins



After the accident at the bridge, Nand began searching for the worker's name and recording what he found in his diary. He asked the contractor for the papers, examined the attendance register and spoke to the other workers.

But the deeper he looked, the more he realised this was no ordinary accident. The bridge company's documents were unclear, the workers' names were not their real names, and the movement of money looked suspicious. Old Baba said, "An investigation is like digging for water: first comes the mud, then the water. Whoever begins digging will come closer to the truth. Keep digging, Nand."

Chapter –8

The Evidence Comes to Light



With Gop Kumar's help, Satyavrat passed all the evidence from his notebook to a trustworthy journalist and an honest investigating agency. Every thread he had gathered over the years was now brought into the open.

As the evidence emerged, the shape of the network became clearer: Ujjwal Jha's debts, Batuknath's legal assistance, Chandrapal's mule account, and Lau Kin-hung's tower were all connected. They belonged to the same net. Old Baba said, "Evidence hidden in darkness will one day see the dawn. The truth may lie at the bottom of the water, but it will surely rise."

Chapter –7

The Half-Ghost Encounter



One night, worn out and full of grief, Nand fell asleep beside the roots of the peepal tree. All that day he had been searching for the name of the worker who had died in the bridge accident, and the sadness had exhausted him.

In his dream, for the first time, he saw Old Baba a little more clearly: an elderly figure sitting upon a branch, between smoke and light. His face was not quite distinct, but his eyes were full of affection and wisdom. Old Baba said, “Half a truth and half a ghost can both frighten you. But the person who knows the whole name need not fear a half-ghost. Find the complete name, Nand, and your fear will go away.”

Chapter –6

Gop Kumar's Final Page



Gop Kumar, now very old, completed the last page of the collection he had worked on all his life: the whole story of Old Baba, from the time of Vachaspati Mishra to the present day. His hand trembled as he wrote. The collection held the memories of centuries, from the conch shell mistaken for silver to Hulasa's water burial, Sukhdev's nameless death, Yadavanand's shadow register and today's digital records.

When it was finished, Gop Kumar placed the whole weight of those names into the hands of Nand and Ananya. He felt lighter, as though the burden he had carried all his life had finally been lifted. Old Baba said, "The one who holds the final page carries the weight of the story. Gop Kumar handed over the names, and his heart grew light."

Chapter –5

The Network Exposed



After months of investigation, the evidence gathered by Satyavrat and Nand finally exposed the local part of the fraud network. Batuknath's involvement in the village and Chandrapal's mule account both came clearly into view.

Legal proceedings began against Batuknath. For the first time, that respected lawyer had to stand before the court himself. Old Baba said, "When the net was uncovered, it was not the fish but the fishermen who were caught. Whoever saw the net could recognise the crocodile."

Chapter –4

The Final List of Names



After months of searching, Nand succeeded in finding the real name of every worker who had died at the bridge construction site. He went from village to village and family to family, searching through papers the contractor had struck out and addresses of workers who had been forgotten.

Thirty names—names linked to a story the official records had forgotten. Nand wrote all thirty of them, one by one, in his diary, *The Reckoning of the Splash*. Beside each name he recorded the family and the story that belonged to it. Old Baba said, “The names that were left out have finally been added. With the list complete, the crocodile’s reckoning is complete too.”

Chapter –3

Twelve Hundred Years Come Full Circle



On a moonless night, Nand, Ananya and every person in the village gathered at Channa Grove for kabaddi, just as their ancestors had gathered for hundreds of years. This was more than a game. It was the village's oldest ceremony for remembering names.

This time, for the first time, Nand's name was included among the players. Nand, who until now had only watched and borne witness, stepped into the game himself. When his turn came, the whole village fell silent. Old Baba said, "The circle of twelve hundred years is complete on this moonless night. What stood at the beginning stands here again at the end."

Chapter –2

The Next Generation's Promise

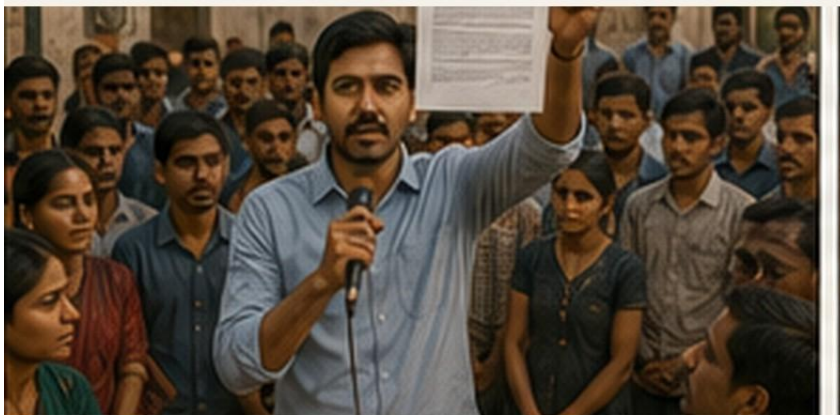


After the kabaddi game, as the darkness of that moonless night began to grow thinner, Nand and Ananya called all the young people of the village to the peepal tree and made a new promise with them. The names that had just been called out during the game still seemed to echo in the air.

In the young people's eyes shone the light Old Baba had longed to see through all those years: the light that said the story would never die, because there were still hands ready to carry it forward. The young people promised, "We will not merely hold on to the names. We will listen to them and carry them onwards." Old Baba said, "A promise made by the next generation saves the village. Holding on to a name is not enough; listening is what sets it free."

Chapter –1

The Final Witness



One last evening, Old Baba called Nand to the peepal tree, alone. “Nand,” he said, “I want to tell you something I have come to understand over all these years. You are the one the whole village has been waiting for. You are its new witness.”

Astonished, Nand asked, “Old Baba, how did you know?” Old Baba smiled and said, “Because when a name was sinking, you did not run away. You stayed, and you asked questions. That is all.”

And Old Baba gave Nand the village’s last—and first—old saying: “The crocodile devours the body, but not the name.” Nand wrote it in his diary. And so the twelve-hundred-year-old story of Garh Narikel passed into Nand’s hands—and a new story began.

Chapter 1

Kabaddi in Channa Grove







In the village of Garh Narikel stood an ancient grove called Channa Grove. Children played there during the day. But as soon as night fell, the villagers said, a very different sort of game began.

The game was kabaddi—but its players were ghosts.

Grandmother used to say, “The ghosts do not come to frighten us. They come to save names from being forgotten.”

The king of the ghosts in Channa Grove was Old Baba Ghost. For twelve hundred years he had sat upon the same branch. Whenever a quarrel arose, all the village ghosts listened to him.

Hulasi had no hands, yet she played better than anyone. Panidubbi came up from the pond to watch kabaddi, her long hair floating in the breeze. Brahma sat in the peepal tree, watching all four directions with his four faces.

This was no ordinary game of kabaddi. Whenever a ghost ran into the other team's half, the ghost had to call out a name—the name of someone the village had forgotten. If the name was spoken correctly, the ghost won. If the name was forgotten, the ghost lost.

One night, a strange match took place. Far away in a city, a great bridge was being built over the River Ganga. A labourer working there had fallen in an accident. The newspaper did not print his name. It printed only a picture of the bridge and a speech by a politician.

The ghosts of Channa Grove came to know what had happened. Old Baba Ghost said, "If a name has been erased from the papers, we shall save it in our game."

From that night onwards, kabaddi had a new rule: "Save-the-Name Kabaddi." Whenever a ghost called out a forgotten name and reached the boundary line, that name sprang up on a leaf of Channa Grove like a fresh green shoot.

Far from the village, a young engineer named Nand worked on that very bridge. He was a kind-hearted man. He began writing the labourers' names in his own diary. "If the government forgets their names," he said, "I will not."

One night Nand had a dream. He saw Channa Grove in Garh Narikel, the ghosts playing kabaddi, and all of them calling his name together: "Nand Aruni! Nand Aruni!"

Nand awoke. In his hand was a torn piece of a labourer's gamchha, or cotton cloth. He knew that this was no ordinary happening.

That same night, Grandmother found a piece of gamchha in exactly the same colour on the doorstep of her village home. She touched it to her forehead and said, "Tell me the name of the person this belongs to."

At dawn, three letters appeared upon a leaf in Channa Grove: ja, la, sa. Later the ink spread, but the ghosts could read the whole word: "Jalsamadhi"—a burial in water.

With that word, a new story began: a story of saving names and searching for the truth. Its first guardians were Nand Aruni and the ghosts of Garh Narikel.





Chapter 2

The Village on the Right Bank







There was an old saying in Garh Narikel: “When the river swallows your field boundary, the papers swallow your court case.”

Grandmother opened an old chest in her house. Inside lay ancient papers, old ornaments and a dried coconut leaf. Lattar Thakur, Grandmother’s father-in-law, had kept that leaf when his son Kalit was born.

Kalit was a remarkably clever child. Even when he was little, he learned to imitate everything. When the village pandits recited the names of ancestral lineages and gotras, Kalit listened quietly and remembered every word.

British rule had reached the region. Lattar Thakur noticed that people who understood official papers were the ones everyone listened to. So he arranged for Kalit to study and brought in a Bengali teacher.

Kalit learned his letters quickly. But he learned something more than reading: with papers, people could change a person's land, name and rights—everything.

One day Lattar Thakur took his son to the riverbank. Bird footprints patterned the sand. He said, "My boy, these marks will be gone tomorrow, but they are true today. A piece of paper can sometimes preserve a lie. If you ever find a paper soaked in river water, smell it first. If it smells of earth, you may trust it. If it smells of money, be careful."

Time passed. Many years later, a young man named Nand, a very distant descendant of Lattar Thakur, stood trembling in the bridge camp with a wet gamchha in his hands. He did not remember that old conversation, but the lesson was alive inside him: "Smell it first."

Far away in the village, Grandmother took out an old slip. In the language of the old courthouse, it said "Next hearing." Grandmother could not read the letters, but she could understand what was in a paper's heart.

She carried the slip and the gamchha to Channa Grove. There she asked Old Baba Ghost, "If this belongs to a name, tell me that name. If it belongs to another court date, I refuse to accept it."

Old Baba Ghost replied, "When the government refuses to recognise something, that thing becomes 'unknown'. This gamchha is not Lattar's old court case. It is Nand's first testimony."

That night Nand wrote in his diary, "Death does not come on the day the body stops moving. It comes on the day a name is taken away."

By morning, a new line had appeared in his diary: "Begin at Garh Narikel."

Nand understood. The story would begin in the village, because a person whose ancestors have been forgotten cannot keep a name alive.

Back at home, Grandmother laid a hand on the head of her granddaughter Aruni and said, "Whenever you find that a paper and your heart tell different stories, try to smell what is in your heart. A paper may hold a lie; the heart cannot hold one for very long."

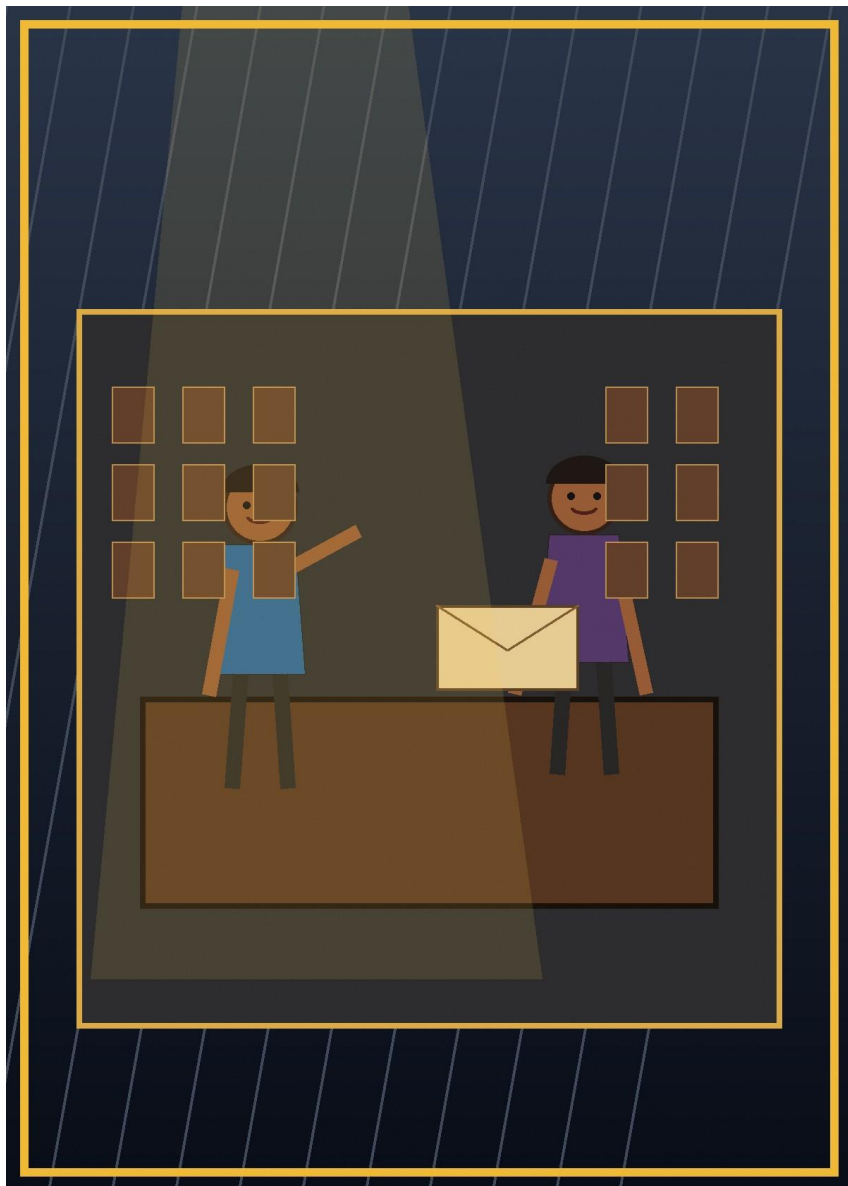




Chapter 3

The Reckoning of the Splash







Nand submitted his application at the office. Divakar Lal, the senior clerk, looked at the papers and said, “Nand Babu, the words you have used are rather harsh.”

Nand answered, “The truth is harsh.”

Nand went to the labourers’ settlement. There were huts made of bamboo and tarpaulin. He asked about a worker named Bisesar Paswan. Bisesar’s wife said softly, “Three days ago he went up onto the bridge support. Then there was the water.”

“But the office records say he left his job and went away,” Nand said.

She showed him a torn shoe. “If he went away,” she asked, “why did he leave his shoe behind?”

Nand realised that the office papers were telling lies. He asked to see the safety register. Its pages were full of fine claims: “Safety helmets

distributed”; “Ropes inspected.” But in reality the workers had no helmets, and their ropes were old.

One evening the senior project officer called Nand into his room. He pushed an envelope towards him. “Take a little money for your expenses,” he said. “Don’t get involved in these matters.”

Nand picked up the envelope, smelled it and put it back. “It smells of money. My elders told me never to sign a paper that smells of money.”

That night Nand found a threatening note on his bed: “Stop writing down names.” He was not frightened. He pasted the note into his diary and wrote, “Threat received. This means I am following the names in the right direction.”

Meanwhile, another game of kabaddi began in Channa Grove. The ghosts called out the names of women workers: Muniya, Sarayu, Phulkali, Rajni. These women had worked on the bridge but appeared in no government record. They had done the work, yet nobody had counted them.

Nand demanded a separate attendance register for the women workers. The office staff laughed. “They are family members, not employees.” Nand stood firm. “If they carry loads upon their heads, they are workers.”

One night, heavy rain fell. The river rose, yet orders came from above that work must continue. The labourers climbed to a high place carrying lanterns. Suddenly a rope snapped. “Stop work!” Nand shouted. But no one could hear him over the roaring rain. Two workers fell into the water.

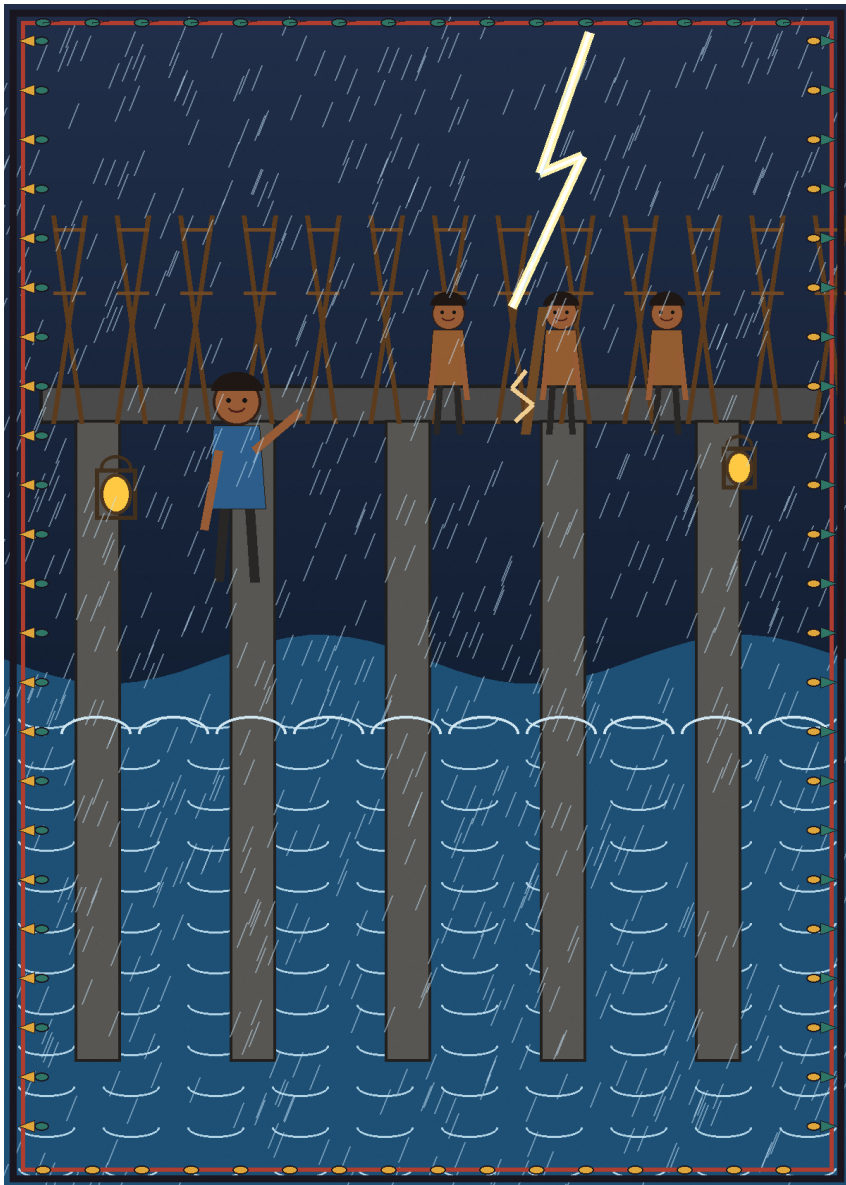
Nand ran to the river’s edge. His fellow worker Bholaram seized his arm. “Babu, crocodiles!” Nand shone his torch across the dark water. Out of the darkness came a cry: “Sarayul”

A woman’s name! Yet the office records said that no woman had been working there. Nand’s heart trembled.

By morning an official notice arrived: “Work interrupted by exceptionally heavy rain. No major loss.” When Nand read this lie, he tore the notice apart in anger for the first time.

That night he opened a fresh page of his diary and wrote, “The Reckoning of the Splash.” Underneath he began listing names: first, Bisesar Paswan; second, Chhotu (real name still to be found); third, Sarayu.

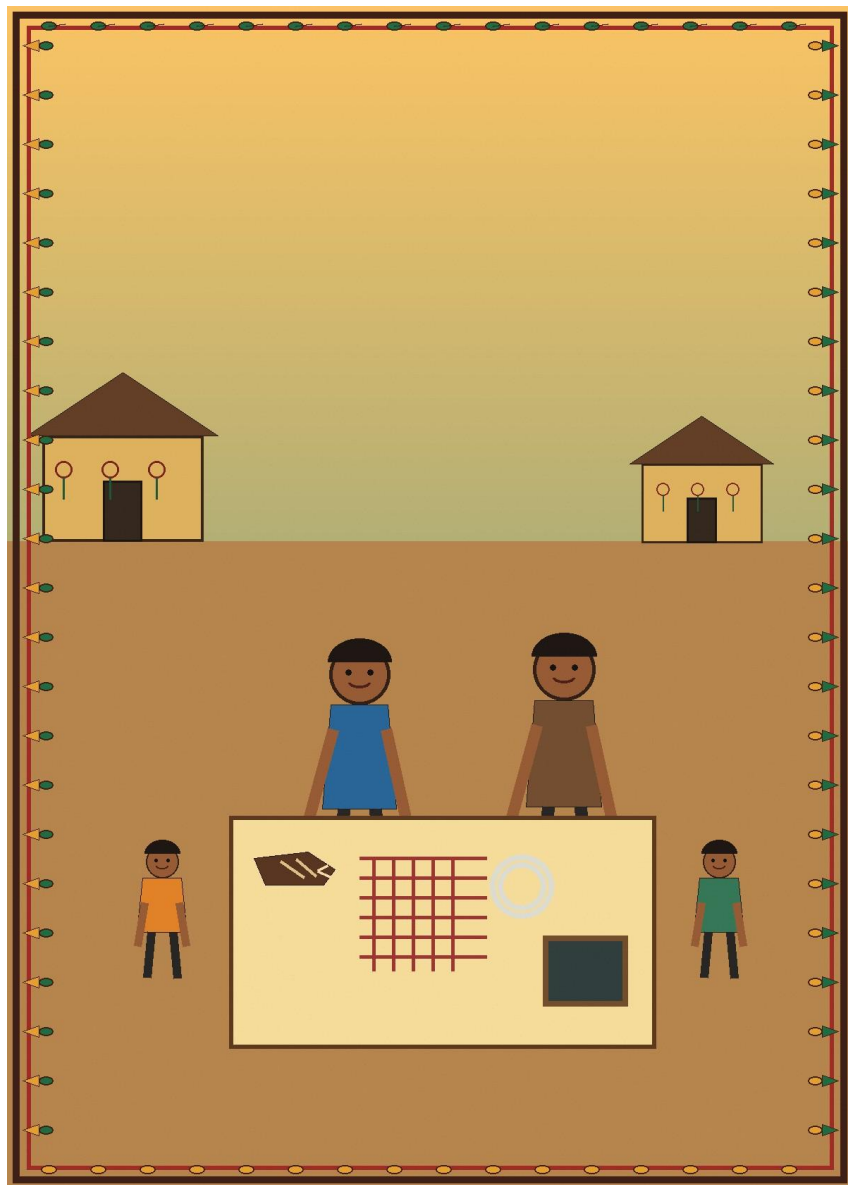
Nand understood that this was not simply the story of a bridge. It was a struggle to save the truth, and it did not belong to Nand alone. It belonged to the whole village, to every ghost in Channa Grove, and to all the people whose names others might forget but whom the earth and the leaves would never forget.

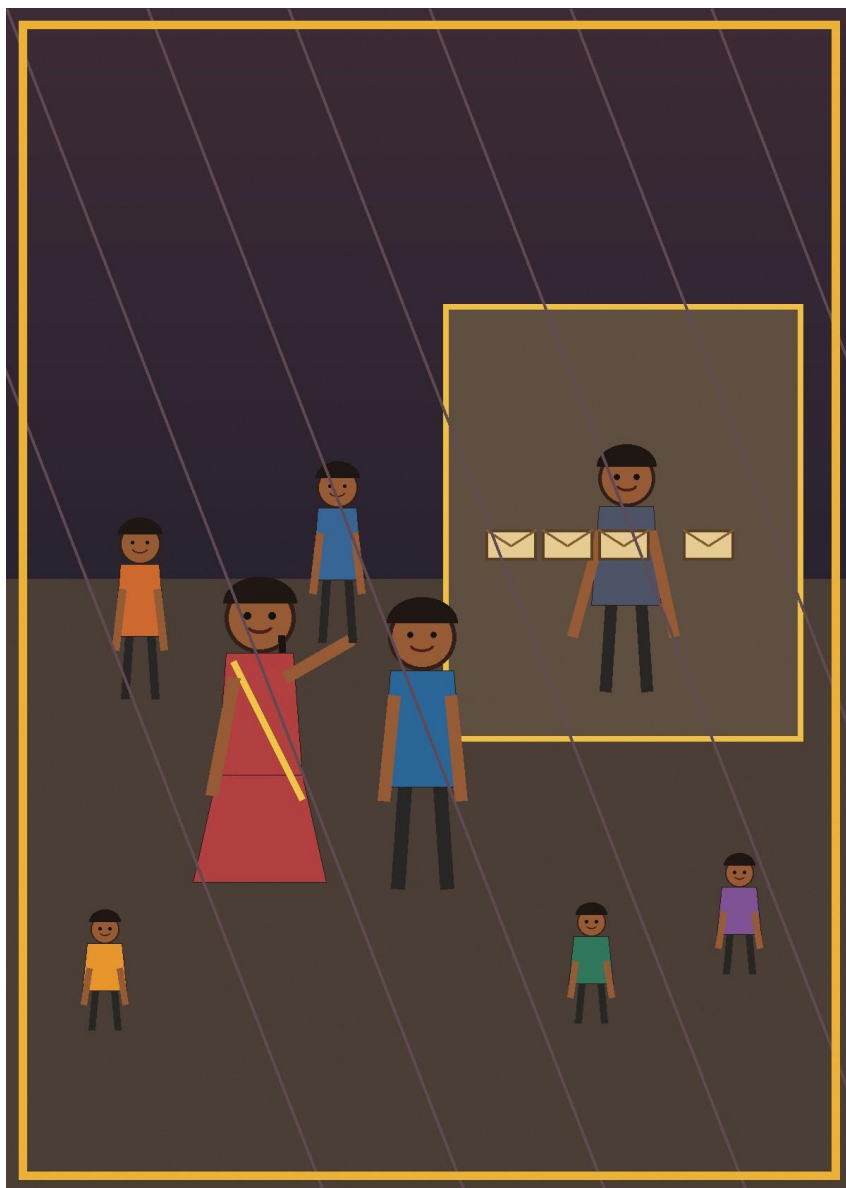




Chapter 4

Thirty Names, Three Hundred Dead







Nand asked Bholaran, “Who is Sarayu?”

“Sarayuu was a worker,” Bholaran said quietly. “But she has no name in the office papers. Her husband had died earlier, and she was working under his name. So her real name was never recorded anywhere.”

Nand understood that many of the real names were missing from the records. He began gathering the workers’ belongings: Bisesar’s shoe, a scrap of Chhotu’s gamchha, Sarayu’s silver bracelet, and the slate belonging to Muniya’s child. Each object was a witness, even if its owner’s name was absent from the papers.

Nand brought these things to the office. “What have you brought here?” asked Divakar Lal, the clerk. “Witnesses,” Nand replied. “When the feet cannot be found, the shoes can bear witness.”

But the official list contained only thirty names. Nand knew that far more people had died—at least three hundred. He raised his voice: “Not thirty. Three hundred!”

On the day compensation money was distributed, a crowd gathered as though for a fair. As Bisesar’s wife accepted her envelope, she asked, “Where is the compensation for Chhotu? And for Sarayu?”

The officer was startled. Nand stepped forward. “That is a fair question,” he said.

After this, Nand was transferred to another post. But he did not give up. He went to a lawyer named Devkinandan Chaubey and filed a case in court. “Where is your evidence for so many hundreds of names?” the lawyer asked. Nand took the shoe, the bracelet, the gamchha and pieces of old paper out of his bag. “These are what remains of those names,” he said.

The case began, but one hearing followed another. Sometimes the government records failed to arrive. Sometimes the judge was away. Sometimes there was some other excuse. Nand realised that the road through the courts was long.

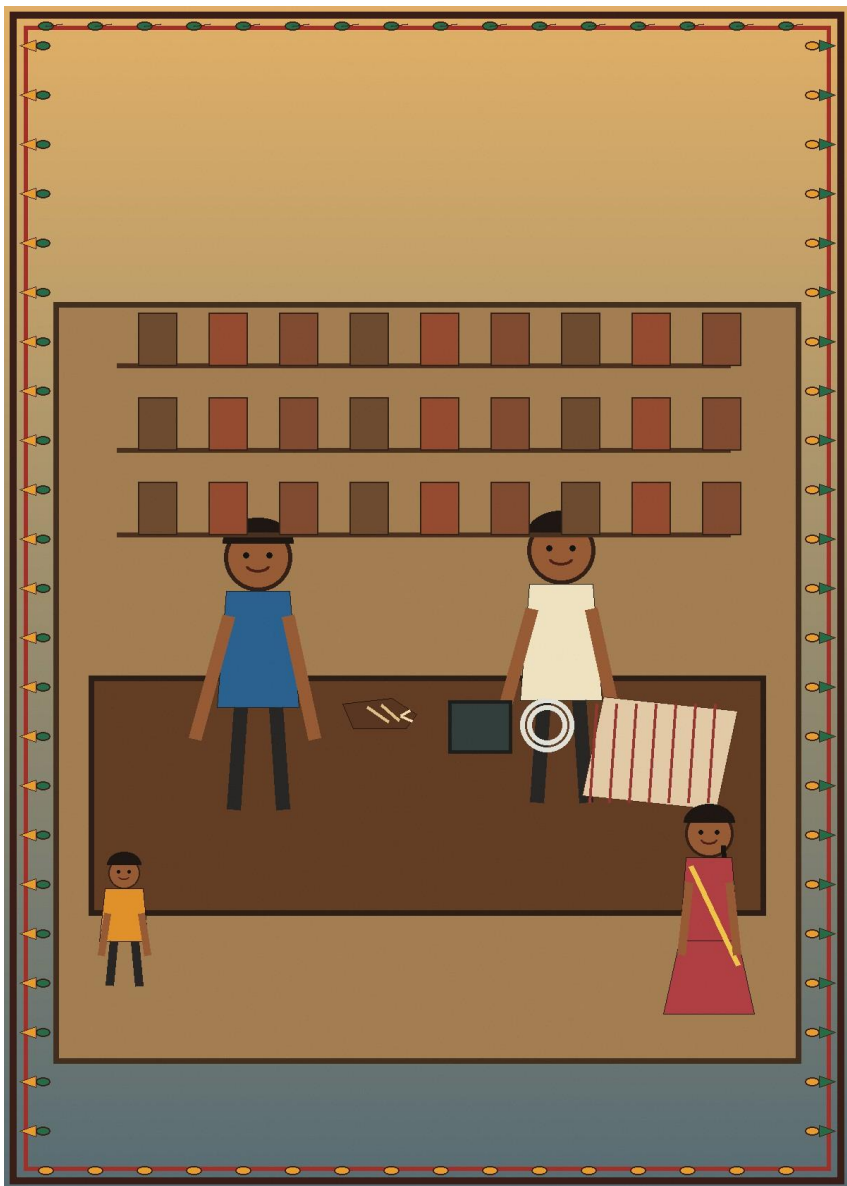
Back in the village, Nand thought of another way. He began teaching all the names to the children. “Bisesar, Sarayu, Muniya, Dhanesari, Bholtun...” At first the children laughed. Then, little by little, they brought the names into their games. Soon the whole village was remembering them.

The government list stopped at thirty, but in the memories of Garh Narikel’s children the count grew to three hundred.

Nand made three copies of his diary. He left one with Grandmother, one with the lawyer, and buried the third in the earth beside the roots of the peepal tree near the river. “Why so close to the water?” Grandmother asked. “Those whom the water took,” said Nand, “should have a copy near the water.”

The bridge was finished. There was a grand opening. A minister cut a ribbon, and people applauded. But to Nand it seemed that a name hung from every iron bar. He kept repeating silently, “Not thirty. Three hundred.”

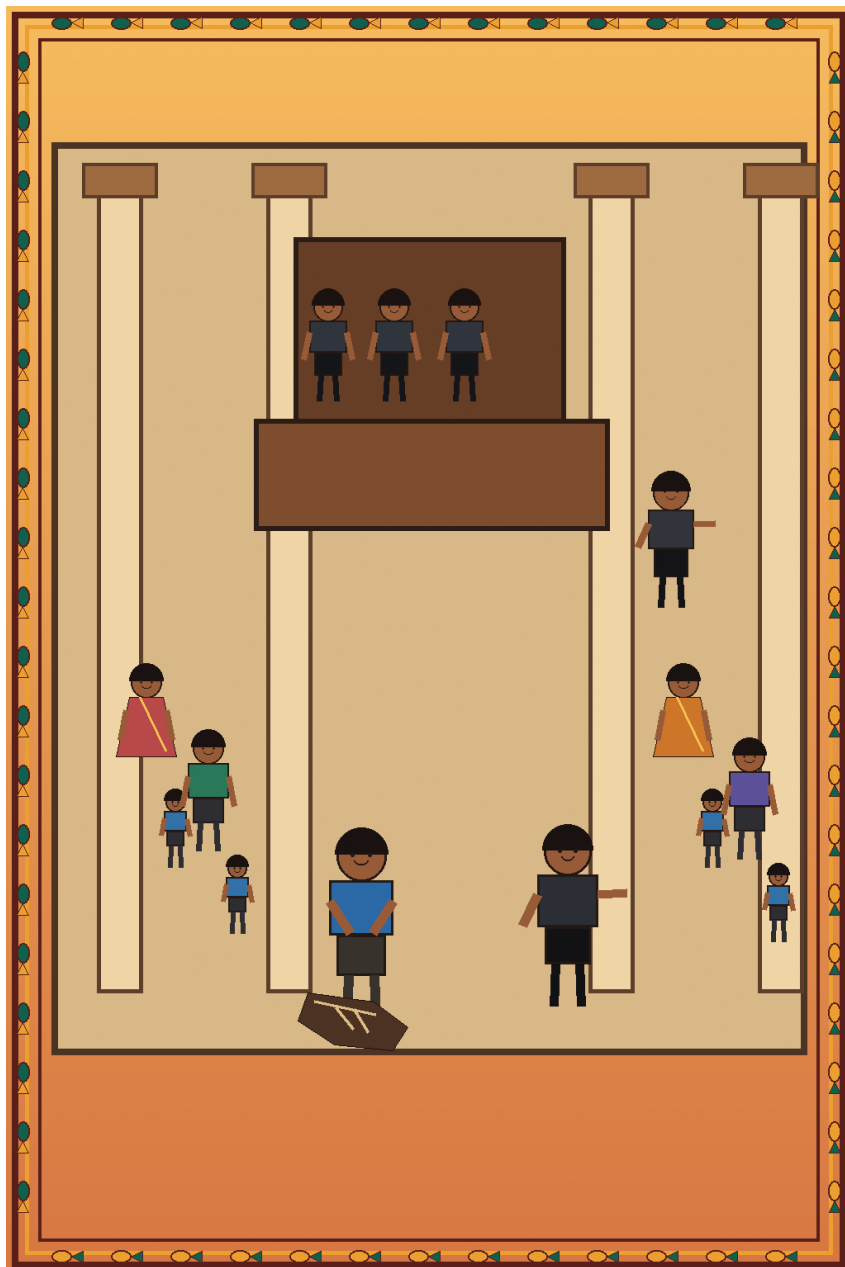
This was not the end of the story. Many years later, Nand's "Reckoning of the Splash"—his complete list of the truth—would come into someone's hands once again. From it, a much greater story about the search for justice would begin.



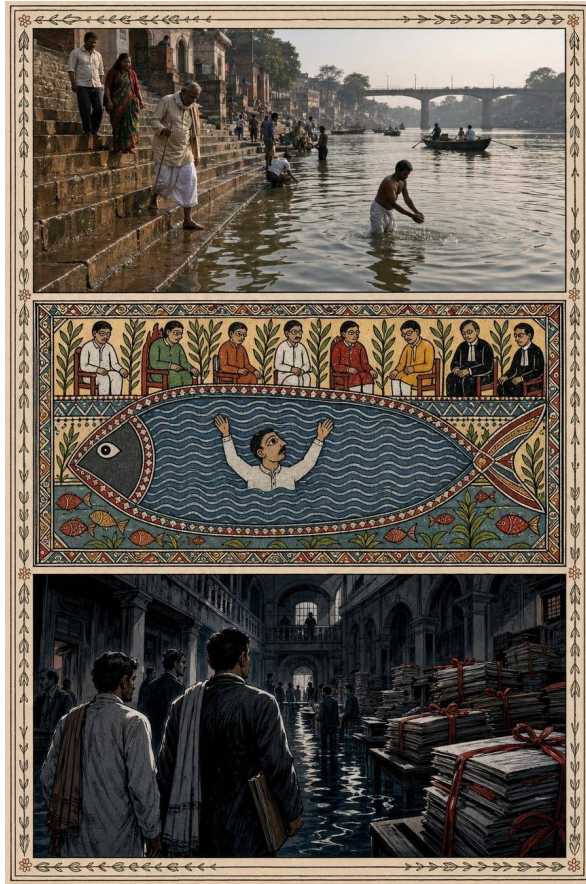


Chapter 5

The Crocodile of Court Dates







Nand went to the district court with his lawyer, Devkinandan Chaubey. The court verandah was crowded: some people had disputes about land, while others had come with very different troubles.

At the first hearing, a young lawyer stood up for the government. His name was Satyavrat Mehta. He held a paper that said, "Number of deaths: thirty. The petition exaggerates the facts." But when Satyavrat noticed Bisesar's shoe peeping out of Nand's bag, he paused. All he said was, "Your Honour, let the state records be called for."

It was a small thing, but it was a good beginning.

In the verandah, Nand met another man, Chandrapal Batra. Smiling, Batra said, "A very emotional case. I could help you if you like." "I don't want help," Nand replied. "I want names." Batra laughed. "Names are made on paper," he said.

One hearing followed another. Sometimes the records were missing, sometimes the judge changed, and sometimes there was another excuse. With every new date, fewer families came to ask for compensation. Some could no longer afford the journey; others had grown old.

Then, one day, a famous lawyer named Batuknath Hariharan appeared for the foreign company. He spoke very sweetly, yet his words had a way of slowing justice. "Shoes, bracelets, amulets," he said. "These may be objects of feeling, but they are not legal evidence."

Nand felt as though someone was pulling the shoes from the dead workers' feet a second time.

The judge nevertheless ordered that the objects be kept safely in the court's evidence store. It was half a victory.

One night a thief broke into Nand's lawyer's office. Papers were scattered, and several important photographs disappeared. But Nand had already kept another set of copies safely with Grandmother. When he told the lawyer, the man stared in surprise. "You had made copies already?" Nand replied, "A river has more than one channel. If one channel breaks, another continues to flow."

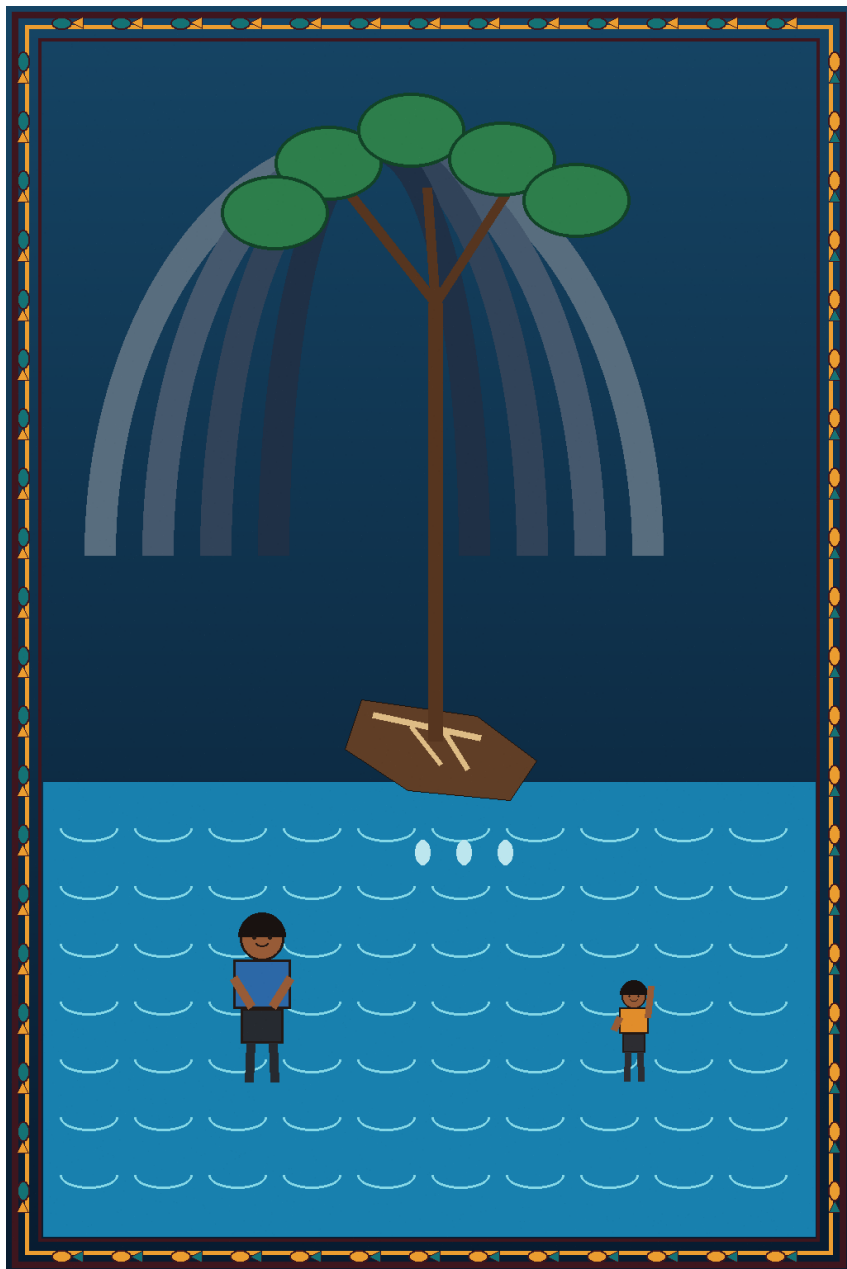
One evening Satyavrat Mehta quietly advised Nand, "Aruni Babu, make many copies of everything you have. Do not rely on the court alone." "But you are the government's lawyer!" Nand exclaimed. "I am," Satyavrat replied, "but I am not the government's servant. If the soul of the state has survived, it lives outside its files."

Years passed. The court files kept changing, but Nand never lost patience. One day water entered the evidence store and soaked Bisesar's shoe. When Nand lifted it, a drop fell: splash. It was the very sound he had heard on the night of the bridge accident.

Nand understood. "In court, the crocodile cannot be seen, but it lives in the form of hearing dates. When a paper gets wet, the dead begin to speak again."

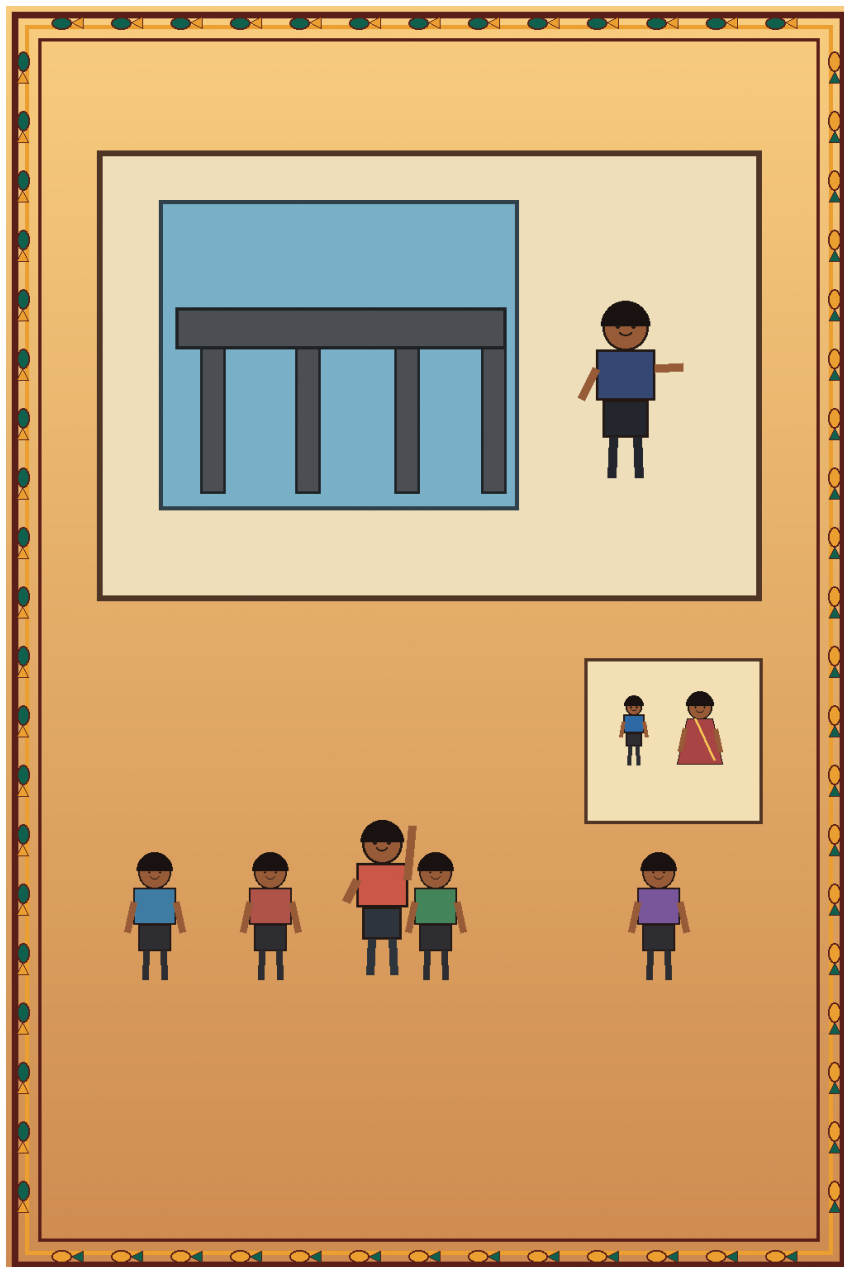
That night, the ghosts of Channa Grove made a new rule: "Dates cannot swallow anyone who is remembered." Slowly a path towards justice began to open, through the villagers' memories, Nand's patience, and the courage of honest people like Satyavrat Mehta.

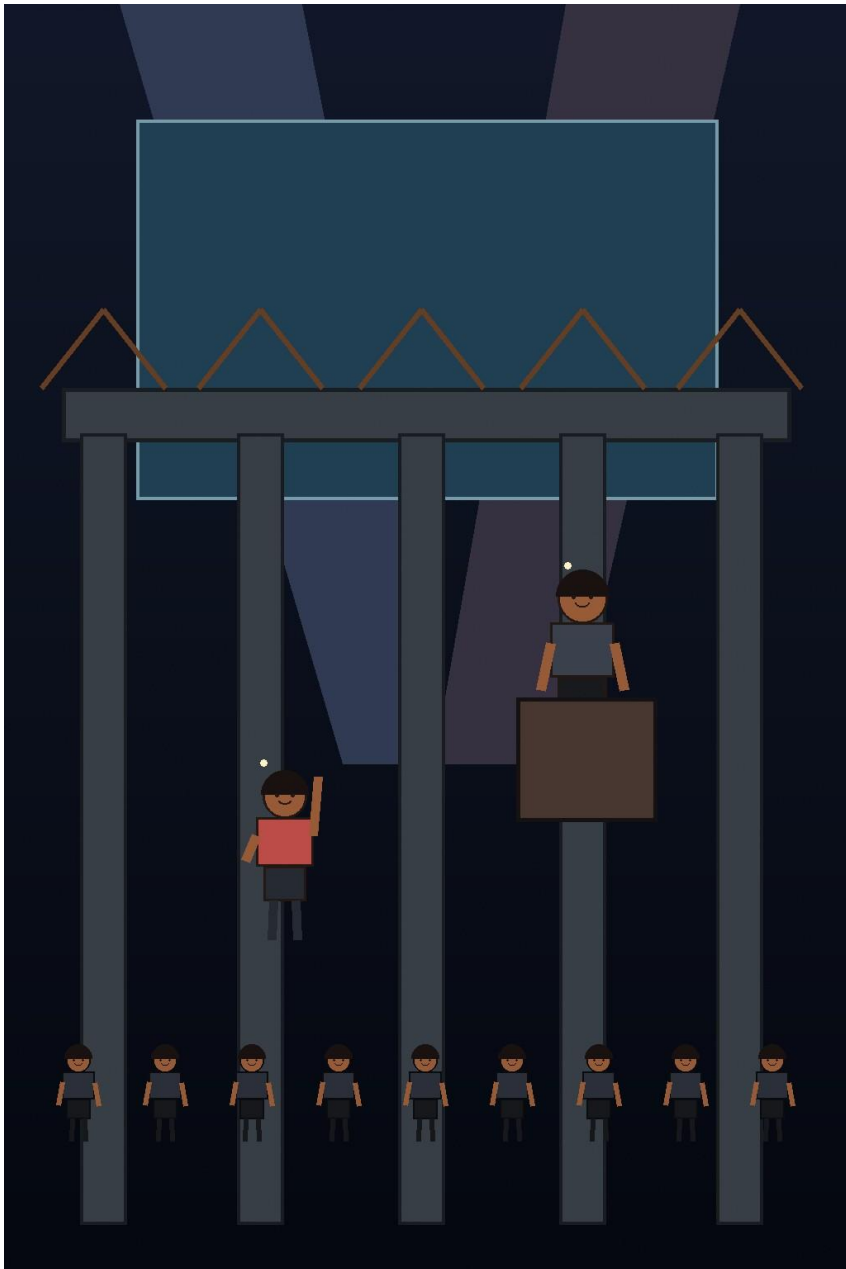




Chapter 6

Ethics at Harvard







Garh Narikel had a daughter named Ira Aruni. She was studying at Harvard University in America. One day the university held a grand event called “Business and Humanity”.

A foreign businessman named Edward Broom came onto the stage. He owned several very large companies. He spoke in beautiful phrases. “We do good for people wherever we work,” he said. He showed photographs of his earlier projects, including a great bridge in India.

The moment Ira saw the photograph, she was startled. She remembered Grandmother’s old words: “Your great-grandfather Nand Aruni did not drown in the waters of the Ganga. He drowned in government papers.”

Ira raised her hand. “How many workers died on the Indian bridge project in 1978?” she asked.

The entire hall fell silent. Broom looked flustered for a moment, then recovered. “I cannot remember every detail of every project,” he said.

Ira asked again, “And what if the local report was false?”

No one had an answer. The event ended, but Ira’s question stayed with her.

That night she sat in the library and read an old letter from Grandmother about Nand Aruni. It said, “The number of dead differs from the government register. The whereabouts of a woman worker named Sarayu are unknown.”

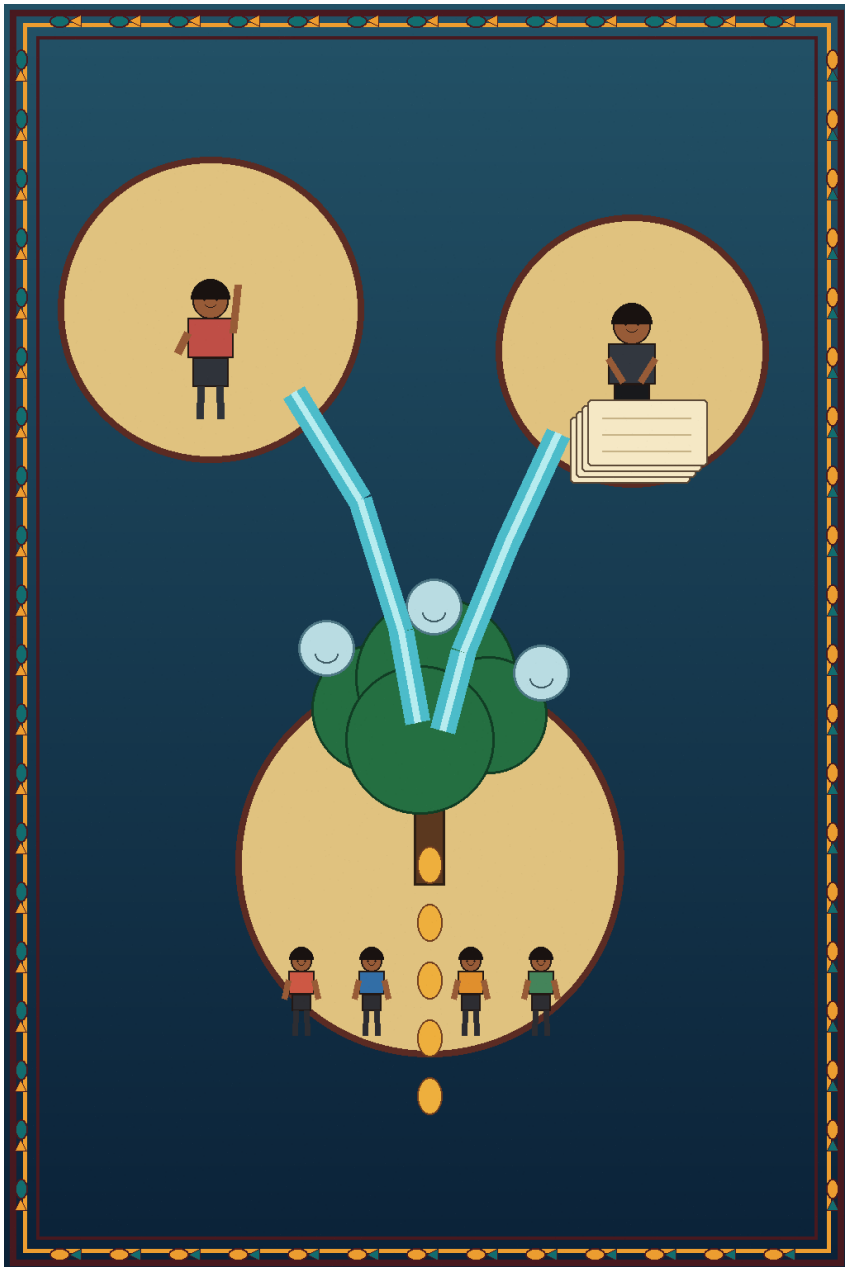
Ira understood that this was the very bridge where her great-grandfather Nand Aruni had worked. She wrote a short email to her professor: “The bridge shown in today’s lecture is linked to an investigation into workers’ deaths involving someone in my family. May I raise a public question about it?”

Far away in Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta—the former government lawyer in Nand Aruni’s case—began working on the old file again. He wrote, “Verification required.”

Meanwhile, in Channa Grove, the ghosts knew all about it. Old Baba Ghost said, “Our daughter is sitting across the ocean, telling our story again. Names never die.”

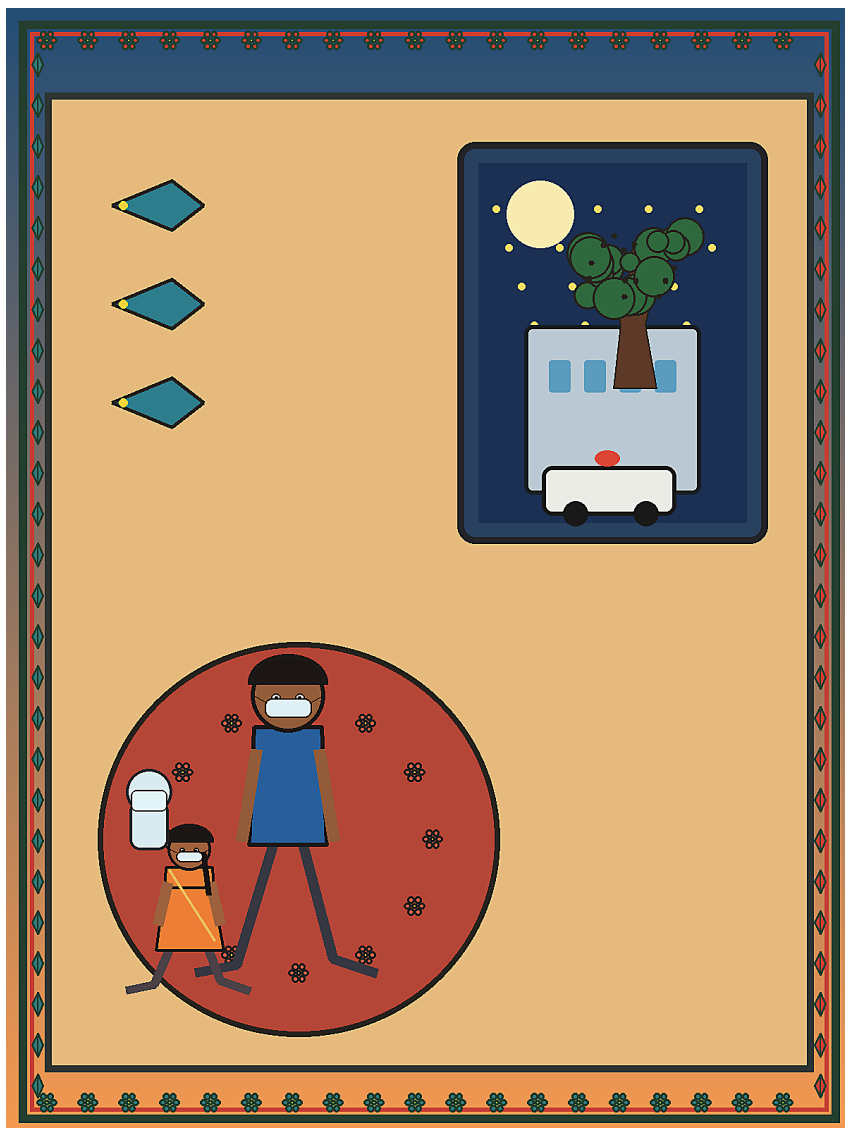
But some dishonest people had also become alert to the search for truth: Chandrapal Batra and the lawyer Hariharan did not want the old facts to come to light. Once a seed of truth has broken through the earth, however, it is difficult to stop it growing.

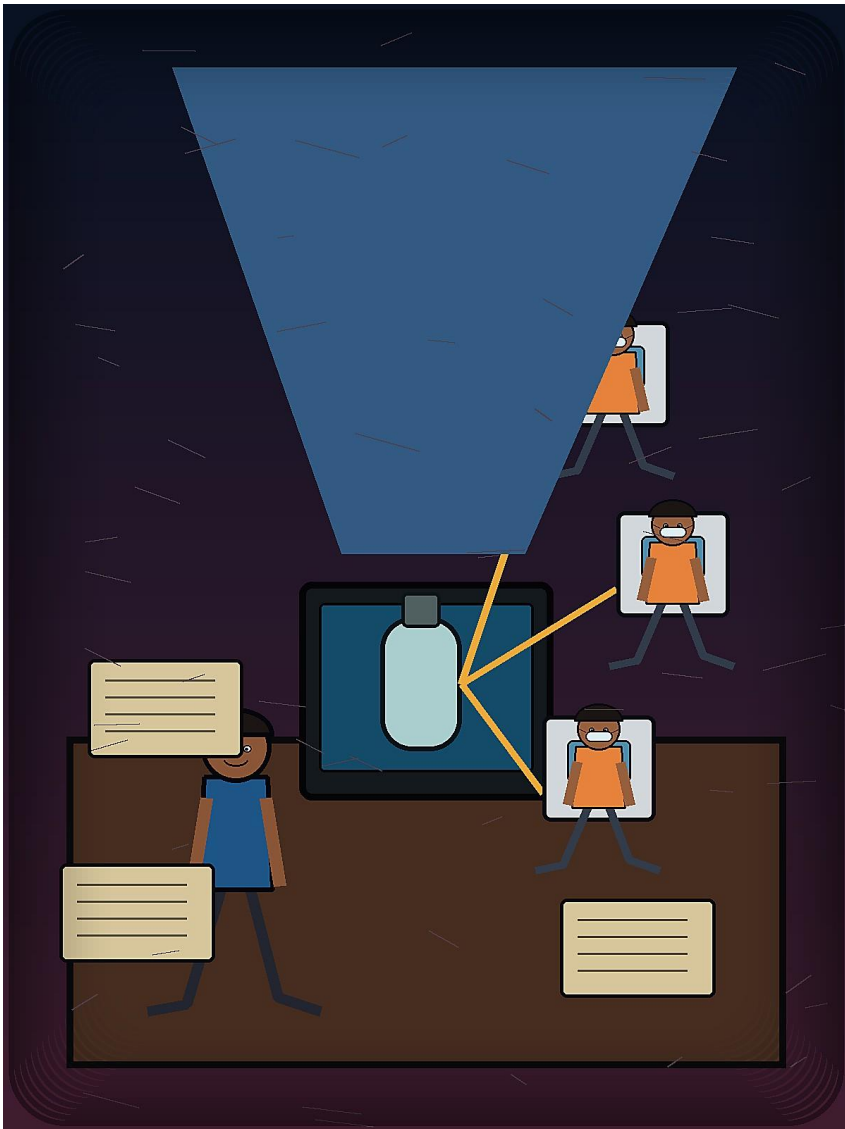


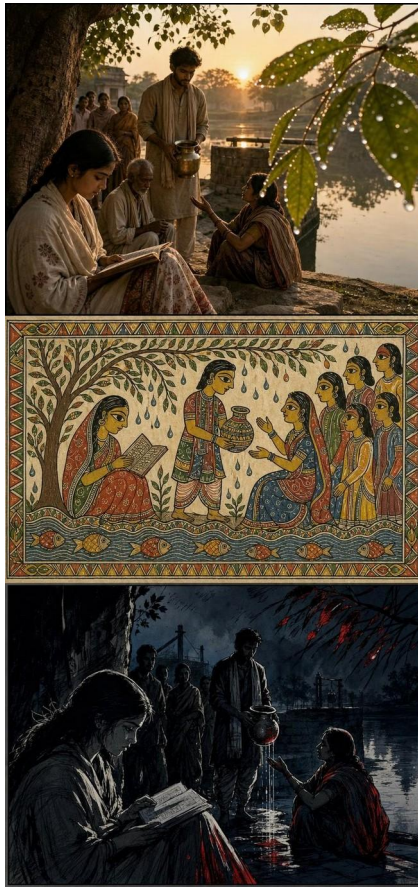


Chapter 7

The Price of a Breath







There came a time when a terrible illness spread across the whole world. People were shut inside their homes. Hospitals ran short of beds and medicines.

In Delhi, Aruni Nandan, a descendant of Nand Aruni, was talking with his little daughter Ananya. “Daddy,” Ananya asked, “do ghosts wear masks?” Aruni could not answer. He remembered Grandmother’s old advice: “Write down the name of every person who dies. Write each one separately. Otherwise, later on, they all become ‘Others’.”

At this time a new person entered the story: Gop Kumar. He worked as an accounts auditor for a company that distributed medicines, oxygen and essential supplies during the illness.

Gop Kumar was very honest in his work. One day, while checking the files, he noticed something peculiar: the records showed that the same

oxygen cylinder had been delivered to three different places on the very same day! That was impossible. Someone, somewhere, was telling lies.

He looked more closely. He found an old code: “N-R-77.” Attached to it was an old paper from the bridge project, bearing Nand Aruni’s signature. Gop realised that the fraud involving medical supplies and the fraud involving the old bridge were connected to the same people.

At a meeting Gop asked plainly, “How can you charge for something that was never delivered?” This caused trouble for him at work. His duties were reduced.

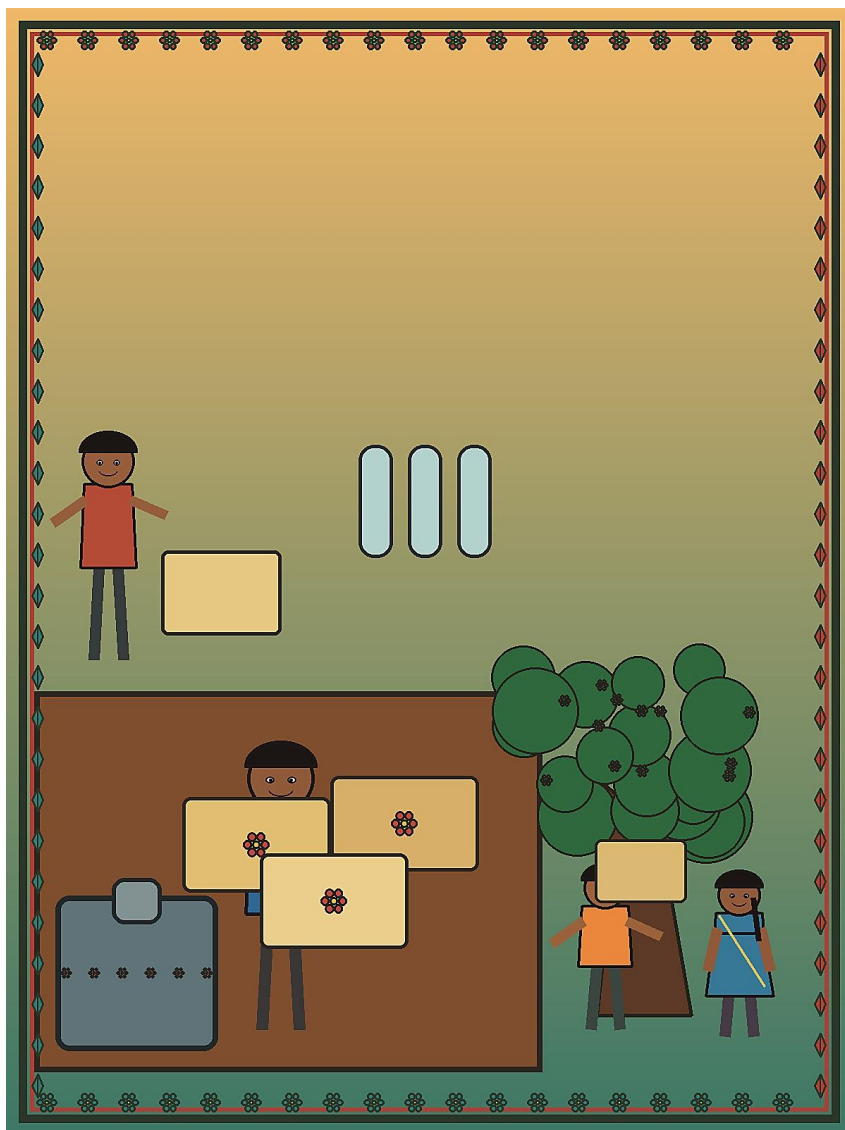
But Gop was not afraid. He sent a secret message to his old friend Ramaiyya. “What should I do when papers start telling lies?” Ramaiyya replied, “Save people, not papers.”

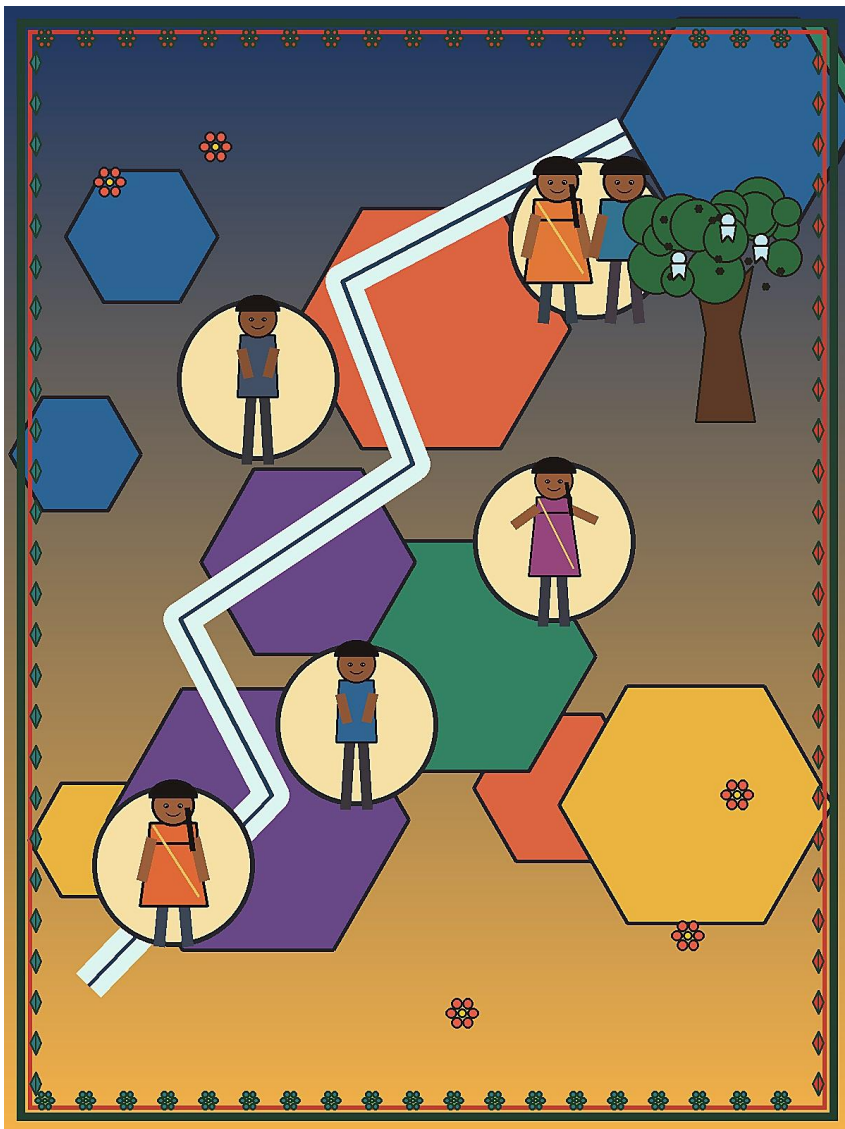
That night Gop received a mysterious message: “Divide the papers into three sets. Keep one in a safe place, one with someone you trust, and one where nobody would even think to look.”

Gop understood that the lesson from Nand Aruni’s time was still useful. He made three copies of the files and hid each set somewhere safe.

Across the ocean at Harvard, Ira spoke to Grandmother on the phone. “Child,” Grandmother said, “when someone’s words are too smooth, look for the thorns hidden beneath them.” In Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta began asking for the old records again.

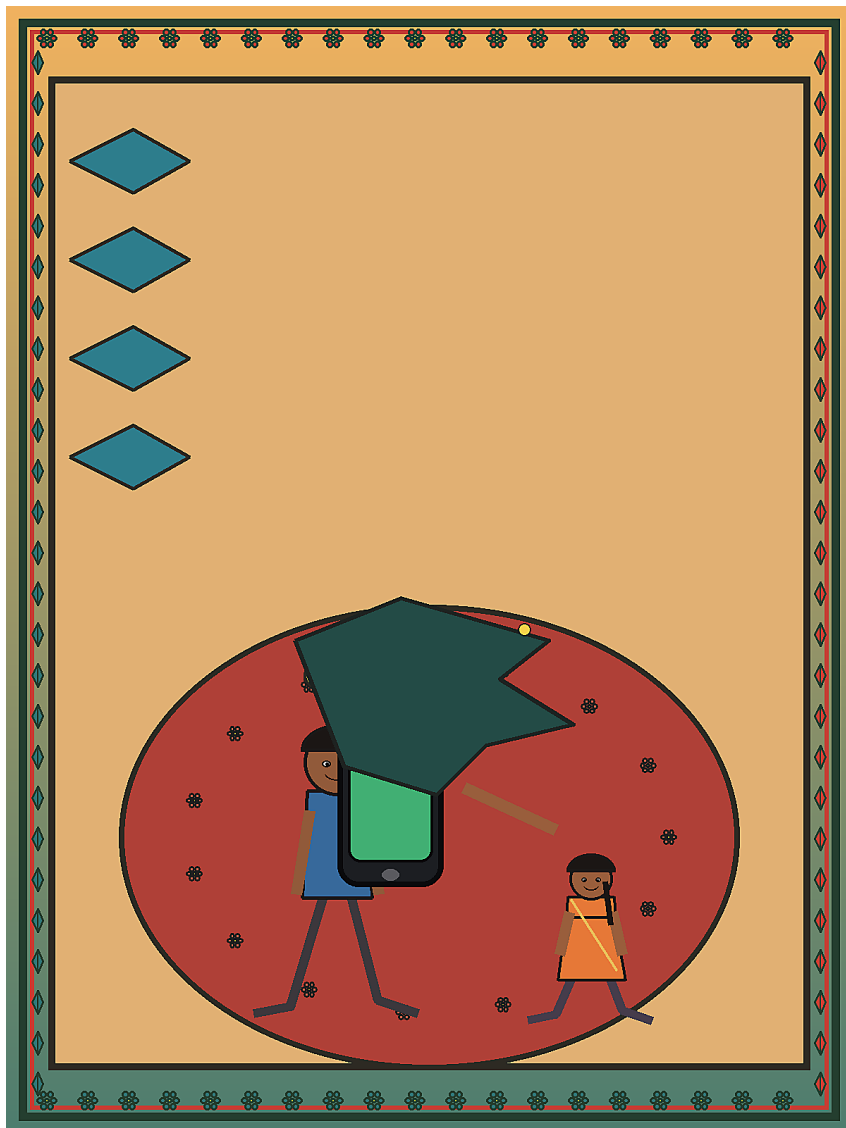
And so, even during that difficult time of illness, the seeds of truth and honesty survived in every direction: in Gop Kumar’s courage, Ira’s questions, Satyavrat’s patience, and Grandmother’s old wisdom. In Channa Grove the ghosts said, “As long as even one person remembers a name, the truth will not die.”

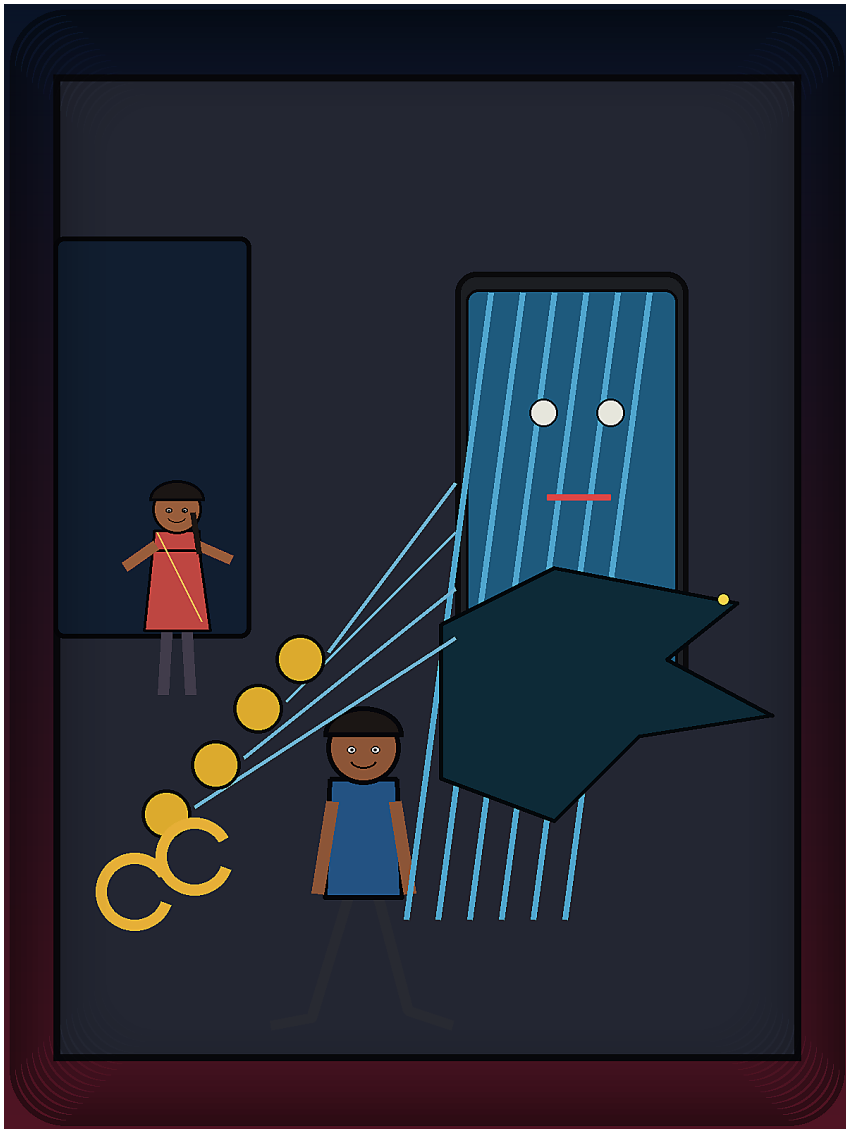




Chapter 8

The Crocodile in the Screen







In Channa Grove, Old Baba Ghost noticed a strange new kind of shadow. It had no feet; it shone and faded like a screen. “This is a new kind of death,” he said. “The crocodile in the river used to devour bodies. The crocodile in the screen devours futures.”

A young man named Ujjwal Jha lived in Garh Narikel. He had no job. One day, an advertisement appeared on his phone: “Play! Win! Get money instantly!” He played for a little money and won. He was delighted.

His sister, Devika Sah, became worried when she saw what he was doing. “This doesn't look like a game,” she said. Ujjwal laughed. “You find danger in everything.” But Devika was right: it was a trap.

Little by little, Ujjwal began staking more and more money. Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost. As his losses mounted, the people

behind the app offered him a “special loan facility”. He began borrowing money.

One day a caller told him, “Money has entered your account illegally. This is a national investigation. Tell no one, or you will be arrested.” Ujjwal was terrified. He said nothing—not to his parents, not even to Devika.

It was a terrible trick known as a “digital arrest”. No real police officers were involved. The callers were simply frightening people to steal their money. But Ujjwal was so afraid that he handed over all his savings, and even the family’s jewellery.

Devika could see that her brother had grown sad and silent, and she worried about him. But Ujjwal told no one. Fear and shame often make people quietest at the very moment when they need help most.

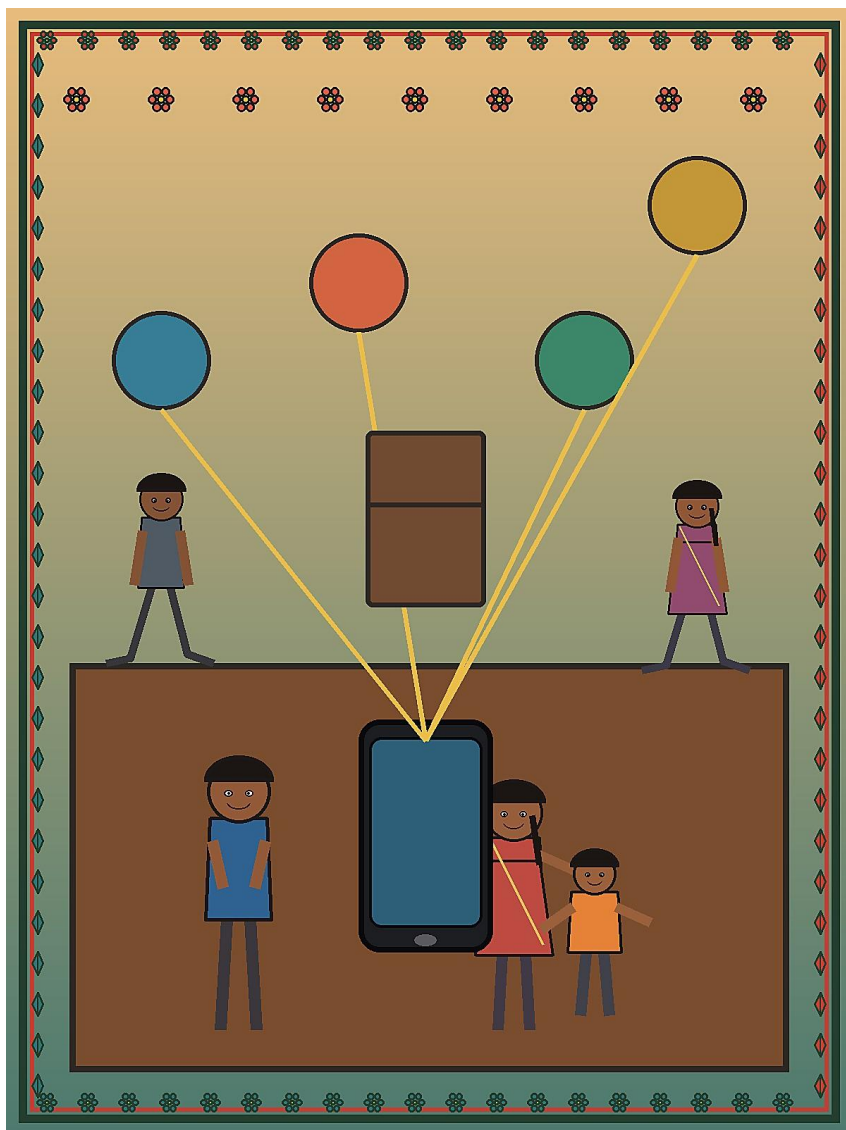
One day Ujjwal left home and did not return. His family was overcome with grief. Devika said firmly, “My brother was not a criminal. He was frightened, tricked and ruined.”

Devika took her brother’s phone to Gop Kumar. He found all the evidence on it: the fraudsters’ threats, fake notices, and records showing where the money had gone.

Gop realised that this was no chance incident. It was part of a large, organised network that frightened and threatened many people in order to steal their money. He saved the evidence and decided to fight for justice.

In Channa Grove, Ujjwal’s spirit came among the ghosts, frightened and sad. Hulasi placed her hand on his head and said, “Child, do not be afraid. Say your name.” Slowly Ujjwal whispered, “Ujjwal.”

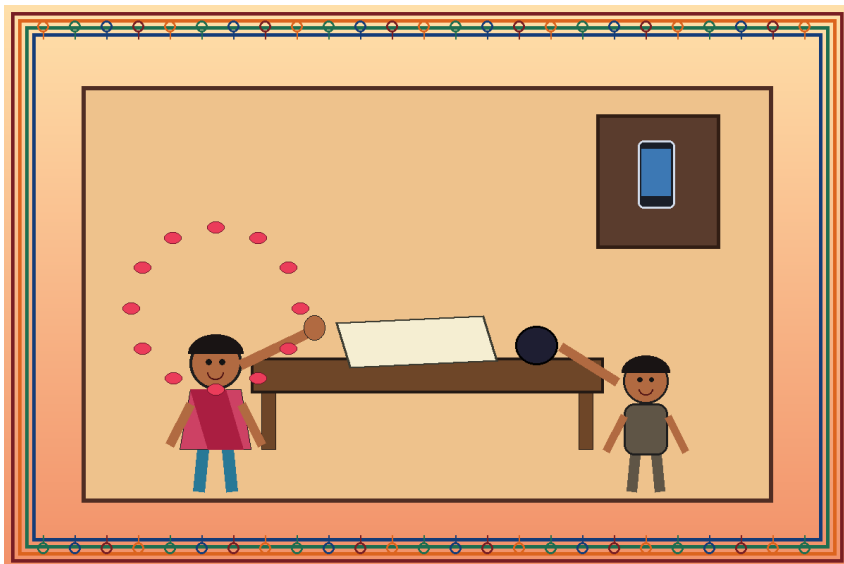
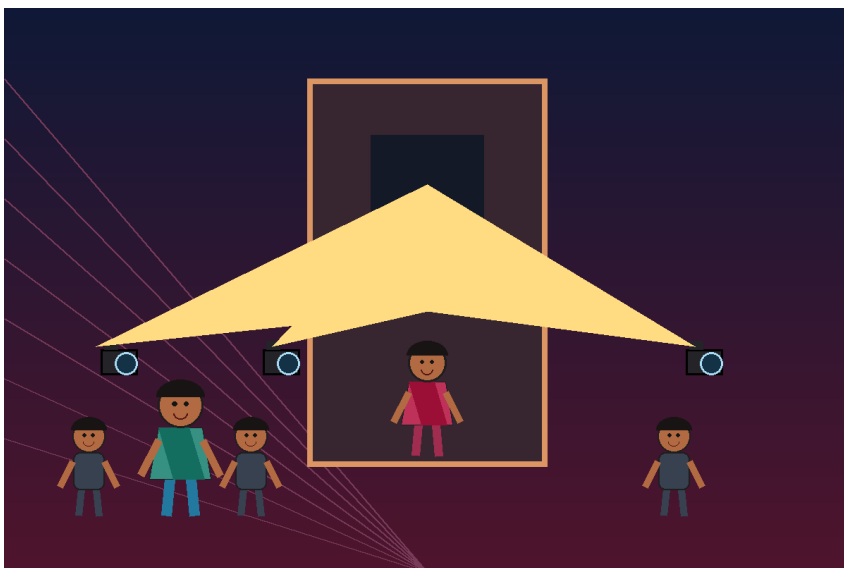
At that moment the ghosts understood that the young man had not been a thief. He had been the victim of a fraud. And the village learned an important lesson from his story: if a stranger frightens you on the phone and demands money, do not suffer in silence. Tell your family at once.





Chapter 9

Phoolmati's Name





The ghosts in Channa Grove were sad that night. Old Baba Ghost said, “A new kind of injustice is taking place. People are being exploited through their fear and their desperate need.”

Far away from Garh Narikel, in a village in Madhubani, lived a young woman named Phoolmati. Someone falsely promised her a good job in the city and tricked her into travelling to a distant city. There her phone was taken away, and she was not allowed to speak to her family.

The people holding her gave her a code name: “F.M.” But Phoolmati did not lose courage. When she was told to press her thumbprint on a paper, she refused. “My name is Phoolmati,” she said firmly. “Not F.M.”

Far away in Delhi, Gop Kumar learned about this network through his investigation. He immediately alerted his friend Saumya Ramanathan, a researcher. “A young woman named Phoolmati is in danger!”

Saumya happened to be near the hotel where an event was taking place. She acted at once. She called the journalists and said, “Broadcast this live!”

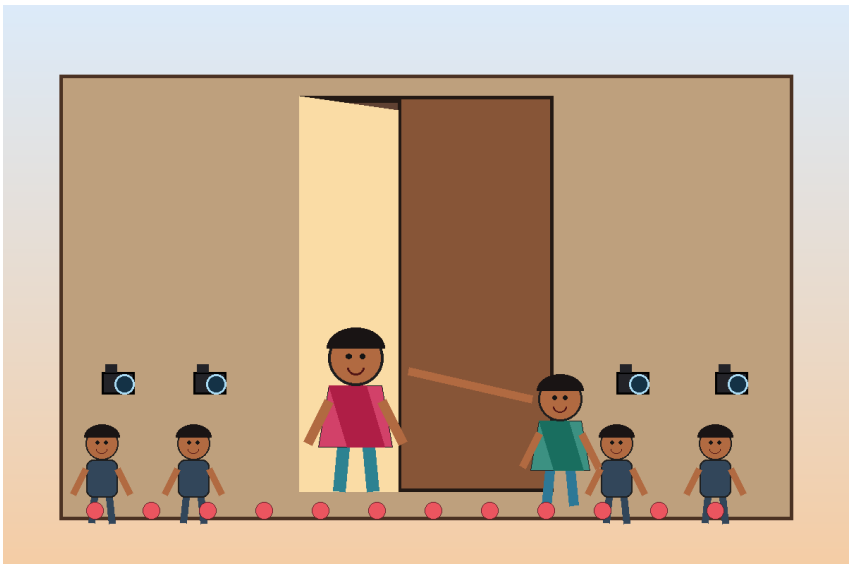
When everyone reached the door of the room, Phoolmati’s voice rang out from inside: “My name is Phoolmati.” The door opened, and she came out trembling but brave—with her real name still her own.

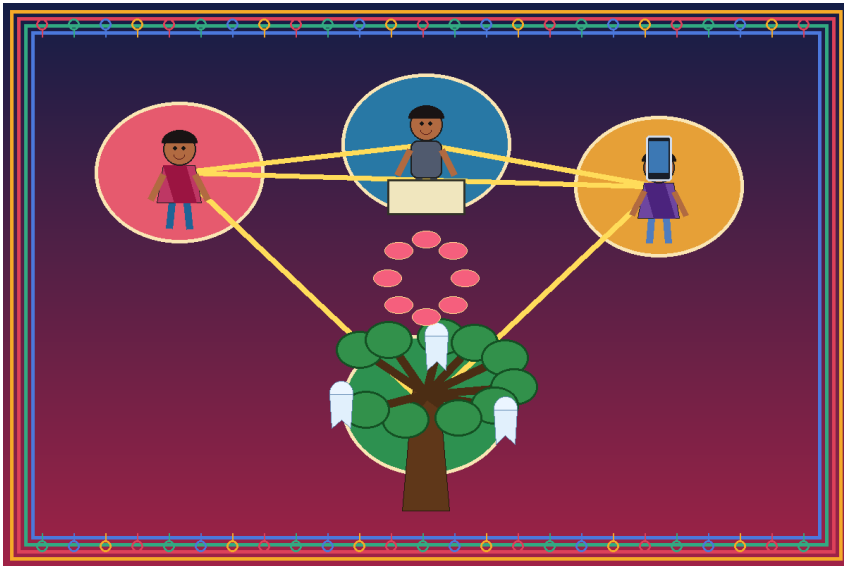
Thousands of people watched the live video. Devika Sah, who still remembered what had happened to her brother Ujjwal, saw it and said, “A name is returning.”

Afterwards Satyavrat Mehta watched the video and wrote in his diary, “There can be no free consent where there is fear.”

Gop Kumar added a new page to his investigation file. He realised that the bridge workers, the fraud involving medical supplies, the online gambling trap and Phoolmati’s story were all different threads of the same criminal net. In his diary he wrote, “When someone’s name is stolen, that person is left alone. But when the name is spoken again, courage returns with it.”

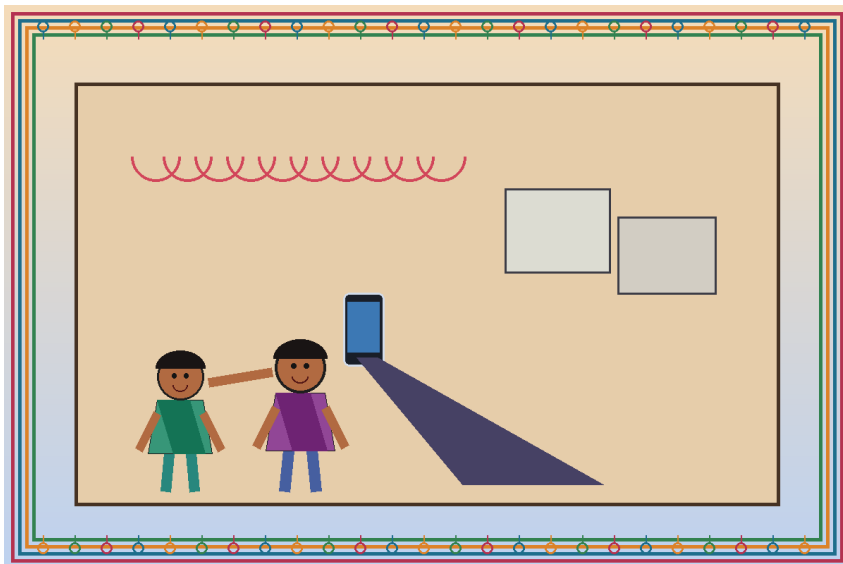
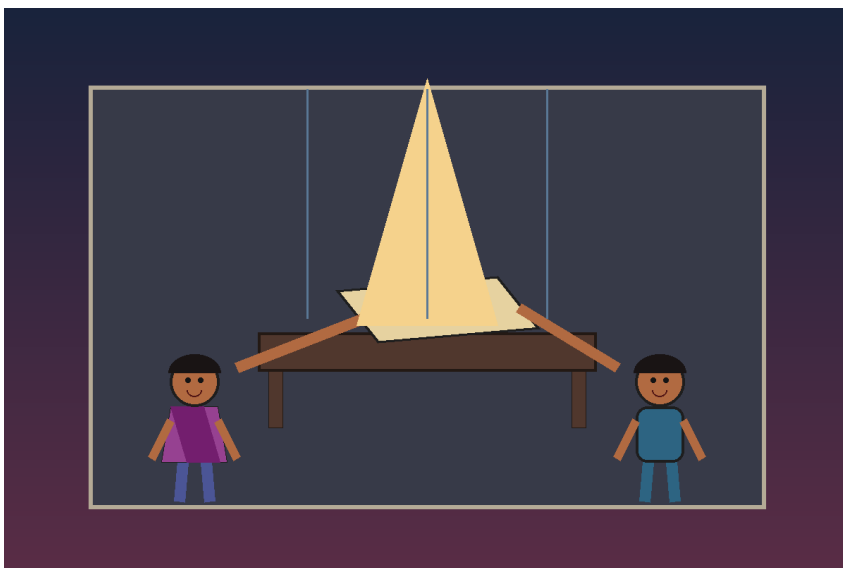
The ghosts in Channa Grove were happy to hear about Phoolmati’s courage that night. Hulasi said, “When someone can stand up for her name and her dignity like that, the crocodiles can be defeated again and again.”





Chapter 10

Meera's Courage





A new name entered Gop Kumar's investigation: Mrinalini Arya, whom everyone called Meera. She was a legal expert and a distant member of the Garh Narikel family.

Chandrapal Batra's gang stole Meera's private conversations and photographs and threatened her: "If you help with this investigation, we will make your private affairs public."

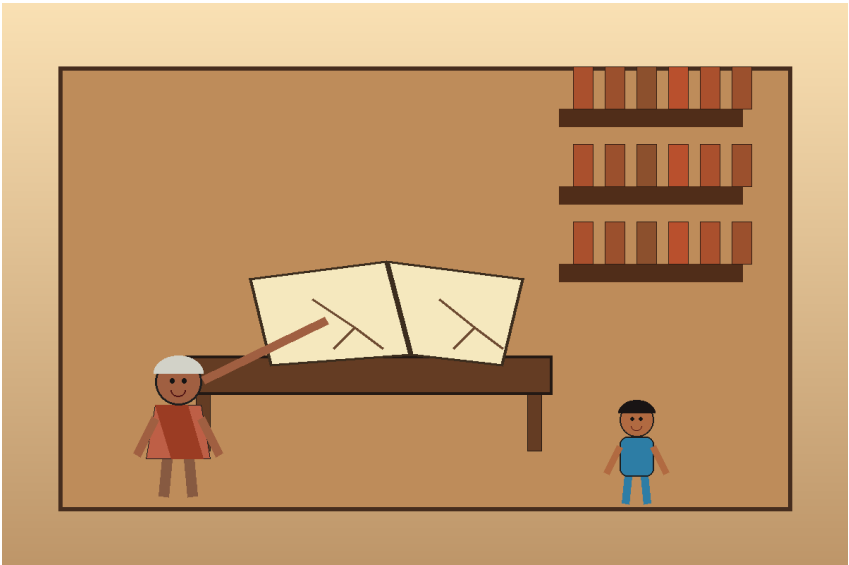
Meera was frightened at first. But a good friend encouraged her. "Those who try to frighten others into silence," the friend said, "are the greatest cowards themselves."

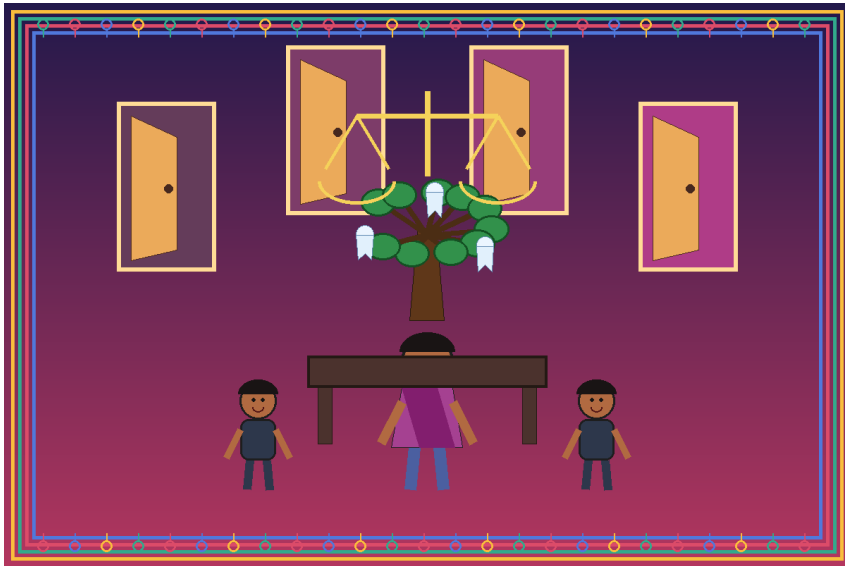
Meera bravely decided not to give in to fear. She handed all her evidence to Gop Kumar and said, "They tried to frighten me into silence. But the real issue is not my private life—it is this criminal network."

Back in the village, Grandmother found Meera's name written in an old family genealogy and said, "No one can erase a daughter of this family who writes her own name."

The next morning Meera gave her formal statement and threw herself courageously into the search for truth. Her bravery would open many doors to the truth in the days ahead.

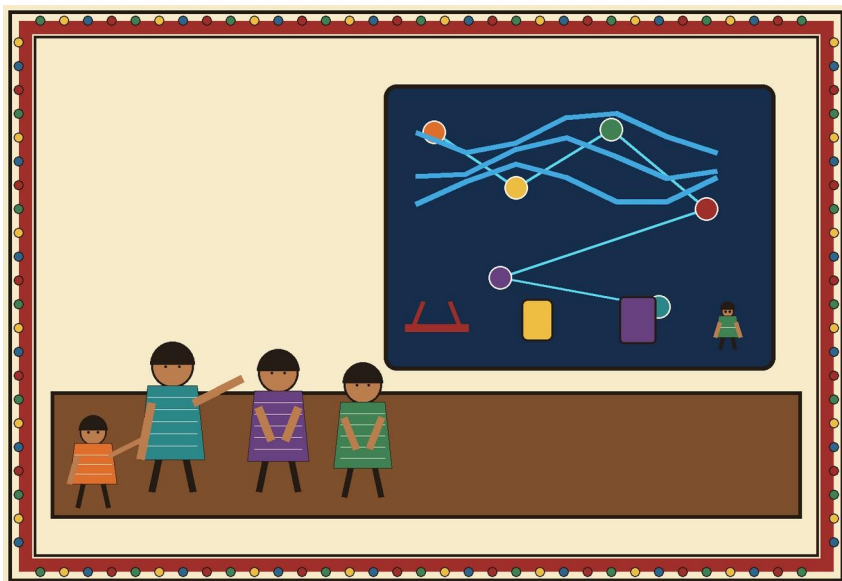
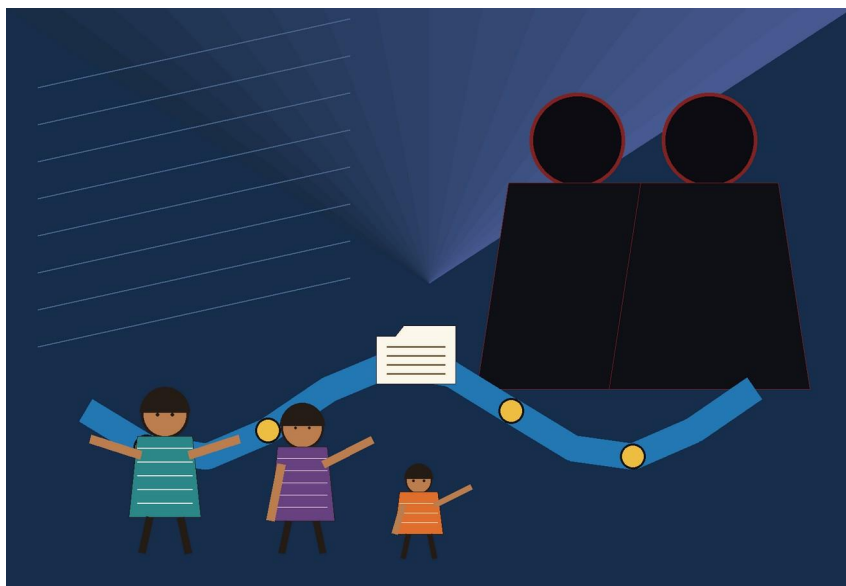
The ghosts of Channa Grove rejoiced when they heard. Old Baba Ghost said, "Even the crocodile cannot devour someone who refuses to be silenced by threats."

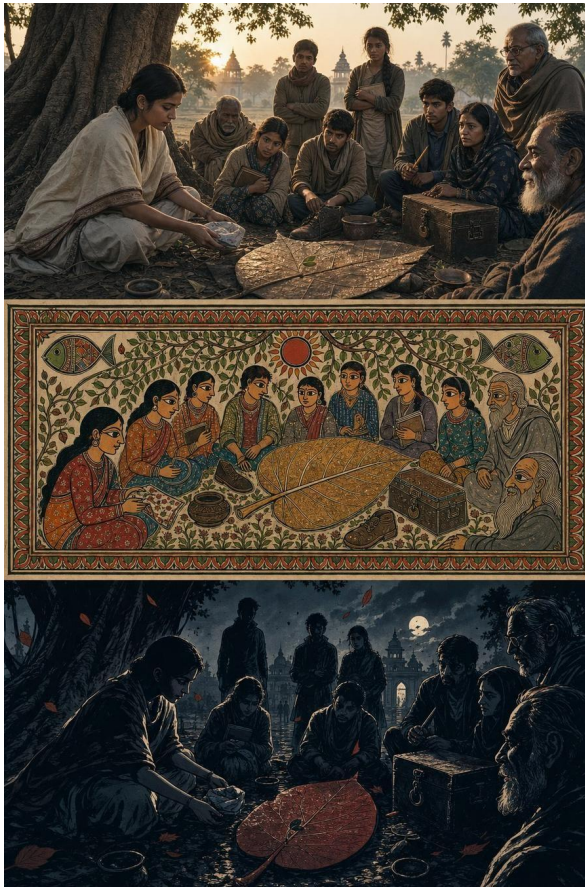




Chapter 11

The Dark River of Money





Gop Kumar, Meera and their friends began a major investigation together. They found a secret informant named Ishan Dutt, who brought them a great deal of evidence.

Ishan explained that the criminals named their accounts after rivers—Kamala, Balan, Ganga—so that nobody would easily discover what was happening. All the frauds—the cheating of bridge workers, the swindles during the illness, online gambling, and what had happened to Phoolmati—were connected to the same criminal network.

On his screen Gop Kumar studied the evidence: the bridge-project scandal, the fake deliveries during the illness, online gambling and the fraudulent bank accounts. Two men, Chandrapal Batra and Raghav Somani, were the chief operators of the network.

Devika Sah, Ujjwal's sister, realised that what had happened to her brother was no accident. He had become a victim of this enormous net.

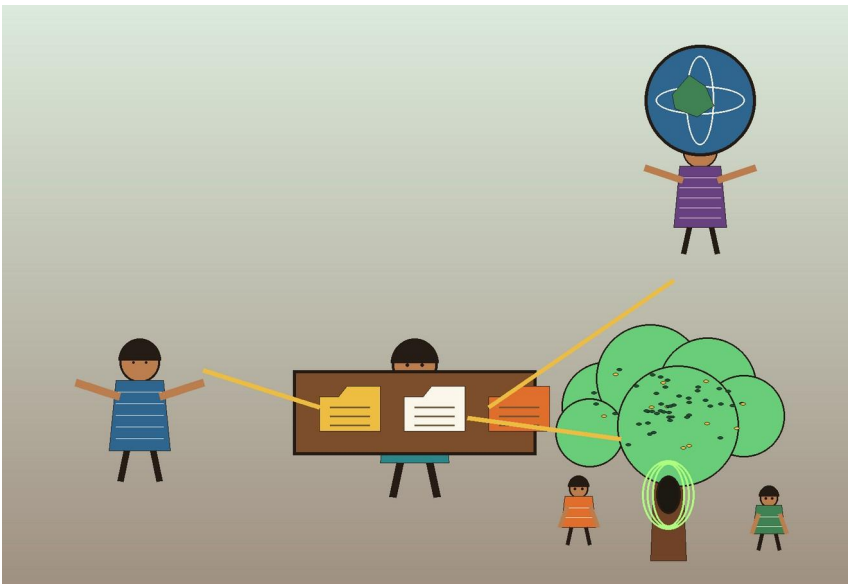
Meera told everyone something that inspired them: "Fear has one master." She meant that the many different ways people had been frightened and exploited were all the work of the same criminal power.

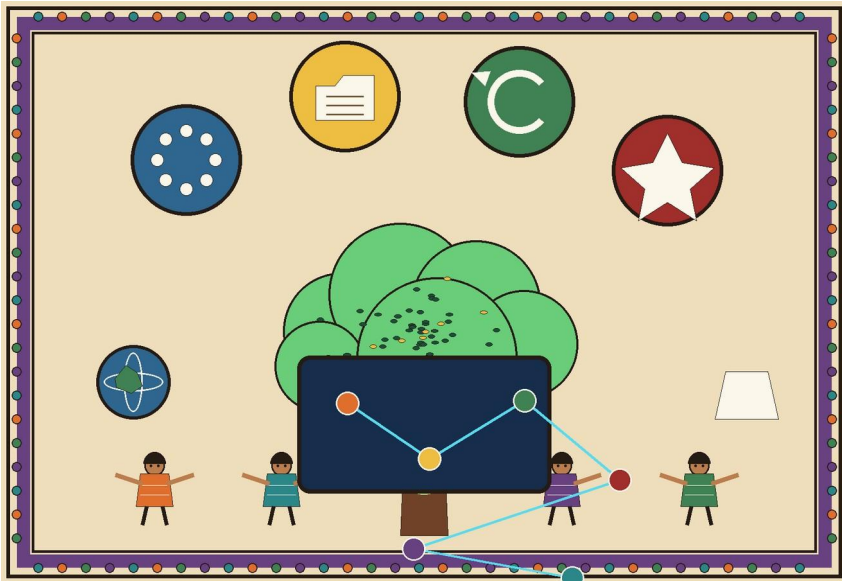
Ishan Dutt suggested four ways to stop the crimes: bring a case to court, reveal the truth to the public, raise voices around the world and—most importantly—help people find their courage.

Satyavrat Mehta received a mysterious letter. It said, "Not thirty names, but three hundred. This is no small matter. It is a great crime."

Gop Kumar made three copies of all the evidence. One went to Satyavrat Mehta, one to Ira Aruni living abroad, and the third was hidden safely inside the hollow of an old village tree. "If one copy is destroyed," he said, "another will survive."

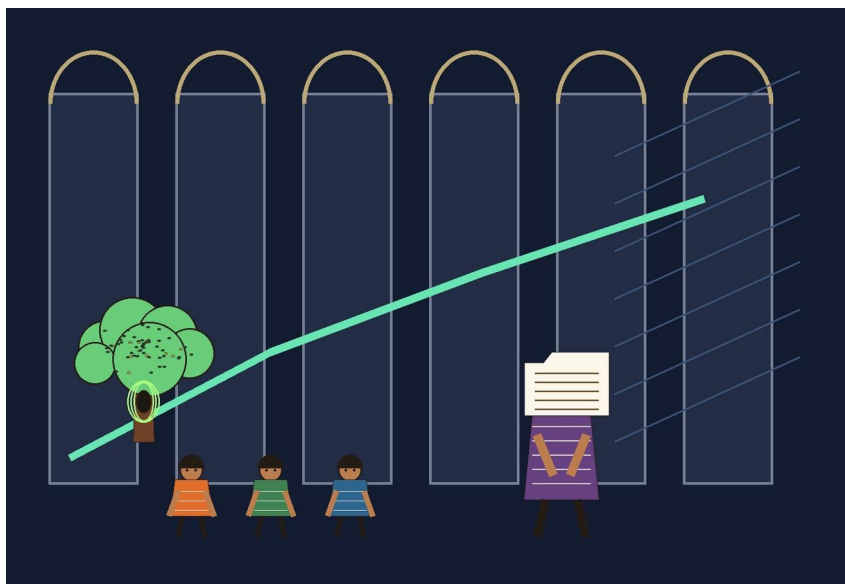
In Channa Grove, Old Baba Ghost said, "Now we must cross accounts, files, screens, courts and halls in foreign lands." From his place in the peepal tree, four-faced Brahma called out, "Names. Evidence. Memory. Courage. These four will give truth its victory."





Chapter 12

The Secret in the Hollow Peepal Tree





The third copy of the evidence, hidden in the hollow of the old village peepal tree, began to glow with a green light. Gop Kumar, Satyavrat Mehta and Meera agreed that all three copies must remain safe in their separate hiding places.

Satyavrat Mehta was saddened by the lies he found in official papers. In his diary he wrote, “If the government’s papers begin to lie, whose side should a person seeking justice take?”

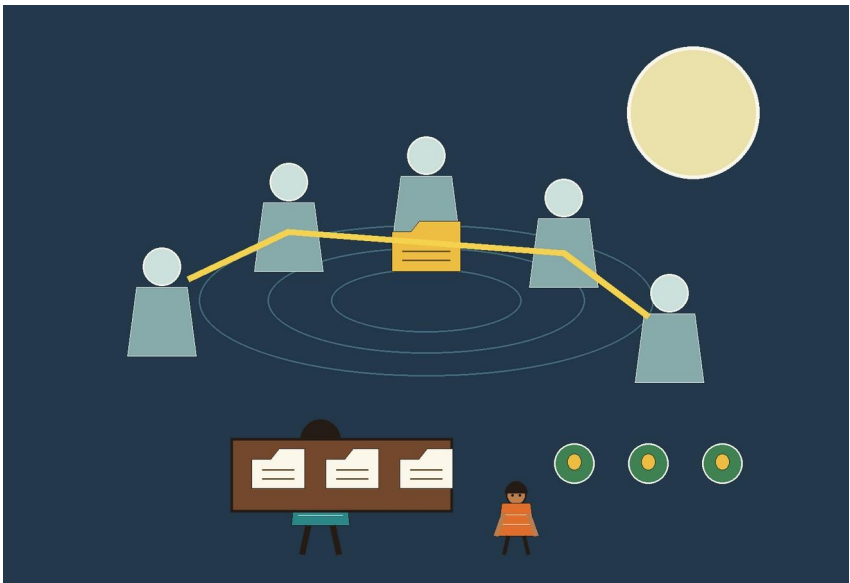
Far away overseas, Ira Aruni, a descendant of Garh Narikel living in America, received a secret file. Inside were old village accounts, photographs and proof of the truth. Ira decided she would ask sharp questions about it at a university event.

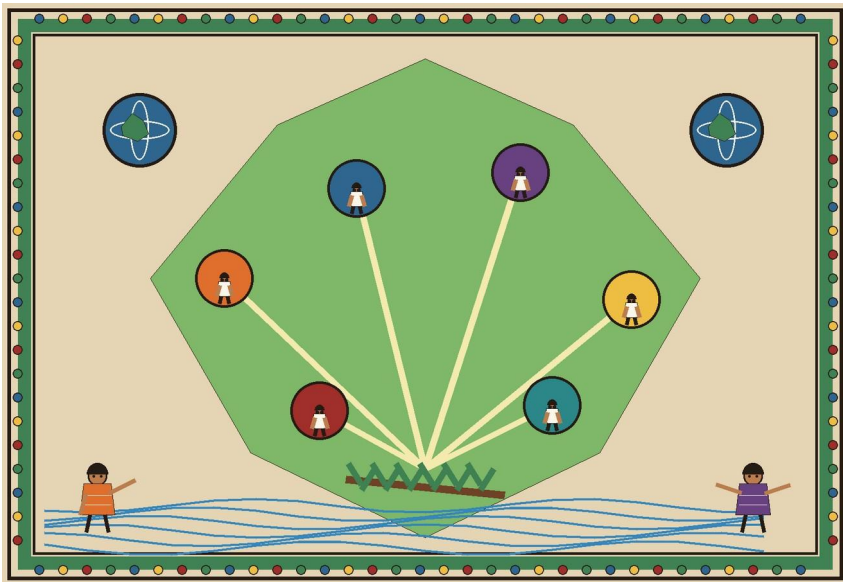
Ishan Dutt suggested a fourth new approach: make the existence of the truth part of the public record. It would have to be done carefully, so that no victim's dignity was harmed.

Meanwhile, Hariharan, an influential official, and Chandrapal Batra grew worried. Little by little the truth was coming into the open.

That night Gop Kumar dreamed that the ghosts were playing kabaddi, only instead of a ball they were passing pieces of evidence to one another. When he awoke, he added a list of rules for protecting victims' dignity and safety to every file.

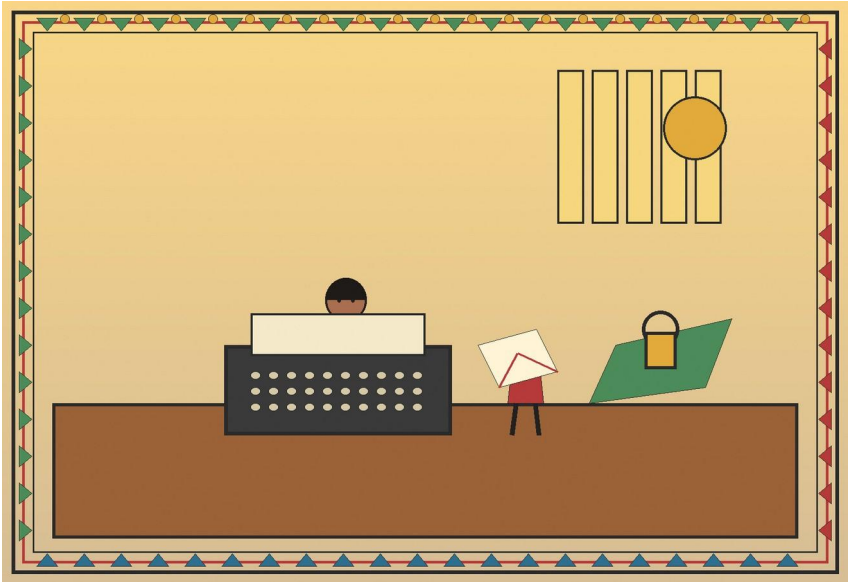
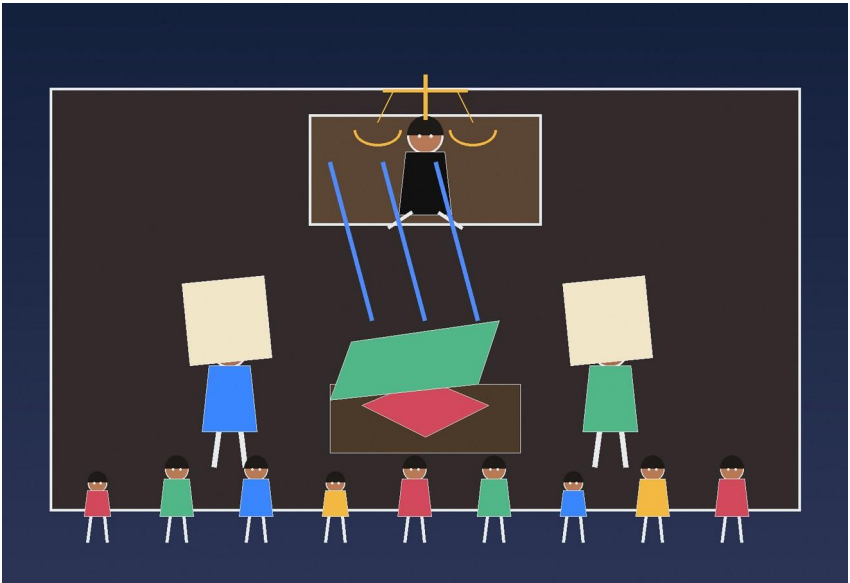
The veins in the leaves of the village peepal tree came together to form a map: the village, Delhi, an overseas university and distant cities were joined by a single line. "The world has come inside the village," said four-faced Brahma. And for the first time, coconut leaves in the village river floated on the surface instead of sinking, as though truth would not be defeated now.





Chapter 13

The Sealed Envelope





In the morning, Satyavrat Mehta typed a letter of explanation on his old typewriter. He began preparing to put the case before the court.

The hearing began. Hariharan and Batra tried one excuse after another to drag out the case. But Satyavrat Mehta rose and declared firmly, "If the state relies upon incomplete records, it is relying upon falsehood."

After listening, the judge ordered that every name and every piece of evidence be protected. Private information, where necessary, was to be kept under seal. But the names and the evidence would remain available for examination.

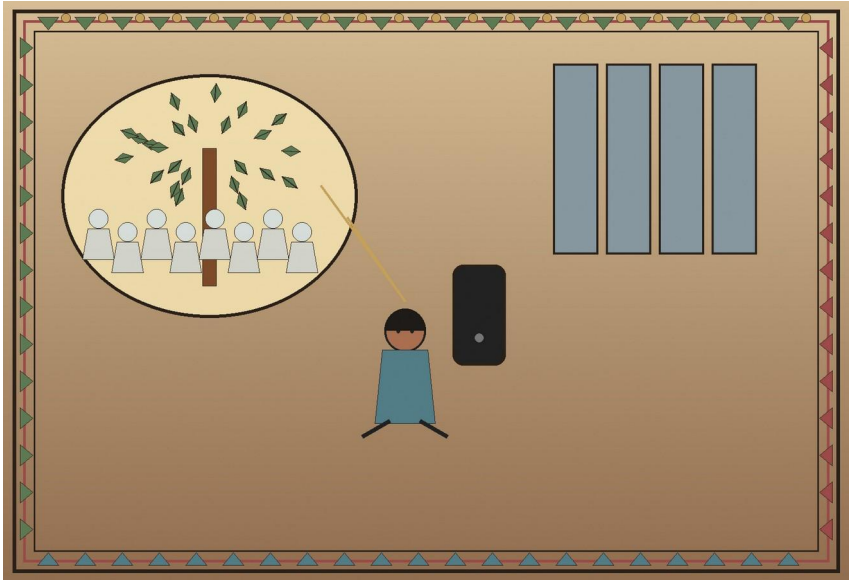
Satyavrat Mehta began reading out the names of the dead. First came the thirty names recognised by the government. Then came all the others. Gop Kumar received permission to read the remaining names,

and he did so in a steady voice. A hush settled over the courtroom. Nobody clapped. There was only a deep silence.

The court ordered that all the evidence be safeguarded and an independent investigation carried out. It was not a complete victory, but it was a great beginning.

Overseas, Ira Aruni received the news: “The names have been read in court.” She closed her eyes and heard the sounds of kabaddi in Garh Narikel, as though the village ghosts were celebrating with her.

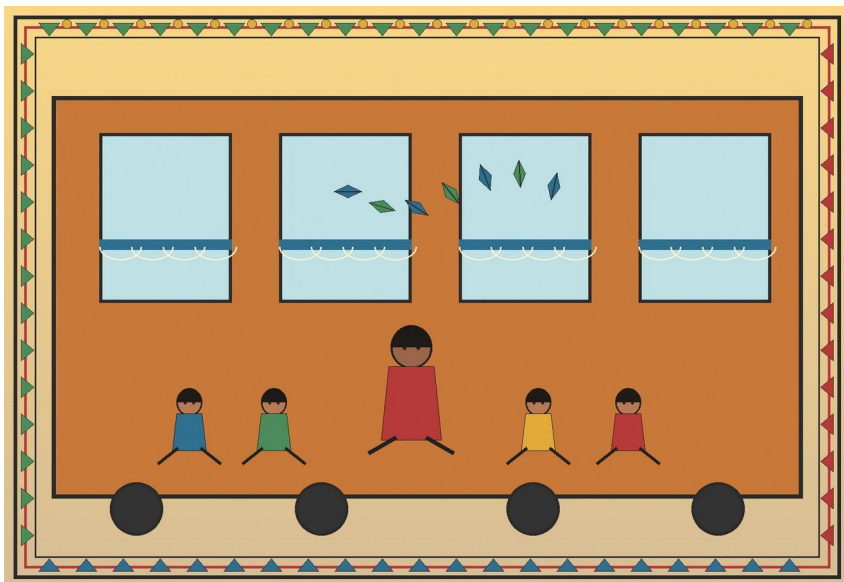
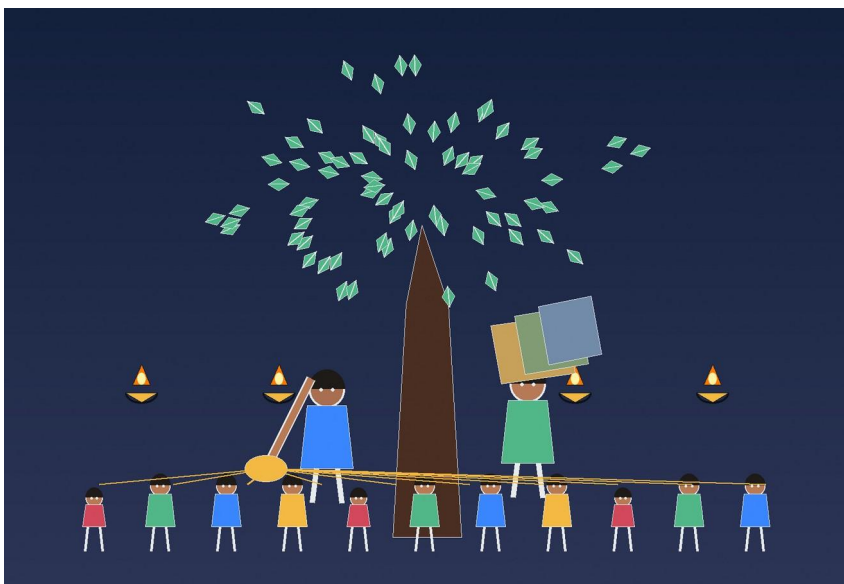
The ghosts of Channa Grove felt lighter that night. Old Baba Ghost said, “This is not defeat. It is the first crack. When a crack appears, the whole wall can begin, little by little, to fall.”

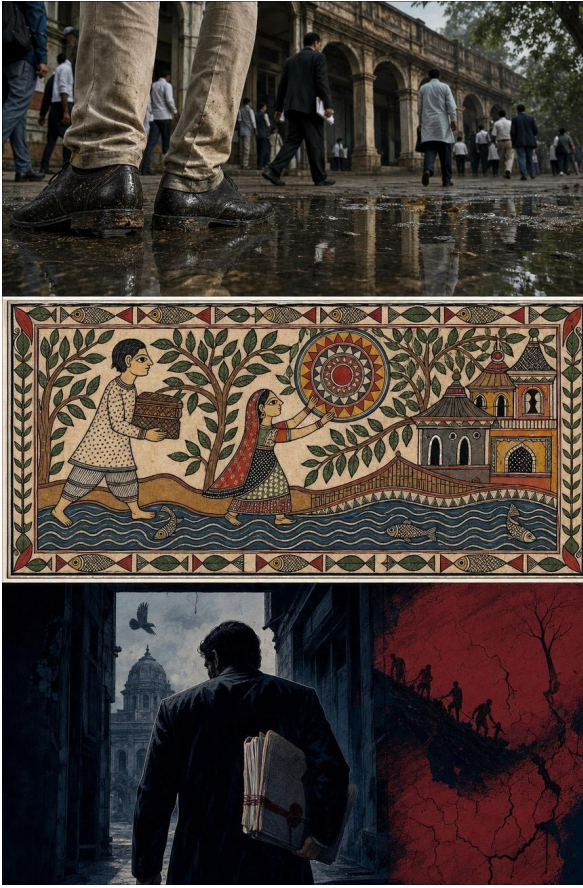




Chapter 14

The Road Home





As everyone stepped out of the courthouse, they caught the smell of wet earth on their shoes, as though an invisible path ran all the way from the bank of the Ganga to Garh Narikel. They decided to return to the village a few days later.

On the train journey, Grandmother told them stories of the Kamala-Balan. “A quiet river can carry its crimes in silence,” she said, “but the song of truth never stops.”

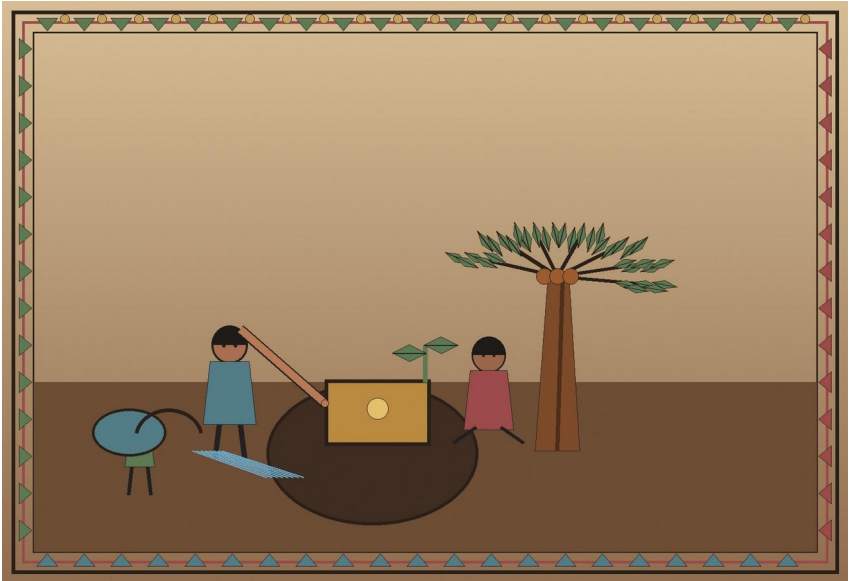
When they reached the village, Grandmother placed her hand upon Ira Aruni’s head and blessed her. That evening the villagers gathered quietly beneath the peepal tree. There was no stage, only lanterns and the trust they had in one another.

Gop Kumar touched the earth and said, “Today we shall place upon the soil the names that are missing from the papers.” Ishan Dutt

brought three bundles: a list of workers, a list of frauds and a record of the paths taken by the money. “These are the bones of truth,” he said.

“Bones are placed in water,” Grandmother observed. “Not this time,” Gop replied. “This time they will go among the roots.” Copies of all the evidence were sealed in a brass box and buried beside the roots of a coconut tree, like seeds of testimony that would one day grow into something great.

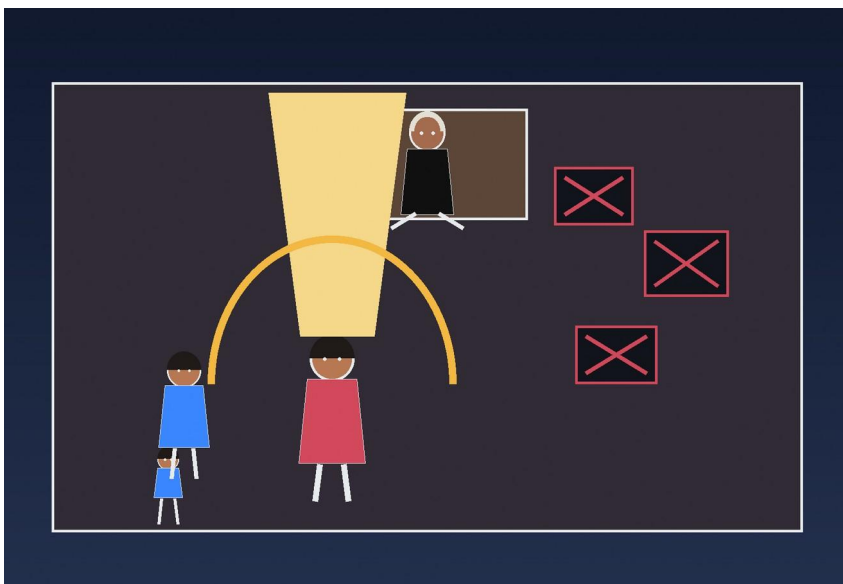
In the kabaddi game at Channa Grove that night, the names rang out clearly: Sarayu, Nagina, Ujjwal, Hulasi, Phoolmati. At dawn everyone understood that the true homecoming would be complete only when every page of truth had found its place in justice. The story had not ended. It was a new beginning.

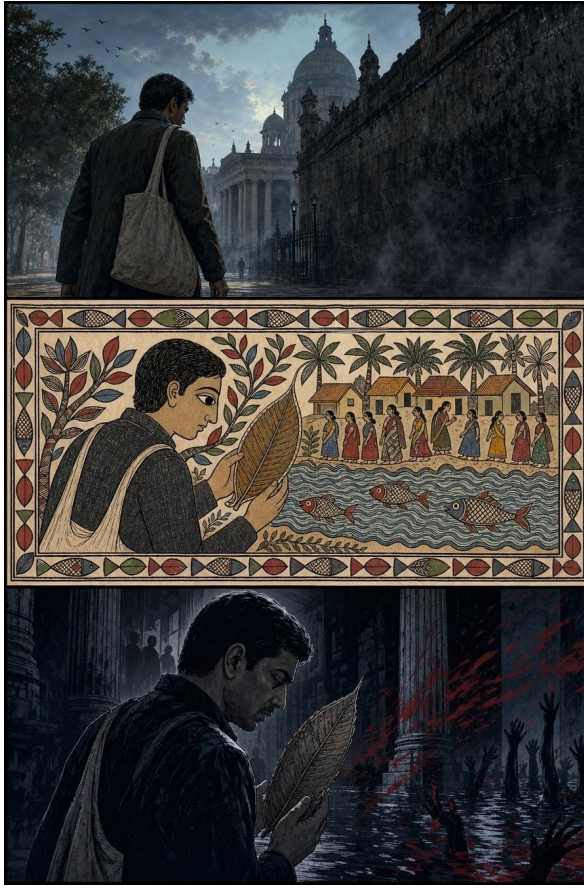




Chapter 15

The Water of Names





The day of the court's decision arrived. Satyavrat Mehta entered carrying an old cloth bag. It held no government papers, only a dried coconut leaf from the village, upon which were written all the names that had never appeared on the official list.

The courtroom was crowded. Satyavrat Mehta stood up and said, "Your Honour, if the names missing from the state's records are allowed to remain missing, it would be an insult to this court."

Hariharan objected, but Satyavrat firmly began reading the names one by one: Bisesar, Sarayu, Nagina and many more. The courtroom fell silent. Not a sound could be heard, only a solemn hush.

Meera—Mrinalini—also stood bravely and said, "Let all the evidence of blackmail and threats remain in the open. My dignity belongs to my life, not to what the people who threatened me have said."

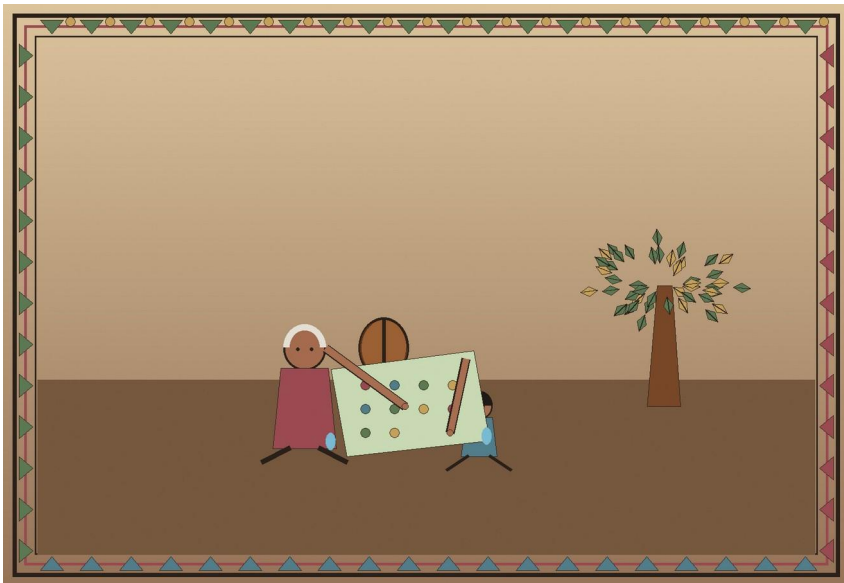
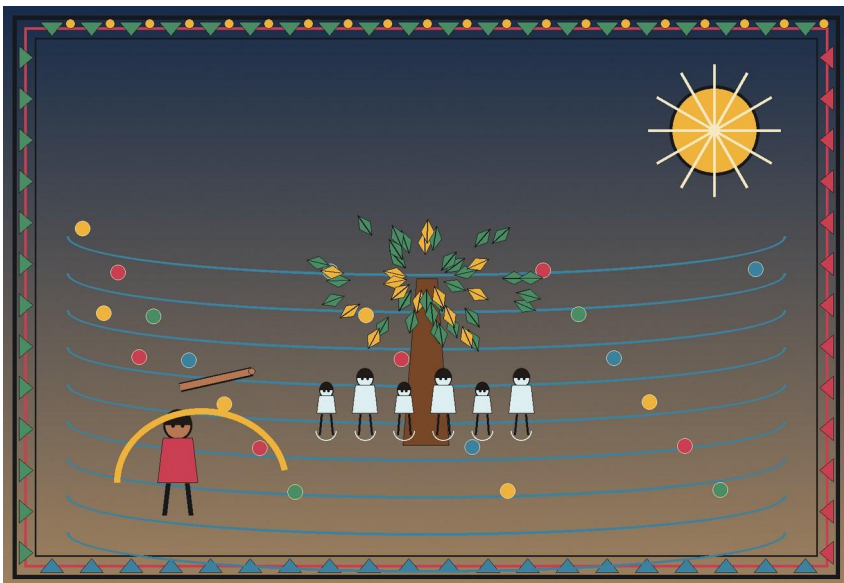
The judge listened carefully and issued an important order. There would be an independent investigation; all the names and evidence would be protected; and the privacy of the victims would be safeguarded. This was not a complete victory, but it was a great victory for the truth.

In Garh Narikel, Grandmother broke open a coconut. Inside was a damp page covered with names: Sarayu, Nagina, Ujjwal, Meera, Munna and many others. Aruni, Nand's descendant, asked, "Why is the last line blank?" Grandmother replied, "The name of someone who dies in the future will come here. A story can end, but the list of names never ends. If anyone tries to make a name disappear, the village will lift it up again."

That night in Channa Grove, Old Baba Ghost announced, "The crocodile eats the body. But if a name is written upon the water, even water cannot wash it away."

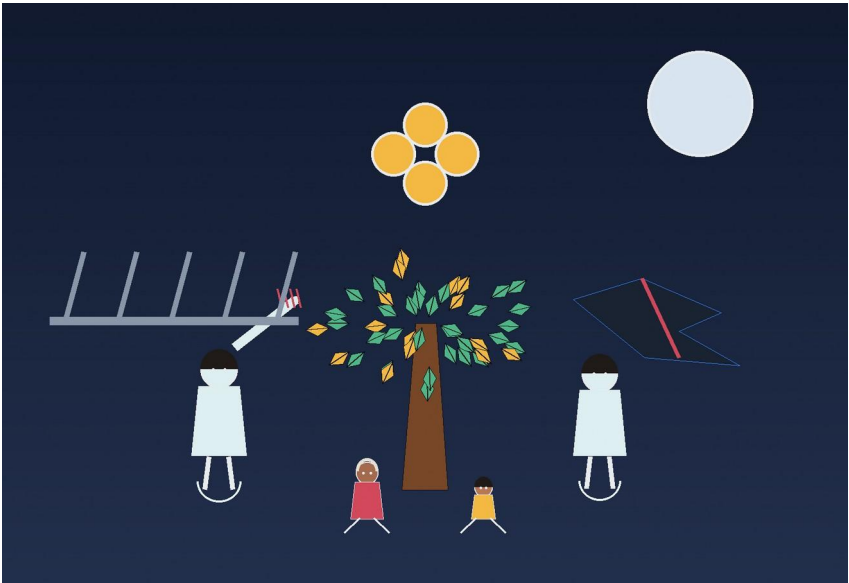
Little Ananya was playing near the doorway when she suddenly looked towards Channa Grove and whispered, "Kabaddi... kabaddi..." Grandmother smiled. "When a child learns the ghosts' game, the ghosts no longer grow old. They become the future."

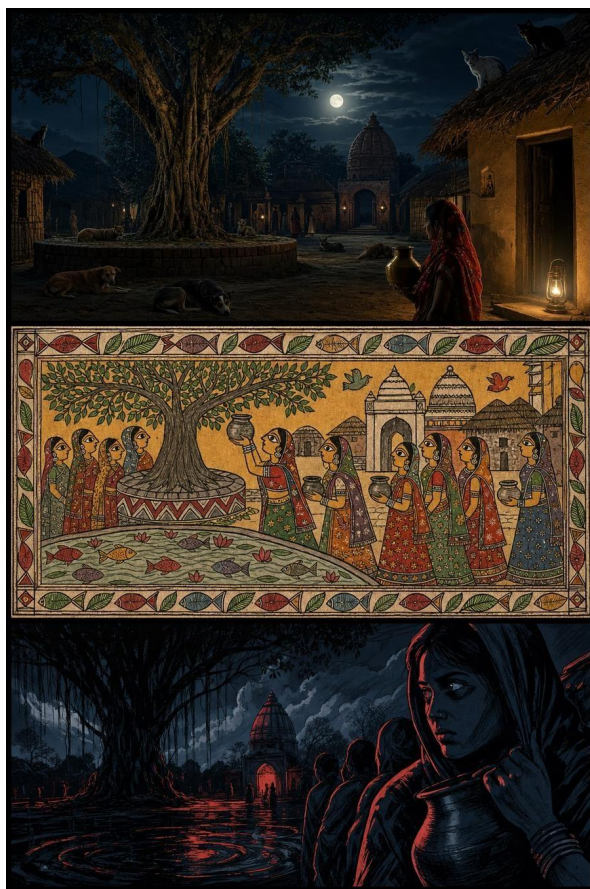
And so this story does not truly come to an end here. It is the continuing journey of a village, a family and a whole society in search of truth—a journey that passes from name to name and from one generation to the next.



Chapter 16

The Court in Channa Grove





An extraordinary silence spread over Garh Narikel that night. The news from the city court had reached the village through the water. When women returned from the pond carrying their water pots, names shimmered in the water inside them.

Grandmother sat on her doorstep. "Now it is not the court of human beings," she said softly. "Now the court of the trees will sit."

A special gathering was held in Channa Grove that night. Old Baba Ghost, Hulasi, Panidubbi and Rakash were all there. From the peepal tree, four-faced Brahma called out in every direction, "Let everyone whose name was crossed out come forward!"

Slowly the shadows of the bridge workers appeared: Sarayu, Bisesar and many others. Then came Ujjwal, who had been caught in the trap of

the screen. Then came courageous people like Meera, who had protected her dignity.

Sarayu gave the first testimony. “I fell. Nobody came to save me. Afterwards, even my name was missing. But today I ask: if I was never there, where did these blisters on my hands come from, the blisters I got building that bridge?”

Ujjwal said, “The owner of the mobile app that trapped me was not even in this country. The person who threatened me was pretending to be someone else, but the trap was real.”

The court in Channa Grove was not a court of paper. There was no prison here, but there was memory. There were no fines, but there was an awakening. Brahma of the peepal tree said, “Those who try to erase a name shall have to search for that very name. Those who try to bury the truth shall never find peace in their hearts.”

After the judgement, all the dead grew peaceful. There was no applause. It was simply as if a heavy weight, long resting upon everyone’s chest, had been lifted. Ujjwal looked towards his sister Devika. “I shall carry your name in my heart,” she told him.

Grandmother said to everyone, “Now there is work to be done for those who lost. We have won a victory, but we must bring this victory of truth into people’s daily lives.”

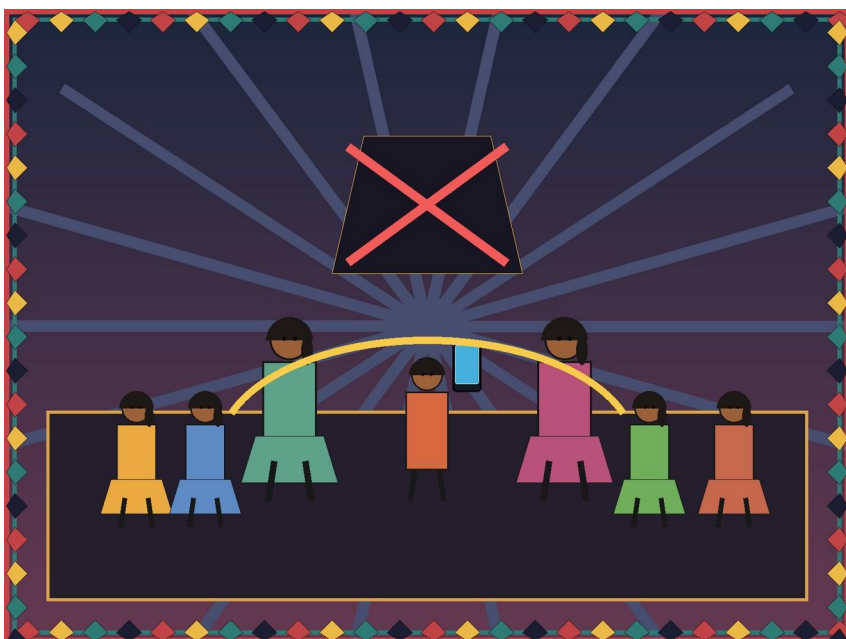
From that day, the villagers worked with fresh energy. Some taught children how to protect themselves from online fraud. Others encouraged women to remember that “the shame belongs to the criminal, not the victim.”

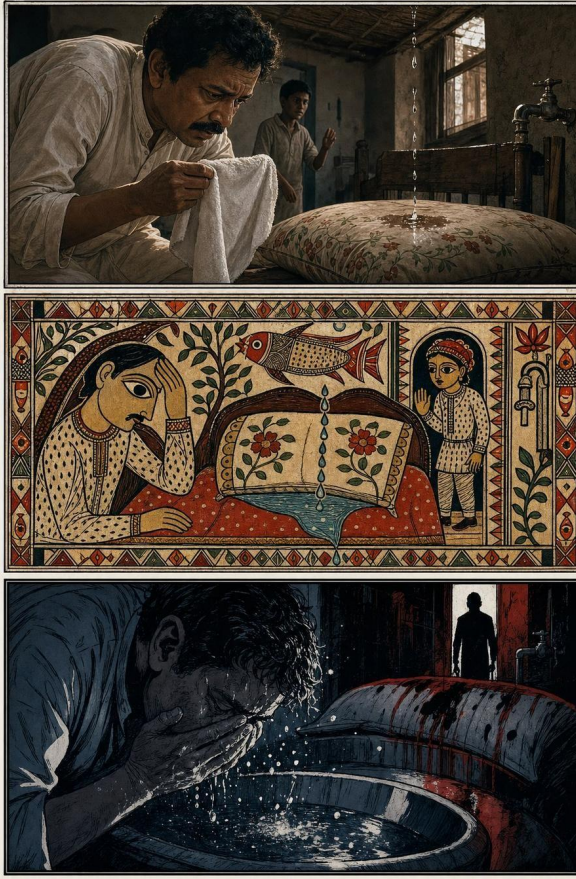
Thus the first circle of this story was complete. But the real journey was only just beginning.



Chapter 17

The Sorrow of Victory





In court, Hariharan and Batra were said to have won, because the judgement had not gone clearly against them on every point. Yet after this victory they felt a strange emptiness.

Night after night, water dripped from beneath Batuknath Hariharan's pillow. Names glimmered within it: Sarayu, Bisesar, Ujjwal. He had the taps examined and the roof checked, but still the water came. He began to understand that some things cannot be repaired by a plumber or a builder.

Far away in Garh Narikel, Gop Kumar, Saumya, Devika, Meera and Ira did not stay sitting by the courthouse doors to make an appeal. They went straight back to the village and set to work.

Devika sat on the steps of the pond and began teaching the village children and young people. "If someone threatens you over the phone

and tries to frighten you, drink some water first, take a breath, and call your family. The criminals want you to be alone.”

Meera and Saumya sat among the women and said, “If anyone threatens to frighten you with your pictures or private words, the crime is theirs and the shame is theirs—not yours.”

Grandmother and Aruni set a stone in the ground beside Channa Grove so names could be written upon it. Little Ananya sat down with a piece of chalk. “Whose name shall I write first?” she asked. “The first person whose name was crossed out of the records,” Grandmother replied. “Sarayu.”

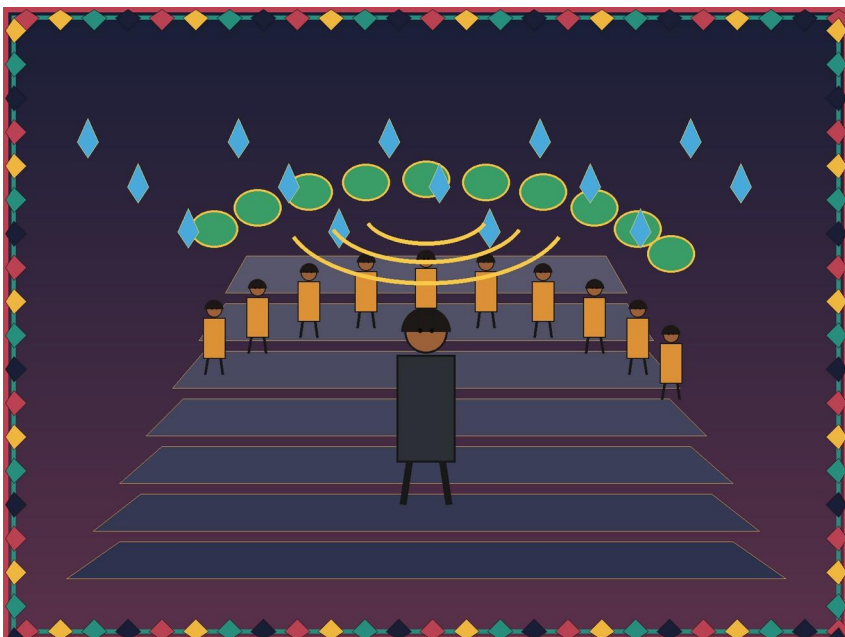
Slowly Ananya wrote “Sarayu”. A photograph of this small moment reached Batuknath Hariharan. He stared at it for a long time. A person might defeat an opponent in court, but who could stop a child from writing a name?

Chandrapal Batra tried to strengthen his criminal network again, but news reached him: “People in village after village are warning one another. Grandmothers are telling their grandchildren not to trust calls from strangers.”

For the first time Chandrapal understood that his real enemy was not the police but an awakened public.

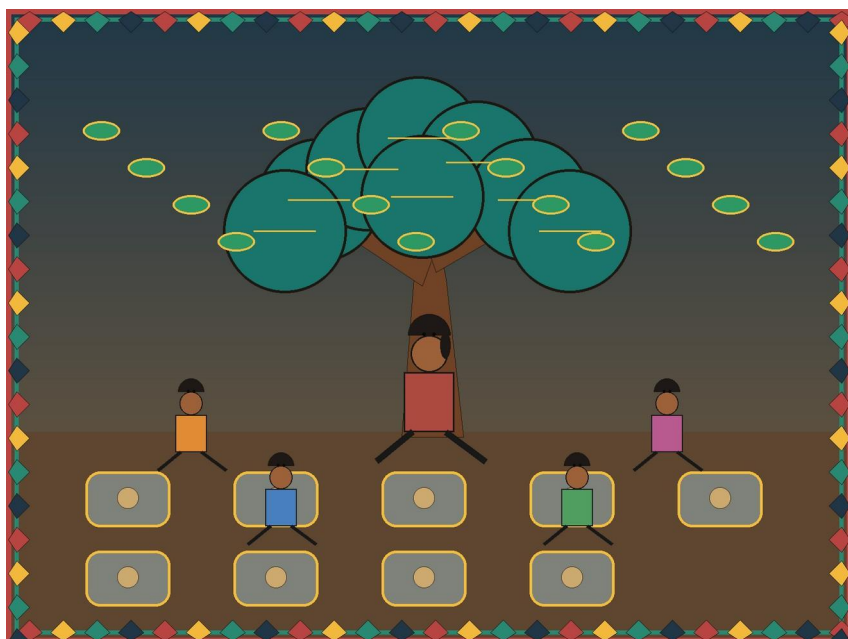
Little by little Batuknath realised that, despite winning, something within him had broken. Standing on the courthouse steps, he said to himself, “Go back. Fight again.” But nobody answered. Only a child’s voice seemed to come from far away, from Channa Grove: “Sarayu... Ujjwal... don’t cross out their names...”

Batuknath covered his ears, but the voice continued to rise from inside his heart. Old Baba Ghost whispered from the grove, “This is the sorrow of victory. No court can give a greater punishment.”



Chapter 18

The Empty Courtroom





The court opened on the next hearing date, but something strange happened: the petitioners did not come. Batuknath Hariharan declared angrily, “This is contempt of court!”

Satyavrat Mehta rose calmly. “Your Honour,” he said, “absence does not always mean disrespect. Sometimes people are doing, outside the courtroom, the work that the court could not do.”

Batuknath interrupted him. “This is a courtroom, not a place for poetry!” Satyavrat answered, “Poetry begins on the day the law stops reading out names.”

The judge thought for a while and set another date.

Outside, Batuknath asked Batra, “Where have those people gone?” “Back to the village,” Batra answered. “To do some farming.” Batuknath grew uneasy. He did not understand what this “farming” meant, but he

knew that once people return to their roots, they become very difficult to defeat.

Beneath the trees of Channa Grove in Garh Narikel, something like a school had appeared. A name was written on every stone. The children read the names, and when they did not understand, they asked questions. Ananya read the first stone: "Sarayu. Who was she?" Grandmother answered, "A worker whose name was crossed out of the papers."

Devika taught the young people, "If someone tells you over the phone that you are under 'digital arrest', don't be frightened. Rule one: don't be afraid on your own. Rule two: don't send money. Rule three: call your family."

Meera and Saumya encouraged the women: "The shame belongs to the criminal, not the victim."

Chandrapal Batra received a message from his contact in Hong Kong: "If village girls are teaching people to hang up the phone, our business will suffer." He grew worried.

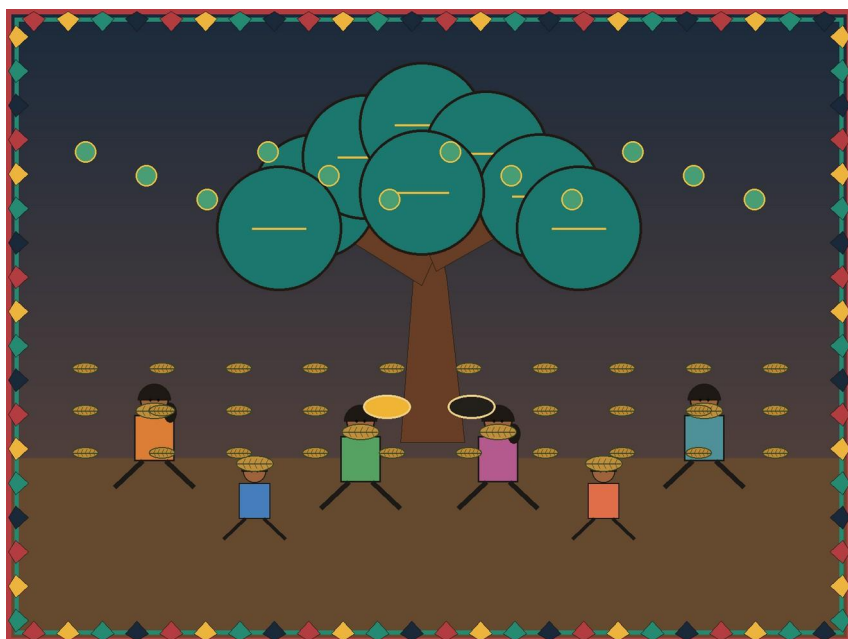
Early one morning a new kind of game began in Channa Grove. The children played kabaddi, but the rules had changed. When someone was caught, their name was not struck out. Everyone repeated it together instead. In this way the game slowly became a practice of remembering.

That night Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his diary, "Today I understood that the greatest challenge to the court is not a lawsuit but an awakened society. When people learn to read their own names and protect themselves, injustice begins to weaken on its own."



Chapter 19

The Register of Names





News of the empty courtroom in the city reached Garh Narikel during the night. Aruni rose early. He had not slept at all.

Grandmother was sitting in the doorway. “How many names do you remember?” she asked. “Not all of them,” Aruni replied, “but if we begin, the rest will come.”

Grandmother opened her old chest. Inside lay Nand Aruni’s old, unfinished application. It said, “The actual number of workers does not agree with the government records.”

“An archive is not this paper,” Grandmother said. “An archive is what people carry in their hearts. But hearts can break, so we must write those things down outside ourselves as well.”

That day a new task began beside Channa Grove: the Register of Names. There was no announcement, no committee. Anyone who wanted a name remembered simply came forward.

First came the granddaughter of Sarayu Devi. "She was my grandmother," she said. "She is not in the papers, but she is in our home. I want her to be in Channa Grove too." Her name was written on a dry coconut leaf in ink made from turmeric and soot: "Sarayu Devi."

Then came the grandson of Kanhaiya Paswan. After him came many other names: Mansur Ali, Phulo Mandal, Ganeshi Sada and countless more. Grandmother made a rule: "Write not the name the government chose, but the name the family called out at home. Papers can tell lies. The call from home does not."

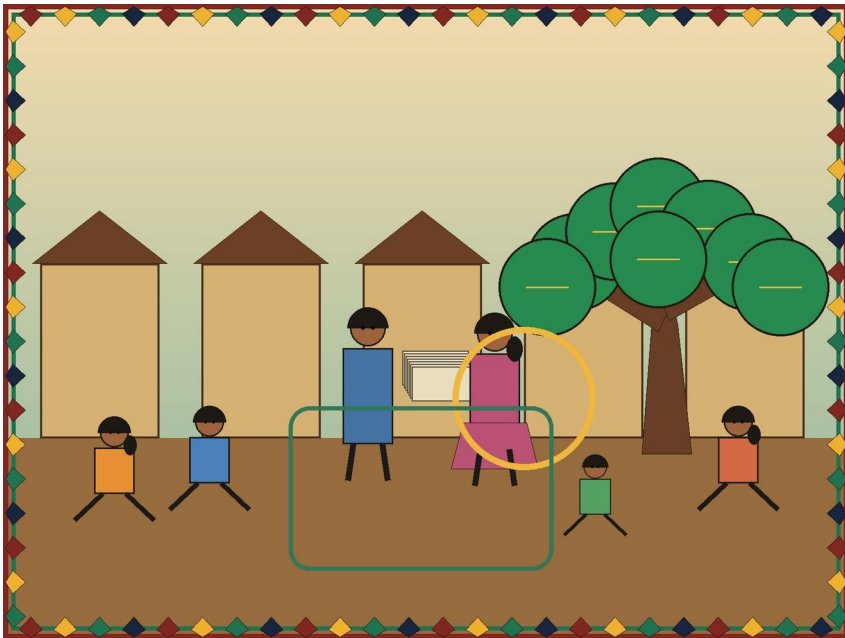
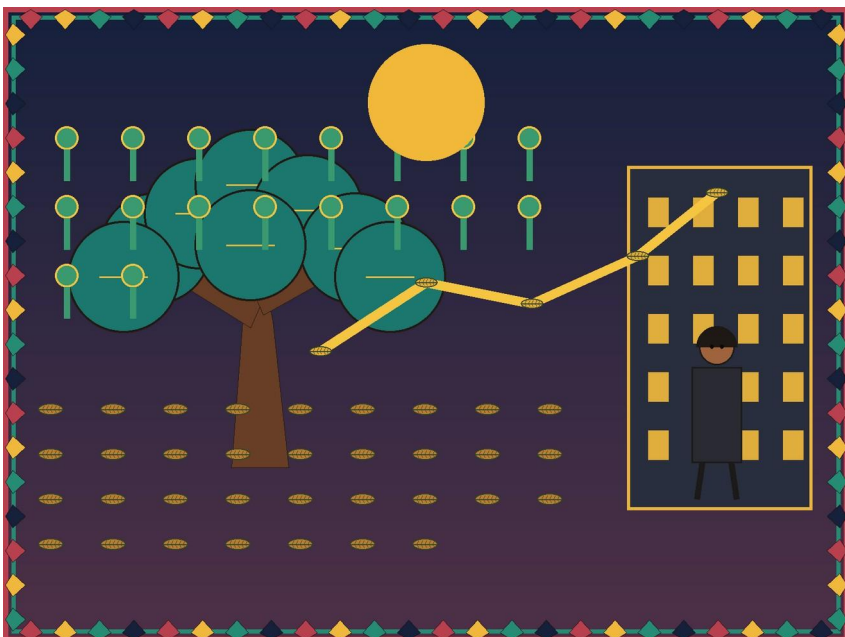
Gop Kumar brought out hundreds of small slips of paper bearing names and evidence. "These names belong here too," he said. "Not only the workers, but those cheated during the illness, the young people caught in screen traps, and many others."

Meera added an important rule: "There must also be a place for silence, for anyone who is not ready to tell their story at once. Some truths cannot be spoken immediately. They need a safe time."

By nightfall the ground in Channa Grove was spread with a carpet of leaves covered in names. One by one, the spirits belonging to those names began to say, "I am here." Slowly the entire grove filled with their voices.

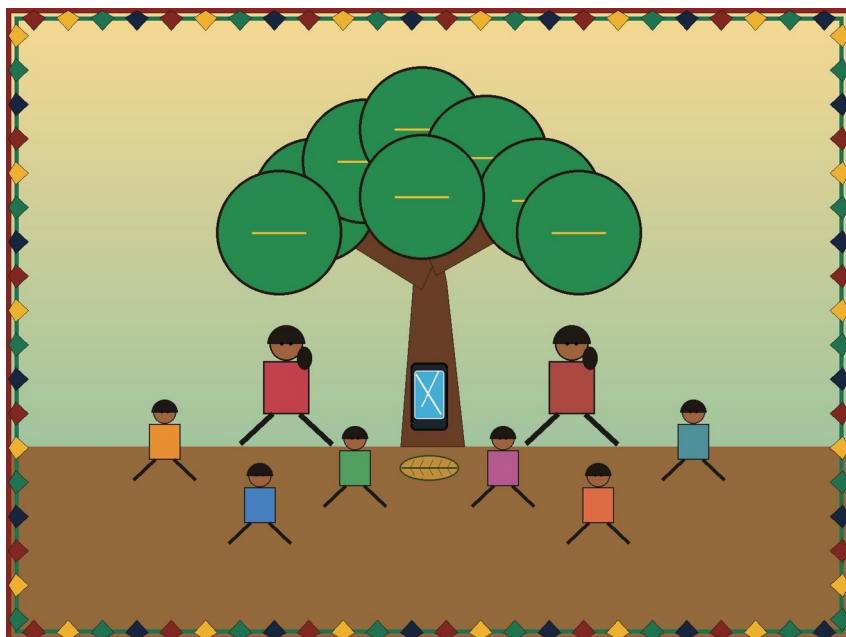
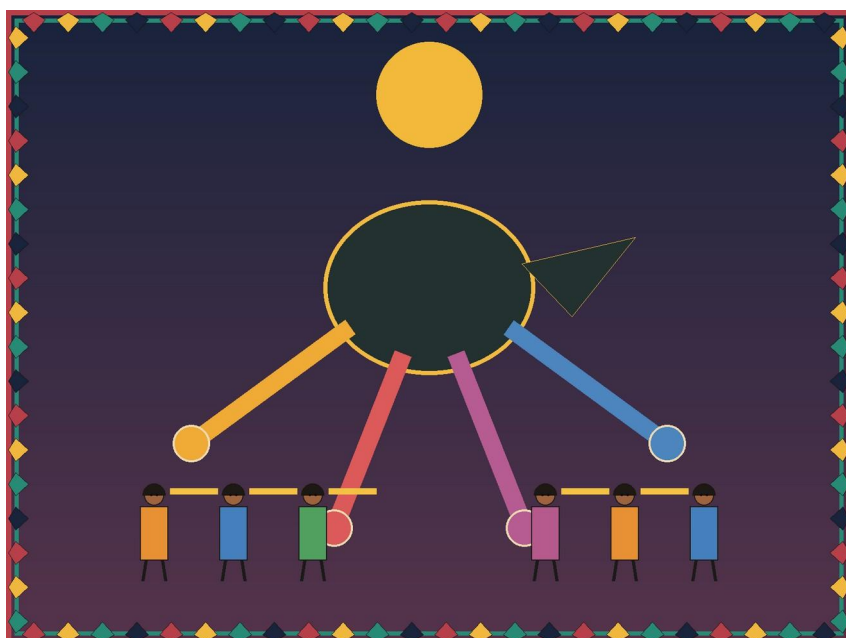
In the city, Satyavrat Mehta also received a coconut leaf with all the names written on it. He read it and understood: "The next hearing will not be in a courtroom. It will be in the memory of the country. No one can defeat a name."

Back in Garh Narikel, Grandmother announced, "From today, the school of names is open."



Chapter 20

The School Against the Screen





A new school opened beside Channa Grove. It had no benches and no bell. The children simply sat in a circle. In the middle lay the broken glass from Ujjwal's mobile phone and a coconut leaf.

Devika told everyone her brother Ujjwal's story: how he had first won a little money, then lost much more, then been threatened, and finally become isolated by his fear of "digital arrest".

"If the law is really taking action against someone," Devika said, "it does not try to frighten that person at home, alone. If a threat tries to separate you from your family, recognise it as a trick built on lies."

Nishant Jha, who had learned about such technology overseas, told everyone, "The crocodile in the screen has four legs: greed, fear, shame and loneliness. If you see all four together, run away at once."

“Where should we run?” a child asked. “To your own people,” Grandmother replied. “The first cure for fraud is not being alone.”

And so the school’s first rule became: “Do not stay alone.”

Nishant admitted his own mistake, too. “I used to work abroad for a company that measured people’s fears and desires. Whether I understood it or not, I caused harm to others. Now I want to change.”

Meera added another rule: “The shame belongs to the criminal, not the victim.”

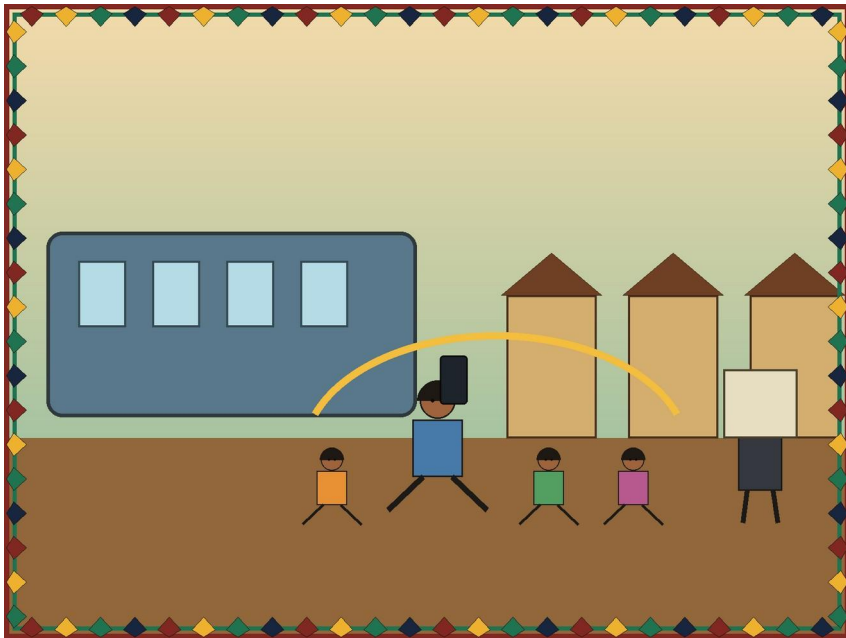
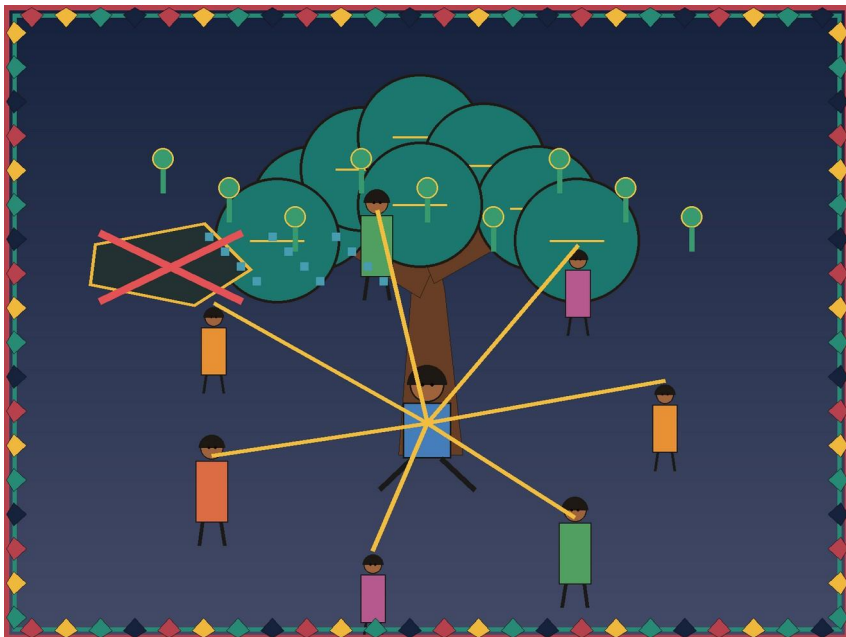
Little by little the school’s lessons spread beyond the village. In cities, markets and trains, children began repeating the rules: “Do not stay alone. The shame belongs to the criminal. The promise of quick money is the crocodile’s tongue.”

Chandrapal Batra was greatly troubled by this new awareness, because his fraud network was growing weaker. He wanted to complain against the school in court, but it had no official name and no address—only Channa Grove and some children. Whom could he send a legal notice to?

Satyavrat Mehta wrote about the school: “Public education cannot be called a crime when it warns people against fear and greed.”

That night the ghosts in Channa Grove began learning the new school’s rules as well. Old Baba Ghost was pleased. “See?” he said. “The living are learning for themselves. There will be less work for us now.”

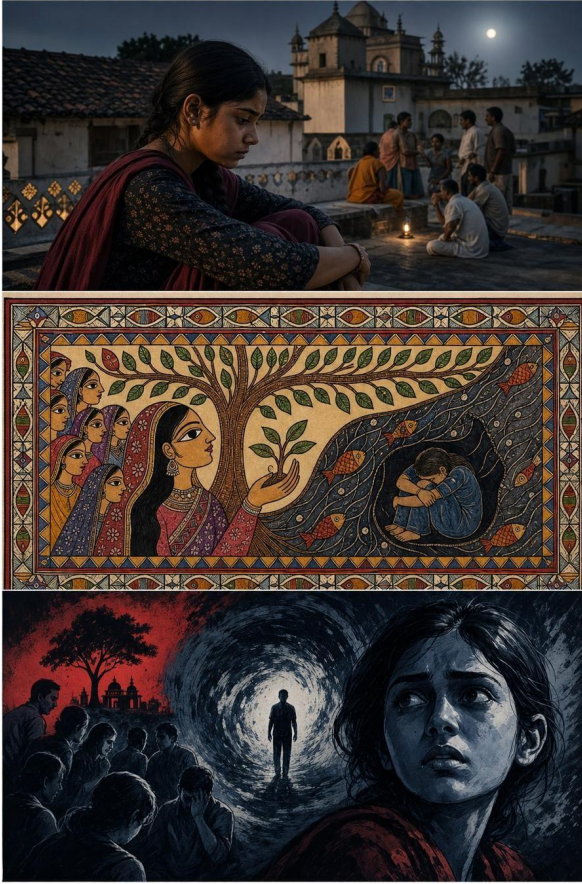
A new greeting arose among the villagers. Whenever someone looked troubled, another person would ask, “You’re not alone, are you?” Slowly the question became like a magic spell, saving many people from fraud.



Chapter 21

The Pledge of Privacy





After the Register of Names had been created, the villagers thought everything would become peaceful. But Devika Sah could not sleep at night. She felt that after her brother's death, society blamed him instead of the criminals.

Beside the Register of Names, Devika wrote a new sentence: "We must identify not the mistakes of the dead, but the traps set by those who deceived them."

Soumya Ramanathan came back to Garh Narikel from Delhi. Meera (Mrinalini), too, had once feared what the villagers might have heard about her. At last, she gathered her courage and returned.

A new meeting took place beside Channa Grove. No announcement had been made; people simply gathered little by little. Soumya drew a circle on the earth and wrote the word "privacy" inside it. "The word is

new,” she said, “but the idea is old. Every person has the first right to their own life, thoughts and feelings.”

Meera said, “Fraudsters do not hold us captive through money alone. They hold us captive through shame. But today we take a pledge: the shame shall belong to the criminal, not the victim.”

At these words, the whole grove seemed to tremble. For the first time in twelve hundred years, Old Baba Ghost laughed out loud.

Munna Paswan, whose bank account had been used for fraud, stepped forward and told his story. “They told me, ‘Just hand over your account and you’ll get five thousand rupees.’ Then the police arrived, and everyone thought I was the guilty one. But nobody even knows the name of the real criminal.”

Meera said, “If someone has been caught because of their name, that very name must also be used to save them.”

A little girl asked, “What should we do if someone threatens us?” Devika answered, “First, do not blame yourself. Second, tell someone you trust immediately. Third, do not send money. Fourth, do not destroy the evidence.”

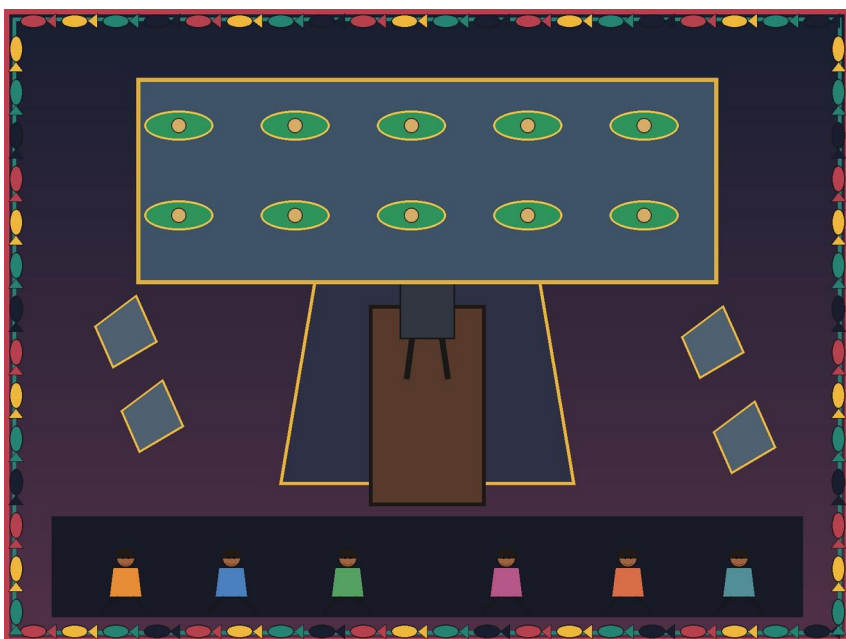
For the first time, Ujjwal’s mother spoke at the gathering. “When my son died, I thought he had brought shame upon us. Now I understand that we had left him alone. If this school had existed then, perhaps he would have said, ‘Mother, I have fallen into a trap.’”

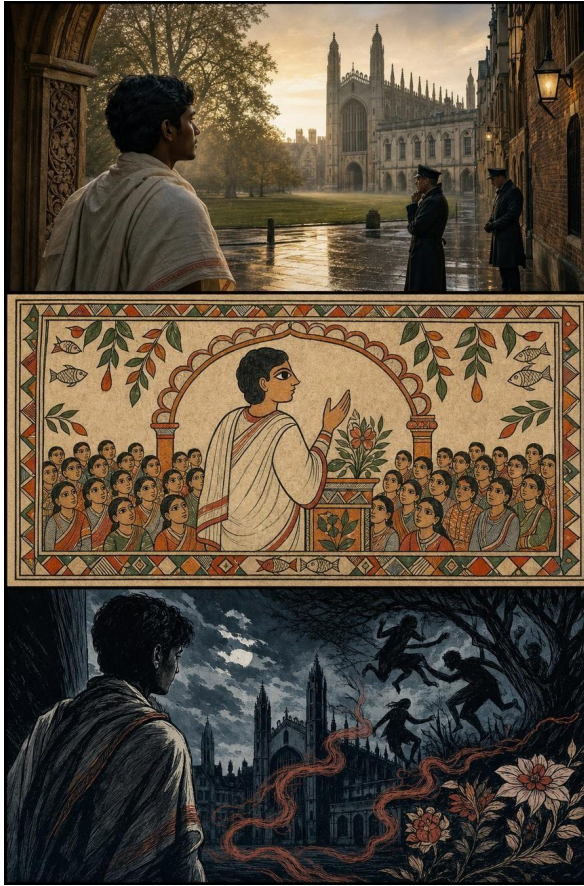
And so a new custom began beside Channa Grove. Anyone who felt afraid would not remain alone, but would come to the grove and say, “I am not to blame.” Slowly these three words became the whole village’s watchword, giving many people courage and safety.



Chapter 22

The Second Speech at Harvard





Edward Broom prepared to deliver another grand speech, this time on “Global Enterprise and Human Dignity.” Ira Aruni had also been invited. But instead of planning to ask questions, she devised a different plan.

She sat on the old steps outside the auditorium, opened her little computer and connected a live broadcast from Garh Narikel.

Evening was falling over Garh Narikel. Beside Channa Grove, the children began reading from the Register of Names. “Sarayu Devi.” Everyone answered, “Present!” “Ujjwal Jha.” “Present!” Their voices travelled from the village into Ira’s device, and from there straight to the auditorium screen.

Inside, Broom’s speech was under way when the screen suddenly malfunctioned. In place of a photograph of the bridge, a name written by the village children appeared. Broom stared in surprise. The screen

was corrected, but then another name appeared, and a third—as though the names themselves were bursting into view.

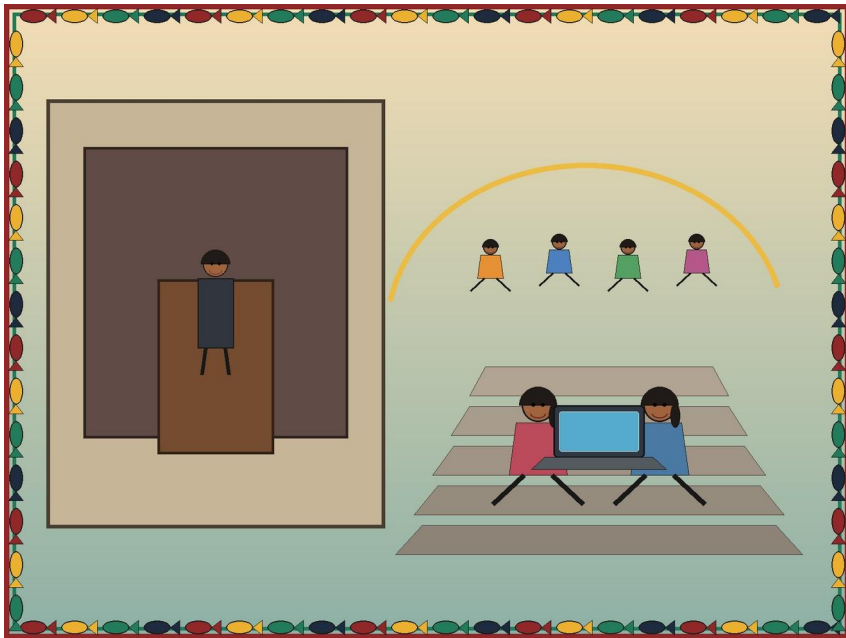
Sweat broke out on Broom's forehead. Elina Graves, who had organised the event, quietly rose and went outside. Sitting beside Ira, she asked, "What should I do?" Ira answered, "Leave the stage. When someone comes to the stage only to speak words, leaving that stage empty can have more power than words."

The incident was broadcast around the world. Lau Kin-hung watched it in Hong Kong, Batra in Delhi and Batuknath Hariharan in the city. But reading out names was not a crime, so nobody could take action against the children.

Satyavrat Mehta watched and said, "The state may delay, but sometimes society stops waiting."

A new saying spread through Garh Narikel: "Listen to the one who speaks on a stage; believe what is written on a leaf." Underneath, Ananya added, "Quietly reading out names is another way of asking questions."

The following week Edward Broom changed his company's name, promising "a new beginning and a new commitment." But the children of Garh Narikel laughed and said, "Changing its name does not change a crocodile's teeth." The story was not over. It had taken a new turn, and much work still lay ahead.



Chapter 23

Batuknath's Search



Batuknath Hariharan received the papers confirming his legal victory, but they brought him no happiness. He had expected the people he had defeated to come and ask him for a settlement. Nobody came.

That empty doorway frightened Batuknath more than anything. He sent Chandrapal Batra a message: “Where are those people?” The reply came: “They have gone to the village. They are teaching children and writing down names.”

Batuknath decided to visit Garh Narikel himself. He imagined that as soon as he arrived, someone would fall at his feet. Instead, at the village

boundary, he met two children drawing a picture of a mobile-phone crocodile in the earth.

“What are you drawing?” Batuknath asked. One child answered, “The crocodile in the screen. First it lets you win, and then it eats your home.”

When he reached Channa Grove, he saw no stage and heard no slogans. The children were simply drying coconut leaves on which names had been written. No one was frightened when they saw Batuknath. No one protested. That unsettled him most of all.

A little girl asked, “Is your name written here?” Batuknath was startled. She went on, “We write down the names worth saving. A name that can save itself does not need to be written.”

Devika Sah, Meera and Aruni went on with their work as usual. Batuknath offered a settlement, but no one seemed interested. Gop Kumar said softly, “Settlement is your word. Ours is remembrance.”

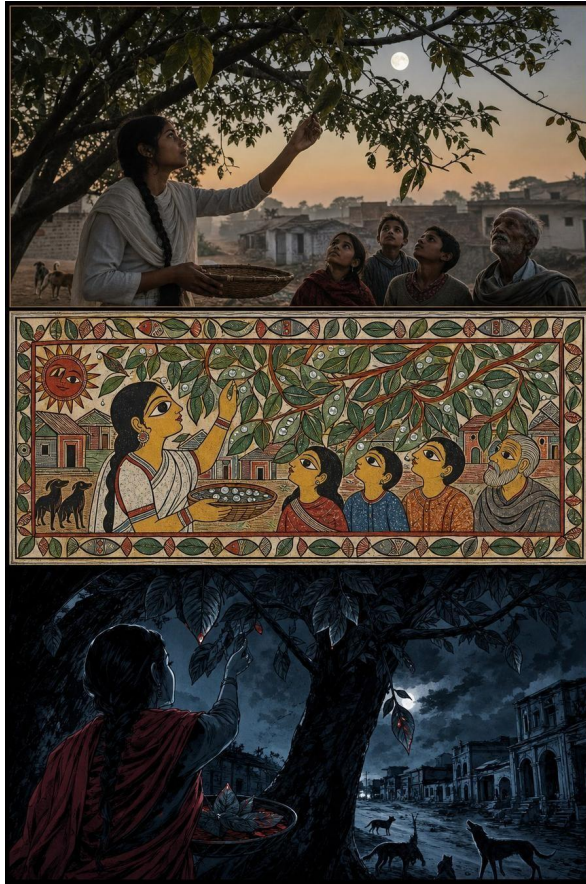
Batuknath took out a blank sheet of paper for his proposed settlement. Ananya took the sheet, folded it into a little paper boat and set it afloat in the pond. After drifting a short distance, it sank. “Water does not keep a paper with no names upon it,” she said.

At that moment Batuknath understood. He had come to the village looking for defeated people, but there were no defeated people here—only free ones. Those who are busy living their lives do not need an opponent.

That night, as he drove back to the city, Batuknath looked again at the document recording his victory. He realised how empty it was. He locked the court order in a cupboard. But night after night, a faint rustling of leaves seemed to come from inside—as though Garh Narikel would never forget him, however far away he went.

Chapter 24

The Novel Begins Again



In the morning, all the leaves bearing names beside Channa Grove glittered with dew. Ananya arrived first and began clearing the ground where the ghosts played kabaddi at night.

“Now the game begins,” said Ananya.

“Whose game?” Devika asked. “The game of those whose names have survived,” Ananya replied, “and of those whose names were erased.”

The first child crossed the line, held a breath and called, “Ujjwal Jha!” Devika stepped forward. “Ujjwal did not lose,” she said. “He helped us recognise the crocodile in the screen.”

The next little girl called Sarayu's name and pressed her palm into the earth. Devika said, "That is a signature. For the person they called illiterate, the earth puts its signature."

Far away in the city, Batuknath Hariharan looked once more at the papers declaring his victory. They still seemed strangely damp. He asked Chandrapal Batra, "What is happening in the village?" The answer came: "Classes. Names. Children. No movement." Batuknath could not work out which section of the law could be used against such "work."

The school in Garh Narikel began to grow. On one side of Channa Grove was the Register of Names, on another a class about recognising the crocodile in the screen, on a third the pledge of privacy, and on a fourth singing. Every child who came to learn first spoke their own name, then the name of someone who had been remembered. Each day, one living child gave one dead person a place among the present.

In the evening the grown-ups joined the game. "Ujjwal is not for sale," said Devika. "Privacy is not for sale," said Meera. Gop Kumar said, "When data becomes a name, fear begins to lessen."

At night, a coconut fell from a tree. Inside was a small leaf bearing the words: "Where names are read aloud, the story does not end."

Aruni read the words and said, "Then I shall not write an ending. The children who play shall write it."

A village woman picked up the empty coconut shell and carried it home. She planted tulsi seeds inside it, as though truth in Garh Narikel were preparing to grow green in another form.

Aruni was closing his notebook when Ananya asked, "Babu, is the story finished now?" Aruni smiled. "A book can end, but a village cannot." He handed Ananya his notebook. "You write."

Ananya wrote her first line: "Today there was another game of kabaddi in Channa Grove." Then she added, "This time the one who was caught was a lie."

And so Garh Narikel's story—the story of saving names, seeking truth and standing together—went on, from generation to generation, from child to child.

Chapter 25

Minds Drawn to the Grove



That night Batuknath Hariharan opened the cupboard where he had kept the document recording his victory. Along its edges he saw fine grains of sand, forming letters that read, “Minds drawn here.”

Batuknath laughed at first, but deep inside he felt uneasy. He telephoned Chandrapal Batra that night. “Is there any legal way to stop people reading out names?” Batra replied, “Reading names is not a crime.”

Chandrapal Batra sat in his room. The framed degree on his wall reminded him of a long-ago incident: the first time he had trapped someone in a crime by deceit. The memory made him uncomfortable.

Raghav Somani heard a strange voice coming from his phone, as though his own voice were telling him, “No paper, no voice, only percentages.” But this time the words carried a note of sadness.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-hung studied a map of Garh Narikel on his screen. The dot marking the village kept sticking in a strange way, as though it were no ordinary marketplace.

While Edward Broom read a draft of his speech, he began seeing names in Devanagari beneath the English words: Ujjwal, Sarayu, Nand. He could not read them, but he could feel their weight.

In Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta read Garh Narikel’s Register of Names late into the night. He wrote, “The state does not own its citizens’ memories.”

In Garh Narikel that night, Channa Grove was quiet, but awake. “Now they will come,” said Old Baba Ghost. “Why?” asked Hulasi. “Their minds have been drawn here,” he replied. “The mind arrives first, and the body follows.”

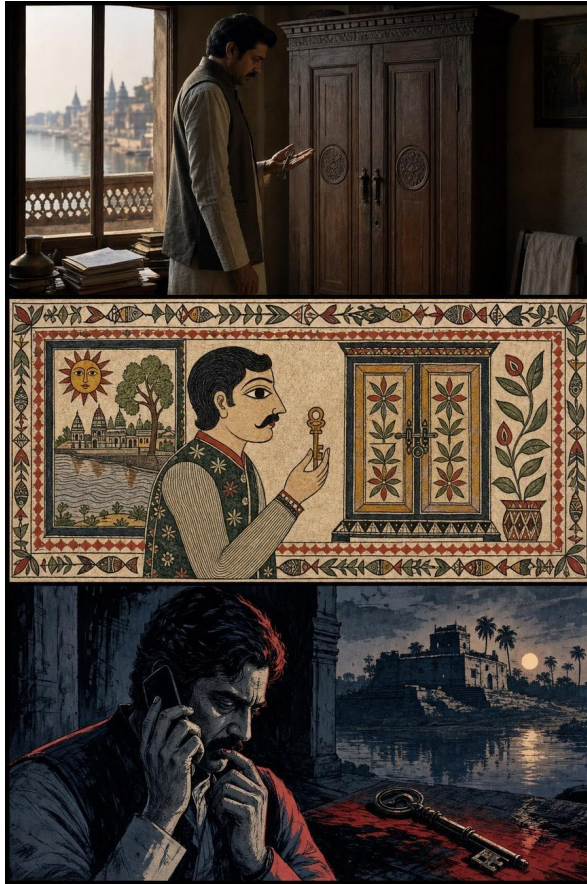
So, little by little, the thoughts of Batuknath, Batra, Raghav, Lau Kin-hung and Broom, sitting in distant places, were drawn towards Garh Narikel. Their bodies were still in cities, foreign countries and offices, but their consciences—the good within them—were becoming tied to the village’s truth.

Ananya woke at dawn and looked at Aruni’s notebook. Beneath the line she had written on the previous page, a new sentence was appearing all by itself: “The mind of falsehood has already entered the grove.”

Ananya woke her father. “Get up! The story is moving forward again.”

Chapter 26

Batuknath Hariharan's Journey



In the morning Batuknath Hariharan cancelled all his meetings and made a decision: “Garh Narikel.” Instead of taking a helicopter, he decided to go by train, which was most unusual for him.

On the train a mysterious old man came and sat opposite Batuknath. He wore a plain dhoti and carried a bamboo walking stick. “Have you studied law?” the old man asked. “Yes, a great deal,” Batuknath answered proudly. The old man smiled gently. “Have you studied names?”

Batuknath grew annoyed. “What is so special about reading names?” The old man replied, “The law keeps a name only on paper: birth,

father, address. But learning to read the feelings inside a name—that is a true art.”

The train climbed onto a bridge. A river flowed below. “Look down,” said the old man. “So many names have been carried away.” Batuknath avoided looking down.

Night grew deep. The old man asked, “Has it never happened in your courtroom that what was true was hidden, while what was false was placed on record?” Batuknath stiffened. “Who are you?” he asked. “I am one who waits for names,” the old man replied.

At midnight the train stopped at an unknown place. The old man rose. “Come. Your first hearing is here.” “I’m not getting off,” Batuknath said. “Your body need not get off,” the old man answered. “Your mind has already stepped down.”

By dawn the train reached a junction. Batuknath took a smaller train and then walked along the earthen road to Garh Narikel. A coconut leaf fell onto his shoe. He picked it up, and letters seemed to appear on his palm: “You have studied law. Now learn to read names.”

Channa Grove came into view in the distance. He could hear the children’s voices—not playing kabaddi, but reading names. Batuknath began to walk more slowly.

Old Baba Ghost, who was many centuries old, appeared before him. “Batuknath Hariharan, you have arrived.” Batuknath made one last attempt. “I have come to talk.” “No,” the old ghost replied. “You have come to learn.”

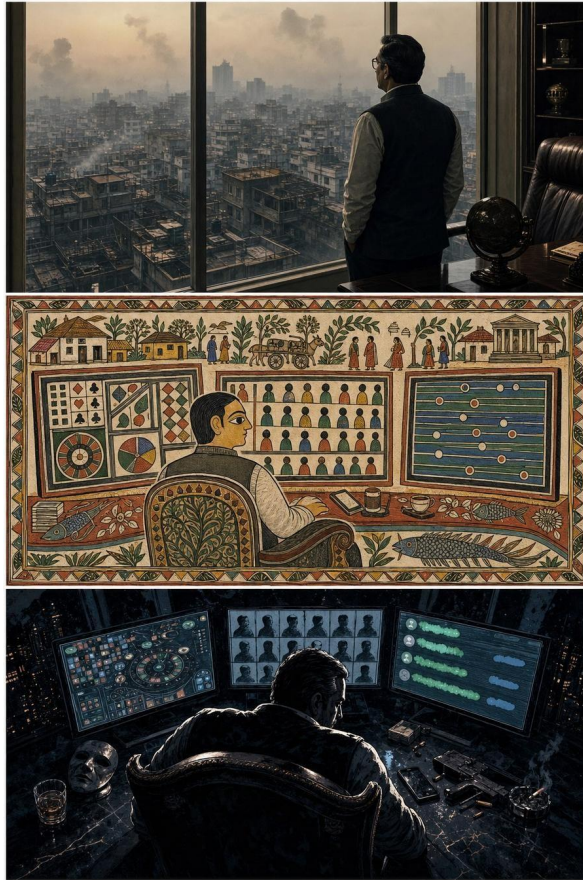
Before Batuknath entered the grove, the old ghost said, “Here you take off not your shoes, but your pride.” Batuknath removed his shoes. The coolness of the earth seemed to rise from his feet all the way to his head.

He stepped inside. The children saw him, but they were not afraid. Ananya came up and asked, “Will you read the names?”

With that question, Batuknath’s real journey began: not a journey from city to village, but from pride to truth.

Chapter 27

Chandrapal Batra's Screens



Chandrapal Batra decided not to go to Garh Narikel. Standing beside the glass wall of his high-rise apartment, he thought, Why should a man who can watch everyone on a screen ever need to set foot on the ground?

Three screens filled his room: one for online gambling, one for the accounts used in fraud, and one for secret messages. But that day something strange happened. Whenever he typed the words “Register of Names”, the shadow of a coconut leaf appeared on the screen.

He looked through his earnings. His eyes stopped at one name: Ujjwal Jha. He tried to erase it, but another name appeared immediately:

Munna Paswan. Then a third and a fourth. The more he erased, the more names appeared.

Batra panicked and called his technical team. “There is some fault in the server. Fix it.” A young man looked at the screen and said, “Sir, this doesn’t look like a fault. The names keep coming back.”

Night deepened. Batra switched off all his screens, but even in the darkness he could see faint green lines like the veins of a leaf. The figure of a child appeared on a screen and wrote, “How did you give the first win?”

Batra remembered his first wrongdoing: when he had tricked a young man into gambling. “I did not kill anyone!” he said. The screen replied, “Then which crime will you admit to?”

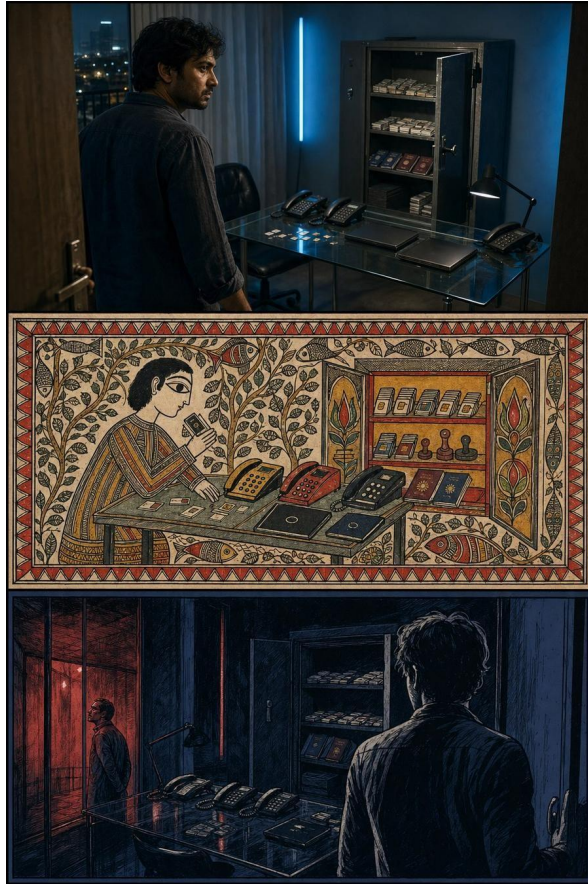
Batra picked up the frame of his old law degree. Words appeared on it: “Your education in reading names is incomplete.” He turned the frame over. On the back were the words: “One who studies law but not human beings becomes a slave to the screen.”

Batra decided that he would never go to Garh Narikel—not in person. But a map opened by itself on his phone. It showed a route from his home to Garh Narikel, and beneath it were the words: “Your mind has already arrived.”

And so Chandrapal Batra entered Garh Narikel without travelling there. His body stayed in the city, but his conscience was slowly being pulled towards the truth.

Chapter 28

Raghav Signal's Silence



Raghav Somani was always deleting messages, because he believed that whatever had been erased had never happened. But that night a coconut leaf appeared on his phone. His printer began working by itself, printing name after name: “Ujjwal Jha”, “Munna Paswan” and many more.

Raghav pulled the cable out of the printer, but it went on printing. He kicked the machine. At last it fell silent, but the printed pages still lay upon the floor.

Raghav thought, Batra was frightened, and now it is affecting me too. Then he remembered his childhood, when his father had run a little

shop. "Write down the names, son," his father used to say. "If the accounts go wrong, you can ask the people whose names you kept." Raghav had laughed then, but now the words returned to him.

He opened an old paper notebook in which he had written his secret escape routes: other names, other passports. Yet a green line was appearing at the edge of every page, like the vein of a coconut leaf.

In the morning Raghav decided to stop recruiting people for new crimes. He sent a message to his associate: "Stop recruiting mules." It was the first unusual order of his life.

He went to his old student hostel, where the young man he had first cheated used to live. An elderly tea seller told him, "A boy named Arunesh Kumar lived here. His father sold his shop, there was a court case, and the boy became almost mad with distress."

Raghav's hands shook. The name he himself had forgotten was still remembered by the village tea seller. That memory was stronger than all his digital erasing.

He came home and created a new file on his laptop called "First Account". He found the young student's name and wrote it down. This time the screen remained quiet. No leaf appeared. Raghav understood that writing down a name could bring a measure of peace.

That night Raghav Signal Somani slept for the first time without keeping his phone beside him. He understood that before breaking his silence he must learn to listen. It was not yet a confession or an act of atonement, but it was a beginning.

Chapter 29

Lau Kin-hung's Dream



Lau Kin-hung lived in a towering glass building in Hong Kong. He was a very wealthy man, but cold at heart. He had sent Raghav Signal one final message: “Account closed.”

That night he had a strange dream. Water began filling his glass building. It did not smell of salt. Instead it smelled of medicine, cement and mobile phones.

A mobile phone floated towards him. On its screen appeared a young man's face. “I am Ujjwal Jha. Which country profited from my defeat?” Then came a woman's face. “I am Sarayu. What happened to the insurance for my life at the bridge?”

More and more mobile phones came floating over the water, each bearing a different question. Lau Kin-hung was terrified.

Then a crocodile appeared in the water, with a phone caught between its teeth. Chandrapal Batra's face was on the phone, and the crocodile began to chew it slowly.

The dream changed. Lau Kin-hung found himself in an auditorium at Harvard, where Edward Broom was delivering a speech. Suddenly water began dripping from the ceiling, while outside, on the lawn, Ira Aruni was teaching children to read names.

An old ghost, sitting on a branch, said, "Your accounts are very neat. Only one column is missing."

"Which column?" Lau Kin-hung asked. "Sleep," came the answer.

He woke with a start. In the morning he heard news of a small village called Garh Narikel, where people were searching for names and children had started a school.

On his desk lay a strange thing: a green coconut leaf that had not been there the night before. He picked it up and felt something like a heartbeat inside it. The leaf seemed to say, "Now your mind is drawn here."

Lau Kin-hung put it down, but the beating stayed in his palm. From that day on, whenever he wanted to close an account, he first checked whether the welfare of any child depended on it.

And so the minds of these wrongdoers, far away from one another, were slowly drawn towards Garh Narikel. The power of truth was so great that it crossed the sea and reached their buildings of glass.

Chapter 30

The Courtroom Within the Tricksters



That night, in four different places, something like a courtroom awoke inside Batuknath Hariharan, Chandrapal Batra, Raghav Somani and Lau Kin-hung. It was no ordinary courtroom. It was the court of their own consciences.

A child holding a peepal leaf appeared before Batuknath. “Read the names,” the child said. Batuknath refused, but deep inside he heard a voice repeating, “Names, names.”

On Chandrapal Batra’s screen a torn bank passbook began to speak. “Consent given through hunger is not the same as consent given under the law.” Batra argued, “Business cannot be run on emotion.” The

passbook replied, "Business remains business only as long as the buyer knows what is being bought. You bought people's futures and sold them as a game."

Leaves began falling onto Raghav Signal's desk, each bearing part of a threatening sentence. He wanted to set them on fire, but the leaves would not burn. They were leaves of memory, and memory cannot be burned away.

Across the sea a question appeared before Lau Kin-hung: "What share did you have in these deaths?" For the first time he was silent. He had always told himself that he merely moved money from one place to another, and committed no crime. But in the court of conscience, it is not hands that are judged. It is one's share in what was done.

Edward Broom, too, faced a question: "Your speeches spoke of dignity. How many people were missing from your accounts?" "I had no direct knowledge," he replied. The question came again: "Was the profit direct?" He fell silent.

In all these inner courtrooms one chair stood empty. It was meant for the very people they had called defeated. A question was asked: "Where are those you defeated?"

"In Channa Grove," said Batuknath. "At the school," said Chandrapal. "Among the leaves," said Raghav. "On little mobile phones across India," said Lau Kin-hung.

"Then why are you all here?" the question asked.

No one had an answer. By morning they understood that the people they had claimed to defeat were still alive, teaching children and saving names. No punishment had come, but something even harder had: waiting, and facing their own souls for the first time.

Chapter 31

The Work of the Defeated



After the court at Channa Grove, the people who had been called “defeated” rose in the morning without shouting a single slogan. They set about their work like farmers scattering seed across a field.

As Ananya marked out a new playing field in the earth, she said, “This time, anyone caught in kabaddi will not be sent out. They will be given a new task.”

Devika Sah placed her brother Ujjwal’s broken mobile phone on the wall of the old village meeting place. Beneath it she wrote, “The crocodile in the screen first shows you victory, then devours your home.” That became the first lesson.

Nishant Jha began explaining the complicated language of banking to the village children in simple words. Munna Paswan, whose account had been used for fraud, sat quietly. Devika took a seat beside him and said, "Someone who has fallen into a trap is a witness before being called guilty."

Soumya Ramanathan began turning difficult government language into plain village speech. "Unreported death," she explained, meant "A person died, but the papers said the person had not died."

Meera stood in the middle of the meeting place. "Nobody's love shall be used as evidence against them," she said. "Nobody's fear shall become someone else's income." The village women and men pledged together: "We shall not make a spectacle of anyone's privacy. If we see someone breaking under a burden, we shall not leave them alone."

Abroad, Ira Aruni began a new gathering called "Reading the Leaves." She told students from different countries the story of Garh Narikel. "Before you listen to speeches about ethics in an auditorium," she said, "read the names of the workers swallowed by bridges built for your companies."

Gop Kumar taught the young villagers to understand stories, not merely data. "Beside each name, write about that person's home, their children, and the dreams the worker had for them." When a dream could not be discovered, he told them to leave a blank space. "A blank space can also be evidence."

Far away in the city, Batuknath Hariharan and Chandrapal Batra began to understand that people who had stopped fighting and started working could no longer be defeated.

Old Baba Ghost said in Channa Grove, "When people stop fighting and set to work, defeating them is not merely difficult. It is impossible."

A new custom grew in Garh Narikel. Whenever anyone visited a home, they first asked, "Who is still here in your family, and whose names have yet to be written down?" In this way, separate wounds came together to form one great family.

Chapter 32

The Third Game of Kabaddi



That night, the leaves in Channa Grove began moving though there was no wind. An extraordinary game of kabaddi began between three teams. One team belonged to the dead, one to the village children, and the third to the consciences of Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau Kin-hung and Broom.

Sarayu entered the circle, chanting her name as she went: “Sarayu ... Sarayu ...” Batuknath’s conscience tried to stop her, but all that came out of his mouth was “Procedure ... procedure ...” Sarayu crossed the line with ease.

Ananya entered the circle and asked Chandrapal's conscience, "Who is your real master?" Chandrapal became flustered. "I am my own master." "Then why did orders keep coming from Hong Kong?" Ananya asked. At this question, a crack appeared in Chandrapal's conscience.

Munna Paswan, too, stepped into the circle. "My name is not 'mule'. I am Munna." For the first time, Chandrapal's conscience was wounded by the words it had used.

Meera stood before Raghav Signal's conscience. "Anyone who frightens people with photographs steals their shadows," she said. Raghav's conscience fell silent.

Across the sea, Lau Kin-hung's conscience stood at the edge of the circle, unwilling to enter. But Nand Aruni asked, "How many foundations are in your accounts? How many bones?" The language of percentages could not count bones, and Lau's conscience seemed to shrink.

Broom's conscience came forward, repeating, "Dignity ... dignity ..." Ira asked in Maithili, "How can you give a speech about someone's dignity when you cannot even pronounce their name?" Instead of "global responsibility", the word that came out of Broom's mouth was "profit".

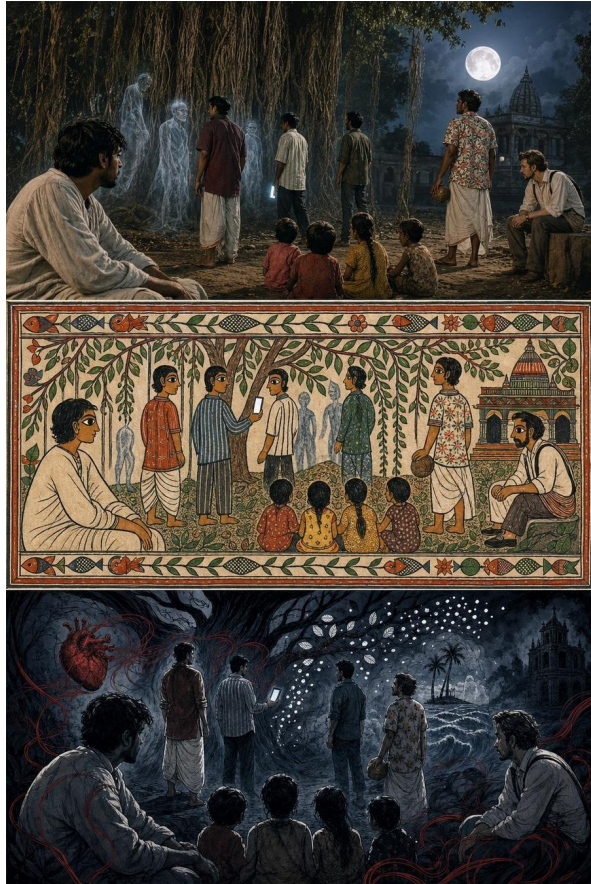
Under the rules of the game, anyone who wanted to leave could do so, but had to leave a word behind. Batuknath left "procedure", Chandrapal left "account", Raghav left "message", Lau left "share", and Broom left "dignity".

But when they went out, they discovered that the meanings of the words they had left behind had changed. "Procedure" now meant the steps for reading names; "account" had become the story of a human life; "dignity" meant speaking someone's name.

In the morning there was no celebration of victory. The children went to school again. In Channa Grove a leaf fell, bearing the words, "Begin again." The story had not ended; this was the sign of another beginning.

Chapter 33

The Test of Conscience



The kabaddi game in Channa Grove continued. Ananya announced, “Whoever plays must speak a name. If a player does not speak a name, their breath will not count.”

Batuknath’s conscience tried to say “jurisdiction”, but out came “Sarayu Devi!” He stared in amazement. Then he tried to say “Your Honour”, but out came “Lakhan Paswan”. The more he tried to use his old language, the more forgotten names escaped his mouth.

Chandrapal Batra’s conscience tried to say “sentimentality”, but what came out was “The first win was not free.” The children did not laugh, for they had understood that long ago.

Broom's conscience said, "Human dignity." Old Baba Ghost laughed. "Dignity? In which language? Say it in the language of the worker whose body went into the bridge foundations." Broom's conscience could not answer, because he did not know the worker's language. Channa Grove translated his word "dignity" for him: it became "price", and then "price" broke apart and became "name".

"Names first. Prices afterwards," the children said together.

Little by little, Lau Kin-hung's conscience began to understand India and the stories of its villages. At last the name "Ujjwal" came from his mouth. As soon as he spoke it, the darkness of the screen grew a little brighter.

Old Baba Ghost told them all a new rule. "Whoever learns to read a name becomes a little more human. Whoever cannot do it will remain empty within, even if they keep their position, money and respect."

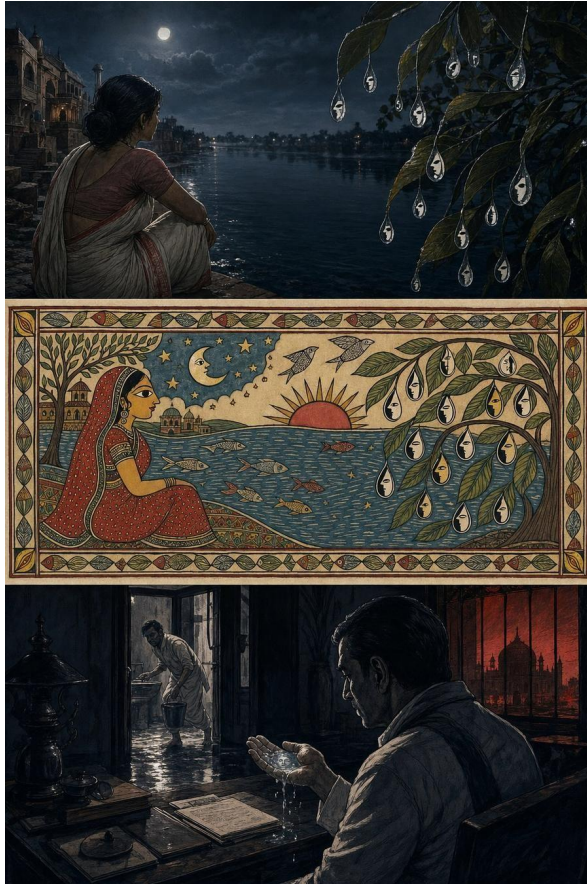
"What if I learn to read the names?" Batuknath asked. Old Baba Ghost replied, "Then your victory will bring you sorrow, but there will be a little peace in that sorrow. A victory without sorrow begins to rot."

All five tricksters trembled at these words. They wanted to feel safe, but safety comes only to those who admit something to themselves.

In the first light of dawn, a leaf shone in Channa Grove. Written upon it were the words: "The fourth breath is over. The next breath begins." And so the story moved forward once more.

Chapter 34

The Listening River



In the morning, the five tricksters—Batuknath, Chandrapal, Raghav, Lau Kin-hung and Broom—had strange experiences in their different cities. In Batuknath’s glass of water, the name “Sarayu Devi” shone. From Chandrapal’s safe came the sound of a child crying.

The children at Garh Narikel’s school had a new lesson: “Never speak only half a name.” Devika taught them, “When a fraudster tries to frighten you, they will not call you by your full name. They will call you a ‘customer’ or a ‘consumer’. First say your own full name, and then ask for theirs. Do not believe someone who cannot tell you their name.”

That night, the consciences of the five tricksters came back to the playing field in Channa Grove. This time a clay bowl stood in the middle. Ananya said, "For every name you speak, one drop of water will fall into the bowl. If you speak the name with true feeling, the water will stay. If you speak it only to save yourself, the water will rise as smoke and disappear."

"Sarayu ..." Batuknath began. A drop fell, but he stopped, for he knew nothing about Sarayu. The water started turning to smoke. "Not half a name!" Devika called from a distance. Slowly Batuknath said, "Sarayu Devi, who climbed onto the bridge foundations with a basket on her head, yet was marked absent in the records." The water did not turn into smoke.

Chandrapal said, "Ujjwal Jha," but his drop immediately became smoke, because he remembered only the amount of money, not Ujjwal's fear.

Raghav said, "Munna Paswan, whose bank account I opened and used to make him look like a criminal, though the crime was not his." His drop remained. The first crack appeared in Raghav's silence.

After much effort, Lau Kin-hung said, "Ujjwal," but his water turned into smoke. He still thought of Ujjwal as an incident, not as a human being.

Broom said English words such as "labour" and "worker". Both times the water vanished. At last he said, "Sarayu Devi," and the water stayed.

"The fifth breath is not complete," Old Baba Ghost said. "It has only begun. Speaking one name does not set anyone free. Now each person must go to the home that belongs to the name."

When morning came, the five men woke. Batuknath bought a ticket to Garh Narikel. And so the story moved on. Each trickster would now have to visit the home of the person whose name he had spoken, and experience the truth for himself.

Chapter 35

At the Doorway of a Name



“Speaking a name was the first breath,” Old Baba Ghost said. “Going to that person’s home is the second.” Ananya made five little houses in the earth: one for Sarayu Devi, one for Munna Paswan, one for Ujjwal, and others besides.

Batuknath Hariharan set out on the road to Garh Narikel. The destination printed on his train ticket changed by itself to “Sarayū Devi’s Doorstep”. On the way he met Old Baba Ghost again. “The name you abandoned is walking ahead of you,” the ghost told him.

Chandrapal Batra wanted to smash his phone. Yet every time, a picture of Ujjwal’s house appeared on its screen: a half-collapsed

thatched roof, and tooth marks on the pillow that Ujjwal used to bite to keep himself from crying. For the first time Chandrapal saw a house like this, and he felt uneasy.

Raghav Signal began learning the letters of the Devanagari script. When he tried to write “Ma”, the word “Munna” appeared on the paper—not “mule”. For the first time, Raghav began thinking of Munna as a real person.

Batuknath arrived at Sarayu Devi’s house. The house was broken, but its doorstep remained. An elderly woman came out and asked, “Whom are you looking for?” “I had read only part of her story,” Batuknath said softly. The woman picked up a handful of dust and placed it in his palm. “If you want to read the whole story, put this dust in your eyes.”

Batuknath touched the dust to his eyes. In a moment he glimpsed Sarayu Devi’s final day. He sank to the earth.

In Garh Narikel, the children made a new rule: “Speaking a name is not enough. You must learn three things about that person: their home, their fear and their dream. Only then is the name complete.”

That night the consciences of the five tricksters returned to Channa Grove. This time five doorsteps stood on the playing field. Batuknath stepped onto Sarayu Devi’s threshold, and it did not move. Chandrapal tried to step onto Ujjwal’s threshold, but it drew away, for he had only seen the house on a screen and had never visited it.

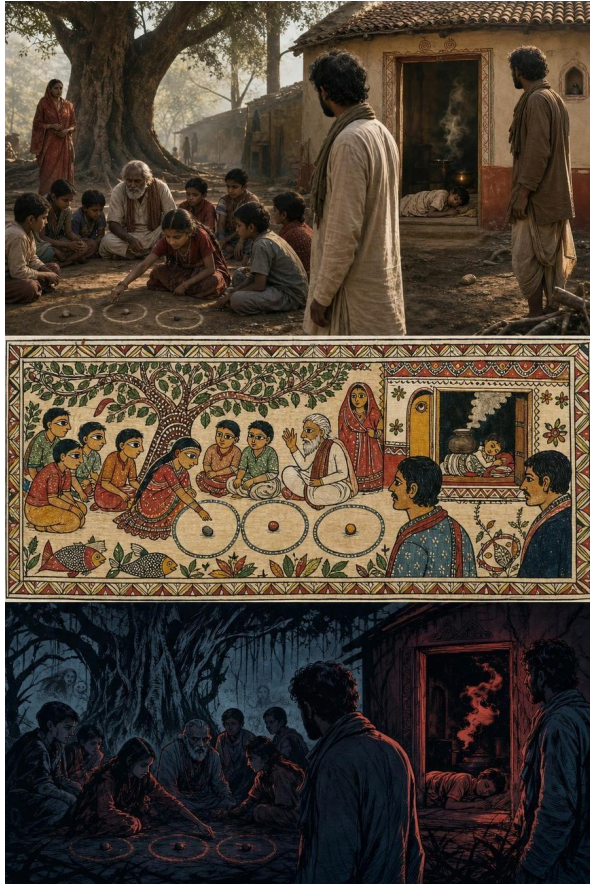
Raghav stepped onto Munna’s threshold and said, “Paswan hamlet, south of the river, near the old peepal tree.” The threshold became steady.

Lau Kin-hung saw hundreds of thousands of doorsteps, but could not set foot on a single one. He had been the owner of markets, not a guest at anyone’s door.

Devika gave them all the final rule. “Whoever speaks a name will be asked about that person’s home. Whoever tells us about the home will be asked about the fear. Whoever tells us the fear will be asked about the dream. Only then will justice be able to breathe.”

Chapter 36

Home, Fear and Dream



The game in Channa Grove went on. Ananya drew three circles in the earth: Home, Fear, Dream. “No courtroom is greater than these three things,” said Old Baba Ghost.

Batuknath looked inside Sarayu Devi’s doorway. He saw smoke, half-cooked rice, and a child who had fallen asleep waiting all night for his mother. He wanted to turn his eyes away, but in Channa Grove even looking away was counted as testimony.

Chandrapal Batra found Ujjwal’s unfinished letter: “Didi, I made a mistake, but I was not a criminal.” He wanted to erase it, but Devika’s voice came to him: “Do not erase the letter. This time, write an answer.”

Raghav reached Munna's home. Munna's father asked, "Why did you write that my son was the ringleader?" Munna's mother held up an old gamchha. "He took this cloth when he went to the bank," she said. "He told us he was going to get a job. Is that what your kind of job is?"

On his map, Lau Kin-hung saw that every dot was a home where someone waited. For the first time he understood that the numbers he had studied represented real families.

Edward Broom tried to write "Forgive me" in Maithili. Professor Elina said, "Mispronouncing a name is not the crime. Refusing to speak the name is."

"Now ask about their fears," Ananya told the children. Sarayu Devi had feared that her child would go hungry after she died. Ujjwal had feared that his mistake would bring shame upon his sister. Munna had feared being called a criminal without ever understanding why.

"We must respect people's fears," Devika said. "Never call a frightened person a coward. Never call a cheated person a fool."

At last came the dreams. Sarayu Devi had dreamed that her child would be able to study. Ujjwal had dreamed that Devika would never be frightened by a telephone. Munna had dreamed that his father would be able to walk through the doors of a bank without lowering his head.

As the children listened to each dream, they wrote one letter on each of their little stones: a letter for the home, one for the fear, and one for the dream. When all three came together, the name was complete.

"Go and learn the things you could not tell us," said Old Baba Ghost. It was not a verdict. It was homework: a journey towards understanding the truth.

Chapter 37

Three Pebbles



All day long the three pebbles in the children's pockets—Home, Fear and Dream—clinked together. Even the tricksters could not escape the rule they represented.

When Batuknath Hariharan rose in his room, he found three pebbles beneath his pillow. On one was written “Beginning”. He understood that behind every great wrongdoing lay some small beginning.

Chandrapal Batra remembered his old hostel days. Once he had taken two thousand rupees from a farmer and forgotten to submit the farmer's papers. The farmer had lost his land. Chandrapal understood that a great wrong can begin with a small lie.

Raghav Signal Somani's real name was Raghavesh. He had been very good at mathematics in school. But little by little, his love of numbers had become a love of accounts, and those accounts had become mule accounts. His greatest fear was that one day his son would ask, "What work did you do?" and he would have no answer.

Lau Kin-hung remembered the poor home of his childhood, where his mother had sewn clothes through the night. It was there that he had first thought, "I will take revenge on poverty." But later he had begun taking revenge not on poverty, but on poor people.

Edward Broom visited an old warehouse belonging to his company. On an old signboard, the name of an Indian river was written incorrectly. He tried to pronounce it properly, but his tongue faltered. "Your tongue stumbles because history has caught you by the throat," Professor Elina said.

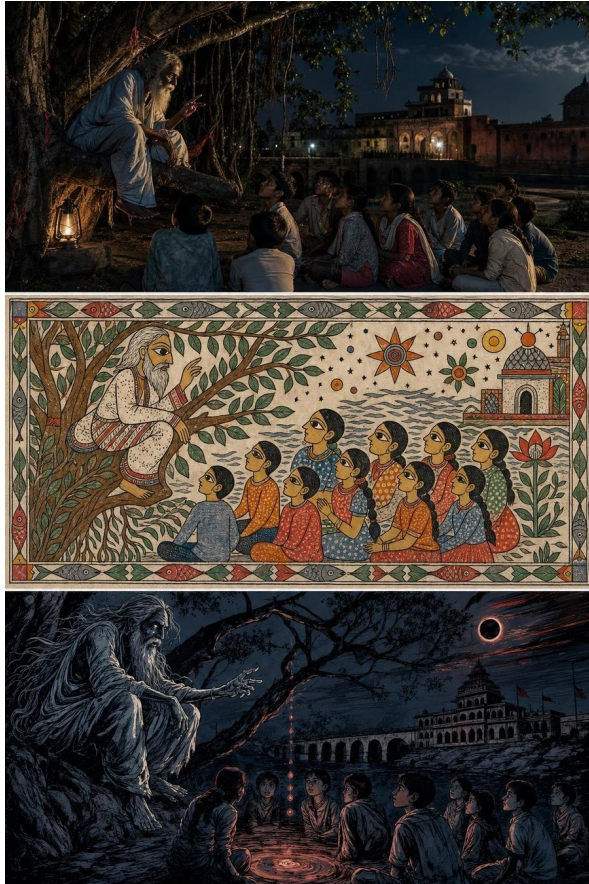
In Garh Narikel, the children learned a new lesson: "Learn about the home of anyone you defeat. Otherwise victory itself may become another crime."

Old Baba Ghost smiled. "These children are dangerous. They do not merely look at an enemy's face. They look for the roots beneath it."

This was neither forgiveness nor punishment. But it was a beginning. When someone understands the roots of a mistake, a path towards making amends can open. And so the air of truth slowly entered the hearts of all five tricksters.

Chapter 38

Speaking the Names



“Once you have written a name,” Old Baba Ghost said, “you must take time to learn how to say it.” A name is not complete merely because it is written down; it must be spoken correctly too.

Batuknath Hariharan saw the letters of the name “Bhola Nat” floating in his tea. For the first time he understood that inside a name might live a father’s voice, a childhood path, and a child’s weeping after a death.

Chandrapal Batra pronounced “Ujjwal” incorrectly. The screen went black, then corrected itself to show “Ujjwal”, as though a school were holding his finger and teaching him the alphabet.

Raghav Signal sounded out “Munna Paswan” slowly, joining the parts of the name. When he finally spoke it, a pain rose in his chest. But with the pain came a new understanding: speaking a name correctly can mark the beginning of a return.

The first gathering for the Reading of Names was held in Garh Narikel. The children made rules: “We shall not read a name wrongly. If we do not know a name, we shall ask. If a name has been hidden, we shall search for it.”

They decided that three things must be read with every name: the person’s home, their death (or fear), and the wrong done to them. They called the rule “The Law of Three Leaves”.

This rule reached the consciences of the tricksters. Batuknath wrote, “Bhola Nat: home unknown.” Then he corrected it: “Home still to be found.” It was a small change, but Old Baba Ghost said, “That is how responsibility for a name begins.”

At last Chandrapal Batra wrote, “Ujjwal’s defeat happened because of my trap.” For the first time, he admitted his part in what had happened.

Raghav wrote, “Munna’s name was stolen.” After those words, a window that had been shut for years opened in his room.

Hulasi, whose death in a well had been wrongly called suicide, spoke at the gathering for the first time. “Read my name too. I fell into the well, but they called it suicide and took away my right to be cremated.”

Old Baba Ghost’s eyes filled with tears. “Now the tricksters’ punishment begins. Every night they must read one name, together with the person’s home, death and humiliation. Those who deny other people’s names slowly lose the right to their own.”

Chapter 39

The Quiet of a Seed



After the Reading of Names, a strange peace settled over Garh Narikel. On the outside it was still, but within it was like a seed preparing to burst into life.

Devika Sah picked up Ujjwal's cracked phone and wrote the first lesson: "Fear kept secret becomes a business." She told the children, "While fear is locked inside someone, it belongs to the fraudster. Once it is spoken aloud, it belongs to the community."

Chandrapal Batra sat in his office. His third phone switched itself on, displaying the words, "The fear has been spoken aloud."

In Raghav Signal's room, SIM cards split open and became little seeds. A leaf grew from each, bearing an unfinished name and a question.

Lau Kin-hung looked at his map and saw that the dot marking Garh Narikel was beating like a heart rather than moving like a stock-market graph.

Soumya Ramanathan began translating the hard language of government papers into the plain speech of the village. "Financial irregularity," she explained, meant "Money belonging to someone else was used to buy a child's fear."

The children of Garh Narikel learned a new game: "Catch the Right Name." One child played the criminal, another the victim, and a third the witness. Whenever a name was spoken correctly, the victim could run again.

"For so many years my name was spoken wrongly," Hulasi said. "When you call me Hulasi, I remember my childhood." For the first time, the children understood that ghosts had once been children too.

Batuknath Hariharan stayed at an inn on the edge of Garh Narikel. All day he watched the Reading of Names, but could not bring himself to enter. He remembered a scene from his childhood. His father had said, "Do not write a poor person's name incorrectly. That name is their land."

A bank clerk was told Munna Paswan's story. He opened his register and marked three mule accounts with a red pencil. There was no great ceremony, only a small red mark.

That night a symbolic feast took place in Channa Grove. The dead, the living and the children offered together a handful of rice and a pinch of salt. Old Baba Ghost said, "The one who finds a place at the meal will find a place in history."

At dawn, every drop of dew resting on the leaves of Channa Grove held a single word: "Now." It was time's command: read the names now, speak the fears now, walk the path of truth now.

Chapter 40

Letters Written in Dew



The word “Now”, written in the morning dew, spread across Garh Narikel. When the children read the drops of dew, their palms grew wet. And from those damp palms came a new understanding: reading names was not enough. After reading a name, they must learn about the life behind it.

“From today,” Ananya told the children, “write down one object beside each name.” An old letter came from one house, a hospital slip from another, a bank passbook from another. Devika brought the shattered glass from Ujjwal’s phone. Meera brought a sheet of paper that said, “My love is not a crime.”

The children asked about every object. “Whose lunch tin is this?” “Bhola Nat’s,” came the answer. “And what did he eat?” An old woman said, “Rice with salt, and the smell of onions in that salt.” At these words, it seemed that half the dead man’s hunger was eased.

Batuknath Hariharan came to Garh Narikel with one of his father’s old slips of names in his pocket. He remembered how carefully his father had corrected the names of poor people before writing them down.

On Chandrapal Batra’s computer, the heading of a press statement changed by itself to “Read My Story Too”.

In Raghav Signal’s room, the seeds made from SIM cards began to sprout. On one sprout was written half of a name: Munna Paswan. For the first time Raghav began imagining Munna’s face.

A stranger arrived at the village market, asking, “Where is the Register of Names?” The children seated him at the school and asked him to write his full name. He could write only “Madhav”, not the rest. Old Baba Ghost said, “Someone who cannot write his own full name has come to erase the names of others.”

Kamli, the daughter of Sarayu Mahato, came to the gathering for the first time. She laid her mother’s broken anklet upon the earth. “When Father went to the bridge, he took Mother’s anklet to be repaired. The anklet stayed broken, and Father never came home.”

In the middle of a speech, Edward Broom saw the picture of a lunch tin on his screen. For the first time in his life, he felt the real taste of labour: salt.

“Once you have learned to read a person’s possessions, learn to read their path,” Old Baba Ghost said. And so the story moved beyond names to lives, and from lives to the roads they had travelled—roads that would reveal who had abandoned the dead, who had sold them, and who had remained silent.

Chapter 41

The Boat of Names



On the twelfth day, the children of Garh Narikel began making a “path” for every person who had died. With rice, turmeric, salt and water, they drew maps on the earth. Bhola Nat’s path ran from his home to the fields, from the fields to a city contractor’s camp, and from the camp to the bridge.

In an old file, Soumya struck out the word “unauthorised” and wrote instead, “Left home, reached work, name was struck off.”

Batuknath Hariharan sat at the inn listening. All his life he had said in court, “The chain of causation has not been established.” But here that chain was being made with rice and salt. He understood that what

he called a “link” in the language of law was called a “path” in the language of the people.

Devika drew Ujjwal’s path: home, school, the mobile-phone shop, his first victory, debt, fear and finally a dry leaf. The path was as deep as the Ganga, though no river flowed through it.

Nishant Jha asked Munna Paswan, “In which bowl is your fear?” Munna replied, “The fear was not mine. It was given to me.” The children wrote, “Fear, too, can become property passed from one person to another.”

An elderly woman whose son had died on the bridge came to Channa Grove. “I cannot remember the path,” she said. “I only waited.” The children wrote in rice the little they knew: “A Monday in Bhadra.” Old Baba Ghost said, “You will not always find a complete path. Fill whatever part you discover with the truth.”

In his room, Satyavrat Mehta wrote, “An unfinished path is still a path.”

That night in Channa Grove, the children wrote a question at the end of every path: “At which turning could this person have been saved?” On Bhola Nat’s path, the answer was a safety belt. On Ujjwal’s, it was a united response to the first threat.

Chandrapal Batra, Raghav and Lau Kin-hung each saw their own turning: the moment when they could have stopped what was happening, but had not.

Old Baba Ghost said, “If nobody stopped it at that turning, who will carry its weight? If the wrongdoer carries it, that is repentance. If society carries it, that is rebuilding. If nobody carries it, the crocodile will come to take it again.”

At dawn, two words shone in the dewdrops: “Carry the weight.” The story stood ready for its next breath—the breath of carrying that weight.

Chapter 42

The Circle of Burdens



Old Baba Ghost said, “Punishment is handed down from above. A burden rises from within and settles upon your shoulders.”

Ananya drew two circles on the earth: “Those against whom a wrong was committed” and “Those who committed the wrong.” A child asked about a third circle. Ananya drew a thin line and said, “Those who saw everything and remained silent.”

First they lifted Bhola Nat’s lunch tin. When Munna Paswan picked it up, his hands trembled. Devika held his hand and said, “This was not your crime, but it is a burden your society must carry. Carry it, so that the next Bhola does not die hungry.”

Batuknath Hariharan tried to lift his file of victories, but it felt unusually heavy. He realised that the file was filled not with paper, but with time—and time is the heaviest thing of all.

On Chandrapal Batra's screen, every mule account turned into a brick. He tried to remove the bricks, but they fell from the screen onto his table and became real weights.

Under his pillow, Raghav Signal found stone leaves, each bearing an unfinished sentence: "The call was not disconnected"; "Grandmother's savings were lost."

Salt water began to flow from Lau Kin-hung's pen instead of ink.

In Garh Narikel, the children began a new lesson. They did not call anyone guilty or innocent. They simply asked, "How much of this burden is yours?"

Gop Kumar wrote down his share: "For how many years did I regard files as my work, rather than people's lives?" Devika wrote, "When Ujjwal first showed his fear, I thought he was only being stubborn."

Satyavrat Mehta wrote, "We need a new idea of justice for sharing the burden that has been left upon society among society, the state and the wrongdoers."

On the evening of the third day, the children planted a leaf beside each object that carried a burden. Each leaf asked, "Who will carry this burden?" The answers were not names but actions: "Feed," "Protect," "Listen," "Stand beside."

Old Baba Ghost said, "A memorial is not something merely to be looked at. A memorial must do something." The lunch tin became a list of people who needed food; the helmet became a promise of safety; the passbook became a lesson in community vigilance. Every object was put to work.

That night in Channa Grove, Hulasi said, "If people will not come to lift the burden, the burden will go looking for them." The story stood ready for its next breath—the breath at the door.

Chapter 43

The Burden That Travels



After the thirteenth breath, the burden had been shared out, but it had not disappeared. Now it began to travel, from village to village and from house to house.

Batuknath Hariharan noticed mist on the glass covering his degree in the sitting room. When he wiped it, the names “Bhola Nat, Sarayu, Munna, Ujjwal” appeared. Just then his elderly mother, who had not spoken anyone’s name clearly for years, called from the inner room, “Batuk, how many names have you swallowed?”

Hariharan stood rooted to the spot. Only those who had known him in childhood called him “Batuk.” For the first time he understood that the door to the inner world could open through his mother’s voice, too.

At breakfast, Chandrapal Batra’s son told him about a dream. “Last night a boy asked me my name and said, ‘Your father’s earnings carry the smell of the rope on which I died.’” Chandrapal was speechless. In which court could anyone put a dream on trial?

At Raghav Signal’s home, his wife looked down at her plate of rice. The grains were arranging themselves into letters: “Account closed.” Raghav threw the plate away.

In Hong Kong, Lau Kin-hung told his secretary to search for “Garh Narikel.” His hand, accustomed to signing contracts worth crores, trembled as he wrote those words.

The children in Garh Narikel continued their work. Devika ran classes on digital fraud; Nishant taught children to understand money and accounts; and Meera gave women courage, saying, “My love cannot be used as evidence against me.”

Soumya was translating the documents into many Indian languages. “When the truth exists only in the language of experts,” she said, “it remains half imprisoned.”

The ghosts in Channa Grove had begun appearing even in the afternoon. Old Baba Ghost said, “Human children are cleverer than we are. They create memories while they are still alive.”

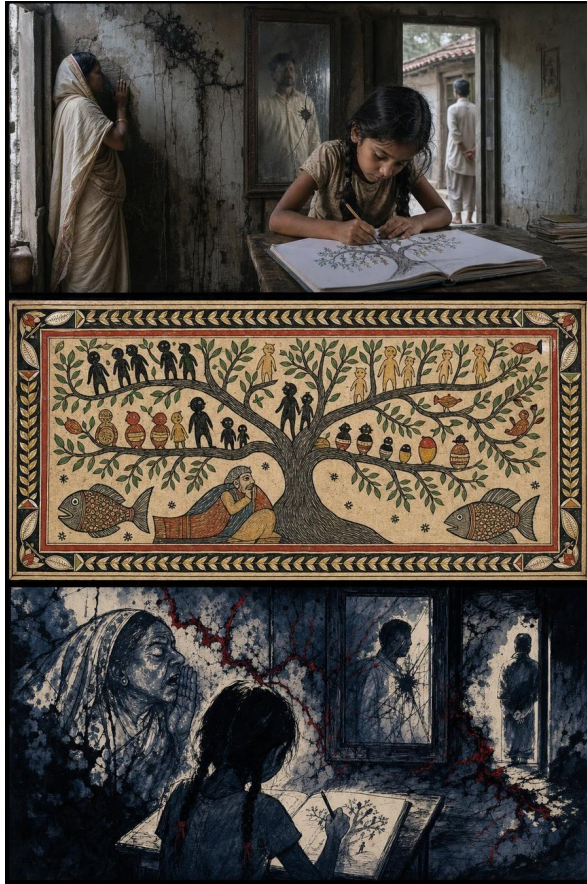
Ba said to Ananya, “Fear has reached their homes now.” Ananya asked, “Does that mean we have won?” Ba smiled. “No. Be careful of the word ‘victory.’ It is often a favourite word of scoundrels. We are at work.”

Ananya wrote “WORK” upon a leaf, and below it, in smaller letters, “BREATH.”

In the morning, a breeze passed through Channa Grove and a voice called, “Forward.” The story was not ending here. It was entering one home after another.

Chapter 44

The Granddaughter's Notebook



After the fourteenth breath, fear reached even the children's notebooks in the homes of the scoundrels. One day, Batuknath Hariharan's seven-year-old granddaughter drew a tree. Black-and-white figures sat in its branches, while an old man stood outside, below it.

The granddaughter ran up and said, "Look, Channa Grove!" Then she asked, "Why is Grandfather standing outside? Why doesn't he join the game?"

Her question left Hariharan speechless. She asked again, "Why does the person who wins have to stand outside the game?" Hariharan's

throat went dry. The entire language of law seemed too small to answer the question of a seven-year-old child.

One day, several young men came outside Chandrapal Batra's house and told his son, "We lost at the game in which we won on the first day. Now we are going to explain it to other children." Chandrapal's son let them go and said to his father, "Their lives were robbed. I keep thinking how many mobile phones are lying switched off inside our home."

Raghav Signal's teenage daughter asked, "Papa, why do you speak so secretly on the telephone? Is a secret always something wrong?" Raghav faltered as he tried to answer.

At school, Lau Kin-hung's son asked, "What if one day people demand an accounting by name, rather than by country?" For the first time, Lau could not meet his son's eyes.

In Garh Narikel, Old Baba Ghost told the children, "When a child asks questions in a scoundrel's house, you know that the names have reached its door."

Devika Sah taught the children in her school, "If someone promises quick money, ask how. If someone says to keep it secret, ask why." Nishant added, "A question is the first thing that cuts down a swindler's interest."

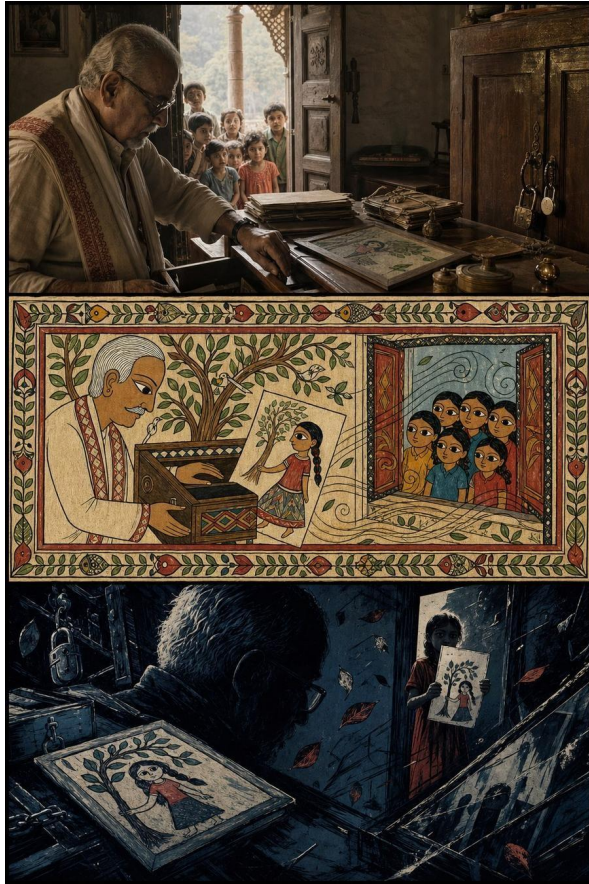
Gop Kumar opened a new file and wrote, "Scoundrels enter the inner world from the outer world not through punishment, but through questions. Their children are the first messengers."

That night, Ananya wrote one word upon the earth in Channa Grove: "WHOSE?" The whole earth shook beneath that single word. Whose money? Whose death? Whose order? Whose silence?

Ba said, "The story has now reached their homes. Even if they wish to, they can no longer remain outside it."

Chapter 45

The Air Inside



On the fifteenth breath, the children asked, “Whose?” On the sixteenth, stale air began to escape from inside the scoundrels’ homes—the papers recording victories that had been locked away for years, the smell of bribes and the locks of fear.

Batuknath Hariharan’s granddaughter brought another picture. It showed three new figures in Channa Grove: an old man eating papers, a person chewing mobile phones and a businessman without a mouth. “Grandfather, who are they?” she asked. Hariharan could not answer. His granddaughter said, “It is because you never tell us stories. When nobody tells a story at home, pictures begin to draw themselves.”

Chandrapal Batra's son laid the keys to his father's car upon the table. "I do not want this car. Why should my name take the place of the people whose mobile phones went silent and the young people who hanged themselves?"

Raghav Signal's daughter came carrying a notebook marked "Record of Silence." She said, "I shall write down every question you refuse to answer in this notebook."

Lau Kin-hung's son wrote a school essay called "The Inheritance of Profit and the Debt of Names." In it he wrote, "If I come from a family whose inheritance is profit, I do not want to inherit it." There was no applause in the hall, only a deep silence.

Edward Broom's granddaughter, who was studying history, asked, "When you give speeches about dignity, where do you keep the names of the people who died in your old project?"

In Garh Narikel, Ba told Ananya, "A group of children is a group of questioners. It is not born to oppose anyone; it is born to oppose lies."

Devika Sah added a new lesson, "Questions at Home." She taught, "Fraud often begins not outside the home, but in the silence within it. If an unusual amount of money, fear or secrecy suddenly enters your home, begin by asking questions with love."

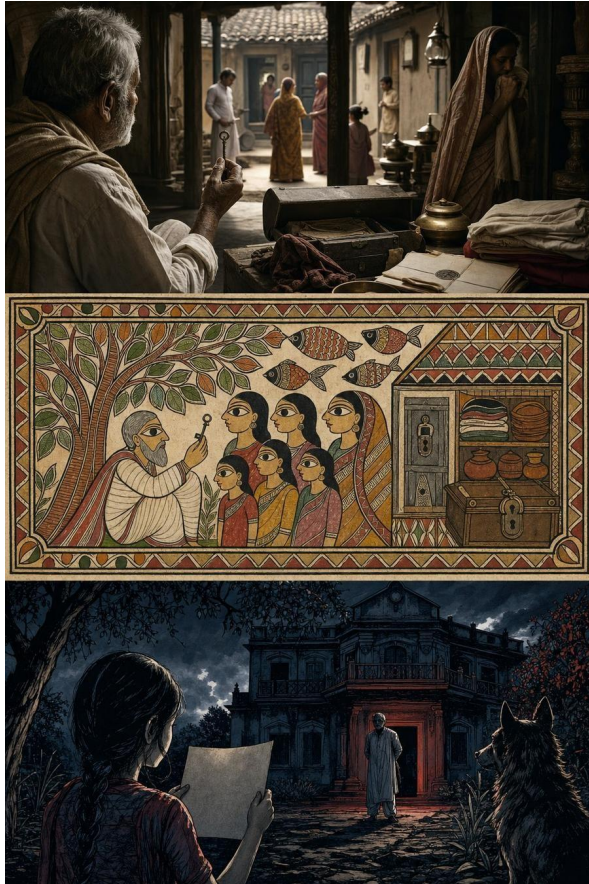
Meera said, "Fear can be inherited, and so can silence. Now there will be a new inheritance—one of consent, questions and the right to decide what happens to our own bodies."

That night in Channa Grove, Ananya wrote on the earth, "What shall we accept? What shall we leave behind?" The children answered together, "We shall accept the names that were erased. We shall leave behind the profits made by erasing those names."

At those words, the leaves of Channa Grove changed colour. Ba said, "This story is no longer only about those who died. It is also about children who refuse to drink the milk of a victory stained by wrongdoing."

Chapter 46

The Darkness of Inheritance



On the seventeenth breath, wealth began searching for its heirs, while the heirs began to look not at the face of wealth but at the darkness behind it.

Batuknath Hariharan's granddaughter returned and asked, "Grandfather, what will you leave in my name?" Hariharan answered, "Everything—the house, land, accounts and our name." The girl drew three circles on a sheet of paper—house, account, name—and little feet beside the house. When he asked why, she said, "If the house was built upon somebody's dead feet, perhaps it walks about at night."

That night Hariharan opened his will. Where it should have said “movable property,” he seemed to read “moving dead people.” He rubbed his eyes and the letters became ordinary again. But he understood that something profound was coming towards him.

Chandrapal Batra’s son asked, “Write down the source of every profit held in my name. If you cannot, remove it from my name.” Chandrapal replied, “Son, the world does not work that way.” His son answered, “Then I do not want that world.”

Raghav Signal’s wife set aside one grain of rice at every meal. When asked why, she said, “For the person whose family was deprived of rice by your money.”

Lau Kin-hung’s granddaughter drew a tree upon a pane of glass. Mobile phones hung from its branches like fruit. From each came a voice asking, “Under what law was my death recorded?”

The children in Garh Narikel invented a new game. Whenever anyone brought an object, the others asked, “Whose labour made this? Whose loss paid for it?” If nobody could answer, the object was left out of the game.

Ananya said, “An inheritance is not an object. It is the story that enters a house along with that object.”

Old Baba Ghost came into the playground and said, “It is better to go without wealth that was made by erasing names. Sometimes going without is a form of freedom.”

That evening, Ananya wrote, “Seventeenth breath: the heirs refuse.” Then she crossed out “refuse” and wrote “choose.” She explained, “They are not merely saying no. They are choosing which story they will carry with them.”

That night in Channa Grove, a blank sheet of paper sank into the earth. A coconut shoot sprang up from that very spot—an impossible thing, but in Garh Narikel even the impossible could learn the rules and grow.

Ba said, “The line of wealth has not simply been broken. A new line has begun—the line of those who free themselves from it.”

Chapter 47

The Tale of the Elephant and the Crocodile



On the eighteenth breath, Ba told the village children an old story. “An elephant went to a pond to drink water. A crocodile was waiting in the pond and caught the elephant by the foot. The elephant pulled towards the land, while the crocodile pulled towards the water.”

Batuknath Hariharan’s granddaughter asked, “Did the elephant survive?” Ba answered, “It did in the story. But we must understand who the elephant was, who the crocodile was and what the water was.”

The children of Garh Narikel turned the story into a game. One child became the elephant and another the crocodile. To escape the

crocodile's grip, the elephant had to do more than use strength; it had to speak the right names and move forward.

Ananya played the elephant and Batuknath's granddaughter played the crocodile. As Ananya called out "Sarayu," "Ujjwal" and "Nand Aruni," the grip loosened. Batuknath's granddaughter released her foot. "I do not want to be a crocodile," she said.

Next the granddaughter played the elephant and Chandrapal Batra's son played the crocodile. When she cried, "Procedure!" and "Law!" the grip tightened. Ananya whispered, "Names!" Remembering something her grandfather had said, the girl spoke the truth, and the grip loosened.

Chandrapal's son, Aryan, became the elephant, while Mei-Lata—the girl from Lau Kin-hung's family who had fled the weight of her family's past and come to Garh Narikel—played the crocodile. Aryan cried "Percentage!" and "Commission!" The grip tightened further. Devika said, "First say your own name." "Aryan," he answered. Devika said, "Now say the name of someone who died in your father's game." Gathering all his courage, Aryan said, "Ujjwal Jha." The grip loosened.

Old Baba Ghost said, "Freedom comes on the day when even the crocodile understands the history of its own grip."

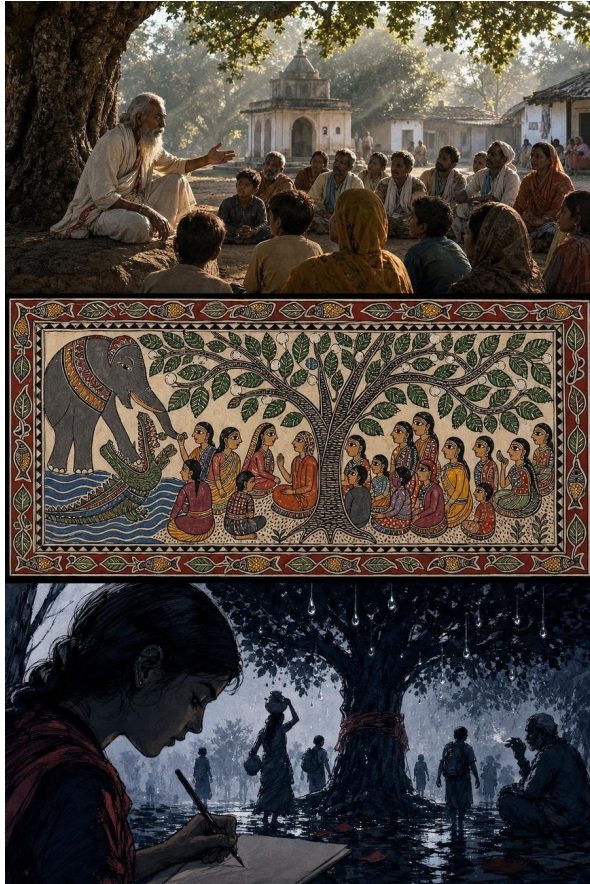
Panidubbi said, "Even a crocodile can be a prisoner of hunger. But turning hunger into a sacred duty is a crime."

Far away in the city, Satyavrat Mehta wrote a letter of confession in his room: "Where the state remained silent on paper, my signature on that paper shares the burden of wrongdoing." He did not sign it at once, but put the letter into his pocket.

Ba said, "Satyavrat Mehta will not arrive with a sword at last. He will arrive with his ears—to listen."

Chapter 48

The Call



On the nineteenth breath, Old Baba Ghost said, “No kabaddi today. Today we shall call out.” Ananya placed an empty bowl in the middle of Channa Grove. “An empty bowl is a home for voices,” she said.

The first call came from Sarayu: “Someone wrote my name incorrectly, but a wrong name does not make a death any smaller.” For the first time, the children began to write down her name, their hands trembling.

The second call came from Ujjwal Jha: “I am not money lost. I am the morning light of a home.” Devika said, “These games swallowed my brother, but I shall write his name in a school, not in a game.”

Munna Paswan came forward, trembling, and told his story. “I opened an account for the commission. I thought I would get two thousand rupees. When crores were lost, it was my name that appeared, not the name of the person whose money had gone. That was how I came to look like the criminal.” Ba rested a hand upon his head and said, “When someone trapped in darkness begins explaining that darkness to others, the burden can become a lesson.” From that day Munna became the school’s first volunteer.

In Delhi, Satyavrat Mehta sat in his library. In a dream a little girl asked him, “Where are your ears?” He touched them. The girl said, “Those are for hearing sounds. The ears for hearing names are inside you.”

In the morning Satyavrat rose, put some clothes and a notebook into a small bag, and set off on foot towards Garh Narikel.

He arrived at Channa Grove that evening. There was no applause and no stage. He touched both his ears and said, “I have come very late. I shall listen.”

For the first time, the empty bowl began filling itself with water, rising from below. Ba said, “Do you see? Satyavrat is not a god. He has simply admitted that the bowl is empty. That is why the water has risen.”

The first voice said, “Sarayu.” Satyavrat wrote it down, then asked, “Her full name?” The leaves answered, “Her name will be complete only when you write down the name of her home, her labour and the child who waited for her.”

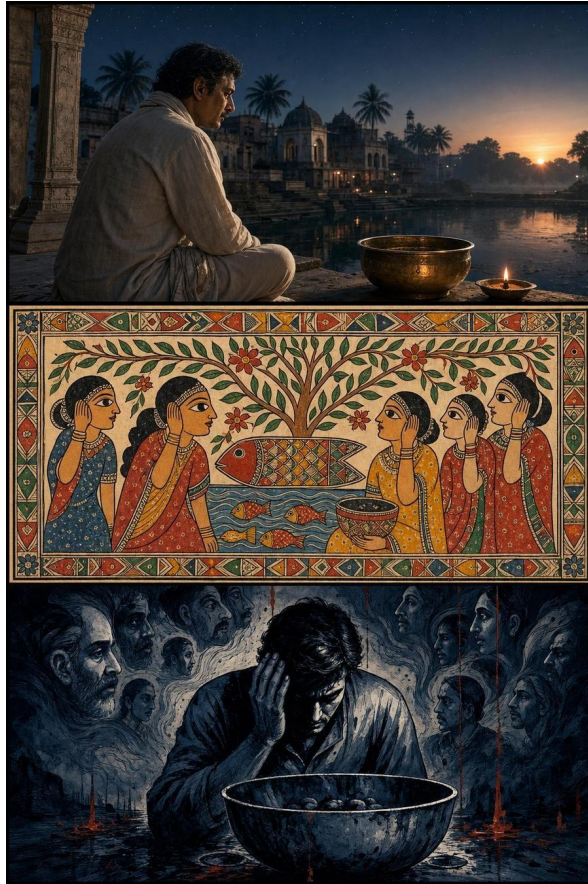
The night grew deeper. When Satyavrat’s hand grew tired, Ananya took the pen, then Devika, then Munna. They all took turns writing.

At last Ba asked, “Now you have listened. What is your own call?” Satyavrat replied, “Write into this record the name of every silence of mine that helped a lie.” The children wrote, “Silence—Satyavrat Mehta.” Tears fell from his eyes.

Old Baba Ghost said, “The person who calls out does not need a god. That person needs ears capable of hearing even the wrongdoing hidden in their own silence.”

Chapter 49

The Record of Silence



On the twentieth breath, Old Baba Ghost said, “The names have been written, but we still have to write the names of silence.” Satyavrat Mehta asked, “Can silence have a name?” Ba answered, “It can. The heaviest name of all.”

Ba explained, “We have written down the names of those who died. We may or may not find the names of those who killed them. But history will remain unfinished unless we also write down the names of those who saw and remained silent.”

The first silence was written beside Sarayu's name: "The silence of the official who did not consider it necessary to ask the woman labourer her name."

Devika Sah wrote her own name: "A sister's silence," because she had dismissed the red glow of Ujjwal's screen as merely part of a game.

Munna Paswan remembered that the bank clerk had suspected something, but remained silent. Ananya wrote, "The silence that followed suspicion."

Tiny words appeared on Batuknath Hariharan's papers: "Why were you silent when you knew?" His granddaughter asked, "Grandfather, will you put your name in the record of silence?" Hariharan could not answer.

The village bank clerk, the hospital compounder and a lawyer's assistant admitted their silences, too: "Leaving the additional-comments space blank"; "Saving face by saying the order came from above"; "The silence at the door."

Fourteen lanterns burned in Channa Grove that night. Ba said, "Do you see? Even something made from the scraping of the body can hold light."

Then the empty bowl spoke by itself: "Silence has been recorded. Now we shall read the names that have been written." Old Baba Ghost said, "Those who stayed silent shall now read."

Ba said to Hariharan, "Read." Trembling, he read, "Sarayu, whose name remained incomplete in the documents; the silence of the official who did not ask her name." Chandrapal Batra's son stepped forward and read Ujjwal's name.

Old Baba Ghost spoke the last line: "If someone listens and then acts, that person's silence will slowly fall away like a leaf. If someone listens and becomes silent again, that silence will turn into a crocodile and seize their foot."

Satyavrat Mehta understood that his task was not to be a rescuer, but a guardian of this record. Whenever those in power declared, "The case is closed," he would answer, "The names are not yet complete."

Chapter 50

The Name After the Body



That night a pond suddenly appeared in the middle of Channa Grove. Instead of water, letters floated in it: Sarayu Devi, Budhan Miyan, Jagesar Paswan, Ujjwal Jha, and countless other names that had never been written in any official document.

Ananya asked Satyavrat Mehta, “Shall we write your name here, too?” Satyavrat was startled. “My name? But I am not dead.” Ananya laughed. “We do not write only the names of the dead here. We also write the names of people who remained silent again and again.”

Satyavrat dipped his hand in the water and said softly, “Satyavrat Mehta. Silence.” His name sank into the water.

Just then a huge shadow approached from the western side of Channa Grove. At one moment it resembled an elephant, and at another a human being. The water parted before it and a crocodile rose from the depths. But this was no ordinary river crocodile. It was the inner crocodile of greed, fear and rank.

The ghosts of Channa Grove began to call out names: “Sarayu Devi! Budhan Miyan! Ujjwal Jha!” Each name fell upon the elephant’s body and broke another chain. At last the elephant was free.

Satyavrat understood that “a water burial among the crocodiles” did not mean only the moment when crocodiles chewed a body. It also meant the moment when the body’s last pride was broken.

Batuknath Hariharan’s shadow appeared in the grove and shouted, “None of this is valid! Where is your jurisdiction?” Old Baba Ghost answered, “Wherever names are erased, the jurisdiction of Channa Grove begins.”

Satyavrat went to Ananya and asked, “Where did you write my name?” Ananya pointed to a leaf: “Satyavrat Mehta—who listened late, but listened.” Satyavrat’s eyes filled with tears. For the first time in his life, he had received an honour that named an ordinary action instead of a position: “Listened.”

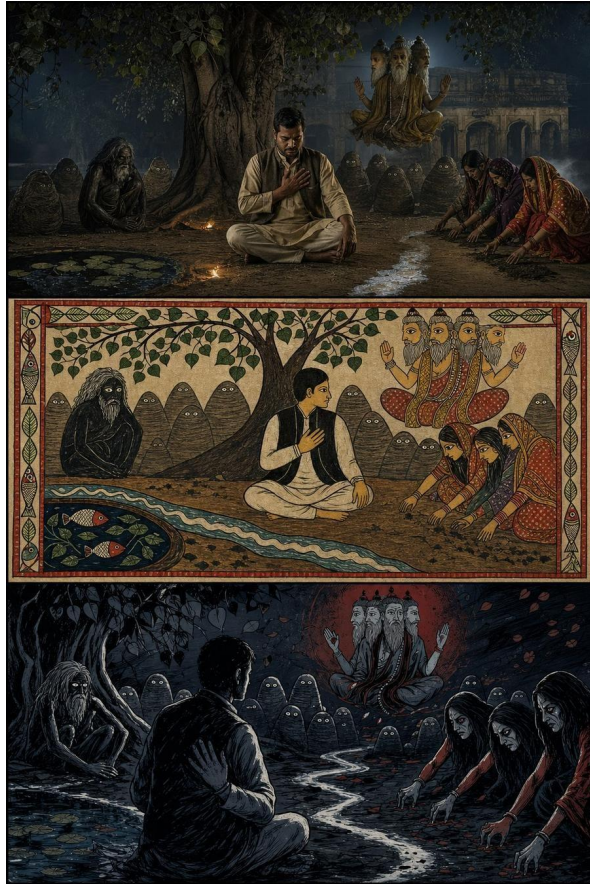
After that night, many people in Garh Narikel had peaceful dreams. Families of labourers dreamed that their loved ones who had died were rising calmly from the water. But in the dreams of the scoundrels, the weight of their own lies kept troubling them.

In the morning Satyavrat Mehta went outside. His driver asked, “Sir, shall we return to Delhi?” Satyavrat answered, “Delhi can wait. First the bridge over the Ganga, where the bodies fell. We still have to put the names there.”

At dawn, the coconut leaves of Garh Narikel moved without a breeze, as if they were saying: the body is gone, and fear is gone, but the name is now searching for roots. And when a name begins to search for roots, the story changes once again.

Chapter 51

The Burden of Witnessing



Satyavrat Mehta sat in the middle of Channa Grove. There was no kabaddi that night, because the silence that followed the testimony was looking for a body of its own in which to become a decision.

Just then crocodiles began coming out of the water. Satyavrat trembled. But Old Baba Ghost said, “Do not be afraid. Not every tooth is a weapon for killing. Some teeth are also made for cutting bonds.”

The oldest crocodile came forward and spoke, with Panidubbi translating: “We eat bodies. That is our nature, and also our burden of blame. But when a body remains bound in the water, it is our work to set it free.”

Old Baba Ghost explained, “A water burial among the crocodiles is frightening, but it is not fear alone. It is both the defeat of the body and the freedom of the name. When a body has been chewed, that does not mean it has simply ended; its bonds have been broken. But such freedom does not pardon a crime.”

Satyavrat spread the papers bearing his official title upon the earth. A breeze rose and the words began to change: “Disposed of” became “A mark left behind”; “Time elapsed” became “Time passed, but the name did not.” Satyavrat understood that the language of the law had often killed the dead a second time.

“I have come late,” he said. Brahma of the peepal tree replied, “Delay is a wrong, too. But admitting the delay can open a door.”

Ananya asked, “What does a witness do?” Satyavrat answered, “A witness does not sell what the eyes have seen.” He placed his nameplate upon the earth. “Make your name smaller first. Take away the title.”

Satyavrat sat down to write his first witness statement: “I, Satyavrat Mehta, moved by my present remorse, admit that while names were being called out, I went on listening only to procedures for a very long time.”

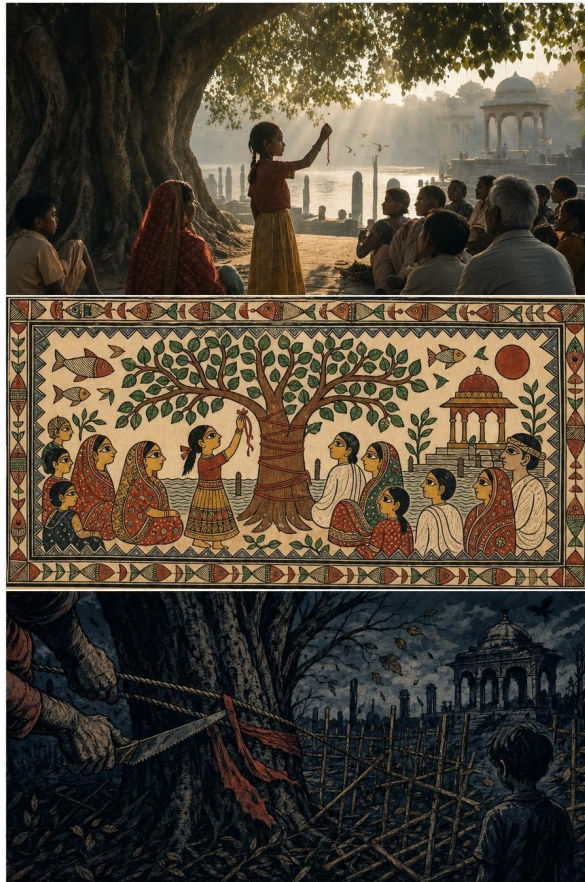
There was no applause for this truthful admission, only peace. The crocodiles went back towards the water. Their work of guarding bodies was finished; the work of guarding names was now in human hands.

On the plain back of his nameplate, Satyavrat wrote a line: “A person who has been heard is no longer alone.”

By morning, a tiny coconut shoot had appeared where the nameplate had been placed. In Garh Narikel, a title buried in the earth sometimes became a tree of names.

Chapter 52

The Next Voice



After the hearing in Channa Grove, the story did not end. There was one long, bright breath. But the world never stands still. Government papers described Channa Grove as an “encroachment,” and an order arrived to cut it down.

At first, people watched silently. When the first branch fell, many colourful things became visible in the darkness within: old clay lamps, little stones marked with names, children’s glass marbles. What had been hidden was not destroyed; it had come out into the light.

This time Satyavrat Mehta arrived in an ordinary white kurta, without a title or a car. A little girl asked, “If the grove is being cut

down, will the story be cut down, too?" Satyavrat answered gently, "A grove can be cut down, but its roots go on listening. A story lives wherever listeners survive."

Slowly the canopy broke apart and the sky appeared. But fewer people did not come; more arrived. Tea sellers set up their carts, women began placing lamps, and teachers brought their pupils. "This place is not simply a grove," they said. "It is a living page of the people's memory."

Some of the labourers quietly poured water over the roots at night. "Our hands are doing the cutting," they said, "but something here goes on watching even after it is cut."

When the last branch was cut, the roots gave off not the smell of decay, but the scent of wet earth and something as tender as a newborn baby. All at once, the stones marked with names grew warm in the children's hands, as though the grove were telling them, "I am here, but in another form."

A girl asked, "Shall we grow another grove here?" A second child replied, "A new grove, but the old names." Satyavrat handed the children an old register bearing the words, "The first witness to the existence of someone whose name has been heard." The girl wrote in it, "From today, we shall keep watch."

Lamps burned and names were read aloud throughout the night. In the morning, a tiny green point was seen sprouting from the cut stump. The children cried, "The grove is listening!"

In this way, a water burial was no longer the last word of fear. It became a doorway to freedom. And where people thought they had reached the end, the story began once more.

Chapter 53

The Morning After the Cutting



In the morning, the first rays of the sun fell upon the half-cut Channa Grove. Old Baba Ghost said, “Look. When a grove is cut down, it reveals its age. When a human being is cut down, we must reveal that person’s name.”

The children made a decision: “From today we shall keep watch during the day as well.” Kabaddi did not stop; only its hours changed. The ghosts played at night, while the children guarded the names by day.

Devika Sah arrived early and ran her hand over the stone bearing Ujjwal's name. For the first time, she wrote his complete name without crying: "Ujjwal Kumar Jha."

Meera came wearing a blue kurti. The children had set aside a stone for her, marked "Privacy." Meera said, "Guarding names is important, but so is the right to remain silent. If someone wishes to say nothing, you must guard that silence, too."

Ira arrived from abroad by bus. A little girl asked, "Have you come from another country? Do names get cut away there?" Ira answered, "There, names are changed into glittering letters. They have a different way of cutting them away."

At midday, everyone worked together on small tasks. They placed a pot of drinking water, made a cloth canopy for shade and left empty spaces for incomplete names. "Perhaps a family will come and finish writing a name," they said.

By evening, more and more people were coming to the grove. Those who had said, "The story is over because the trees are cut," were now saying, "The story has climbed down from the leaves onto the tongues of the people."

But that evening, two strangers were seen wandering along the outer village road. Speaking softly into a mobile phone, they said, "The site is open. The crowds come regularly. A project is possible." Panidubbi grew worried. Wherever memory awakens in the hands of the people, the marketplace can smell an opportunity and follow it there.

At dusk, the first star seemed to rest upon the green point on the cut stump. Just then the village watchman came running with a yellow paper bearing the municipal seal: a notice. The children stopped their game.

The first real test of guarding the names was about to begin—not in the morning, but now.

Chapter 54

Around the Stump



The children sat in a circle around the half-cut stump. Many old things could be seen inside its roots: names partly written on sharp stones, glass marbles and ashes. Ananya stopped the children. “Do not pick up anything you find inside the stump. Listen to it first.”

Ba arrived leaning on her stick, touched the roots and said, “So what if the grove was cut? Many heads have been cut off in our village, but the family line has not ended. As long as roots survive, shade can be born again.”

An old labourer’s son read out the first name, trembling as though he were a child again. As the name was spoken, a gust of wind passed

through. The children wrote, "The name was heard, and the stump answered."

Ujjwal's mother read his name. Devika told her, "Read slowly. A name is in no hurry." When she had read it, a bird chirped three times. Ananya wrote, "The earth can hear even a name lost inside a screen."

Meera made a rule. "Every name that is read shall be written upon a stone and placed around the stump. But no one's suffering shall be made into a spectacle."

One stone bore the words, "The one whose name was not found." It was placed first of all. Ba began to cry at the sight.

That evening a postman rode up on his bicycle and handed Aruni a thick yellow envelope bearing the municipal seal. Aruni was about to open it when Ananya stopped him. "We are reading names. The yellow paper can wait."

As she closed the register, Ananya said, "Tomorrow we shall read the yellow paper. But first we shall ask the name of the words written on it." The children understood: government language could not remain nameless when it laid claim to memory. They would question its name, its greed and its purpose, too.

So the first day ended. But inside the circle the yellow envelope seemed to toss and turn all night, waiting for the next hearing.

Chapter 55

The Municipality's Yellow Notice



In the morning, Ananya picked up the yellow envelope. “You may read,” she said, “but first we shall hear what this paper is called.” Satyavrat Mehta understood that the girl had learned the first lesson of law very well: a document that governs people can itself be questioned by name.

Aruni read, “All stones, markers and lamps erected unlawfully on the said site must be removed.” Ba said, “When a name becomes a stone, they call it unlawful. Is the one who erased the name lawful, then?”

Gop Kumar read the third page, which demanded names, proof and ownership details. He whispered, “Proof from those whose bodies went

into the water? Ownership from those whose names were lost in a fraud?”

Just then a newcomer arrived in white trousers carrying a shining file. “Batuknath Babu has sent me,” he said. “We shall turn this place into the ‘Channa Grove People’s Memorial Centre.’ There will be a gate, a ticket office and donation boxes.”

Ananya asked, “Where is the stone marked ‘The one whose name was not found’ in this drawing?” The messenger was startled. Another child asked, “Where will the ghosts play kabaddi?” A little girl said, “Then this is not a centre. It is a cage.”

Satyavrat Mehta stood up and told the messenger, “Before turning memory into a trust, you must ask memory’s permission—in the presence of the people.” The word “Present!” rose from the crowd: first one voice, then ten, then twenty.

The villagers wrote their reply on the blank edges of the yellow notice: “Not an empty plot—this is a place of names.” “Not a crowd—a family.” Those who could not write left their thumbprints.

As the messenger departed, he threatened, “Remove everything within seven days, or force will be used.” Old Baba Ghost said, “Those who talk of using force often have less strength than fear inside them.”

That night the villagers made a map of their own. The government map showed only an empty square. The people’s map showed a centre of memory, names and stories. Ananya drew a red circle around the cut stump. “Memory will spread from here.”

Facing a threat of seven days, Garh Narikel sat down to make its first map of memory.

Chapter 56

The First Map of Memory



In the morning Ananya said, “First we shall show the people who call our place empty just how full it is.” The villagers began making their own map of memory.

Aruni drew the Kamala-Balan River through the middle of the map, not as a straight line but with many bends. When asked why, he said, “This is not the river of a file. It is the river of bodies. How can the line be straight when names have drowned inside it?”

Ba drew an old footpath. “My mother used to walk this way to the pond.” The children labelled it “Mother’s Path.”

Soumya asked the women which households had lost men working on the bridge. Widows, sisters and daughters came forward to tell their stories. A workers' settlement appeared upon the map, with a handprint for each home.

At midday two municipal workers arrived with a measuring tape and said, "We must mark out the land." Ananya showed them the map and asked, "Where will you drive your pegs—through a name or through a footpath?" The workers fell silent.

On one edge of the map, Meera drew a circle without a single name. She called it "The Right to Leave a Story Untold," for women who did not want to make their stories public.

Ira said, "There is no sky here." A child drew the sky all around the map and filled it with little planets. Ananya said, "If someone tries to steal names and leave the earth, the sky will stand guard, too."

The map was hung up that evening. Just then a man stepped out of a gleaming car and said politely, "Batuknath Hariharan says that to protect this people's memory properly, we must establish an official 'People's Memory Trust.'"

Silence spread around the stump. For the first time, the children understood that the next attack upon memory would not arrive with an axe, but in the sweet language of protection. Ananya said, "Tomorrow we shall ask the name of this proposal."

Chapter 57

Gangesha's Question



A white car arrived in the morning. Batuknath Hariharan stepped out carrying a red file—a proposal to establish the “Garh Narikel People’s Memory Trust.”

Ananya picked up a stone from the stump and asked, “Creating a trust may be fine, but do you understand justice?” Batuknath laughed. “My child, how could there be a trust without justice?” Ananya asked again, “Then tell us about justice first.”

Ira brought an old book: *Tattvachintamani*, by Gangesha Upadhyaya, the great philosopher of logic from Mithila. She said, “Gangesha Upadhyaya was the founder of Navya-Nyaya, the new school of logic, a

scholar who developed the study of reasoning and evidence. His lesson was to examine the evidence before accepting a claim as true.”

Ira explained, “Gangesha’s real lesson was that we should judge a person by truth and justice, not by their family, caste or circumstances.”

Meera added, “If somebody silences the truth in the name of family honour, that is not honour. It is injustice.”

Ananya asked Batuknath, “Gangesha taught that a proposition needs proof. Then what proof is there for caste divisions or discrimination? What evidence could justify denying someone’s humanity?”

Batuknath tried to regain his composure. “Very well,” he said. “There will be no discrimination in the trust’s rules. Everyone’s name will be recorded.” Meera immediately asked, “Will everyone be respected, too? Merely writing names does not end discrimination.” Devika added, “And no trust will own those names. Names belong to families and to the people. An institution should serve them, not own them.”

On the first page of the red file, Aruni crossed out “Jurisdiction of the Trust” and wrote “Duty to Serve.” Batuknath’s face tightened. He had lived by authority; responsibility frightened him.

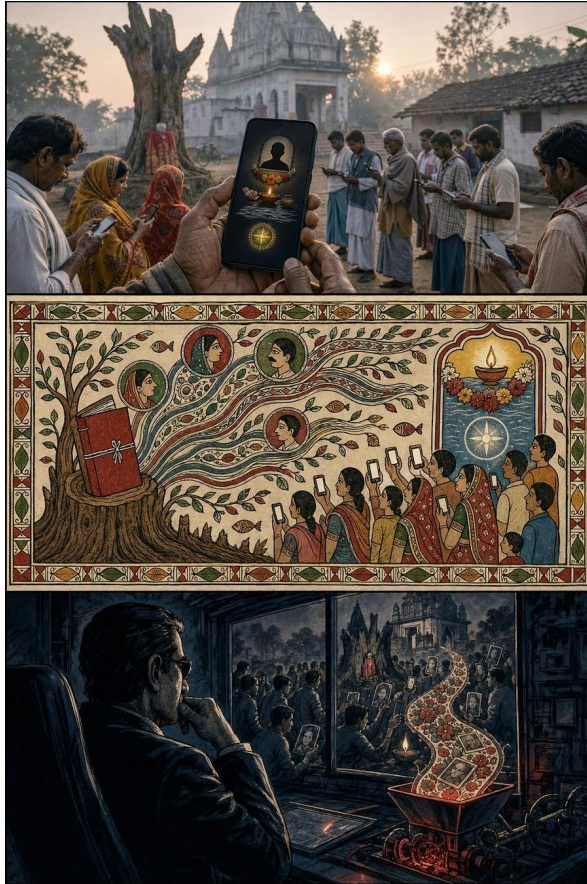
The children drew a new circle upon their map, with the words “No Trust Without Justice.”

That evening Satyavrat Mehta came and said, “The word ‘trust’ looks smaller than the word ‘justice.’ But without justice, a trust can become a crocodile.”

That night the villagers saw some young people reading a new notice on their mobile phones: “Garh Narikel Digital Tribute Platform: Upload the Name of Your Loved One.” After the trust on paper, a trust on the screen was arriving. Gangesha’s question—the question of evidence and justice—had not ended here.

Chapter 58

Chandrapal's Memorial App



In the morning, Chandrapal Batra's "Digital Tribute Platform" began glowing on the village's mobile phones. "Make the name of your loved one immortal," it announced.

Devika opened the platform and saw that it demanded a great deal of private information before a name could be added: a complete address, bank details, a photograph, the status of any compensation claim and, finally, "Consent to use information for publication of memories, research, donations and partnerships." Devika switched off her phone. "This is not a tribute," she said. "It is a trap."

Ira told the children, “Yesterday we spoke about evidence. Now apply that test to this app. What is inside?” Ananya said, “A crocodile lies quietly on top of the water, but hides its teeth underneath.”

Meera read the conditions and said, “It says here that stories, photographs and family details can be used for advertising and donations. That means if you give them your grief, they will turn it into an advertisement.”

Gop Kumar explained, “Do not trust anyone who asks for unnecessary information using your sorrow as an excuse.”

Satyavrat Mehta came and said, “If a hungry person is made to sign a paper in exchange for food, is that consent or compulsion? If a grieving family must give information in exchange for remembrance, is that a tribute or a bargain?”

The village children started a “School of Names.” The first lesson: speaking a name and handing over control of that name are two different things. The second lesson: a photograph of grief must not become someone else’s property. Meera wrote a new pledge: “We shall speak the names of the dead, but we shall not sell their tears.”

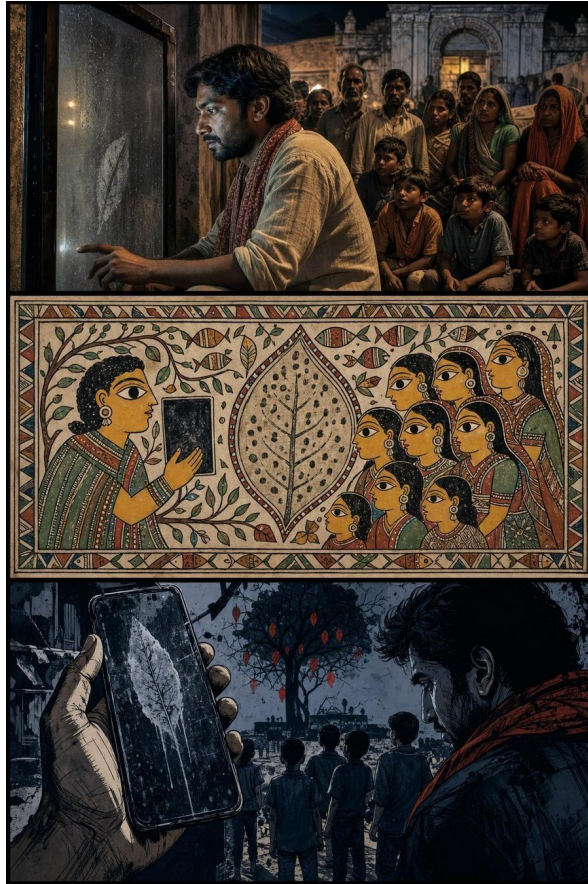
In the evening, an elderly mother came to put her son’s name on the app. But when Devika explained its risks, she stopped. “My son went into the water, and I brought his name out of it. Why should I drown him in a screen again?” She wrote her son’s name upon a stone beside the stump and went home quietly.

That night Gop received a secret message: “The tribute platform is not working alone. Raghav is watching.” Ananya understood that Chandrapal and Raghav Signal were both involved in this new trap.

The children kept watch all night. Channa Grove had been cut down, but four crocodiles were still lying in wait: the government, the trust, the screen and the signal.

Chapter 59

Raghav Signal's New Code



In the morning Ananya said, “Before we read the code, turn the code into evidence.” The children began using Gangesha’s method: the glass of the mobile phone was something they could see directly; theft concealed beneath a request for donations was an inference; a sweet word like “tribute” was a word to examine; and a crocodile—quiet on the surface, with teeth beneath—was a comparison.

Gop Kumar explained, “Raghav was always giving things new names. Money became donations; commission became service; theft became procedure; and threats became advice.” Meera stopped him at once. “Privacy is not a shield for criminals. It is the right of the person who has been harmed.”

Batuknath Hariharan returned and said, “Digital evidence is not easily accepted in court.” Ananya answered, “Here, justice must be accepted first.”

Just then Bhavesh, a young man who worked on Chandrapal’s app, came forward trembling and confessed, “I did not know all of this was wrong. Raghav used to send instructions about what each piece of code should do.”

Raghav was not there himself, yet his absence weighed more heavily than a presence. At midday a message from Raghav appeared on the yellow notice: “Donation code changed. Look for the source of silence.” Everyone turned towards Satyavrat Mehta. But Satyavrat sat quietly. This time his silence was not a wrong; it was a place from which to listen.

Satyavrat said, “Raghav is searching for the source of silence because his code works through words. Where there is listening before words, his code breaks.”

Just then, Ujjwal’s mother fell silent after reading her son’s name. A long silence followed. Suddenly, in the distance, a child ran past crying, “Kabaddi, kabaddi!” The child touched the stump and returned. Ananya wrote, “The answer to a name: a game.”

That night a third message appeared upon the earth like a blue line: “Remove the source.” Ananya understood that the source was not one particular person but the practice of listening. She wrote, “The source of silence: the ears of everyone listening together.”

At these words, the blue line cracked apart. Old Baba Ghost said, “The code has been read. Now silence shall be heard.” Raghav’s code had broken, but the fear behind it was still not completely revealed.

An elderly leatherworker came forward and said, “If Gangesha stands for justice, I belong within that justice, too. Do not write my name at the back.” The children wrote his name right in the middle of the stone.

Chapter 60

Satyavrat Mehta's Second Silence



Raghav's new paper used sacred words such as "devotion," "fund" and "support." Devika held it up to the sunlight. Beneath "devotion" glowed "share of profits," and beneath "support" appeared "commission."

Ananya went to Satyavrat Mehta and asked, "Why are you silent?" Her question brought Satyavrat's first and second silences face to face. The first silence had been a wrong: he could have spoken, but did not. The second silence was happening now: he could speak, but did not want his own voice to drown out the voices of the people.

Satyavrat said, "In my first silence I kept people from being heard. If I speak at once now, I shall make their voices smaller again. I shall only listen."

A meeting was held beside the stump. Devika said, "The people building a memorial on a screen want to measure our tears. This fraud is old; only its words have become holy."

Meera said, "If memory is turned into a picture without permission, it becomes another insult to the body."

Soumya read every word of every document and asked, "What do you mean by 'empty'? Who keeps the accounts for these 'donations'?"

Ba said, "Gangesha wrote about justice, but society did not do justice to his life. Memory was murdered in the name of honour. If the names of Channa Grove are now turned into mere statues, that will be another kind of murder."

Satyavrat said, "Anyone who wishes to build a memorial must first visit the homes of the dead. Anyone who wishes to give a donation must first open the old accounts and let the truth flow out."

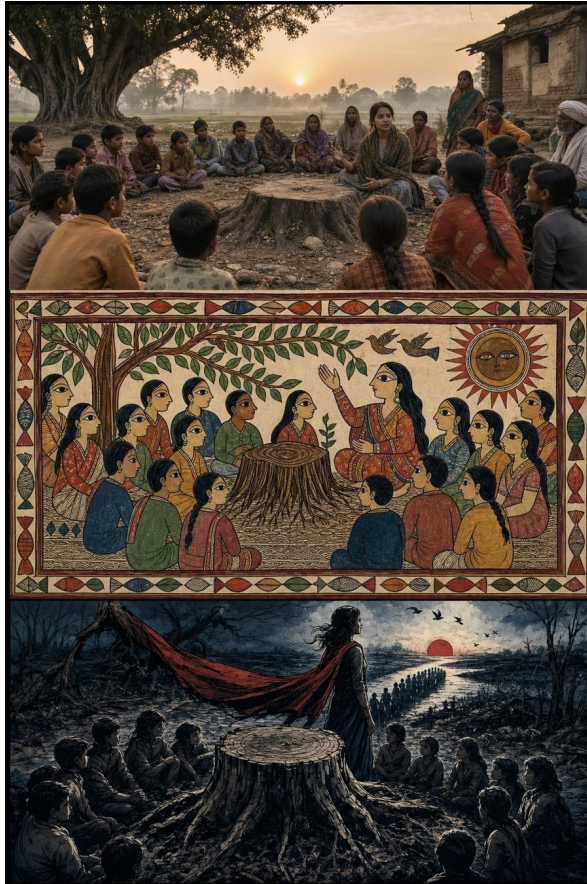
The children worked together to prepare a page called "The Proposer's Pledge Before the Names." Satyavrat wanted to sign, but Ananya stopped him. "The children first." Each child left a mark: one a fish, another a leaf. At last Satyavrat wrote on the final line, "Listened." Nothing more.

In the evening one of Chandrapal's publicity men arrived carrying a phone. "Shall we broadcast this event live?" he asked. Devika covered the phone's screen with a cloth and said, "Not today. Where names are taking their first breath, cameras must come later."

It was decided that the following day would be the "First Festival of Names"—without music, without a stage. Every household would bring just one name, one sign and one question.

Chapter 61

The First Festival of Names



The morning of the Festival of Names arrived, without drums or flags. Ananya said, “A name that is heard again is no longer only a cry of grief. That person is present. And being present is a celebration.”

A boy said, “Justice does not begin with an order of names. It begins with listening. Those whose names have not been found must come first.” The words on the first stone were read aloud: “Those whose names have not been found.” The children answered with one voice, “Present.”

On the second stone was an unfinished name: "Sar..." Meera said, "If we turn an unfinished name into a complete one, we erase the truth that it was left unfinished. Read it as it is. Hear it as it is."

Ba said, "Gangesha asked about the nature of things, but society asked about family lineage. So, when we read names, what a person is comes first and lineage comes later."

Devika read Ujjwal's name. His mother answered, "Present." Then Devika added, "His silence is present, too."

At first, Meera did not want to read her own name. "I am alive," she said. But when the women urged her to do so, she stood and read, "My right to privacy is present." The women answered together, "Present."

Kabaddi was part of the Festival of Names, too, but its rules had changed. After every ten names, the children ran while holding one breath. If someone ran out of breath, that child was not declared the loser. The child simply sat down to guard the next name.

At noon, Batuknath Hariharan's people came again and began reading an invitation from their trust. The children stopped them. "Today, anyone whose name is read must answer 'Present.' Shall we read the name of your trust?" The assistant's mouth went dry.

Aruni said, "Today belongs to the dead. The trust and the committee can be heard tomorrow. Today will not become a stage for the tricks of the living."

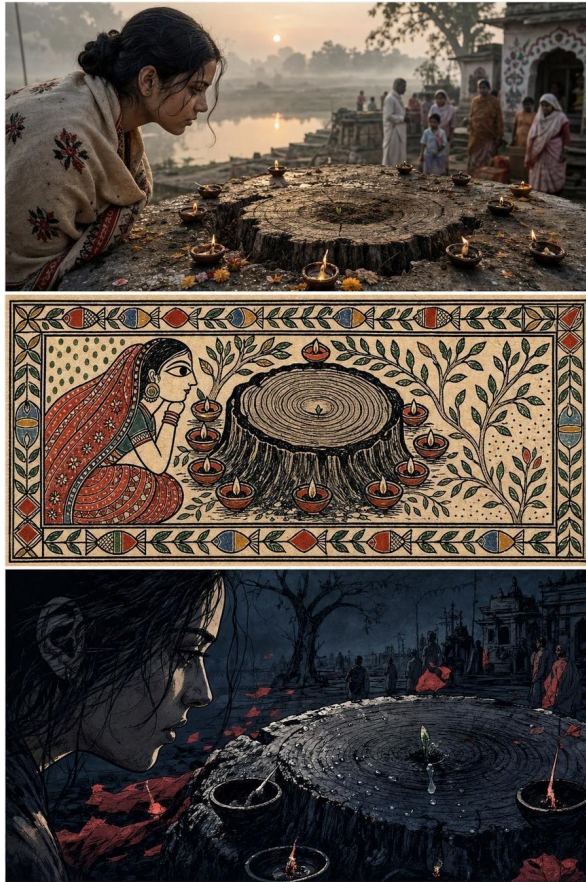
As the name of an elderly labourer was being read, his widow fainted. Satyavrat Mehta hurried forward and caught her. At that moment, people understood that a human being is someone who rises at once when another person needs support.

In the evening, the last name was read. A boy asked, "Is the festival over?" Ba answered, "A festival of names never ends. Only today's breath is complete."

That night, Satyavrat sat beside the tree stump. Something green glimmered in a narrow crack in its roots. But they would wait until the next morning before calling it proof.

Chapter 62

A Green Speck in the Stump



At dawn, Ananya came alone to the stump. On the edge of its cut trunk she saw a tiny green speck. Before touching it, she bent down to listen. From very far away came a sound like the breath of a kabaddi player: “Kabaddi... kabaddi...”

The children gathered around. One child said, “This is my father’s answer.” Ba came and said, “When sap remains inside a cut tree, a bud can appear. And when a name remains inside a wounded memory, people can grow again.”

A photograph of the sprout appeared in Chandrapal Batra's app, with a donation button underneath. Devika said, "If this green speck is an answer to the names, we must not let it become a picture to be sold."

Meera said, "Those who have suffered have rights over their bodies and even over what grows from their memories. Displaying someone's memory without permission is theft, too."

That night, Old Baba Ghost stood by the green speck and said, "The grove was cut down, but the game is not over. From now on, kabaddi is a game of protecting this new shoot."

The next day, the kabaddi rules changed. Whoever entered the playing area had to call out a name. Whoever returned had to say, "Present."

A student asked, "If Gangesha was a founder of the new study of logic, why did society fail to see the injustice in his own life?" Ba replied, "Society lays flowers on a book but is afraid to look at the life of the person who wrote it."

Within a week, a gleaming car arrived. An official and a consultant stepped out. Ananya asked, "Have you listened to the reading of names?" The consultant replied, "First inspection, then participation."

The official said, "This place can be developed. Roads, visitors' galleries, ticket counters..." Aruni asked, "Will you charge a ticket to enter a place where people give testimony?"

That evening, they wrote in the register, "Green speck: its leaves trembled during the outsiders' inspection." It was the first warning of a new age. In the night, a sheet of paper blew in. Its heading read, "Garh Narikel Heritage Corridor: Preliminary Proposal." All night, the green speck trembled in the shadow of that paper.

Chapter 63

The Garh Narikel Heritage Project



On the third day after the green speck appeared, government cars began to arrive. The place that had been called an “empty plot” until yesterday was now being called the “Garh Narikel Heritage Project.”

A consultant stepped out and said, “This place has enormous potential.” Ananya asked him, “Have you read the names written on this stone?” He laughed and said, “We will read them all, child. Let us draw up a plan first.” Ananya replied, “How can you plan for people whose names you have not read?”

The cultural officer unfolded a colourful map. It showed a “Channa Memorial Gateway,” a “Ghost-Kabaddi Theatre” and a “Water-Burial

Viewing Gallery.” He explained that there would be a sound-and-light show and tickets for visitors.

Devika stared at him. “When a mother’s voice trembles as she reads her son’s name,” she asked, “will an actor repeat that trembling voice?”

Meera said, “The right to tell a story of suffering belongs to those who have suffered, not to consultants.”

Ba leaned over the coloured map. “Where have you shown the spot where Sarayu’s name was first read?” she asked. “If none of these places is here, this is not a map. It is a pattern for printing cloth.”

Just then the green speck began to take the shape of two leaves. The excited consultant raised his camera, but Ananya stopped him. “This is not a symbol. It is a child. Ask its mother before taking its picture.”

Aruni told Satyavrat Mehta, “I want to save the grove. But even if we cannot save it, we must save the names from the hands that want to sell it.”

The officials left in the evening, but they left a copy of their colourful map. The children began reading names again, adding a new question after each one: “Who owns this name?” The answer was, “A name belongs to the person, but everyone shares the duty of guarding it.”

During the night, a municipal worker quietly came and pasted a new notice near the stump: “Garh Narikel Heritage Project: Tenders Invited.” In the morning, Ananya saw it and wrote in the register, “Today they invited bids for our memories.” The green leaves did not tremble. It was as though they were saying, “Now the struggle begins.”

Chapter 64

Bids for Memory



Within three days, the same white notice appeared at the tehsil office, the municipality and the bus stand: “Tenders Invited for Memory Conservation and Beautification.” The stump was renamed “Site Section A,” and the children’s watch over the names became a “Community Participation Component.”

Ira brought a copy. A child asked, “Are they going to auction the names?” Everyone fell silent.

Meera read a line: “Collection of oral material available at the site.” She said, “This is not collection. It is an intrusion. Who has given anyone

the right to record the whisper of a woman reading the name of someone she has lost?"

The children returned to Gangesha's method. "Evidence? Reason? Purpose?" When they read "Protection of Public Sentiment," they asked, "Evidence?" Nobody could answer. For "Tourism-Oriented Development," they asked, "Purpose?" Aruni said, "Profit." The children replied together, "Profit is not evidence."

Under the heading "Sound Design," the tender even proposed including the final ring of a dead person's telephone. Ujjwal's mother read this and said, "My son's last telephone ring will not become a sound in a show."

Looking over the cost estimates, Soumya said, "The line for rehousing workers' families is empty, but the biggest amount is set aside for 'Brand Identity.' This is not a plan to preserve memory. It is a map of a marketplace."

Batuknath Hariharan returned with another proposal for a trust. Ananya asked, "Will the families whose names are here be part of the trust? What about Gangesha's questions?" Batuknath hesitated. The children called out together, "Evidence, reason, purpose!"

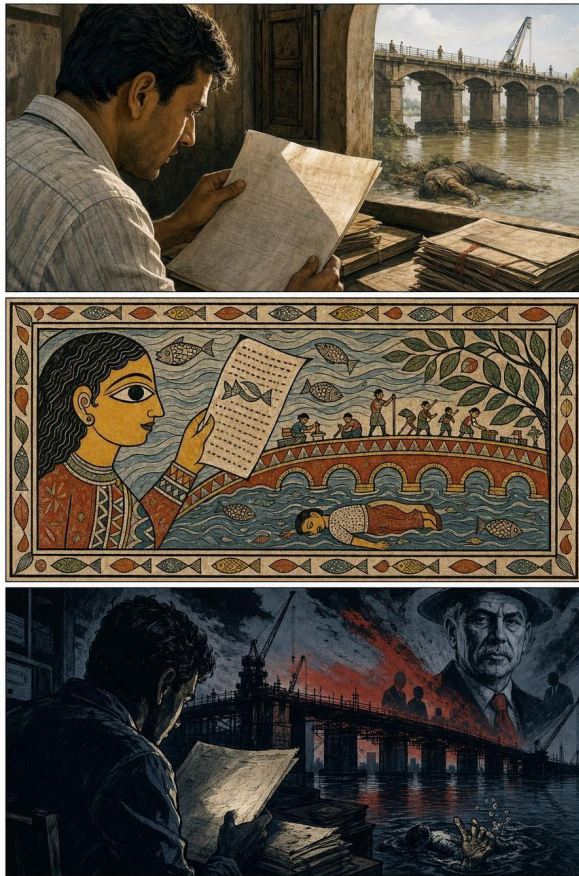
Aruni asked, "If we join your trust, will we still have a voice, or will you only use our names?" Hariharan replied, "Law stands above emotion." Ba said, "Law does not stand above emotion; it stands below justice. When law abandons justice, it becomes a crocodile."

In the evening, the children played a new kind of kabaddi, calling, "Evidence! Evidence!" Whoever was caught had to explain the reason for one line of the tender.

That night, inside the yellow notice, Gop Kumar spotted a faint signature. It looked like the signature of the foreign consultant on the old bridge project: Edward Broom! Ananya wrote, "Bids have been invited for our memories. The person making the bid is still hiding his name."

Chapter 65

Broom Returns



When the tender papers were opened, an old smell seemed to rise from them—the smell of the contract for the old bridge. The company’s name was “Nav-Arogya Aadhar Private Limited,” but Gop Kumar understood at once. “The name is new. The owner is old.”

A letter came from Edward Broom. In it, he described Garh Narikel’s suffering as “an opportunity for collective healing.” Instead of “water burial,” he wrote “Water-Memory Section.” Instead of “dead workers,” he wrote “Workers’ Story Gallery.”

Ira said, “Look! The man whose actions sent bodies underwater now wants to sell tickets to see their memories.” Devika read the words

“Personal Memory Archive” in the letter and realised that the shadow of Chandrapal’s memorial app had reached this place as well.

Ananya asked, “Will they ask for all the names? What will they do with them?” Batuknath Hariharan said, “The names will be safe in the archive, and the whole world will know them.” Ananya asked, “Will the world know them, or will the company keep them?”

The letter included a picture: a glass building, a clear dome over the stump and an artificial crocodile whose eyes would glow red at night. Ghost-kabaddi had been turned into a “Nighttime Light Show.” The children stared at the picture in silence.

Satyavrat Mehta said, “Go to every home whose family member’s name would be used in this proposal. Ask the families. No memory is to be made public without permission.”

Meera said, “If a memory centre is built, permission from those who have suffered must be its very first brick. Without permission, there must be nothing.”

Gop Kumar explained that the foreign company was connected with the same old medicine trade, the former bridge-safety consultants and the investors in the digital memorial app.

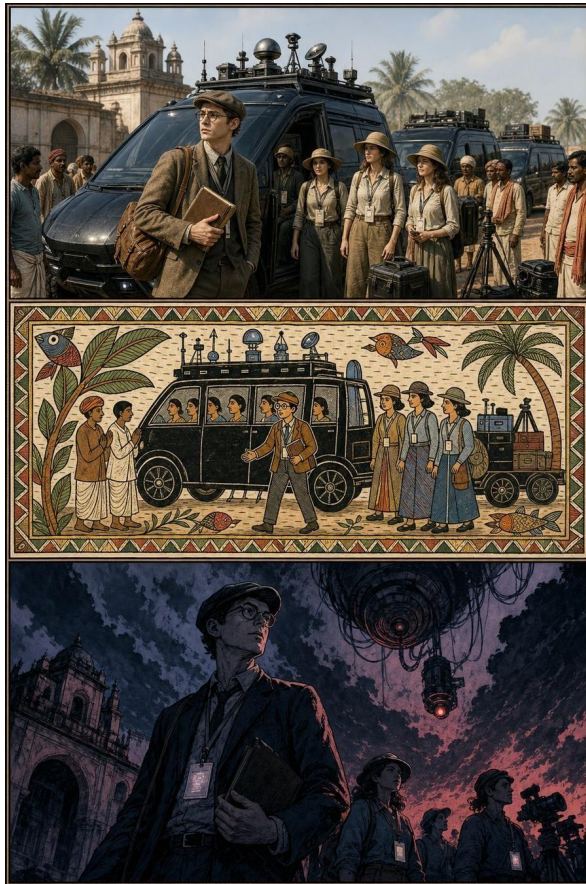
An elderly woman from Sarayu’s family stood up. “My husband went into the water,” she said. “Now I understand that when his name was not kept, that was another kind of death. If these people put his name inside a glass house and sell tickets, it will be a second death.”

A small boy was pouring water on the green speck. Batuknath tried to stop him. “This will become an official relic,” he said. The boy replied, “You can make it official. I will keep it alive.”

That night, Gop received a message. A research team from Harvard, led by Professor Elina Graves, was coming. Ananya said, “Wherever people make contracts over memories, researchers come too. Tomorrow we must ask them our first question: Have you come to listen, or to write?”

Chapter 66

The Harvard Research Team



On the third day, a gleaming car arrived with a research team from Harvard University. A young researcher asked, “Could you guide us in studying your caste structure and the history of your rituals?” Ira replied, “First, the names. Guidance can come later.”

Ananya taught them, “When you hear a name, do not immediately write it down. First say, ‘Present.’” The researcher answered in a trembling voice, “Present.”

Ba asked a woman scholar from Harvard, “You have read Gangesha’s books. Have you also read about the hardships of Gangesha’s life?” The scholar fell silent.

One researcher asked, “What are the written sources for this story?” Ananya replied, “The source is breathing here. Many truths are killed even after they have been written down. Many other truths remain alive even though they have never been written.”

Meera told the visitors, “Caste is not just an idea. It is being stopped at someone’s doorway and humiliated at the edge of a well. If you write about these things, protect people’s faces as you write. If you steal those faces, your research will become another act of violence.”

Gop Kumar showed the team the village’s map of memories and led them along the paths on foot. Ira said, “If academic distance keeps you away from the earth beneath your feet, it will not bring justice.”

Outside a widow’s house, a researcher lifted a camera. Meera stepped in front of it. “Stop. Her face is not your research material. First ask whether she wants to be photographed.”

The widow said, “Do not write about my face. Write my husband’s name. The papers said he was absent. You must write that he is present.” This time, the team spoke the word “Present” with less hesitation.

By evening, a young Harvard researcher’s notebook was still empty. “I thought I would find material here,” he said, “but all I seem to be finding are questions.” Ba replied, “How will you ever find justice if you do not find questions?”

Meera told the researchers the rule for the following day. “Tomorrow, if you want to take pictures, we will first talk about the right to look.”

Chapter 67

Meera and the Right to Look



The following day, the Harvard research team returned, this time carrying cameras. Ira stopped them outside the circle around the stump.

Meera stepped forward. “What you see here is not something put on display for you. Listen first. And if you must look, ask yourself: Why am I looking? Who will have the right to keep what I have seen?”

One researcher said, “I can blur the faces.” Meera stopped him. “Blurring a face does not give you permission. The first question is whether you will let my consent set the limits of your gaze.”

Ba said, “Gangesha was honoured for his learning, while the difficulties of his life were hidden. When the eyes that look at people wear the spectacles of caste, even justice becomes prejudiced.”

Meera led an elderly leatherworker, Jagdish Ram, to a stone and said, “For twenty minutes, write nothing. If something stirs inside you after those twenty minutes, ask whether the stone itself wants to be shown.”

Jagdish Ram thought for a long time. Then, with a trembling hand, he wrote, “What I see is evidence, too.”

Meera drew up a simple set of rules that the children called the “Watch over Looking.” No face would be shown without permission. No one’s tears would be turned into a picture unless the person crying wanted that. And anyone who looked would remain responsible for what they had seen.

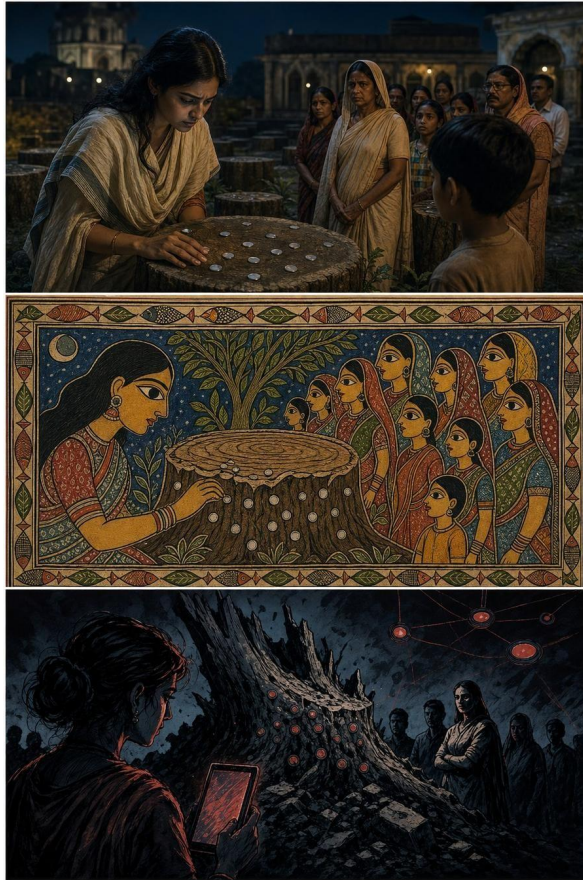
A young researcher tried to take a photograph secretly, but his camera screen went dark. Words appeared upon it: “You looked. But did you allow yourself to be seen?”

In the evening, Martha, one of the researchers, asked Meera’s permission to photograph only the red thread tied around her wrist. “But I will tell its story in my own words, not yours,” she said. Meera agreed.

As the team was leaving that night, they found a new advertisement beside the stump, promoting Chandrapal’s memorial app: “Tribute Picture Collection Opening Soon.” Meera said, “Today I stopped the researchers from looking without permission. Tomorrow the memorial app will enter people’s homes.” Ananya wrote, “The first doorway to the theft of names.”

Chapter 68

Devika Versus the Tribute App



Chandrapal Batra’s “Tribute App” had been switched on again. Its advertisement said, “Pay your respects with a single touch.” Devika trembled when she read it. The app asked people for names, photographs and bank details.

Devika first tried entering the words “Those whose names have not been found,” from the stone, but the screen kept insisting, “Enter full name.” She realised that the app would accept only names that fitted into the marketplace’s boxes. Unfinished names and nameless workers had no place there.

A child asked, "If only part of a name was found, does that make the person incomplete?" Another child, remembering Gangesha's questions, answered, "Anything that removes missing people in the name of evidence is not justice. It is trickery."

Devika went to Chandrapal's new office. A beautiful but false picture of Channa Grove hung on the wall. Chandrapal said, "You are being very emotional. I have only provided a convenient service." Devika asked, "Why does your app refuse to recognise a person whose full name has not been found?"

In a back room, Devika saw young people typing names. Beside Ujjwal's name were the words "High Emotional Reach." A chill went through her. She came out and said, "Remove Ujjwal's name."

At the village meeting the next day, Devika told everyone what she had seen. The children wrote a new rule: "Before putting anyone's name on a screen, get permission from those close to that person. An unfinished name is no less important than a complete one."

Meera added, "If an app touches someone's grief without permission, it will not be allowed into Channa Grove."

That night, notifications arrived on many mobile phones: "The name of your loved one has been added to the Garh Narikel Memory Collection." Ujjwal's mother received the same message. Quietly, she said, "Do not drown my son in a screen again."

In the morning, the children saw that the letters on three of the name-stones had grown faint, as though someone had scraped them during the night. Old Baba Ghost said, "Anyone who steals names for screens will soon come to lay hands on the stones." Ananya wrote, "Today the theft of names began."

Chapter 69

The Theft of Names



Sarayu Mandal's name had vanished from the register. Only an ink stain remained. The children inspected his stone. The stone was there, and so was the string around it, but the name had been scraped away.

Ba said, "The true thief is not the one who steals a stone. The true thief is the one who convinces everyone that there was never anything written on the stone."

Devika checked the digital list and found that Sarayu Mandal's name and the names of Munna Paswan's fathers and forefathers had been marked "Unverified."

Ananya asked, “What is evidence? Something written down? Something kept in memory? Or something the powerful choose to accept?”

Meera went to Sarayu’s sister, Rakhi. “They have erased his name?” Rakhi said. “Look at these hands. Father rowed a boat during every flood. Have the stories he told been erased as well?”

Batuknath Hariharan returned once more with his papers for a trust. Ananya asked, “Will you begin by reading the name that has been erased?” Batuknath replied, “If there is evidence, I will.” Ananya asked, “What if the evidence is not in your papers but in the voices of our elders?”

Devika asked, “Who owns a name?” Batuknath answered, “It is a matter of public interest.” Meera said, “You know very well how often ‘public interest’ has been a curtain of paper drawn over the tears of the poor.”

In the evening, they drew up a list of the names that had been erased. There were seven in all. The children decided to spend seven days hearing the story of each name again—the family, the home, the work, everything.

On the first day, it was Sarayu Mandal’s turn. When they lifted his stone, they saw a little pond-shaped hollow in the wet soil underneath. That night, a faint glimmer of water appeared there. Old Baba Ghost said, “When a name is erased, water keeps it safe.”

Ananya wrote in the register, “The erased names have gone down into the water. Tomorrow we will listen to the pond.”

Chapter 70

The Testimony of Panidubbi



At dawn, the children opened the register and found that some of the names had grown faint. Gop Kumar said, “When there is a plot against names, the evidence goes looking for water.”

Together they went to the pond behind the village, where Panidubbi lived. Before anything began, Meera read out the rule: “No one’s face is to be shown by force.”

Ananya read the first faded name. Her tongue stumbled. Just then, a bubble rose from the bottom of the pond, and the name shone inside it. Satyavrat Mehta said, “When society’s written letters turn out to be false, nature’s reflection can become evidence, too.”

A circle of darkness formed in the middle of the pond. From it rose Panidubbi's voice: "The reflection of a name that has sunk into the water cannot be stolen."

Ananya asked, "And what about a name that was never written down?" The water answered, "A name that was never written carries a greater weight than all the names that were. Give that person the first stone."

Devika asked, "How will the name of someone who died inside a screen reach the water?" Panidubbi answered, "A screen is an imitation of water, too: a shining surface with darkness underneath."

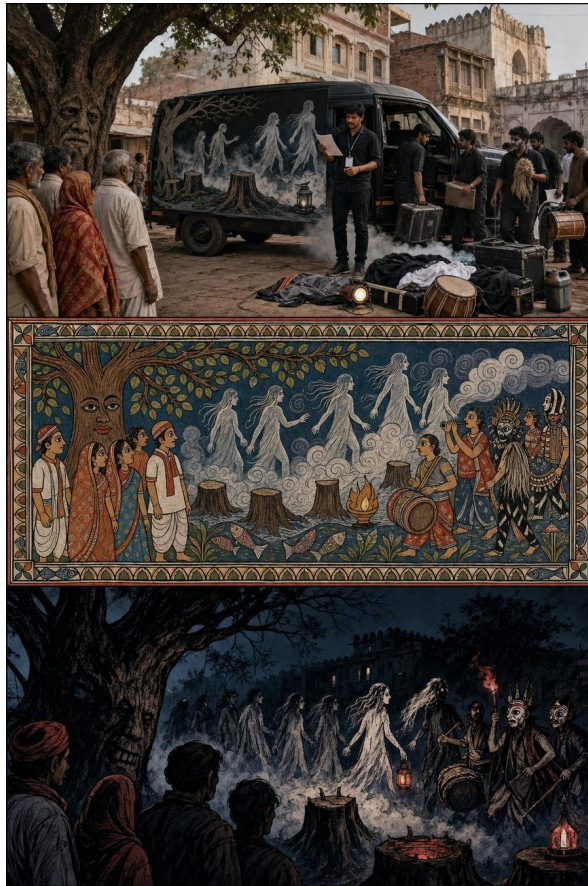
Chandrapal's false app opened by itself on Gop's phone. He tilted the phone towards the water, and as the screen's false image fell across the pond's surface, it broke apart. Panidubbi said, "Water does not keep the accounts of those who earn money from people's names. Mud keeps those accounts."

That night, Panidubbi's last words rose from the pond: "Do not merely save the names. Save their game as well. A name that plays kabaddi will go on breathing." Old Baba Ghost added, "If kabaddi ends, the watch over names will grow old."

The following morning, a new poster appeared on a wall: "Channa Grove Ghost-Kabaddi Festival: A Wonderful Folk Experience, Tickets Available." Ananya fell silent as she read it. The memories had survived, but now the marketplace wanted to turn them into a performance.

Chapter 71

The Procession of Fake Ghosts



The next day, a van arrived with the words “Channa Grove Night Experience: Ghost-Kabaddi Procession” painted on its side. Performers climbed out, carrying smoke machines, drums and blue lights.

Meera asked the organiser, “Have you obtained permission from the families whose dead relatives’ names will be used in this procession?” He replied, “We won’t use any names. We’ll just create an atmosphere.” Meera answered, “Making an ‘atmosphere’ out of the people who drowned or were cheated is a new way of stealing what belongs to them.”

The fake kabaddi began. One performer tried calling “Kabaddi, kabaddi,” but ran out of breath halfway through. The children began to write: “Breath ended. No name was called. The earth gave no answer.”

Just then, another performer stepped on a warm line running along one of the stump’s roots. Suddenly, the name of his own father burst from his mouth—a labourer who had died in a mine in a faraway district. The performer began to cry. The children brought a stone and wrote the first letter of his father’s name upon it.

Then a second performer, and a third, began telling the stories of their own true sorrows. Little by little, the pretence on the stage turned into real testimony.

A boy in a ghost mask tried to howl, “Ooooo!” But instead, the word “Present” suddenly came out of his mouth. He frightened himself and pulled off his mask.

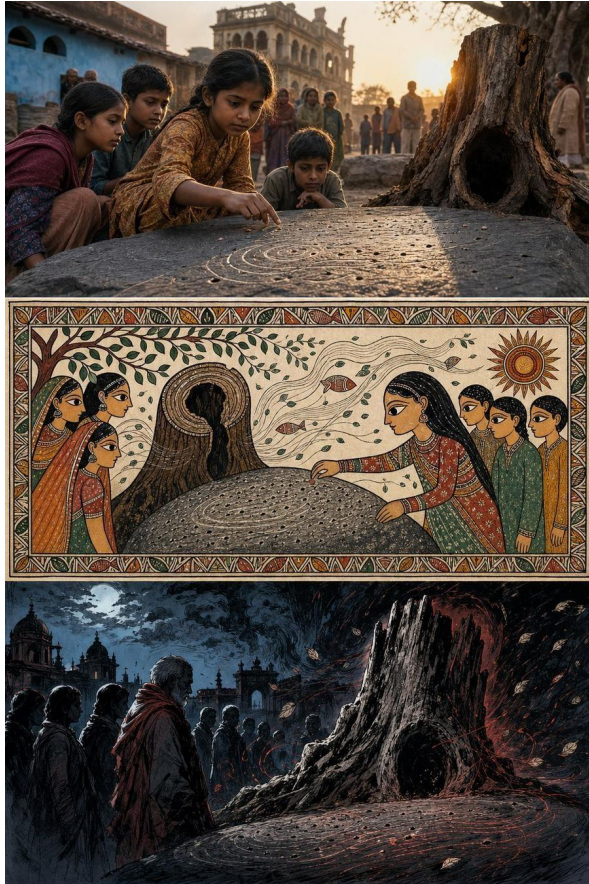
Devika told the organiser, “Now return the money you took from the people who came to this show.” Meera added, “Into which account do you pay the tax on selling fear of the dead?” Without arguing, the organiser opened the box of ticket stubs and returned the money.

That night, the performers stayed seated around the stump. Ananya told them, “You came here to pretend, but you spoke true names. Now learn to keep watch instead of acting.”

After midnight, a soft laugh rose from inside the stump. Ba said, “When memories are put up for sale but manage to survive, the grove laughs.” The children wrote a heading on a new page: “Channa Grove’s Laughter.”

Chapter 72

Channa Grove's Laughter



By dawn, the stump's laughter had echoed throughout the night. Ananya touched a name-stone and said, "The grove was not simply laughing. It was answering." Ba added, "Sometimes an answer comes not in tears but in laughter. When people try to sell suffering, memory laughs at them."

Ananya asked, "What is the proof of laughter?" The fourth girl, who rarely spoke, answered, "When suffering refuses to be sold, the sound that rises at that moment is proof of justice."

Chandrapal Batra's team tried to record the laughter, but the recording held only emptiness. Whoever listened to that emptiness heard the name of their own wrongdoing.

Even amid the applause for his Harvard lecture, Edward Broom imagined he could hear that laughter. Suddenly, his coffee tasted like earth.

Meera put up a notice beside the stump: "No one owns laughter. No one may sell the pain of the dead or the testimony of the living. This laughter is not entertainment. It is a refusal."

A journalist asked the children, "What is the main story here?" A boy replied, "There is no one main story. There are many names. When you make one story the main one, you cut all the others away."

Batuknath Hariharan wanted to add the words "Preservation of Laughter" to the draft for his trust. But a question rose from within him: "Do you know what justice is?"

In the evening, the children placed a new stone. Its words read, "This stone belongs to all those who escaped being sold."

That night, kabaddi began again, with less running and more attention to each breath. An old ghost who had once played the game told the children, "In kabaddi, you hold your breath. But in memory, you share your breath. Whoever returns calling a name will keep the game alive."

The green speck on the stump spread a little that night. It looked as though the shoot were growing not towards the sky, but towards the ears of the people.

Chapter 73

Batuknath's Dream Court



Channa Grove's laughter rang in Batuknath Hariharan's ears all night. He sat down to write the draft for his trust, but the ink spread across the paper and turned into leaves. Each leaf carried the same question: "Will you establish a trust, or will you learn justice?"

At midnight, he fell asleep and saw himself in a great hall. Gangesha Upadhyay stood in its centre. Old stories of Gangesha's difficult life and his study of justice came into Batuknath's mind. Batuknath tried to say, "Society has its traditions and proper ways." Gangesha replied, "If those ways choke the truth, they are not proper ways at all. They are fear dressed in a sacred thread."

A trial began in his dream. The charge against Batuknath was: “Turning justice into a profession and leading people away from justice itself.” He tried to defend himself, but each word became a dry leaf and fell to the floor.

Gangesha asked, “Do you want evidence?” At once, the stump in Channa Grove, Panidubbi and the voices of the children guarding the names cried, “We are present!” Batuknath bowed his head.

A girl entered the dream and asked, “Mr Hariharan, you want to create a trust. Will those whose names were never found have the first page?” Batuknath remained silent. Now his silence was not a defence; it was evidence against him.

A kabaddi line began shining across the ceiling. Old Baba Ghost said, “All your life you have put other people out of the game. Today, hold your breath and cross over to the side of justice just once.” Batuknath tried to say “Kabaddi,” but his breath caught, and he fell.

Gangesha said, “In justice, you must do the work of standing up yourself. But the first condition is to step down from the throne of your pride.” Batuknath saw all his titles dropping away until only “Batuk” remained—a frightened little boy. He began to cry.

He woke in the middle of his tears. In the morning light, he found that the heading of his draft had changed. Instead of “Chairman,” it now read, “Not the First Servant, but the Last Listener.”

Batuknath did not go to Garh Narikel that day. He opened his old files and found a note from Chandrapal Batra: “Memorial App Secured.” He understood that the court inside his heart was now moving on to the heart of the next wrongdoer.

Chapter 74

Chandrapal's First Confession



Channa Grove's laughter travelled through the air until it reached Chandrapal Batra's mobile phone. He tried to look at the figures in his app, but every row turned into a name: "Ujjwal Jha," "Munna Paswan."

That night, Chandrapal looked at himself in the mirror. He saw many faces looking back: Ujjwal's face, the workers' faces and the eyes of widows. He cried out in terror.

At dawn, he set off for Garh Narikel without knowing what he would decide to do, broken by exhaustion. The children were keeping watch over the names beside the stump. Nobody made a noise. They simply

watched, listened and waited. Their quietness frightened him more than anything.

Ananya asked, “Will you read a name?” Chandrapal said, “I... I’ve come to say something.” Ananya asked, “Your birth name, or the name you use for business?”

Chandrapal remembered his real childhood name: “Chandu.” The children wrote, “Chandu, also known as Chandrapal Batra—spoke his birth name for the first time.”

Meera said, “Tears are not evidence. Tell the truth along with your name.” Slowly Chandrapal said, “I did not treat people as people. Behind my screen, I saw only a crowd. I opened a way to collect donations using the names of the dead. I did not hate anyone. Perhaps that made what I did even worse. If I had hated them, I would at least have seen their faces. I never made the effort to look.”

Devika asked, “And the money made from Ujjwal’s name?” Chandrapal pulled a paper from his pocket. “The accounts are here.” Devika said, “Accounts can never equal a name, but without the accounts, our next struggle will remain unfinished.”

Chandrapal understood that the first day of confessing was not the end of justice. It was the beginning.

That evening, Chandrapal tried to send Raghav Signal a message: “Stop. Things have changed.” But his phone displayed, “No contact... Where names are heard, code cannot reach.”

Chandrapal understood that his confession would not end with him. Raghav would be next—but in Raghav’s world, it would be memory, not a network, that worked.

Chapter 74

Chandrapal’s First Confession

Channa Grove’s laughter spread through the air and reached Chandrapal Batra’s mobile phone. All his life, he had thought of people only as numbers. By saying “They are a crowd,” he blurred the faces of those he had wronged.

That night, he opened his phone. In every row he saw a name: “Ujjwal Jha,” “Munna Paswan,” “Sarayu.” He turned the phone off, but the names still appeared—on the glass table, on a bottle and on the window.

In the bathroom mirror, he saw many eyes in his own face: Ujjwal’s, the workers’, the widows’. Frightened, he screamed.

At dawn, he arrived in Garh Narikel on his own. The children continued their watch over the names. Nobody raised a fuss. They watched quietly. Their silence frightened Chandrapal more than anything.

Ananya asked, “Will you read a name?” Chandrapal replied, “I... I’ve come to say something.” Ananya asked, “Your birth name, or your business name?” Chandrapal said softly, “Chandu.” The children wrote, “Chandu, also known as Chandrapal Batra—spoke his birth name for the first time.”

Meera said, “Tears are not evidence. Tell the truth along with your name.” Chandrapal said, “I did not treat people as people. Behind the screen, I saw only a crowd. I turned fear into a product. I did not hate anyone personally. Perhaps that made what I did even worse. Had I hated them, I would have seen their faces. I never made the effort to look.”

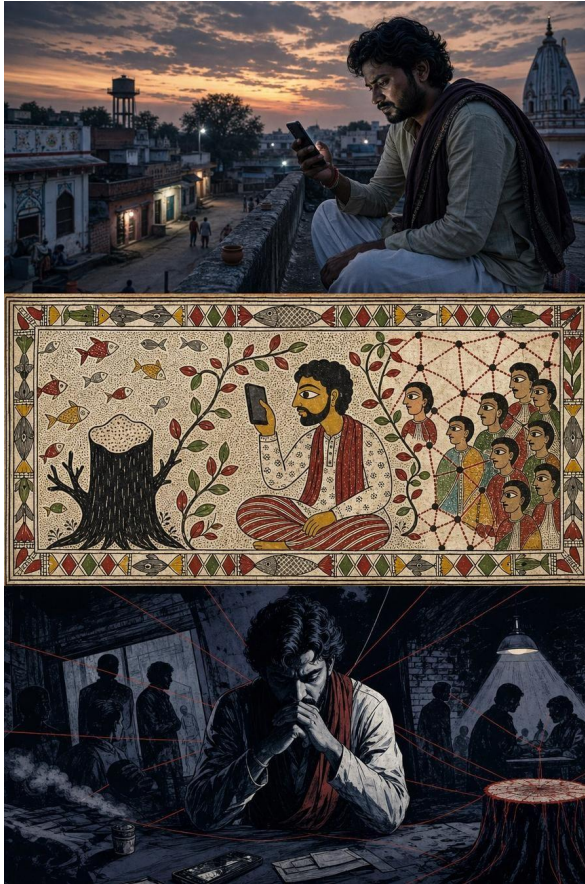
Devika asked, “And the money earned from Ujjwal’s name?” Chandrapal took out a paper. “Here are the accounts.” Devika said, “Accounts can never equal a name, but without the accounts, our next struggle will remain unfinished.”

That evening, Chandrapal tried to send Raghav Signal a message: “Stop. The names have risen.” But his screen displayed, “No contact. Where names are heard, code cannot reach.”

Chandrapal understood that his confession would not end with him. Raghav’s turn would come next.

Chapter 75

Raghav Signal Without a Network



All the network bars were showing on Raghav Somani's phone, but none of his messages reached anyone. The screen would say "Sent," but it never said "Delivered."

He tried to send warnings to Chandrapal, Batuknath, Broom and Lau Kin-hung, but every message got stuck.

That night, the dark screen of his phone showed him the roots of the cut stump instead of his own face. Then names began growing across the screen, one by one: Ujjwal, Sarayu, Munna. Raghav was terrified. A voice came from the phone: "Before sending a message, you used to choose its receiver. Now the names will choose who receives them."

He opened his old paper notebook. In it, the word “percentage” had changed to “promise.” What had once been his share of money had become the weight of his word.

Far away in Channa Grove, the children keeping watch at night began slowly chanting “Present, present” instead of “Kabaddi.” A message appeared on Raghav’s phone. Sender: Unknown. Subject: Present. Inside was only an empty space.

Raghav tried to reply, “Identify yourself.” The phone answered, “You are the one who must identify yourself.” He understood that language itself had begun to testify against him.

Raghav removed the batteries from all his phones and opened the window. Outside, every tower in the city looked to him like the branch of a felled tree, with all its wires searching for roots.

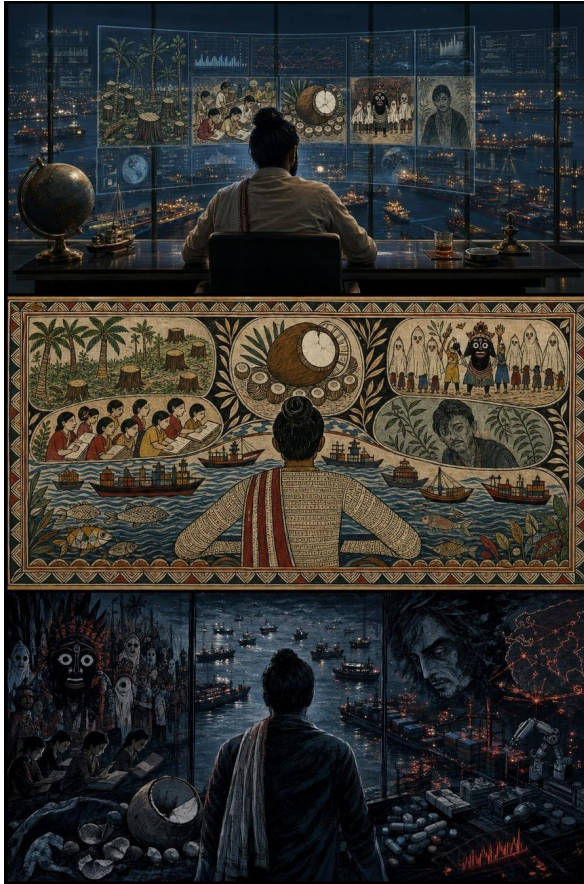
In the morning, all his phones lit up together. But instead of answers, they showed a map. Garh Narikel, the stump and the rooms of the city were joined by a single line: “The Network of Memory.” A new point glowed on the map: “Lau Kin-hung.”

Raghav stood at the window. For the first time, without a phone, he spoke the full name: “Lau Kin-hung.” As soon as he said it, the room felt lighter, but his body felt heavy. Speaking the name was not freedom. It was a frightening first step towards it.

In Garh Narikel, Ananya closed the register and said, “Today a faraway name has begun to move. Now a path will open, not a network.”

Chapter 76

Lau Kin-hung's Journey to India



Across the sea, Lau Kin-hung sat in his glass building looking at pictures of Garh Narikel. In a dream that night, he saw a river where crocodiles were chewing paper contracts. One crocodile asked, “In which water is your name written?” Lau woke up trembling.

In the morning, he decided to travel to India. Inside his folder, the word “Gangesha” appeared in a note: “Local philosophical symbol; caste dispute; possible use in memory politics.”

On the aeroplane, he heard the words “Kabaddi, kabaddi” again. An elderly Indian passenger beside him showed him a newspaper with the headline “Festival of Names in Garh Narikel.” Lau asked, “What sort of

place is this?" The old man replied, "A place where the names of the dead are alive."

Lau wanted to say, "Names can stay alive on a server, too." The old man replied, "And what if the server shuts down? Paper can burn as well. But when children have heard a name, it begins a second life."

As he slept, Lau had another dream. Inside the stump of Channa Grove, a figure that seemed to be Gangesha's question asked him, "What is the evidence of profit?" Lau answered, "Numbers." The figure asked, "How will you count the loss of someone whose name is missing?"

His plane landed in India. At the immigration counter, Lau saw a crocodile in his reflection in the glass. It seemed to ask, "Have you brought a name with you, or profits made from the nameless?"

The media were waiting outside. But Lau told his interpreter, "Straight to Garh Narikel." The interpreter looked surprised. "Today?" Lau answered, "The longer I delay, the longer that crocodile will stare without blinking."

Chapter 77

The Crocodile at the Airport



Lau Kin-hung's plane landed in the morning. At the immigration counter, he looked towards the camera, but for a few moments the screen showed a crocodile's eye instead of his face. "Please look again," the officer said. This time, the face matched, and the gate opened. Yet Lau felt as if the crocodile's eye were following him.

In the guest lounge, the news showed Channa Grove in Garh Narikel and scenes from the Festival of Names. Lau asked, "Haven't they moved those children away?" His assistant replied, "They could be moved. But if they were, they would spread into even more places."

Lau filled a glass with water. At the bottom of the glass he saw river water, thick and greenish black. An elderly cleaner approached and said, “Sir, if you think of a name while you drink water, the water will stay clear.” This person’s name appeared in no record.

As Lau left the airport, the driver asked, “Garh Narikel?” Lau was startled. The journey was supposed to be a secret.

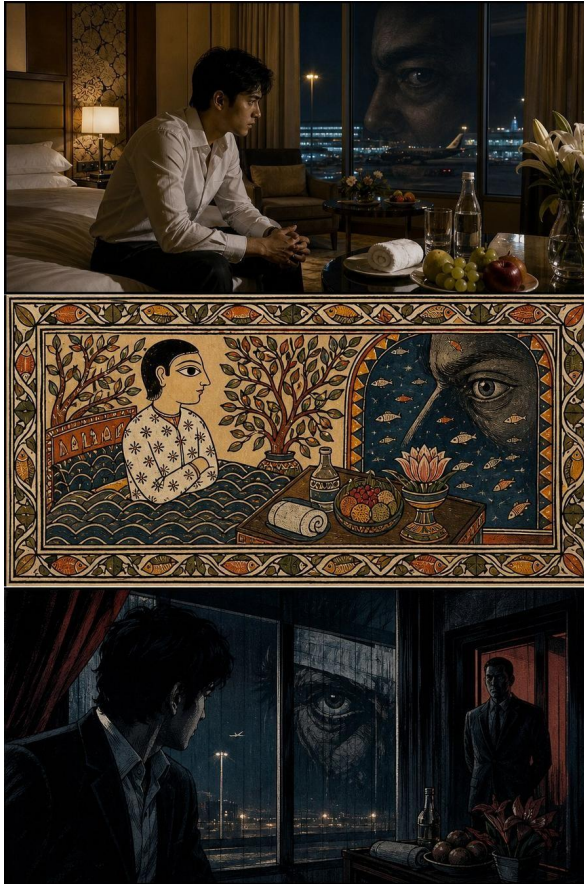
That night, Lau dreamed that the children at the stump were asking for his “real name” instead of his passport. A crocodile began chewing through his account books, and from every page rose the voice of a worker.

In the morning, a message arrived on his phone: “If you want to hear the names, come.” The location was “Empty Waiting Room, Old Airport Road.”

By noon, Lau Kin-hung had decided to go. He understood that this was not an invitation but a call to give testimony. The crocodile at the airport had not taken his body. It had stripped away the first layer of his feeling of safety. With his next breath, he would come face to face with Satyavrat Mehta—without weapons, without an official title, carrying only the weight of names.

Chapter 78

Satyavrat and Lau's Silent Conversation



Lau Kin-hung wanted to meet Satyavrat Mehta. Satyavrat did not call him to an office. He invited him to the cut stump in Channa Grove. “If you want to meet me, come to the place of names.”

Lau reached the stump. Satyavrat was sitting outside the circle, without bodyguards and without having prepared an argument. He simply said, “Sit.”

The children were reading the names. After each name, a chorus answered, “Present.” Lau listened for a while, and then began to tremble.

Lau asked, “Do you want to accuse me?” Satyavrat replied, “A court makes accusations. Here we read names.” Then he added, “In your world, a name matters because it can open an account. Here, a name matters for grief, justice and freedom. You have counted your profits. For once, count the names.”

Ananya placed a stone near Lau and asked, “Will you write your name?” Lau wrote it in his own script. Under it, Ananya wrote, “Lau Kin-hung.” The stone felt heavy in his hands. For the first time, his name felt like a weight.

Satyavrat said, “This is not forgiveness yet. It is only being present.”

That night, Lau stayed in a room at an old school outside the village. Instead of silken bedding, there was rough, rustling khadi cloth. In a dream, he saw a “nameless planet” where every building had a number but no name.

At dawn, he offered to make a donation. Satyavrat stopped him. “Donations too often cover up the accounting of a wrong. Here, before a donation come the documents; before the documents, the names; and before the names, listening.”

Later that day, a messenger from Edward Broom arrived with a great deed of donation. Ananya placed another empty stone there and said, “Now we will ask about the name behind the donation.”

Chapter 79

Broom's Deed of Donation



In the morning, an elegant deed of donation arrived in the village from Edward Broom's new company, the "World Memory Restoration Fund," for a "Channa Grove Centre for Memories of Suffering."

Broom's representative said, "This donation comes with no selfish purpose. It will pay for a museum and a digital archive." Devika asked, "What will you take in return?" "Nothing," he replied. But when Meera questioned him, he admitted that there would be "consent provisions."

Ananya read the deed and asked, "Who does this say owns the names?" The representative answered, "The community." Ananya

asked, “Then where is the community’s signature?” No one had an answer.

Ba smelled the deed and said, “This paper does not smell of tears. It smells of a room with its doors locked.”

Gop Kumar read the tiny print: “The fund shall have the first right to use jointly communicated material.” He said, “This is not a donation. It is the first claim of ownership over the stories.”

Suddenly, clouds gathered, and a few drops of rain fell on the golden seal. The colour of the paper began to change. Letters from the old bridge contract rose from beneath the surface—old, lifeless lines about workers’ housing, safety and compensation. The deed had been a mask. Once it was wet, the real face appeared.

Ba said, “It is not the paper that has become wet. It is the skin of wrongdoing.”

Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his notebook, “When a donation hides the record of a crime, it is not charity. It is a defence offered too late.”

That night, Batuknath Hariharan’s son picked up his father’s papers for a trust and asked, “Father, is this meant to protect justice, or your profession?” Batuknath’s mouth went dry.

Around the stump, the children laid down the empty envelope that had held the deed of donation. On it they wrote, “Compassion that demands rights over others must be examined.”

Chapter 80

Hariharan's Children



That night, Batuknath Hariharan sat on his veranda. His daughter Tarini, who was studying law, came inside. She had never visited Channa Grove, but she had watched all the events on her phone.

Tarini asked, “Father, have you protected justice, or your profession? You set aside the papers of the families of the workers who drowned at the bridge, calling them technically flawed. Was that the law, or a crocodile hiding inside the shell of a profession?”

For the first time, Batuknath felt like an accused outsider in his own home. Tarini said, “You are a man who decided that his intelligence was

greater than everything else, and buried his conscience beneath stamped papers.”

Speaking of Gangesha, Tarini said, “If Mithila is a land of reasoning, why is it so silent when caste is questioned? To put a garland of honour around the truth of Gangesha’s life and then kill that truth—whose justice is that?”

Batuknath asked, “Do you think I am a criminal?” Tarini replied, “No. Calling you a criminal would be easy. You are a man who has placed his conscience beneath papers.”

Tarini said, “If a public-memory trust is formed, the children and the workers’ families must run it. If you want to offer advice, first come and listen to the names. Do not seek to be chairman. Be present.”

Batuknath could not sleep all night. In the morning, he wrote, “Proposal for a Public-Memory Trust Postponed.” Then he crossed it out and wrote, “Proposal to be heard before the People’s Watch.”

As she left, Tarini removed a garland of certificates of honour and said, “Gangesha needs questions, not garlands. Justice needs listening, not titles.”

That morning in Garh Narikel, dew had gathered on the little shoot growing from the stump. A faint, bell-like sound rose from within the wood, as though the questions of the next generation had been accepted by the watch.

Far away, in his closed room, Chandrapal Batra sat down to write his full name on a sheet of paper for the first time. His hand trembled. Another court was waiting for him, too.

Chapter 81

Batra's Unfinished Name



Chandrapal Batra sat in his room before a sheet of white paper. Written on it were the words: "Write your name."

He tried to write "Chandrapal Batra," but what appeared on the paper was "Ten per cent." He crossed it out and tried again. This time he wrote "Half the profit." On his third attempt, he wrote "Commission." It was as if a clerk lived inside him who knew how to write only shares of profit where a name should be.

He remembered his childhood writing slate: "Chandrapal—the one who guards the moon." His mother used to say, "There is light in your

name, son.” But the light had begun to feel heavy to him, and little by little he had abandoned it and entered the darkness of numbers.

In Garh Narikel, the word “percentage” suddenly appeared of its own accord in Ananya’s register. Ira said, “After the theft of names, the accounts of names will now be opened.”

Chandrapal tried to write “Channu,” the name his mother had called him. But his hand stopped after writing half of the letter “Ch,” as though caught between a crocodile’s teeth.

That night, Chandrapal wept for the first time. These were not tears asking for pity. They were the tears of a man who had realised that he could no longer find the name of the child still living within him.

Ananya opened a fresh page in the register and wrote, “Unfinished Names.” The children asked, “Why should we write down the name of someone who has committed a crime?” Ba answered, “A crime is written down not for forgiveness, but for evidence.”

Satyavrat Mehta said, “Justice asks not only for the names of those who have suffered, but also for the true names of those who caused their suffering. A nameless crime can come back again.”

That night, Chandrapal could not write his whole name. All that remained on the page was “Ch...” and, written below it without his realising, “Percentage.” In Garh Narikel, Ananya said, “Next time, the elephant and the crocodile within us will play.” The game was leaving the playing field and entering the waters of the mind.

Chapter 82

The Elephant and the Crocodile Within



That night, a new scene appeared inside the stump of Channa Grove. Old Baba Ghost said, “Today we will see the elephant and the crocodile within us. Do not immediately call those you see guilty. First, look at the living creature trapped inside them.”

Batuknath Hariharan appeared first. The elephant within him was his childhood love of justice; the crocodile was the dishonesty of his profession, which told him, “You are not justice. You are your profession.”

Then Chandrapal Batra appeared. His inner elephant was a little boy who wanted to write his name correctly. His crocodile was enormous:

the percentages that had climbed over his unfinished name. Devika said, “How can someone save other people’s names when he has lost the letters of his own?”

Inside Raghav Signal, a small, transparent elephant appeared. It was constantly erasing things. The crocodile was the technology of silence. Meera said, “This is not respect for privacy. This is the darkness that hides crime.”

The elephant inside Lau Kin-hung wanted to smell the earth of Mithila. His crocodile was capital without any homeland, whispering, “Names are a loss.” The elephant replied, “Without names, profit turns to stone.”

Satyavrat Mehta stood there himself. The stump looked inside him, too. His elephant was the desire to listen to justice; his crocodile was the discipline of office and a conscience that had awakened too late. “Do not leave me out either,” Satyavrat said. Ananya wrote, “A witness is not beyond examination.”

Then the true scene of the elephant and crocodile appeared. All the elephants joined to become one elephant; all the crocodiles joined to become one enormous jaw. The elephant began calling out names—first one, then many. With every cry of “Present,” one of the crocodile’s teeth loosened.

Old Baba Ghost said, “Remember, seeing the elephant inside a wrongdoer does not erase that person’s crime. The wrongdoing must still be accounted for. But if we cannot see the elephant within, we will never recognise the crocodile’s kind.”

In the morning, the children made a new rule: “We will not read only the names of the dead. We will also look for the names trapped inside those who are alive.” Ananya opened a new page of the register and wrote, “The Coconut-Leaf School.” The game was becoming a lesson.

Chapter 83

The Coconut-Leaf School



At dawn, Ananya began clearing the sand behind the stump. Someone asked, “What will you build here?” “A school,” she replied.

Ba gave it a name. “The stump of Channa Grove will remain, but we need leaves for shade. Coconut leaves catch the wind from far away. This school will catch people’s voices in the same way.”

Devika wrote on the wall, “No one’s suffering shall be recorded here without permission.” Meera added, “No one’s body shall be made into a spectacle here.” Gop Kumar wrote, “Paper is evidence here, but without the human voice it is incomplete.” Satyavrat Mehta wrote, “Silence, too, is testimony here, provided it comes from listening and not from fear.”

The children gathered fallen coconut leaves. On each they wrote a reminder: “The Bridge Pier,” “Digital Fear,” “Gangesha’s Question.” They left an empty space beneath every reminder. “If we write a story as though it is finished, where will the next person speak?”

At noon, the hands of a leatherworker’s son and a Brahmin boy touched the same leaf. A green line flashed across its centre. Ba said, “Do you see? The Tattvachintamani does not live only inside a book. Sometimes it opens between two hands.”

By evening, they had built a little pavilion of coconut leaves. People said, “The grove was cut down, but its leaves have grown again.” “Not grown,” Meera corrected them. “Come together.”

That night, the first lamp was lit. Ananya gently struck an empty bowl three times. “The school opens today,” she said. “The first lesson is tomorrow. Today we shall only hear the rules... Here, those who are absent will be called first.”

On a fresh page of the register they wrote the heading, “First Lesson: Present.” All night, the absent names of Garh Narikel seemed to wait quietly for their turns.

Chapter 84

First Lesson: Present



On the school's first day, no one studied the alphabet. Ananya said, "Our first lesson is 'Present.'" The children repeated, "Present."

The first child stood and spoke her grandmother's name, a name no one at home used any longer: "Sitamoni." In the register they wrote, "Sitamoni—Present."

A girl named Sonaki spoke the name of her uncle, who had gone into the river, though the family always said he had "gone away to earn money." "Bholaram," she said.

A third child rose hesitantly. "My great-grandfather was a leatherworker. Grandmother says that without him, the household's

shoes, drums and so many other things could never have been made. His name was Manglu Das.” Some of the older people’s faces tightened.

Meera said, “When everything rests on someone’s labour, that person’s name belongs not at the bottom, but in the foundation.” Devika wrote Manglu Das’s name in the middle of the page.

The fourth child could not say her sister’s whole name. Her sister had been threatened on a mobile phone and silenced by the fear of shame. Meera said, “If she does not want her name made public, we will write only this: a daughter who was silenced not by shame, but by violence.” The register read, “One daughter—Present with dignity.”

An elderly mother spoke her own mother’s name, Phulkumari, a name she had been forbidden to say in her husband’s household. She took it from a charm tied in the corner of her sari. Nobody could read the paper inside, but as she spoke the name, the thread around the charm loosened on its own.

An old pandit arrived to object. “It is wrong to teach children things contrary to the scriptures in a school like this,” he said. Ananya asked, “Do the scriptures protect names, or do they erase them?”

By evening, the women who had listened from the edges all day began speaking softly to one another. They told of beatings at home, of violence because of love, of names whose stories had never been spoken. Meera said, “Some names need the night. Today’s lesson belonged to the children. The women will learn the next lesson tonight.”

On the empty page of the register, someone wrote in charcoal, “Next Lesson: The Women’s Night Assembly.”

Chapter 85

The Women's Night Assembly



That night, the women gathered silently around the stump of Channa Grove. Ba said, “Tonight we will read neither men’s papers nor government notices. Tonight, the body will speak.”

Meera said, “Whatever anyone tells us here will remain her own story. Anyone who wishes to be silent will have her silence recognised as present, too.”

Ujjwal’s mother laid her son’s old shirt beside the stump. “My son was not defeated by a screen alone,” she said. “He was defeated by the silence of a society that makes people afraid to speak of fraud at home

because they feel ashamed. My testimony today is this: before we speak of saving a son's soul, we must open a mother's ears."

A bridge worker's widow rose. "My name is Phulkumari. The water swallowed Munna's body beside the bridge pier. People kept calling me 'widow,' but no one asked my name."

Ira said, "Justice is incomplete without the memory of the leatherworker woman whose story was suppressed in Gangesha's life. Society kept the scholarly texts and erased the woman's name."

Ba said, "Gangesha wrote the Tattvachintamani, said to be equal to twelve thousand works. But if we cannot read the name of one woman of that society within it, what are those twelve thousand books worth, and to whom?"

Meera gave each woman a piece of red thread. They made a rule: a woman who had told her story would keep the thread on her own wrist. Telling a story did not make a woman public property.

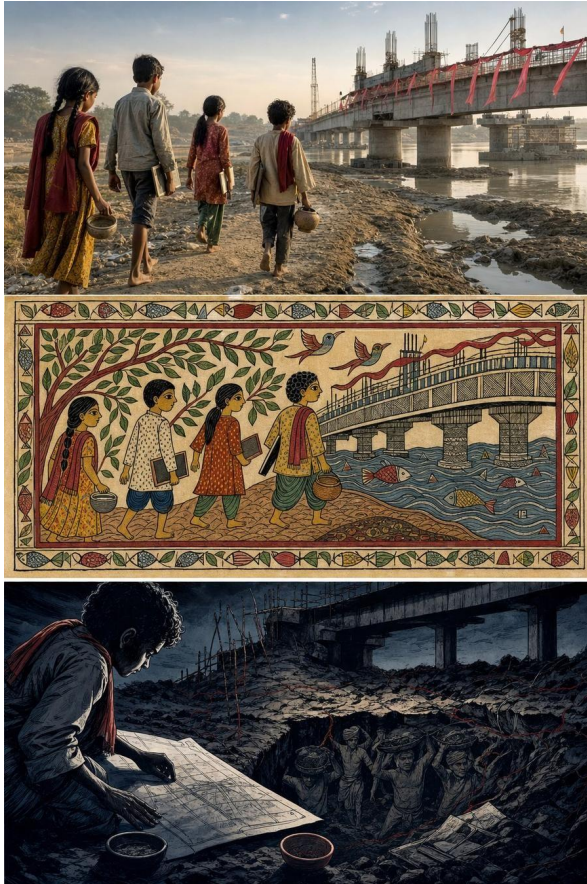
A young woman who had remained silent finally said, "Do not write the name of the person I love. Write this: a woman who, despite being afraid, refused to call the truth inside her a lie." Devika wrote, "Confidentially Present."

The meeting ended before dawn. They agreed on five things: no woman's story about her body without permission; any violence caused by the caste system must be questioned in the name of justice; the shame of digital fraud belongs to the fraudster, not the victim; the names of women in workers' families must be remembered alongside the workers' names; and privacy is part of the dignity of memory.

Looking at her cracked heels, Phulkumari said, "Tomorrow, we must study the workers' feet." "Present," the children replied. And so the story turned towards the feet of the labourers.

Chapter 86

The Workers' Feet



One morning, the children walked towards the bridge where the names of labourers had been left out years before. Munna Paswan's uncle, who wore no sandals, stood beside the first pier. "My brother's sweat fell here," he said. "His name is not on the paper, but the mark of his feet is here."

Ananya set down a bowl of clay. The uncle put his foot into it and left an imprint on a leaf. It was the first footprint: evidence not of a written name, but of a life that had walked upon the earth.

Ira wrote, "The foot of Munna Paswan's uncle: Labour Present." Ba let a single drop of water fall upon the imprint. It blurred the lines but did

not erase them. “That is what a worker’s name is like,” she said. “Tears may make it faint, but they cannot rub it away.”

One by one, workers’ families arrived and left their footprints: women, men and children. Devika said, “And the feet that walked to bring food home—were they not working too?”

Touching the bridge pier, Aruni said, “A bridge that does not keep the names of its workers is an unfinished bridge.” Ananya wrote, “A bridge is complete only when its feet are present.”

Chandrapal Batra’s people arrived carrying a ready-made plaque. “Give us the names, and we will have them printed,” they said. The old uncle answered, “Someone who cannot read the footprints will never be able to read the bones buried beneath the bridge.”

Meera said, “No one may take an image of a person’s footprint without that person’s permission.”

Satyavrat Mehta took off his shoes and tried to place his feet on the clay. “I am not a worker,” he said, “but let my feet be covered with the dust of this bridge’s silent crime.” Ananya replied, “Not your feet. Your silence has already been recorded.”

That night, the footprints were brought to the stump and placed beside the stones bearing names. The children opened a new section in the register: “The Record of Feet.” They wrote, “Those who walked this earth need not only garlands laid above their heads in memory, but justice for their feet.”

On the way home, Ananya said, “Tomorrow the screens will stay off at the school. We have studied feet today. Tomorrow, we must open our eyes and ears again.” The next day, Garh Narikel would begin its fast from screens.

Chapter 87

A Fast from Screens



The children announced that Garh Narikel would observe a day-long fast from screens. It would not be a fast from food, but a fast for the eyes.

Ananya placed an earthen pot beside the stump. “The screen pot,” she called it. Anyone who wished to put away a mobile phone could leave it there. No one was forced.

Devika put in her phone first. “A day of rest for it, too.” Meera added hers. “Today, let the eyes of the thing that once tried to sell my image remain closed.” Satyavrat Mehta placed his phone in the pot and said, “For years, when the phone rang, I got up and left in the middle of

someone's words. Today the phone will be silent, and I will remain seated." Ba put down her spectacles. "Today, I shall listen," she said.

That day, it seemed as if the village had found its ears again. They could hear the rooster and the clatter of a cooking spoon against a pot.

Beside Channa Grove, they held a storytelling lesson. One old story was told from each household. An elderly farmer declared, "The phone has eaten my field." The children wrote, "Phones do not eat fields. They eat away at togetherness."

At noon, the children played kabaddi with a new rule. Every child crossing the line had to say a name and tell that person's story. If the story remained unfinished, all the players would help complete it.

The women said, "Turning off a mobile phone is not enough. Merely seeing someone else's face or suffering does not make you its owner."

By evening, old village songs that had been drowned out by mobile ringtones returned. Shopkeepers wrote their accounts by hand. After many days, the shops seemed to smell of human connection again.

In a distant city, Chandrapal Batra grew uneasy when he saw the figures on his app falling.

At night, the children made new rules: phones would be switched off during the reading of names; nobody's tears would be photographed without permission; when frightened, people should knock on a human being's door rather than only turn to a phone.

At the end of the night, Ananya looked at the sky. Because Channa Grove had been cut down, the whole sky lay open above them. Stars appeared one by one. The children wrote, "Today the screens closed, and the sky opened."

Ira decided to write to the children of Garh Narikel who lived abroad. "If you hold a screen in your hands," she wanted to ask them, "can you still hear the names?"

Chapter 88

Ira's Letter to Children Abroad



On the day after the fast from screens, Ira sat down to write to the children of Garh Narikel living in other countries. “Dear children living far away,” she wrote, “Garh Narikel is not a picture from your holidays. It is your responsibility.”

“If you come to Garh Narikel, do not take a photograph first. Listen to a name first. If you pronounce it incorrectly, apologise to the name’s family.”

Ira added the story of Gangesha. “Mithila is not only a land of pride in caste; it is also a land of questions. If you listen to stories of Mithila’s greatness, listen to the injustices of Mithila, too.”

Ananya asked, "Will children born abroad be able to write their village's name?" "Perhaps not," Ira replied. "But a child who makes the effort can become a guardian."

The first letter crossed the sea that evening. Two days later, a reply came. A boy in Toronto named Neel, short for Neelkanth, wrote, "I have never visited Garh Narikel... but I will learn. Send me the first name."

A girl in Melbourne wrote, "My mother says there are too many problems in the village, and we should live in the city. But if people's names are buried beneath those problems, I want to hear them."

A child in Dubai wrote, "My father builds buildings, but his name is never written on them. Will his name be guarded, too?"

Every reply contained the same thought: "I am present, but I still have much to learn." The children made a stone for these letters and wrote on it, "Present from Afar."

Ira asked Satyavrat Mehta, "How can we hear the testimony of people who live far away and do not know the language?" Satyavrat wrote in reply, "A public hearing is not only for bodies that are present, but for responsibilities that are present, too. At our next hearing, we will read the letters from the children abroad."

The following morning, Ananya wrote a heading in the register: "Satyavrat's Public Hearing." The village understood that listening now had no borders.

Chapter 89

Satyavrat's Public Hearing



The first reply from abroad was a map drawn by a child. It asked, “Where should I put my grandmother’s name on this?” Ananya said, “A person who lives far from the land needs even more room for a name.”

The day of Satyavrat Mehta’s public hearing arrived. There was no stage, no chairs—only people sitting on the ground around the stump. “Today I am not the chairman,” said Satyavrat. “First of all, I am a listener.”

An old register, dry leaves and an empty earthen bowl were placed in the middle. Ba said, “Those who cannot speak their words may place their silence here.”

The first testimony came from an elderly leatherworker woman. “The same caste society that is happy to see me making sandals does not want to see my daughter studying the scriptures,” she said. “Who makes the shoes that carry knowledge?”

Ira read a letter from abroad. “At my school, the teacher said, ‘Correct the spelling of your grandmother’s name.’ But my grandmother’s name was not a spelling. It was her voice.”

A young man from a worker’s family said, “On paper, my father was a temporary labourer. In the water, he became permanent.” The children wrote, “The permanent water burial of a temporary name.”

Satyavrat said, “I will not pass judgement on these testimonies. Today, each testimony will remain in its own form.”

In the evening, the children drew the kabaddi line. Touching the stones bearing names, they began calling, “Present.” The public hearing had become a game; justice had a body again.

By night, the empty bowl seemed heavy. So much silence had been placed in it. The elderly leatherworker woman said, “If you want to lift silence, let go of caste, shame, fear, position—all of them.” Ananya touched the bowl, and it rose.

Ananya wrote in the register, “We need rules to guard names.” The children wrote six rules, among them “Do not erase names,” “Do not make a spectacle of suffering,” and “Do not destroy the truth of a life in the name of caste.” The public hearing had become the birthplace of the people’s code.

Chapter 90

The Constitution of Names



On the day after the public hearing, there was no ordinary lesson at the school. The teacher said, “Today we shall write rather than read—the rules you want to make for guarding names.”

Ba said, “A constitution is made by a society willing to look at its own wrongs. First look at the wrongs. Then write the rules.”

Together, the children made fourteen rules:

1. Devika: “Names must not be erased.”
2. Meera: “Privacy must not be sold.”
3. Soumya: “No one’s body shall be dishonoured.”

4. Aruni: "Memory must not be handed over to a contractor."
5. From Gangesha's questions: "Justice must not be killed in the name of caste."
6. Gop Kumar: "The truth on paper is incomplete without the voices of people."
7. From the fast from screens: "Do not let convenience become your master."
8. From kabaddi: "Return before you run out of breath, but do not abandon your teammate."
9. Ba: "Give the first seat to those whose names have not been found."
10. Satyavrat Mehta: "Keep an account of silence. Write the name of the person who commits a crime; also record the silence of the one who sees it and says nothing."
11. In memory of those who drowned: "Do not claim ownership of what the water has kept."
12. From Ira's letter: "A village is not a souvenir picture, but a responsibility."
13. There was a debate about forgiveness: "Forgiveness is not something to be declared. It is born slowly from listening."
14. About the future: "Children shall be guardians, elders witnesses, women keepers of the code, and workers owners of the earth."

When the question arose of who would stamp this constitution, Ananya soaked a dry fibre from the stump in water and placed it in a corner of the page. "The seal of the roots," she said. The children dipped their thumbs in clay and pressed their marks beneath the rules.

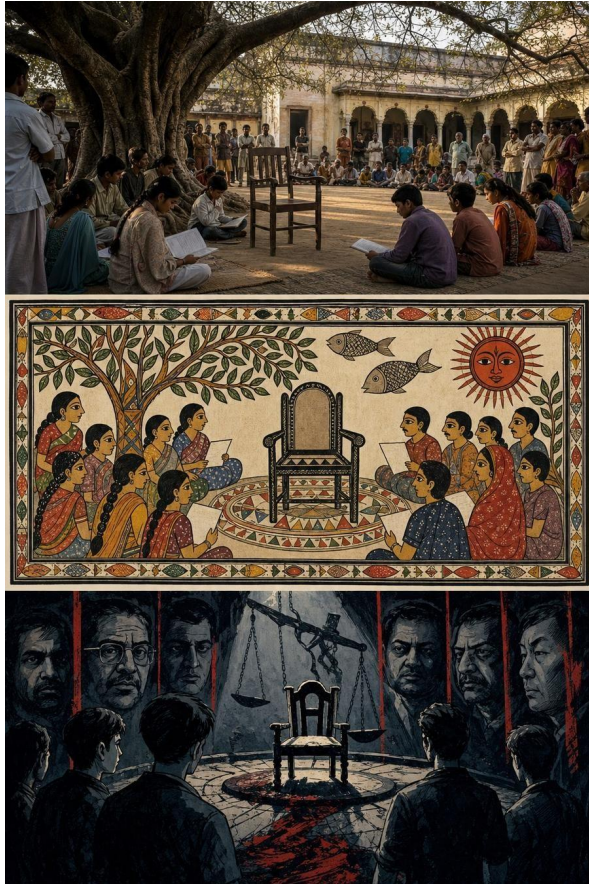
That night, the rules were read aloud all around the stump. After each one, the people said, "Present."

Far away, the lines of these rules began to glow of their own accord: in Batuknath Hariharan's house, on Chandrapal's machine, on Raghav's phone, in Lau Kin-hung's room and upon Broom's donation deed. Garh Narikel had made its rules, and its testimony had been recorded, but the wrongdoers remained absent. Now came the next question: when a

society makes its own constitution, is the absence of the schemers a punishment, or the beginning of another conspiracy?

Chapter 91

The Absence of the Scheming Men



A question arose at the gathering: should the people who had caused so much suffering be invited? Some young men said, “Invite them.” The women said, “No. Why should everyone be punished by having to look at their faces again?”

Ananya announced her decision. “We will read the names of those who are present. We will also read the absence of those who are not. But we will not give them a stage. Those whose names were killed, drowned or stolen must have the first places. The schemers belong at the edges.”

Satyavrat Mehta wrote, “Evidence of absence: when the wrongdoers were not invited to speak, the voices of those who had suffered grew stronger.”

In a distant city, Batuknath Hariharan waited, but no invitation came. For the first time, he understood that some things could happen without him.

Chandrapal Batra kept searching his phone for pictures of Channa Grove, but no notification appeared. He realised that the people were meeting with their phones switched off. The greatest defeat for the network was that, for one whole day, people did not think they needed it at all.

Lau Kin-hung was told that his name had not been read out and his donation had not been accepted. “You have been kept at the edge,” the interpreter explained. At first Lau did not understand: in Garh Narikel, being kept at the edge was a punishment.

At the back of the register, the children opened a page with a black border and wrote, “Those Who Wounded Names.” On it they wrote each schemer’s misdeeds in large letters, and the person’s name in very small ones. Ba said, “Write the wrongdoing large and the wrongdoer small. Otherwise the wrongdoer will die, while the wrongdoing lives again under another name.”

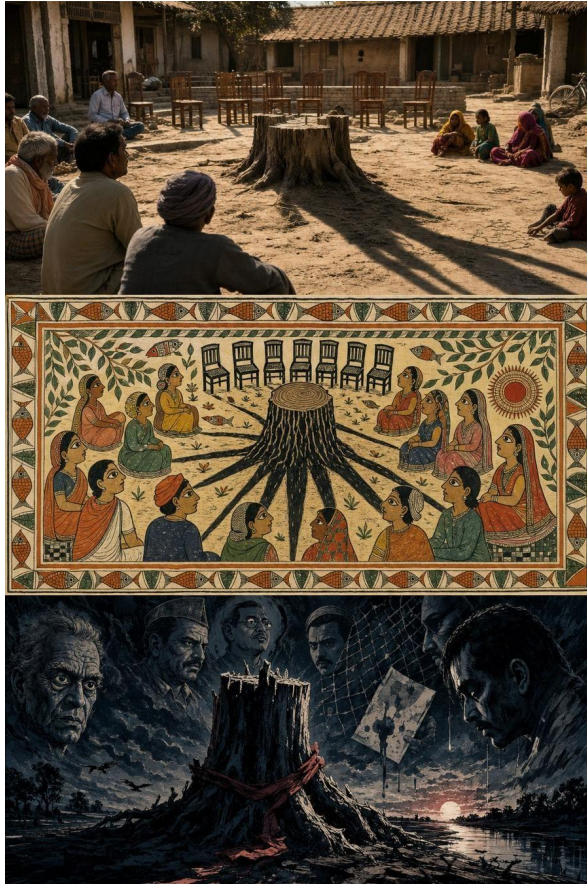
Meera asked, “If we do not let them speak, is that cowardice?” Ananya replied, “No. Today we will not measure our wounds by the look in their eyes. Today we will speak our names with our own mouths.”

In the evening, a long, dark shadow stretched from the western edge of the stump. Ba said, “That is not the grove’s shadow. It is the shadow of the absent ones who have been kept outside the guarding of names.”

Ananya wrote in the register, “The Shadow of the Stump.” The schemers remained absent, but their shadow became the next day’s lesson.

Chapter 92

The Shadow of the Stump



After the schemers were kept away, the stump's shadow began to grow unnaturally long. The grove had been cut down, yet its shadow was long and wavy, stretching towards the old course of the Kamala-Balan River.

Ba said, "In a grove's shade, the body finds rest. In a stump's shade, the mind finds responsibility."

A boy asked, "Is a shadow evidence?" Ananya said, "The shadow itself is something we can see; the memory of the grove is something we can infer; Ba's account is testimony in words; and the fourth kind of

evidence is the crying in the home of the person whose name the shadow covers.”

Meera added a line to the rules: “A shadow may be photographed, but a face may not be photographed without permission.”

Batuknath’s daughter arrived carrying her father’s old pen. “My father signed so many petitions with this pen,” she said. “May I leave it beside the stone?” Ananya asked, “Is the pen guilty, or the hand?” They put the pen on the earth behind the stone, not on the stone itself.

Kabaddi was played again that night, but this time the ghosts did not enter the field. They only watched. When the moon rose, the shadow became a line of silver. Ba said, “A shadow made from memory keeps its light even in darkness.”

At midnight, Aruni looked towards the sky. Far away, black clouds were moving towards Garh Narikel. The stump’s shadow stretched further towards the water.

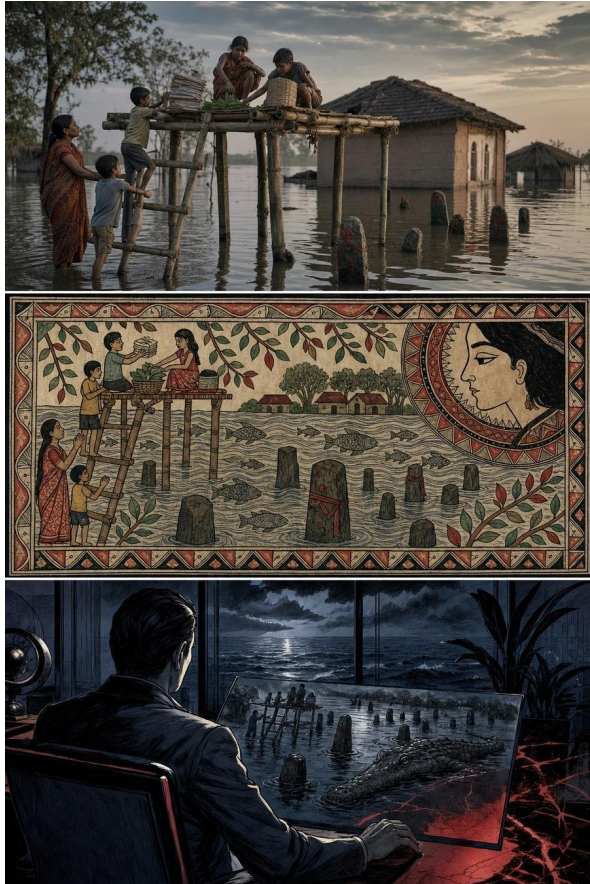
Ananya immediately said, “Tie up the register. Do not move the stones bearing names, but make copies of what is written on them.” The children began copying the names onto paper, cloth and clay tablets.

Before dawn, the first raindrop fell—right on the stone inscribed “Those Whose Names Have Not Been Found.” Ba said, “The rain brought news first to those whose names are still missing.”

The smell of the river was unmistakable now. The Kamala-Balan was returning.

Chapter 93

The Flood Returns



The waters of the Kamala-Balan did not stay silent at first. The river sent its smell ahead to announce another flood. Clouds gathered above the green speck on the stump. Ananya said, “This time we must save not only the tree, but the names as well.”

Ba sat on the veranda and said, “When the water comes, it does not ask permission first. But now we must ask: whom will we take with us? Which names will we save?”

Devika and Meera wrapped the pages of names in waterproof bags. Gop Kumar brought his secret list, tied up for safety. But Ananya said,

“Our copies must live not only on paper, but in our voices.” The children began memorising ten names each.

The first heavy rain burst upon them. Houses, lanes and ponds began to disappear beneath the water. Yet the writing on the stones bearing names did not fade. It seemed to grow darker. Ba said, “Look! Ink that has been heard aloud does not fear water.”

At night, the children did not try to lift the stones. Instead, they pressed impressions of each stone into clay and set a small coconut leaf over each one. “The stone may sink, but its imprint will remain.”

Old Baba Ghost said, “In a flood, breath faces its truest test. Whoever can say ‘Kabaddi’ amid the water can carry a name out of the house of fear.” The children stood knee-deep in water with rain beating on their heads and formed a circle. “Saryu—Present!” “Ujjwal—Present!” Kabaddi had become a boat for names.

Aruni gave the order: “People first, documents next, stones last.” The children added, “The names will go with the people.”

Satyavrat Mehta set up a temporary listening corner in the school building. Meera kept saying, “Even the suffering of a flood must not be made into a spectacle.”

At midnight, the green speck on the stump shimmered beneath the water. Old Baba Ghost said, “The tree is reading the flood.”

But greed grew watchful in the disaster, too. A fake relief account flashed on Chandrapal’s app; the words “Disaster Opportunity” appeared in Raghav’s code.

At dawn, a long black shape appeared on the misty water, with two shining eyes. Old Baba Ghost whispered, “Now they are returning as well.” The flood had come, the names were being saved, and the next testimony was about to rise from beneath the water.

Chapter 94

The Crocodiles Return



That night, the water began to shine black like oil. A long line sliced across its surface. Someone whispered the word, “Crocodile.”

Fear spread, but Ananya did not retreat. “Watch how it breathes,” she said. “A creature that has come to eat will hurry. One that has come to watch a boundary will hold its breath and swim slowly.”

The largest crocodile stopped directly in front of the stump. It did not come any farther, but stared down towards the submerged roots. Ba said, “They are not merely creatures that eat. They are also keepers of boundaries.”

The stone marked “Those Whose Names Have Not Been Found” floated towards the crocodiles. The great crocodile nudged it gently back to the bank. The children wrote, “The guardianship of the unnamed was returned by a crocodile.”

An old boatman said, “My father used to say that a crocodile eats bodies but overturns a boat of lies. When names are spoken, the water grows calm.”

The children formed a kabaddi circle in the floodwater, with crocodiles in the outer circle and children inside. “Kabaddi, kabaddi.” Ananya said, “We will not break the circle. We will not abandon the names. The crocodile is not the enemy; it marks a boundary.” A boy asked, “What is a boundary?” Ananya answered, “It is where pride ends and listening begins.”

In the middle of the night, the water began to recede. The largest crocodile turned once more towards the green speck on the stump, then swept its tail through the water, making a circular line, and vanished. Ba said, “Did you see? The game has not ended. The water has drawn the playing line.”

At dawn, Ira received a message from abroad. A company had proposed buying the flood-stricken land of memory for a “Water Safety and Future Housing” project. It was the same network of Lau, Broom and Chandrapal. Ananya said, “Now they want to buy not just memory, but water, too.” Ira replied, “Then our next lesson will be about making deals.”

The return of the crocodiles was not the end of fear. It was the beginning of the next struggle.

Chapter 95

Lau Kin-hung's Final Offer



In the middle of the flood, a glossy proposal arrived from Lau Kin-hung. It promised flood relief, a school and a memorial building. But buried among the conditions were these: copies of the records would be deposited elsewhere, the children would be called “trained volunteers,” and the land would pass into “joint management.”

Ira read a hidden part of the letter: a distant project called “Nameless Settlement,” which proposed moving talented people to a safe place in the future. She understood that this was not simply an offer to buy a village. It was an advertisement for the dream of leaving Earth.

The letter reached the village, but Ananya would not take it. “First, this paper will listen,” she said. The proposal was placed on a bamboo platform, its reflection trembling in the floodwater.

Satyavrat Mehta read aloud the phrases “Humanitarian Cooperation,” “Global Expertise” and “Local Community Participation.” Ananya wrote, “Those who seek power over others first speak of participation.”

Ba said, “Give a child an official title and the child will no longer be a child. Change the name of the guardian and you change the guardianship.”

Ira said, “This is a new mouth of the crocodile. It will not chew up bodies; it will chew up gratitude, and use it to claim other people’s names as its own.”

Ananya announced, “We will not answer on paper.” The children sat on the platform and began reading names amid the flood: Sarayu, Ujjwal, Gangesha. Each name sounded different over the water.

That night, a corner of the proposal in Lau’s building grew damp all by itself. He touched it and murmured, “They are not asking for a price... They do not even want to leave their Earth.” For the first time, his plan for a “Nameless Settlement” seemed to tremble.

Ananya wrote in the register, “An offer came, and it was heard. We did not simply say no; we sentenced it to listen to the names.”

Just then, Batuknath Hariharan approached the bamboo platform empty-handed through the darkness of the flood. Trembling, he said, “Let me listen to the names for one night. I need to change the kind of ears I have.” The following night would test his long-delayed plea for forgiveness.

Chapter 96

Batuknath's Long-Delayed Forgiveness



On the third day, Batuknath Hariharan came alone, without a car or a lawyer. Dust clung to his feet, as though the earth had caught hold of him for the first time.

He said to Satyavrat Mehta, "I have come to ask forgiveness." Satyavrat answered, "Not from me. Ask those whose names are read here." Ananya added, "Here you will be heard not as a legal case, but through the names."

Batuknath sat at the edge of the stump, facing the stone inscribed "Those Whose Names Have Not Been Found." The first name was read:

Sarayu. Batuknath trembled. He remembered how many times postponing a hearing could be like killing someone a second time.

The second name was Ujjwal; the third, Munna Paswan. After each one, those gathered said, "Present." At first Batuknath kept constructing arguments in his defence, but as the night deepened, his excuses grew tired.

When the name "Gangesha" was read, Batuknath suddenly cried, "I am guilty." Ananya asked, "Guilty towards whom?" Batuknath replied, "Towards names. I turned names into cases, instead of seeing human beings."

A young man shouted angrily, "You say that now? After everyone has died?" Meera said, "Anger is present, too. It deserves a place."

The last name was read: "Unnamed." Batuknath wanted to answer "Present," but his throat was dry. At last, with great effort, he managed a whisper: "Present."

The sun was rising. Batuknath asked, "Have I been forgiven?" Ananya said, "Forgiveness is not a verdict. It is a practice. We will read the names again tomorrow. Come back."

For the first time, Batuknath left without an answer, empty-handed. Yet the weight of those empty hands felt greater than the weight of all the offices he had held.

That morning, the accounts screen on Chandrapal Batra's phone opened of its own accord. In every line, instead of "Credit" and "Debit," the same word began to glow: "Intermediary." Half asleep, Chandrapal murmured, "I only moved the money around." The screen replied, "Mule." The door to the next story had opened.

Chapter 97

Chandrapal's Mule Account



Chandrapal Batra did not go to listen to names all night. Instead, he sat alone in his old room. On the table lay an old account book, a switched-off mobile phone and a speck of dust from a stone in Channa Grove.

He began to think. He had opened many accounts during his life, but in truth he himself had been opened up and used. He had thought he was the owner, when he had only been a passage. Money flowed from place to place, and wrongdoing moved from hand to hand.

Gangesha's question troubled him: how could something be proved? He felt like a pack mule carrying a load that did not belong to it.

He began writing his name: “Chandrapal Batra.” His hand stopped. The pen moved to the next line of its own accord and wrote, “Percentage.” The third time, his hand shook. He wrote, “Chandrapal Batra, mule account... the route through which wrongdoing passed.”

There was a knock at the door. A wet leaf slid inside. On it was written, “Whose account was it?” Chandrapal wrote, “Mine, too.”

He saw account books floating on the water, looking like small crocodiles. Their open mouths were chewing not money, but names. He wondered what society’s face would look like if all its accounts were opened.

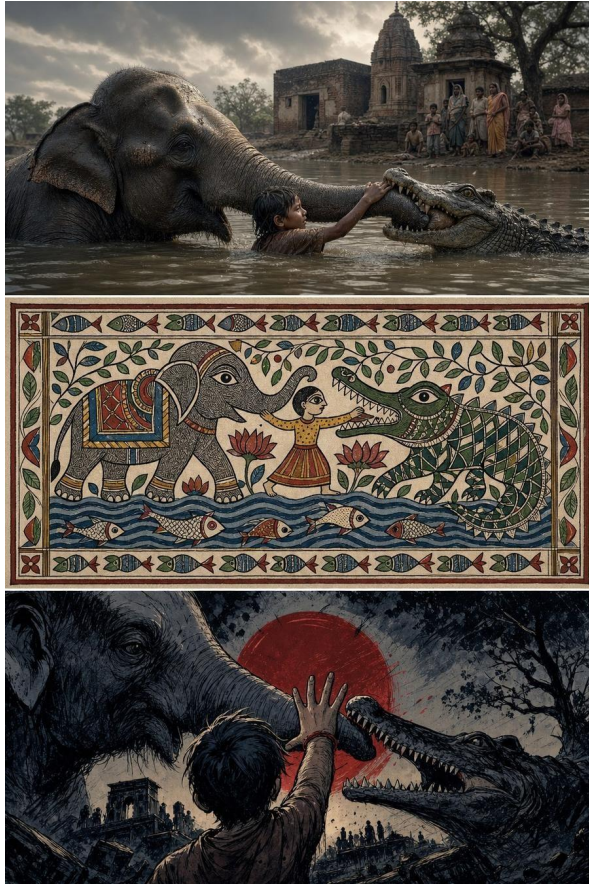
He picked up his switched-off phone and wrote, “I was an intermediary, but I was not innocent.”

At dawn, Chandrapal wrapped his account books and leaves in cloth. Limping through the floodwater, he set out for Channa Grove. In his mind he said, “Write my full name, but write my percentage as well. Do not call the person through whom wrongdoing passed merely a victim. Call him a path that helped the crime along.”

At that moment, the water stirred. No crocodile appeared, but the water parted as though the river were saying that the opening of the accounts had begun. As Chandrapal reached the stump, Raghav’s phone gave one last flash: “The message will not be erased.”

Chapter 98

Raghav's Final Message



Five devices were glowing in Raghav Signal Somani's room. He wrote many messages, then kept deleting them: "Close the accounts." "Open a new route."

He closed his eyes and saw an enormous dark room where thousands of deleted messages hung like leaves. The vanished messages had not vanished at all. They had become leaves on the second body of Channa Grove.

He tried to write his full name, "Raghav Somani," but the screen displayed "Raghav Signal Somani."

At last he wrote, "I am afraid." The message went through. A reply came: "Present." In that single word, he seemed to hear the voices of the children gathered around the stump.

He wrote again, "The account is not closed; the soul has opened." This message would not be deleted. A green line sprouted across the screen, and the letters became like the veins of a leaf. The room filled with the scent of fresh green growth. Frightened, Raghav threw down the phone. A tiny green leaf broke free from the screen and flew into the air.

Far away in Garh Narikel that night, a leaf came and stuck to the edge of the stump. It said, "The account is not closed; the soul has opened." Ananya placed a stone beneath the leaf and wrote, "Waiting."

Raghav sat down to write on ordinary paper: "The silence I enforced was a crime." He could not finish. He stopped after the first line. He had never practised writing the truth.

When Satyavrat Mehta saw the leaf, he said, "This is not testimony. It is the doorway to testimony." Ananya asked, "Who will testify?" Satyavrat replied, "Those who failed to speak when they should have must speak first. I must, too."

That evening, the leaf stirred lightly. A tiny line appeared beneath the words: "The debt of listening remains unpaid." Satyavrat's hand went of its own accord towards his bag, which held an old register and an ink pen.

Chapter 99

Satyavrat Mehta's Testimony



Raghav's message, turned into a leaf, remained on the stump: "The account is not closed; the soul has opened." Ananya said, "The soul opens only when someone gives testimony."

At these words, Satyavrat Mehta began to tremble. The people's code said, "Whoever listens must also write down the name of their own silence." He took a white page from his bag and wrote, "The Testimony of Satyavrat Mehta." Ananya asked, "Will you not write your official title?" He answered, "The heavier the title, the more often a person hides behind it."

With shaking hands, he wrote, “Many times I could have spoken when it mattered, but I did not.”

He continued, “When the names of the bridge workers were removed from the list, I wrote, ‘The process is under way.’ While the process continued, their bodies decayed.”

He added a memory of Gangesha. “If great care over evidence is turned against caste-oppressed people, workers, the poor or the dead, it is no longer justice but cleverness. Many times I, too, dismissed uncomfortable truths as ‘procedural difficulties.’ That was the caste system of my silence.”

Ananya wrote in the register, “The Caste System of Silence.”

At the end he wrote, “I ask forgiveness for this, but asking is not enough. Let the history of my position and every delay in my decisions be made public.”

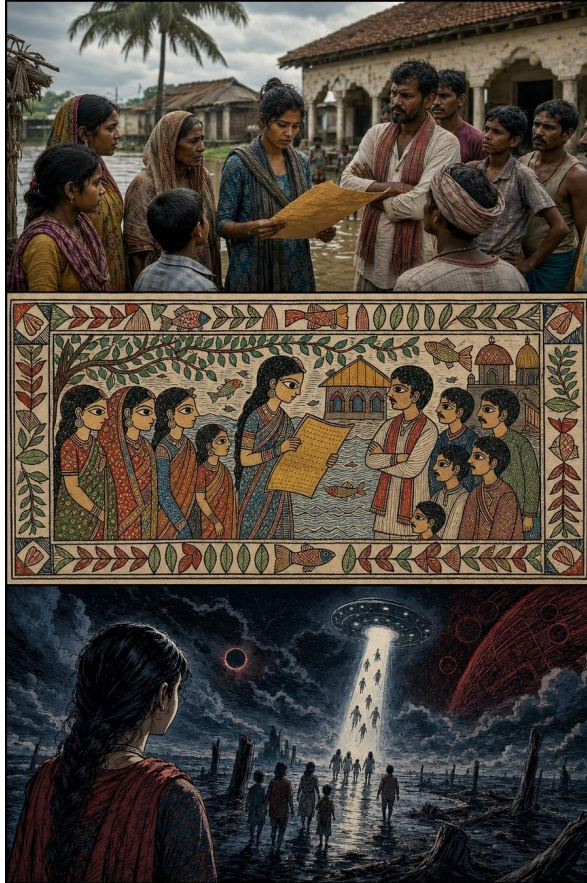
He gave the page to Ananya. She placed it among the names, inside the circle of stones.

For the first time, Old Baba Ghost appeared in his full form, the colour of the earth—neither black nor grey. He said to Satyavrat, “You have written your testimony. Will you now listen? Listening needs not only ears, but hands. Next time the crocodile catches hold, the elephant will need more than a cry for help. It will need a hand to hold.”

That night, Satyavrat’s testimony was pasted into the register with the words, “Silence, now seated to serve its sentence of listening.” The children said with one voice, “Present.”

Chapter 100

The Elephant, the Crocodile, and a Child's Hand



That night, Ba said, “Tell the story of the elephant and the crocodile once more.” Ananya asked, “Who is the elephant? Who is the crocodile?” Meera said, “If someone claims to be saving you without your permission, that is not a helping hand. It is another crocodile.”

Ananya wrote a heading in the register: “The Elephant, the Crocodile, and a Child's Hand.”

Ujjwal's mother told her story. “My son called out, but at first we thought his cry was something shameful, and then we met it with silence. We reached out too late.” Devika said, “From today, recognising

the digital crocodile will not be only a lesson about crime. First we must listen to the cries buried under fear.”

Aruni spoke about the workers. “The real crocodile was the paper on which the workers’ names became mere entries for wages. A crocodile is not only a pair of jaws. It can be language, too.”

Meera said, “For me, the elephant is the woman whose privacy has been seized. The crocodile is the eye of a whole society that wants to look at her without showing respect.”

Old Baba Ghost said, “Sometimes an elephant is trapped inside a wrongdoer, too. But before that elephant is freed, we must see whether it will name its own crocodile.”

Batuknath’s inner elephant was trapped in paperwork. The children asked, “Say your whole name.” After a long time, all he could say was “Batak.” This was not freedom, only the beginning of an admission.

When Chandrapal Batra was asked, he first said, “Commission,” and then, “Chandrapal.” Ananya wrote, “Saying a name is not enough. The debt carried by that name must still be heard.”

Raghav Signal tried to cross the kabaddi line, but he could not hold his breath and say “Kabaddi.” Meera said, “Someone who spent his life erasing other people’s voices must first bear the weight of silence.”

The elephant inside Lau Kin-hung wanted to flee Earth for another planet. Ba said, “Those who fear names on Earth go looking for a nameless sky. But the guardians of names can reach there, too.”

The children played kabaddi. Ananya crossed the line. From under the water, the shadow of a crocodile asked, “Will you save me?” “First, say your name,” Ananya replied. Then came the elephant’s voice: “Present.” The crocodile loosened its teeth. This was not a rescue. It was the first touch of justice.

At dawn, the green speck on the stump opened into two new leaves. The story was moving beyond the village, the bridge and the courtroom, towards a call that had come from another planet.

Chapter 101

A Dream Invitation from an Unnamed Planet



After the story of the elephant and the crocodile, the night grew deep. Aruni sat beside the stump, reading an advertisement, and fell asleep. It said: “New Horizon Human Settlement: A New Beginning Without Sorrow.”

In his dream he saw a shining planet. There were no rivers there, no roots of trees. Instead of names, every house bore a number. Everyone smiled, for no one remembered losing anything. Their memories of sorrow had been erased.

Aruni understood that forgetting could be a kind of violence too. Once pain was forgotten, those who had caused it were freed from having to answer for their deeds.

Ba's voice rang out: "If someone has no name, how will you put a comforting hand on that person's head?" Ananya asked, "Are all these people equal, or have they all been made nameless at once?"

Meera read the words "Cultural Memory Specimen" written on a wall. "I am not a specimen," she said. "My story will go nowhere without my permission."

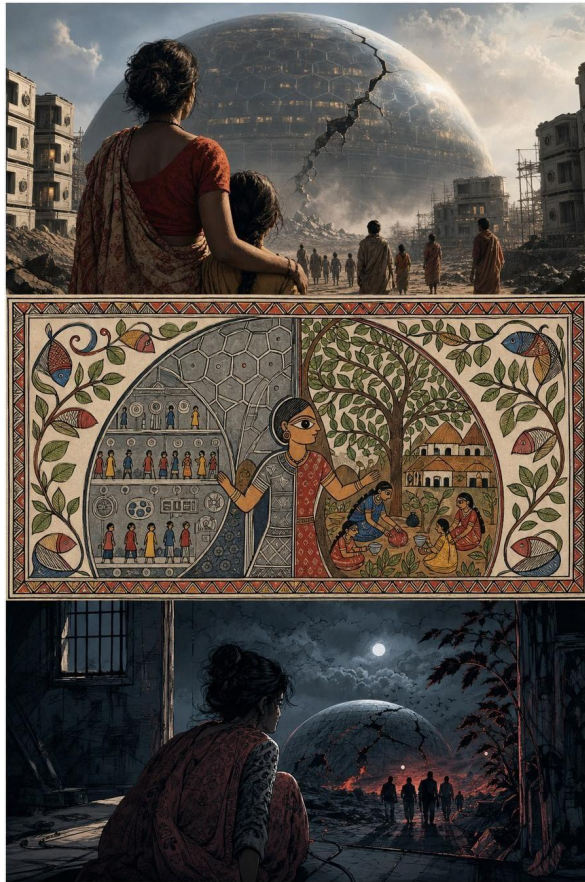
Far away, in a glass room, Lau Kin-hung went to sign a document, only to find his own name wiped from its page. Chandrapal's "percentage" remained, but "Chandrapal" vanished. Batuknath's title survived, but "Batuk" disappeared. This dream of escape was swallowing the wrongdoers' identities first.

Aruni understood that this was no scientific voyage. It was the criminal network's next move: in the name of keeping people safe, make their histories useless.

Ananya took his hand. "We shall cross the line," she said, "but we shall bring one name back with us." With those words, the shining planet's invitation ceased to be a promise of the future and became a question.

Chapter 102

Kabaddi Among the Planets in a Dream



The shadows of the children descended upon the unnamed planet of the dream. Ananya made a rule: whoever crossed the line must find a forgotten name and bring it back. Whoever forgot the name would lose that turn.

Trembling herself, she said, “Ujjwal,” and took the first step.

The guards of the dome had no faces. They had numbers on their chests. “Names give birth to sorrow,” they said. “Give up your names.” Meera answered, “Sorrow is not born from names, but from the wrongs committed against those who bear them. This body is mine. Let it be evidence, not a spectacle.”

Satyavrat tried to cross the line. First he called himself “Officer,” then “Witness,” but the line would not open. At last he said, “I am the man who saw what happened and remained silent for far too long.” The line shifted a little.

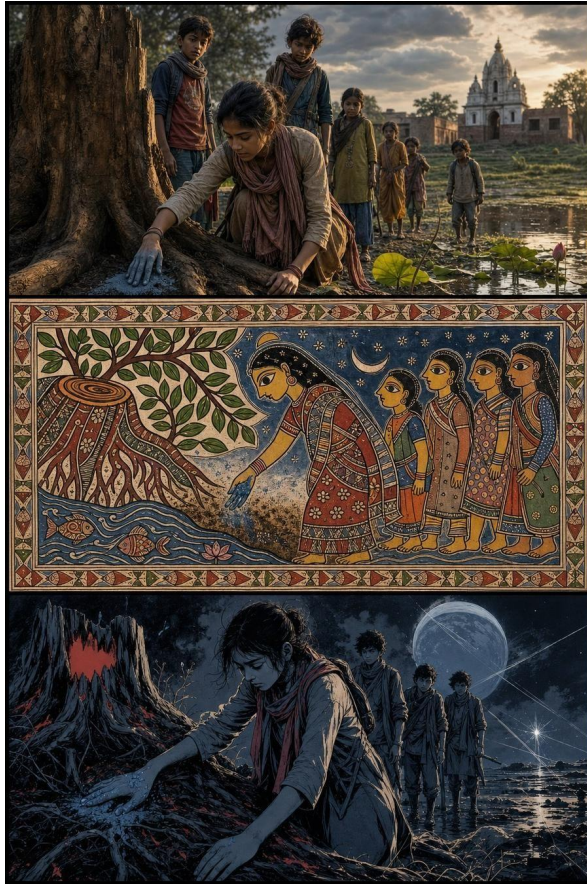
Aruni placed his hand upon the ground. It had no scent and no life. He realised that a chain of evidence is not made of instruments alone. Behind every link stands a human being with a name.

Ananya reached the centre of the dome, touched the blank wall and whispered, “Present.” The first clear crack appeared in it.

From beyond the crack came the smell of water. For the first time, Earth’s water entered the memoryless planet of the dream. The game was not over. The lesson in names had begun.

Chapter 103

The Lesson in Names on the Dream Planet



Inside the crack lay a vast hall. Only numbers were written on its walls: 30, 300, 791. When Ananya read the first name, what emerged behind the number was not merely a face, but a relationship: someone's mother, someone's child. Names were beginning to turn numbers back into people.

Meera read the women's names, adding after each one, "Her story must not be told without her permission."

Batuknath sat in his dream courtroom. For the first time, he understood that what truly frightened him was not greed, but the fear of losing respect.

Chandrapal remembered a day in childhood when his teacher had mispronounced his name and he had come home in tears. Yet, despite remembering that humiliation, he had reduced thousands of people's names to percentages. His self-pity did not redeem him; it only made his hypocrisy plain.

However many messages Raghav erased, they kept appearing again upon the wall. He covered his ears, but the voices he had deleted continued to rise from within.

"Names obstruct the market," said Lau Kin-hung. "Yes," Ananya replied, "because names demand an accounting."

On an empty line of the register, Aruni wrote, "Those whose names have not yet been found." The largest number on the wall broke apart.

The planet was not destroyed after the lesson in names. Only its glitter faded, revealing ordinary grey earth beneath. As memory returned, the supposed paradise came to an end. Only then did the possibility of real life begin.

Chapter 104

Awakening: Garh Narikel Chooses Earth



Aruni awoke with a start. Dawn light lay upon the stump. Ananya, Meera, Satyavrat and the children were there too. They all remembered the same blank wall and the same crack opened by the word “Present.”

Ba said, “The body need not travel for us to go very far. But when we wake, our feet must still step upon Earth.”

Meera tied her red thread again. “My story will survive,” she said, “but only with my consent.” Satyavrat wrote, “Forgetting is not rehabilitation.”

Aruni investigated. “New Horizon” was not a real plan for travelling to another planet. It was a trial advertisement run by the criminal

network—a digital campaign designed to measure people’s fear and their longing to escape. Broom, Lau, Chandrapal and Raghav were all connected with it.

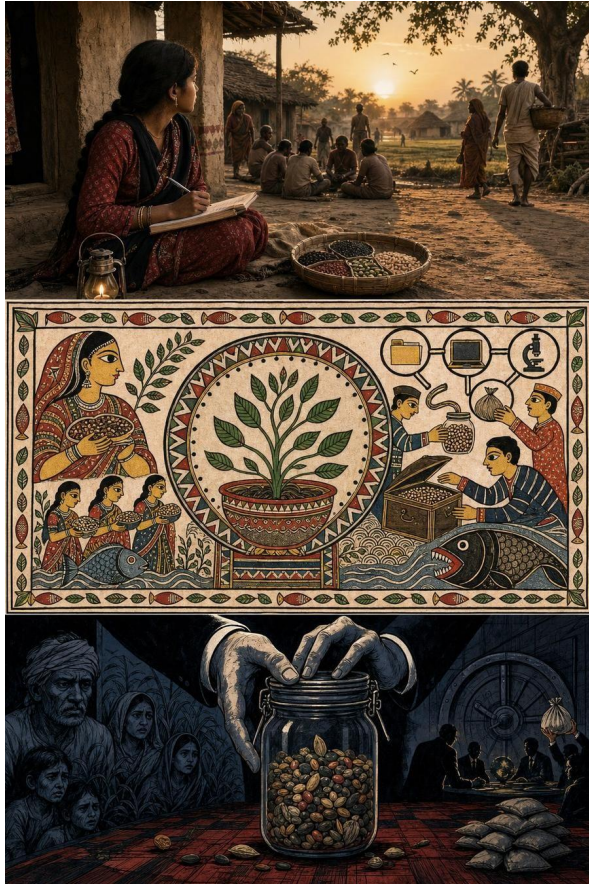
The children wrote down their decision: “We shall not erase sorrow; we shall change what causes it. We shall not abandon Earth and leave crimes unaccounted for. Where a name has been crossed out, we shall write it again.”

For Batuknath, Chandrapal and Raghav, this decision was no letter of forgiveness. They were given the work of restoring names: open the files, listen to the voices, stand before the people you made invisible.

Dew shone on the new shoot growing from Channa’s stump. Beneath it Ananya wrote, “We choose Earth, because here we must give our answers.”

Chapter 105

The First Watch over Earth



Ananya touched the bark of the stump. Blue dust, like the dust she had seen in the dream, clung to her hand. But when it fell upon the damp roots of Channa Grove, the soil drank it up at once. Ananya understood: nameless dust cannot remain separate upon Earth. It must mingle with the history held in the soil.

Ba said, “Anyone who chooses Earth chooses more than soil. That person chooses their dead, their crimes, their river and their failures—all of them.”

Satyavrat added a new line to his sworn statement: “There is no freedom to be found by leaving Earth. We must seek freedom here, by protecting names.”

The children gave Batuknath only one task: search the old files for names buried within them. For the first time, Batuknath understood that punishment was sometimes not humiliation, but work.

Devika told Chandrapal, “Wherever names were stolen through your work, write those names back.” “I don’t know how to write them,” Chandrapal said. “Then listen,” Ananya replied. “There are children who can write.”

Raghav’s final leaf remained stuck to the stump. Beneath it the children wrote, “The first proof that a soul is opening: look at the people you made invisible.”

Ananya read out the new rules of kabaddi: “One breath for Earth, one for water, one for names and one for those whose names have not been found. Anyone who breaks the breath will not be sent out, but will sit and listen.”

That night the stones kept beside the stump began to make a faint sound—the sound of agreement rising together from within the soil. “Earth is accepting our watch,” Ba said.

In the morning the children wrote down their first pledge: “We shall not abandon Earth. We shall save Earth. Whenever a name is erased, we shall write it again.”

“I am on Earth,” said one child. “Present,” answered another. “The watch begins,” said a third. The stump of Channa Grove was no longer a tree, yet it still held the determination to become one. In the morning breeze, it drew a long, deep breath.

Chapter 106

The Seeds Give Testimony



In the morning, Ba had something new to say. “We have stood guard over names. Now stand guard over seeds.” She drew a circle in the earth. “Those who erase names also erase seeds. And if the seeds are eaten up, where will the next generation find even the words to speak?”

At noon, seeds were spread upon a mat at the school: rice, sesame, finger millet and makhana. With every kind of seed came questions about its story. Who had kept it? In which season? With which song?

Devika said, “Those who speak of the unnamed dream planet are preparing to steal the names of seeds too.”

Old Baba Ghost laughed. “Seeds do not ask anyone’s caste. Put rice in a leatherworker’s hand or a Brahmin’s hand: it will grow with whoever gives it soil, water, labour and time. It was human beings who built fences inside their own heads.”

In the evening, the women came carrying seeds from their homes in old tins, earthen jars and cloth bundles. “These came from my mother-in-law,” said one. “These survived the year of famine,” said another. Meera told them, “If you do not wish to share a seed’s story, you need not. Seeds have a right to privacy too.”

Just then a government jeep arrived. A sign announced an “Improved Seed Collection and Climate Protection Project.” A local official said, “The old seeds will be kept safe in a seed bank.” “Will their names go with them?” Devika asked. “Their numbers will,” the official replied. The little shoot on the stump trembled.

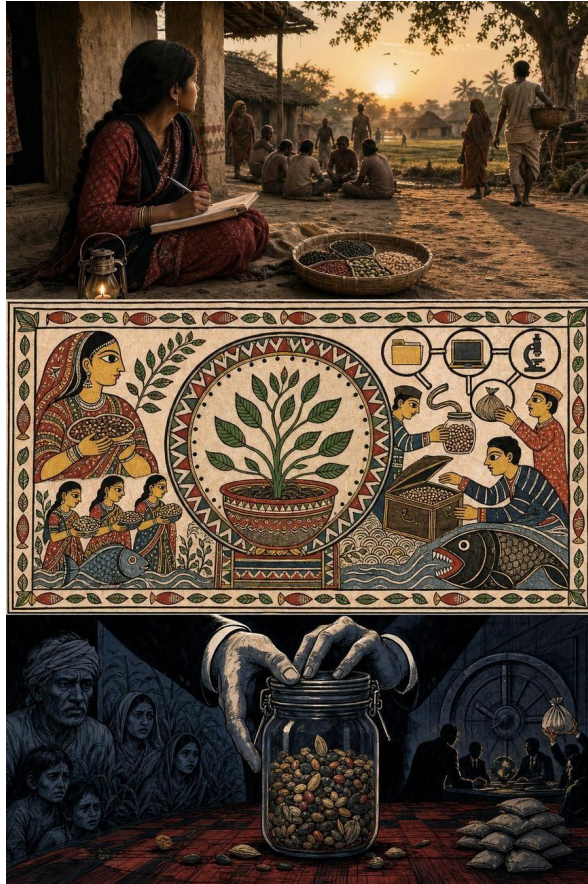
Gop Kumar examined a tablet. It listed seed codes, caste and “commercial potential.” “This is not an inventory for conservation,” he said. “It is an inventory for taking possession.”

Ba walked up to the jeep. “You want to take away the seeds? First sing their songs. Tell me how many drops of water they need.” The officer said nothing. Ba sniffed the paper. “This does not smell of earth,” she said. “It smells of a locked strongbox.”

That night Satyavrat Mehta noticed the shadow of a signature from Broom’s old deed of donation on the paperwork. In the morning Ananya wrote a heading in the register: “The Theft of Seeds.” The watch had now extended from names to seeds.

Chapter 107

The Theft of Seeds



Surmani Kaki arrived carrying an old brass tin. Inside was a kind of rice called “Drowned Breath.” “My mother used to say this rice can withstand three days beneath floodwater,” she said.

At noon, officials came from the town. “Indigenous Seed Conservation and Interplanetary Adaptation Study,” they announced. “Where will the seeds be stored?” Ananya asked. Reading the small print, Gop Kumar said, “For use in external settlement projects, if required.” “Is this connected with the New Horizon advertising scheme?” Ananya asked. The official turned pale.

Meera read aloud: “The seeds will be ‘anonymised.’ Their village, caste, women’s histories and growing seasons will all be removed and replaced with numbers.”

Ba said, “First you took the land, then the water, then the names, and now the seeds. Will you try to take possession of the womb next?”

The children drew a kabaddi circle around the seed containers. The official’s shoes stopped at its edge.

A foreign woman researcher began to cry. “They told me it was only genetic material.” Surmani Kaki answered, “Call it genes or spirits; before anything else, it came from my mother.”

Satyavrat Mehta said, “If these seeds are the work of memory, labour and the community, that community’s living consent is needed before they can be taken.” The official asked him which clause of law he meant. Satyavrat replied, “The river here is the Kamala-Balan. If you ask the current, the water will answer.”

By evening a decision had been made. No seed would leave until its full name, home, field and season were recorded clearly. The children called this “The Seeds Give Testimony.”

That night a question seemed to rise from the soil inside one of the containers: “Where shall I grow?” Ananya opened a fresh page and wrote, “The Mouth of the Earth.” The theft had been stopped, but the seeds still needed a place in which to grow.

Chapter 108

The Mouth of the Earth



In the morning Ananya wrote in the register, “Fourth watch: The Mouth of the Earth.” The village began reading out the names of its fields—Bargadahi, the edge of the Musahari settlement and Ujjar Dih—just as it had read the names of the dead.

“My upper field is pure,” said Harihar Jha. “Plant the seeds there.” “What do you mean by pure?” Ananya asked. “No one from the leatherworkers’ settlement has ever ploughed that field,” he replied. Surmani Kaki said, “A grain of rice does not ask about caste when people are hungry.”

Dhiramati, a granddaughter from the leatherworkers' settlement, stepped forward. "There is fallow land behind my home. If seeds need water and human hands rather than caste, plant them there."

They decided to test the seeds in five kinds of soil: "soil of sorrow" in the leatherworkers' settlement, "soil of water" in the Musahari settlement, "soil of endurance" in the widows' garden, "soil of labour" in a worker's field and "soil of memory" beside Channa's stump.

A procession reached the fallow land behind the leatherworkers' settlement. It was not a procession of false ghosts, but a procession walking quietly. "If seeds can grow here," Dhiramati said, "it will prove that life has no nose with which to sniff out caste."

Seeds were planted in all five beds, with the name of each seed spoken aloud. "This is flood-resistant rice," said Surmani Kaki. "This is the light in hands called impure," said Dhiramati. "Present," said the children.

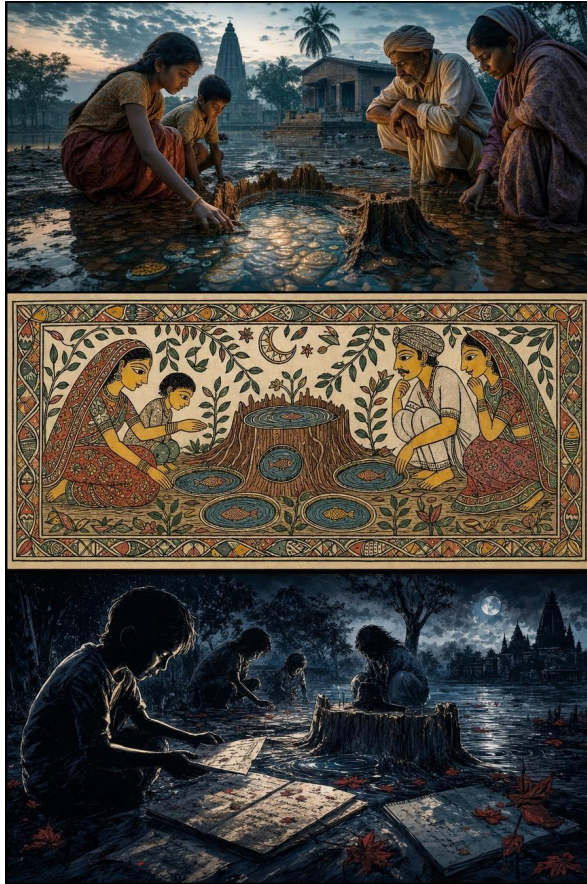
As the first grain was sown, the dark back of a crocodile rose from the distant waters of the Kamala-Balan and sank again. Ananya wrote, "The crocodile saw, but did not eat."

That night Dhiramati asked, "And if the seeds do not sprout?" "Then we shall ask again what the soil needs," Ananya said. "The watch will not have failed. It will remain unfinished."

In the morning strange marks appeared on the borders of all five seedbeds: little iron nails, dabs of red paint and measuring-tape marks. Ananya wrote, "The seeds have found a place to grow, but now the crocodile of ownership has come to the field boundaries."

Chapter 109

The Memory of Water



In the morning the children found small pools all around the stump. Names floated upon the water. Ananya knelt and put her ear close to the surface. The water was speaking softly: “I could not hold on to their bodies, but I kept the memory of the last touch.”

Ba said, “Water is a very old witness. People committed wrongs before water long before they built courts.”

Panidubbi came and said, “The earth holds a name, and water holds the course it travelled. Now draw the paths in water.”

The children made a new map on the earth. Where no record of workers' wages could be found, they drew a ring of ripples. Where money had been lost through digital fraud, they drew a glass screen.

The women brought water from their homes in small metal pots. Each pot of water had a different smell. The children began recognising the water by its scent.

Satyavrat Mehta dipped his hand into the water. Tiny blister-like letters appeared upon his fingers: "Silence," "Delay," "Witness."

The children played a new kind of kabaddi around the pools. Whoever crossed the line had to bring back a name. Ujjwal's spirit gleamed blue upon the water and told one child, "My mother's crying reached the water. Write it down."

An elderly leatherworker arrived with a pot of water. "The names of our ancestors have never been read in this grove," he said. The first drop of water was placed there for them. "Now justice has begun," Ba said.

By evening the little pools had joined, making a circle around the stump.

Just then a vehicle came from the market, advertising: "Sacred Memory Water: Devotion in a Bottle." There was blue water in glass bottles, each labelled with a picture of Channa Grove. The children fell silent.

"The water is speaking," Ananya said, "and they have come to shut it up inside bottles." Satyavrat said, "When memory begins to be sold as water, the watch must grow stricter still."

Chapter 110

Fire Gives Testimony



Smoke rose at night from the place where the names were guarded. It came from the old paper store behind the stump. Someone had set it on fire to break the watch over the names.

The children did not scream. Instead, they called “Present!” together. People ran with buckets. Meera stopped Aruni’s hand. “If we put out every trace,” she asked, “how shall we find evidence of what was burnt?” Devika and Saumya sprinkled water and brought the fire under control.

On the burning papers the black letters disappeared first. Then the hidden truth underneath came into view. Behind “Unlawfully Occupied

Vacant Land” shone the words “Land Valuation for Memorial Area.” Ananya wrote, “Fire eats the outer ink of a lie and leaves its greed within.”

Gop Kumar investigated. Three people held keys to the paper store: Ananya, Devika and the records keeper, Hemnarayan. Hemnarayan had disappeared.

At midnight, Hemnarayan was found unconscious beside the pond. When he regained consciousness, he spoke in a trembling voice. “My son’s name is on the hospital’s debt list. They told me the debt would be forgiven if I opened the paper store. They never said anything to me about a fire.”

“Punishment is necessary,” Ba said, “but it should be a punishment that saves the human being and destroys the lie.” They decided that Hemnarayan would sit on the night watch for a month and work to rewrite the half-burnt names.

Only three fragments of letters remained on a scorched page: “Sar...,” “Uj...,” “Na...” Ujjwal’s mother said, “Do not treat these half-burnt names as incomplete. Let them stand for all the unnamed.”

“An instrument can be the same, while its purpose is different,” Devika said. “One person brings fire to burn papers; another brings it to drive away darkness.”

A small child asked, “Fire has spoken, water has spoken, and earth has spoken. When will the wind speak?” Satyavrat answered, “Wind is the most difficult witness. It stays in no one’s hand, yet it reaches everywhere.”

Ananya opened a new page and wrote, “Seventh Watch: The Wind’s Testimony.”

Chapter 111

The Question of the Wind



After fire had given its testimony, what remained in Garh Narikel was not ash but a smell. In the morning a gust of wind turned the pages of the children's register by itself, revealing the words: "Seventh Watch: The Question of the Wind."

"How can we catch the wind?" Aruni asked. "Even what we cannot catch can be polluted," Gop Kumar replied. Meera added, "Insults to a person's dignity and gossip about private lives—these things fly through the air too."

The children made rules for guarding the air: no unverified story would be spread, and no anonymous accusation would be repeated.

At noon someone began spreading a rumour. Ananya asked, “Did you see this yourself, or did you hear it from someone else?” The register was marked with the words, “Rumours have wings, but no roots.”

The wind reached Batuknath’s house. It swept dust across the words “Forgive me,” which he had written, and wrote over them, “Listen first.”

Dust settled on the screen of Chandrapal’s app and spelled out, “Names must not be filtered.”

On the glass screen of Lau Kin-hung’s air-purifying machine appeared the Devanagari word “उपस्थित” — “Present.” “What language is this?” he asked. He realised that the wind could read him in a language he himself could not read.

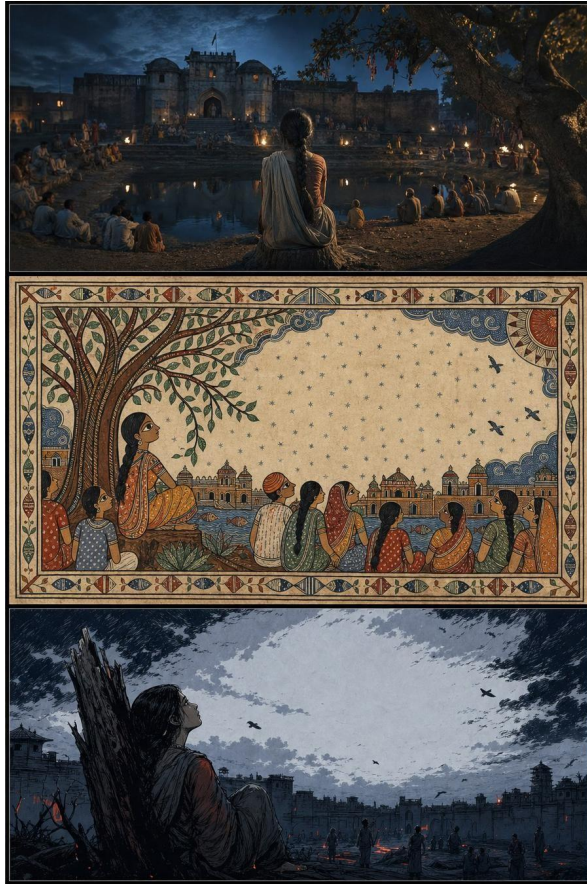
In the evening, the children made little flags bearing the words Truth, Names, Privacy, Labour, Water, Earth, Seeds, Fire and Wind. Ba said, “See? If something truthful that has been written goes into the wind, it may become a song. If a lie goes into it, it becomes dust.”

A boy who had once entered a false name joined the game and confessed, “I put a lie in the register.” They wrote, “A breath that tells the truth about its wrongdoing does not break.”

At night a low voice rose from within the stump. “Who will guard what you call breath?” Ira answered, “If we do not protect names in the air of Earth, even our breath will be available only for rent on the unnamed planet of the dream.”

Chapter 112

The Emptiness of the Sky



After the wind's question, the morning sky seemed to open all by itself. It was so clear that the grove's shade appeared not to have lifted away, but to have risen from within.

Ananya sat beside the stump and kept looking up. She understood that the sky was not empty. It was the greatest vessel of all for listening.

"What is the sky's mark?" a boy asked. "Its mark is an empty space," Ananya said, "a place where a name has not been written, but can still be heard."

Old Baba Ghost said, "Emptiness made by power devours. Emptiness held for memory makes room."

“No one has a deed of ownership over the sky,” Ba said. “Someone may seize the village stones, but cannot own the open space above them. The sky hears everything; we only have to lift our heads to listen.”

A new custom was made for reading names. Whenever a name was read aloud, everyone would look up. The first name was read. Every head turned towards the sky. A thin white line appeared across it.

A sentence glowed on Chandrapal Batra’s screen: “What has risen above cannot be downloaded.”

The sky of Mithila appeared on Lau Kin-hung’s glass. He understood that people might dream of abandoning Earth and building an unnamed planet, but they could not escape the memory of the sky.

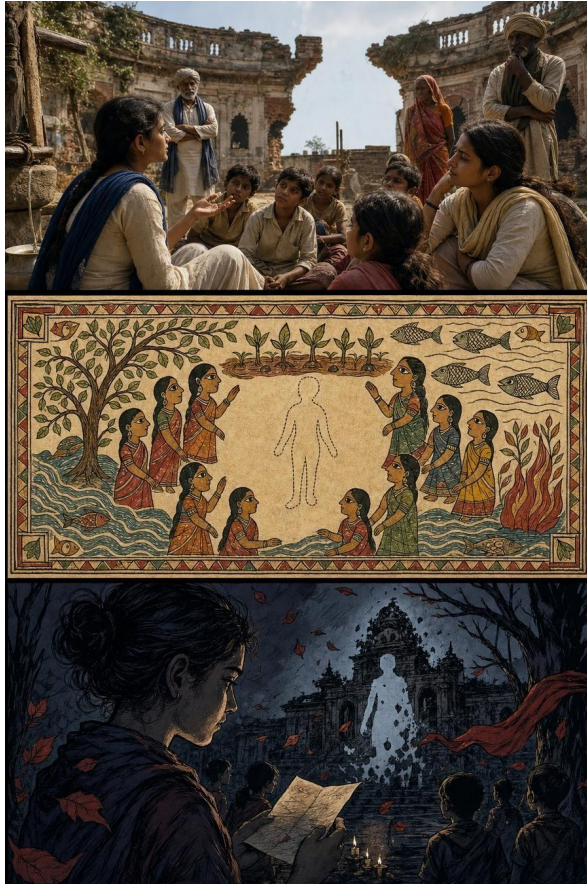
In the evening the children played another kind of kabaddi: the boundary line was drawn not on the ground, but in the sky. Old Baba Ghost smiled. “The game is being written above us now,” he said, “but its breath will remain here.”

“The empty sky has room for the women whose stories were buried inside their homes,” Meera said. That night the women whispered their untold names and let them rise upwards.

At night the stump’s roots trembled. From inside the earth came the soft beat of a drum. “The sky has listened,” Ba said. “Now the world beneath will answer.” When memory reaches the sky, the roots begin demanding an answer from below.

Chapter 113

The Body of Words



After the emptiness of the sky opened, names began to ask, “Where are our bodies?” Ananya explained, “When a lie becomes words, it soon takes a body: a file, a seal, a deed of donation. But even when truth is spoken, its body remains unfinished unless we put it into action.”

At school they held an “Assembly of Letters.” Five words were written: Name, Present, Justice, Privacy, Earth. The children were asked, “What do you see as the body of each word?”

“The body of a name is a stone,” said one child. “The body of a name is a mouth,” said another. A fourth child said, “The body of a name is time. If nobody stops to listen, the name dies again.”

Gop Kumar showed them his old papers. “The words here had bodies, but no souls. They said ‘beneficiary,’ while the people themselves had disappeared.”

“Words have strong bodies in the law,” Satyavrat said. “But if there is no compassion inside them, those bodies are like dead bodies.”

Beside the five words, Ananya drew five empty circles: a stone, an ear, a tulsi leaf, a mirror and a seed.

Ira put a seed before the word “Earth.” “The body of the word ‘Earth’ is not only a round planet,” she said. “It is also a pair of feet carrying a burden.”

Meera placed a mirror before “Privacy.” “Privacy is not another word for hiding,” she said. “It is the right to decide what happens to your own face.”

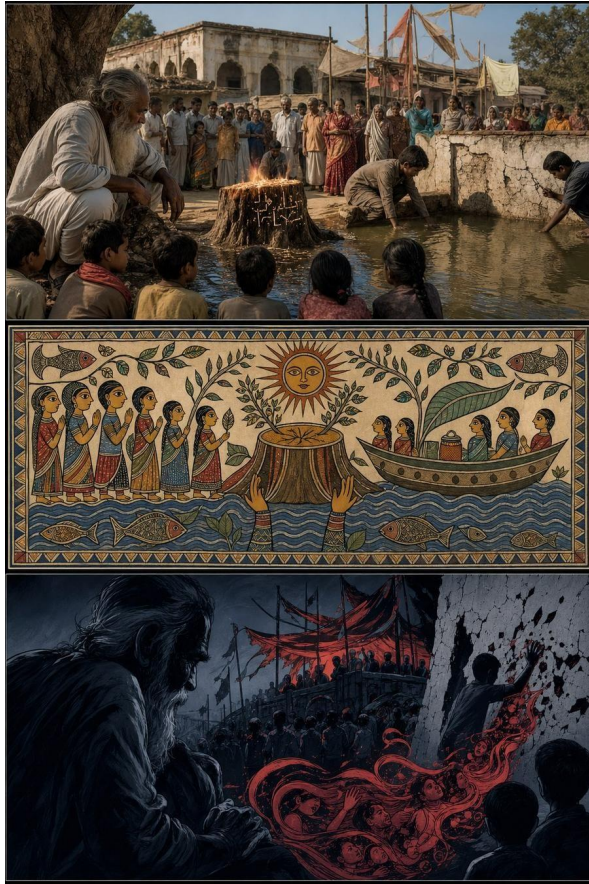
The children added a new rule: “No word shall be accepted without a body.”

That night, as they played kabaddi, a new word shone before them: “Contract.” No body could be seen beneath it, only a glittering light. “This is a dangerous word,” Ananya said. “It wishes to remain without a body while buying everyone else’s.”

“Look for the body of the contract,” Old Baba Ghost said. “If you cannot find its body, you will find its belly.” The next morning Garh Narikel would have to understand that a contract is written not only on paper, but on people’s bones, their land and their future.

Chapter 114

The Soul of Meaning



Old Baba Ghost gave them a warning. “If words have bodies, they can become ill. You have saved their bodies. Now save their meanings.”

In the morning new flags had appeared at the market square, proclaiming a “Present Campaign,” with a government seal and the names of donors. Ananya looked at them. “It is the same word,” she said, “but it is no longer our word. A body may stay the same while its soul changes.”

At school the lesson changed to “Words,” “Meaning” and “The Watch over Meaning.” Old Baba Ghost explained, “When ‘Present’ is an answer to the name of someone who has died, it means one thing. When

‘Present’ is printed on an advertisement for a scheme, it means another.”

Municipal officials began handing out caps. “Be Present, Save Our Heritage,” they said. On the caps was a false picture of Channa Grove, full of green leaves that hid the tree’s wounds. “Why show a tree that has been cut down as if it were whole?” Ira asked. “We must create a positive image,” the official replied.

“The humiliation of my body was covered up with a ‘positive image’ too,” Meera said. “Now they are polishing up memory and calling it heritage. This is the theft of meaning.”

In the evening they held a test of meanings beside the stump. When they came to the word “Heritage,” Ba said, “If your hand does not tremble when you touch it, it is not heritage but decoration.”

Standing beside the stone marked “Justice,” Satyavrat said, “Justice lives when it saves the victim’s time. If justice eats up years of someone’s life, the word remains, but its meaning dies.”

A child came running with a leaflet. It proposed “Reinterpretation”: “Water Burial” would become “Water Heritage”; “the Dead” would become “Fragments of the Past”; “Victims” would become “Stakeholders.”

“The murder of meaning has begun,” Old Baba Ghost whispered. Ananya opened a new page and wrote, “The Court of Reinterpretation.”

Satyavrat rose to his feet. “When wrongdoers change the words,” he said, “justice must stand guard over language.” The next struggle would be the most delicate of all: a struggle inside meaning itself.

Chapter 115

The Watch over Voices



In the morning a new machine appeared at the village meeting place. Its label said, “Voice Collection of Names.” People calling themselves “Guardians of Hearing” announced, “We shall preserve the reading of names as sound recordings.” But the small print said, “Rights to the recordings shall belong to the organising institution.”

“If the name belongs to one person and the voice to another,” Ananya asked, “who owns the rights?” “Institutional preservation in the community’s interest,” the guardian replied. The children heard how cold the words sounded.

Ananya stood up. "Whoever reads a name must listen first," she said. "Whoever listens must first ask permission."

The reading began. Ujjwal's mother spoke his name softly. "Must a voice be clear," Meera asked, "or must a heart be clear?" An old man said, "I will not tidy up my dead loved one's name to please a machine."

A boy whose grandfather had disappeared while the bridge was being built wanted to say his name, but his throat tightened. "Even weeping that cannot form words is a voice," Ananya said. The machine could not capture his grief; it produced only a crackling noise. "Emotional sound is valuable," Chandrapal whispered. "Keep it." Devika heard him and told everyone, "Look! Even tears are being turned into goods for sale."

Meera told the men with the machine, "No voice will be imprisoned here without its owner's permission."

"The rights people have today cannot be taken away in the name of the future," Satyavrat said.

Ba said, "A name heard through human ears enters the body. A box can listen, but its stomach never aches."

The children wrote a rule: "Watch over Voices: no recording of a name without the permission of the household to which it belongs; living ears come first." The machine was removed, but Ananya added, "Write a name for that box as well: the Ears of Greed."

That night the names were read without a machine. All the different voices formed a rhythm together, like the breathing of kabaddi players.

"Where no voice can be heard," Ananya said softly, "there is no place for a name." The next page of the register opened by itself: "The Pen."

Chapter 116

The Inheritance of Silence



One day no lesson was taught at the school. Ba said, “Today, begin by reading the words that were never spoken.”

Satyavrat Mehta said, “When I could have spoken but did not, my silence was a crime. But when someone who has suffered does not wish to speak, that silence is a right. If we fail to understand the difference, justice becomes a crocodile once more.”

A sound-collecting group arrived from the town. “We should preserve the oral heritage of the reading of names,” they said. But the small print on their leaflet said the recordings could also be used in future performances.

Meera asked, “Once you have taken someone’s voice, will another person be able to play it again without permission?” “We do this for cultural preservation,” the leader replied. “If preservation separates a voice from the body it belongs to,” Meera answered, “it is theft.”

The children wrote a new rule: “No one who does not wish to speak shall have a name dragged out of them. Silence, too, can be present.”

Ujjwal’s mother rested her silence upon a blank page. She simply placed her hand upon it and sat there.

Then a girl arrived who had never been able to make a sound with her voice. She placed a leaf beside the stump, marked only with a line. When the leaf was put in a bowl, the wind rose, and the line curled into a circle—the circle of kabaddi. The girl ran around the stump, holding her breath, without making a sound. The children ran after her without chanting “Kabaddi.”

“Now the ghost’s game is teaching the children even in silence,” said the village elders.

Ba said, “You have already seen a court without justice. Why is it so difficult for you to imagine kabaddi without a voice?”

That night a black dot appeared on the blank page of the register: “The Dot of Silence.” Ujjwal’s mother placed her hand on it. “Today my son has asked nothing of me for the first time,” she said.

Ananya wrote on the next page, “Now we must guard what the eyes see.” For once voices and silence were protected, the market would attack the gaze.

Chapter 117

The Debt We Owe to Memory



On the wall of the school, the children wrote a new question: “Who will carry the debt of a name that has been heard?”

Ananya explained, “This is not a debt that money can settle. Once you have heard a name, you cannot repay it without changing the way you live.”

Ira gave the children an exercise. “Bring from home a name that people do not speak with respect.” One boy brought the word “Leatherworker Woman.” He had not found her full name. The elders at home said that there had been a leatherworker woman in the life of Gangesha Upadhyaya, but her name must not be spoken. The boy asked,

“If the Tattvachintamani is worth twelve thousand books, is there not room inside it for even one letter of that woman’s name?”

Ananya wrote on the wall, “Whom does the absence of evidence protect?”

Ba spoke slowly. “It is easy to place a garland upon the head of a sacred book, but difficult to touch the thorns in its body. A society that accepts Gangesha’s wisdom while cutting away the uncomfortable parts of his life kills half of him.”

Meera left an empty space beside the words “Leatherworker Woman.” “We have not found her name,” she said, “so let us give a name to its absence.”

Satyavrat Mehta wrote in his notebook, “Caste shame: the murder of memory.”

Then a rule was made: every name that was heard must be tied to an action. Beside a worker’s name there would be work to honour labour. Beside the name of a young person cheated online, a lesson in staying safe from scams. Beside the empty place for the leatherworker woman, a lesson in the truth about caste. The children said, “A name without action is a stone; action without a name is wind.”

In the afternoon an unfamiliar official arrived with a “Memory Debt Relief Scheme.” Money would be paid if, instead of reading people’s names, the village accepted the official story of the memorial. Ananya asked, “Has he come to free us from the debt, or to become its owner?”

An elder said, “It would be improper to leave an empty space for a leatherworker woman next to Gangesha. We must uphold propriety.” The boy said quietly, “If propriety eats names, it is no better than a crocodile.”

That night kabaddi was played in a new way. A child who entered the other team’s circle chanting “Kabaddi” had to name an action when returning: “I will not erase a name because of caste,” or “I will protect the empty place for the leatherworker woman.”

Old Baba Ghost laughed. “Those who return carrying a debt keep the story alive.”

At midnight the “debt relief” document grew damp. Only three words remained: “Whose freedom is it?”

Chapter 118

The Right to One's Body



The people behind the heritage project arrived with a new list: “Collectible Materials: root-soil from Channa Grove, bone-like fragments and oral materials from the families of the dead.” Meera pressed down the corner of the paper. “The remains of people who have died are not exhibits for your display.”

Devika told Broom’s representative, “Preservation means protecting a family’s rights. Putting sorrow behind glass and selling tickets is not preservation. It is devouring that sorrow a second time.”

Aruni looked at the list. “Anyone who refuses to write down the names of the dead has no right to claim their earth or remains.”

A special lesson called “The Right to One’s Body” was held at the school. “If this hand takes someone’s photograph without permission, or lifts their bones without consent,” Ananya said, “it stops being a guardian’s hand and becomes a thief’s.”

“When others begin claiming someone’s body,” Meera said, “caste, the market, religion, cameras and the law can all look as though they belong to one family.”

Ba told an old story. “People worshipped Gangesha’s wisdom, but were afraid of the uncomfortable parts of his life. Society builds a statue of a thinker and kills the rebellion of the living body.”

An outside team came to the leatherworkers’ settlement carrying cameras. An elderly woman said, “You may write about our hands, but first ask whom we allow to touch us.” The cameras were lowered.

Ananya wrote a “Code of the Body”: a living person has the first right over their own body; the rights and dignity of the dead must be honoured with their families; to humiliate a body in the name of caste is a crime against memory; no research, art or donation may use someone’s wounds without consent.

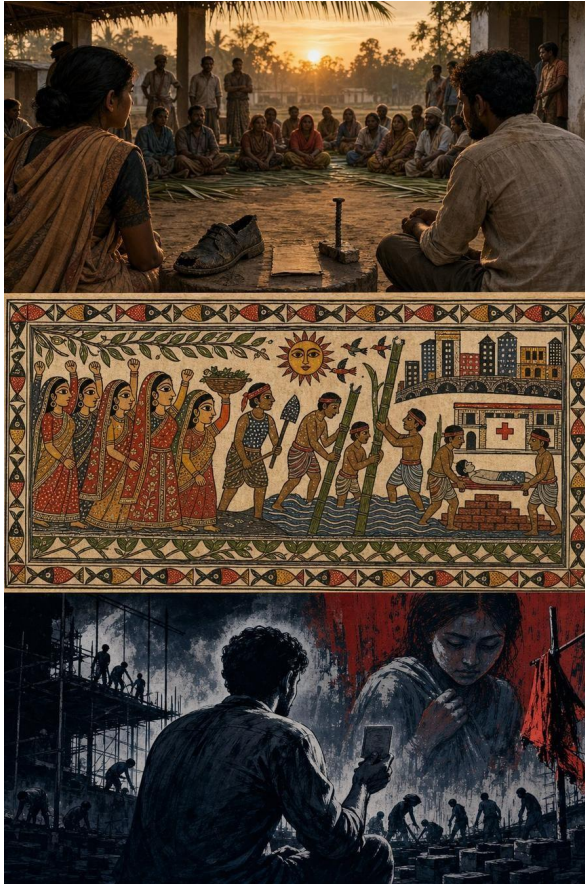
“If justice does not begin with the body,” Satyavrat wrote, “it remains only a game of words.”

In the evening the soil and pieces of cloth were returned to the families, without any buying or selling.

That night an old caste register, closed for years, opened by itself. A voice came from within: “Who will give proof of a family line?” Channa’s stump stayed warm beneath the weight of the question.

Chapter 119

The Body of Labour



Beside the stump, Aruni placed a worker's torn shoe, a nail and a wage slip bearing only a number where the name should have been. "Can a number be a name too?" Ananya asked. "No," Aruni replied. "A number is put in place of a name when the employer is afraid of the name."

The children decided to write the stories of the bodies whose hands had built Garh Narikel's bridge and roads.

Jhagaru the mason's wife came to them. Her husband had fallen into the river while laying a bridge foundation. Yet the papers said, "Absent from work." She told them, "The hands that kept our cooking fire

burning did not even count as being at work that day in the company's records."

Gop Kumar showed them an old paper. It said, "Men: 47. Women: 9." There were no names. "If you can write down whether a body is male or female," Meera asked, "why can you not write down that person's name?"

Looking at the workers' hands, Satyavrat Mehta said, "I studied injuries to the body in law books. Today I am learning to read the labour of the body."

Bhagelu Paswan said, "The bridge was built to join people together, but those who built it were made to sit apart beneath its shadow."

"Gangesha wrote about reasoning," Ba said, "but society did not read the reasoning of the body." The children wrote, "The first lesson of New Logic: the labour of the body is not beneath anyone because of caste."

An engineer from the heritage project spoke about employment. "Contracts with names?" Aruni asked. "Wages paid on time?" Devika asked. "The right to treatment if someone is injured?" Meera asked. The engineer had no answers. Satyavrat said, "If we claim to preserve the names of the dead while leaving living workers nameless, this will not be a memorial. It will be another crime."

"Our labour became a mule account too," Bhagelu said. "The sweat was ours; the profit went to someone else."

That night they read the workers' names, adding a task beside each: "One who laid the foundation"; "One who carried a dead body home."

At the end, the workers' feet were washed. An empty stone was placed there, bearing the words, "For those who work, yet remain unseen."

Chapter 120

The Body of Justice



The children opened a new page and wrote, “The Body of Justice.” An elderly woman labourer said, “If justice truly wants to serve the body, it must be able to bear the smell of sweat.”

Ba said, “Justice that comes wearing perfume has often come to cover up the smell of a rotting body.”

Aruni spread the old bridge plans upon the ground and said to the workers’ families, “Touch every place where your loved ones’ feet once stood.”

A potter from the village brought soil from the banks of the Kamala, from beside the bridge’s foundation and from Channa’s stump. He

began shaping it into a body. "What are you making?" the children asked. "The body of justice," he replied. "Not a statue, but a body. A statue asks to be worshipped; a body asks us to take responsibility."

The women labourers pressed their palms into the clay. Aruni pressed his trembling palm into it too.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped forward. "My hands bear the marks of a pen, not of sweat," he said. "I want to leave the mark of my silence." "You cannot leave the mark of silence with your hands," Ba said. "Put your ear to the earth." Satyavrat bent down and lay with his ear against the clay.

Meera and Devika stopped the cameras. "The families of those whose bodies were lost must give permission," they said.

By evening the clay body was ready: a bent figure with one ear against the earth and an empty space in its chest. "Why is the chest empty?" the children asked. "Because names will come and live here, one after another," the potter said. "The chest of justice must not be a permanent decoration. It must be an open house."

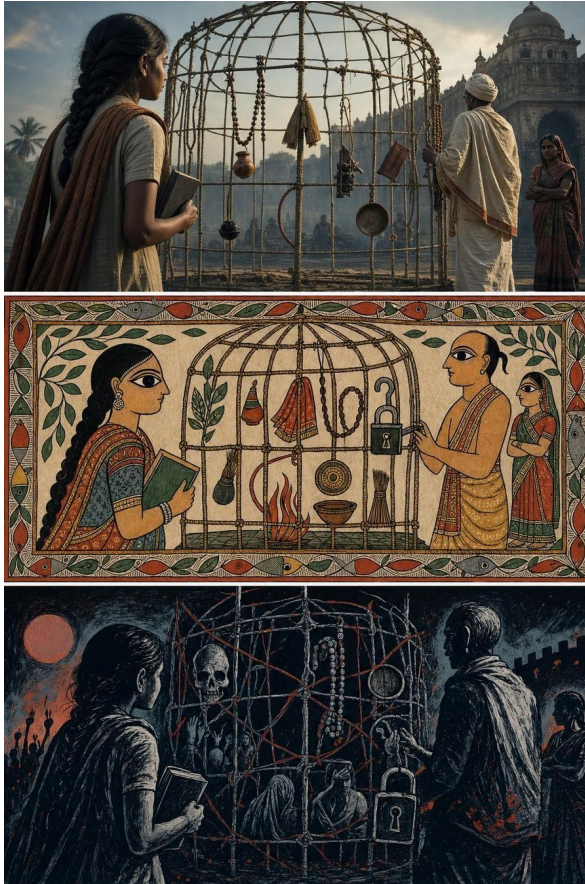
Broom's representative arrived with a proposal: cast the figure in bronze and sell tickets to see it. "Can you bear the smell of this body?" Ananya asked. The representative could not answer.

At midnight the first empty stone was placed upon the clay chest. A crack appeared. The potter smiled. "A crack is not a bad thing. If justice has no cracks, how will the voices inside come out?" A drop of dew emerged from the crack. The children wrote, "The body of justice can weep."

In the morning the potter saw that the shadow of the little shoot had fallen across the empty chest. Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "Seventeenth Watch: The Law of Shadows."

Chapter 121

The Cage of Caste



An elderly man from a Brahmin family came into the shade of the stump, carrying an old family genealogy. "Everyone has the right to have their name written down," he said, "but the honour of one's lineage matters too." Ananya asked, "If a person's name is heard, but their lineage refuses to accept them, where does justice stand?"

Ira told the story of Gangesha once more. "Why does society take pride in a thinker's intelligence, yet keep silent about the uncomfortable truths of that thinker's life?"

Batuknath Hariharan shifted uneasily. "Every life story is controversial. Regard a great book as a great book." Meera replied,

"When society passes judgement on a woman's body, her private life suddenly becomes public. But when questions arise about a scholar's life that broke caste boundaries, we are told to keep quiet because it is private. What kind of proof of justice is that?"

A symbolic voice rose among them. "Caste is not an inference but an accusation. Birth is not proof but a cage built by the system. Touch is not a fault; it is the target of a politics of fear."

The children wrote, "When society traps the inconvenient parts of a thinker's life inside a statue of honour, it may not be killing the body, but it is certainly killing memory."

Aruni said, "If justice can reach the foundations of a bridge, a labourer's feet and a woman's body, why should it stop at the doorway of caste?"

A young labourer put his earth-stained hand upon the stump. Beside it, the elderly Brahmin placed his trembling hand. The stump's soil coloured both hands alike. Ba said, "Look. Every grain of the grove's earth gives us the same colour. Human beings create caste; the earth does not."

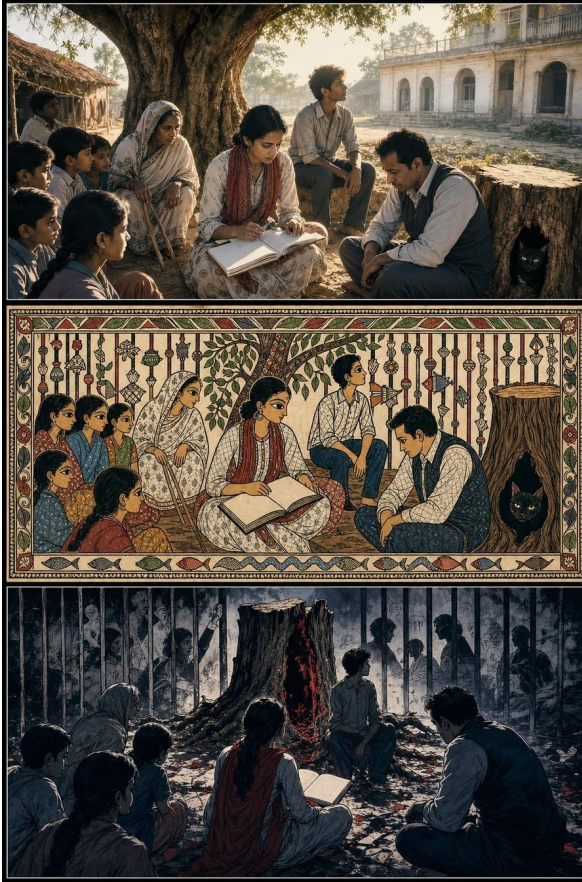
That night the children wrote a new lesson. "Hear the name before asking the caste. Hear the sorrow before asking the lineage. See the labour before speaking of purity. Accept another's touch before writing of justice."

After that lesson, the doors of kitchens opened a little wider in many homes. For the first time, unfamiliar feet could rest beside the rims of several wells without being met with abuse.

Batuknath Hariharan wrote a secret note: "The episode concerning Gangesha must be kept within limits." But by dawn the paper had turned dark, and between its letters a word had sprouted on its own: "Touch."

Chapter 122

The Liberation of Gangesha



At dawn, black dust rose from inside the stump and formed a word: "Evidence." Ba said, "Gangesha has come."

"Gangesha Upadhyaya?" Ira asked. "The one whose Tattvachintamani is said to equal twelve thousand books?" "Yes," said Ba. "But do not look only at the weight of his writing. The very society that crowns a thinker can use its other hand to cut away the uncomfortable parts of his life."

An old tale, handed down in popular memory, surfaced once more. It concerned stories about Gangesha's birth and a woman linked to those stories, described in the tale as a "charmakarni," a woman of the

leatherworking community. Her real name had not been recorded in history.

Meera asked, "Why did nobody write down the real name of a woman remembered in history only by her caste?" In the register she wrote: "Charmakarni — a complete human being, waiting for her name."

Ananya asked, "If, according to this folktale, the father of the philosophy of Nyaya crossed caste boundaries, why does the caste system use his writings to polish the bars of its own cage?"

Ba said, "When you read the work of a person said to have written the equivalent of twelve thousand books, read at least one sentence from that person's life too."

The children said, "When society cuts the inconvenient parts from a thinker's life to make a carefully preserved statue, it commits a kind of 'honour killing' of memory."

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Justice needs evidence. But if a caste gatekeeper sits at the entrance to evidence, truth can be killed before it gets inside."

The children wrote four sentences. "Direct perception without compassion is darkness. Inference without humility is arrogance. Words without responsibility are violence. Memory without justice is incomplete."

That evening, four new stones were placed around the stump. They bore the words "Gangesha," "Charmakarni: real name awaited," "The truths of a life cut away in the name of honour," and "Tattvachintamani: the fire of questions."

At the evening kabaddi game, the children added a new chant to "Kabaddi, kabaddi": "Evidence, evidence."

A deep voice came from within the stump. "Anyone who fears a question has no right to administer justice." Ananya opened the next page and wrote, "Nineteenth watch: a crack in the evidence."

Chapter 123

A Leaf from the Tattvachintamani



After Gangesha's liberation, the children sat in the shade of the new shoots. "Gangesha Baba has been freed," said Ananya, "but the watch over his book still remains."

Ba said, "Its breadth was said to equal twelve thousand books. But a book that cannot teach us to see another human being is worth less than half a leaf, let alone twelve thousand volumes."

The children drew four circles in the earth: direct perception, inference, testimony and non-apprehension.

The first circle was "Direct perception." One child asked, "Can we perceive caste?" Meera replied, "We can see a human body. We can see

the effects of humiliation. But the superiority claimed in caste's name is not something we can perceive. It is a cage made in the mind."

The third circle was "Testimony." A priest's grandson said, "The words of scripture are above everything." Meera asked, "If a human body is harmed in the name of scripture, which stands higher: the words or the human being?" Ba said softly, "Words used to push human beings down are no longer merely words. They are power."

The fourth circle, "Non-apprehension," was the hardest. Pointing to an empty space, Ananya said, "Even what we cannot find can tell us something true. We cannot find the full name of the woman linked to Gangesha in the old folktale. That absence matters. A society that failed to preserve her name has left its justice incomplete."

Ananya wrote in the register, "Gangesha's liberation cannot be complete until we search for the name of that unnamed woman."

Two scholars came from the city. "Such material from folktales should be presented in a controlled manner," they said. Ananya asked, "If the woman's name is removed, does your scholarship remain serious?"

Ira said, "We need evidence, but who guards the gate to evidence? The same caste that grants privilege? The same history that erases a woman's name?"

Satyavrat Mehta said, "Justice is not merely a verdict. Justice also concerns who is allowed to ask questions."

That evening Ananya read out a new rule: "No scripture stands above the human body. No philosophy is complete without the name of the woman history pushed aside." "Present," answered the children.

From the roots of the stump came a deep voice. "Justice remains incomplete until the question itself is given a body."

Chapter 124

The Fire of Evidence



The words written on the Tattvachintamani's leaf kept changing. "Evidence" became "Whose evidence?" and "Justice" became "Whose justice?" The children understood that reading Gangesha's leaf did not simply mean reading an old book. It meant putting their hands into the hidden fire of their own society.

Ba said, "Even if just one leaf of a book said to equal twelve thousand volumes were truly read, all the pride of caste might turn to ashes."

"Society kept the books but cut away the life," said Ira. "Is that justice?"

Gop Kumar admitted, "Information can be evidence, but it is never the whole of it. If society removes the truths of someone's life and keeps only the books, the documents survive, but the person disappears."

Meera said quietly, "That is killing in the name of honour. Killing a body is one thing; killing its memory is another. Society says, 'We think you are great,' but then cuts away the very things that made you human."

A boy asked, "What was the charmakarni's name?" Everyone fell silent. Nobody knew. The children took a stone and wrote on it: "Charmakarni — her name is being sought."

When sunlight fell on the stone, the scent of earth rose around it. The children understood: caste marks bodies, but the earth receives every body as the same dust.

The voice of the water-diver came: "Caste does not survive in water." "Exactly," said Ba. "In a water burial, where does the caste of a body go?"

Satyavrat Mehta wrote, "Evidence is not only a written text. It includes oral memory, lives suppressed, lines cut out, silences imposed by caste, and the suffering of ordinary people."

Ira said, "Gangesha gave us Navya Nyaya, the new logic. But we also need a new memory. When caste ties up the evidence, justice goes dark."

Ananya told the children, "From today our school has a new lesson: the more uncomfortable a life story is, the longer we must stay with it." The children repeated, "Keep watch over uncomfortable truths."

That night the children wrote, "Gangesha will be liberated not through his books alone, but through acceptance of his whole life." On the next page Ananya wrote a title: "The Charmakarni's Name."

Chapter 125

The Rice of Judgement



By morning, the ashes had grown cold. "What verdict can be given when the evidence has burned?" Ananya asked. Aruni bent over the ash and said, "Let us draw a line across a field with these ashes."

Ba took out some rice seeds. "These seeds will go into a field where many feet were once stopped in the name of caste."

The field belonged to a family whose members had once been forbidden to sit in the village's central meeting place. An elderly woman from that household sat on the field's embankment. When the children went to bow to her, she started in surprise. "Bow to the earth, not to

me," she said. Meera replied, "The earth speaks through your palms. So we bow to you as well."

Ananya sprinkled ashes along the first embankment. "These are not only the ashes of evidence, but of what was denied as evidence: all that was suppressed, all that was cast outside the lineage, all that was removed from memory in the name of honour." "Present," the children answered.

In their account of the old folktale, the children wrote not "wife" but "fellow witness." Ba said, "Any scripture that cuts out a woman's name leaves its pages unfinished." Meera wrote in the register, "Without a fellow witness, Navya Nyaya remains incomplete."

Holding a handful of rice, Satyavrat Mehta said, "If a verdict does not become food, if it does not become a place where everyone may sit equally, it is not justice. It is merely the language of a system."

A line was drawn through the middle of the field. Holding her kabaddi breath, Ananya crossed it, took seed from the elderly charmakarni's hand and came back. "Turn any boundary that blocks justice into a game," she said.

The ghost of the Elder appeared faintly in the sunshine. "There is still a turn of kabaddi waiting at every wall that remains," he said.

A boy asked, "When scholars remove the uncomfortable truths of a life and make a statue of the person, are they committing murder?" Ira replied, "Memory can be killed again and again. When truth is removed in the name of honour, the pain can be like the pain of a killing."

That evening the plough moved through the field. The elderly charmakarni made the first furrow, Aruni the second, Meera the third, Satyavrat the fourth and Ananya the fifth.

At night the sky lay reflected in the water of the field. The stars shone like seeds. "The rice of judgement has only just been planted," said Ananya. "Its ending will come at harvest." In the register they wrote, "Today justice entered the field."

Chapter 126

Justice for Food



At dawn, the heads of rice looked bowed along the ridges of the field. Ba breathed in the smell of the earth and said, "Justice that never becomes cooked rice is only a sentence. Justice that never reaches a hungry mouth is like the shade of a grove without roots."

Ananya held a single grain in her hand. "What is the name of this grain?" she asked. A little boy answered, "The thing that stops hunger." Meera smiled. "That is its name in the language of justice."

The women arrived carrying weights and measures and empty bowls. "We have a record of names," they said, "but where is the record of hunger?" Devika opened a fresh page and wrote, "The Roll of Hunger."

"Hungry people do not need pity; they need their share," Ananya said. Ba added, "Pity is rice thrown down from above. A fair share is rice eaten while sitting together."

A messenger from Batuknath brought a proposal for a "Food Fund of the People's Memory Trust." The donors' names would be inscribed on a stone plaque. "Not the donor's name first," said Ananya. "First the names of those who grew and harvested the grain."

Another proposal arrived from Lau Kin-hung, offering seeds from abroad. "What memories do these seeds carry?" Aruni asked. "Seeds are science, not memory," said the consultant. Ira replied, "If a seed carries no memory, to whom does it belong?"

The women drew up rules for a common grain store. Some grain from every field would be set aside for the watch over names. Those who received food would be called "members," not "the poor."

An old priest raised questions of caste custom. "If hunger has only one caste, how many castes does rice have?" Ananya asked. Ba set down a grain of cooked rice. "Eat it. If this grain can ruin your lineage, your lineage must be very weak." The old man ate it and burst into tears. "There is no greater purification than hunger."

That night a child brought an old, empty plate from home. "For many days this plate rang with sound but held no rice." The plate was set in the middle of the common grain store.

"Until today I have written the names of the dead," said Satyavrat Mehta. "Now I shall write the names of hunger among the living." Ananya opened a fresh page and wrote, "The Name of Hunger."

Chapter 127

The Name of Hunger



The empty plate remained in the middle of the grain store throughout the night. At dawn Ananya wrote in the register, "The Name of Hunger." Her pen trembled. Writing the names of the dead had been hard; naming the hunger of the living was harder still.

"To write the name of hunger is not to open someone's stomach," said Satyavrat Mehta. "It is to uncover the shame people have been made to feel."

The first woman said, "For three days, the smell of cooking rice did not rise from our house." Ananya wrote, "Hunger's first name: the fasting hearth."

An old shepherd said, "I could have sold my cattle and kept the household going. But selling them would have been like selling the sound of my father's voice." The children wrote, "Hunger endured to preserve Father's voice."

An elderly woman from a family proud of its high caste said, "I did not hold out my hand, because my family would have said that our honour was lost." Ba replied, "A lineage that silences its daughter when she is hungry has already lost its honour."

Devika raised a question. "We have written down the names, but when will there be food?"

Satyavrat stood up. "We shall not call out the names of those who donate rice. This will not be food given as charity, but food received by right." A merchant wanted his name displayed on a plaque. "The plaque will speak of hunger, not the person who supplied the sacks," said Ananya.

That evening the first communal cooking fire was lit. Meera said that nobody was to photograph the faces of those who came for food. "Not pictures of hunger," said Devika, "but a shared part in ending it."

An elderly man who had hidden his poverty stood at the back of the queue. "There is no shame in saying you are hungry," said Ananya. He began to cry. His name was entered as "The stomach that could not speak."

That night a single grain of rice was left in the empty plate. "Why?" asked Satyavrat. "We must never assume that hunger has ended completely," Ananya replied. "As long as one grain remains, we will not abandon our watch."

At midnight the grain turned in the plate and came to rest pointing north, towards a dry well. "Thirst will come after hunger," said Ba. The children opened a new page and wrote, "The Watch Over Thirst."

Chapter 128

The Name of Thirst



In the morning, a small boy arrived carrying an empty brass water pot. "You wrote down the name of hunger. Where is the name of thirst?"

Ba said, "When I was a child, even water had a caste. Some wells belonged to everyone. At others, a thirsty human being was not allowed to cast so much as a shadow."

Ananya wrote, "Evidence: thirst." "What is the evidence of thirst?" Ira asked. The little boy held up his empty pot.

They began telling the story of an old well outside the village. The women of the leatherworkers' settlement had not been allowed to draw

water there. Water lay in the courtyards of the higher castes, while the throats of those branded 'lower' remained dry.

"Without the right to one's body, there is no right to water," said Meera. Saumya added, "When someone is forbidden to drink, even their voice begins to dry up."

The children went to the old well to read out the names. An elderly woman said, "That night my mother heard more than the shattering of her earthen pitcher. She heard the breaking of her right to quench her thirst." The children wrote, "Thirst's first name: the silenced throat."

A young man said, "We had names, but the vessels from which we were allowed to drink had caste written upon them." Ananya wrote, "Thirst's second name: the separate drinking pot."

"The past of this well and the future of the unnamed planet in our dreams lie along the same line," Ira said.

A new feature appeared in Chandrapal's app: "Donate Water for a Name." "This is a mule account made out of thirst," Devika said.

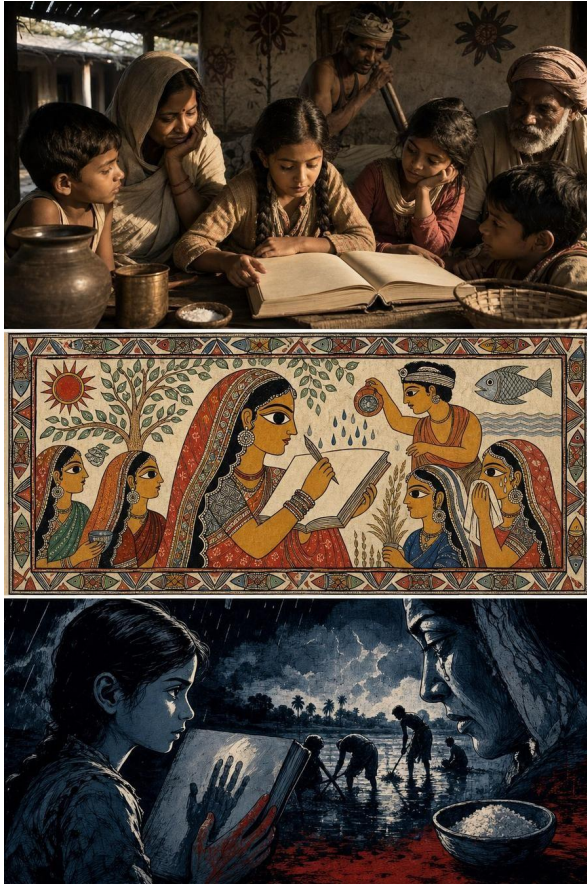
That evening they cleared the bushes from around the well. The elderly woman whose mother's pitcher had been broken lowered the first bucket. After ten buckets, the water ran clear. After thirty, cool air rose from the well. "The well has taken a breath," the villagers said.

At night they held a communal reading of water and names. Each person took a palmful from the bucket and spoke their own name. "I share this thirst."

Ananya wrote in the register, "Thirst has been named. But our watch over thirst will remain unfinished until every well, river and pond upon the earth is free."

Chapter 129

The Oath of Salt



After naming thirst, the children understood that a human being was not made of food and water alone. There was also the taste of salt upon the tongue. Ananya wrote, "Twenty-fifth watch: the Oath of Salt."

The children brought a pinch of salt each and placed it beside the stump. "This salt holds the memory of my mother's kitchen," said Ba.

Devika brought salt from Ujjwal's home. The little container had remained just as it was since the day Ujjwal disappeared.

"Nobody will ask what caste salt belongs to," said Meera. "Salt tastes the same in the hand of a charmakarni, on a Brahmin's plate and in a labourer's sweat. Why should it be divided into separate rows?"

An elderly woman said, "People who would not drink water in my courtyard ate bread made by my hands. My salt was pure upon their tongues, but my water pitcher was impure to their hands. What sort of justice is that?" Satyavrat Mehta bowed his head and wrote, "Salt bears witness that claims of purity often hide the theft of labour."

Munna Paswan's brother said, "The one who fell from the bridge left this salt behind too. Everyone crossing that bridge now walks over the salt of his labour."

A merchant proposed selling "Garh Narikel Memory Salt." Ananya asked, "Will it carry the taste of the half-cooked lentils left by Ujjwal's mother? The sweat of the workers? If not, this is not the salt of memory. It is only salt for sale."

Devika intercepted a secret message from Raghav: "Turn emotional content into a product." The merchant's face fell.

Ananya announced, "From today salt will not be sold. It will be shared." The women formed an oath. "We will not forget the labour behind the salt we eat. We will not separate people by caste when we share our bread."

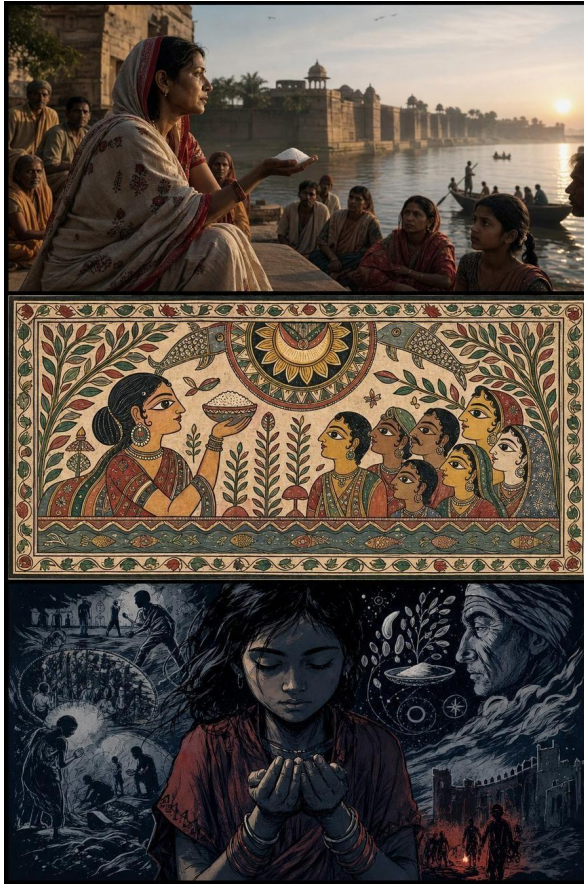
Satyavrat Mehta took a pinch of salt and touched it to his tongue. His eyes filled with tears. Perhaps that taste had brought him the shame of his justice arriving so late.

The ghost of the Elder said, "Once a person understands the taste of salt, it will take a long time for them to leave the earth."

At dawn Ananya wrote the final line: "Salt does not demand an oath. Salt becomes the taste of the oath."

Chapter 130

Justice in Taste



On the morning after the Oath of Salt, Ba said, "We eat salt, so we must accept the justice that comes with it."

A communal meal was prepared in the school courtyard. Every household brought something. Children from homes that could bring no food carried water instead. Ananya wrote, "Those without grain still have water; those without water still have a name."

An elderly man said that sitting in a single row would break the rules of propriety. Ba set down a plate. "Any custom that asks a hungry person's caste is not propriety; it is an insult to the body." The old man

asked for water. It was brought by a boy whose caste he had questioned all his life. He drank it. The row remained unbroken.

People from the heritage project arrived with packets labelled "Channa Grove Memorial Feast," "Memory Salt" and "Water-Burial Greens." Ananya asked, "Whose taste is this? Who went hungry? Whose sweat and labour are inside these wrappers?" The visitors had no answer.

Satyavrat Mehta sat beside the last leaf-plate. "After those whose names have been swallowed. After all those cooking with their own hands."

The meal began. Before the first mouthful, Ba said, "Names." They spoke the names one by one: labourer, a young man lost in digital fraud, charmakarni, Gangesha, the unnamed. Each name was followed by a mouthful of food.

A rule was made: those who cooked would taste the food first, and those who served would also sit down and eat.

Ira wrote to children abroad: "To speak of the 'Taste of Mithila' without seating together those whose hands were forbidden and whose bodies were kept outside the eating row is a lie."

Ba said, "We must try to understand even the hunger of the creature that chewed a body, so that we see it not merely as a monster, but as a terrible question posed by the world."

The heritage team proposed selling tickets for the meal. "Those who have never understood hunger will not manage this meal," Ananya replied.

After the meal, the leaf-plates were buried in the earth beside the river. A single sign-like letter appeared upon each leaf.

That evening, a mark of scent appeared within the ashes. "Taste remains on the tongue," Meera said, "but memory returns through smell. When a household kitchen has burned, its name often comes back first as a scent."

Ananya opened a new page and wrote, "Twenty-seventh watch: the testimony of scent."

Chapter 131

The Shared Plate



After they had spoken of justice in taste, a difficult question arose. It was easy to listen to separate stories of hunger and thirst. It was much harder to sit together and eat from the same plate.

Ba said, "Child, people here can sit beside a ghost, yet tremble at the thought of sitting in the same row as another living person."

Preparations began for a shared meal. Every household contributed something. But the preparations also brought hidden fears into the open. "Eat with everybody? Will the elders at home allow it?"

An elderly Brahmin stopped at the edge of a leaf-plate when he saw a young man from the leatherworkers' settlement. Ba rose, placed her

walking stick beside the young man's plate and sat down there herself. "You honour Gangesha in the scriptures. Why are you afraid of what his life tells you?"

Ananya asked the elderly man, "Shall I write down the name of your fear?" After a long silence he said, "Lineage." "And the name of your hunger?" she asked. "Human," he whispered.

Once those two lines had been written, the old man touched his food. The young leatherworker offered some of his greens. "My mother cooked these." The old man offered him jaggery. "My grandson brought this."

Yet some women remained standing far away, afraid of household rules and their fathers-in-law. Meera went to them. "Even if you cannot sit with us, you can still have your words written down. We need the names of what holds you back." The women answered, "Home," "Shame," "Our daughter's marriage," "What the village will say." The children wrote down every one.

Satyavrat Mehta sat in the last row and wrote, "Today the question of justice has entered the plate. A mouth that has recited the law must first learn equality at a meal."

The meal began. A child said, "In kabaddi, you touch someone and run back. At the plate, you touch and stay."

After the meal the leftover grains were returned to the earth. "What remains is not waste," Ba said, "but an offering."

Ananya wrote a heading: "Twenty-seventh watch: the Shared Plate." Beneath it she wrote, "Where caste prevents a shared plate, justice eats an unfinished meal."

At night the new shoots of Channa Grove trembled. "Liberation does not mean only hearing one another's names. It also means being able to share the same taste upon the same earth."

Chapter 132

The Republic of the Kitchen



After the shared meal, Meera said, "If caste still rules the kitchen, sharing a plate will remain nothing more than a festival custom." Ananya opened a new page and wrote, "The Kitchen's Test."

They agreed to set up a public kitchen around the Channa stump. Every ingredient would arrive with its story. An elderly farmer said, "This rice comes from a field where rubble from the bridge project lay for two years." A young woman from the leatherworkers' neighbourhood said, "These greens were cooked by my mother, but there are many homes that would never eat food from her hands."

Ananya asked, "If Gangesha was concerned with the nature of truth, what is the true nature of food? Is untouchability its evidence, or is hunger?"

An elderly Brahmin had brought clarified butter from home, but could hardly bring himself to hand it over. "In my family there was a rule against touching food made by certain hands," he said. "Today this ghee will go into the pan where the vegetables grown from those seeds are cooking." The ghee fell into the pan. Everyone fell silent at the sound.

Meera made a rule: "No person's work will be called lowly." Men too were assigned the tasks of chopping, washing and scrubbing dishes.

Five cooking fires, seven pans and water from three different castes came together in a fragrance no family name could claim.

As they served the food, Ananya said, "The first serving will go to the one whose name was never written anywhere." A leaf-plate was placed before the stone for the unnamed.

Then came the washing-up: the real test. Those who had spent their lives clearing away other people's plates were told to sit down. People from the so-called higher castes were asked to scrub the dishes. "Anyone who cannot wash a plate cannot write about justice," Ba said.

Ananya wrote, "The Constitution of the Kitchen Republic: Whoever eats must cook; whoever cooks must eat; whoever eats must wash; and the hands that wash are sacred."

At night the ghost of the Elder noticed a line of leftover salt on a dry leaf. He touched it to his forehead and said, "The next test will not be about leftovers, but about seeds and ashes."

Chapter 133

An Invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival



After the Republic of the Kitchen, a letter arrived in Garh Narikel. It said, "Videha Theatre Festival." The village was invited to bring its own story to the stage.

"We shall put on a play," Ananya said, "but only those who know how to hold their breath shall act in it." The children who played kabaddi would become the actors.

"This will not be a summary," Ananya said. "A summary can be like a crocodile: it chews up the body and leaves only bones. A play needs a body, not bones alone."

The kabaddi players began rehearsing. One player spoke the name "Gangesha" and stopped. Before he could cross the line, someone asked, "What is evidence?" "The body is evidence," he replied. "Humiliation is evidence. Love is evidence too."

"Nobody's suffering may be made into a scene without their permission," said Meera. Devika added, "And the first seat shall go to the person whose name has not been found."

Someone began making a comical imitation of Batuknath Hariharan. Ananya stopped him. "Do not turn a villain into a clown. That makes the wrongdoing seem smaller."

The role of Chandrapal went to a young man who had once wept while reading his father's name during the parade of false ghosts. "You are not simply going to play a cheat," Devika said. "You must show the audience the emptiness inside a human being who becomes one."

A little boy wanted to play Satyavrat Mehta. "Let me," he said, "because I do not speak very much."

That night the ghost of the Elder said, "A stage can be a grove too. If its roots are false, its leaves become applause. If its roots are true, its leaves become names."

A stone was placed upon the invitation to the Videha Theatre Festival. On it were written the words, "Even an invitation will bear witness."

At last Ananya wrote the opening line: "There is water in the middle of the stage. Anyone who enters must first speak the name of their reflection." With those words, the door of the play opened.

Chapter 134

A Play Written by Kabaddi Players



For three days no drum sounded in Garh Narikel. The children sat in a circle, deciding how to bring their story to the stage.

"We cannot perform the whole story," Ananya said. "It is too vast." Ujjwal's spirit laughed. "You do not play a story; you give it breath."

"Nobody's sorrow will become a spectacle," said Meera. "And nobody's name will be used without permission," Devika added.

They named the play "The Watch." Its subtitle was "A Play Written by Kabaddi Players." No single person would be the hero. Breath itself would be the hero. The people who had died would not be called "ghosts," but "present."

Ira wrote the first line: "The spectators will enter the stage." Ananya crossed out "spectators" and wrote "witnesses."

No character was given a caste beside their name. "Caste is not a character," said Ananya. "It is a cage. The cage will hang empty above the stage."

The first scene would be "Morning After the Riverbank Collapsed." A child would touch the severed stump and say, "The grove has been cut down, but its roots are listening." All the actors would answer together, "Present."

The second scene was "The Yellow Notice." The third was "Gangesha's Question." An empty cage marked "Caste" would hang at the centre of the stage.

The fourth scene was "The Memorial App"; the fifth, "The Parade of False Ghosts"; the sixth, "The Unnamed Planet of Dreams"; the seventh, "The Republic of the Kitchen"; and the eighth, "The Elephant, the Crocodile and the Child's Hand."

They argued over the title of the ninth and final scene. "If we close the play, we lose the game," said Ujjwal's spirit. They named it "Earth Again." The schemers would reach out to touch a new shoot, but first their hands would have to write their own names.

Ba suggested the final line: "While there is breath left, the story is not finished. Kabaddi has not stopped."

That night the ghost of the Elder took one step forward in an old kabaddi stance, then stopped, as though saying, "The play is written. Now let us see how it breathes on stage."

Chapter 135

The Performance at the Videha Theatre Festival



By nightfall, the festival ground was crowded. The children refused a raised platform. "Where the story of names is performed, there must be no higher place for the actors and lower place for the audience." They marked out a circular ground, with a kabaddi line running through its centre.

In the first scene, a boy began chanting "Kabaddi, kabaddi," then changed his chant to "Name, name, name." He set down a stone and said, "This is not a stone. It is a seat for the person whose name was never found." From every direction came the reply, "Present."

In the second scene, a crocodile appeared without a mask. "Give me a body and I shall eat it," it said. "But if the children hold on to the name, what can I do?"

The third scene was the water burial. A player "drowned" — not by falling to the ground, but by rising slowly and sitting beside the stone. A child said, "The body sank; the bonds fell away."

In the fourth scene came Gangesha's question, with an empty seat. A girl asked, "What is evidence? If caste stands guard over the human body, how can justice be born on paper?"

In the fifth scene, Batuknath Hariharan entered carrying a thick book and reciting, "Trust, rules, committee." When the book opened, dry leaves fell out. Each leaf carried a question: "Who owns the trust?"

The sixth scene belonged to Chandrapal Batra. Holding a pretend phone, he said, "Tribute, tribute," but the screen began showing him his own unfinished name.

In the seventh scene, Raghav Signal's messages turned into leaves and fell to the ground.

In the eighth scene, Lau and Broom said, "The earth is unsafe. Come to the unnamed planet of dreams." The children tossed the kabaddi line up towards the sky.

In the ninth scene, names were read aloud upon that unnamed dream planet. The player acting as Lau asked, "Where is my name?" No answer came.

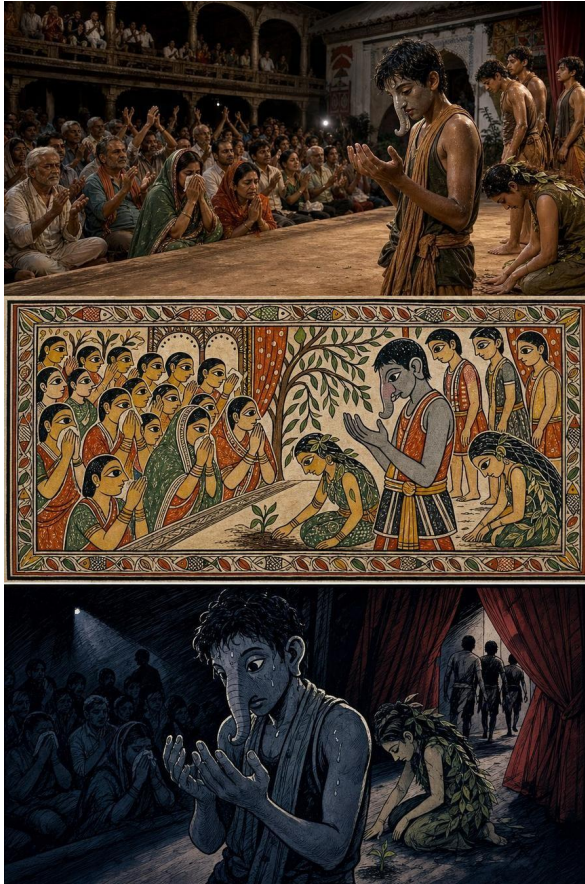
In the tenth scene, an empty chair stood for Satyavrat Mehta's silence. "The one who did not come to listen will leave his chair empty," said Ananya.

The final scene was kabaddi — pure, swift and full of breath. When it ended, the organisers moved to applaud, but the children held up their hands. "Applause marks the end of a performance. We do not want this night to end."

An elderly man stood up. "There is another name in my home, one that was not in the play." Others rose behind him. The play that had begun in one village spread into the voices of the people.

Chapter 136

The Silence After the Applause



After the performance, the applause began to change. Some hands stopped in mid-clap. Some people wiped their eyes.

The director of the Videha Theatre Festival said, "I shall not give a speech about this performance. Let those whose names were left out of the play come forward."

An elderly woman said, "My husband's name was never spoken." Another woman said softly, "My daughter is alive, but our family will not speak her name. Can it be written too?" Ananya answered, "Someone whose name has been silenced is no less worthy of being remembered than someone who has died. Write it down."

Satyavrat Mehta spoke to the boy who had played him. "When people applaud another person's pain, we must be especially careful to listen again. Pain speaks not to win praise, but to demand justice."

Chandrapal Batra stood outside the hall. He had not dared to sit inside. A sentence flashed across his phone: "Your name is not written on the stage, but among the losses suffered by the people."

Batuknath's representative tried to claim the rights to the play. But when audience members climbed onto the stage and began adding their names, the representative's notebook became useless.

"A story that comes from a water burial should have an authorship like a river," Ira said. "Many villages may stand along its banks. The river is not divided among them. It keeps flowing."

"But an open space does not give anyone the right to violate another person's privacy," Meera added. "A play may belong to the public, but each person must still control the rights to their body and memories."

That night the hall emptied, but the stage did not. The children decided that at every future performance they would listen to local people's names and weave their stories into the play. Ananya drew a small square upon the stage. "This is not a kabaddi line," she said. "It is the stage's promise." Each player crossed it saying not "Kabaddi," but "Present."

By dawn a new line had appeared in the dust of the stage: "Where a play ends, a village begins." "This will stay at the back of our script," said Ananya. "Whoever reads it will write the next act."

Chapter 137

The Audience Bears Witness



The silence that followed the applause had settled deep inside the people. "Today we shall first find out whether the audience wishes to write its own story," said Ananya.

An elderly man rose from the front row. "I was a clerk on the bridge project," he said. "I knew the true number of labourers, but I kept quiet." He drew out an old, yellowed sheet of paper. "I have kept this list."

A kabaddi player stepped down, took the paper from the man's hands and touched it to his forehead. Ananya wrote, "First testimony from the audience: the silent clerk."

A woman rose from the second row. "I used to distribute medicine in a hospital. Medicines meant to be given to poor patients for free were entered in the name of a private shopkeeper, and I was made to do it. I did not object." She took a key from around her neck and placed it in Ananya's hand.

A young man said, "I made advertisements that filled old people's eyes with fear. I thought they were only words. Today I understand that words have teeth too."

One by one, audience members rose. Someone had stopped a marriage in the name of caste; someone else had stood by without speaking. That night everyone began to understand how many small wrongs could join together to become a great crocodile.

Batuknath Hariharan was in the gathering, sitting far away. With each testimony, a little more of his smile vanished.

Satyavrat Mehta listened without speaking. He understood that true testimony begins when a person can give a name to their own silence.

A middle-aged devotee of literature said, "I have watched plays for years, but today I understand that if the audience does not bear witness, the play remains half-finished." A boy asked, "Will the audience play a part in the next act, then?" "Not a part," Ananya said. "They will bring their own names."

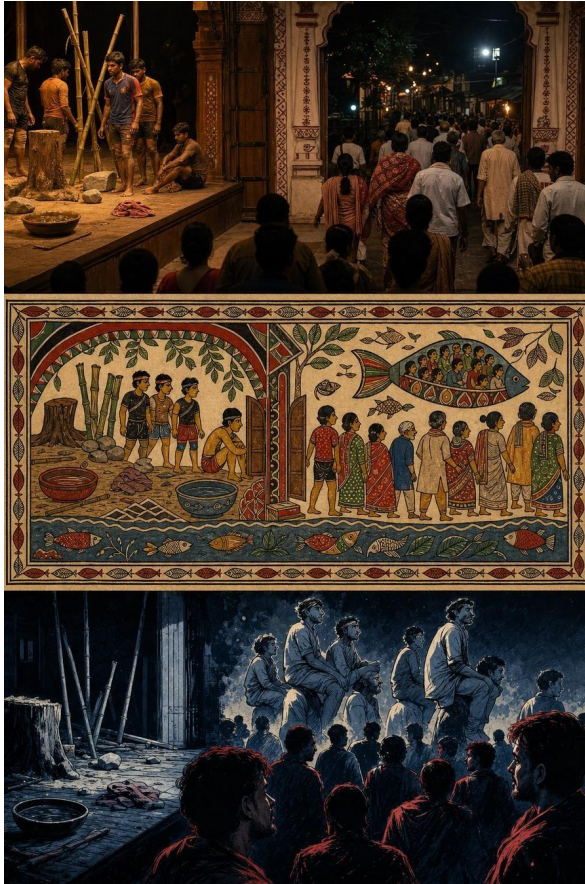
Meera reminded everyone, "A witness owns their testimony. The stage is only its servant."

That night the ghost of the Elder and the kabaddi players called, "Present!" From every corner of the auditorium came the answer, "Present!"

At dawn a fresh notice, handwritten by the children, was found on the festival gate: "In the next act, the audience's testimony will be added to the play. Kabaddi continues."

Chapter 138

The Procession Beyond the Stage



As people came out, the crowd stopped upon the hall's steps. Someone asked, "Was that a play or a court?" An answer came: "When a court becomes a play, justice dies. When a play becomes a court, memory speaks."

The first testimony outside the hall was given at a tea stall. A woman said, "My brother's name is not in any record either." For the first time, the tea seller wrote his name in his little book of customers' debts.

The second testimony came at the bus stand. A young man who had put white lime on his face to play a ghost said, "I shall not wash this colour away until my father's full name has been written down."

The third testimony came beside the rear entrance of the festival pavilion. The actors began speaking their real names. The grandfather of the actor who had played a labourer had truly disappeared in the bridge disaster.

The narrator found a sentence written upon a page of the script: "When the audience carries a story inside itself, the author of that story changes."

"Private testimony must not travel beyond the stage," Meera said. "Ask permission before publishing anything."

Raghav Signal tried to delete the word "Present" from his code, but it kept coming back.

Batuknath Hariharan heard the news. "How big is the crowd?" he asked. "It is more than a crowd, sir," his secretary replied. "People are giving testimony." Batuknath's expression darkened. A crowd could be controlled. Testimony could not.

At dawn the kabaddi players began a game in the street outside the hall. For a moment, people carrying milk and a boy delivering newspapers stopped to watch.

"Whatever we print, something will be left out," Ira said. "But we should admit what is missing when we print it."

Just then a letter arrived from abroad. "We too shall perform this play," it said, "but first we shall listen to the names." The kabaddi line now seemed ready to cross the sea.

Chapter 139

The Road Becomes a Stage



The play had left the hall and come out onto the road. A man carrying milk became a spectator for a moment. A rickshaw puller held his breath and caught the rhythm of "Kabaddi."

The first performance took place near the market. A player, dressed as an ordinary young man, said "Present" very slowly. A knife stopped in the hand of a fish seller. An old woman selling chillies answered too: "Present."

On the second day they acted at the bus stand. The conductor himself read aloud from a leaf. "If a name has not been entered on a ticket, is

that person no longer a passenger? If a name has not been entered into the story of life, is that person no longer human?"

The third scene was played on the verandah of a courthouse. A girl laid down a blank sheet of paper and asked, "In which box do we put the evidence of a life that has been suppressed?"

The fourth performance took place outside a medicine shop. The shopkeeper stepped forward himself. "I raised prices too," he said. "I profited when people were afraid." Meera replied, "The first breath of testimony may begin with admitting a wrong, but it must not end there."

Some traders protested, "All this will drive our customers away." The children's answer never changed. "We are not stirring up a quarrel. We are reading names."

When Batuknath Hariharan heard about it, he smiled. "A play on the public road? It will be easy to prove that they are causing disorder." But as he lifted his pen, the word "Present" wrote itself across his paper. He understood that Channa Grove had entered the courthouse verandah.

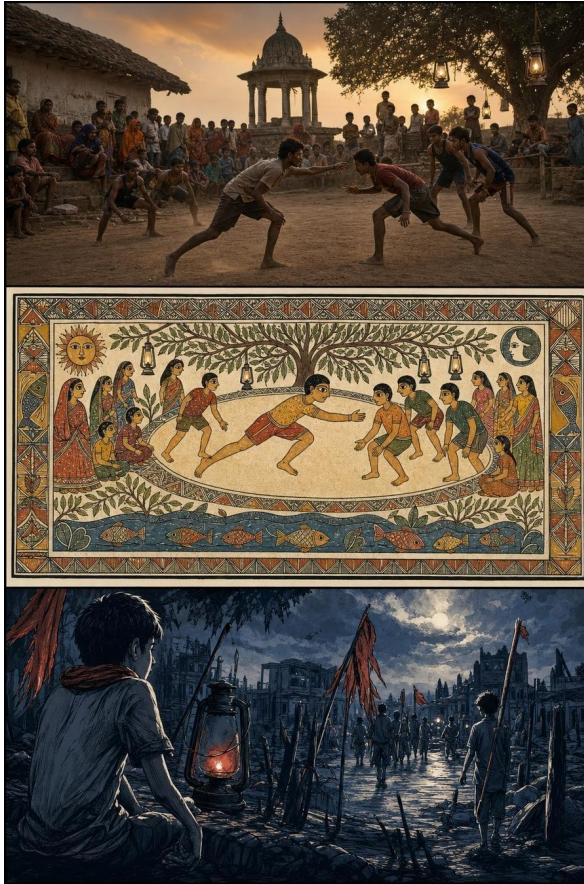
Chandrapal sent his people to set up cameras in the market, but the women stopped them. "We will not put memory up for sale again," Meera said.

Raghav Signal tried to file the event under the name "Travelling Play," but he could not work out who should receive the message. There was no owner and no single leader.

Sitting in a distant country, Lau Kin-hung understood that these people would not leave the earth. Memories that had begun to perform themselves upon the roads could not be bought with a contract for another planet.

Chapter 140

The Travelling Village Assembly



The kabaddi players made a new rule. Every performance would end with a game, but nobody would be declared winner or loser. A player would cross the line chanting "Kabaddi," ask someone opposite for a name, and come back before running out of breath.

The children named this theatre of the road the "Travelling Village Assembly." It needed no stage, only three things: an open space, a listening ear and a name not yet complete.

That evening the procession returned to the stump. A little boy, who had seen a performance for the first time that day, wrote, "A play is not

just what happens on a stage. A play is what makes life tell the truth about its own lies."

Ba laughed. "Now it is life's turn. The story will enter the homes of everyone who stood and watched. Those are the real stages: the kitchen, the verandah, the field, the courthouse, the mobile phone and sleep itself."

At night two policemen arrived on bicycles and handed over a paper headed "Request for Explanation Regarding Unauthorised Obstruction of a Public Road." The children read it. Nobody was afraid. They knew that when a story steps onto the road, those in power begin measuring its footsteps.

Ananya placed the paper on the edge of the stump. "We shall read this tomorrow," said Satyavrat Mehta.

"Not read," came the ghost of the Elder's voice from behind them. "Played."

The following day they would play not the theatre of the road, but the kabaddi of paper — a game in which they would have to bring back the thief's name from between the lines of the law before their breath ran out.

Chapter 141

The Verandah's Verdict



The kabaddi of papers reached the courthouse gate. The old stones of the verandah, which bore the weight of shoes, waiting, and calls for hearing dates all day long, became a stage that night.

Satyavrat Mehta stood in one corner. When the play ended, an elderly litigant came forward and said, "My case went on for twenty-three years. My son grew old after starting out young. The court said the papers were incomplete. But who will write the papers of my life?"

A clerk came out of the courthouse and said, "Some files are covered not in dust, but in the ashes of names." Ananya asked him to name his

fear. "The fear of losing my job," the clerk answered. The children wrote, "Fear of losing one's job is another kind of silence."

An old pupil of Batuknath Hariharan, now a lawyer, laid his coat on the stone and said, "We learned the language of law, but not the language of listening to justice." Slips bearing court dates fell from his pocket. The children said, "Let him read the slips he has dropped, himself, first."

"There was a play on this verandah," Devika said. "Now there will be lessons here."

Meera cautioned everyone: "Do not pull someone who wants to keep their story private into public applause."

"How can all this weeping be evidence?" a student asked. Aruni pointed to the old litigant's cracked feet, the slips bearing hearing dates, and the children's register. "If evidence exists only on paper," he said, "the lives of the poor will always be called unproved."

At last Satyavrat Mehta handed Ananya an old sheet. "The courthouse verandah is not outside the court. It is the ear the court has refused to use." Beneath it Ananya wrote, "When that ear opens, the verandah will become a courtroom."

In the morning the old litigant said, "I received no verdict today, but the years I have waited have finally been given a name."

Early the next day, the old files inside the court's record room began fluttering by themselves, as though they were saying, "Read us too."

Chapter 142

Darkness in the Record Room



The following day, they came to the record-room door. Its wooden panels seemed to be beating from within. The attendant, Bhikhari Lal, put in his key, but the lock would not open. "The lock isn't old," he said. "The breathing inside is too heavy."

At last the latch opened. Dust entered not their eyes but their memories. Ananya went towards a sack of discarded papers. "This isn't rubbish. These are papers that have been humiliated." Aruni said, "Each name in that sack is itself a command." Meera warned them, "Don't tear a single file. Count first, then read."

Inside the first land-dispute file, they found a torn piece of a wedding invitation. The court case had caused a marriage to fall apart.

Another file contained a young man's petition: because of his caste name, his surname had been changed in the admission register, and both his scholarship and his job prospects had been stopped. Aruni said, "Cutting out a name doesn't merely cut out letters. It cuts away someone's future."

Satyavrat Mehta came inside. "If the dust of the records never settles on a judge's body," he said, "the judge will go on thinking he is clean."

An elderly woman came in from the verandah. "My husband's file is here. I thought, if a human being can go missing, why can't his file go missing too?" Meera tried to bring her a chair, but the woman remained seated on the stone. "I've sat on stone for years. A chair no longer feels real to me."

For the sixth time, the children came upon a sheet of paper with only half a name left on it. The elderly woman pressed it to her forehead. "Even half a name is a name, if someone is willing to hear it in full."

"We shall make a list of every missing file," Devika proposed. "A missing file will not mean that the person has ceased to exist."

Batuknath's former pupil came to apologise. Meera said, "An apology isn't a word spoken on a stage. Use your hands to find the files you kept hidden."

Satyavrat Mehta wrote an order: "Every file in the record room must be counted afresh. A public list of missing files must be prepared, together with records of the spoken testimony of people still waiting for their cases."

"This is not an hour of victory," Ananya said. "It is the beginning of our watch."

Chapter 143

The Testimony of the Rubbish Sack



The heaviest corner of the record room was the one where the sacks of discarded paper had been piled. "Carefully," Meera said. "What is called rubbish today may hold someone's last hope, written on a sheet of paper."

Ananya opened a sack. Out came a page marked, "Original record unavailable." "The original record isn't simply unavailable," Aruni said. "The original human being has been made to disappear."

Satyavrat Mehta read one page: a widow's petition about land that had been taken from her in the name of a mortgage. In the margin someone had written, "Unclear." Tears filled Satyavrat's eyes. The

widow's handwriting had not been unclear; the system had never learned how to read her pain.

"The first lesson of the rubbish sack," Devika said, "is that the people we threw away did not cease to exist."

One page contained only the words, "Please hear me." Beneath them was a thumbprint. Ananya said, "If the name is lost, protect the sentence."

"I was taught to clear out old papers," said Bhikhari Lal, the attendant. "But nobody told me that old cries were hiding inside those old papers."

The children decided to make a copy of every page. Meera warned them, "If making a name public could hurt the person's family, cover that name. Protect the testimony; don't put the witness's body up for sale."

Seeing a page, the old litigant said, "That looks like my brother's application." Meera stopped him. "'Looks like' is the beginning of testimony, not the end of proof."

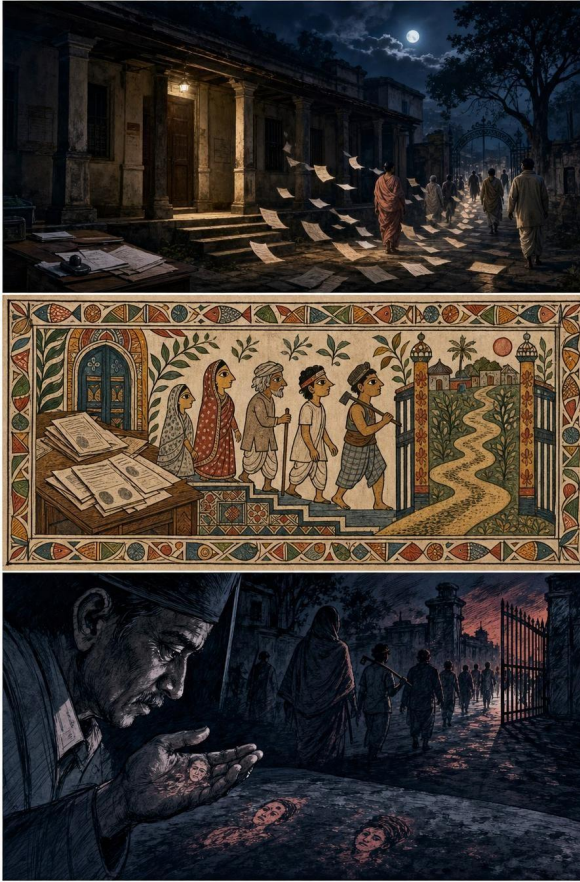
By night the rubbish sack was empty, yet the record room seemed fuller than before. On the sack the children wrote, "Testimony was buried here."

Satyavrat Mehta said, "The day an office dares to examine its own rubbish is the day justice begins to recover its first face."

The Elder's Ghost said, "It's easy to call something rubbish. It's harder to turn it into testimony. Today that difficult work has begun."

Chapter 144

The Journey of Names



"The journey of names began with papers," said Ananya, "but it won't end on paper." Meera added, "Before we carry news to someone, we must carry dignity."

The list was divided into three parts: people still alive; people who had died, whose relatives would be sought; and people whose homes had faded from memory, whose names would be read at Channa Grove. Aruni wrote, "No faces without permission. No testimony without dignity."

Satyavrat Mehta said, "If a procedure doesn't protect human beings, it's merely a latch. Let this list become a doorway, not a latch."

A young lawyer, who had placed his coat on the stone the day before, arrived without it. "I'll help find the homes belonging to these names," he said. Aruni stopped him. "Help, but do not become their master."

They searched for Jasoda Devi's house first. She had died. Her niece, now a grandmother herself, asked, "Is her name still alive?" Placing a hand on her chest, the elderly woman said, "She used to say, 'If my field is taken, I will be nothing.' People laughed. Now the papers are speaking."

Jasoda's field was now in someone else's possession. A middle-aged man demanded harshly, "What good will digging up old matters do?" Bhikhari Lal answered, "Nothing changed while the papers were in the wrong hands. Now they'll pass into the hands of the names."

The group returned that evening. "Jasoda Devi is no longer a dead case," Ananya said. "She is a living memory."

Satyavrat Mehta also asked them to put the clerk's fear on the list. "A system that buries names first chokes its own workers into silence." The clerk wrote the heading, "Statement of an Employee's Silence."

At last Ananya said, "Some names may never find a home again. But we shall give those names a place at Channa Grove."

In the morning three copies of the list were prepared: one for the record room, one for the verandah stone, and one for Channa Grove. Drops of dew shone on the pages. "This isn't dew," Meera said. "The names are having a bath."

Chapter 145

The First Crack in Fear



The three copies of the list took three different paths: one to the record room, one to the verandah stone, and one in Ananya's bag towards Channa Grove.

At Channa Grove the list was opened. "These names are looking for their homes," Ananya said. "We'll take each one home if we find it. If we cannot, we'll give it a place in this grove's memory." "The grove has given its consent," Aruni said.

News reached Chandrapal Batra: "The list is ready. The children have taken it to Channa Grove." His hand trembled, and tea spilled from his cup.

Raghav laughed, but felt hollow inside. "What can children do?" Yet he remembered that children asked questions, and questions could not be answered with sticks.

At noon an official came outside the court and scolded the clerk. "Why were files shown without permission?" The clerk took a slip from his pocket. "The files weren't shown," he said. "They were read. Inside papers called rubbish were human petitions."

Bhikhari Lal stepped forward. "I used to sweep the floors. I called those papers rubbish. Now I say they weren't rubbish."

Satyavrat Mehta told the official, "If a rule erases a human being's name, the rule must be interpreted again."

An elderly litigant came to Channa Grove with his grandson. "Grandfather, is that your name?" the boy asked. The old man laughed and then wept. "Yes. But it belongs even more to the waiting that went on until your father's time."

Chandrapal's messenger tried to stop the list. "If respected families are named without evidence, there will be unrest in the village." Meera replied, "Those who buried papers and sold people's waiting will not be protected by calling the truth 'unrest'."

That night, at a meeting of those opposed to the court's new work, an elderly lawyer said, "Copies of the files exist in three places. The people have heard. The time of fear is passing." That was the first crack.

"From tomorrow we'll go from house to house," Ananya said. "We won't write down a story without permission." Meera added, "And we'll write down the name of fear, too."

Chapter 146

The Stain of the Seal



Ananya opened an old bundle marked "Special Records." The sheets inside bore seals—some clear, some crooked, some only half-impressed.

Aruni read a petition. A field's boundary had changed, a family's hearth had changed, and at the bottom was a seal saying "Verified." "A lie that swallowed someone's life was called verified," he said.

Meera picked up a sheet with three different remarks about the same woman: "Attended," "Absent," and "Documents insufficient." She asked, "How could the same woman be present and absent on the very same day?"

Chandrapal's former clerk, standing in the crowd, said, "I didn't lose the files. I just sent them upstairs. They never came back down." "Who was upstairs?" Ananya asked.

At last the clerk produced a folded sheet. It was a list marked "Orders of B.H." Batuknath Hariharan's name was not written out, but his shadow seemed to spread across the room.

Just then a child came running from Channa Grove carrying a stone, stained red and bearing the words "Save the Names."

Meera warned them, "The most dangerous time has begun. When papers start becoming evidence, people who burn papers begin to appear."

Bhikhari Lal laid his key in front of Ananya. "I can't keep watch all by myself." "Keep the key in your own hand," she told him. "The difference is that your hand won't be alone any longer."

"No verdict was written in court today," Satyavrat Mehta said, "but the first statement against the seal has been recorded."

The children entered in their register: "When a seal is stamped over a human being, the first act of justice is to make that person's outline visible again."

Chapter 147

Knocking on Every Door



At dawn Ananya, Aruni, Devika and Bhikhari Lal began going from door to door. "We're not going to make announcements, but to listen," Meera said. "A knock on someone's door should be the first touch of respect, not a commotion."

The first house belonged to Surmani Devi. "This is a copy of your petition," Ananya said gently. Surmani Devi answered, "I didn't write it myself. I spoke, and the land-record keeper's son wrote. But where was my crying in his handwriting?" Aruni wrote, "Someone else was the writer; the sorrow belonged to the person who spoke."

The second house belonged to Rameshwar Sah, who had died. His daughter-in-law grew frightened. "Are you reopening the case? We're all exhausted." Meera took her hand. "We're not reopening the case. We're writing down the name of your exhaustion."

"If I ever handed you a slip with a hearing date, please forgive me," Bhikhari Lal told the daughter-in-law. "I didn't understand whose hearth might remain cold because of that slip." "If you understand now," she replied, "write it down."

The third house belonged to Phulkumari. Her mother said, "She left school that year. It wasn't her evidence that was incomplete; it was her stomach." Ananya asked, "May we write this story?" "Write it," the mother said. "But write about my daughter as someone with rights, not as someone to be pitied."

The children did not call out at doors that remained closed. "A closed door is an answer too," Meera said. They left a slip at each threshold: "If you wish, we can come and listen."

In the marketplace Raghav's adviser spread a rumour: "These people are disturbing the peace." Nandu the blacksmith stopped his hammer. "Was there peace in the house where the cooking fire never burned?"

Murari, an old photocopy-shop owner, arrived with a bundle. "These are extra copies. When people couldn't pay me on time, I kept them." Bhikhari Lal whispered, "Human lives survived among the rubbish."

That night the statements gathered on the first day were read at Channa Grove. For anyone who had not given permission, an empty lamp was kept instead—no wick, no flame, but a place of its own.

Meanwhile, at another meeting in Chandrapal's house, a plot was devised. "It's easy to defeat the truth if you mix enough lies into the crowd around it." Meera had already sensed this trick. She set out five new rules: listen twice, keep separate copies, distinguish accusations from experiences, blame no one without evidence, and always investigate falsehoods.

Chapter 148

Recognising the Mixture of Lies



"Today we shall listen, but we shall also examine," Meera said. "Examination doesn't mean distrust. It means protecting names. If lies slip in wearing the clothes of truth, real suffering will be brought into disgrace again."

The first visitor introduced himself as "Bhola Mandal." His story was almost too neatly arranged. "What did the earth in your field smell like?" Meera asked. "Like earth," he replied. Someone who had truly lost a field would not answer like that.

Devika examined his papers. The folds were new, the dust artificial. "The spacing between the letters of the seal is different," the clerk said.

"Tell the truth," Bhikhari Lal said. "Who gave you the false papers?" At last the man admitted, "My name is Bhikhan Sah. Raghav's people said I'd get two hundred rupees if I told this story."

Meera did not humiliate him in front of the crowd. She simply wrote, "The individual is at fault, but there is also a network behind the fault."

The second visitor was Jagmaya, telling her husband's story. The receipt bore the name "Harimohan Jha," but she said, "At home we called him Mohan." That small difference was a sign of truth: the name used at home is often different from the name in a register.

At noon three young men arrived carrying papers written in identical handwriting. Each repeated the same sentence: "We want justice, nothing but justice." Devika questioned them separately about their thresholds and their fathers' voices. Their answers became hopelessly tangled. The mixture of lies was plain.

A small boy told the truth: the young men had been seen on Raghav's verandah. Meera immediately made sure the boy was safe. "First protect the child who speaks the truth."

That night Murari, the photocopy-shop owner, admitted, "Raghav's people told me to make false copies or they'd have my shop closed. But I left a scratch so the copies could be distinguished from the real seal."

Devika wrote, "A human being is not wholly black or wholly white. Justice must learn to read the grey."

Jagmaya did not take her receipt back. "I want a copy, not a claim of ownership," she said.

That night the pages under suspicion of being mixed with falsehoods were placed in a box. It was tied with red thread instead of locked. "When we open it, we'll open it before everyone."

Chapter 149

A Map of the Network



Morning brought the task of mapping the network that lay behind the lies. Meera warned them, "We'll open the box, not throw accusations around. First look at the marks, then the connections, and only then write down names."

Bhikhari Lal began measuring the sizes of the papers. "A crease in paper speaks just as a wound on a body does."

Four of the young men's sheets had the same piece cut from the left corner. The scratch left by Murari was absent from Bhikhan's sheet, but it appeared on the copies belonging to three of the young men. Lies were being manufactured in two places.

"A false paper isn't an isolated falsehood," said Satyavrat Mehta. "When it joins other false papers, the method behind them begins to show."

Devika noticed the scent of incense on a sheet. "Incense is burned on Raghav's verandah every evening," the clerk said. "In that smoke, paper begins to look old."

At last the clerk revealed his name: Kailash Prasad. He admitted, "Some files were marked 'temporarily unavailable' at the request of Raghav's people."

Beneath an old wooden plank in the record room, they found three files bearing both the seal of Batuknath's ashram and the court's record numbers.

A new circle was added to the map: "Ashram." "This crocodile walks not on four legs, but on four institutions," Aruni said.

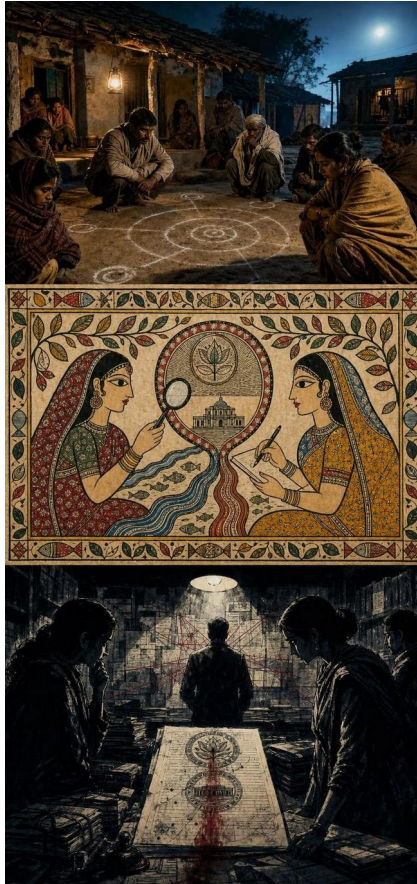
Bhikhan Sah returned with a two-hundred-rupee note. "This is what I was paid for my false statement." Meera refused to take the note. "It is evidence. Tell us how it was given to you."

Murari admitted, "I did wrong because I was afraid. But deep inside, I wanted to be caught one day." "That wish doesn't wash away the wrongdoing," Satyavrat said. Meera added, "But it may become a crack through which the network can be broken."

That night the map went back into its box, marked "First Outline of the Network." A green spot appeared on a root. "The root is still alive," Aruni wrote. Ananya added, "If the root lives, the map won't disappear."

Chapter 150

The Shadow of the Seal



Both the ashram's seal and the court's record number had been found on the list. "Until we trace this seal's path," Ananya said, "we won't see the body of the network."

Meera laid down a rule: "Don't rush to attack the ashram simply because we've seen its seal. We must ask, compare and listen."

Satyavrat Mehta noticed a tiny notch in the seal. Kailash Prasad explained, "About ten years ago, a temporary seal was used in the court. Later it was recorded as 'lost'."

"When something goes missing in a court," Bhikhari Lal said, "it never goes missing all by itself."

Murari gave them a name: Chhedi the scrap dealer. Four of them went to his shop. "Once I found a heavy piece," Chhedi said. "Not a full circle, but a semicircle, cut at one edge, with backward letters." Murari turned pale when he heard this.

Chhedi told them he had passed the piece to a travelling metal buyer known as Sikka. Instead of asking for the date, Meera asked what season it had been. "After the monsoon month of Sawan," he answered.

In one of Chhedi's old sacks they found the torn cover of a donation register. Under "Settlement Service" it bore the name of Shyamsundar, Surmani Devi's husband.

"My husband said that after a visit to the ashram, the important men grew gentle," Surmani Devi said. "Now I understand. They weren't gentle. They were drawing people into their coils."

Ramesh, the son of Bhanu Lal, an old seal-maker, showed them his father's register. "Special circular seal, for a temporary court; recut and used in the ashram's name."

Ramesh said his father had told him before he died, "Make seals, but don't become the maker of a seal's sins."

Haricharan, carrying a white umbrella, came from Chandrapal's office with a threatening message. Meera stayed calm. "We aren't writing accusations. We're writing connections."

That night Ramesh brought an old wooden handle with no rubber attached. "Father kept this safe," he said. "Put the handle near the stump," Meera replied. "Let everyone see that a seal is held in a human hand. It isn't a god."

Chapter 151

The Hand That Used the Seal



Ramesh the seal-maker said, "Father used to say, 'Son, use the seal, but never ask what the seal means. If you start asking questions, our home will go under.'"

"When a seal falls into the wrong hands," Satyavrat Mehta said, "what forms is not government but an orderly system of theft." Bhikhari Lal added, "When theft becomes a system, the office attendant becomes its first guard."

Two young men arrived from the ashram. "Why do the papers of public welfare carry the court's record numbers?" Ananya asked. "For convenience," one of them replied. "Whose convenience?" Meera asked.

"The widow's, or the hand that used the seal?" The young man fell silent.

Jagmaya brought a letter from Mohan. "The papers were stamped, but I couldn't understand how I had become a stranger on my own land."

Ramesh pointed to four codes on a page of his father's register: "A," "Ch," "R," and "Aa." Bhikhari Lal understood. "A for the court, Ch for Chandrapal, R for Raghav, Aa for the ashram?"

Bhikhan, the tea-seller, said, "There was a man who always drank tea without sugar and kept red thread in his pocket."

They met an unidentified man with an umbrella who gave his name as "Ramlakhan Sahay." "I only carried papers from one place to another," he said. "I used to say exactly that," Bhikhari Lal replied.

"In Batuknath's time, people worshipped the seal," Ramlakhan said. "After he left, it became a business." "When a person becomes a god," Surmani Devi said, "someone else sets up a shop on his seat."

"The language of suspicion stirs up crowds," Satyavrat Mehta said. "The language of investigation catches the hand that did the deed."

That evening Haricharan arrived and objected to people speaking against the ashram. Devika replied quietly, "If the ashram is sacred, how did papers bearing its name reach unclean hands?"

By night Ramlakhan's statement was half finished. Behind the hand that used the seal was a hand that gave instructions; beyond that were the shadows of a verandah, an office and an ashram.

Chapter 152

The Source of the Orders



In the morning Meera wrote a rule: "When looking for the source of an order, don't attack a person. Pay attention to the words." It was important to follow the footsteps of phrases like "It's the procedure," "It's a service," and "Orders came from above."

"If a paper says the order came from above but doesn't say who was above," Satyavrat Mehta said, "it isn't an order. It's pressure."

Bhikhari Lal brought his old box. Inside were slips with red borders saying "Hold the file" and "Delay the copy." They had no signatures, only a mark in blue ink: two curved lines with a dot between them.

"Those weren't direct orders," Ramlakhan Sahay explained. "They were reminders... reminders to put down on paper a decision that had already been made."

"If the decision came before the paperwork," Satyavrat said, "the court had become nothing but a stage."

Ramlakhan named a man: "Mahavir Pathak," an old student of scripture under Batuknath who later became an adviser to the ashram.

Mahavir Pathak's house looked like a storehouse of old manuscripts. At first he laughed. "You children have got yourselves caught up in a game of letters." "Land was lost and people died because of letters," Ananya replied. "We need to learn the rules of that game."

Inside an iron chest in Mahavir's house they found three ledgers: "Memories of Meetings," "Thoughts on Service," and "Rules of Settlement." One entry said, "A direct claim to the piece of land in the grove will be difficult. Revive memories of religious use. Employ the language of public welfare."

Ramlakhan remembered. "I went to fetch betel leaf that night. Raghav was there too. Those were almost the exact words: 'Employ the language of public welfare.'"

"In Batuknathji's time, all this began for the public good," Mahavir admitted. "I couldn't stop the many hands that joined in later." Surmani Devi's voice was sharp. "The man who couldn't stop them kept his name. The people who were stopped lost their land."

"An apology can't take the place of testimony," Meera interrupted. "Tell us everything first."

That evening copies of Mahavir's ledgers reached the stump. "We won't seize the originals," Meera said. "Seizing things is also the language of wrongdoing."

Chapter 153

The Name Behind the Sign



Ananya drove a peg into the ground near the stump and hung up sheets marked "Farmer from the South," "Widow Across the River," "Old Lawsuit," and "Piece of Land in the Grove." "It is honest to leave a space blank when we don't know who belongs there," Meera said.

An elderly man, Ramparikshit Paswan, came forward. "The farmer from the south may have been my uncle, Devan Paswan." Meera made two columns: "Remembered" and "Awaiting Proof."

"There were many widows across the river," Surmani Devi said. "The papers always treated them as alone and therefore weak." "Their homes were the first targets of those greedy for land," Jagmaya said.

A teenage girl called Kamla brought her grandmother Phoolkali Devi's little bundle. In it were a lump of earth, a cloth stained black with thumbprint ink, and a sheet bearing the word "Voluntary." "What does voluntary mean?" Kamla asked.

"If you tell a hungry person, 'You gave it happily,' that isn't a free choice," Surmani Devi answered. "If you tell a frightened person, 'Write that you want to,' that isn't a free choice. If you surround a widow alone and take her thumbprint, that isn't a free choice."

Phoolkali Devi's name was entered on the list of "Initial Names." "Don't celebrate. Be careful," Meera said. "Finding a name doesn't mean finding justice."

In Bhanu Lal's coded register they found another letter: "B." "Batuknath?" Devika whispered. "Not a name yet. A possibility," Meera corrected at once.

Mahavir Pathak arrived. "Don't attach the letter B to Batuknathji," he said. Surmani Devi's voice was not bitter, but it cut deep. "If a man treated like a father allows other people's thumbprints to be taken on his behalf, then the word 'father' must be examined too."

"One place in the meeting notes says 'Baba'," Ramlakhan revealed. Satyavrat wrote, "Unnamed Baba: a possible higher source of the instructions."

Before leaving, Mahavir said, "Sometimes faith was placed above papers." "And then human beings were crushed beneath the papers," Devika replied.

That night Meera handed the list to Ananya. "These aren't merely names. They're responsibilities."

Chapter 154

Baba's Words



The words from the previous day kept everyone awake through the night: "Not every word of Baba's is written down." Satyavrat Mehta wrote, "Devise a way of hearing words that were never recorded."

Meera gave them a rule: "Today we won't honour anyone merely by calling him Baba, or accuse anyone merely by calling him a criminal. First let us trace how the words travelled."

Mahavir Pathak arrived with copies of four ledgers and a piece of cloth from the old ceremonial seat. "I've brought whatever survived in my home," he said. The ledgers contained instructions such as "Leave the piece of grove land for the public good" and "Delay the old names."

Satyavrat explained, "Delaying a name means holding it back so long that the person becomes too tired to press a claim."

An elderly woman named Sharda Jha, who had once cooked at Batuknath's ashram, came forward. "Baba rarely named people directly. He spoke in hints. 'That man from the south is stubborn.' 'Service at the grove will be for everyone.' I used to roll out bread while he spoke. I thought they were talking about religion. Later I understood: my hands rolled the bread, but the decisions were cooking in someone else's stomach."

"Did you call Batuknath Hariharan 'Baba'?" Satyavrat asked. "Everyone did," Sharda replied. "I did too. But calling someone Baba doesn't make him innocent."

Ramlakhan Sahay produced a slip and confessed, "Bhanu Lal handed it to me one day. He said Baba's instruction was to put the date on the donation deed a month earlier."

"The light of a donation doesn't excuse the darkness of a crime," Surmani Devi said. "Someone who gets a pond cleaned has no right to dirty another person's papers."

Haricharan flared up. "You're putting religion on trial!" Meera remained calm. "Not religion. Decisions made in religion's name. A religion afraid of questions isn't religion; it's a chair of power."

That evening the cloth from Batuknath's old seat was unfolded. Kamla placed a grain from her grandmother's lump of earth beside it. Ramparikshit touched it with his walking stick. Sharda showed the cracks in the flour on her hands. Three generations stood around the same seat.

Meera read the final note: "Today the word 'Baba' has been connected for the first time, through remembered testimony, with Batuknath Hariharan. The evidence is not yet complete, but the direction is clearer." Silence was more fitting than applause.

Chapter 155

The Account Book of Service



On the previous day's list Ananya wrote the heading "The Results of the Words." Satyavrat Mehta said, "Today let's read the language of who benefited from the system, not rush into the language of guilt."

Mahavir Pathak showed them the "Service Expenses" section of his ledger: "Phoolkali—two maunds of paddy"; "Devan's family—medical assistance." "Did Grandma receive the grain?" Kamla asked. "Perhaps she did," Surmani Devi answered. "But if she lost her land in exchange, how can we call it service?"

Sharda Jha showed them a feast list. "The homes of the people in whose names rice was taken from the kitchen often became more silent

afterwards." Haricharan laughed. "Eat the rice and then complain?" "If rice given to a hungry person is meant to silence a rightful claim," Sharda replied, "it isn't food. It's a rope."

"We won't insult charity," Meera made clear. "We'll examine whether charity was used to impose silence."

Ramlakhan Sahay confessed, "The pages of the service account were kept separately. When someone feared a court case, expenses were entered opposite that person's name. Later we would say, 'Look, the ashram helped you. There's no point in quarrelling now.'"

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Bhikhari Lal asked. "Because I took medicine for my daughter from that very account," Ramlakhan replied.

Three people came from the southern hamlet. Kailash Mandal said, "My father used to say, 'Don't speak against the man whose hand brought the medicine.'" Sakuni Khatun added, "Medicine shouldn't be the price of keeping one's mouth shut."

Hariballabh Das said, "I received an offering, but there was a condition: don't raise a claim over the road through the southern hamlet."

"Are you turning everything into a crime?" Haricharan roared. "Investigation doesn't destroy what is honest," Satyavrat answered. "It reveals what is corrupt."

On the last page of Mahavir's ledger were the words "Baba's Prasad: Feast of Silence," dated to the time when Phoolkali Devi's donation deed was drawn up. Surmani Devi said sternly, "Telling someone who has lost their home to forget is to kill them a second time."

Kamla placed her lump of earth beside the ledger. "A feast of silence in exchange for Grandma's land?"

"Today we've made it clear," Meera declared, "that the service account was not merely a list of assistance. It may also have been a system for securing silence." No one applauded.

Chapter 156

The Debt of a Gift



Meera opened the list of hands that had risen only halfway. "Today we won't hurry to find a criminal," Satyavrat Mehta said. "First we must understand how a debt comes to live inside someone's body."

Kailash Mandal said, "It's true that my father took medicine. But the ashram's people would say, 'If Baba's kindness saved your father's life, will you question Baba's claim to the land?'" Meera wrote, "Turning kindness into shame."

Sakuni Khatun said, "My mother received grain. At the village council they told her, 'You're poor. Charity is enough for you; educated people will understand the papers.'" "That's not charity," Surmani Devi said.

"It's a plate balanced on sand. You can see the food, but the ground slips away beneath your feet."

Hariballabh Das said, "In our house, questioning Baba was considered a sin. Father said the offerings for playing the small cymbals kept the family going." "Would the stain fall on devotion," Satyavrat asked, "or on the way the offering was used?"

Ramlakhan Sahay himself stepped forward. "I did wrong, but I wasn't the only one. Write down the names of those who turned my hunger and my daughter into tools, too." Ananya coined a new term: "Crime under bondage."

"The person who ate is guilty; the person who gave is virtuous," Haricharan said. "The one who ate because of hunger and the one who used that hunger to bury a claim cannot be weighed on the same scales," Satyavrat replied.

Kamla asked Mahavir, "Didn't anybody in your house ask why Grandma's land wasn't written in the service account?" After a long silence, Mahavir answered, "Because the moment anyone asked about land, Baba felt insulted." "A poor person's land isn't greed," Kamla said. "It's the shadow of their body."

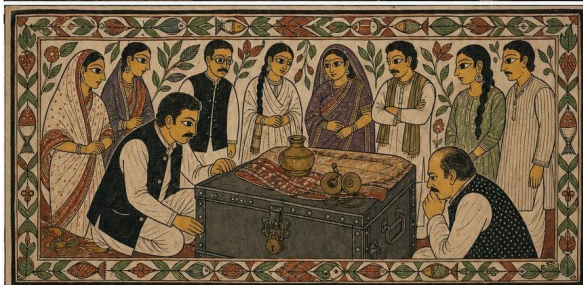
Nirmala the potter added another story. "I gave earthen pots and received grain in return. Once my father asked about the papers and was told, 'We're doing service, not making a bargain.'" Nirmala laughed. "When the poor give something, it isn't even called a gift. When the rich take something, it's called a favour."

Bhanu Lal spoke of a secret notebook called "Consent," kept in the iron chest at Mahavir's house.

"We won't open the chest today," Surmani Devi said. "First we need rules." Meera announced, "Today we've seen that a debt of charity isn't only a debt of money. Some people suffered, some were involved, and some were trapped by a debt turned upside down. Next we'll examine the Consent Notebook and the iron chest."

Chapter 157

The Iron Chest



At dawn Mahavir Pathak led everyone to the upper room of his house. The rules were read first: no one would open the chest alone, every object would be listed, and private matters would remain protected.

The key was brought from the prayer room. "First make an impression of the lock as it is," Surmani Devi said.

When the lock opened, they found two ledgers, sealed documents and a bundle tied in red cloth. The first ledger was labelled "Food Distribution." One column was marked "Promises," with entries such as "Will uphold Baba's honour" and "Will not raise a land dispute."

The second ledger was called "Consent." On its first page were the words "Assurances obtained after gifts, service or emergency aid." "An assurance after help during a crisis," Satyavrat Mehta said. "That means the crisis itself was made into a document."

One sealed paper bore Phoolkali Devi's name. It said, "Boundary dispute suspended in exchange for temporary shelter." "She was given shade because her home had collapsed," Meera said. "In return, the shade of her field was taken away."

"I saw Phoolkali sleeping on the verandah that year," Sharda Jha said. "Her child was shivering. I didn't realise that the blanket from that night would later be turned into a paper."

Mahavir broke down. "Why wasn't I told?" "What remains unspoken within a family is often that family's truest lesson," Satyavrat replied.

Ramlakhan Sahay trembled when he saw his own name. In one place he was marked "Witness," in another "Explained." "I thought I was helping people understand," he said. "I never understood that I was manufacturing consent."

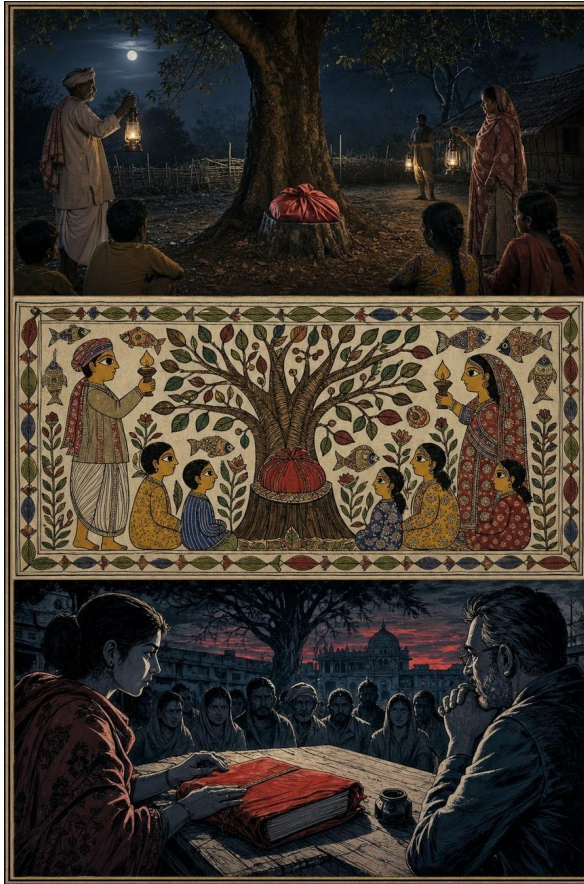
In the bundle wrapped in red cloth was a map. The boundaries of Channa Grove and the fields had been drawn anew in red ink, beside a trident-like mark associated with Batuknath. Satyavrat wrote, "Symbol of authority without a signature."

By evening the iron chest was empty, but the room felt heavy. "The chest is empty now," Surmani Devi said, "but its story must enter the village's belly. Digest it slowly, or it will turn to poison."

"When will Grandma's paper be read?" Kamla asked. "When you're ready," Meera replied, "and when her story can be heard as a way to heal, not as a spectacle."

Chapter 158

Checking the Consent Notebook



At dawn Meera read the rules. "Today the notebook's names will not be read aloud before everyone. First we'll listen to each family separately, and then compare their accounts with the papers."

Rampari, Kailash Mandal's sister, came forward. "Yes, the medicine arrived. But nobody asked its price. Father was ill. They held his hand and took his thumbprint." Devika wrote, "Night of illness: consent in doubt."

Sakuni Khatun said, "They made my mother keep her mouth shut. Her silence was written down as a promise."

Kamla came ready to tell Phoolkali Devi's story. "Grandma's story is no longer a fear. It's a lamp." Sharda Jha gave her testimony. "It was raining. The thatched roof had broken. Phoolkali took shelter on the ashram verandah. I heard no discussion of a boundary dispute that night. The next day a man took away a paper."

Gripping a doorpost, Mahavir Pathak said, "I was proud to think that my home's verandah had become a refuge. Now I see that behind the refuge a net of documents was being woven."

Hariballabh Das said, "Father went there to sing, not to witness a document. The rhythm of his little cymbals was recorded as proof that a witness was present. He could read the name, but not the trick."

Ramlakhan Sahay confessed, "I used to say, 'Don't be afraid. Just put down your thumbprint.'" "Whose orders were you following?" Aruni asked. "Everyone said it was Baba's wish," Ramlakhan answered.

Bhanu Lal said, "Lau used to say, 'If people don't understand the language of papers, speak to them in the language of trust. Trust makes the thumbprint come more quickly.'"

One name carried a date from after the person's death. "A dead person's consent?" Bhikhari Lal asked. "Put a special mark on that page," Satyavrat said.

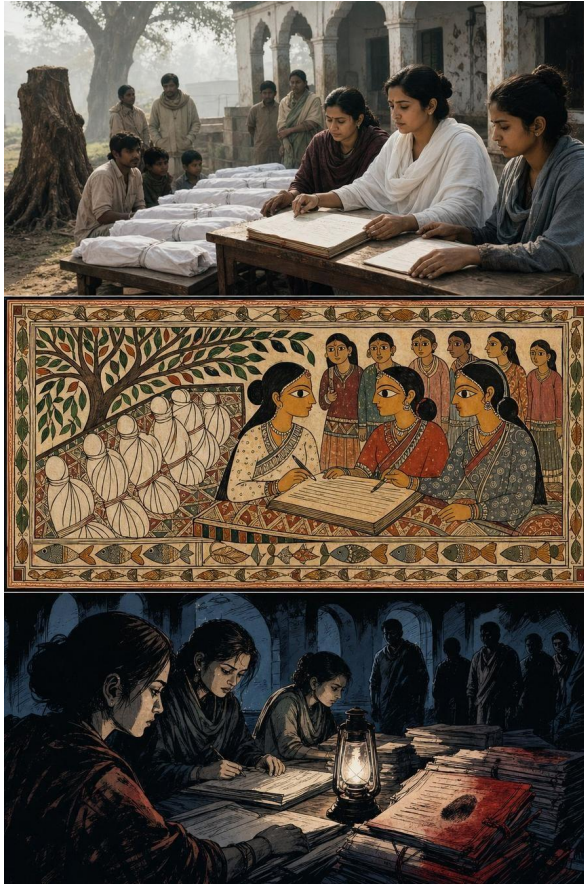
By noon eighteen names had been checked against the Consent Notebook: five showed clear pressure, three had silence turned into a promise, two involved lasting claims, four repeated the same witnesses, and one bore a dead person's name.

"The documents will be made public, but people will not be stripped of their dignity," Surmani Devi said. "We'll expose the method of the wrongdoing, not turn suffering into a spectacle."

Sitting beside the stump, Kamla said, "Grandma took shelter. She didn't give up her field."

Chapter 159

The Consent of the Dead



Today the documents bearing the names of the dead and the absent were tied separately in white cloth. "Names of the dead need careful white, not black ink smeared over them," Meera said.

The first page opened under the name of Jagdish Mahto. The Consent Notebook gave the date as the eighteenth night of Bhadon, but the village death register said Jagdish Mahto had died just after the last Monday of Sawan. Jagdish's grandson Parmanand said, "I remember the day we offered Grandfather water at the funeral. How could he have given a thumbprint after that?"

The second page bore Sona Jha's name. But he had been living with his son in Kashi. There was a letter from the son: "Father's wound on his foot has grown worse. He cannot go anywhere."

The third case concerned Rukmini Devi. The signature did not have the rounded letters of an educated woman's writing; it had the hard strokes of a man's hand. "It's a shadow wearing a name as its clothes," Kamla said.

Mahavir Pathak brought a brass-bound box from his house. On it was Batuknath's symbol: three lines, a crescent and a dot. Inside was a book called "Notice of Rights," with some of its pages cut out. "What has been cut away is part of the hidden story," Ananya said.

Ramlakhan Sahay confessed, "People grew afraid when they saw pages carrying the symbol of authority. I would say, 'It's Baba's seal. What's the point of arguing now?'"

Bhanu Lal brought an old seal case. "Lau said that if the original seal was far away, we should use a shadow seal. People look at the mark, not the hand." Devika compared the impressions. The false seal looked very much like the real symbol, but the crescent's right corner was slightly crooked.

Aruni stretched red thread across the map from the record room. It showed that three sale deeds had later been drawn up for the disputed boundaries whose cases were suspended using dead people's names. Those deeds bore the names of people linked to Chandrapal.

"It's hard to lay a hand on a shadow," Surmani Devi said. "But we can see what casts it."

Mahavir did not close the box. Instead he tied it with red and white thread and placed it near the stump. "Until the inquiry is finished, the grove will guard this box."

"Grandma took shelter, but a copied seal tried to swallow her field," Kamla said. Kailash added, "Grandfather was dead, but someone made his thumbprint come alive again."

Chapter 160

The Shadow of the Warehouse



"Today we won't worship a symbol," Meera said. "We'll examine how it was used." Every thread of profit led to one place: Chandrapal's old warehouse, which poor farmers called "the room that swallows papers."

Dhiru, Lau's former servant, unlocked it. "Master Lau told me to. Lau said the goods belonged to Chandrapal Babu, but he was responsible for looking after them."

As the door opened, they saw sacks of paddy, iron chests and an old map on the wall. Its marks matched the points traced by the red thread the day before.

"Those are not lines of land revenue on the map," Satyavrat Mehta said. "They are lines of greed."

Mahavir Pathak saw that the symbol of authority from his house had been stamped not at the edges of fields, but at the points where land had been seized. "A seal that changes boundaries in the name of easing sorrow is no seal," Surmani Devi said. "It's a crocodile's tooth."

Inside an iron chest they found ledgers marked "Shadow Seal: Expenses Adjusted."

Beside Jagdish Mahto's name was written, "Service after death; family weakened; hold boundary." Parmanand shuddered as he read it. "Here they called Grandfather's dead body a service."

In a second chest lay seal cases: one original seal and two copies. "A copy imitates only the shape," Aruni said. "Its errors remain its birthmarks."

Inside a wooden box they found practice signatures, blank sheets already stamped with seals, and strips bearing thumbprints. The strips were labelled "Old," "Widow," "Away," and "Dead." "They reduced human beings to less than names here," Surmani Devi said.

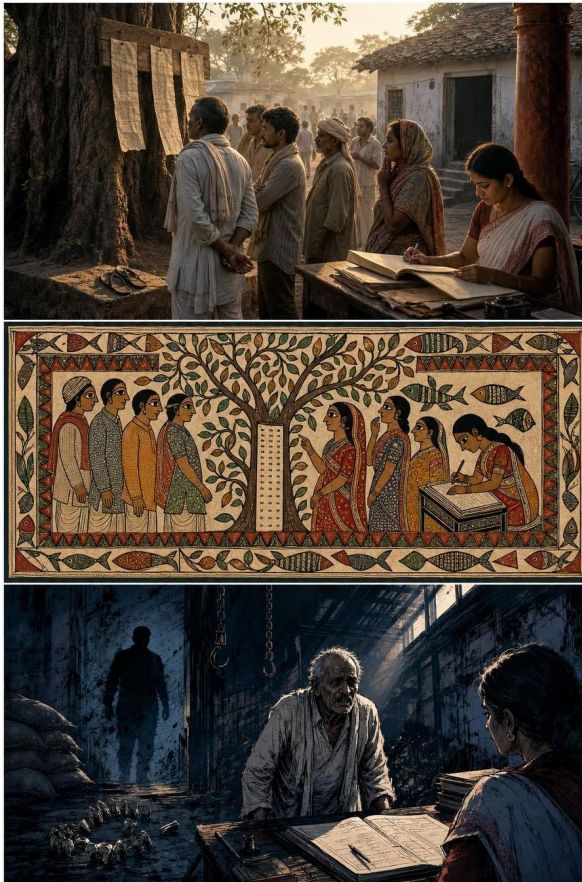
In the back room they found a half-burned paper: "Chandrapal Babu's verbal instructions: no pages are to leave." Lau's signature appeared beneath it.

"First they spoke of charity, then boundaries, then debt," Dhiru said. "I was told to serve the tea. Inside they laughed; outside people wept."

That night, for the first time, Chandrapal's name was spoken in the village as a question instead of a fear: "Where is Chandrapal?"

Chapter 161

Imprisoned by a Phone



Meera opened a fresh page and wrote, "The Crocodiles Beyond Paper." "The crocodile that once chewed away the boundaries of fields," she said, "now chews up voices, fear, and numbers."

An elderly client came in, panting. "They imprisoned me inside my phone," he said. He had received a call at night: "Your name is connected to a serious crime. Do not leave your house. Do not tell anyone."

Ananya wrote, "House arrest by telephone." Aruni added, "A prison that does not surround the body but closes around the mind has fear for its lock."

The old man's grandson had recorded the call. A voice said, "To protect your account, transfer the money at once to a secure account." Half the money had already gone.

Ananya made three columns: "Fear," "Information," and "Money." Devika added a fourth: "Imitating a voice."

"There isn't just a city swindler behind this voice," Satyavrat Mehta said. "It smells of the record room." Bhikhari Lal agreed. The clerk admitted, "Some people bring mobile phones inside, saying they are making copies. They say the orders have come from above."

On hearing one of the recorded voices, Dhiru started. "That sounds like Madhukar, who used to drink tea in Lau's warehouse."

Meera gave instructions: "Do not answer a frightening call alone. Do not share secret codes. Do not transfer money at the bank without understanding why." One sentence was carved on stone: "There is no court hearing over the phone."

The old man's phone rang again. Meera asked him to put it on speaker. "Who are you? Tell us the name of your branch, your position, and the written order," she asked. The voice turned harsh, then the line went dead. For the first time, the old man stood straight. "I was trapped inside the phone. Now the voice has run away."

In the record-room visitors' book, Bhikhari Lal found the name "Madhukar Prasad" three times. One entry described him as "Chandrapal Babu's representative."

That evening, a new watch was organised in the village: teams of children and adults in every neighbourhood to protect elderly people from telephone traps.

At night, news came that Madhukar Prasad had disappeared. In his room, a sheet of paper had been found with the same name written again and again: "C. Babu."

Chapter 162

The Seal of a Voice



In the morning, the elderly villagers sat near Channa Grove with their phones. "The phone is not guilty," Meera said. "The guilty thing is the voice that comes out of it wearing the seal of authority." Aruni wrote, "A voice's seal = an imitation of trust."

Bhikhari Lal remembered, "Madhukar used to come to look at files, but he watched people's faces more than the papers. He would ask, 'Is this client old? Does his son live away from home?'"

Ananya opened a new register: "Details of the Voice Trap." Information began arriving from house after house. Some callers claimed to be from the electricity department, some from bank security,

and some from the police station. The calls were different, but the trick was the same.

"I saw Haricharan's men going into Madhukar's rented room," Sakuni said. "They were carrying a bag of papers." "Write what you saw," Meera told him. "Keep your guesses separate."

Bhikhari Lal, Surmani Devi, and Ananya entered Madhukar's room. Three dates had been circled in red on a calendar. Beneath them were the words, "Old, son away, land, account." Surmani Devi shuddered. "Those aren't details about a human being. They're the measurements of prey."

Under the bed lay a bag of prepared sentences: "Begin with fear of arrest," "Keep the person alone," "Mention information from documents to win trust." A recorder contained fragments of someone practising voices.

Haricharan Tiwari arrived. "Don't make too much of all this," he said. "It will spoil the village's good name." "Is a village's name spoiled by fear," Meera asked, "or by crime?"

That evening, the bank sent word that half the old man's money had disappeared into an account named "M. Prasad Service Centre." Madhukar's "M" had appeared again.

At night, Sakuni overheard Haricharan speaking softly into his phone: "Remove the papers." He went to Meera. "This isn't a guess. I heard it myself."

"We won't leave the room sealed up and forgotten today," Satyavrat Mehta said. "There will be a copy at Channa Grove, one in the record room, one with Surmani Devi, and one in the children's register."

A new pledge spread through the village: if a telephone call frightened you, you would let at least three people hear about it.

Chapter 163

The Trace of a Missing Document



At dawn, Bhikhari Lal stood by the gate. "Babu, I found the lock shut," he said, "but the lock is not silent." Fresh scratches marked its metal fastening.

"If even a speck of dust is disturbed inside the record room today," Meera said, "we shall record it."

The strip of dust beneath cupboard number seventeen had been broken. There were footprints of bare feet. When the cupboard was opened, they found an empty ring of string where a bundle of papers had been. The papers were gone.

"We must learn to read empty spaces too," Aruni whispered.
"Sometimes what isn't there speaks the loudest," Satyavrat said.

On a page of the visitors' register they found the pressed impression of letters: "P...ma..." "Parmanand?" Bhikhari Lal suggested.

Parmanand was the court's new clerk. He admitted, "Haricharan Babu's people said the order had come from above. They handed me a bag. I didn't look inside." "Didn't you see," Surmani Devi asked, "or didn't you want to see?"

Behind a shelf inside the cupboard, they found a carbon impression: "Death certificate attached" and "M. Prasad Service." Madhukar's shadow had appeared once more.

They could read a name marked "deceased" in the impression. The elderly client trembled. "That's Nageshwar Jha! He's alive. He was ill yesterday and couldn't come."

"A death certificate for a living person!" Satyavrat exclaimed. "That opens the way to land and bank accounts, to everything."

Meera formed two teams. Sakuni went to Nageshwar Jha's house. "I'm still here to hear my own name," the old man said. "Who declared a man dead while he can still hear his name?"

The other team went to the bank. They learned that "M. Prasad Service" was linked not to a local bank account but to a payment-service centre outside the area. "This crocodile doesn't swallow a body in one bite," Devika said. "First it takes little pieces."

Haricharan did not attend the meeting that day. Meera wrote, "Haricharan absent."

One more mark appeared in the carbon copy: "17/C." "Cupboard seventeen and C. Babu?" Aruni wondered.

Chapter 164

Inside Chandrapal's Shadow



"Today we won't examine Chandrapal's home," Meera said. "We'll look inside the belly of his shadow. Shadows rarely lie."

Satyavrat Mehta put the papers in order again. "You can usually recognise a net by what it has swallowed," Surmani Devi said.

They discovered that "17/C" was a section of the record room containing documents about disputed inheritances, mortgages, and death certificates.

Parmanand was summoned once more, this time to sit in a chair. "The person on the phone first said 'Section C,'" he explained, "then suddenly fell silent. He said, 'Just take out the bag from seventeen.'"

Parmanand remembered a whisper: "Don't say the name. Don't say C."

Sakuni brought an old receipt from Nageshwar Jha's house bearing the seal of "Chandrapal Advice Centre." An elderly clerk said, "There's a room in Chandrapal Babu's office that people call the C Room." "Why didn't you tell us before?" Meera asked. "Because everybody knew," the clerk replied.

"From today," Surmani Devi declared, "'everybody knows' will not be allowed to remain outside the register."

There were three desks in Chandrapal's C Room. A sheet on one read, "Identification required to verify dead/alive status." "Who was given the right to verify whether a person is alive," Devika whispered, "when we can see that person living before us?"

On the wall hung a map marking homes occupied by elderly people, sons living away, and couples living alone. It was a hunter's map. Surmani Devi shivered. "They've turned public service into a hunting ground."

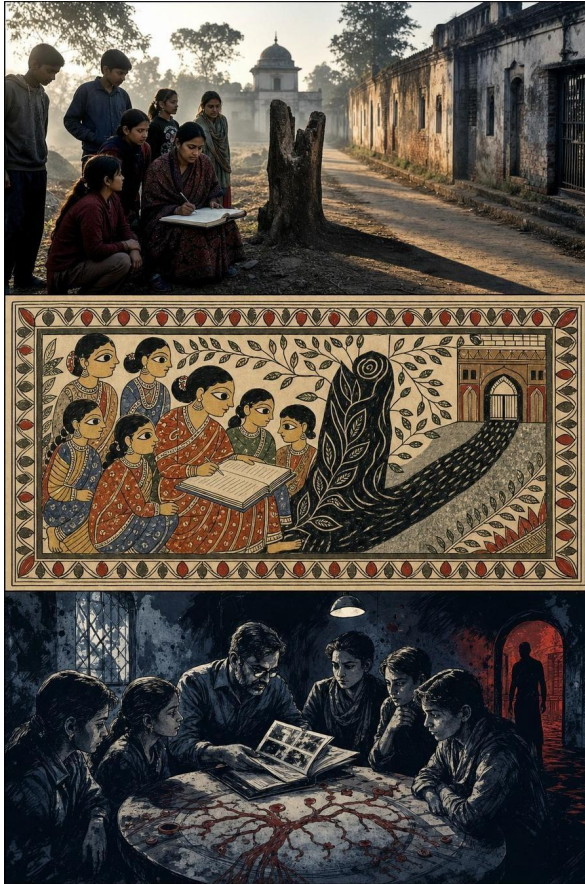
Haricharan burst in angrily. "Entering a private office like this is illegal!" "Which part of the law," Meera replied, "allows someone to make a death certificate for a living person?"

Outside, two elderly women said, "We were told our pensions would stop unless we put down our thumbprints." Aruni wrote, "The C Room is not merely a room. It is the belly of the trap."

That night, round eddies continued to rise along the riverbank. "Now we're measuring the belly," Surmani Devi said.

Chapter 165

The Body of the Shadow



Ananya wrote, "The search for the body begins with the shadow." Meera warned them, "No raiding homes today. We're looking for the body of a whole system."

"C may mean more than a room," Satyavrat Mehta said. "But whatever it means, it must have left a trail of accounts somewhere."

In the lane behind the office, the letter "C" showed through the dust on an old iron door. "I've stood by this door again and again to deliver pages," Parmanand said. "The pages were carried inside and empty envelopes came out." "Where an empty envelope is said to be heavy,"

Surmani Devi observed, "you know it carries the weight of an unseen bribe."

Nageshwar Jha arrived. "Officially, this door is closed. But there's another opening, an upper ventilator. I was once declared dead, and a dead man's ears hear plenty."

Peering through the ventilator, they could make out faded letters on a white-striped trunk: "C-17." Satyavrat grew serious. "A criminal will sometimes reverse a number."

"We will not break the door," Meera decided. "We will read names aloud before it. We will call out the names of those who may be inside."

The reading of names began in the lane. When "Madhukar Prasad" was called for the third time, something fell inside, beyond the ventilator.

A child came running with a receipt found beneath the mat in Madhukar's room: "Transport: four trunks, night watch, destination: C Warehouse." Parmanand whispered a name: "Chandrapal's man—Dharni Mahto."

Near an old weighing scale they found a scrap of paper: "Original copy secured." "The real trunk is still safe somewhere," Satyavrat said.

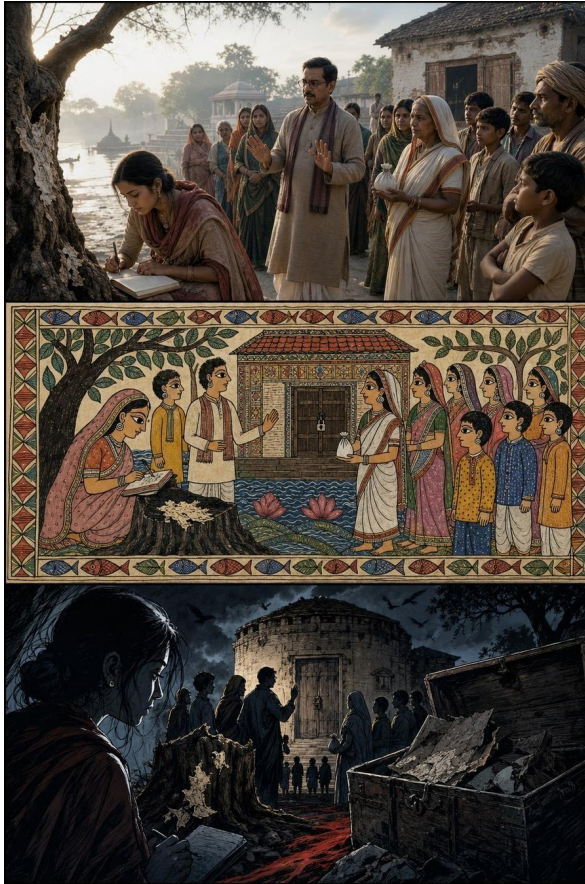
Meera decided to keep three copies in separate safe places: at Channa Grove, with Satyavrat, and in a widow's home. "Criminals think she is weak," she said. "Sometimes what they take for weakness makes the safest hiding place."

An old boatman told them, "The old Tetri Ghat. There's a half-sunken storehouse there. People have seen a lantern burning at night." Ananya wrote, "Tetri Ghat: possible C Warehouse."

That night, the crocodile on the riverbank pointed its jaws not towards the water but towards Tetri Ghat.

Chapter 166

The Storehouse at Tamarind Ghat



In the morning light, everyone set out towards Tetri Ghat. Satyavrat Mehta read out a rule: "Before anything found at the ghat is lifted, it must be observed. Before it is examined, it must be identified, and witnesses must be present."

The old boatman testified, "Twice last month I saw a lantern burning at night. No boat came in to the landing, but the water was disturbed. Someone approached not from the steps but from farther downstream."

The lock was opened in the presence of village-council witnesses. "Let the air come out first," Meera said. "Imprisoned papers need to breathe too."

On a trunk inside, someone had written "C-17" in red chalk. "No cheering," Meera said. "We've found evidence, not won a victory."

The trunk contained envelopes: a copy of Nageshwar Jha's original mortgage deed, a draft statement by Dharni Mahto, and consent papers concerning two widows' land, bearing signatures that seemed to have been made by the same hand.

Beside the names of old people on one sheet were the words "Alone," "Son away," "Won't be heard," and "Quick to frighten." "They were measuring old people's weaknesses," Aruni said. "Not weaknesses—circumstances," Meera corrected gently. "We will record them as circumstances. Loneliness is not an opportunity for crime; it is a failure of society."

In a desk drawer they found a recording device with the sentences "Your Aadhaar has been misused" and "Tell no one." "Those are the lines from the telephone prison!" Devika said, trembling.

An iron box behind the back wall held five little account books, each wrapped in red cloth. In the fourth, many names had "Ready to mark deceased" beside them. Surmani Devi said in a shaking voice, "Someone who kills a living person on paper commits a kind of murder without spilling blood."

On the last page of the fifth book were the words "Next consignment: Across the river."

Haricharan arrived at the ghat and objected. "You arrived late," Satyavrat told him, "but you've spoken at just the right moment. Your words will now be recorded too." Haricharan remained silent when asked three questions.

That evening, the storehouse was sealed, with a watch set over the names. "We shall protect the victims' privacy," Meera said, "and reveal the criminals' methods."

Chapter 167

A Voice Across the River



"We shall cross the river," Meera said at dawn, "but not as a procession. People who trade in fear are caught not by a crowd but by careful steps."

The old boatman brought his boat. First he bailed out the water. "If you leave water in your own boat, you'll blame the current," he said. "You must empty your boat first."

In midstream, an unknown number called Aruni's mobile. Meera signalled for him to use the speaker. A voice said, "Your name is under investigation. Tell no one."

"Who is my father?" Aruni asked. There was a moment's silence before the voice snapped, "Names are not disclosed during an investigation." The call ended.

On the far bank, they reached the house of Madhukant Jha and his wife, Kamala Devi. "Yesterday that voice pretended to be my son," Kamala Devi wept. "It said, 'Mother, don't tell anyone. There's a police case.'"

"It sounded like my son," Madhukant Jha said, "but it didn't breathe like him. My son laughs every little while as he speaks. That voice did nothing but frighten us." Ananya wrote, "Recognising a breath."

The money had been sent in three instalments. "The lock of trust is first opened with a small key," Satyavrat said.

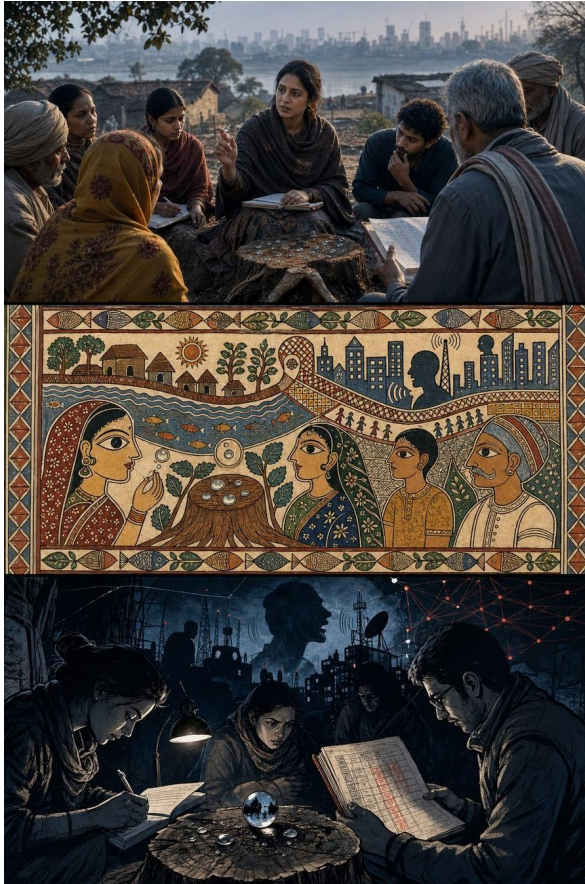
They caught a young man called Naval, who worked at the "Public Service Centre" across the river. In his pocket was a list of names with notes such as "Mother will cry" and "Father will break quickly." At last he broke down. "I only sent data," he said. "When you call people's circumstances 'data,'" Satyavrat said sternly, "you've already hidden half the crime."

Near a microphone in the centre lay a sheet reading, "Mother, hurry! I'm trapped!" Kamala Devi cried out, "That's exactly what he said!" Meera took her hand. "That sentence is no longer his to use. Now it is evidence."

That night, Kamala Devi's real son called from abroad on the boatman's phone. "Mother, trust my voice," he said, "but not an order made out of fear." Surmani Devi opened her little bundle of salt. "Let the dampness of the voice dry," she said.

Chapter 168

The Voice of the City



"Today we'll follow the voice," Meera said, "but we'll pay even more attention to the path taken by the names. A machine can make a false voice. But where did it get the right home, the right age, and the truth that a son lives abroad?"

Naresh, a young worker at the Public Service Centre, arrived trembling. "Two years ago, a man came and offered to scan our old papers and clean up the computer system for free. But some copies were taken to the city without permission." The receipt said "M. Services"—Madhukar's associate.

In Naresh's bag they found a page headed "Village Contact List: Senior Citizens First." "They didn't see elderly people," Surmani Devi said. "They saw prey."

At the old address of "M. Services" in the city, they found a shop called "Mitra Data Solutions." Inside, a recorded voice said, "A warrant has been issued against you..." Devika shuddered.

From a locked room inside came the words, "Babuji, don't hang up." The elderly client shook. "That's the voice that imprisoned me."

"What we're hearing isn't a single voice," Devika said. "Some lines are recorded; others are spoken live."

Bhikhari Lal spotted a label stuck to a box: "C Group: Rural Elderly." A man emerged and said, "Customer data is confidential." "Privacy is the victim's right," Meera replied, "not a shield for criminals."

Under a desk lay two registers, labelled "Voice Batch 3" and "Village Story Cues." "This," Meera said, "is the moment someone's story is stolen."

The police arrived. On a computer screen appeared the line "Chandra 2: Old files active." "Chandra 2 may refer to Chandrapal," Satyavrat Mehta cautioned, "or it may not. We mustn't turn a guess into a verdict."

That evening, the group returned home. Surmani Devi opened her little bundle of salt. "Without salt, a throat goes bad," she said. "Without truth, so does a voice."

"I thought a person was speaking to me on the phone," the elderly client said. "Today I learned there was a whole market speaking."

Chapter 169

The Door of Chandra Two



"We cannot simply dismiss repeated names as a coincidence," Meera said in the morning. "When a criminal won't write the whole name," Satyavrat Mehta said, "that silence becomes a signature of fear."

From the bank messages, Devika picked out a name: "Chandra Service Office," behind the old vegetable market in the city.

Inside was a crowd of elderly people. A clerk was saying, "Don't tell anyone at home or the work will be stopped." Satyavrat immediately wrote, "Creating isolation: the first step of the crime."

The cover of a file read, "Assistance to the Elderly, Land Disputes, Sons Abroad." Inside was a section headed "Emotional Cues": "Mother cries quickly" and "Widow insecure about land."

The man at the counter introduced himself as "Chandramohan." "I only serve the poor," he said. "There's a line as thin as a grain of sand," Meera replied, "between helping with papers and stealing them."

A contact saved on a mobile phone was called "Chandra 1." "Who is Chandra 1?" Meera asked. "If Chandra 2 is a business code," Satyavrat replied, "Chandra 1 will be on the first page of the accounts."

On a page in the back room were the instructions "Use names people already trust": "Batuk Babu, Panditji, Chandrapal Uncle, Court Babu."

Chandramohan lost control of himself. "I'm not alone! The lists came from above. I only matched them up!" "Who is above?" Meera asked. Very softly he answered, "Chandra 1."

Bhikhari Lal found entries in an account book: "Old Trust List," "Dead, Helpless, Involved in Cases," and, underlined in red, "Channa Grove Area." "They were reading us long before we started reading them," Ananya exclaimed.

Meera had the book sealed. "Those who made a habit of reading other people's lives into a kind of power," she said, "will now be read before the public."

Surmani Devi opened her bundle of salt. "We've found Chandra Two. Now look for Chandra One. But take care: the brighter the moon, the clearer its blemish appears."

Chapter 170

Unmasking Chandra One



"We must open the disguise around a name, not worship the name," Meera said. Satyavrat Mehta read from the register: "First filter: families awaiting justice." "A common street swindler couldn't have written that language," he said.

"The lists arrived, along with samples of voices," Chandramohan admitted. "I didn't ask questions." "Those who refuse to ask questions," Bhikhari Lal replied, "share the responsibility for the answers."

One page said, "Chandra 1: Father's Voice." "Chandra 1 may not be a person," Satyavrat explained. "It may be the mask of an old kind of authority."

The group went to "Room Seven, Old Typists' Lane" on the other side of the city. There they found Mohanlal Jha, an elderly typist. "I only type what I'm given," he said.

A document was titled "Five Steps to Pressure a Mother's Mind": isolate her, remind her of an old case, use her son's name, speak with an authority's voice, and demand money at once. "It's a school for crime," Devika whispered.

Aruni read Kamala Devi's statement aloud. "I didn't know people could be hurt so deeply," Mohanlal said.

A red file marked "C-One" held voice samples, speeches by old priests, courthouse announcements, and parts of Chandrapal's speeches. Now "Chandra 1" became clear: a false mask made by mixing together voices associated with old authority.

"Names can be sold, Babu," Mohanlal said. "People pay more to imitate the voice of a name before which others bow their heads."

Finally Mohanlal admitted, "Madhukar Babu brought us news from old court-related documents. But he always said, 'Start with the area around the old grove.'"

"Once you understand a spell, half its power to frighten you dies," Surmani Devi said at Channa Grove. A new warning was posted on the stump: "If a telephone call frightens you, don't suffer alone. Call the guardians of names."

Kamala Devi came forward. "My money is gone, but my fear has come back to me. I will no longer feed it alone."

Ananya wrote, "Chandra One is not a person. It is the false light of authority. The mask has come off, but the real night is still ahead."

Chapter 171

The Invisible Court of Channa Grove



"No official judgment will be given here," Meera announced. "Here we shall listen to names, and we shall listen to fear."

Beside the roots of the stump, Ananya made a circle of red thread and placed three stones inside it: "Name," "Fear," and "Testimony."

Kamala Devi gave the first testimony. "They told me my son was in trouble and ordered me not to tell anyone. Now I understand: the criminals wanted my silence, not my son's safety." The children wrote, "Silence is the swindler's first room."

A farmer named Lakshman Yadav said, "My field grew smaller in the files, but the land-tax receipts stayed the same. When the earth shrinks on paper, a farmer feels his chest shrinking too."

A young man who lived away from home said, "I didn't call my mother often. The swindlers called her much more. When the true voice of home grows distant, a false voice slips into its place."

An elderly seal-maker, Shivrinarayan Mishra, said with a tremble, "I wrote some sample letters with Mohanlal." Repentant, he promised, "For every sample I wrote to frighten people, I shall write its opposite to help protect them."

A veiled woman said, "After my husband died, bankers and middlemen came to our doorstep. They told me, 'Sign, or your daughter's marriage will be stopped.' I signed. Now I have neither my home nor my name." "In the records of crimes against many women," Devika said, "there is no name, only a thumbprint. But that print is really the mark of pressure."

Aruni wrote four words on the stone: "Isolation. Authority. Haste. Silence." "Together these four form the crocodile's mouth," he said.

Satyavrat Mehta stepped into the circle. "Fear repeated throughout a society is itself the beginning of evidence," he said.

A young man said, "Madhukar Babu came here to conduct a survey fifteen years ago." "Stop there," Meera said. "We must distinguish what we have heard from rumours."

Ananya handed out threads in three colours: red for what someone had seen, yellow for what they had heard, and black for fear or guesses. By evening, Channa Grove had become an archive of coloured threads. There were more black ones than any other. "Our society has collected more fear than proof," Devika said.

As she left for home, Kamala Devi said, "Now if a call frightens me, I shall first call the guardians of names."

Chapter 172

Reading the Knots



"Yesterday we listened," Meera said. "Today we shall separate what the eyes saw, what the ears heard, and what fear made up inside us."

Ananya placed three baskets on the ground: red, yellow, and black. Aruni read the first red knot, about the measurements of Lakshman Yadav's field, where the papers contradicted one another.

A knot belonging to an elderly woman contained a thumbprint, but she said she had been in hospital that day. Devika compared two documents: they carried the same date, but different times.

After every yellow statement, Meera asked, "Did you see it? Who told you?" "Questions are not a sign of distrust," Satyavrat explained. "Questions are the steps by which fear can reach a court."

Shivnarayan Mishra read out his "Letter of Protection": "If a caller says, 'Don't tell anyone,' tell someone else first. If a caller demands money at once, stop the payment at once."

"Mothers should agree on a secret word with their sons and daughters beforehand, to use in an emergency," Kamala Devi added. "A false voice won't know that word."

A young man opened his black knot. "Nobody called me," he said, "but when I hear the word 'police,' my body starts shaking by itself." "That isn't only personal fear," Meera said. "It is a tremor left over from history."

A little boy named Phulesar asked, "I'm not afraid of mobile phones. But when Father says, 'Study, or you'll have to work as a labourer,' I get frightened. Which colour is my knot?" "Black too," Devika answered, "and red too."

Before evening, an elderly village-council worker named Ramkeval Paswan brought an old register. It bore a fifteen-year-old signature: "Madhukar Mishra, Special Survey Assistant." "Those men used to mark houses occupied by old people, widows, and families whose members lived away," he explained.

"First we'll make copies of this page," Meera said. "The original must stay safe."

Ananya tied a red knot bearing Madhukar's name to the stump. "Now Madhukar Babu has stopped being just a shadow," Aruni said. "He's entered the pages."

That night, a crocodile rose halfway out of the water, but its movements were unsteady.

Chapter 173

Guarding the Register



"No testimony until we've arranged a watch," Meera said the next morning. "We must protect the papers we've found."

Ramkeval Paswan laid the register on a stone. Its pages held a fifteen-year-old survey: names of households, widows, elderly people, debtors, and, in one corner, the words "Special Attention."

"During the telephone 'digital arrest,' they asked the same questions first," Kamala Devi said. "Who is at home? Where is your son? What bank account do you have? This fifteen-year-old sheet looks like a rough draft of those questions."

"Madhukar Babu told us the survey was to bring government benefits," Ramkeval explained. "Later, instead of benefits, we got notices. If not notices, then calls. If not calls, then threats about mortgages."

Devika wrote, "A list made for public assistance can become a criminal's weapon if nobody guards it."

A young man, Neelmani, volunteered to help. "I can scan it," he said, "but I'll protect the file with a password. I won't send it over WhatsApp."

At midday, Dhruvesh, one of Chandrapal's men, arrived. "This old register will disturb social peace," he said. "Hand over all the papers to the village council office." "Will you put the reason for taking them in writing?" Meera asked. "Will you ask the people whose names are here for permission?" Dhruvesh went away empty-handed, saying, "Keep your papers safe tonight."

Ananya read aloud, "If a page contains my name, my thumbprint, my fear, and my waiting, I have the right to protect that page."

They decided to keep the original register at Devika's house, one copy in Satyavrat's sealed envelope, another on Neelmani's computer, and another in the children's register.

At midnight a shadow crept along Devika's wall. Phulesar gave the warning signal: knock, knock, knock. The shadow fled, leaving behind a note: "Dig up the old matter, and there will be a new case against you."

"A threat isn't the enemy of evidence; it's evidence's shadow," Meera said. "Once we write it down, it becomes a footprint left by the criminal."

By daybreak, the register had survived: the original safe, the copies safe, and the threatening note safe as well.

Chapter 174

The Threshold of the Invisible Court



That evening, a circle formed around the stump at Channa Grove. Nobody called it a court, but people began quietly taking off their shoes.

Ananya laid down a blank sheet. "Today we'll write here what was present in the papers, yet never managed to become a proper document."

Aruni arranged ten stones in a line: name, body, water, land, paper, fear, silence, waiting, trap, memory. "These ten stones are the sections of law in this invisible court," he said.

Sona, a daughter-in-law, testified: "I was present. The only people absent were those who never took their seats to look at me." Meera wrote, "The presence of a body."

An elderly litigant named Bholaram opened the record of his household. The year a hearing date was fixed, his son was in Class Five. The year the file disappeared, his daughter-in-law died in childbirth. "And the judgment?" Aruni asked. Bholaram laughed. "The judgment was written on my body."

A young man said, "A voice on the phone told my father I was a criminal. My father gave away his savings to protect me. Later we realised the criminals had turned his fear into their weapon." Devika wrote, "A trap set from afar."

An elderly woman known as "Silent Auntie" said, "Three letters arrived at my house. All three got my name wrong." The crowd repeated her correct name three times. Meera wrote, "Getting a name right is the first step towards justice."

A court clerk named Ramballabh laid his private notebook on a stone. "For years I kept noting bits of information about where files said to be missing had actually been stored. Today I place this notebook before the grove." Ananya wrote, "Clerk Ramballabh: afraid, but present."

One of Chandrapal's men arrived to object. "Are you running a court in a grove?" "We'll examine its legal standing later," Satyavrat replied. "Right now, humanity is taking account of its own worth." Meera asked the man his name; he remained silent. She wrote, "Anonymous objection: trust in seals, distrust of people."

That night, the wind turned the first page of the notebook. A name was written there that would make old crimes catch their breath as soon as it was spoken: the real keeper of Batuknath Hariharan's seal. The invisible court was about to knock on a door inside the house of crime itself.

Chapter 175

The Name of the Seal Keeper



In the morning, everyone was startled by the name in Ramballabh's notebook: "Dinbandhu Jha, Keeper of the Seal. Connected with Batuknath Hariharan's private seal and copies of mortgage deeds and special lists."

"We've found a name, not proved an accusation," Meera said. "Now there will be a hearing, not an uproar."

Satyavrat Mehta remembered Dinbandhu Jha: a thin, soft-spoken man who carried red sealing wax, black ink, and a brass seal in a cloth bag.

"Dinbandhu Babu wasn't an employee of the record room," Ramballabh said, "but many files passed through his hands."

Kamala Devi testified, "My brother-in-law's mortgage deed bore a thumbprint. Later I saw a seal that looked like the mark of the red wax Dinbandhu carried in his bag."

Beside the words "Special Attention" in his register, Ramkeval showed them the faint curve of a seal. "A half-impression speaks more than a complete one," Satyavrat said. "A full seal claims to be lawful; a half-impression suggests the haste of theft."

At noon, Dinbandhu's younger son, Shashibhushan, arrived carrying a bag of stamps. "Why are you using my father's name?" he demanded. Meera invited him to sit on the edge of the circle. "We don't turn anyone's father into a criminal here without a hearing."

Shashibhushan brought what remained of his father's things: torn cloth, a stamp pad, a brass seal, and a diary. "These have lain in our room since Father died," he said. "When I heard his name, I brought them."

The diary held abbreviations: "Red," "Black," "B. H.," and "Ch. Pa." "Don't turn abbreviations straight into names," Ananya warned.

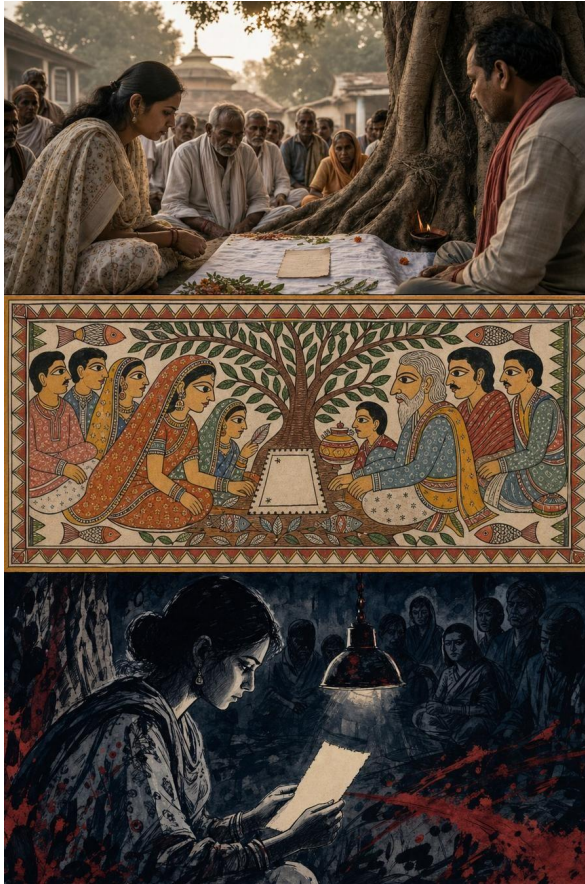
Dhruvesh came back and tried to frighten Shashibhushan. "You'd be better off selling those old things and earning some money." Meera laid a hand on Shashibhushan's shoulder. "Disgrace belongs to those who hide the truth." Shashibhushan pushed the box containing the seal towards her. "Examine it," he said. "But don't write lies."

"Memory isn't against the law," Satyavrat said. "Making people afraid is an old trick of criminals."

Shashibhushan did not go home that night. He stood watch until copies of the seal's impressions had been secured. Nobody called him a criminal's son. They saw him as someone who had brought his father's remaining darkness out into the light.

Chapter 176

Darkness at the Service Ceremony



In the morning, the sheet headed "Final List" was laid on clean cloth at Channa Grove. Ananya read, "Final List—Before the Service Ceremony." Beside the names were codes: "Beneficiary," "Special," "Hold," and "Replace Original."

"We went to that ceremony," Bholaram said. "The organisers told us the poor people's names would be read onstage and everyone would receive help. We applauded."

"When people hear the word 'service,' they feel hopeful," Meera said. "But if that service swallows their land, names, and rights through documents, it cannot be called service."

Ramballabh remembered, "Before the ceremony, temporary desks stood outside the courthouse. People were putting down thumbprints while they listened to devotional songs. Names were read onstage, and pages were changed behind the curtain."

Kamala Devi brought an old photograph of the ceremony in a bag. Batuknath Hariharan wore a garland; poor families stood in a line before him; Kamala Devi's brother-in-law was pressing down his thumb.

From the record room, Bhikhari Lal brought a red-bordered cloth stained with sealing wax and smeared with ink. "Let this object testify," Satyavrat said, "but handle it with respect. It isn't rubbish; it's the skin of the stage where the crime was performed."

"That day the women stood in a separate line," said Bholaram's wife, Shanti. "They called it a women's assistance scheme. Afterwards, the documents never came to our homes." Meera wrote, "When women's signatures are taken before they can read the papers, the road opens not to charity but to possession."

Shashibhushan brought a slip: "Replace the original after the stage reading. Signal to come from B. H." "That instruction to replace originals reveals the structure of the crime," Satyavrat said.

Bholaram trembled. "I thought they were honouring me. Now I understand: they read my name onstage so they could silence my papers."

Shashibhushan signed the slip and wrote, "I am handing this over of my own free will." "If someone finds darkness in his home and brings a lamp outside," Meera said, "we call that person a witness, not a criminal."

Before dawn, they found a line on another page of the diary: "Collect papers from the homes of those whose names were announced onstage."

Chapter 177

Papers from House to House



"The names that were read onstage shall be heard in their own homes today," Meera said at dawn. Ananya divided the children into three groups. "We mustn't steal anyone else's privacy in the name of searching for truth," Aruni added.

Their first stop was Bholaram's house. His wife Shanti showed them a document marked "Voluntary Consent" from a brass box. "I put my thumbprint on the paper for a women's assistance scheme," she said. "What was I supposedly consenting to?" The children wrote, "House One: They said assistance; the document said consent."

At the second house they met elderly Subhadra Jha. Her document used the language of a mortgage and bore Dinbandhu's seal. "The thumbprint may be genuine," Satyavrat said, "but the meaning made out of it may be false."

The third house belonged to Chamru Mahto. Onstage his name had been read as "Chamru"; on his medal it said "Chandu"; in the register he was "Chandramohan"; and the mortgage deed named him "Chamru, also known as Chandramohan." "I'm just one person," Chamru said. "On paper I've been cut into four pieces."

At every house, Meera said, "Admit what you didn't understand. Putting a thumbprint on a paper you couldn't understand isn't a crime. It shows the pressure you were under."

Dinbandhu's widow, Ragini Devi, said, "It would be a lie to say Dinbandhu understood nothing. But in his last days he was terribly afraid." From beneath a pillow she brought out a page: "Do not give copies to the households whose papers you collect. Keep the originals upstairs."

An elderly volunteer named Lalit showed them a poster: "All records will remain safely with the Organising Committee." "Who said that?" Meera asked. "Chandrapal," Lalit replied quietly.

That evening, they all returned to Channa Grove. Chamru Mahto sat in the middle with his four different names laid around him. "But I'm only one person," he repeated.

"The upper room of the old courthouse," Ramballabh said. "That was where the boxes of closed files were kept. Chandrapal's people always had the key."

Ananya opened a new page and wrote the heading, "The Upper Room."

Chapter 178

The Upper Room



"A key that jingles every day makes people feel safe," Bhikhari Lal said in the morning. "But a key kept silent is the one that opens the real door."

"We will open the room," Meera cautioned, "but we won't loot it. Everything we find must be listed."

The door carried marks of three seals: the court, the land-revenue office, and a private service committee. The lock was broken in the presence of five witnesses. Shanti, Subhadra Jha, and Ragini Devi sat on the stairs, and nobody dared push past them.

Boxes of files were inside. Pages headed "Complete Transfer of Rights" had been added separately, and the thumbprints had been matched up. "These thumbprints aren't speaking for themselves," Meera whispered. "Someone has made them tell lies."

"The entries for these should have been made in a separate register," Ramballabh admitted. "Chandrapal kept the register for the upper room."

In a photograph, a paper onstage clearly said "Acceptance of Assistance," but Kamala Devi's file said "Relinquishment of Rights."

One bundle contained women's applications marked "Husband absent," "Widow," and "Cannot read." A page said "Explained to applicant," but gave no name, only initials.

A thick register contained codes instead of names: K-1, K-2, U-1. Ramballabh found the key to the codes: K for Kamala, U for Ujjwala, and Ch for the Chamru group. "They squeezed whole people into single letters," Sona said.

A box contained three seals, including a forged land-revenue office seal, and a piece of unused rubber.

On a half-burnt page were the words "Batuk Babu's instructions": "Public honour," "Withhold copies," "Chandra... will oversee."

That evening, they sorted the objects into three categories. "My thumbprint is no longer alone," Shanti said.

"We've opened the upper room," Satyavrat Mehta said, "but now we must follow the road leading higher: the land-revenue office, the bank, the register, and the city offices." Ananya opened a new page and wrote, "The Trail of the Seals."

Chapter 179

The Footprints of the Seals



Early in the morning, the children took separate impressions of all three seals and labelled them "Promised service," "False authority," and "Changing names."

Before leaving for the land-revenue office, Meera read out a rule: "Whatever is asked must be written down." "If the truth is to reach a courtroom," Satyavrat said, "its own journey must be clean."

In the land-transfer register at the revenue office, an entry in Kamala Devi's name said "Voluntary Relinquishment of Rights." "How did my field disappear on the day I was given a shawl onstage?" Shanti whispered.

An elderly clerk at the revenue office admitted, "People from Seva Niketan used to bring files and say they were helping the poor get their work done quickly. The officers simply stamped them." "Did the officers read them?" Meera asked. "Some read," the clerk answered. "Some sold their trust."

At the registration office, Kamala Devi's account number brought up the words "Transfer completed." The witnesses' names belonged to the ceremony's organisers. On a computer was a picture of Kamala Devi, her head half lowered, another person's hand beside her. "This picture doesn't show consent," Meera said. "Her body's position shows pressure."

At a city bank, they found a chain: land transfer, then a loan, then overdue payments, then possession of the land. "Money entered these accounts," an officer explained, "but was immediately moved into three separate accounts." Three names emerged: Seva Niketan, a building-materials supplier, and "Harihar Welfare Trust."

Aruni wrote, "The name was taken away, but the money left footprints."

Outside, Dhruvesh's men began taking photographs. Devika faced the camera directly. "Photograph my face if you want," she said, "but don't steal the face of the documents."

That night, they read the map of the trail at Channa Grove: service ceremony → revenue-office entry → registration photograph → bank loan → trust account. "They didn't only take my field," Shanti said. "They took my trust."

"Don't begin with accusations," Satyavrat Mehta said. "Look at the structure. Those who had power benefited from it. Those who were frightened gave their silence." "And protect the voices of those who do speak," Meera added.

Chapter 180

The City's Accounts



"We still have to see the body of the crime," Ananya said at dawn. "Yesterday we only saw its feet." "Reading accounts isn't simply counting money," Satyavrat said. "It means seeing whose trust was turned into money in somebody else's bag."

At the city's Siddhi Advisory Services office, an accountant named Govardhan Sahay said, "The trust's accounts were filed according to the rules. I merely organised the papers."

The Harihar Welfare Trust's documents said its purpose was to help the poor and rehabilitate widows. "However fine the stated purpose

sounds," Meera said, "we must follow the money." The sums were dated after the transfers of land.

"Are these dates after they took my field?" Shanti asked. "Yes," Satyavrat replied. "They took from people," Devika said, "and then made donations in those very people's names."

On one page they found the code "Ra.Ch.L." "Abbreviations are dangerous," Satyavrat said, "when writing a full name would make someone answerable."

Govardhan showed them an envelope: "Combine the funds from Kamala, Ujjwala, and Ch-group accounts under service donations. Do not mention them separately."

As they left the office, a threatening message appeared on Ananya's phone: "Leave the papers alone or your face will be made public." "That's not just fear," Devika said. "It's evidence."

At the cybercrime branch, a young officer said, "The number may be temporary. The SIM may have been obtained under a false identity. Digital crocodiles leave footprints too."

On their way home that evening, two of Dhruvesh's men began filming them from a motorbike. "Time: five twenty-eight in the evening," Devika said loudly. "Place: the bend by the old bridge."

That night, Shanti laid her ceremonial shawl on a stone. "They used this shawl to cover my shame and to hide what happened to my field," she said. "Today let it become our table for evidence."

"If justice reads only the old files, it will find only half the truth," Satyavrat Mehta said. "It must learn to read the glass of a phone as well." Ananya opened a new page and wrote a heading: "The Teeth of the Digital Crocodile."

Chapter 181

The Shadow of the SIM Card



Satyavrat Mehta examined the receipt from the cybercrime unit. The number had been changed seven times in the past three months. But one thing had remained the same throughout those months: each SIM card had first connected to a mobile tower in the market near the village's old bus stand.

At a little shop called Madhav Communication Service, a young man named Madhav said, "Some people came three months ago. They said they were holding a trust's service camp to activate phones for poor people. I thought it was charitable work."

The ledger contained the names Ramratiya Devi and Kamlu Paswan. There was a red pencil dot beside one name. Madhav admitted, "I marked the papers that had come from outside with a dot." Then he explained, "The person whose name was used for the SIM never had the phone in their hands."

Madhav's nephew showed them a red box. Inside was a photograph of Ramratiya Devi, who had died two years earlier. Ananya wrote, "A SIM card operating in a dead woman's name." Aruni added, "A living threat sent in the name of the dead."

Madhav began to cry. "I didn't know those SIM cards would be used to threaten people." Mira said, "Not knowing does not wash away a wrong. But telling the truth is different from covering it up."

Just then, Bishambhar, a servant of Dhruvesh, arrived and began recording a video. Devika immediately read aloud, "Time: eleven thirty-two in the morning. Present: Bishambhar and two unidentified young men." The hand holding the camera slowed.

A crowd gathered. An elderly man said, "They took my thumbprint at that same service camp. They told me I would get a pension."

Mira formed two lines. Anyone who wanted to speak had to give their name first. By noon, eight names had been written down. Three of those people were dead, two were ill, and one was living away from home.

Satyavrat said, "This is not just a trick involving phones. It is the theft of a person's very existence."

Ramratiya Devi's grandson said, "If they sent threats in Grandmother's name after her death, they have not merely insulted her dead body. They have tried to murder the name she left behind."

That night, the sound of drums came from Dhruvesh's mansion. Someone said, "When wrongdoers become frightened, the first thing they do is make the celebrations louder."

Chapter 182

The Door of Harihar Service Centre



Ananya was awake before dawn. Today was the day they would knock on the door of Harihar Service Centre.

Mira read out the rules: “We will examine the papers, but we will not snatch them. We must have a person’s permission before reading out their name.”

At the centre, the elderly watchman, Narhari Kaka, said, “Young people, the centre is closed today. Orders from above.” Satyavrat asked, “Where is this ‘above’—on the roof, in an office, or inside your fear?” Narhari unfastened the latch.

Among the heaps of forms inside, Ramratiya Devi's name appeared again, this time beside three different mobile numbers. Satyavrat compared the dates. The SIM activations and the service camp had taken place on the same day.

Narhari Kaka began to speak slowly. "My only duty was to look after the keys. Sometimes people came at night to take files away— Bishambhar, Dhruvesh's assistant, and sometimes a gentleman from the city who wore spectacles."

They found two registers in a cupboard: "Beneficiary Attendance" and "Digital Assistance." The second contained the words "Phone Returned." Mira said, "These words open the real door. A phone is registered in someone's name, then taken back from that person's hands. That is how a voice is stolen."

A queue formed outside. Shanti said, "Yesterday my dignity was protected on paper. Today other people's dignity will be protected too." The children made three categories: "Name Verification," "Benefit Denied," and "Phone Returned."

Bishambhar arrived and objected. "This is a private institution." Devika replied, "You can only set a fire where there is none already. Here the fire has been burning beneath the ashes for a long time. We are merely recording the smoke."

Narhari Kaka stood before Bishambhar. "I guarded the keys for years and let the names be lost. What good will it do me to save my job now?"

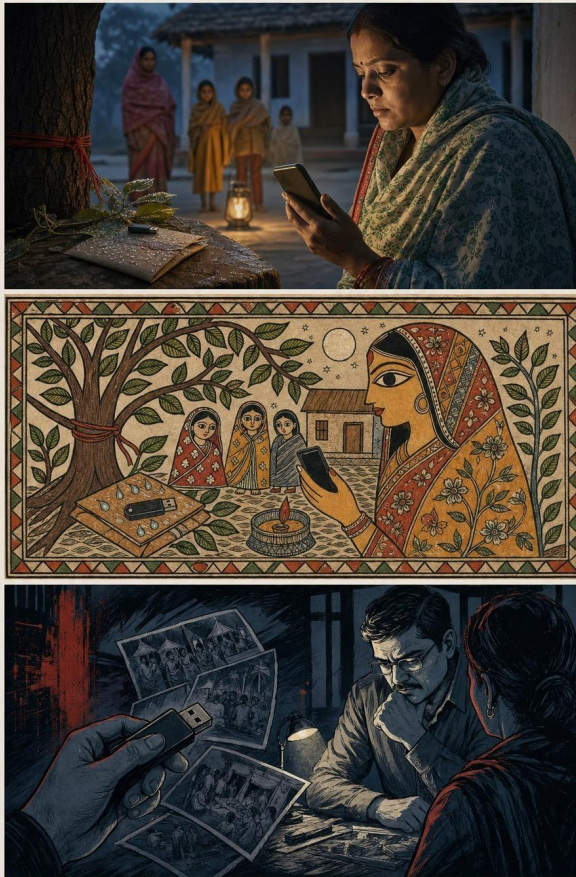
In another room they found a pen drive labelled "Camp Photos." Mira stopped everyone. "This is digital evidence. Nobody must touch it without following the procedure for making a verified copy."

That night, Ramratiya Devi's grandson said, "If they used a phone in Grandmother's name, it was not her spirit they captured. They made her name a slave."

Satyavrat drew the final chain: Service Centre — SIM Register — Phone Returned — Trust Account — Threatening Messages — Dhruvesh's Assistant. Ananya opened a fresh page and wrote, "The Face Inside the Phone."

Chapter 183

The Face Inside the Phone



In the morning, a cybercrime officer named Vineet Jha arrived and explained the rules for opening the pen drive. “First we make a copy. The original remains safe. The time is recorded and the witnesses sign.”

A temporary table was set up beneath the trees of Channa Grove. Mira read the rules: “We will look at the pictures, not turn them into a spectacle. We must respect everyone whose face appears.”

The first folder contained photographs from the service camp. Devika said, “When a picture looks too perfectly arranged, look at its edges.” At the edge stood Bishambhar with a bundle of receipts.

In the second picture they saw Ramratiya Devi, a mobile phone placed in her hand. Beside her, a young man was leaning forward. The symbol of Harihar Service Centre hung around his neck. Deepak, Ramratiya Devi's grandson, quietly got up and stood at a distance.

A voice in a video said, "The photo is done. Now hand in the phone. It will be returned later." Mira stopped the video at once. "We will not show this publicly without the permission of the people in it."

In a folder called "Special," they heard an elderly woman crying in a recorded message. "I am frightened of the police. Please leave me alone." It was the voice of Somri Kaki from their village. For the past month she had stayed inside her house, saying she was ill. Mira sent two women to visit her without bringing a crowd.

Another video showed a hand with long nails and a black thread tied around the wrist. Satyavrat compared it with an old photograph kept by Chandrapal. Dhruvesh's assistant had the same kind of thread around his wrist.

Ananya wrote, "Sometimes a face tells a lie, but a hand leaves the truth behind."

That evening Somri Kaki said, "When someone claiming to be the police spoke on the phone, another person laughed in the background." Narhari Kaka trembled when he heard this. "That must be the man from the city. He used to laugh like that whenever he came to the centre at night."

Deepak placed the photograph of his grandmother in front of him. "Today I didn't see Grandmother's face. I saw the theft of Grandmother's name." Mira put a hand on his shoulder. "We have found the theft. Now we will find the path to the thief."

The ghost of the Old One said softly, "Once, names were erased. Now voices are made out of names. Find the breath of the person who makes those voices."

Chapter 184

The Mask of a Voice



Vineet Jha warned them, “Comparing voices is not final proof in court, but it can certainly be a lamp to guide the way.” Mira wrote, “A crowd will not decide what the ear has heard. A careful process will.”

A faint laugh could be heard in the background of the threatening message sent to Somri Kaki. Narhari Kaka closed his eyes. “It is the laugh I heard at night. Whenever they carried files up to the room upstairs, I heard that same laugh.”

Devika listened carefully to the word “first” spoken by a young man in an old video of the service ceremony. He pronounced it in the same

peculiar way as the speaker in the threatening message. Aruni wrote, "Words can change their shape, but habits remain."

A file called "Re-check" in the "Special" folder contained the same sentence spoken in several different voices. Someone had been practising how to make false voices.

Somri Kaki admitted, "At the camp they told me to say, 'I have received the benefit.' I thought it was only for a photograph." Several other elderly women began to say, "They asked us to do that too."

Bishambhar appeared at the far end of the crowd. Mira announced, "Anyone who feels suspicion falling upon them should not run away. Speaking the truth may save their name."

Narhari Kaka explained, "The man from the city would not let anyone turn off the fan. Three months ago he took the old fan away to the city, saying it needed repairing." The sound of that fan matched a noise in the threatening message.

That night Bishambhar came forward and confessed, "I collected the phones, but the man from the city did the speaking. Dhruvesh called him 'Madhaves Babu.' Perhaps that was not his real name."

Bishambhar showed the hand with the black thread. "I got this wound on the night an elderly person bit my hand while I was snatching away a box of phones." Deepak's eyes filled with tears. "Grandmother?" Bishambhar remained silent. Mira raised her hand. "Testimony must catch the criminal, not the crowd."

Ananya opened a new page and wrote, "The Master's Room." Aruni added, "Where a voice was made, a face may have been left behind."

Chapter 185

The Master's Room



Trembling, Bishambhar said, “There was a room in the city, behind the station, above an old photocopy shop. The Master made the voices there. Dhruvesh said that with Harihar’s influence behind them, people would trust them more.”

Mira established the rules: “We will visit the room, but not as a crowd. Leave guesses outside and record only what is found inside.” Bishambhar insisted on coming, but Mira stopped him. “Your presence might contaminate the evidence.”

A new sign hung above the photocopy shop: “Master Media Service.” In the rental register the name appeared as “Madhavesh Mishra”—with

a vowel mark missing from the version of the name they had heard before.

Before opening the locked upstairs room, the officers prepared a written inspection record noting the time, witnesses and seal. When the lock was opened, they found an old fan marked “Hari-2.” It was the second fan from Harihar Service Centre.

On the desk were slips of paper: “Grandmother’s voice: slow, reassuring, no crying”; “Farmer’s voice: address him as son”; “Police voice: stern.” Mira said, “He was not studying how people speak. He was mapping their relationships.”

In a box Deepak found a paper strip: “Ramratiya—Grandmother—Deepak—City.” For a moment he could hardly breathe. Mira asked him to sit down. “You may cry, but do not touch the paper.”

The railway tracks were visible from the window. As a train passed, the room shook, and the fan made a clicking sound even though it was not running. Vineet Jha exclaimed, “The rumbling behind the threatening phone calls could have come from a train.” The times matched.

Under a calendar they found an underlined chain: “Harihar Service Centre → Room Above Photocopy Shop → City Account → Trust → ‘D’ → ‘M’.” Satyavrat stopped them. “Record the letters, not what you think they mean.”

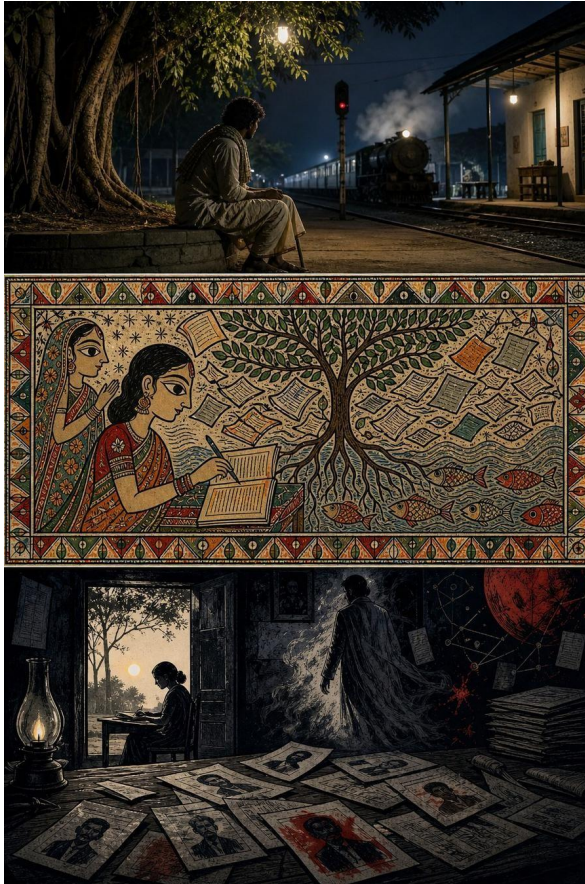
The shopkeeper’s son told them, “Last night a man left with two bags. His beard looked false. It was around half past eleven.”

On the bus back to the village, Deepak said, “They went on using Grandmother’s voice even after she had died.” Mira answered, “That is why we will write down the right to one’s voice. Even a dead person’s voice belongs to the family’s memories, not to the market.”

Bishambhar whispered, “The Master used to say, ‘Keep your name short and you will escape.’” Aruni wrote, “Making a name shorter does not make a crime smaller.”

Chapter 186

Madhaves' Real Name



Ananya wrote at dawn, “Madhaves’ Real Name.” Mira warned everyone, “Today we are looking for a name, but that name must not set a crowd against anyone. We will not accuse an entire caste, family or village of a crime.”

Narhari Kaka remembered, “Many years ago a boy used to come to Harihar Service Centre. He could imitate voices—the throat of an old man, a crying child, almost anything. We jokingly called him Madhukar.”

The group went to the old secondary school. The admissions register contained the name “Madhukar Madhav Mishra,” father “Maheshwar

Mishra,” village “Bariyarpur Tola.” The headmaster recalled, “His father himself had his name changed. He said Madhukar sounded too much like a village boy’s name.”

In an old photograph of the school’s theatre day, a thin boy stood onstage wearing a police cap. The caption read, “Madhukar—Voice Imitation.” Ananya thought about a talent that had been born to win applause and then turned into a tool for selling fear.

An elderly woman in Bariyarpur Tola said, “Madhukar? His voice was like a honeybee, so they called him Madhukar. Maheshwar said his son would one day speak on the radio in the city. Then he began working with Dhruvesh in the name of service.”

Across the threshold of the house, half a sentence had been written in charcoal: “Do not sell your voice.” The elderly woman said, “His mother wrote that before she died, after the boy had mocked the way other people spoke.”

Bishambhar said, “The Master used to say, ‘Madhukar is dead; Madhaveshe earns money. Say Madhukar and people think of a village, poverty and a mother. Say Madhaveshe and they think of papers, the city and trust.’” Ananya wrote, “The man who ran from his own mother’s voice sold the voices of other people’s mothers.”

Deepak asked, “If his real name is Madhukar, why should we call him Master?” Mira replied, “One name will help us catch the offender; the other will help us understand his history.”

Satyavrat Mehta wrote his final note: “Suspect’s possible real name: Madhukar Madhav Mishra. Still to be confirmed: bank records, travel, connection with Maheshwar, trust funds.”

Ananya opened the next page and wrote, “The Queen Inside the Hive.” Aruni added, “We have found the bee, but in whose house has the honey been stored?”

Chapter 187

The Queen Inside the Hive



Ananya wrote a new heading: “The Queen Inside the Hive.” Mira warned, “Hearing the word ‘queen’ is no reason to accuse a woman. If wrongdoers are using a woman’s name as a shield, our first duty is to remove the shield, not strike the person behind whose name they hide.”

In the equipment from the Master’s room, Vineet Jha found a chart divided into three sections: “Flower,” “Honey,” and “Queen.” Aruni said, “Madhukar was collecting the honey, but the queen was above him.”

They opened the first “Queen” account. It was registered to Rani Devi, aged seventy-two, of Haripur Katan. Mira said, “We have read a name, not discovered a crime. First we must meet this woman.”

The team went to Haripur Katan. They found Rani Devi drying grain in the sun outside her house. "My old-age pension had stopped," she told them. "A man said, 'Give your thumbprint and a photograph, and your pension will start again.' So I did. Money arrived for two months, then stopped. Where could these lakhs of rupees have come from?"

The thumbprint on the account was round and complete. But Rani Devi's real thumb was partly worn away. Vineet Jha said, "The name is real; the thumbprint is false." Mira said, "That makes her the victim of a crime, not its perpetrator."

Rani Devi's grandson explained, "At the service centre they held Grandmother's hand against a glass panel three times. They said the machine was broken."

On the way back, they found another "Rani Kumari," who had married and moved away five years earlier. A third entry, "Rani Women's Assistance Committee," existed only on paper.

Mira said, "We will not declare any of these women criminals. Wrongdoers turn the names of people society considers weak into strong safes for hiding stolen wealth."

Bishambhar reported, "Maheshwar Babu used to say, 'Open accounts in women's names. Questions won't be asked so quickly.'" The committee's register bore a seal: "Maheshwarnath Sevak, Coordinator."

The Old One's ghost rustled among the leaves. "In older days, people wrote a woman's name on a plate of offerings to wash away their sins. Now they write a woman's name on a digital account to hide their sins. The plate has become an account, but the trick remains."

Rani Devi's grandson said, "Grandmother wants her name cleared." Deepak replied, "Let justice begin with the names of everyone whose identities were used in these crimes."

Ananya turned the page and wrote, "Maheshwar's Seal."

Chapter 188

Maheshwar's Seal



Mira opened the meeting. “A seal is not a criminal, but the way it has been used may reveal the path of a crime. We will look at its use, dates, papers, ink and chain of authority, not jump to conclusions about a person.”

Vineet Jha showed them photographs of three seals: “Maheshwarnath,” “Maheshwar Nath,” and “M. N. Sevak.” All three seemed to be versions of one original seal.

Narhari Kaka said, “As a child, Maheshwar used to ring the bell at Harihar Service Centre. Back then he was called Mahesar. Later that became Maheshwar, and then he added ‘Sevak’—servant.”

Bajrang, an elderly seal-maker from the village, examined the impressions. “This is not a hand-carved seal. A machine cut the mould. There was such a machine in the lane behind the station, the same lane as the Master’s room.” He remembered, “Someone once ordered three seals. He did not come himself. He sent a follower, who was said to be named Dhruvesh.”

On the bank papers, the date of a seal impression came before the approval letter’s date. Vineet Jha said, “When the future has already been decided, the paperwork gets filled in afterwards.”

Women from three villages testified that they had never seen Maheshwarnath. Satyavrat said, “The face behind an active seal is often absent.”

In a donations ledger, the words “Keeper of the Key” appeared after Maheshwarnath Sevak’s name. Narhari Kaka said, “There was an iron chest at the centre containing old certificates, seals and blank letterheads. It had been there since Batuknath Hariharan’s time. Often the signature came first and the name was filled in later.”

Devika said, “If this practice is old, today’s digital arrests are not an entirely new kind of wrongdoing. They are a new sentence written on an old blank sheet.”

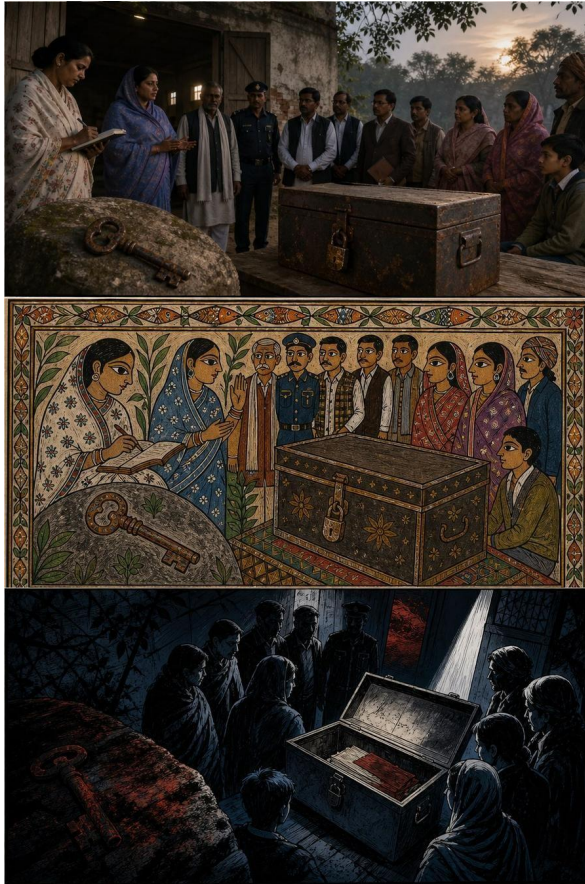
That evening an elderly watchman named Gadadhar arrived with a rusty key. “They gave me this and told me never to use it. The iron chest is still there, in the storeroom.”

Mira decided, “We will open the storeroom properly, following the procedure. Tonight we will only guard it. We will open it in the morning.”

Ananya turned the page and wrote, “The Iron Chest.” Aruni added, “Where blank papers were filled in, the real names remained locked away.”

Chapter 189

The Iron Chest



In the morning Mira announced the rules. “Every paper will be lifted and recorded exactly as it is. The crowd must remain outside. Opening a chest is not entertainment. It is part of gathering testimony.”

They found the iron chest in the storeroom. “SERVICE” was written on it in chalk, though the last part of the word had nearly rubbed away. Gadadhar turned his key. The lock groaned, “Khhrrraak!”

The first object was a dried coconut leaf. Mira said, “A crime may begin with a leaf used as a sign of blessing. The leaf is not guilty. We must examine what people did with it.”

Beneath the leaf lay a stack of blank letterheads marked “Harihar Service Centre.” The spaces for names were empty, but Maheshwarnath Sevak’s seal was already stamped on them. Ananya shivered. “Where names are to be filled in later, people have already been made to disappear.”

There were four coloured bags: red for the women’s committee, blue for the bank, black for phones, and yellow for workers. The red bag contained copies of photographs and thumbprint marks belonging to Rani Devi, Somri Kaki and other women.

The black bag held a list of mobile numbers with notes like “elderly,” “cannot read,” and “son living away.” Deepak saw his grandmother’s name. “They were recording her loneliness too,” he said.

In the yellow bag lay an incomplete page about Bisesar Paswan. It did not say “dead”; it said “absent,” and carried an old seal of Batuknath Hariharan’s institution.

A cloth bag contained five rubber pieces shaped to make thumbprints. From outside Somri Kaki cried, “Did they make another copy of my thumb?” Gadadhar admitted, “They used to put oil on the thumb first. They said it would make a clearer print.”

In a blue notebook the columns were headed: Name, Real Number, Voice, Account, Fear. Satyavrat read one entry: “Ramratiya—Son Away—Night—Arrest Notice.”

A folded sheet contained these words: “Batuknath Hariharan Memorial Fund—Blank certificates: twenty-five; sealed orders: twelve; voice list: twenty-six.” Maheshwar, Dhruvesh and Madhukar appeared on separate lines.

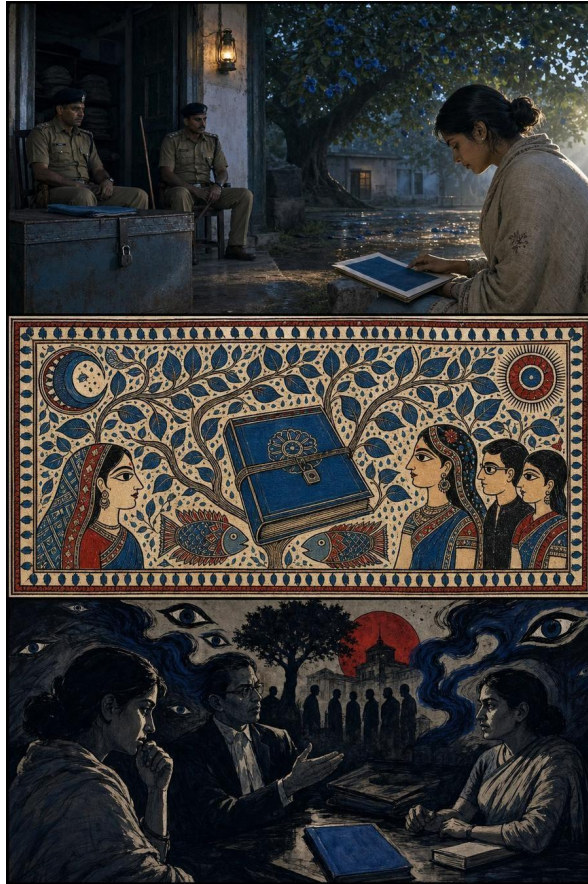
Mira said, “Before we read further, copies of all the names must be secured. No one’s name will be made public until we have spoken to that person’s family.” Ananya said loudly, “A victim’s name is not a spectacle.”

Deepak asked, “Can loneliness itself be stolen?” Satyavrat answered, “Yes, when it is turned into a sign of someone’s fear.”

Satyavrat wrote his concluding note: “The old institutional structure and the new digital methods appear to be connected in this collection.” Mira added, “The chest is open, but the people are still trapped.”

Chapter 190

The Blue Register



Mira cautioned them, “The names in this register are not all meant to be made public. Exposing victims in the marketplace again would be another form of wrongdoing.”

The first page bore the heading “Service List: Special Protection.” Its columns were: Name, Relationship, Fear, Voice, Account, Share, Status. Under “Fear” were phrases such as “son abroad,” “widow,” and “mother alone.” Aruni wrote, “Where ordinary people see their own troubles, criminals see opportunities.”

The second page contained women's names. Mira said, "These women are victims, not suspects. Having an account opened in your name does not necessarily make you the criminal."

The third page held traces of workers' names: "B. Pa." for Bisesar Paswan, "S. A.," and an empty box beside Chhotu's name. Gadadhar shuddered. "That is from the time of the old bridge." Satyavrat said firmly, "If an old matter is still alive in an account, it is not really old."

A crumpled page contained a map connecting Harihar Service Centre, Maheshwarnath Sevak Trust and the Rani accounts with blue lines. Beside Madhukar was written "Voice"; beside Dhruvesh, "Instructions"; beside Maheshwar, "Blessing/Seal"; and beside Batuknath Memorial Fund, a question mark.

On the fourth page, under "Practice," they found a list of Madhukar's phone scripts. Ananya said, "This is not language. It is a snare."

One page carried the name "Nand Aruni," followed by "Former Engineer—Report—Workers' List—Family Connection—Caution." Aruni's face went pale. Satyavrat said, "Someone marked 'caution' by the wrongdoers may have been an obstacle to them."

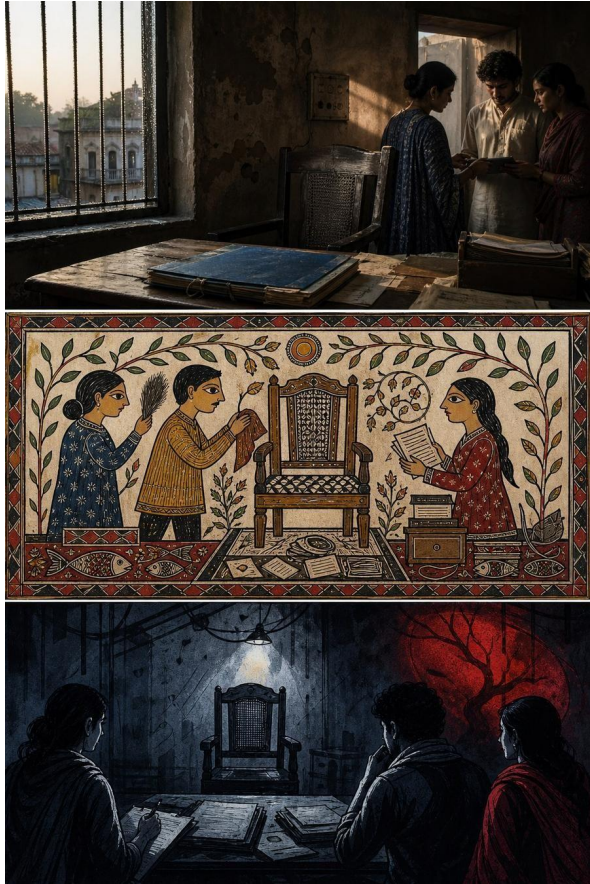
Hulasi's name was not written plainly, but they found a coded reference to "the woman at the well." Mira said at once, "That is not a name. It is an insult. When we discover her real name, that name will be restored in place of this phrase."

A thin sheet slipped from the back of the register. It said, "Register secured. Orders verbal. No page opens without consulting the chair." Gadadhar trembled. "That is Dhruvesh's mark."

Ananya wrote on the page, "Dhruvesh's Chair." Aruni added, "Even the person who has never stood up must be made to rise."

Chapter 191

Dhruvesh's Chair



Ananya wrote the heading “Dhruvesh’s Chair.” Aruni added, “The chair that looks empty may be carrying the heaviest burden of all.”

Mira announced the rules. “Do not move the chair. First list the dust, papers and footprints around it.”

Gadadhar held the key to the upstairs room and said, “I only swept the floor. At night I sometimes heard a phone ringing, a man speaking softly, or a chair scraping across the floor.”

A blue thread was caught in one of the chair’s wheels, matching the colour of the blue register’s cover. On the desk were a bell, a broken charger and a black box containing a rubber seal.

In the first drawer they found a slip: “Mother alone—gentle voice.” Satyavrat noted, “The voice was adjusted to the victim’s emotional vulnerability. This crime involved acting as well as information.”

The third drawer contained a bundle of blank statement forms bearing the instruction: “If they object, prepare a confession.” Aruni shivered. “First the criminal writes the threat, then makes the victim speak the confession.”

On the wall hung a map of targets linking Garh Narikel, the station, bank, phone shop and Harihar Service Centre. Red dots meant “Beneficiary,” blue dots meant “Fear,” and black dots meant “Resistance.” Ananya gasped. “This is not a map of services. It is a map of people to prey upon.”

When they lifted the chair cushion, they found an envelope marked “Dhru.” Inside were five copies of papers, including a torn section of Nand Aruni’s old report: “The list of deaths is incomplete. Names must be verified.” Aruni trembled.

Vineet Jha said, “If someone wants the names of people who died long ago, it opens the way to compensation, claims, identities and bank accounts.” Mira said, “The thread from the old water burial to the digital arrests is becoming clear.”

The soil caught in the chair’s wheels looked like earth from beside Channa Grove. Satyavrat carefully wrote, “Soil found with blue thread; source still needs to be tested.”

That evening they did not remove the chair. They drew a yellow line around it and sealed the room. Mira said, “The chair was not empty. Fear, orders, acting, old reports and new frauds were all sitting on it.”

Chapter 192

The Voice in the Switched-Off Recorder



Ananya wrote the heading “The Voice in the Switched-Off Recorder.” Mira said, “A recorder is not a toy. Every sound it contains might one day become evidence in court.”

A sound-recording examiner named Abhay arrived from the city. He took off his shoes before climbing the stairs. “I don’t want dust getting into the equipment.” Mira said, “Here, even the dust is a witness.”

On the memory card, they found “Dhru” written in blue ink, just as it had appeared on the envelope under the chair cushion. Vineet Jha recorded, “The markings are similar, but this is not conclusive.”

The files had strange names: “Gentle_Mother,” “Law_Fear,” “Confession,” “Chair_Night,” “Nand_List,” and “New_Register.”

A sweet voice spoke from the “Gentle_Mother” file: “Mother, please don’t worry. I am calling from the service centre.” Mira stopped it at once. “If listening is upsetting someone’s memories, we must pause the hearing.”

A stern voice in “Law_Fear” said, “A notice has been issued against you.” Satyavrat wrote, “The language of the state has been stolen.”

Then, in the middle of the recordings, came the words, “Bisesar’s case is old. Do not open it now.” The whole room froze.

In “Nand_List” someone was reading from a page: “The list of deaths is incomplete... Names must be verified... Recorded as absent.” A voice behind the reader said, “Cut this part. We only need the names.” Aruni clenched his teeth.

Madhukar’s voice came from “Confession”: “Just say that you handed over the papers willingly.” Gadadhar listened, stunned. Mira asked him, “Do you recognise this voice?” He answered, “It sounds like Madhukar Babu, but sometimes Dhruvesh wrote his lines for him.”

From “Chair_Night” came a whisper: “New names in a separate register.” Suddenly the last line of the blue register seemed to be speaking aloud.

The most frightening message was in “New_Register”: “Do not leave the children alone. They are becoming guardians of the names.” Then came a name: “Aruni?” Ananya dug her nails into her palm. Fear appeared in Aruni’s eyes, but neither of them closed their notebook.

Mira immediately said, “The children’s safety comes first.” Ananya began to protest. “We won’t be frightened.” Mira held her hand. “Not being afraid and being careless are two very different things.”

That evening they placed an empty clay bowl beside Channa Grove instead of the recorder. Ananya said, “A voice has no shape. It needs an empty space in which to be heard.” She turned the page and wrote, “The Face of a Voice.”

Chapter 193

The Face of a Voice



Ananya wrote the heading “The Face of a Voice.” Mira said, “We will not find anyone guilty just because a voice sounds familiar. We must add the time, place, equipment, witnesses and sample recordings to what our ears tell us.”

Abhay examined the lines showing the voice patterns. “If two voices share the same rise and fall of breath, and the same way of cutting off syllables, the comparison becomes stronger,” he said.

They took a sample of Madhukar’s voice. At the fifth sentence he faltered: “I will say only what I am told to say.”

Gadadhar brought an old disc. It contained a recording of the opening ceremony at Harihar Service Centre. Dhruvesh was speaking from the stage: “The village’s suffering is my suffering.”

Abhay compared the patterns. “Dhruvesh clears his throat slightly just before pronouncing the ‘r’ sound. And there is a faint whistle after the ‘s’ sound.”

In an old video from the bank branch, they heard Dhruvesh say, “First trust, then fear.” The same sentence had been heard in Madhukar’s voice on the switched-off recorder.

They played the sentence to Madhukar. His hands shook. Mira asked, “Who gave you that instruction?” Madhukar said, “It sounded like Dhruvesh Babu.” Mira replied, “Don’t say ‘sounded like’ if you know for certain. Tell us exactly how sure you are.”

Madhukar admitted, “I am afraid. They said that if I gave a name, they would stop paying for my mother’s medicine and take away my son’s job.” At last he gave a written statement.

An elderly woman arrived whose crying had been heard on the recorder. Mira did not reveal her name publicly. The woman said, “There was another voice in the background of the calls—the same voice that spoke from the stage at the service centre.”

Ananya drew a tiny lamp in the place where the woman’s name might have been written. “When a name must be hidden to keep someone safe, let us record its light instead,” she said.

Abhay prepared a technical report: “Similarities found in pronunciation, breathing pauses and rhythm of words.” Satyavrat said, “These words are cautious, but in court, cautious words stand firmer than a furious accusation.”

At night Ananya wrote, “Today we did not see the whole face, but we found the doorway of its breath.” Aruni added, “Now a summons must be sent to that face.”

Chapter 194

A Summons for the Breath



Ananya wrote the heading “A Summons for the Breath.” Mira made it clear: “A summons is not a punishment. It is a call to explain yourself. Now you must make clear the connections between your breath, your voice, your signature, the chair and the register.”

Vineet Jha prepared the summons, setting out Dhruvesh’s name, the links to the blue register, the sound examiner’s suspicions and the bank meeting video in order. Mira added, “Do not write the victims’ full names. Give them reference numbers.”

Gadadhar, two constables and Aruni went to Dhruvesh’s house. There was a high gate, cameras and a fountain. The manager, Sheetanshu,

said, "Sir has gone to the city for medical treatment. He left last night." Aruni examined the tyre tracks. The marks leading out were faint, but those leading in were deeper.

The summons was posted on a noticeboard inside the gate. At that moment a phone rang inside the house. Gadadhar began to tremble. "That is the very same ring!" It was the sound he had heard in the upstairs room.

Aruni reported back to the village, "The summons was not handed over; it was displayed. The paper went up on the gate, but the phone inside the house woke first."

In the evening a letter arrived from Dhruvesh's lawyer: "There is a health crisis; protection from public agitation is requested." Mira wrote in reply, "The voice sample will not be postponed."

Abhay prepared five controlled sentences for Dhruvesh to read, including "Service is not a business of fear" and "A crocodile's teeth can bite the body, but not the name."

At night there was movement around Dhruvesh's house. A car came and went. A herdsman saw someone leaving through the back gate with a bag. Mira said, "Nothing unverified. Record the time, direction and the person who saw it."

Mohan Paswan, a former assistant of Dhruvesh, came quietly to Mira. "Twice I delivered envelopes with my own hands. They told me only, 'No receipt, no memory.'" In Nand Aruni's old writing, Satyavrat found the words, "Where there is no receipt, let memory become the receipt."

That night Ananya wrote, "The Frozen Account." Aruni added, "When the road for money is blocked, the voice of fear begins to change." The telephone rang three times that night. No one answered.

Chapter 195

The Frozen Account



In the morning a queue formed beside the bank's shutters. Ananya wrote, "The Frozen Account." Aruni added, "When the road for money is blocked, the voice of fear begins to change."

Vineet Jha said, "We must examine the list first. No account will be frozen merely because its holder has a similar name."

They matched the first account against the blue register: "Harihar Service Centre Assistance Fund." Its description said "Special Service." Gadadhar explained, "Special service meant instructions from above."

A woman named Surajmukhi Devi stepped forward. In the register her name had been shortened to "Surja." She said, "Someone called and

told me my son would be sent to jail. I sold my goat.” Ananya wrote, “Surajmukhi Devi—full name.”

In a back room of the bank, they found a slip headed “Nand Aruni Report Assistance.” Gadadhar said, “They claimed to be collecting documents for victims of the old bridge. In truth, the money went upward.” Aruni shook. His father’s name had been stolen yet again.

The bank manager, Manoj Mishra, admitted, “Sometimes calls came from above. They said it was service work for the village.” Mira asked, “Did you recognise the voice?” Manoj replied, “Everyone said the orders came from Dhruvesh Babu.”

Many threatening calls came in. Mira said, “Once the money stops, threats quickly begin to speak in their true language.”

Outside, the crowd started chanting, “Save the service!” Mira said, “If a service dies the moment an account is frozen, it was not a service. It was a business.”

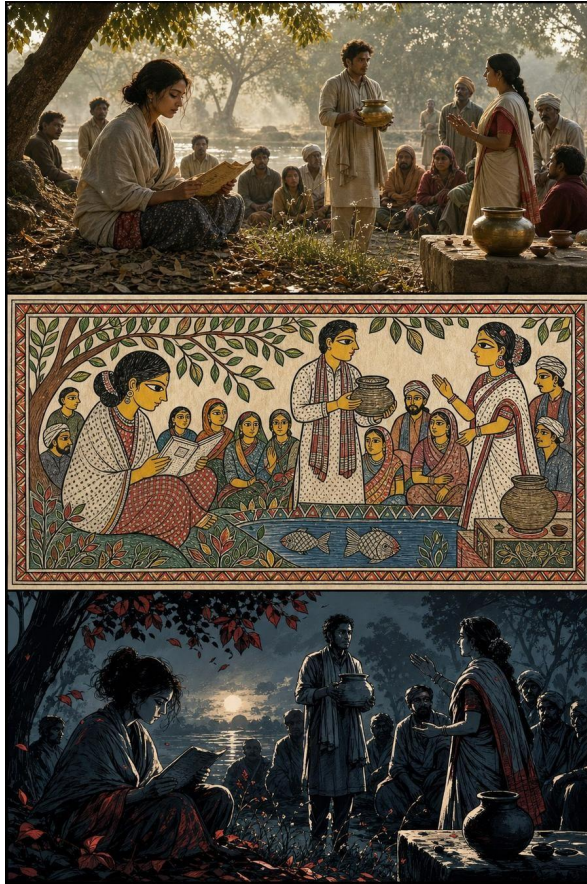
Surajmukhi asked, “When will I get my money back?” Mira replied, “I will not sell you a date. I will explain the process.”

That night, beside Channa Grove, the Old One’s ghost asked them to read out the names: Surajmukhi Devi, the unnamed frightened woman, Nand Aruni, Bisesar Paswan and Chhotu. The words “water burial” rose again.

The Old One’s ghost said, “Sometimes it is not water that drowns people. It is forgetting.” Ananya wrote, “The Meaning of Water Burial.” Aruni added, “The person who drowned in water lost a body; the person who drowned in forgetfulness lost a name. Now the names will rise.”

Chapter 196

The Meaning of Water Burial



In the morning Aruni brought an empty water pot to represent the waters of the village well, the Kamla-Balan and the Ganges. Mira said, “We are going to fill this not with water, but with meaning.”

The son of the old boatman, Fakira Sahni, brought a bronze bowl. “My father used to say, ‘Crocodiles eat bodies, not names.’ Now I understand. When someone cuts a name from the papers and swallows it into a register, where can that name find a shore?”

Mira poured the first drop of well water. “This water is for all those who died inside their homes, whose deaths were hidden by family shame, fear of caste and women’s silence.”

Aruni poured a second drop from the Kamla-Balan. "This water is for the fields whose boundaries the river swallowed, though the papers refused to admit it."

Devika poured a third drop from the Ganges. "This water is for Bisesar Paswan, Salamat Ansari and Chhotu, whose real name we are still trying to find."

Satyavrat Mehta opened Nand Aruni's diary and read, "Crocodiles eat bodies, not names." He said, "If a person has lost their body, save their name. If their name has been buried, save their voice. If their voice has been bought, save their breath."

Mira said, "Today water burial is not a judgment against Dhruvesh. It is a ceremony to give the words their meaning. The first rule of justice is to bring back up what was pushed under."

One by one they wrote the names: Bisesar Paswan, Salamat Ansari, Gopi Mahto and Rajnu Mandal. The fifth place bore the name Chhotu, still incomplete. Mira said, "Leave the space open. An empty space can also give testimony."

An elderly woman brought a small box. "There are no ashes of my son inside. These are the ashes of notes that I burned in fear. These are the ashes of my trust." Mira said, "We will not throw the ashes of trust into the water. We will keep them beside the register."

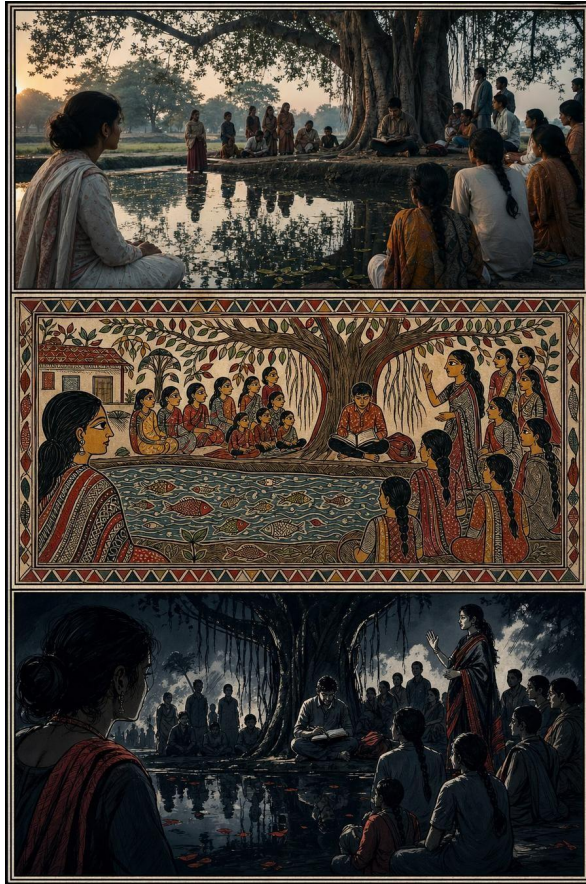
The Old One's ghost said, "You are no longer performing a water burial. You are bringing the waters to light." Ananya was startled. Could memory itself call back those who had sunk into forgetfulness?

That night, for the first time, Mira wept openly. Her crying was not loud. It fell into the bowl like a single drop.

Aruni wrote the last line in the register: "Water burial does not mean only that water carries away a body. It also means that a name is cut out of people's memory. Today the first name rose again."

Chapter 197

The Names That Rose



Mira stopped everyone. “Whatever comes to light today must not be turned into a spectacle. We will read a name publicly only if the family agrees. If a family chooses silence, that silence must also be respected.”

Satyavrat Mehta took out a copy of Nand Aruni’s old bridge-construction diary. In crooked letters, at one corner, was written “Shiv... Lal.” In the note beside it, the name “Chhotu” had been crossed out.

An elderly woman came forward. “I am Phulkali,” she said. Mira approached her. “Would you like the name to be read aloud?” Phulkali said, “My son did not run away. Read only that.”

Ananya wrote, “Shivlal, also known as Chhotu. Mother: Phulkali. Dead/missing at bridge worksite. Recorded in the register as absent.” Her pencil broke. She drew a line through “absent” and wrote beneath it, “Lost in the water, present by name.”

Phulkali knelt beside the bowl and bowed her head. “After so many years, your name has come home, my son.”

Bisesar Paswan’s grandson said, “In the village Grandfather was Bisesar, but on paper they called him Bisesaru. Mother always said his name was Bisesar Paswan.” Ananya wrote, “Name confirmed according to the mother’s memory.”

Surajmukhi Devi came and said, “Raise my name too. People said I had taken the money. I never did.” Mira said, “We will bring the dead people’s names back into the light, and clear the names of the living as well.”

Looking at an old page, Phulkali asked, “Why is my thumbprint not on this?” Vineet answered, “Because they never let you reach the papers.” Phulkali laughed. “My son was in the water and the papers were above him. Now the papers have come down.”

A child asked, “What if we never find somebody’s full name?” Satyavrat replied, “Then we will keep the incomplete name safe and say it is incomplete. To invent a complete name would be another kind of killing.”

Aruni made a “basket of waiting” for the names that had yet to be verified. They would not be thrown into a rubbish sack.

Before leaving, Phulkali lifted a little soil and placed it beside the bowl. “The name has come out of the water. Now let it rest on the earth.”

That night a vehicle was heard moving in the direction of the city. A young man on watch sent a message: the back gate of Dhruvesh’s house had opened, an iron trunk had been loaded into a vehicle, and it had turned onto the dirt road. Mira said, “No more guessing. Now we must follow the proper steps to act.”

Ananya wrote, “The Criminal’s Earth.”

Chapter 198

The Criminal's Earth



Hearing a vehicle move in the night, Mira said, “Anger will not be our feet tonight. Our feet will carry the evidence.”

The vehicle became stuck in the soft sand at a bend of the Kharihani stream. Mira held everyone back. “No one goes forward. Let the earth tell its own story.”

In the vehicle’s headlights, Dhruvesh appeared without his usual covering for the first time. Two men were pushing the trunk. From a distance Ananya wrote, “Iron trunk. Three persons attempting to unload it from the vehicle. Place: dirt-road bend at Kharihani stream.”

Dhruvesh shouted, "That is my private property!" Mira answered, "Private property does not usually flee through a back gate in the middle of the night." Satyavrat added, "If it is private property, we will make an inventory and return it."

Surajmukhi Devi arrived as well. "If this trunk contains the papers that ruined my good name, open it!" Mira said, "Not without the officials present."

Two officers from the police outpost arrived. Dhruvesh's phone kept vibrating. Mira said, "Put it on the loudspeaker so everyone can hear." Instead, Dhruvesh kept ending the calls.

When the officers began applying a seal, Dhruvesh stepped backward. His shoe stuck in the mud, and his bare foot came out of it. Mira held back a smile. "We must not humiliate someone because he is barefoot."

Abhay drove small bamboo stakes into the ground around the marks. Ananya wrote, "Dhruvesh's right shoe stuck in the mud. Bare footprints five handspans north of the trunk."

Dhruvesh said angrily, "You have already made me guilty." Satyavrat answered calmly, "We do not make someone guilty. We only write down the names that were erased. But feet running away do not speak very convincingly of innocence."

The trunk was sealed officially and loaded onto the police vehicle. A dark mark remained in the sand. Devika said, "The ground turns black wherever lies are hidden." Mira corrected her. "Not black. Heavy."

Phulkali lifted some soil and touched it to her forehead. "This earth must know my footsteps."

At dawn Satyavrat wrote, "The Criminal's Earth. The fleeing iron trunk was stopped. Justice is not only about proving guilt. It is also about giving the earth a chance to speak."

Chapter 199

Morning Inside the Trunk



The official seal was broken in a room at the police outpost. When the lid was raised, what emerged was not dust but a smell: silt from the Ganges, banknotes and the sweat of labourers. Mira said, “This trunk held more than objects. It held fear that time would reveal the truth.”

In the top layer lay an old cotton towel, a dried coconut leaf and a small bundle tied with red thread. Phulkali began to tremble as soon as she saw the towel.

Inside the bundle was a torn page from a workers’ wage register. Satyavrat Mehta read, “Shivnath Sada, age sixteen, mother’s name

Phulkali. Daily wages recorded: three days. Payment: zero. Remark: absent.” Phulkali said softly, “Chhotu.”

Ananya wrote in the register, “Chhotu’s real name confirmed: Shivrath Sada.” Aruni added, “The body recorded as absent is present with its name.”

In the second layer was a file labelled “Water Burial—Old.” It contained a copy of Nand Aruni’s diary: “Crocodiles eat bodies, not names.” Then came thirty names, then three hundred names, followed by a blank space across which someone had written “Exaggeration” in red ink. Satyavrat said, “When criminals cannot cut away the evidence, they call the suffering an exaggeration.”

The file of Rani accounts held more than twenty women’s names. A woman called Jamuna said, “I have never entered a bank in my life.”

There was a wax mould used to make forged thumbprints. Ananya wrote, “Theft of a thumbprint is more than an insult to a hand. It is theft of a person’s existence.”

The file of digital orders held telephone scripts and fake police symbols. Mira said, “This was not merely the theft of money. It was the kidnapping of people’s peace of mind.”

A sound recording carried Madhukar’s voice: “Keep the names separate, keep the accounts separate, and make sure the service centre looks clean.” Dhruvesh said, “That is not my voice.” Satyavrat remained calm. “The equipment will help determine whose voice it is.”

At the bottom of the trunk was a map. Arrows ran from the bridge site to Harihar Service Centre, the bank and the city. In the centre was a small circle marked “Channa.” Devika said, “On your papers this may be just a place. To us it is the grove that listens.”

The final page of the file had an empty space labelled “Future Successor.” Mira shivered. “A crime can be bigger than the person committing it. If we leave this space empty, another Dhruvesh may be born.” Ananya wrote in large letters, “Empty space to be made public.”

When Phulkali walked out of the police outpost, her steps had changed. Now she was the mother of Shivrath Sada.

That night everyone returned to Channa Grove. Mira said, “The ending begins when a village gives up the right to close its eyes.” Ananya wrote, “Guardians of the Names.”

Chapter 200

Guardians of the Names



Mira was the first to arrive at the grove in the morning. In her hand was a small cloth wrapping letters dampened by earth, dew, ashes and water from the bowl. She said, “Today we will write the final chapter, but this is not the end. This is the page on which each of us opens our eyes and takes responsibility for our own name.”

Ananya opened the register and read all the chapter titles again. Those who had been declared dead in the story were made present. The names of those accused of wrongdoing were read as well.

With her own hands Phulkali placed a copy of Shivrath's page beside a leaf. "This is not my son's death certificate. It is the page of his homecoming."

Satyavrat Mehta rose slowly. "All my life I looked for justice in the language of documents. Today I have learned that papers need the voices of a village to give them human meaning."

The village children held hands and formed a circle. One little child laughed and said, "Crocodiles eat bodies, not names." Every eye turned towards the child.

Abhay asked, "The names of the accused will go to court, but where will we put the names of our own silences?" Satyavrat Mehta opened a new page titled "Register of Silences": "Fear," "Profit," "Show," and "The habit of closing one's eyes when reading papers."

Small clay tablets were placed around the village, each bearing a name. For names that were incomplete, a blank space was left. Phulkali placed a lamp before one of the empty spaces. "Those whose names have not been found must not be left in darkness."

A little whirlpool formed in the bowl, and letters rose through the water: "Crocodiles eat bodies, not names." This time Phulkali cried openly, like rain falling.

Satyavrat Mehta wrote the final testimony: "Today Garh Narikel became the guardian of names. Punishment for offenders is a matter for the court, but guarding memory is the village's responsibility. No body without a name."

Mira lifted the bowl and passed it to Ananya, who passed it to Aruni, who passed it to a small child. The child's hands sank slightly beneath its weight. Mira smiled. "If it spills, the earth will drink the water. Just make sure the names do not fall."

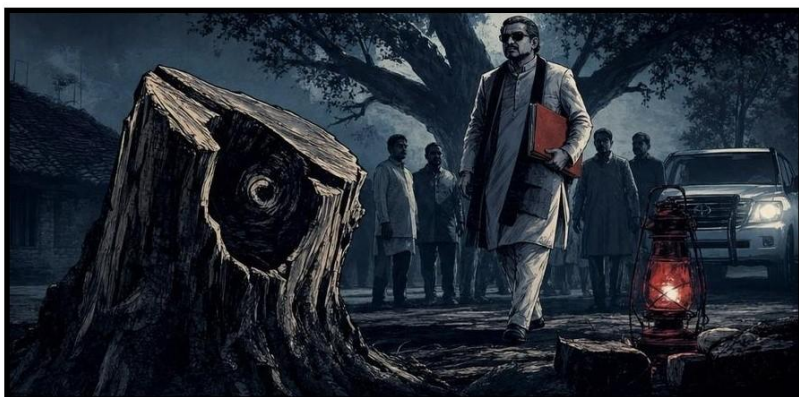
The Old One's ghost returned to his branch and, for the first time, laid his judge's stick on the earth. "Let the living make the decisions now." A brand-new green bud on Channa Grove shone in the sunlight.

The book's final voice: the water returned, the trees laughed, and the drowned names rose one by one and went home. Truth was a seed and it sprouted; names were water and they rose; and Garh Narikel chose

Earth once more. This story does not end here. It lives on in every mouth that says, "I am here."

Appendix 1

The Folk Treasury of Garh Narikel (Children's Edition)



Knowledge took many forms in Garh Narikel. One kind of knowledge could tell, simply by touching the soil, whether rice or pigeon peas would grow well there. Another could watch the clouds and know whether the river would rise that night. A third could recognise an occasion from the tune of a song: this was a sohar, a song celebrating a birth; this was a transplanting song; and this was the boatman's call. Such knowledge did not oppose learning at school. It was simply older than the school.

Grandmother told stories to her granddaughter. A boatman taught a child to read the river's current. A drummer taught his pupil how the fingers struck the drum and how its notes rose. Knowledge entered through the ears and settled into the body.

River Cradle (A Lullaby) — The children were frightened on a night of floods. Grandmother sat beside the ashes of the hearth and sang a lullaby, making the river into a cradle, the moon into a watchman, and the tree into a grandmother: "Sleep, little one, rock in the river's cradle. The moon keeps watch, Peepal Grandmother is near. Sleep without fear."

Blessing of the Clouds (A Wedding Song) — Rain began to fall over the wedding canopy. The people grew anxious, but Grandmother said, "The clouds have come to bless the bride and groom with the fragrance of the earth." A song arose: "Rain, clouds, rain over the wedding canopy. Lay the earth's fragrant blessing upon the bride and groom."

Four Strokes of the Pestle (A Rice-Pounding Song) — The four pestles were not striking in the same rhythm. Sarayu stood between them and began the refrain. Every time she finished it, the pestles fell together: "Lift your pestles, lift them to the same beat. Follow Sarayu's refrain and let each stroke meet the next."

The First Letter (A Naming Song) — When it was time to name a newborn child, Ananya said, "Choose a name that nobody can cross out." First the name was written on a leaf, then on paper: "Choose a name, choose one that cannot be erased. Weave it from the seasons, mother, village and hope."

A Question in the Middle of a Story (A Song for a Vow) — On a day of religious observance, the tale was not told merely as a bargain for receiving rewards. Grandmother would interrupt the story to ask, “Was this woman’s decision right?” The song said: “Ask, ask in the middle of the story. Before counting the reward, weigh the decision.”

Alone? (Call and Response) — After the incident involving Ujjwal Jha, a call rang through the school: “Alone?” The answer came: “No, we are together.” The song said: “Call out, ‘Alone?’ Let the drum of the answer beat: ‘No, we are together!’”

A Village in a Small Room (Garh Narikel in a Distant City) — In a tiny room in the city, people from Garh Narikel sang Sama-Chakeva songs, birth songs and Chhath songs. With no pond nearby, they watched the moon reflected in a bucket of water: “Make a home, make a village within this little room. Bring the moon down into a bucket and sing the Sama song.”

Hundreds of songs and tales like these are kept in this folk treasury: songs of water, soil, work, ceremonies and every turning point of life. From them, the children of Garh Narikel learn that knowledge lives not only in books, but also in earth, water and the human voice.

Appendix 2

Original Songs from the Unnamed Planet Episode (Children's Edition)



The original songs from the unnamed-planet episode in Chapters 101–104 are presented briefly here.

Chapter 101 — The Invitation from the Unnamed Planet —

When the distant planet sent its invitation, a song arose: “Pack your travelling bag, pack your bag for the journey. Take the scent of the earth and your mother’s song. That is all the treasure you need.” They were to carry neither money nor weapons, only the lamp of their names and a message of shared affection.

Chapter 102 — Kabaddi Among the Planets — As they played kabaddi among the stars, they sang: “Go, players, go to the other side of the stars. Hold your breath, open your names, and keep both together.” The children did not call out “Kabaddi,” but “Present!” At that word, the first crack shone in an invisible wall.

Chapter 103 — The Lesson of Names on the Unnamed Planet — In the darkness of the unnamed planet, each child called out their own name. With every cry of “Present!” a speck of dust began to shine.

Chapter 104 — Garh Narikel Chooses Earth Again — In the end, the children chose their muddy Earth rather than a palace of glass: “Choose Earth, choose Earth again and again. Prize your own mud above a palace of glass.” Choosing Earth was not a sign of weakness, but a great act of love: “Where there is a wound, grow the seed of healing. Do not run away from Earth; make Earth anew.”

In the final song the children said: “We do not want numbered dwellings; we want a doorway with a name. We do not want a contract for oxygen; we want our own air and soil. Earth, your wounds are ours, your tears are ours. Let our next life be spent guarding your name.”

Together, the songs of these four chapters say that the soil of home, the doorway bearing our name and the company of our own people are more precious than the glitter of a faraway planet.

Appendix 3

Original Inner Tales of Nyaya Philosophy (Children's Edition)



At the end of every chapter in the main story there was a short philosophical thought. These were originally connected with the stories of Acharya Gangesha's knowledge: stories about the question of how we know what is true.

The Last Page of the Novel — In Garh Narikel's library, an old book was incomplete. A student asked, "Why is it unfinished after so much hard work?" Gangesha replied, "You are treating the result and the supporting causes as if they were the same. A lamp shows the path, but it does not walk in the traveller's place." In other words, trying is not enough; we also need all the means necessary to complete the work.

The Leatherworker's Lamp — Near the edge of the village, a woman worked with leather. People said some kinds of work were "impure." The woman laughed. "Look at what shoes do to protect your feet, not only at the birth of the person who makes them." In other words, the value of work comes from what it does, not from birth.

The Empty Seat — At a gathering, the teacher's seat was empty. A student asked, "Are not seeing someone and their not being there the same thing?" The teacher replied, "In a well-lit hall, with an open doorway, an empty seat can truly tell us that the person is not there." In other words, under the right conditions, the absence of something can also be reliable evidence.

Smoke on the Mountain — Travellers were going towards a mountain when they saw smoke in the distance. One said, "There is a fire over there." An elder asked, "Did you see the fire with your eyes?" "No, I saw the smoke." But experience of the cooking hearth had taught the traveller that smoke indicates fire. This was the art of inference: learning about what we cannot see from the evidence we can see.

The Red-Hot Iron Ball — A student said, "Where there is fire, there is smoke." The teacher showed him red-hot iron. There was heat like fire, but no smoke rose. Then he put wet wood on a fire, and smoke rose at once. The teacher said, "It is dangerous to make a rule too quickly from things we have seen together." In other words, jumping to conclusions without a full examination can lead us astray.

The Yellow Conch Shell — A sick person saw a conch shell as yellow, though it was white. The physician asked, "Did all the objects

change colour at the same moment, or is there something wrong with your eyesight?” In other words, our eyes can sometimes deceive us, so we must test what seems true.

Through these little stories, Gangesha taught four paths to knowledge: direct perception, inference, comparison and the word of a trustworthy person. But care is needed on every path, for our eyes, ears and minds can all mislead us at times. Examining the truth again and again—this was Gangesha’s greatest lesson.

A Water Burial Among the Crocodiles — Children's Edition



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A WATER BURIAL AMONG THE CROCODILES

"A crocodile may devour a body, but never a name."

There was once a village called Garh Narikel, made of earth, breathing through water, and keeping all its old stories safe among its trees and leaves.

Before the story begins, Grandmother gives the children one lesson: listen to the village first. Beside a river that remembers everything, near an ancient grove where even ghosts play, in a place where no hungry person is ever sent away, the children of Garh Narikel will uncover a great mystery.

Woven through the tale are little stories from the Nyaya tradition of Acharya Gangesha about how we know what is true. As Old Baba says: "First look, then ask, and only then believe."

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