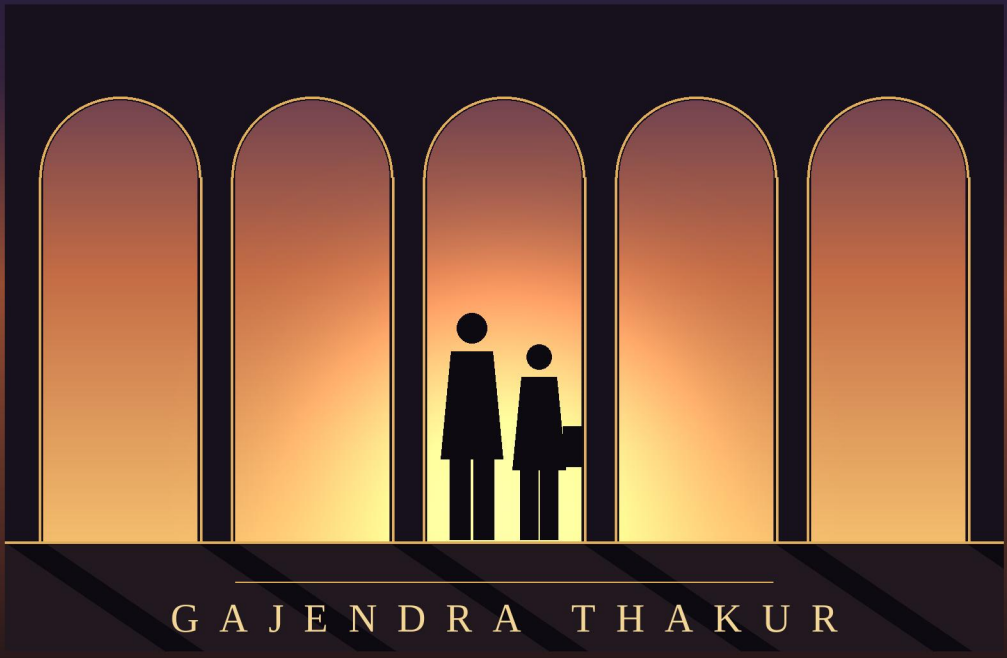
A MAITHILI NOVEL

BHARAT 2027

Twenty-Seven Years of Testimony

2000 — 2027



GAJENDRA THAKUR

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Translated from original Maithili by the author himself.

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Author: Gajendra Thakur

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Literary Notice

The characters, prosecutions, courtroom conversations and judicial outcomes in 2027 portrayed in this novel are fictional. References to historical events and the legal background are used for the purposes of constructing the narrative.

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CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE FIRST DOOR OF THE COURT

Chapter 1 — The Magistrate's Courtroom 2
Darbhanga, July 2000

Chapter 2 — The Seizure List 18
Darbhanga, July–October 2000

Chapter 3 — The Shadow of Parliament 34
Delhi and Darbhanga, December 2001

Chapter 4 — The Land of Marudhar 51
Jodhpur, January 2002; recollections of 2001

Chapter 5 — The House That Burned 67
Ahmedabad, February–December 2002; parallel events in Marudhar and Delhi

Chapter 6 — The House of the Silent Witness 83
Darbhanga and Jodhpur, January–December 2003

Chapter 7 — The Sea's Devastation 99
Little Andaman, December 2004–January 2005

Chapter 8 — The First Judgment 115
Darbhanga, December 2004 — Parallel Events

PART TWO — RECORDS, RIGHTS AND THE HIGH COURT

Chapter 9 — The First Right to Information 132
Darbhanga and Kamalpur, 2005

Chapter 10 — The New Law Against Money Laundering 148
Darbhanga, Kamalpur and Mumbai, 2005–2006

Chapter 11 — The Second Record of Marudhar 165
Jodhpur, 2006–2007

Chapter 12 — Chandrayaan and the Accused 181
2008: Ludhiana, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Darbhanga

Chapter 13 — The Workers' Unpaid Wages 199
2009–2010: Ludhiana

Chapter 14 — The Platform of the People's Movement 217
2010–2011: Delhi, Sonpura and Ludhiana

Chapter 15 — The Woman Who Became a Witness 234
2012: Delhi, Darbhanga and Ludhiana

Chapter 16 — The High Court's Questions 251

Jodhpur and the Rajasthan High Court, December 2012–January 2013

PART THREE — DIGITAL MONEY AND A CHANGING COUNTRY

Chapter 17 — The Deal Within the Game....268
Delhi, Darbhanga and Ludhiana; May–November 2013

Chapter 18 — The Road to Mars and the Right to Identity....285
2014: Jodhpur, Bengaluru, Delhi and Darbhanga

Chapter 19 — The Sentence Written on the Screen....302
2015: Jodhpur, Jaipur, Delhi and Darbhanga

Chapter 20 — The Last Night of Cash....321
2016: Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Darbhanga and Jodhpur

Chapter 21 — The Name of Privacy....338
2017: Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Delhi and Darbhanga

Chapter 22 — The Many Meanings of Dignity....356
2018: Jodhpur, Darbhanga, Delhi, Ludhiana and Chandigarh

Chapter 23 — The Moon's Darkness, the Valley's Questions....373
2019: Sriharikota, Jodhpur, Srinagar, Delhi and Darbhanga

Chapter 24 — Closed Courtrooms, Open Suffering....391
2020: Ludhiana, Jodhpur, Delhi, Darbhanga, Chandigarh and the Andamans

PART FOUR — STATE, CITIZENS AND NEW LAWS

Chapter 25 — The Price of Breath....411
Ludhiana, Darbhanga, Jodhpur and Delhi; 2021

Chapter 26 — A Voice in the Name of the Fields....429
2021: Harnampur, Ludhiana, Chandigarh and the farmers' movement on Delhi's borders

Chapter 27 — The Test of Crime and Bail....447
Delhi, Darbhanga and Chandigarh, 2022

Chapter 28 — The Light of Chandrayaan....466
Bengaluru, Jodhpur and Darbhanga, 2023

Chapter 29 — The Records of Electoral Funding....484
2024: Jodhpur, Delhi, Ludhiana and Darbhanga

Chapter 30 — Who Stole the Examination Questions?....503
Jodhpur, Bengaluru and Delhi; 2024

Chapter 31 — New Codes, Old Charges....523
Delhi, Jodhpur and Ludhiana; July–December 2024

Chapter 32 — The University's Locked Room.....541
Jodhpur and Kota; parallel events of 2024

PART FIVE — THE RECKONING OF TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS

Chapter 33 — The New Law on Gambling.....561
2025: Darbhanga, Jodhpur and Delhi

Chapter 34 — The Ledger of Five Hundred Names.....579
Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Kharar and Mohali; December 2025–March 2026

Chapter 35 — The Accounts Were Frozen.....598
Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Kharar and Darbhanga; April–September 2026

Chapter 36 — The Special Court's Hard Questions.....619
Jodhpur, Mumbai, Darbhanga and Dubai; September–October 2026

Chapter 37 — Twenty-Seven Years in the High Court.....638
Jodhpur and Darbhanga; October–December 2026

Chapter 38 — The Price of Falsehood.....658
Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Darbhanga, Mumbai and Dubai; November–December 2026

Chapter 39 — Before the Supreme Court.....677
Delhi, Jodhpur, Darbhanga, Ludhiana, Mumbai and the Andamans; January–February 2027

Chapter 40 — The District Court Veranda.....696
Darbhanga, Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Bengaluru and the Andamans; March–April 2027

PART ONE

The First Door of the Court

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Chapter 1 — The Magistrate's Courtroom

Darbhanga, July 2000

On that July morning, rainwater was dripping from the roof of the old courthouse in Darbhanga. Clouds that had emptied themselves through the night had turned the courthouse courtyard to mud. Near the gate, the tea seller lifted the lid of a brass kettle on his stove, and the steam clouded his spectacles. The smell of damp paper, old wooden cupboards, stamped sheets and mud carried in on wet shoes had mingled into an odour rarely encountered outside a court of law. For some it was the smell of hope, for others of fear, and for most, of a whole day spent waiting.

There was still half an hour to go before ten. On the veranda, an elderly woman kept untying and retying the papers knotted into the end of her sari. Her son repeatedly warned her, "Mother, the papers will get wet." She gave no answer. Beside her, a boy stood holding his father's hand. He could not understand why people spoke so softly in court when so much was being said, so loudly, within each one of them.

A police vehicle drove into the crowd. Its rear door opened, and Neelkanth Sah stepped down between two constables. The sleeve of his kurta was wet. So much mud had collected in one of his sandals that it kept slipping loose as he walked. The hair on his head was matted with the night's sweat and rain. His eyes searched the throng along the veranda. A policeman's hard hand rested on his shoulder, but it was not that hand that made his eyes restless. It was his son, standing at a distance.

Twelve-year-old Amresh stood by the gate with his mother, Nirmala. She held a brass-coloured tiffin containing two rotis and some vegetables cooked the previous night. The moment she saw the police vehicle, she tried to move forward, but a constable at the entrance stopped her. "After he's been produced before the magistrate," he said. "May I at least give him his food?" Nirmala asked. The constable looked at her for a moment. "Not yet." She pressed the tiffin to her chest. Amresh looked once towards his father. Neelkanth tried, with that single look, to tell him not to be afraid. But his lips did not move.

A little distance away, Shivnarayan Jha entered the veranda, folding a black umbrella. Of medium height, with a measured step, he carried on his face, now past fifty, a composure that could easily be mistaken for

severity. A young woman accompanied him—Revati. She had a book in her hand, a cloth bag over her shoulder and the restlessness of unanswered questions in her eyes. Revati had not yet completed her legal studies, but the courtroom drew her more strongly than many a book.

“We should meet the family first,” Revati said.

“We will,” Shivnarayan replied, “but first we must look at the papers. It is necessary to understand people's suffering; suffering is not a reason to argue without examining the documents.”

Revati fell silent. The words struck her as harsh, although she knew that her father never spoke harshly without cause. There was so much grief on that veranda that, if one neglected the papers, every person's story could seem the whole truth in itself.

Neelkanth lived in a lane behind one of Darbhanga's old markets. Peepal and neem trees shaded both sides of the lane, but in the rains a heavy smell gathered there. In front of the house stood a small shop selling grain, oil, soap and other necessities. Neelkanth was a modest trader, and people said he had a remarkably quick hand with accounts. During the first week of each month, when some households found themselves short of cash, they could buy on credit at his shop. This had earned him respect among the poor; yet the very same accounts could also become grounds for suspicion.

The police had arrived at his house at about eleven the previous night. Rain was falling; the shop shutters were half closed; Neelkanth was preparing to eat. Three men entered, two in uniform and one in plain clothes. They had information that records of illegal wagers were being kept in the back room. At first Neelkanth laughed. “You've come to the wrong house,” he said. But when the cupboard was opened and a thick ledger, some papers, cash and two old packs of playing cards were brought out, he stopped laughing.

Nirmala stood in the doorway. She recognised the ledger: it contained their accounts of rice, oil and lentils sold on credit. But that night an unfamiliar officer, opening one of its pages, declared that these figures were not the figures of ordinary trade. “The name of the person concerned is written against every account,” Neelkanth said. “If you want to understand, ask.” “We certainly will,” the officer answered. Then the pages were set aside one by one. Neelkanth was asked to sign the seizure list prepared by the police; he said he would not sign until he had read the entire list.

Revati noticed that, as Nirmala described the night, she repeatedly distinguished between “I saw” and “I was told”. Even amid the family's fear, there were things she remembered clearly and others she did not. Shivnarayan asked, “Who opened the cupboard?”

“He gave them the key,” Nirmala answered, “but I didn't see everyone who had entered the room earlier. The child was crying.”

“Were all the pages of the ledger kept together?”

“There was one large ledger. The other loose sheets were separate. Later they put everything on the same table.”

Shivnarayan wrote her words on a small sheet. Revati watched her father looking not only for statements favourable to his client but also for facts that might later prove damaging. Every answer Nirmala gave found a place in his notes.

On another veranda of the courthouse, Sub-Inspector Dinanath Prasad was turning the pages of the case diary. His eyes were red from the operation the previous night. He was preparing the day's proceedings for his superior. Dinanath was not a malicious man. He believed that something beyond ordinary commerce was going on in Neelkanth's shop. For months there had been complaints about strangers coming and going in one part of the market. Young men from two households had repeatedly lost money, and their families had pressed them to make complaints.

But not every part of a complaint could become evidence in court. Dinanath knew that at the first production he would have to answer when and where the accused had been arrested, on what grounds, how long he had been held in police custody, and why further custody was necessary for the investigation. It was for this reason that he was setting his papers in order.

An employee in plain clothes held out a thin sheet to him. “Here's the list of names. They still have to be verified.”

“How can I attach it to the principal papers before it's been checked?” Dinanath asked.

“Sir has said to put everything in.”

Dinanath studied the list for a moment. He disliked the instruction. “I'll record what was seen. What was merely heard will be kept separate,” he said. It was the discipline of his daily work, not a display of heroism. Yet that small precaution was to have consequences for many years to come.

The complaints that had reached Dinanath had not begun in any ordinary fashion. Three months earlier, a mother had come to the police station. Her son had lost part of the money he had brought home after selling two oxen. He said that people gathered late into the night in a corner of the market to bet on the outcomes of games. But he had not named Neelkanth. Another man named him explicitly, although he had an old dispute with Neelkanth over an unpaid debt. Dinanath had recorded these two accounts on separate sheets. He knew that a quarrel over recovering a debt sometimes turned into a criminal complaint, just as a genuine crime could sometimes hide behind the appearance of a private feud.

Among the old men who sat on a raised platform in the market, an argument went on about whether playing cards was wrong in itself. One man said that labourers who had worked all day played a few hands in the evening to rest; where was the crime in that? Another said that if a man staked the money meant to buy grain for his family, he was selling his children's rights in the name of a game. Their argument lacked the strict definitions of a legal judgment, but it held the moral knowledge of ordinary life. When Dinanath first questioned the group, they had looked from one face to another. No one was willing to speak openly against a neighbour.

Then one day a confidential tip arrived. The informant claimed that, alongside ordinary credit transactions, accounts of betting were being kept in the back room of Neelkanth's shop. He described certain abbreviated marks and figures. Dinanath tried to decipher them, but could not conclude that each mark necessarily proved the offence. Even so, it would have been wrong to ignore the complaint. A policeman's duty was not simply to believe; it was also to test.

Dinanath's own son was in Class Nine. When Dinanath returned home that night, the boy had asked, “Babu, if somebody's name is written on a piece of paper, does that mean he's guilty?” Dinanath had first replied, “A name is a name.” Then the boy asked, “What if somebody writes down my name?” Dinanath had been unable to answer. He told the boy to eat his dinner. Now, looking at the list intended for the court, he heard the question repeating itself within him.

One small detail of the seizure troubled him particularly. The police list recorded the number of pages in the thick ledger, but the count of loose sheets did not agree with the first account. Perhaps a mistake had been made in the night's haste; perhaps someone had added sheets afterwards. Dinanath had noted both possibilities separately in the case

diary. He believed that the first condition of preparing a strong prosecution against anyone was honesty in the prosecution's own records.

At twelve minutes past ten, Revati and Shivnarayan reached the door of the judicial magistrate's courtroom. An old ceiling fan revolved inside. It did nothing to ease the heat, merely stirring the corners of the papers. The court clerk called the cases one by one. At each name, a family waiting on the veranda suddenly straightened to its feet. Here there was a complication over a fee; there, a surety's identity; elsewhere, incomplete police papers. For ordinary people, the procedures of the court were a foreign language.

Revati took a page from her book. On it was written the language of a constitutional provision safeguarding the production of an arrested person before a magistrate within the time prescribed by law. She looked at her father. Shivnarayan had told her that there was a great distance between the words of a book and the practice of a court; but understanding that distance was no reason to abandon the safeguard.

"Will we get to see the case diary?" Revati whispered.

"To the extent the law permits," her father replied. "We won't be shown every internal police note today. We'll frame our first questions from what we can establish. If we pass off uncertainty as certainty, even the judge won't believe us."

Neelkanth had been seated on a wooden bench outside the courtroom. When she saw him, Nirmala held out the tiffin of rotis. A constable again motioned her back, but Shivnarayan asked how food would be arranged. The constable said they would look into it after the hearing. Neelkanth turned once to look at his son. Amresh was rolling a small pencil in his pocket. He had begun learning to keep his father's shop accounts; to his mind, every question in the world could be answered in numbers.

"The State versus Neelkanth Sah," the clerk called.

The constable took Neelkanth inside. Revati entered with her father. Judicial Magistrate Vimalakant Mishra sat in the courtroom. Before him lay piles of files, a glass of water and an old record bound in red cloth. He looked first at Neelkanth and then at the police officer.

"Time of arrest?" the magistrate asked.

Dinanath supplied the prescribed particulars.

"Was the accused informed of the grounds?"

"Yes, sir. Notice was given in writing."

"Medical examination?"

Dinanath handed over the relevant document.

The magistrate looked at Neelkanth. "Have you any complaint? Were you beaten? Do you need food or medicine?"

Neelkanth was silent at first. He had assumed that whatever the police said would be accepted as the truth. But the question was repeated. "Nobody beat me," he said, "but I haven't eaten since last night. And my ledger contains the accounts of the shop as well."

The magistrate had an instruction recorded to ensure that he was fed. Then he examined the police application. It sought further police custody for the investigation.

Counsel for the prosecution rose. He said briefly that there had been complaints of regular betting accounts being maintained in the local market; a thick ledger and cash had been recovered from the accused's premises; and questioning was needed to identify other persons involved.

Shivnarayan rose in turn. "Your Honour," he began quietly, "I am not asking that the investigation be brought to an end here. I ask only that the need for custody be stated clearly. It would be hasty to presume that a man from whose house a ledger was recovered must be the sole author of every page and responsible for the meaning of every entry."

"The accused is a businessman," the prosecutor said. "Accounts were found in his possession. That is why questions arise."

"The existence of accounts gives rise to questions," Shivnarayan replied, "but it does not answer them. This ledger contains records of rice sold on credit, of oil, of cash deposits. Show us the particular meaning of those entries the police call signs of betting."

The magistrate intervened. "Does the defence seek a full trial of the ledger today?"

"No," Shivnarayan answered at once. "For the present, I ask only that an assumption of complete guilt should not, by itself, become grounds for police custody. The court should examine the particular investigative necessity set out in the case diary."

Revati discerned a subtle lesson in this reply. Her father was not trying to prove the ledger innocent. He was saying only that the issue today was custody for investigation, not a final determination of the offence. Keeping that boundary clear was the first condition of understanding the language of the courts.

The magistrate asked Dinanath, “For the identification of which persons is police custody necessary? What is the source of the list attached to the application?”

“Several names appear in the ledger,” Dinanath replied. “Some persons have been identified. Others remain to be verified.”

“Do you expect any particular recovery that cannot be made without the accused's cooperation?”

Dinanath turned a page. He remembered his superior's instructions from the day before. Even if he had wanted to, he could not go beyond the facts. “That is not yet certain.”

Shivnarayan's eyes moved towards Revati for a moment. It was not a look of triumph. It was a reminder: the decisive moments in a courtroom are often born of very short answers.

The prosecutor then raised concerns about preserving certain documents and the possibility that the accused might exert influence. Shivnarayan submitted that the court could address these concerns through suitable conditions and the remedies available to it. Details were placed on record of Neelkanth's permanent residence, shop, family and established local identity. A separate bail application was still awaiting consideration.

The magistrate continued to examine the papers. For a few moments, nothing was heard in the courtroom but their rustling. Rain had begun outside again. Neelkanth stood with one hand pressed against his side. He understood half the arguments, and half escaped him; but he understood enough to know that a decision about his future was imminent.

The magistrate dictated an order recording that the material presented did not sufficiently establish any specific need for immediate police custody. The investigation would continue. Neelkanth was remanded to judicial custody for an appropriate period, and the hearing on his bail application was fixed for the following day. The case diary and the full particulars of the seizure were to be produced. The order also made clear that it was not a final finding on guilt.

As the order was written, Revati's attention fell on the magistrate's clerk. His hand moved rapidly, recording the alleged occurrence, the identity of the accused, the substance of counsel's submissions and the next date. After each word, the nib of his pen barely brushed the paper, as though he were turning an ordinary day into a record for the future. Revati thought that most of what had been said in that room would fade

from people's memories within a few days. The written order, however, might survive for years.

Neelkanth watched the magistrate's face more closely than the papers. He knew that he had been given the chance to answer one question truthfully, but the many mysteries of the shop ledger had yet to be explained. What if the police questioned him again and he could not properly identify the customers whose names appeared against credit entries? He had recorded many of them by household names; others had different formal names. Some people knew both kinds of name, others only one.

He wanted to tell the court that, in twenty-five years of trading, thousands of credit transactions had been recorded. Sometimes a customer gave the amount verbally, sometimes a member of the family did so. The handwriting might belong to several people. But Shivnarayan had already advised him to answer only what was asked and not to add unnecessary speculation. Neelkanth was trying to observe that caution. He had no idea how important it would become in a great dispute still to come.

The magistrate read out part of his order again so that the officials concerned would understand the procedure. It became clear to Revati that refusing the request for police custody did not mean that the accused had been freed; nor did an order for judicial custody mean that his guilt had been established. Such distinctions between legal positions disappeared in everyday speech. The family waiting outside would probably understand only that Neelkanth was not coming home. A court could not wholly remove that human suffering, but it could make itself answerable for its decisions by recording adequate reasons.

When Neelkanth crossed the veranda again, Nirmala held the tiffin towards him. This time the constable took it, promising to pass it to the person responsible for arrangements inside. Nirmala and Amresh found a small measure of relief: at least the rotis might reach him. But Amresh understood that what his father needed was not bread; he needed to be home. The boy struggled to remain composed, but his eyes filled with tears.

A shadow of disappointment crossed Neelkanth's face. He had hoped to return home. Nirmala's tiffin did not come back into his hands. Shivnarayan explained gently, “Police custody and judicial custody are not the same thing. There will be a separate hearing on bail tomorrow. We will come prepared.”

“When will I go home?” Neelkanth asked.

Shivnarayan did not invent an easy answer. “The court's decision will depend on the law and the evidence. I will present your case properly.”

There was reassurance in that plain answer, but no false promise. Neelkanth bowed his head. Revati saw that her father would not claim certainty about the future merely to comfort a client. It was the demanding ethic of his profession.

As soon as they emerged from the courthouse, Nirmala pressed close to Shivnarayan. “He'll come home tomorrow, won't he?”

“The bail application will be heard,” he said. “Bring the documents relating to your house, the legitimate accounts of the shop, identity papers and particulars of anyone who could stand surety.”

Amresh asked, “Is Babuji a thief?”

No one answered at once. Several people on the veranda turned towards the question. Shivnarayan looked into the child's eyes. “The court hasn't decided that,” he said. “Being accused of an offence and being proved guilty are two different things.”

“Then why did the police take him away?”

“It is the police's job to investigate suspicions and evidence. But a final judgment isn't made on suspicion.”

The answer was difficult for Amresh. He was worried about having to open the shop without his father. He wanted some grown-up to say plainly: your father is innocent. But all the adults spoke of papers, testimony and tomorrow.

At the western end of the veranda, an old man was searching through a heap of papers for the date of his next hearing. His son asked Revati for directions, and she showed him the way to the records office. At that moment she felt how differently time moved for so many lives within a single building. For Neelkanth, tomorrow was one day away; for the old man, four months. For a newly married woman, the next judgment might mean living in her parents' home or her husband's; for another person, it might decide the boundary of a small field. The courthouse heard the ticking of many human clocks at once.

In the afternoon, Shivnarayan returned to his office in an old building near the court. It contained a wooden desk, law books, a brass clock, an earthen water vessel and an extra chair for Revati. Wet neem leaves were visible through the window. On his desk, he laid out separately the preliminary seizure particulars supplied by the police, Nirmala's statement and his own notes.

"All you asked was why police custody was needed," Revati said. "You didn't argue whether the game on which the bets were placed involved skill or chance."

"What would have been gained by raising that argument today?"

"It might have weakened the basis of the accusation."

"Sometimes," Shivnarayan said, "an argument advanced too early weakens one's own case. First establish what kind of game is alleged, what amounts, what transactions and which law are involved. The Supreme Court has delivered earlier judgments concerning rummy. It has also ruled on questions of skill in horse racing. But simply invoking a judgment about rummy does not make records of direct illegal betting lawful. The meaning of a precedent is determined by its facts and the limits of the law applicable to it."

"So you think Neelkanth may have done something wrong?"

"I think the matter must be investigated. An advocate's task is to protect a client's right to be heard, not to fabricate truth on the client's behalf. The prosecution must prove its charges. We must test its evidence. Between those two tasks stands the court."

Revati closed her book. Her father had glorified no one in this reply; he had merely drawn the boundaries of responsibility. Yet in that very simplicity she discovered a grave idea: the law asks us to place our trust not in a person but in a process.

Shivnarayan opened an old copy, available to him, of the accounts kept at Neelkanth's shop. Nirmala had said that the ledger recorded the names of customers who bought on credit and the quantities supplied. Some pages listed sacks of rice, tins of oil, mustard oil and soap. In between were names and numbers alone. One page was written in blue ink, another in black. Even the way the pages were folded differed.

Revati began reading the names slowly: Rambriksh, Shambhu, Suresh, Jugal, Lakhni, Kariman, Sitaram. There were thousands of people with such names in Darbhanga's markets. A shared name could not identify a particular person. She added up a few figures. The accounts would not balance, for some entries gave no indication of what the amounts represented.

"What does this figure mean?" she asked.

"We don't yet know," Shivnarayan said. "Where we don't know, write: 'Not known.'"

Revati ruled three lines on her sheet: What was seen directly; what was reported; what was not yet understood. She had never prepared university notes in quite this manner. Those three lines would return to her many times in the years ahead.

A memory from her childhood stirred in Revati. She had been ten when a family from their village came to her father over a boundary dispute. Everyone in the village said that one party was dishonest because his house was large and he was pressuring a poor farmer to surrender his land. Even then, Shivnarayan's first demand had been for the old records. Revati had angrily asked why he did not immediately take the poor farmer's side. Her father had said, "Poverty is one truth; the boundary of a plot of land is another question. Justice in each case requires its own evidence."

She had disliked the answer as a child. Years later she understood that her father had not been indifferent to the poor man's distress. He had feared only that, in a rush of sympathy, supporting a false claim might ultimately destroy someone's genuine right. Yet Revati disagreed with her father on one point. Why was the proper use of the law so costly and difficult for the poor? How many papers, hearing dates and fees had to be gathered before a person could even tell the truth? Her father had no complete answer to that question.

In her college library, Revati had read judgments concerning skill and chance. Their facts, the nature of the game, the law applicable in each state and the ways money was earned were all interconnected. The language of the judgments was severe, but within it lay an old question from ordinary life: at what point does something a person does by knowledge and practice become a wager dependent on chance? And if a game involves skill, does the illegal business carried on under its cover somehow become lawful as well? Revati had found no simple answer.

She reflected that the most important question in Neelkanth's case was not that a pack of cards had been found. It was what sums of money, what legal allegations and which specific entries could establish which activities. The inventory of seized articles included an old pack of cards. It might be something the children of the shop played with, or it might be connected to the alleged activity. Context and evidence would determine its meaning. In a textbook this might occupy a short paragraph; in court it had become a question of a person's liberty.

"Show me what you're writing," Shivnarayan said. Revati held out her three-line note. Her father asked again, "The amount written on this table—what is its source?" "Unknown," Revati replied. "And the

names?" "They are written on a sheet; their identities haven't been confirmed." "Good," her father said. "Then today's study hasn't been wasted."

An elderly visitor arrived. He was Kamleshwar Das, a long-established trader from near Neelkanth's shop. He bowed his head as he entered Shivnarayan's office. "I've heard they've arrested Neelkanth," he said. "He's been giving our household goods on credit for twenty years."

"Do you recognise his accounts?"

"Some of them. Not all."

"Don't guess about anything you cannot recognise," Shivnarayan said. "Speak only of what you know firsthand."

Kamleshwar Das sat down. He had borne the expenses of marrying off two daughters, and on several occasions Neelkanth had supplied goods on credit at a low rate of interest. Kamleshwar regarded him as a saint. Shivnarayan listened, but asked what that judgment was based upon. The old man insisted that someone who helped the poor simply could not be a bad man. "The virtue of helping others and the truth of a particular accusation are two separate questions," Shivnarayan replied politely.

Displeasure came over Kamleshwar's face. "Are you his advocate or his opponent?"

"I am his advocate," Shivnarayan replied. "That is precisely why he needs truthful testimony, not merely praise."

Revati wrote the sentence in her notes. Her father no longer seemed severe to her; he seemed dependable.

Evening was approaching. The moon struggled to emerge from behind the clouds, but water still lay on the courthouse veranda. Amresh had opened the shop. Nirmala sat in the shop's small room, checking accounts with the customers. The first customer came for mustard oil. "Will Neelkanthji be back tomorrow?" he asked. Nirmala could not smile. "There will be a hearing in court," she said.

On a small wall of the shop hung a certificate from the school's year-end examinations. Amresh had stood first in mathematics. Beneath the certificate was a sentence his father had written: "Keep your accounts clear." Amresh looked at those words and felt something break within him. He suddenly understood that adding numbers correctly was not enough to make an account clear. Who had written it, for whom, why, and who could testify to its truth—those questions lay beyond arithmetic.

As Revati was leaving her father's office, the clerk Narayan Babu arrived carrying a page from an old file. One arm of his spectacles was tied with thread. He said that the list of the following day's hearings was being prepared, but a copy of one application still had to be filed on time. Shivnarayan examined the paper calmly. Narayan Babu smiled at Revati. “How are your studies going?” “Today,” she replied, “I understood that every word written in a book has a different life here.”

“I've been on this veranda for thirty years,” Narayan Babu said. “I've noticed one thing. When people arrive, they say, ‘Hear me first.’ When they leave, they ask, ‘Was I heard completely?’ Those are not the same thing.” Shivnarayan smiled. “And what has happened to the number of papers in thirty years?” “They have gone on increasing,” Narayan Babu answered. “But I cannot say that the measure of human suffering has either grown or diminished. Each sorrow fills the whole house in which it lives.”

A strange peace settled within Revati after this brief conversation. She felt that a court's true strength did not reside in the personality of a brilliant lawyer, a stern policeman or a patient judge. A judicial institution was made of many people and many papers, opportunities to correct mistakes, the patience to hear an opposing side, and reasons committed to writing. Such an institution might be imperfect. But to recognise its imperfections and to try to repair them were both duties of citizenship.

On her way home, Revati stopped beneath an old tree. Drops of water fell from its leaves. She realised that the ledger carried into court that day was not merely Neelkanth's business record. It was an unknown object placed between the market's trust, the police's suspicion, a family's fear and the law's patience. Its meaning had been no more certain on the first day in court than it had been at Revati's first glance.

The city was settling into its evening rhythm. At a paan stall on the corner of the market, an argument was under way. One man insisted that because the police had been watching Neelkanth for many days, his guilt was certain. Another said that the police arrested people without cause, and therefore Neelkanth must be innocent. Both assertions seemed incomplete to Revati. Arrest did not prove an offence; neither did a possible police error, by itself, dispose of every allegation. In the market people spoke to win arguments. In court they had to bear the burden of proof.

The old credit customers of Neelkanth's shop were divided too. Some said the incident had shattered their trust. Others expressed sorrow. A

trader who lent money at interest saw an opportunity: in Neelkanth's absence, customers might come to him for loans. The link between commercial rivalry and a criminal allegation was only this—that people might alter a story for their own gain. Revati understood, in this sense, that behind every statement in society stood a different person, interest and experience.

That night Nirmala tried to examine the shop accounts again. Two sacks of rice were entered against the name of a customer from a village. When she called him and asked, he admitted that he had taken one sack, while the other had gone to his brother's household. Both had been recorded under a single name. There was no fraud in this, only the old practice of a small trader. Yet Nirmala was suddenly afraid. If such differences became part of the prosecution's material, who would explain them? Which officer or lawyer would understand the traditional household names used in a village?

Her brother, who had come from her parents' home, said the shop should be closed. Nirmala disagreed. "If we close it, how will Amresh continue his studies? And how will the people we've supplied on credit bring flour into their houses?" To her, the shop was not merely a means of earning a living. It was a trust shared among neighbours. But she now had to discover for herself how many of its accounts were uncertain. She decided to preserve every surviving copy separately. She would neither tear out a page nor alter one at anyone's request.

That night Amresh's schoolteacher came to visit. He told the boy not to give up his studies. Amresh asked what use it was to add numbers correctly in mathematics when the name written on a paper was wrong. The teacher considered the question for a moment. "Mathematics tells us what happens when numbers are added," he said. "But human beings must discover the truth about names. Education gives us the power to understand both." Amresh fell silent. It seemed to him that his small schoolbook was now speaking to the great file in the courthouse.

Revati returned to Shivnarayan's office to prepare for the following day. Her father had opened a volume of old judgments. Its pages had yellowed like leaves in autumn. "Will he get bail?" she asked.

"I hope so," her father said. "But don't write hope as though it were an order. When circumstances change, the arguments may change too."

"What should I tell Amresh?"

"The truth. Tell him what the court ordered today. Speak of tomorrow's expectation as an expectation. Do not turn it into a promise."

Revati was about to leave when Shivnarayan read one of the names in the ledger again. His brow tightened slightly. He did not mark the name in pencil. He merely looked up and asked, "Didn't Kamleshwar Das say that an old customer of this name was no longer alive?"

"Which name?"

"Ramkishun Mahto."

Revati examined the entry. An amount appeared against the name, and the date was from the previous month. "Where did this man live?" she asked.

"I'm not certain yet," her father said. "We'll ask Kamleshwar again. There may be another man with the same name."

That night Revati visited Amresh's house. Nirmala had placed a lamp beside the sacred basil plant on the veranda. Amresh was studying the next day's lessons, but his eyes kept returning to the same page. Revati told him that the court would hear the bail application tomorrow; he must understand it as an opportunity, not a decision. Amresh nodded.

Nirmala asked softly, "Is Ramkishun Mahto's name in the ledger?"

Revati was startled. "Do you know him?"

"He used to come to the shop for goods on credit from the time I was married. He died five years ago. His son lives in another village now."

"Could there be someone else with the same name?"

"Perhaps," Nirmala said, "but the Ramkishun I knew is no longer alive."

Revati answered with great care. "We must now verify the name, the place and the date. We won't draw a conclusion from a name alone."

Nirmala said nothing. Surprise and fear mingled in the shadow on her face. If a dead man's name appeared in a ledger, was it merely an error on paper or a deception practised by the living? She could not tell.

The night deepened. Revati walked home through Darbhanga's deserted streets. Little patches of light fell between moon and cloud. Somewhere in the distance a train whistled. Her bag held a volume of old judicial decisions, copies of the bail papers and a small sheet ruled into three lines: Directly observed; reported; unknown.

Suddenly she remembered Amresh's question: “Is Babuji a thief?” She felt that behind every name brought before a court lay a question that might be small in the language of law but immense within a family. The allegations against Neelkanth would be investigated, and the court would decide whether guilt was proved. But there was another question to investigate: did the story of the life behind the dead man's name still survive in anyone's memory?

She reached home and stood beside her father's desk. Shivnarayan was reading by lamplight. “There is testimony that Ramkishun Mahto died five years ago,” Revati said quietly. “But we still need to verify that the name and the person are indeed the same.”

Shivnarayan closed his book. “Good,” he said. “Don't turn this into an accusation yet. First establish the facts of his life. Before trying to interpret accounts maintained in the name of a dead man, find the living witnesses.”

Revati did not sleep until very late. Tomorrow's bail hearing, the police ledger, the limits of the law described by her father and the dead customer's name circled together before her. For Neelkanth Sah, the first day in court had come to an end. For Revati, that day had opened a new question.

Who is responsible for a name written on paper? The person who writes it? The person who reads it? The one whose name it is? Or the institution that accepts the name as evidence?

That night the city remained awake.

Thunder sounded again beyond the window. Darbhanga's night was filled with rain. Every light in the old courthouse had gone out. Inside, the seized ledger lay motionless. Its pages contained some genuine debts, some possible crimes, and certain names still waiting for someone to give voice to their meaning.

Chapter 2 — The Seizure List

Darbhanga, July–October 2000

Thunder had sounded all night, but by dawn the drops falling from the courthouse eaves could almost be counted. This time Nirmala Sah had packed papers, not rotis, in her tiffin. The receipt for the land on which their house stood, an old licence for the shop, Amresh's school certificate and identity documents for two proposed sureties had all been wrapped in the end of an old sari. Revati had told her that it might help to establish the permanence of their home and business before the court. All night Nirmala had wondered why a court needed so many proofs of a home's permanence when Neelkanth himself had lifted bricks into its walls.

Amresh's school was open that day. He told his mother he would not go. Nirmala objected at first, then saw his determination and fell silent. His eyes were red. The previous night he had awakened again and again to ask whether Babuji had eaten. More than the arrest itself, he was tormented by the thought that the family meal had left one plate empty, waiting for a man who had not come home. Nirmala had not had the courage to open the shop shutters without Neelkanth, but she also worried about customers whose households depended on the credit he had already extended.

In his office, Shivnarayan Jha was reading the bail application. Facing him, Revati wrote out a brief note: Neelkanth's permanent residence, his trade, available information about any previous criminal record, the risk of flight, the possibility of influencing witnesses, and his cooperation with the police investigation. She had learned from her father that absolute assurances such as “He will never abscond” could weaken a case in court. Whatever could be proved must be stated within the limits of the proof. What could not be established must not be turned into a promise.

“Mother is terribly frightened,” Revati said. “So is Amresh. Shouldn't the court be told of their fear?”

“Certainly,” Shivnarayan replied. “But fear is not the only ground for bail. The hardship to dependants, the nature of the allegation, the needs of the investigation, whether the person is likely to flee—all must be

considered. If we offer the magistrate nothing but emotion, the prosecution's particular concerns will remain unanswered."

Revati wrote on her paper: The language of suffering is different from the language of legal questions; yet it is impossible to sever the connection between them. Below the sentence she left some blank space. She felt that filling it would take longer than a day.

A little after ten, the bail hearing began. Judicial Magistrate Vimalakant Mishra first read the prosecution's short reply. Sub-Inspector Dinanath Prasad had written that the investigation was continuing and that some customers remained to be identified. The prosecutor argued that Neelkanth's shop stood in the middle of the market, putting him in a position to reach potential witnesses. Shivnarayan did not dismiss the concern. He submitted that the court could impose appropriate conditions, but that keeping a person in custody indefinitely without specific grounds would not be proper.

The magistrate asked Neelkanth, "How many people work in your shop?" "I do, and members of the family," Neelkanth replied. "Sometimes labourers come to unload sacks." Then he was asked, "Do you keep any accounts apart from the records seized?" Neelkanth said that old pages recording credit sales and receipts for purchased stock were at his house. The magistrate made clear that the ultimate truth of these matters would not be decided at the bail hearing.

Dinanath was questioned too. He needed time to identify some of the names, but could offer no specific reason why the inquiry could not proceed without custody. The prosecution asked for a condition requiring Neelkanth to remain available and not interfere with the investigation. The defence agreed to lawful conditions. Beneath the rattling fan in the courtroom, the magistrate wrote several lines, read them, struck out one word and wrote another.

Bail was granted subject to conditions. The order provided that Neelkanth would be released once the sureties had been verified and the necessary bonds executed. Nirmala did not fully understand the sentence. She kept looking at Revati, who explained softly, "The order has been made. Once the paperwork is completed, he can go home. The case will continue." Relief came into Nirmala's face, but Revati repeated those last four words: "The case will continue."

"Does that mean Babuji has been proved innocent?" Amresh asked. Revati shook her head. "No. Bail is not a judgment of guilt or innocence." Disappointment appeared in the boy's eyes, followed by an unsuccessful struggle to understand. He wanted the world divided in two:

at home meant innocent, in prison meant guilty. The court would not accept so simple a division.

Neelkanth reached home that evening. His hands trembled as he opened the shop shutters. Dust had settled inside. After only three days of closure, even the goods seemed to smell different. Nirmala brought him water first and then food. Amresh sat down beside his father. No one in the family mentioned the ledger at once. After eating, Neelkanth sat on the old wooden platform where he used to write the evening accounts. It was bare, for the large ledger remained in police custody.

“I need to look through those papers again,” Nirmala said. “I've set aside the copies we have at home.” Neelkanth looked at her. “I never wanted all of you drawn into this trouble.” Nirmala answered, “I know the accounts of the rice we sell, too. If I have to testify to that, I will. But where I don't know something, I shall say I don't know.” For the first time Neelkanth saw in her eyes a firmness quite separate from his own fears.

Beside Neelkanth's shop stood a mud-walled house where Champa, a widow who sold paan, lived with her two children. Neelkanth supplied her rice on credit at the end of the month. The three days following his arrest had passed for Champa as though the road through the market had suddenly dried up. Another shopkeeper demanded proof of earlier outstanding debts before allowing her credit. “I'll pay,” Champa said, “but I need a day or two.” The shopkeeper replied that his own business had to run on the strength of its accounts. There was no conspiracy in Champa's predicament, only the fragile thread on which the lives of the poor hang—a thread that could be disturbed even by a shopkeeper's absence.

Nirmala called Champa into the house and gave her lentils and rice. Champa wanted to write down the day on which she would pay, but Nirmala said there was no need to record it yet. Then she checked herself. After the dispute over the ledger, she had come to understand the risk of an account left unwritten. She took out a separate old notebook and recorded Champa's name, the quantities and the date, telling her that she could note them on her own paper as well. “Don't you trust me?” Champa asked. “It's not that,” Nirmala replied. “I acknowledge the limits of my own memory.” It was a small change: a written record kept not from distrust, but to protect each other's rights.

Talk of old betting arrangements persisted in the market. One day the mother of the young man whose complaint had brought the police into the matter stood outside Neelkanth's shop. She would not go in. Nirmala

came out and asked what she wanted. The woman's eyes were angry. “My son lost the money from selling our oxen. You say all those accounts are for rice, but where did our household's money go?” Nirmala said nothing. She did not know how to answer. In defending her own family, she could not deny the suffering of another.

That night Nirmala told Neelkanth what the woman had said. He did not answer immediately. At length he said, “Some of the entries in the papers found in my shop are things I still need to understand myself. If someone has misused my trust, I won't protect them. But I won't admit to something I haven't done either.” “And if some of the mistakes were yours?” Nirmala asked. Neelkanth looked at his wife. The question was harder than anything a lawyer had asked him in court. “I won't run from the answer once I know the truth of it,” he said. The answer felt incomplete to Nirmala, but for the first time she saw his fear for what it was, rather than seeing only his shame.

Over the following weeks, Darbhanga's market tried to return to its customary rhythm. Neelkanth opened his shop, but his customers behaved differently. Some bought things in silence; others looked curiously towards the old back room. One customer laughed and asked whether prices had risen or fallen since the police raid. Neelkanth did not laugh. He weighed the goods accurately and returned the change due. The ordinary proprieties of a shopkeeper had become his way of resisting.

During the investigation, Dinanath Prasad examined the ledger's pages separately. The original seizure record gave one count for the large ledger, but the number of loose sheets differed between two copies. The first list mentioned seventeen loose sheets; the later office copy mentioned nineteen. “How did two more sheets appear?” he asked his colleague Chandrakishor. Chandrakishor suggested that two half-sheets might have been counted separately. “Then write that it's a possibility,” Dinanath said. “Don't alter what was entered on the original list that night as something actually observed.”

There were two witnesses to the seizure. The first was Mathuranand Kapari, a neighbouring grocer who lived round the next bend of the lane. The second was Rafiq Ansari, who had been summoned from home during the night. Mathuranand's signature was clear. Rafiq had signed his name in Urdu script, and its spelling in Hindi transcription differed in the office copy. Dinanath knew that a difference of one letter did not, in itself, constitute a lie. But leaving the variation unexplained could provoke questions in court.

Revati did not learn of the discrepancy immediately from the police papers. Her first suspicion arose when she compared copies of the judicial record lawfully available to her with older papers held by the family. Nirmala had a small list written that night of the things taken from her house: the large ledger, a bundle of thin old account books, a little metal box, some cash and a two-page account. It was not the seizure witness's inventory; it was Nirmala's own recollection, recorded in fear. Revati did not treat the two documents as equivalent evidence.

“I remember,” Nirmala said, “they brought down two thin sheets from above the cupboard. But I couldn't count how many sheets were already on the table.” “When did you make your own list?” Revati asked. “That same night, after the police left.” “Did you put the date on it?” “No.” “Then keep separate what you remember and what the paper records.” Nirmala was silent for a moment. “Why do you lawyers divide everything into two parts?” “So that nobody's words are misrepresented,” Revati replied.

At the beginning of September, the charge-sheet was brought before the court in accordance with procedure, on the basis of the material gathered during the investigation. The judicial magistrate was examining the legal position of the charges. The crowd that day was smaller than on the first occasion. Many who imagined the courthouse as a palace from outside were surprised by the labour that went on within: the clerk counting sheets, the court record-keeper checking the sequence of files, advocates requesting copies of orders. Amid all this, the question of a family's future could sometimes be reduced to the weight of a file.

One day Shivnarayan explained clearly to Revati, “The seizure witnesses will be cross-examined at trial, not at the bail hearing. First the prosecution will present its witnesses; then the defence will question them. And our own rights have limits. We cannot read every page of the police case diary simply because we wish to. We must prepare within the records the law allows us to obtain.” Revati found the restriction inconvenient, but she was beginning to understand that procedural difficulties could not be changed for the convenience of either side.

Meanwhile Kamleshwar Das, the old trader from the market, came to Revati and said that the customer named Ramkishun Mahto had died five years earlier. Without further verification, she never treated the statement as evidence of a crime. She asked a village schoolteacher about available details of the family but did not turn private information into public rumour. There might have been another person with the same name; payments by the family of a deceased debtor might also have been

entered under his name in an old credit ledger. She listed these possibilities with her father.

When Neelkanth was asked about Ramkishun, he said, “I knew my old customer. He died a long time ago. I can't remember whether someone from his family later took more goods.” “If you don't remember, say only that you don't remember,” Shivnarayan said. “Don't manufacture a memory.” Neelkanth grew solemn. Suddenly it seemed that the small, incomplete accounts of his trade were no longer merely evidence of money. They had become testimony to memory.

Before Mathuranand was to testify, an awkward scene unfolded in the little waiting room of the courthouse. His son Rajiv came to see him and asked in a low voice whether he would tell the truth or change something to help Neelkanth. “Do you want a lie told in my name?” Mathuranand replied. Rajiv said Neelkanth had helped their household for years. His father explained, “We can be grateful for that help. But if I say I saw what I did not see, that isn't gratitude; it's a lie.” Rajiv fell silent. A witness's obligations were bound not just to papers but also to the long history of debts and favours in society.

In a corner, Rafiq Ansari sat worrying about the broken leg of his sewing machine. He had had to close his shop for the day to come to court. If his evidence was not taken today, he would lose another day's earnings. Revati asked how he felt. “The police say, ‘Come.’ The court says, ‘Come on time.’ The customer says, ‘I need my clothes tomorrow.’ Who will pay me for my day?” Revati could not answer. She understood that judicial procedure consumed social time, but that time did not carry the same price for everyone.

Inside the courtroom, two other cases were called first. An elderly man stood holding papers for the demarcation of his land; a young woman sought information about her application for maintenance from her husband. Revati felt that the very heart of this veranda was made of many kinds of waiting. For her, the question of Neelkanth's ledger was the centre of the world; for the old man, it was the boundary of his field; for the young woman, the food on her table. The daily order of a court turned human distress into a queue, but every sorrow in that queue carried its own history.

At a distance a tobacco seller was telling a courtroom story: a certain witness had turned hostile and Neelkanth would now escape. Hearing this, Shivnarayan told Revati, “The fact that a witness's recollection is partly uncertain does not mean that the witness has turned hostile. People who make news of such things seldom read the whole testimony.

Compare what you heard with the written statement." Revati cautioned her own excitement. She, too, had wanted to treat Mathuranand's "I didn't see" as a victory for the defence. But the prosecution still had other evidence to present.

One morning in October, Mathuranand Kapari appeared as a witness. Sweat glistened on his forehead. He had left his son in charge of the shop and come to court. Judicial Magistrate Vimalakant Mishra sat within. The prosecution first asked Mathuranand about his identity and his presence on the night of the incident. He said the police had summoned him, that he had come through the lane and had seen some papers and cash in the rear of the shop.

"Did you sign the seizure list?" the prosecutor asked. Mathuranand recognised his signature. The paper was shown to him, and he confirmed that the name at the top was his. The prosecutor asked again, "Was this list prepared in your presence?" Mathuranand first said yes, then thought for a moment and added, "By the time I saw it, the ledger was on the table. I didn't see where every article came from." The court clerk recorded that sentence accurately.

Shivnarayan stood up. His voice was not raised. "Mathuranandji, did the police bring you from your house?" "Yes. A constable came to my door at night." "When you arrived, was the cupboard open or shut?" The witness closed his eyes. "I think it was open." "You think so, or did you clearly see it?" "When I arrived, the doors were open." "Did you see who opened them?" "No." Shivnarayan stopped. He asked no further question while the answer was being recorded. Revati watched, learning that silence, too, was part of cross-examination.

"Did you read the entire list before signing it?" "I read it," Mathuranand said, "but it was very late. The letters were small." "Had you brought your spectacles?" "No." "Are your glasses for distance or for reading?" An embarrassed smile came over Mathuranand's face. "I need them for reading close up." "Then how much were you able to read?" The magistrate intervened. "Keep the question specific. Don't entrap the witness in a maze of conjecture." Shivnarayan bowed his head. He asked again, "Did you personally count the loose sheets entered on the list?" The answer was no.

The prosecutor rose immediately to point out that the witness still acknowledged his signature and said he had seen the articles. The magistrate, while allowing the questions, said that both what the witness had seen and what he had not seen would be recorded. Revati saw no complete victory for either side. Mathuranand had not seen the cupboard

opened, but he had seen the ledger on the table. He had not counted the listed sheets, but he could identify his signature. No one's simple story was well served by such a truth made of halves.

Shivnarayan asked his next question. “The seizure list mentions seventeen loose sheets. Were you a witness to their being counted?” “I saw the papers together. I didn't count them.” “On which table in Neelkanth's house?” “On the left side of the back room.” “How often had you visited that room before?” “Sometimes, when I went to fetch rice.” “Were the customers' credit accounts also kept there?” “Yes. I saw the account in my own name as well.” Silence settled briefly over the courtroom. There was independent indication that the seized ledger had an ordinary commercial use. But the prosecution remained entitled to establish the meaning of separate entries on which its accusation rested.

When Mathuranand had finished testifying and came outside, Neelkanth looked at him gratefully. Mathuranand did not linger. “I said what I saw,” he said. “I have a shop to open.” Neelkanth understood that the witness had not come to swear an oath to their friendship; he had spoken only of what he remembered. It was not easy for Neelkanth to accept this. He wanted the entire market to stand beside him, but every person's memory had its limits.

At the following hearing, Rafiq Ansari appeared. He was a tailor and showed a small needle wound on one finger. The prosecution called him as a seizure witness. He said the police had summoned him, that he had stood for a while in the back room of the shop and that he had written his name on a paper. The defence questioned the difference in the spelling of his name on the list. Rafiq laughed naturally. “I wrote my name in my own script. Someone else wrote it in another. That doesn't turn me into two men.”

Revati drew a short line beside the reply in her notebook. Ramkishun's name in the ledger, two spellings of a witness's name and the question of a person's identity came together in her mind. She felt that the right to write a name was not quite as simple as it appeared. The habits of both writer and reader could change the shape of a name. But a difference in spelling did not automatically change the person in the eyes of the law.

Shivnarayan asked Rafiq, “Did you arrive before the seizure began or afterwards?” “The shop was open when I went in,” Rafiq said. “But the ledger had already been taken out of the cupboard.” “Did you see how the articles packed in your presence were marked?” “I saw thread tied round some of the sheets. The large ledger was separate.” “What about

the copy of the documents given to you?" "I wasn't given a copy of the list. I don't know what they gave the householder." The magistrate directed that the answer be recorded.

The prosecutor objected that the witness was being asked to speculate beyond what he remembered. Shivnarayan explained that he was asking not for conjecture but about direct presence and the sequence of the seizure. The magistrate allowed some questions and required others to be put more precisely. These small interventions mattered to Revati. Cross-examination was not the sequence of sharp questions described in her textbooks, but a difficult test of truth conducted under the court's control.

After Rafiq's testimony, the magistrate adjourned the hearing for the day. The prosecution undertook to have Dinanath Prasad and other witnesses present on the scheduled dates. Outside the courthouse, Kamleshwar Das stopped Revati. "Have you been to Ramkishun's house?" he asked. "We're waiting for verified particulars from the records," she replied. Kamleshwar said, "His son Sudarshan lives in another village now. He could be asked." Revati answered that, if his testimony became necessary, he should be called through a summons or another lawful procedure.

That evening, Shivnarayan and Revati examined the copies of old shop accounts that remained in the house. Nirmala explained the sacks of rice, quantities of lentils, tins of oil and sequence of credit sales. Some customers were entered by their full names; others were identified only by village or occupation. "This is how we've always done it," Neelkanth said. "I learned it from Babuji." Shivnarayan asked, "A practice being customary and every entry being true are not the same thing. Can you recognise the different hands?" Neelkanth studied several pages, then fell silent.

"These letters aren't mine," he said at one point. "Whose are they?" Shivnarayan asked. "I can't tell. Sometimes, when the shop was crowded, a customer wrote down the goods he was taking. Amresh, too, has written small entries once or twice. But this handwriting looks neither like his nor like mine." Revati would not permit a direct photograph or reproduction of that page without first clarifying the legal status of the records available to them. No conclusion was possible without comparing the original ledger held by the police with the private copies in the house.

Amresh was standing in the doorway. He remembered the accounts he had written himself. One day, at his father's instruction, he had recorded rice supplied to Rambriksh. His handwriting was very crooked. He

became afraid that his name might somehow be drawn into Babuji's case. Nirmala saw his face. “What is it?” she asked. “I've written in the ledger too,” he said quietly. Neelkanth drew him close. “Tell them what you wrote. Writing in a ledger isn't a crime in itself.” The boy wanted to believe him, but the courthouse veranda still weighed heavily on his memory.

A few days later, Dinanath Prasad appeared as a witness. The prosecution questioned him about the course of the investigation, the seized articles, the complaints received and the preservation of the records. Dinanath made clear that his account of the first night concerned what he had directly observed. The statement of an outside informant could not be treated as conclusive proof without independent corroboration. He appeared in the courtroom not in uniform but in neat civilian clothes. Revati remembered the face of the cautious officer from that night.

Shivnarayan began his cross-examination. “In your first account you recorded seventeen loose sheets?” “Yes,” Dinanath answered. “Then why does the later office copy say nineteen?” “One possibility is that half-sheets were counted separately. But I haven't been able to confirm that explanation conclusively.” “In whose presence was the original count made?” Dinanath named the two witnesses, then admitted that the actual counting had not taken place before everyone. “Did you record this discrepancy in the investigation register?” “Yes, as a question requiring clarification.”

“You say ‘as a question’,” Shivnarayan continued. “Then the discrepancy remains unresolved?” “On that particular point, yes,” Dinanath answered. “It should be distinguished from the seizure of the other articles and the grounds of the investigation.” Shivnarayan studied the officer for a moment. The reply acknowledged the defence's question without abandoning the whole inquiry. He asked another: “Did you investigate the legitimate credit business conducted at Neelkanth's shop?” The officer said he had taken statements from some customers. “From every customer?” “No.”

The prosecutor asked to question the witness again. He asked Dinanath whether the difference between seventeen and nineteen altered the existence of the seized large ledger. “It doesn't affect the existence of the large ledger,” Dinanath replied. “The identification and count of certain loose sheets are a separate matter.” On that basis the prosecutor attempted to preserve the central case for the prosecution. Shivnarayan, questioning again, said that the existence of a seized object and the

authenticity of every page of it were not identical questions. The court recorded both replies and reserved its conclusion.

When Dinanath's evidence ended, Revati wanted to ask her father something: why was there uncertainty in the case diary written by this officer, and yet such firmness in the police accusation? Shivnarayan said, "The prosecution's work is to establish its charge from the available evidence. The investigating officer must be free to say what he does not know. Both voices, though different, have their place within the procedure." Revati understood that the answer to a question of truth would not be found in the solitary voice of the police or the defence, but in testing all the evidence.

That day an old man selling umbrellas sat in the courtyard. He depended on the people who came to court for his daily trade; when it did not rain, business fell. On her way out, Revati asked, "How many years have you been here?" "Twenty-seven," he answered. Revati was startled. "Then the court must have changed a great deal?" "Judges changed, lawyers changed, the colour of the papers changed. But the people who don't understand the date of their next hearing still ask me about it." There was neither law nor sermon in the old man's reply—only the testimony of everyday life around the courthouse.

Revati told her father what the man had said. Shivnarayan smiled. "A person may be given a copy of a document," he said, "but without help understanding what it means, justice remains distant." He remembered an incident from his youth: an illiterate woman had obtained a court order granting bail, yet had waited for a month in the belief that a constable would come to her house and release her husband. She did not know the procedure for putting the order into effect. "It isn't enough to open the door of justice," Shivnarayan said. "Someone must show the way inside."

That evening a small gathering of affection took place in Nirmala's house. Champa, Kamleshwar's wife and two neighbouring women came and sat together. They spoke not of criminal records but of the child's schooling and the shop's place in the neighbourhood's trust. One woman said that since the police had come, her husband did not want to buy anything from Neelkanth's shop. Another said the court would decide whether Neelkanth was guilty; there was no reason in the meantime to break the tie by which a family obtained its food. Nirmala pronounced no judgment for either side. She only listened. Society, too, held its own informal courts.

Amresh listened from inside. He was astonished by the speed with which adults reached their decisions. Those who had obtained credit from Babuji's shop spoke of trust; those who had lost money spoke of crime. For the first time the boy understood that each person saw the direction of truth from within their own experience, but the direction of a gaze was not the complete shape of the thing seen. That night he wrote in his school notebook: "In court, testimony is taken in an order, but at home everyone speaks at once."

Beneath this sentence he wrote his father's name. He marvelled that simply writing a name on paper transferred neither guilt nor innocence to it. Sometimes a child, alone at night, took a first step towards understanding something that those in court had spent the whole day seeking through testimony. Amresh now wished he could ask his father every question, but some answers would come not at home, only one day in court after evidence had been tested.

Coming out of court, Revati said to her father, "Dinanath didn't conceal the truth today." "A person's duty towards the truth is no less important because of which side he belongs to," Shivnarayan replied. "A police officer is a witness too. Our task isn't to vilify him, but to distinguish what he observed from what he inferred." "And if his uncertainty harms the prosecution?" Revati asked. "Even then, uncertainty must not be concealed. The court has a right to know what remains uncertain."

Dinanath himself was not at ease that day. His superior expected the seizure proceedings to appear beyond reproach. Yet Dinanath did not regret the original note he had written. Returning to the office, he told a subordinate, "If a record needs correcting, there is a proper procedure for correction. We won't strike out the original page and invent a new truth." His colleague nodded. Neither said a word about whether Neelkanth was guilty. Their task that day was accountability for the record.

At home that night, Amresh sat with his school notebook open. He was practising the meaning of the word "truth". His teacher had set an exercise: write one sentence. Amresh first wrote, "Truth is what I saw." Then he crossed it out. He remembered that Mathuranand had not seen the cupboard being opened, but he had seen the ledger on the table. He wrote again: "I can speak the truth about what I have seen; what I have not seen must be investigated." The sentence was too long for his teacher's exercise, but for the first time Amresh felt he had put his own thoughts into words.

Kamleshwar Das told Revati a story from his years in trade. Long ago, he had taken five sacks of rice from Neelkanth. The record showed four because the fifth had been collected that day by one of Neelkanth's relatives in his own name. At the month's end the accounts of the two families were added together and a dispute arose. In the end the two men sat down and corrected the record. “The paper was wrong,” Kamleshwar said, “but the person who wrote it was not acting dishonestly. A court must have the sense to distinguish the two.” “And what if somebody deliberately changes the amount?” Revati asked. “Then that must be examined as well,” the old man replied. “I'm speaking from my experience, not giving evidence for everyone.”

The market's methods of keeping accounts had their own history. Some wrote their figures not in Roman numerals but in local Devanagari; others abbreviated village names; still others drew a red mark beside an outstanding debt. One day, as Revati examined an old private copy of a ledger, she noticed that within one family a red line meant “debt paid”, while in another trader's accounts the same line meant “debt still owing”. That was why she did not dare to assign a fixed meaning to any mark in court on her own authority. The meaning of evidence comes from its context, not merely its shape.

Shivnarayan told Revati about an old case from his office. In a civil suit, the direction of a field had been entered the wrong way round on a survey document. After ten years of litigation, the evidence of an elderly surveyor finally established that the north arrow had been placed incorrectly when the map was drawn. “Ten years,” her father said. “People quarrelled over the meaning of a small mark for ten years. But what court can compensate them for the quarrels, suspicion and bitterness born on that land during those years?” “Then is the work of the courts futile?” Revati asked. “No,” he replied. “What is futile is persisting in calling an error correct even after recognising it. A court offers the chance to put things right; it has no magic to return lost time.”

That evening Revati read the chapter on expert evidence in her law book. She saw that a handwriting expert might offer an opinion, but someone familiar with a person's handwriting, the circumstances of a document and other objective evidence would matter too. She wrote to a friend that in court the word “science” did not mean an unquestionable final answer; it could also mean a method of testing. Her friend was studying physics. In reply she wrote that if a measuring instrument was faulty, a scientist measured again. In this brief correspondence, legal knowledge and scientific discipline drew close to one another.

Before the next hearing, Shivnarayan prepared an application for an appropriate expert opinion on the disputed handwriting in the seized ledger. “Is it necessary to call an expert just because some letters look different?” Revati asked. “The court will examine whether it is necessary,” her father said. “First we must establish which entry raises a dispute about authorship that could prove decisive. An expert's opinion is not the final truth; it is one means by which a court tests evidence. Under the older law of evidence, expert opinion, proved handwriting and the testimony of persons concerned each have a distinct place.”

Revati revised the wording of the application again and again. Her first sentence had read: “It is clear that the writing is not Neelkanth's.” Shivnarayan struck it out. “It isn't clear yet,” he said. “Write that a genuine dispute has arisen over the authorship of the handwriting, and explain why a comparative examination may be necessary.” Revati was not disappointed. She understood that by changing a single word in an application, an advocate could bring a claim closer to the truth.

Neelkanth took a little comfort in this. “Then the pages I didn't write will be separated out?” he asked. “Perhaps they will, perhaps not,” Shivnarayan answered. “The expert's opinion, the condition of the original ledger, known samples of handwriting and the testimony must all be considered. I won't promise anything.” Weariness showed in Neelkanth's face. In court every hope had to remain a possibility; yet without such caution, no decision could rest on just grounds.

Meanwhile, Kamleshwar Das brought back the address of Ramkishun Mahto's son. Sudarshan had left his village and now lived in a nearby market town. His father had indeed died five years earlier. But Kamleshwar had not been able to establish whether another Ramkishun of the same name lived in a different hamlet. Revati did not treat these details as verified facts. She and her father agreed that, if necessary, a witness would be called through lawful process. For the time being, the riddle of the dead man's name had to be kept apart; the questions before the court concerned the seizure list and the handwriting. Revati did not want two unfinished mysteries to be used as proof of each other.

The people sitting on the veranda, trying to keep their bundles of papers in order, knew nothing of the mysteries of this case. They had their own sorrows, each waiting for another hearing.

On that day, the last of the monsoon rain fell along the courthouse veranda. An application for expert examination was presented before Vimalakant Mishra. The prosecutor said that the prosecution, too, favoured clarifying the source of the disputed papers, but the scope of the

examination ought to be limited. “Which pages? Which handwriting? Which available specimens?” the magistrate asked. Shivnarayan laid out the particulars one by one. He was declaring no one guilty or innocent, merely defining questions that could be tested.

The magistrate dictated a reasoned order on the application. Directions were given that the preservation of the disputed pages, the verification of available specimens and the obtaining of a suitable expert opinion should be considered through lawful procedure. The value of the expert opinion would be assessed at the final trial alongside the other evidence. Revati listened to every word. Her father gave her a brief glance: this was no victory, only the opening of another door through which truth might be tested.

In the meantime, a stranger came to Neelkanth's shop. He bought a small tin of oil and paid for it. Then, while Nirmala's back was turned, he asked in a low voice, “Have you seen page forty-five of the seized ledger?” Neelkanth was startled. “Who are you?” “My name won't help you. Just understand that not all the writing is in one hand.” There was no threat in his voice, only a strange urgency. Before Neelkanth could answer, he walked away into the lane.

Nirmala told Revati about the incident. Revati immediately advised them not to decide, on conjecture alone, that the stranger was either a criminal or a rescuer. Neelkanth should write down separately everything he could remember firsthand. They could ask whether anyone else in the shop had seen the man. Shivnarayan, too, thought it proper to convey the information to the investigating officer through lawful means.

That night Revati opened the three old lines in her notebook once more: Directly observed; reported; unknown. Under the first she wrote: Mathuranand saw the ledger on the table; Rafiq arrived after it had been taken out of the cupboard; Dinanath acknowledged the discrepancy in the page counts of the two copies. Under the second she wrote: An unidentified man mentioned page forty-five. Under the third: Who was he, what does the page contain, whose handwriting is it, and is it in any way connected with the entry under Ramkishun's name?

Shivnarayan entered and asked, “What have you understood now?” Revati said, “The seizure list names all the objects, but not their journey. Which hand lifted them, who saw them, when they were counted, who wrote them—those questions change the meaning of a paper.” Her father said nothing. He merely set an old wooden box on the desk, filled with copies of judicial documents from years gone by. “This box holds answers to many cases,” he said, “but not the whole life of a single one.”

Back in the courthouse records room, the seized ledger lay safely in its designated place. At the margin of page forty-five, a name was written in blue ink, with an amount beneath it in black. The formation of the letters differed from that on the neighbouring pages. That fact alone could not establish that the name was wrong, the amount false, or the page written by someone without authority. Yet this much was certain: the writing on this one page had now become a matter of questions before the court.

In the last hours of the night, Amresh was asleep. Nirmala sat beside a lamp. Neelkanth gazed silently into the darkness of the lane outside. Again he heard the stranger's question: “Have you seen page forty-five?” He had not yet found the courage to say how much he himself knew about that page.

Far away, the old courthouse was quiet. The seizure list counted the objects found on a table. But no list could say whose fear lay behind each signature, whose life behind each name, or whose want behind each sum of money. Even after returning home, Revati could not free herself from a question that would pursue her for years: who is the author of a paper brought before a court—and who will determine its meaning?

Chapter 3 — The Shadow of Parliament

Delhi and Darbhanga, December 2001

In December, dawn comes late to Delhi. Even after the streetlights go out, their yellow glow hangs for a while in the air, suspended between smoke and mist. When Revati Jha opened the window of her hostel room, two pigeons were huddled together on the ledge. Neem leaves were falling in the courtyard. She closed the book on criminal procedure lying on her desk. All night she had been studying the first appearance after arrest, police applications, and the exercise of judicial discretion in granting bail. In the book, every procedure unfolded in its proper sequence. She remembered her father's court, where, amid that sequence, human beings stood waiting—a rain-soaked kurta, hands trembling with cold, a child waiting at home.

More than a year had passed since she came to Delhi. Alongside her studies she was learning to put records in order at the office of a senior advocate. Her father wrote from Darbhanga every fortnight. After the customary news of the family, each letter contained some incident from court: an incorrect address, a witness who had not received travelling expenses, a farmer waiting for a copy of an order. Revati's replies contained questions rather than sections of statutes. In her last letter she had written: 'Before treating the name on a piece of paper as the person who bears it, what questions ought we to ask?' Her father had replied: 'Ask the name. Then ask who wrote it. Then ask where that person was at the time.'

On 13 December she had a morning class at the university. She met her friend Rais Mir, who had come from the north, on the library steps. Rais was from Srinagar, but in Delhi he had to introduce himself over and over again: people heard his accent and asked where he was from before asking what he studied. He used to laugh and say, 'I came here to study law, not to justify the place where I was born.' Revati understood the weariness beneath his joke. That morning they arranged to study the law of evidence together in the afternoon. There was no presentiment of disaster.

A little before noon, people in the university corridor suddenly came to a standstill. A student ran in with the news that there had been an

armed attack on Parliament House. At first no one believed him. Someone said there had been an explosion; another said shots had been fired; a third insisted the report was false. A crowd gathered outside the watchman's room, where a radio was kept. The newsreader's voice was unusually grave. Parliament had been attacked; security personnel had lost their lives trying to repel the assault. Revati could not speak. She understood what it meant for the building she had so often imagined while reading her law books to come under attack: individual deaths, a nation's fear, and the defence of an institution had converged in a single moment.

Rais stood just behind the radio. Another student asked him, 'Had you heard anything about something like this back home?' There was more suspicion than curiosity in his voice. Rais turned towards him. 'I study law,' he said quietly. 'I don't keep secret intelligence.' Revati could not tell whether the questioner felt ashamed of his words. But in the silence that spread through the crowd, she recognised a new kind of fear: how quickly people could construct a bridge between news of violence against the nation and the identity of an innocent person.

That evening armed guards stood along many of Delhi's roads. The university gates closed early. The guard at the library checked students' identity cards. When Revati returned to the hostel, her friend Madhavi said that calls had been coming continuously from home: everyone wanted to know whether Delhi was safe. Revati telephoned her mother to say that she was all right. Her mother began to cry, then asked, 'Did the people in Parliament survive?' Revati said, 'I don't know all the details. It is heartbreaking to hear about those who died defending it.' She felt it would be wrong to speculate about the exact number of casualties or the circumstances of the attack.

She spoke to her father that night. Shivnarayan sounded tired. 'Everyone at the courthouse here looked frightened today, too,' he said. 'Our country's Parliament has been attacked. How could anyone call that an ordinary event?' Revati asked, 'Does a court's duty change in a time of fear?' Her father answered, 'Its duty becomes harder. An arrest does not put an end to the legal examination of an allegation. Honouring those who stopped the attack and protecting the rights of the accused are not contradictory obligations.' Revati copied the sentence into her notebook.

In Darbhanga, Neelkanth Sah's shop had closed early that day. Amresh was approaching his thirteenth birthday; when he heard the news, he remembered a picture of Parliament in his school textbook. He asked his father, 'If people start shooting in the place where all the

country's affairs are discussed, who will listen to people like us?' Neelkanth took some time before answering. 'Those whose duty it was to protect that place held their ground,' he said. 'We owe them a debt.' Nirmala was stirring khichdi over the stove. Their own lawsuit suddenly seemed very small, though it had not vanished.

When Shivnarayan reached court the next day, the old clock in the veranda had struck ten. Sub-Inspector Dinanath Prasad was there in uniform, his eyes weary from a night on guard duty. 'There is unrest in the market,' Dinanath said. 'Rumours everywhere. People bring the police whatever they happen to hear.' Shivnarayan asked, 'Do you record every piece of information in the same way?' Dinanath gave the answer he had given before. 'What was seen, what was heard, and what is conjecture must be kept separate. But preserving those distinctions is difficult when a crowd is afraid.' They went on to their respective work.

The forty-fifth page of Neelkanth's ledger was still awaiting expert examination that month. The original page had to be preserved, and suitable handwriting samples were being collected for comparison. As the court adjourned the matter to another date, Shivnarayan made it clear to Neelkanth that even an expert opinion would not, by itself, settle the entire dispute. Neelkanth was unhappy. 'My son has been asking for more than a year—who wrote that page?' Shivnarayan answered, 'That question needs a reliable answer more than a quick one.' Neelkanth fell silent, but the wound of waiting remained visible on his face.

Three days after the attack, police took Faizan Alam, who ran a printing and stationery shop in a narrow Darbhanga lane, in for questioning. Faizan was twenty. He attended undergraduate classes in the evenings and made photographic reproductions during the day. His shop produced wedding invitations, school notices, small traders' bills, and all kinds of printed papers. Two documents resembling passes for entry into a municipal office had been found there, raising police suspicions that an official seal had been copied. Faizan said a customer had supplied the original specimen, but he did not know the customer's full name. The police were not satisfied.

Among the people crowding outside the shop, some began to shout 'traitor'. None of them had seen the passes, yet the word travelled from mouth to mouth. Sub-Inspector Ashok Rai tried to disperse them, explaining that the case concerned an investigation into forged documents and that no connection with the attack on Parliament had been established. His caution disappeared into the noise. Faizan's mother, Shahida Khatoon, stood weeping in the veranda. All she asked the police

was, 'What offence have you written against my son?' Instead of answering that simple question, the crowd cast a shadow of guilt across the threshold of her home.

Ashok Rai spoke separately to Faizan's co-worker Binod. Binod said an unknown customer had supplied the design for the passes. The police recorded his statement. Yet in his first account Binod had used the words 'government office', and in the second, 'factory'. This was no small difference. Ashok's assistant hastily suggested that everyone involved in printing the papers should be treated as participants in the same design. Ashok stopped him. 'Forgery is the allegation. It has to be proved. A crowd's shouting is not a section of the law.' Dinanath Prasad, who was at the station that day on another investigation, heard him and remembered his old seizure list.

Faizan's sister Nazia was a secondary-school student. She had asked her brother to bring some paper from the bookshop. Now, as she passed through the same lane, people stopped her with questions: 'What was your brother making?' At first Nazia protested; later she fell silent. A teacher called her aside at school. 'Leave the investigation to those whose duty it is,' she said. 'Don't give up your studies.' The teacher's kindness comforted Nazia, but it did little to relieve the fear that visited her home each day.

Shahida came to Shivnarayan's office that evening. An old customer had told her the advocate's name. Shivnarayan was tying up the papers in Neelkanth's case. He asked Shahida to sit, gave her water, and questioned her one point at a time. He noted the hour of the arrest, the kinds of papers, the shopkeeper's responsibilities, the signatures on the seizure record, and who had been present with the police. 'My son is innocent,' Shahida kept saying. Shivnarayan repeatedly told her, 'Your faith in him matters. In court we must find what we can demonstrate through documents.' He knew that to dismiss a mother's faith would be cruel, but to substitute it for judicial proof would also be an injustice.

Revati was in Delhi at the time. Her father described the case over the telephone. 'Have they recorded any allegation linking him to the attack on Parliament?' she asked. 'The papers I have received contain allegations relating to forgery,' her father replied. 'What people are saying is another matter. I will place that distinction before the court.' Revati thought that the proper response to the grief of the attack was to strengthen security, not to condemn a man on account of his identity before his innocence or guilt had been determined. 'I'll come home during the holidays,' she told her father. 'I want to study these papers.' 'Come,' said Shivnarayan.

'But remember: take seriously both the victims' families' fear and the nation's grief.'

When Faizan was produced before the magistrate, Shahida and Nazia sat in the veranda. Vimalakant Mishra asked the police about the time of arrest, the seized material, the nature of the allegations, and the need for further investigation. Ashok Rai said it was necessary to trace the original specimen of the forged passes and the person who had supplied it. The prosecution feared that, if Faizan were released immediately, other records at the shop might be altered. Shivnarayan pointed out that the shop was already under police inspection, and submitted that any actual risk of the accused absconding or destroying evidence must be established separately.

The magistrate did not make a final decision on bail that day. He fixed a date for production of the necessary records and police report, and recorded his reasons concerning custody. Shahida understood that her son was not coming home yet. Outside the courtroom she asked Shivnarayan, 'What if they don't let him go tomorrow either?' 'There are further legal remedies,' the advocate said. 'But I cannot promise what lies within the judge's authority.' Shahida's eyes filled with tears. She wanted the truth, not merely reassurance; even so, its slow passage through the law had exhausted her.

Amresh saw Nazia at court that day. Neither knew the other's name, but they sat on the same bench. From his father's case Amresh had learned how long decisions could take. Nazia asked, 'How many days did it take your father to come home?' 'He was granted bail after the first appearance,' Amresh answered. 'But the case is still going on.' Nazia asked another question. 'Then coming home and being proved innocent aren't the same thing?' Amresh nodded. At thirteen he found the weight of that distinction almost unbearable.

That evening Amresh told his family about the encounter. Nirmala listened and drew a long breath. 'People accuse first and ask questions afterwards,' Neelkanth said. Nirmala answered at once, 'You yourself have acknowledged certain entries in your accounts. We cannot put every fault upon someone else.' Neelkanth fell silent. For the first time his parents spoke so plainly about the truth of their case in front of Amresh. The boy saw that love did not alter the truth; sometimes love gave a person the courage to speak it.

The week after the attack seemed to divide Delhi into two kinds of time. The clocks went on as usual: buses took to the roads, examinations were held in schools, shops opened their doors. Yet armed guards had

multiplied at the entrances to public buildings, and people studied unfamiliar faces for longer than before. One evening, returning from the library, Revati stopped on a road leading towards Parliament. From where she stood she could see not the walls of the building but only part of its security cordon. She tried to imagine how an ordinary day had begun in the homes of those who had stood at the gates and repelled the attackers. One might have sent a child to school; another might have promised to return home for a meal. A great date in history had become a private emptiness for their families.

Revati invited a few fellow law students to a small discussion. Its subject was the state's responsibility for security and the protection owed to an accused person. Some argued for stringent security legislation; others feared that an emergency born of public terror would displace ordinary judicial judgment. Rais remained silent at first. At last he said, 'Living in Srinagar doesn't diminish my right to condemn the attack. But when the person questioning me has already placed me among criminals, my answer cannot reach him.' Another student, Sudhanshu from Bihar, said plainly, 'Those who died defending Parliament deserve justice. How will that justice be achieved by increasing suspicion against innocent people?' Everyone fell silent.

After the discussion, Rais and Revati sat down for tea outside the university. Rais showed her a letter from his mother. She had written that people beyond the mountains, too, had been stunned by the news. His family was worried about his safety in Delhi. The letter ended: 'Don't neglect your studies, and don't get into needless arguments with anyone.' Rais tried to laugh. 'My mother sent me away to study,' he said, 'not to take a vow of silence.' 'You have the right to speak,' Revati answered. 'But sometimes silence is also a way of protecting yourself.' They both understood that the precautions of private life and the demands of public justice did not always follow the same easy road.

At the library Revati studied the relevant chapters of the Indian Evidence Act. An older judgment discussed the difference between inference and proof. In her notebook she drew three columns: 'Seen', 'Reported', 'Inferred'. The habit she had developed over the first ledger in Darbhanga supported her now in Delhi. As she read the newspapers about the events of 13 December, she marked what was an event, what was a preliminary official statement, and what was a journalist's conjecture. The discipline did not lessen her grief. It gave the grief clearer contours.

One day her senior advocate, Vimlesh Pathak, said at the office, 'Most young lawyers think the strongest voice wins in court. But I learned from

my elders that knowing when to remain silent is a considerable skill.' Revati asked, 'Even when the government's counsel disagrees?' 'Then we must hear their argument in full,' Pathak replied. 'And if the victim is suffering deeply, we must listen to that too. If we rush to answer an unfinished sentence from the other side, our own argument will eventually remain unfinished.' That day a railway employee had come to the office with documents concerning his service. Pathak let him tell his whole story. Revati watched: patience in law began not only inside the courtroom but at the very first meeting in an advocate's office.

Meanwhile, in Darbhanga, the question of the forty-fifth page of the old ledger arose again. The prescribed samples from the seized documents were being supplied for expert comparison. The identity of the unfamiliar visitor to Neelkanth's shop was still uncertain. The description Nirmala had given of his appearance had not enabled the police to identify a particular man. Shivnarayan cautioned Neelkanth against attaching a name to an incomplete description. Neelkanth was irritated by the warning; he thought that whoever he suspected ought to be arrested at once. Dinanath told him, 'We shall investigate the suspicion. Once a man has been accused, clearing his name is harder than it was before.'

Kamleshwar Das came back to the court office concerning the old ledger. He was a small trader whose business had often depended upon credit from Neelkanth. He was prepared to give an account of actual transactions in an account bearing a particular name. Shivnarayan explained that the wish to speak for a friend was not the same thing as personal knowledge. 'I won't take Neelkanth's side,' Kamleshwar said. 'I shall say what I saw myself.' In a letter to Revati, her father praised those words, while adding that a witness's possible interests must be examined alongside his identity.

In Faizan's case the police received a written reply from a municipal office. The office stated that the recovered passes did not correspond to its official issue register. This strengthened the suspicion that the documents were forged, but it did not answer the question whether Faizan was criminally responsible for producing them. The supposed customer had given the name 'Pramod', without a full address. According to Binod, the customer had an old bandage on one hand. Ashok Rai would not accept that recollection alone as a basis for identification. He prepared the necessary application for permission to investigate further.

A rumour spread through the town that anti-national letters had been found at Faizan's home. When Ashok asked where the story had come

from, three people named three different sources. No such letters were mentioned in the available seizure record. The sub-inspector told a reporter from a local newspaper to keep verified records distinct from rumour in anything he published. At first the reporter wanted a sensational headline. The following day, a single word had acquired greater importance in his report: 'alleged'. But even that could not erase the stain of disgrace from the walls of Faizan's home.

Shahida was washing her son's clothes at home. In the pockets of every kurta she found little scraps of paper from his studies. Nazia picked up a library slip among them. 'Bhaiya went to take photographs of the Darbhanga Museum,' she said. 'He loves paper so much he even keeps pictures of old buildings.' Shahida answered, 'Without paper, one person's words cannot reach another. But paper can bind a person, too.' In that house the absence of the young photographer was visible in everything: a dried-up tin of colour, an unfinished invitation, the place where he used to set down his tea.

Revati reached Darbhanga in the last week of December. Her father was waiting at the station. The cold was so sharp that their breath drifted across their faces in white clouds. 'Are your studies going well in Delhi?' Shivnarayan asked. 'They are going on,' Revati said, 'but this time I read people's faces more than papers.' Her father looked at her for a moment. 'Then your education has not been wasted,' he replied. On the way home she looked out at the familiar shops. On the shutter of a closed establishment, large letters proclaimed: 'The Nation First.' The words appealed to her, but they raised a question as well: who would make room for Nazia's family within that nation?

At home Revati first touched her mother's feet, then went to Neelkanth's house on the pretext of looking at Amresh's schoolbooks. Nirmala sat her down and gave her warm milk. Amresh had grown taller; there was still a thin note of childhood in his voice, but his questions had changed. 'Didi, have they increased security around Parliament in Delhi?' he asked. Revati said they had. 'If someone here becomes afraid just by looking at Faizan bhaiya,' Amresh asked, 'is that security too?' Revati considered the question. 'Security is meant to prevent danger,' she said, 'not to pass judgment. Those who provide security can make mistakes as well. That is why there are rules.'

Neelkanth raised the matter of the forty-fifth page again. 'A man came to show me something and said that not all the writing was in the same hand. I don't know whether he was telling the truth, but that page has robbed me of sleep.' Revati asked, 'Have you yourself read the names

written on it?' 'Only partly. They didn't give me an opportunity to examine the entire ledger that night.' 'Then keep your belief about the names in the category of conjecture,' Revati said. Neelkanth smiled. 'You're beginning to sound like your father.' Nirmala said, 'Listening to the two of you, I feel the court has moved into our house.'

Copies of the papers from Neelkanth's case lay on the old desk in Shivnarayan's office. Revati examined them carefully. The original seizure list, the later copy, and the order recorded in court had been arranged in separate sequences. Her father explained that the relationship between documents was determined not only by their page numbers but also by how they had been obtained, their signatures, their dates, and the circumstances in which they had been written. 'When the figures on two papers differ, there is a discrepancy,' he said. 'But a discrepancy does not always mean forgery. Sometimes it is a simple error in counting; sometimes a grave irregularity. Before reaching a conclusion, examine the history of the document, not who might gain or lose from your conclusion.'

Revati also read the available papers in Faizan's case. The police application mentioned the recovered passes, printing equipment, and certain business accounts from the shop. The government office had stated that the passes were absent from its official list of documents issued. Faizan maintained that the customer had brought the specimen. Binod's two statements differed in their description of the customer. Revati wrote: 'Whether a document is forged, and whether the person who printed it knew it was forged, are distinct questions.' Her father underlined the sentence. 'That is what we must make clear in court,' he said.

Shivnarayan took Revati to Shahida's home. The voices in the lane had grown quieter since the first day, though a certain distance remained between neighbours. Shahida opened the door and welcomed them. Nazia was making tea on the stove. A photograph of Faizan hung in the room: he was photographing children at a school's annual celebration. 'Do you remember the day this was taken?' Revati asked. Shahida did. She remembered the school's name, the month, and even how much Faizan had been paid for the photographs. Revati listened carefully. Not every memory is evidence, but memory can furnish the basis for a question.

Nazia showed her a letter she had written to her brother. 'You make documents,' she had written, 'and because of that people have misunderstood you. Does every paper made by a printer also express what the printer believes?' Revati read it without speaking. 'Can we give this

letter to the court?' Shahida asked. Shivnarayan replied, 'The court may understand your daughter's feelings, but evidence about the actual dispute over the passes will require something else. Keep this letter for her brother.' Shahida folded it again with a heavy heart. She understood that the language of motherhood and the evidence of a court were different, yet both were necessary.

The next morning a clerk from the police office brought copies of earlier business stationery printed at Faizan's shop. He said the lettering on some old order forms resembled the lettering on the disputed passes. Ashok Rai told him plainly that many printing presses used the same typefaces; such a resemblance could not establish one person's guilt. The investigation now needed to establish who the customer was, who had been present when the order was placed, and what the accounts could corroborate. Ashok submitted a written progress report to the officer in charge of his station. His superior wanted swift results, but Ashok knew that a mistake born of haste could weaken the entire trial.

That evening Revati and her father visited an old bookseller near the court. The shop held copies of the Constitution of India, books on criminal procedure, and collections of judgments from different High Courts. Shivnarayan picked up a volume and turned its pages. 'Look,' he said. 'The law discusses the exercise of discretion in bail matters. Here the judge will need to consider the nature of the offence, the material available, the risk of flight, the possibility of influencing witnesses, and the requirements of investigation. But granting bail does not mean acquitting someone.' 'And refusing bail does not mean declaring someone guilty either,' Revati replied. Her father nodded with pleasure.

That night Amresh saw Binod, Faizan's friend, sitting on the market's raised platform. Binod's hands were trembling. 'I couldn't remember everything I first said about the customer,' he admitted in a low voice. 'When the police question you, you feel you must answer at once. But memory is incomplete.' 'Then didn't you tell them what you didn't know?' Amresh asked. 'At first I said yes. If I tell the truth now, people will say I've changed my story.' Amresh could find no words to reassure him. At last he said, 'Revati didi says what you saw is one thing and what you guessed is another.' Binod fell silent.

The next day Binod voluntarily gave the investigating officer a clarification. He was certain, he said, that the customer had a bandage on his hand, but he could not clearly remember which office the customer had named. Ashok Rai did not quietly replace the earlier statement with this one. He preserved both accounts in the record, to the extent the law

permitted. The precaution did not immediately strengthen the police case, but it opened the way for the real discrepancy to be examined in court.

When Revati heard what had happened, she asked, 'If a witness corrects a mistake, does that make him less trustworthy?' 'Sometimes it does,' Shivnarayan answered. 'Sometimes the correction is a sign of honesty. The court has to consider the timing, the reason, any possible advantage, and the other evidence. One changed word in a witness's statement does not settle a question; it raises one.' Revati wrote in her notebook: 'A change in testimony is not itself a verdict. It is the beginning of examination.'

A fresh hearing on Faizan's bail application was fixed for the final week of December. The veranda had been crowded since morning. Shahida kept wiping her hands on the end of her sari. Nazia had brought a schoolbook, whose pages she opened again and again without being able to read them. Nearby an old man was asking for the date of his next hearing in a land dispute. On the other side a young woman sat holding a copy of her application for maintenance. The nation's grief still cast a heavy shadow over the ordinary crowd at the courthouse, but people could not absent themselves from their own legal affairs. Life here never came to a halt for a single event.

Faizan was brought before Vimalakant Mishra. The prosecution submitted that forged entry passes could pose a threat to the security of a public institution. Shivnarayan acknowledged the general importance of that concern, but raised a precise question. 'What does the available material establish against this accused? He does not deny that the documents were found in his shop. But what corroborated evidence shows that he knew of a plan to use them fraudulently?' The judge asked the prosecutor whether there was evidence that the passes had actually been used. The answer was: 'The investigation is continuing. We do not yet have verified particulars of their use.'

The prosecution argued that, if the accused were released before the investigation was complete, he might influence the customer or his co-worker. Shivnarayan agreed that the concern deserved serious consideration. He proposed that the court could ensure the accused's attendance by imposing appropriate conditions, a matter for the judge's discretion. Documents establishing Faizan's permanent residence, his educational enrolment, and his business were produced. One point was made clear: the suspicion that the passes were forged could not be dismissed lightly, but the bail decision had to take account of this

particular accused's role and the possibility of interference with the investigation.

The judge asked Shivnarayan, 'Do you accept that the documents are false?' 'The government office says they do not appear in its official issue register,' Shivnarayan replied. 'I do not deny that fact. My submission concerns how far Faizan's personal participation in their production, intended purpose, and use has been established. I am not asking for a final determination of guilt at this stage.' The answer reminded Revati once again what her father's legal discipline meant. To deny the prosecution's entire case for convenience could itself become a form of untruth.

Giving an account of the investigation, Ashok Rai said that both of Binod's statements had been preserved and that the customer had not yet been identified. The judge asked whether arrangements had been made to safeguard the original equipment and other seized articles. Ashok answered from the prescribed records. The room was silent. Shahida was trying to see her son's face from behind the doorway. Revati knew that a single sentence of the decision in that small room would affect a family's meals, a student's examinations, and a shop's livelihood. Yet personal suffering alone could not furnish a court with its grounds for judgment.

Vimalakant Mishra examined the papers for a while before dictating his order. Then he briefly recorded his reasons: the seriousness of the alleged offence, the state of the evidence immediately available, the accused's ties to the locality, the needs of the investigation, and the possibility of influencing witnesses. He ordered Faizan's release on bail, subject to an appropriate bond and conditions of attendance, and directed that he must not contact witnesses or interfere with the available records. The order expressly stated that the bail decision was no final finding on the merits of the allegations. The prosecution's investigation would continue, and the accused would have to appear whenever required.

Shahida rose as soon as she heard the order, but Faizan could not return home immediately. The bond, verification of sureties, and formalities for giving effect to the order remained. Revati explained the procedure to Shahida. 'Does this mean they have accepted that he is innocent?' Shahida asked first. 'No, Mother,' Revati answered very gently. 'He has been granted bail for now. The allegations against him will be examined in due course.' Shahida closed her eyes for a few moments, then said, 'In all these days I've learned the difference between two things: being released and being proved innocent.'

In the veranda an elderly advocate was telling someone that severity was essential at a time like this. Another replied, 'Not severity for its own sake. Rigour founded on proper evidence.' Revati heard them but did not join in. She was holding a copy of the court's order, with Vimalakant's signature at its edge. This time the correct application of the law meant not the brilliance of a theory but a young man's conditional opportunity to go home. And it meant, as well, that an allegation remained unanswered.

When Faizan finally arrived home, a few people stood watching from doorways along the lane. Nazia ran to him and took his hand. Shahida served him food. At first he broke a piece of roti in silence. Then he said, 'I'll try to identify the man who brought those documents to the shop. But people will say again that I'm lying.' 'Say what you saw,' Shahida replied. 'Don't add to your account what you didn't see.' Her words recalled to Revati Nirmala's first testimony: what I saw, and what I was told.

That night children played in the lane. One child called out 'traitor' at Faizan; another told him to be quiet. Faizan shook with anger, but Nazia took his hand and led him indoors. The bail order had altered his position in police custody. It could not quickly dispel the accusations that had lodged in the public mind. Faizan was home now, but he had not returned to his former life.

As he closed his office that night, Shivnarayan said, 'Today one life has been given time. The court has not written a declaration of his innocence.' 'But the prosecution's investigation has not been stopped either,' Revati answered. 'So the decision keeps both sides answerable.' Her father looked at her. 'That is what one must understand beyond the arguments. It is difficult to call a victory final justice if it preserves one side's rights only by ending the other side's search for the truth.'

During the last week of December, droplets of mist gathered on the leaves of Darbhanga's trees. In the evenings a cold wind blew through the courthouse veranda, but people clutching bundles of documents went on waiting for their next hearing dates. One day Revati accompanied her father to the old record room. A court employee was wiping the wooden cupboards with a dry cloth. He said the old registers had to be checked at the year's end. Revati asked her father about examining the entry recording Neelkanth's ledger in the official register. Shivnarayan explained that the original seized exhibit could not be opened without the court's permission and the required procedure. Even those entitled to examine an article had a duty to preserve its condition.

A letter arrived from the expert's office in Neelkanth's case. It said that the disputed pages were being compared with the handwriting material available, but some samples were indistinct and clearer specimens were needed. After reading it Shivnarayan told Neelkanth that the delay was inconvenient, but an immediate pronouncement founded on speculation would be improper. Neelkanth's anxiety over the forty-fifth page intensified again. 'If that man comes back, I'll ask him his name,' he said. 'Ask his name,' Shivnarayan replied, 'but don't assume the investigator's role yourself. Write down what he says—not to evade the police inquiry, but to keep the truth on a lawful path.'

One day Dinanath heard from Mathuranand's home that the old man's eyesight was failing. Mathuranand was an important witness to the first seizure. Dinanath went to see him in person and ask after his health; he made no attempt to discuss his testimony. As the officer left the house, the old man's son asked, 'Sir, if my father cannot go to court, will the case be spoiled?' Dinanath answered, 'His condition and the legal remedies available will be considered when the time comes. Tell the court the truth about the witness's health.' Back at his office he recorded that information had been received about the elderly witness's physical difficulty. That small note would one day become important to the conduct of the trial.

To Revati, the papers from the two cases on Shivnarayan's desk often seemed to be speaking to one another. Neelkanth's ledger contained old debts, wagers, and pages in different hands. Faizan's shop had yielded printed passes, an unknown customer, and Binod's altered recollection. In the first case the question was who had written each figure; in the second, who knew the actual purpose of the printed papers. In the eyes of society both cases had already become stories of crime. But in court the difficult journey from statement to proof was taking a different course in each.

One evening Revati asked her father, 'Do you ever feel the courts move too slowly?' 'I do,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Delay destroys people's lives; there is no consolation for that. But when speed and fairness seem to compete, we must preserve both. I am not defending the court's idleness. We need a timely examination of the truth.' 'Meanwhile,' Revati said, 'the person sitting in the veranda lives by another clock.' Her father looked at her for a long moment. 'You are right. A case's hearing dates and a human being's years do not advance at the same pace.'

Shivnarayan was not yet an old man, but by the end of 2001 his temples had begun to turn grey. Father and daughter seldom had time

for conversations like this. Most days were taken up with court, books, and the family's affairs. That evening Revati asked for the first time why he had become an advocate. 'My father went to court for years over a small dispute about a field,' Shivnarayan said. 'He wanted to win, but he couldn't understand how the lines of the order had been written. I studied law because I wanted to be able to read those lines.' 'Then justice has been coming into our house for a very long time,' Revati said. Her father laughed.

A letter arrived from Rais, her friend in Delhi. He wrote that classes at the university had resumed their regular schedule, though some students had still gone home out of fear. He mentioned the unnecessary questions attached to his name, but also repeated what a university teacher had said: 'If we stop studying, fear will have won.' At the end he reminded Revati of their first experience as classmates: 'The day you sat silently by the radio, I understood that the language of grief is the same for everyone; it is we who invent the language of suspicion.' Revati slipped the letter into her notebook.

Amresh, meanwhile, was preparing for Republic Day at school. His teacher assigned him a short essay on the role of Parliament. Amresh wrote that Parliament made laws and the courts examined questions according to those laws. Then he stopped. He remembered his father's case. He added: 'Rules are made for people, but people are also needed to explain what the rules mean.' His teacher wrote 'Good' beside the sentence in red ink. At home Amresh read his essay aloud to his mother. Nirmala listened as she washed the utensils, thinking how her son's childhood language was now being formed by the long wait of the courtroom.

One evening Neelkanth visited Shahida's house, bringing cooking oil, rice, and two books. At first she was reluctant to accept them. 'Don't think of these as a loan,' Neelkanth said. 'Take them as a neighbour's affection.' Faizan was there. Neelkanth asked if he would reopen the shop. 'I will,' Faizan answered. 'But the people who once trusted me no longer come.' 'Trust cannot be restored by putting it in writing,' Neelkanth said. 'It returns through the work we do, day by day. I have had to learn that, too.' The two men were facing different suspicions of wrongdoing, but they shared the burden of public disgrace.

Faizan showed Neelkanth an old wedding-invitation design. Many people made changes to such a paper, he explained: the customer's name, the shopkeeper's design, the office's seal. 'Does every word on something printed belong to the person who printed it?' he asked. 'Not every figure

in my ledger is mine either,' Neelkanth replied. 'But I shall have to answer whether I could have ignored what was happening in my shop.' Faizan fell silent. There was more a sense of responsibility than self-defence in the admission.

An unusual comparison took shape in Revati's mind. On the day Parliament was attacked, the security personnel had faced circumstances demanding immediate decisions. A judge in court, by contrast, was given time and procedure. In the first setting a moment's hesitation could mean life or death; in the second, the determination of guilt required prolonged examination. It would be wrong to demand the same speed of both. Respect for the state's duty to protect and respect for the court's restraint could coexist without diminishing each other's legitimacy. She wrote the thought in her notebook that night, but not as a sermon from a textbook. First she remembered the trembling fingers of Faizan's mother, then the family of a guard who had died at Parliament's gates.

On the last day of the year a letter arrived from Rajasthan. A teacher at Marudhar College had been introduced to Shivnarayan through an old friend. The letter mentioned a new hearing in a land dispute. An educational trust wanted to enlarge its campus, while a farming family remained firm in its reliance on an old boundary-survey document. The teacher wrote that delays in constructing the hostel had forced many rural students to live in rented rooms. A farmer's daughter was asserting her family's rights over their field. Both sides regarded their difficulties as the truth of the matter. Shivnarayan showed the letter to Revati. 'There is another story of documents unfolding in that town,' he said.

Revati looked at the last page of the letter. It mentioned a copy of an old map whose north-south orientation was disputed. She remembered an error of measurement in a civil suit her father had once described. But she did not assume that the same error had occurred in this dispute. 'We should see the original map first,' she said. Shivnarayan nodded. 'And find out who has custody of the original.' From a small office in Darbhanga, a door was about to open onto a courtroom in Rajasthan.

That night some shops in the town were lit for the New Year. The calendar was turning for many people, but Neelkanth's case, the charges against Faizan, Shahida's worries, and the memory of a stunned capital would not end when midnight struck. On the last page of her notebook Revati wrote: '2001: the memory of those who gave their lives defending Parliament; the court's duty to examine the truth of allegations; and the waiting of a family. We must not sever these three from one another, but neither must we allow one to usurp the place of another in their name.'

In the morning her father opened an old trunk in his office. He placed the copy of Neelkanth's ledger in one compartment, Faizan's bail order in another, and the letter from Rajasthan in a third. Shivnarayan arranged the papers in order and shut the trunk. Outside in the lane, Amresh was setting out for school. 'Uncle, will all the cases be over next year?' he asked. Shivnarayan looked at him. 'I don't know,' he said. 'But next year we must not stop asking the questions properly.' Revati stood by the door and listened to his reply.

The mist was lifting. The old courthouse bell sounded. A distant train whistled. Across a country recovering from the blow struck at Parliament, innumerable households moved towards a new morning, carrying their own small waits for justice. A ledger in Darbhanga, forged papers in a printshop, and an old map in Jodhpur were not yet one story. But in Revati's life all three had entered as a single lesson: the ability to distinguish a name written on paper from the human being who bore it, and the responsibility not to cast that human being's suffering outside the paper altogether.

Chapter 4 — The Land of Marudhar

Jodhpur, January 2002; recollections of 2001

A January dawn in Jodhpur is unlike the winter morning of Darbhanga. There is less mist here, but the chill that stone walls store all night can still be felt against the hand well into the morning. When Ramdev Mandal rose from his cot and set his feet on the earthen courtyard, the cold within the soil felt familiar. Forty years earlier he had come west from a village in Mithila in search of work. He had first cut stone, then kept accounts for a small contractor, and eventually bought a little agricultural land beyond the city with his earnings. His roots in this land had been made not by birth but by labour. Two date palms, a jujube bush, and the old stone rim of a well stood upon it. There was little water in the well now. Ramdev's wife, Jeevani Devi, said the well had grown old, but to Ramdev it was the oldest living witness in his home.

People who had come from his village still called him 'Mandalji'; the Marwari families nearby called him 'Ramdevsa' in their own accent. Ramdev had never seen any contradiction between those two versions of his name. A registered sale deed from 1978 lay in his iron trunk. Where the purchaser should have signed was his thumb impression; beside it was the signature of the old clerk who had read the document aloud. Ramdev had taught himself to read papers while seeing his children through their education. 'Khasra one hundred and eighty-seven slash two' was more than a number to him. Bound within it were the northern edge of the field, the path on its southern side, the villagers' way to the well, and his family's future.

For two years he had watched the buildings of Marudhar College rise in the distance. First there had been a small teaching room, then a library, then the science department. Ramdev was not opposed to education. His son Vimal studied accountancy at the same institution, and his daughter Kusum hoped to gain admission there. The dispute began when the trust's contractor, driving boundary stakes for khasra number 187/3, continued towards Ramdev's cultivated plot. Returning from work one day, Ramdev found three red marks beside the well's southern wall. The labourers said that the hostel's foundations would be laid there. 'Who gave permission for this?' Ramdev asked. Their foreman

showed him a copy of a map. The line on the map was straight; in Ramdev's field it bent.

The incident had not come without warning. During the monsoon of the previous year, two members of the trust had visited Ramdev's house. They had proposed that he accept payment for the disputed strip and surrender it, keeping the rest of his land, so the college could build its hostel. Ramdev refused to sell. Half the field, he said, was not merely land for growing grain but the approach to his home. Jeevani Devi wanted the matter settled by agreement. She was also worried about her son's studies: if the trust took offence, Vimal might face difficulties at college. But the boundaries accompanying the area described in the trust's letter did not match their registered deed. At dusk Ramdev opened the trunk and asked Kusum to read the old sale deed aloud. Her voice trembled, but its words were clear: to the east, the public footpath; to the west, the wall of the old well.

A reply had arrived from Shivnarayan Jha's office towards the end of December 2001. One of Ramdev's old friends lived in Darbhanga, and the letter had reached the advocate through him. Shivnarayan had advised Ramdev to seek the assistance of a competent local lawyer in Jodhpur, preserve the original documents, and gather proof of the disputed boundary's present physical condition without delay. He emphasised at the end that preventing construction and finally determining title were separate questions. By the time the letter reached Ramdev, the new year had begun. 'I am not going to have the college closed,' he told his son. 'I only want them not to dig up my part of the field without asking me.' Vimal closed his notebook as he listened. Some of his teachers praised the trust. He understood that standing between his father and the institution where he studied would not be easy.

Jeevani Devi was baking millet rotis on the stove. 'How will we pay the household expenses while fighting over so many papers?' she asked. 'I can go back to cutting stone,' Ramdev replied. 'But if the earth beside the well is taken, no new document can bring it back.' Jeevani understood his stubbornness. She also knew inwardly that ownership of the field was bound up with the family's kinship ties, neighbours' trust, the children's schooling, and the opinion of creditors. Kusum asked her mother whether women could go to court. 'If my labour has helped save this family's land,' Jeevani said, 'why should my feet not cross the courthouse veranda?' The following day she accompanied Ramdev to Jodhpur.

Many worlds occupied the veranda of the city's civil court at once. One family had brought succession papers, a trader a claim for unpaid money,

an elderly man an application for maintenance against his son. Some spoke broad Marwari, some Hindi, some Gujarati; in the speech of a group of labourers Ramdev heard a sound familiar from Mithila. He sat clutching his bundle of papers against his chest. A local advocate, Suresh Pareek, came to meet him. Pareek first questioned him carefully about the field's boundaries, the registered sale deed, how long he had possessed the land, and the state of the construction. Then he said, 'In a civil suit the first question is the basis of your right. The second is whether an alteration to the disputed land might render the eventual judgment ineffective. But the court will need clear evidence.'

Ramdev unfolded his registered deed. Pareek advised him to obtain a certified copy and compared it with the revenue-record extracts available. The khasra number was clear in Ramdev's original sale deed, but the boundary description referred to 'the western wall of the old well', whereas the revenue copy showed the well as an eastern landmark. 'Why the difference?' Pareek asked. Ramdev said that the well's surround had been repaired from time to time, but the well itself had never moved. The advocate said memory mattered, but would need corroboration from the survey, the map, and descriptions of neighbouring plots. He did not promise Ramdev an impossible victory. 'We shall claim what we can prove,' he said. Ramdev was not dissatisfied with this answer. It reminded him of a rule from his days as a labourer: take upon yourself only as much stone as you can lift.

The trust was called the Marudhar Educational Trust. Its chairman, Sharad Kothari, had invested part of the wealth he had made in the textile trade in the college. He was respected in the city for his philanthropy. A library, scholarships for some poor students, and scientific equipment had come through his support. The trust's secretary, Prahlad Vaidya, was the leading advocate of expanding the hostel. Vaidya argued that young women coming to study from distant places urgently needed safe accommodation. There was truth in his argument. But the immediate need for construction could not confer an automatic right over the boundary of someone else's land. Sharad Kothari understood this; Prahlad was impatient; and the contractor had to account for his labourers' wages each day. For different reasons, all three wanted the same construction project to proceed.

One day, after class, Ishwardatt Rathore, who taught history at the college, called Vimal, Ramdev's son, aside. 'The students are discussing your family's dispute,' he said. Vimal was embarrassed. 'I am not asking my teacher for help with this matter.' 'Helping you does not mean taking a stand against the trust,' Rathore answered. 'It also means ensuring that

a student is not prevented from studying. Don't abandon your course.' He showed Vimal an old photograph of the campus, in which a field lay where the present library stood. 'When education takes land,' he said, 'the land's previous life ought to have a place in its history.' Vimal repeated his words at home. For the first time, Ramdev heard that someone within the college, too, understood his question.

There was no great movement against building the hostel. Some students wanted it finished quickly. Naseema Bano, a first-year student from Bikaner, lived in a rented room two miles from college. If she missed the last evening bus, she had to walk home. Her mother asked every week when the hostel would be ready. Hearing about the dispute over Ramdev's field, Naseema said, 'I need somewhere to live, but not by taking away somebody's field.' Her friends laughed. 'Then how will it be built?' Naseema had no answer. In her silence lay the difficult question between the legitimate aspiration to education and the right of ownership.

Pareek prepared the plaint in the civil suit. Ramdev Mandal and his wife Jeevani set out the grounds of their claim to title and possession of the disputed strip and their request to prevent unauthorised construction. They did not claim any right over the college's entire landholding. Only a particular piece of land along the boundary between khasra 187/2 and neighbouring khasra 187/3 was disputed. They also filed a separate application for an interim injunction, attaching photographs, a copy of the sale deed, revenue extracts, and an affidavit from a neighbouring landholder. Pareek told Ramdev clearly, 'If subsequent facts change during the proceedings, do not conceal them from the court. Describe truthfully what work was done on the land before the court made any order.' Ramdev agreed. He had to remember the limits of his claim.

At the first hearing Civil Judge Sudhanshu Mathur examined the application. Arrangements were made to serve notice on Sharad Kothari's trust. Considering the preliminary facts, the court indicated that it would be appropriate to hear the opposite party before issuing any far-reaching order without notice, but it would consider details of the immediate risk of fresh construction on the disputed strip at the next hearing. As he came into the veranda, Ramdev asked Pareek, 'Has the field been saved today?' 'Today the court has taken up your question,' Pareek answered. 'It has not yet decided who owns the field.' Jeevani tried to understand. 'We must be patient. But while the hearing is pending, what can be done to stop the contractor from moving his stakes farther?' Pareek said it would be necessary to read the exact limits of the next order carefully.

That night the contractor, Nandlal Chaudhary, was measuring the construction site with his masons. He had been engaged to begin the foundations of the girls' hostel the following week. He told the workers to continue on the portion far from the disputed line. But a young mason asked, 'Where exactly is the line?' Nandlal held the trust's map. On it, the well appeared in a different place from the one where the stones of its rim glimmered in the darkness. He hesitated, then said, 'We'll check the measurements again in the morning.' Because of that small precaution, the well's stone surround remained untouched that night.

The following day Ratnaram Bhati, who cultivated the land adjoining Ramdev's field, came up behind his camel and stopped. He had seen the western boundary for many years. Ramdev asked whether he would testify in court. 'I'll say what I saw,' Ratnaram answered, 'and not what I didn't.' Ramdev wanted him to state unreservedly that the disputed strip had always belonged to the Mandal family. But Ratnaram added something. 'Some boundary stakes were moved twenty years ago. I can't remember which year.' Ramdev was troubled; he had not thought of discussing such an uncertain memory. Jeevani said, 'If our own people have difficult truths to tell, shouldn't we hear them first? What good will half a story do us in court?' Ramdev agreed.

That evening Vimal walked the boundary of the field with his father. He wrote down approximate distances on a piece of paper. He used a rope to measure from stake to stake, knowing that this was no official survey. 'My mathematics teacher says we must allow for errors of measurement,' Vimal said. Ramdev laughed. 'And when we measure the earth, can we measure the landowner's pain?' 'Pain has no measure,' Vimal replied. 'But if a line on the map is wrong, numbers can show it.' His father listened attentively. For a moment the labour of an ageing body and the learning of a new generation stood side by side. Until those days, Ramdev had regarded his son's education mainly as an honour to the family. Now he understood that study could also give one the ability to ask the right questions in a dispute.

Sharad Kothari convened a meeting of the trust's executive committee at his home. From a thick file Prahlad Vaidya produced the building plans, donors' letters of commitment, and a list of students' accommodation needs. 'If the work stops, enrolment of female students will fall next year,' he said. Kothari asked, 'How much of the farmer's land is disputed?' 'Only a small strip,' Vaidya replied. 'We can pay him for it.' 'Money does not transform every right,' Kothari said. 'Have you examined the boundary described in the sale deed?' 'The trust's surveyor has,' Vaidya said irritably. Kothari then directed that all original records

be prepared for production in court. The secretary fell silent. He feared that the instruction might reveal a survey error made two years earlier. Whether that mistake had arisen from self-interest or carelessness, Vaidya himself could not say with certainty.

Rajnikant Bhandari, a local advocate, represented the trust. Bhandari had seen many land disputes in court. 'It would be wrong to seek a final decision on ownership at the interim-relief stage,' he told Kothari. 'Your map and the farmer's map differ. We must clarify when each document was prepared, who certified it, and how the survey was conducted.' Kothari asked, 'Can we carry on building the hostel?' 'The court may give separate directions concerning construction on undisputed land,' Bhandari replied. 'Insisting on working on the disputed strip may harm your own case.' Kothari agreed to follow his advice. But administration does not move at the same pace as documents. By the next dawn, labourers, sand, and stone had already been brought onto the campus.

Kusum met Naseema Bano on the steps outside the college library. They had not known each other before. Kusum had come to give her brother a book; Naseema was waiting to ask about the admission application. Seeing Kusum, a group of girls whispered, 'She's the daughter of that family in the land dispute.' Naseema invited her inside. 'Is your name Kusum?' she asked. 'Yes.' 'I heard they're building a hostel on your field.' 'Not on our field exactly. The dispute is about the boundary of the field the trust claims as its own.' Naseema smiled. 'Then we'll have to understand that boundary.' Together they drew a small sketch on a sheet of paper, but halfway through Kusum rubbed out the drawing. 'You can erase a line on paper,' she said, 'not the wall of a house.' 'Sometimes,' Naseema answered, 'a line on paper is harder than a wall.'

Kusum went with her mother to the market to buy paper for her studies. Jeevani Devi wanted her daughter to complete a degree, but household expenses and the cost of the case were mounting. While filling out an application for a college scholarship, Kusum discovered that a family with land was not necessarily rich. They had a field, but the harvest brought little income, water was scarce, and the dispute made cultivation impossible on part of the land. The scholarship office asked for a certificate of annual income. Ramdev laughed. 'Our income depends on the very field I cannot save.' Kusum did not laugh at the irony. She wondered how long her higher education would have to wait if the case continued for years. Taking her mother's hand, she said, 'I won't stop studying. But tell Father he must let me read all the papers too.'

Before the next hearing, Ramdev, Jeevani, Vimal, and Ratnaram sat together in Pareek's office. The advocate questioned each of them separately. Ramdev gave the year of the purchase. Jeevani remembered when the well had been repaired. Vimal described the measurements he had made with a rope. Ratnaram acknowledged his uncertain recollection of the boundary stakes being moved. Pareek recorded that the family's private measurements did not constitute official proof. 'Your story is stronger if it makes room for its contradictions too,' he told Ramdev. The old man looked tired. 'Why, at my age, must I see the truth in so many pieces?' he asked. 'Because the court must first establish which part lies within whose knowledge,' Pareek answered.

The trust's written reply arrived in court. Bhandari submitted that the disputed boundary corresponded to the trust's 1998 purchase deed and a subsequently authenticated map. Earlier title records of the family that had sold the land to the trust were also produced. Pareek asked to examine the older chain of title. Judge Mathur questioned both sides about actual possession, which portions of construction had been completed, and where fresh foundations were proposed. The trust argued that stopping construction would harm the public interest. Ramdev's side said that digging up the disputed strip could destroy the old well and footpath. The court directed both parties to submit clearly marked plans of the disputed area, with supporting affidavits, at the next hearing.

After the hearing, Prahlad Vaidya approached Ramdev in the veranda. 'Settle the matter between us,' he said. 'We will pay you a fair price.' 'Why do you want to pay me for land you say is yours?' Ramdev asked. Vaidya paused. 'To settle the dispute.' 'First understand the dispute,' Ramdev said. 'If it turns out the land isn't mine, I won't take a single paisa. If it is mine, the right to sell it will be mine as well. The name of a hostel cannot oblige me to regard the surrender of my rights as a donation.' Vaidya walked away angrily. Pareek had watched the exchange from a distance. He told Ramdev that an out-of-court settlement was always possible, but its terms had to be clear and founded upon free consent.

That day a local newspaper carried a small headline: 'Hostel Construction Entangled in Land Dispute.' Inside, the trust secretary's statement received extensive space; Ramdev's position was given two lines. A local reporter, Gajendra Ojha, visited the field the next day. 'Are you stopping development?' he asked Ramdev. Ramdev took him to the well and showed him its old stone wall. 'If development proceeds by cutting off the path to someone's home, measure the land before calling it development,' he said. The journalist also visited the trust's building site and heard the students describe their difficulties finding

accommodation. In the next issue, his headline changed: 'The Need for a Hostel and a Disputed Land Boundary.' He declared neither side criminal. Kusum read the report and said, 'At least people will understand now that this is a dispute about land, not opposition to education.'

When Sharad Kothari read the article, he felt unexpected relief. He believed in work for the public good, but public praise was not sufficient to make his decisions right. He asked Prahlad why the field's well did not appear on the old construction map. Prahlad replied that the well had been regarded as disused when the survey was made. 'Disused and nonexistent are not the same thing,' Kothari said. 'If the well is an old boundary marker, it matters on the map.' Vaidya could find nothing to say. For the first time a member of the trust's executive committee called for a certified report on the boundary as it existed on the ground. Some members considered this an unnecessary delay; Kothari supported the demand.

One Sunday in February, Ramdev's family decided to offer a small prayer in the field. The ritual belonged to their faith; it was not legal proof in the dispute. Jeevani sprinkled water on the well's rim, Kusum placed a lamp beneath the jujube tree, and Vimal tied up an old rope. Ramdev was touching the well's wall when he heard the distant college bell. He laughed. 'My son reads books over there, and here I go to court to protect my field.' 'This isn't a quarrel between books and fields,' Jeevani replied. 'It's a quarrel over a wrong line.' Kusum wrote down her mother's words. Later she thought of publishing them in a student magazine, but her father stopped her. 'The case is in court. We'll say what we have to say there.' 'Is it a crime even to write about our home?' Kusum asked. Her father fell silent.

A seminar was under way in the college's science department. Its subject was the conservation of water in desert regions. The speaker explained that the history of a dry well could reveal older knowledge of groundwater levels, habitation, and cultivation. Kusum sat listening with Naseema. The speaker treated the well not merely as a reservoir but as a landscape's memory. Kusum asked, 'If an old well is left off a new map, does the history of the land change?' 'Leaving it off the map does not mean it has disappeared from history,' the speaker replied. 'It means the record is incomplete.' The students applauded. At home Kusum told her mother, 'I want to study geography.' Jeevani laughed. 'Understand the geography of your own field first, then go and measure the world.'

Vimal heard from his classmate Mahesh that some employees of the trust were calling Ramdev's family greedy. 'If your father gives the land

for the hostel,' Mahesh said, 'they'll put his name on a plaque.' 'A donation is something you freely give from what is yours,' Vimal replied. 'Surrendering something whose ownership is disputed isn't a donation.' Mahesh smiled. 'Are you going to become a lawyer?' 'No, I'm studying accountancy. But even in accounts there's a rule that money must be entered under the name of the person to whom it belongs.' Behind this ordinary exchange lay Vimal's private fear. Would his teachers' decisions affect his examinations? Rathore assured him that the assessment of his studies would be kept separate from the land dispute. The assurance was not in writing, but it meant a great deal to the student.

Representatives of both sides came on different days to the court office to obtain certified copies of the revenue records. An old map was kept in the copying room. The edges of its paper had yellowed and some markings were faint. A government clerk explained which documents were available, but the parties could not simply take the original map away with them. Pareek applied for permission to inspect it and for a certified copy. Bhandari requested a copy as well. The two sides wanted the same document, each reading it into its own story. To the court clerk it was an old revenue paper; to Ramdev, living land; to the trust, the boundary of a building project. The paper kept its silence.

At the beginning of March, an unusual incident occurred at the construction site. Nandlal's labourers were piling stones on the undisputed portion. As stones were unloaded from a bullock cart, a jolt from one wheel struck an old boundary marker. The stone fell. Ramdev reached the field and saw that one of the red-marked stones was no longer in place. Furious, he moved to seize Nandlal by the collar, but Vimal stepped between them. Nandlal said it had not been deliberate; his workers knew nothing of the dispute between the two sides. 'If you don't watch the boundary markers,' Ramdev demanded, 'how will the court measure the land?' 'We've been hired to build a hostel,' Nandlal said. 'It isn't our job to account for things in court.' 'But the present condition of land under dispute must not be destroyed,' Vimal replied. Rather than continue the quarrel, they informed Pareek.

Pareek came to the site at once. He had photographs taken of the fallen stone, would not allow anyone to fill in or alter the spot, and advised that the actual circumstances be recorded in an affidavit. But the question he asked displeased Ramdev: 'Which way had the marker been leaning before it fell, and who witnessed it?' 'I didn't see it fall myself,' Ramdev admitted. 'Then we cannot say it was removed deliberately,' Pareek replied. Ramdev lowered his head. For a moment his longing to win in court had tempted him to make an incomplete fact serve as proof;

the advocate had stopped him. Jeevani was glad of this. 'If the field is truly ours,' she said, 'what need have we of a lie?'

The trust members regarded the incident as an insult to them. Prahlad Vaidya believed Ramdev was enlarging the dispute to obstruct construction. Sharad Kothari said something different. 'The stone may have fallen through a labourer's carelessness, but leaving the boundary unprotected was our mistake.' He was advised that no permanent structure should be erected on the disputed strip until the court had heard the matter. Meanwhile Naseema Bano began gathering signatures for a petition asking for the hostel to be completed. At the top of the petition she added an extra sentence: 'Construction should be completed promptly after the dispute over ownership has been lawfully resolved.' Some students objected to this condition. 'Our need for accommodation is urgent,' Naseema said. 'That does not extinguish someone else's rights.' Her petition made the trust's secretary uncomfortable.

On the day of the interim hearing, people from both sides were present in the courthouse veranda. Ramdev carried his household file with its yellow cover; Sharad Kothari held the trust's blue file stamped with its seal. Pareek kept his submission brief. He described the boundaries in the registered sale deed, the present condition of the old well, the prospect of fresh foundations on the disputed strip, and the irreversible nature of the damage that might follow. He made it clear that the plaintiffs did not seek to halt construction throughout the college. Bhandari argued that the trust had documents of ownership, that the hostel served the public interest, and that delay might disrupt the academic session. He emphasised uncertainties in some of the maps produced by the plaintiffs. Judge Mathur heard both sides and noted the date of each document.

Mathur asked, 'Is the well described in the plaintiffs' sale deed still in use?' Pareek said, 'There is little water, but the old structure still exists.' Bhandari replied, 'The trust's map refers to another old water reservoir. What the plaintiffs call a well may be different from that location.' 'Has there been a physical inspection of both water structures?' the judge asked. Neither side gave a satisfactory answer. Mathur next asked, 'How much of the land is undisputed?' Bhandari produced a sketch; Pareek accepted parts of it. 'Then at least this much is clear,' the judge said. 'The court is not being asked to decide ownership of the entire educational campus, but a strip along its boundary.' Those waiting outside the courtroom felt a little of their fear subside at that single sentence.

Bhandari submitted a list setting out the students' accommodation needs. The judge noticed Naseema's signature. He asked whether the girls' hostel could be built without using the disputed strip. The trust's technical representative said the foundations of the western portion could be redesigned, but the cost would rise. 'An increase in cost,' Pareek said, 'is a different kind of loss from the destruction of land rights.' The judge did not immediately favour either side. He asked how difficult it would be to identify the land's earlier condition if it were altered before the court reached its final decision. Both representatives fell silent. The case for building the hostel rested on an immediate need, but the destruction of the stone well and its boundary could have lasting consequences.

Ramdev said little during the hearing. The judge asked him one question: 'Do you want all work at the college to stop?' Ramdev joined his palms. 'No, Your Honour. My son studies here. My daughter hopes to study here. I only ask that no one's spade change the path to my well or the boundary of my field until the survey is clear.' The judge had his answer recorded. Bhandari, too, felt relieved: he understood that the plaintiff was not seeking a comprehensive prohibition. Jeevani sat at the back. Her eyes filled at the simplicity with which her husband had expressed the heart of their struggle. But she wiped the tears away. Their suffering had found a place in that courtroom; the decision still lay ahead.

When the hearing ended, the court reserved time to prepare a reasoned interim order. In the veranda people were already trading predictions: the trust would win; the farmer would win; all construction would stop; half the field would be sold. Pareek warned the family not to draw conclusions before reading the order. 'What if I lose?' Ramdev asked. 'An interim order is not the final judgment on title,' the advocate said. 'Further legal remedies remain available.' Sharad Kothari put the same question to his lawyer. 'If an interim restriction is imposed,' Bhandari replied, 'it would be wrong to draw a conclusion about ownership from that alone.' The two advocates were explaining the same procedure to their clients from the perspectives of two different experiences.

Leaving court, Kusum and Naseema met beside the steps. 'Is your mother all right?' Naseema asked. 'She's worried,' Kusum said. 'When will your housing problem be solved?' 'It's hard to say. But I couldn't be happy living in that building if it cut off the path to your home.' For the first time Kusum took Naseema's hand. 'Our fathers aren't fighting one another,' she said. 'They're fighting over documents and lines.'

'Documents are written by human hands,' Naseema answered softly. 'So human beings must answer for them.' Kusum kept the words with her. She felt that she wanted to study not only geography but law.

Two days later a copy of the interim order became available. The court had considered the records presented on a prima facie basis, the property's existing condition, the possibility of irreparable harm, and the balance of convenience between the two sides. The order expressly stated that ownership had not been finally determined. Until a further lawful order, new permanent construction or alteration of the existing boundary markers was prohibited on the disputed strip, particularly around the old well and its immediate surroundings. On land that was undisputed, the trust could continue construction, subject to its title and the necessary permissions. Both sides were given an opportunity to produce the records necessary for inspection of the site and demarcation of the boundary. The court also directed that compliance with the order be documented and made clear that neither party was barred from pursuing remedies available under the law.

Ramdev had the order read aloud. 'Have I won?' he asked Pareek once again. 'You have received temporary protection to preserve the disputed portion as it is,' Pareek said. 'The trial of ownership remains.' Sharad Kothari read the order in his office and issued written instructions that no workers were to go near the well. 'Construction will become more expensive,' Prahlad Vaidya protested. 'Even a cheap building is costly when its foundations are improper,' Kothari replied. He directed that the plan for student accommodation be redesigned. Nandlal, the contractor, had the stones moved away from the well. For the first time, the sound of spades ceased on the disputed strip. Relief came to the two households in different forms, but neither celebrated complete victory.

That evening Jeevani Devi went out to the field. Resting her hand on the well's rim, she said, 'At least your stones won't be broken tonight.' Ramdev smiled. 'Are you talking to the well?' 'When everyone at home begins speaking the language of lawyers and documents,' Jeevani replied, 'it is easier to talk to the well.' Kusum laughed. Vimal was copying words from Pareek's notes in order to understand the court's order: prima facie, temporary, disputed, irreparable. He explained to his father that the boundary would need to be measured again on the ground to establish the precise reach of the order. 'Then more papers the day after tomorrow,' Ramdev said. 'Yes,' Vimal answered. 'But now the papers will be read before the spades are lifted.'

A few days later a copy of a revenue document from 1982 became available. The paper was worn. Pareek wanted its particulars checked against the original before filing it in court. When Ramdev unfolded the copy at home, he saw that the well was marked in a position different from the one described in his sale deed. 'That seems to support the trust's map,' Vimal said. Ramdev's face fell. Kusum studied the drawing closely. The direction of the north mark at the top seemed strange to her. The written boundary description placed the 'old footpath' to the south, but the map drew the footpath to the north. Kusum took her geography book and sketched a compass diagram. The two papers appeared to be viewing the same place from different directions.

Ramdev showed the copy to Pareek. At first the advocate said the old map might be unfavourable. 'Turn the map around,' Kusum said softly. Pareek rotated the paper. The written numbers became inverted, but for a moment the relative positions of the well and the footpath seemed to accord with the sale deed. The advocate did not become excited. 'Rotating the paper does not prove its orientation,' he said. 'We need to examine the north mark on the original map, authenticate this copy, and check the survey's scale.' 'I only noticed that the north arrow on the copy isn't in the corner,' Kusum said. 'It's beside an old seal in the middle.' Pareek looked carefully. There were indeed some ink stains at that spot that resembled a different arrow.

The next morning Pareek wrote to Bhandari that the available copy showed inconsistencies between the direction markings and the boundary description, making inspection of the original revenue map necessary. Bhandari replied that the trust would not oppose a joint inspection of the site, provided the court's lawful procedure was followed. As he signed the reply, Sharad Kothari said, 'If our map contains an error, it ought to be corrected; if the farmer's document does, that too should be clarified.' Prahlad Vaidya found such openness risky. But the trust's chairman was beginning to understand the dispute's long-term consequences. The reputation of an educational institution, he thought, was built not only with buildings but with fair conduct.

The episode brought an unexpected change to Kusum's studies. She applied for admission to the geography department at Marudhar College, naming as her proposed area of study 'Old Water Sources and Directional Markings in Land Records'. Rathore read her application. 'You must be careful about making a dispute concerning your own family into a subject of study,' he said. 'In research, the conclusion must not be settled in advance.' 'I don't know the conclusion,' Kusum answered. 'But I want to ask about what the map fails to show.' Rathore explained the

admission requirements and recommended suitable books. He did not promise to appear in court as a witness for Ramdev; he maintained the limits of his role as a teacher.

The sky above the field was clear that night. In the cool air of Rajasthan, a faint echo rose from inside the well. Ramdev opened his old trunk again. He laid the 1978 sale deed on one side, the copy of the 1982 map on another, and the trust's 1998 papers on a third. He sat comparing them. It had never occurred to him, even in dreams, that twenty-seven years in the future these documents would be discussed as far away as the Supreme Court. His only immediate concern was how water would reach his field, and how his children would leave by the back door of the house, if the footpath were filled in.

Jeevani brought him water. 'Go to sleep now,' she said. 'The order has been made, and the well is safe for the time being.' Ramdev asked, 'Which map looks right to you?' Jeevani studied both. 'I cannot measure these papers,' she said. 'But in summer the shade fell from the direction you always called north. I learned my directions from everyday life.' Kusum was startled by her mother's words. Here was a living memory distinct from the directions on the maps, though it still awaited scientific examination. She opened her notebook beside the lamp and wrote: 'Evening shadow on the eastern wall of the well; Mother's account; verification needed.' It was not a conclusion that she entered on the page, but a question.

In the days that followed, word arrived that a date had been fixed to inspect the original map at the revenue office. They would be able to examine not merely the two copies but the original north mark and the portions cut away at the edges. Pareek incorporated this news into his preparations for the next court proceedings. A clerk quietly mentioned that the date of the survey in the old revenue register for 1982 was different from the date written on the map's copy. Pareek did not put this into the record as a fact without documentary confirmation. He nevertheless considered the discrepancy worth investigating. 'Whose mistake is this?' Ramdev asked. 'It would be too early even to call it a mistake,' the advocate replied. 'First we must understand why the dates differ.'

Even before the question of the well's drainage channel arose, contact between the two parties was beginning to change. Pareek and Bhandari had each prepared a list of all available documents. Although he represented the trust, Bhandari said plainly that whatever the original government records revealed could not be accepted only on condition

that it favoured his client. Pareek, too, warned Ramdev not to use the interim order as publicity for a victory. When a newspaper reporter came to the field, Ramdev followed that advice. 'The court has only stopped the spades,' he said. 'It has not determined my title.' There was restraint rather than disappointment in his voice. In Darbhanga the ledger of 2000 was still under discussion; here in Jodhpur, an old map was waiting for someone to decipher its own language.

The principal of Marudhar College called a joint meeting of the students. Work was continuing on an undisputed portion of the hostel, but an additional room proposed for the library remained on hold. The principal said the purpose of the college was not merely to issue certificates, but also to teach respect for rules in public life. One student asked, 'If the plaintiff is poor, why doesn't the trust just give him more money and end the dispute?' 'Whether to accept an offer of money is a matter of rights,' the principal replied. 'Before fixing a price for something claimed by another as his property, we must understand the position of that right.' Not everyone agreed. Some students insisted that education mattered more and the dispute was secondary. But Naseema wrote in her notebook that setting education against justice was itself an insult to education.

One day Kusum took two handfuls of earth from near the well and placed them in separate glass jars. One held soil from beside the old wall; the other, soil from the new building site. 'Will this prove who owns the land?' Vimal asked. Kusum laughed. 'No, not at all. I only want to understand the soil's composition. Court evidence needs an expert; the science of soil needs an experiment. In both places the question has to be clear first.' Jeevani listened to her children. What mattered most to her was that the long lawsuit had not deprived them of their education; instead, it was giving their studies new questions. Yet she knew in her heart that only the future could tell whether that balance would survive the growing financial strain.

Late that night, turning a page, Kusum noticed a small mark that also appeared in Ramdev's old sale deed: not the jujube tree beside the well, but an old rainwater channel to its west. The channel's line was only half printed on the 1982 copy; on the trust's new map it was absent altogether. 'Father,' Kusum said, 'if the channel was there, we'll have to examine the well's orientation again.' Ramdev rose from his cot and came to her. His eyes were tired, but he looked at the line in his daughter's notebook and said, 'Don't go to court and declare that line to be the truth. Say that it is a question which needs investigation.' Kusum nodded. The desert night was deep outside. The spades had stopped on the disputed strip, but from

within the old map a fresh question had awakened: who had determined where north lay on the paper, and where had the actual land stood when that decision was made?

Chapter 5 — The House That Burned

Ahmedabad, February–December 2002; parallel events in Marudhar and Delhi

In Ahmedabad that Phagun, the sunlight had the colour of old brass, as though someone had grown weary of polishing it. Salim Ansari was sweeping scraps of paper from the front of his bookbinding shop. It was not a large establishment: two wooden tables, an iron paper-cutter, boxes of thread and paste, and a clock hanging on the wall. The school examination season was approaching, and orders for binding answer books and registers had increased. Salim took a particular pleasure in bringing the pages of a book together. 'When sheets of paper lie apart,' he would say, 'what they have to tell remains scattered. Once they are sewn, they find their order.' His daughter Saira laughed whenever she heard him say this. She dreamed of studying history at university, but the family income could scarcely meet the cost of her examinations.

Salim's home stood four lanes behind the shop. In the mornings Jamila Begum swept the courtyard, Hakim Yusuf sat on a cot reading the newspaper through his old spectacles, and the younger son, Faiz, drew pictures of rivers in his sister's exercise book. Hindu, Muslim and Jain families lived on either side of their house. Next door, Kantaben Patel had a small sewing business. Ramesh Prajapati sold earthenware. It would be untrue to say that there were no quarrels in the lane. People disputed the drainage of water, where a handcart might stand, and credit owed to shopkeepers. But beneath these daily disagreements lay an ordinary trust: that at night each household would close its gate and in the morning open it again.

On the evening of 27 February, Saira had written to her maternal cousin Naseema Bano, who was studying in Bikaner. Naseema was awaiting a place in the hostel at Marudhar College, and Saira wanted information from her about admission to the second year. In the letter she mentioned her history teacher's advice: 'In your study of history, read fewer accounts of kings and queens and more letters written by ordinary people.' She wrote, too, of the peculiar feeling she had when she saw people's names in old government registers brought to her father's shop for binding. How different, she wondered, might the lives of those named on the pages have been from the records themselves? At the end she asked Naseema to send her the Marudhar scholarship application

form. Before she could post the letter, the family heard on the radio that evening of the fire aboard a train at Godhra and the deaths it had caused. Jamila stood motionless as she served the evening meal.

Hakim Yusuf did not turn off the radio. He had long since given up treating patients with herbal remedies, but had never relinquished his habit of listening to the news. 'How could so many people have died?' Salim asked. Yusuf did not answer. He said only that whoever was held responsible for the fire should be investigated according to law and brought before a court; burning down the homes of the innocent would not bring the dead back to life. Saira folded her letter and put it in a chest. She believed that an event in a distant part of the country would remain distant, like the mark denoting a mountain in a geography textbook. By the following morning that belief had begun to break apart.

During the morning of 28 February, the shops in the market began closing in haste. Salim asked the grocer opposite what had happened. 'A crowd is out. Go home,' came the reply. Slogans could be heard from some distance away; in that noise it was difficult to distinguish the voices of familiar neighbours. Salim lowered the iron shutter of his shop, leaving inside a number of school registers, bindings for scholarship certificates and his own account book. He thought of going back for the ledger. Then he saw people running at the bend in the lane. Jamila stood in the doorway. Salim abandoned the ledger and turned towards home. For months afterwards he would try to understand the meaning of that small decision: what could have been saved, and what had to be saved first.

By midday the air in the lane had changed. There was the smell of smoke, the sound of blows against iron gates, commands for someone to hide indoors, and voices calling out particular names. Local people had played specific parts in the violence, but Salim was in no position, at that moment, to see every face. Kantaben opened her back door and called Jamila and the children inside. 'Quickly,' was all she said. Hakim Yusuf stumbled as he came down the steps. Kantaben's son Harshad caught his hand and led him in. Salim looked towards his own doorway for the last time. Smoke cast its shadow across the neem tree standing in the courtyard.

Seven people crowded into the room downstairs at Kantaben's house. Faiz trembled beneath a sheet drawn over his head. Saira held his hand, though her own hand was shaking. Kantaben gave the family water and listened to the sounds outside through the closed gate. Harshad tried to

use a friend's telephone to alert the police; whether the call connected was unclear. Then Salim heard glass shattering in the direction of his shop. He tried to go towards it, but Kantaben stopped him. 'A shop can be built again. A person cannot.' Salim fell silent. She was right, yet the shop held, along with his work, the memory of everything he had earned. It was almost unbearable to imagine that being destroyed.

Sometime after noon the crowd moved towards another lane. Salim saw smoke above the roof of his house. Kantaben's neighbour Premji Makwana repaired water taps for the municipality. He had left his vehicle at the roadside and was trying to make his way home. On the way he thought he saw a local man he knew, accompanied by several others, near Salim's shop. Whether Premji had seen the man's face clearly or had made a frightened assumption would become a central question in his life. For now he saw only smoke and scraps of book paper strewn beside a gate that had been forced shut. Instead of going towards Salim's house, he signalled to Kantaben that there was a safer way out at the back.

At dusk the family was taken to safety in a relief vehicle. The names of everyone aboard were being recorded, but the person writing them down was exhausted too. Hakim Yusuf's name was entered as 'Yusuf Hakim', although his identity card read 'Muhammad Yusuf'. Saira spelled out her name, but amid the noise of the vehicle the recorder wrote 'Saiba' instead of 'Saira'. Jamila insisted that the names be corrected. 'First let us get you somewhere safe,' the relief worker said. 'We can correct them afterwards.' As an immediate priority, this was reasonable; nevertheless, the same errors passed into the relief records that followed. The family did not yet know how a single incorrectly written letter could return again and again.

No clock could measure the first night in the relief camp. Children crying, people queuing for water, the groans of the wounded, voices calling the names of relatives who had not arrived. Jamila sat at the edge of an abandoned blanket. Salim held a bunch of keys to his shop, unable to understand why he was still gripping them. Hakim Yusuf closed his eyes in exhaustion. Saira asked a volunteer sitting near the entrance for a sheet of paper. She wrote down the family's correct names, ages and former address so that the mistakes in the vehicle's list could be put right. The volunteer looked at it and said, 'Keep a copy with you. Don't let it out of your possession.' For the first time Saira understood that a piece of paper bearing the right name could become a path by which someone who had survived might be found.

Two days later Salim and Premji returned to their old neighbourhood with the permission of an officer organising relief. Among the burnt houses, walls were still standing in many places, but the lives once lived within them had been destroyed. The wooden tables in Salim's shop were blackened. One side of the iron paper-cutter had twisted out of shape. Pages, half burnt and half soaked, clung to the floor. The chest in which Jamila had taught her daughter to keep her certificates stood with its lid open. Salim said nothing. 'Has any evidence survived?' Premji asked. Salim lifted an iron box. Inside were a bundle of scorched cloth and an exercise book, half wet. The original certificate of Saira's school results was nowhere to be found.

Premji had concealed his fear while viewing the damage, but on the way back he kept looking over his shoulder. His wife, Savitri, asked what he had told the police. 'I'll tell them what I saw,' he replied. Savitri pointed out the route their young son took to school. 'Then remember that, after you testify, he will still have to walk through this same lane every day,' she said. They remained silent for a long time. Premji understood that it would be wrong to conceal what he had witnessed when an entire family had lost its home, yet his fear for his own family's daily safety was real. This was where the story of civic courage began: where the wish to speak the truth and the fear of its consequences stood together in a single mind.

At the beginning of March, police officers and other personnel came to the relief camp. Some people related what they knew of the incidents mentioned in the first information report; others wanted to add details to complaints already recorded. Salim separately described when his shop and house had been attacked, what he himself had seen, and what he could say about people whose names he did not know. The officer repeatedly asked whether he had seen the assailants' faces. Salim answered truthfully: 'I did not see everyone. There was smoke, there were voices. The question of identifying those I did see is a separate matter.' He sensed the officer's impatience, but did not alter his memories merely because the truth might be unwelcome.

The police fixed a separate date to record Premji's statement. He said that among the crowd near Salim's shop he had seen the face of someone he knew from the neighbourhood. The officer recorded the name and asked about the time and the direction from which he had looked. Premji's statement became material in the police investigation; it was not yet testimony given under oath in court. Premji did not fully understand that distinction on the day. In a new notebook Saira recorded the police visit, what her family had said and the witness's anxieties. She wanted to

study history. Now she began to feel that history was not simply a book written much later by somebody else; it could also be a trembling signature made while an event was still unfolding.

News was slow to reach Naseema Bano, in her rented room in Jodhpur. She had first heard of the tragedy at Godhra, then of the violence that had broken out in Gujarat. But when she could not discover the whereabouts of her aunt Jamila and cousin Saira, sleep became difficult. After many attempts from the telephone in a friend's home, she finally spoke to a volunteer at the relief camp. 'They are all alive.' Those few words brought Naseema her first moment of relief. Yet when she learnt that Saira's certificates had burnt and the family was in no position to return home, she remembered the student assistance fund at Marudhar College. She submitted an application to the principal's office—not a political speech, nor an unproven accusation against anyone, but a request for verifiable educational support for a displaced student.

The principal read the application and first asked, 'Does your cousin want admission here?' Naseema replied, 'She wants to continue her studies. The papers are gone, but the school must still have a record of her name.' The principal explained the admission regulations and the requirement to verify certificates. The history teacher Ishwardatt Rathore was present. Because of Ramdev's land dispute, he had already been taking an interest in the students' circumstances. 'Could an authenticated duplicate be obtained from her school?' he asked. The principal said it might be possible. The institution could also consider temporary assistance with her studies, although the rules governing formal admission could not simply be waived. For the first time Naseema saw a practical course of action in the answer.

Rathore showed Naseema the standard scholarship form. 'We must find a way for a student not to lose her education simply because her documents are missing,' he said. 'But manufacturing false certificates is no solution.' Naseema did not smile. She knew that at this very moment Saira's family was worrying about its next meal, while she was here discussing books. Reading her silence, Rathore said, 'Food comes first, but education is not its enemy. If she comes here, we shall also have to find somewhere for her to live.' He recalled the unfinished girls' hostel. Naseema had not thought the interim injunction concerning Ramdev's land was wrong, but the new disaster made the need for the hostel more urgent to her than ever.

Kusum Mandal saw Naseema sitting unhappily outside the library. Their earlier encounters had been about the hostel and the well. Kusum

came over and asked, 'Is everything all right at home?' Naseema told her what had happened to her aunt's family. Tears rose in Kusum's eyes. She had heard arguments about the need for a hostel during the dispute over her father Ramdev's land; now she was hearing of a girl who no longer possessed even the original copy of the document that could secure her another chance at education. 'My mother says a misplaced line on a paper can cost someone their land,' Kusum said. 'Your cousin's papers have been burned. Must her education burn with them?' Naseema replied, 'That is the question I am trying to answer.'

Meanwhile Saira began teaching the girls at the relief camp. Many children had lost their books. With broken pencils, scraps of waste paper and pages from old exercise books supplied by volunteers, she helped them form their letters. A little girl asked, 'Will you draw a plan of my house?' Saira asked her to trace the four sides of the house in the earth. The child drew a room, three people inside it and a bird on the roof. Saira noticed that she had also marked the place belonging to her dead father. She did not stop her. Within the dates written in history textbooks lay countless such private scenes. Saira made a note of it, but did not pass the child's name to anyone without authorisation.

Every day vehicles of many kinds came to the outer gate of the relief camp. One brought flour, another medicines, another clothes for the children. Some donors wanted their names made public; others unloaded their supplies and departed without a word. Jamila saw that the helping hands belonged to people of different religions, languages, castes and convictions. An elderly Hindu teacher had bought exercise books with his retirement savings. A Muslim woman doctor examined children all day. A Dalit young man organised the queue for water. They differed among themselves, too, but when it came to feeding a hungry child, no one had time to demand an identity card first. Saira gave this parallel life a title in her notebook: 'Those Who Survived Amid the Fire.'

Kantaben Patel reached the camp by a safe route. She brought some clothes for Salim's family, Faiz's old schoolbooks and a half-burnt notebook belonging to Saira. She had found the notebook in the back room of her own house. Saira started at the sight of its edges: these were pages from her history notes. The flames had reached the doorway, yet some of the writing within had survived. 'Auntie, where did you find this book?' Saira asked. 'When I went back that day, I saw it lying there and put it away,' Kantaben said. 'How could I call the half-burnt pages of a book rubbish?' Her eyes filled with tears.

Kantaben did not stay long at the camp. Fear hung over her own house as well: some neighbours reproached her for giving shelter to Salim's family. Each time she gave the same answer: 'They are my neighbours.' But she was paying a social price for those simple words. Two longstanding customers had stopped bringing her clothes to sew. An unknown person had written abuse in black paint on her gate. Harshad washed away the letters, but scratches remained on the threshold. Salim offered her some of the money he had left. 'You need it more than I do just now,' she replied.

Jamila was adamant about one thing: Saira would return to her studies. Salim said they needed a home first. 'It is hard to study without a home,' Jamila argued, 'but if she gives up studying, the means of rebuilding a home will shrink as well.' Hakim Yusuf gave his silent assent. He had moved house many times in his life. He knew how long a situation described as 'temporary' could last if the children's education were interrupted now. Saira told her mother that a letter had arrived from Naseema. It described scholarships at Marudhar, the library and ways of verifying lost certificates. Salim read it attentively. What he read was 'admission may be possible', not 'admission is guaranteed'.

Meanwhile, on the Marudhar campus, Kusum and Naseema began collecting books on a small scale with the principal's advice: an old history textbook from one student, a geography atlas from another, a dictionary from a third. Although occupied by the dispute over his farmland, Kusum's father Ramdev donated a wooden chest in which the books could be kept safe. Naseema thanked him. 'My land case is still going on,' Ramdev said, 'but that is no reason to close the door to education.' No donor's name appeared on the chest. A single slip of paper was attached: 'For those whose books have been destroyed.' The college students joined the modest effort for different reasons. They did not all think alike, but many hands came together.

At the beginning of April, an Ahmedabad lawyer named Vinay Desai came to the camp to meet Salim's family. He was associated with a local legal-aid group and had spent the week preparing orderly records of complaints from many families. Desai made no promise that he could secure justice for them all. He asked who had seen what firsthand, who had heard what from others, which documents had survived and who was willing to be a witness. Salim described the damage to his shop. 'The loss suffered by the shop and the criminal responsibility of whoever set it alight are two separate matters,' Desai said. 'We must prepare the evidence for each separately.' 'And what about all the papers that have

burned?' Jamila asked. 'If copies exist in public records, we'll look for them there,' Desai replied.

Vinay Desai knew neither of Neelkanth's case nor of Shivnarayan's family. But in Delhi, where she was studying, Revati heard through a fellow student about the legal-aid work being done in Gujarat. She sought her father's advice rather than his permission. 'If you go,' Shivnarayan told her, 'go as a student volunteer, not as a lawyer. Promise nobody a victory, and do not rewrite anyone's statement in your own words.' Revati kept his warning in mind. The small group of volunteers arriving from Delhi began preparing copies of documents, families' contact addresses and requests to schools for replacement certificates. Their principal task was to listen. At that time Revati had no right to represent anyone before a court.

Saira and Revati met in a makeshift classroom at the camp. Saira was helping the children draw a map of India in the earth. 'Are you a teacher?' Revati asked. 'I am a student myself,' Saira said. 'I have no books, but I am writing down what I remember.' Revati examined her notebook. On the first page was a list of names, on the second the possessions her family had lost, on the third descriptions of the drawings children had made of their homes. 'These are not evidence prepared for use in court,' Revati said, 'but they are an important attempt to preserve memory. Record the dates separately, and the source of each account.' 'Will anyone believe what I saw?' Saira asked. 'I don't know what a court will accept,' Revati replied. 'But leave what you witnessed with your own eyes untouched.'

The answer did not satisfy Saira. She wanted someone with experience to tell her that everything would be all right. Yet there was truth in Revati's inability to promise it. At the relief camp, too many people were offering assurances they had no power to fulfil. 'When our house was burning,' Saira said quietly, 'I saw smoke and heard some voices. But I didn't see with my own eyes all the people whose names others mention.' 'Then preserve that distinction in your testimony,' Revati said. 'You don't need to imagine another person's name in order to establish the reality of your suffering.' Saira held the severity of those words in her mind. She did not feel insulted; she felt that her memory had been respected.

Revati met Desai. When she raised a question about a copy of a statement given to the police, he explained that a statement recorded by the police during an investigation did not automatically become substantive evidence at trial. A witness's later testimony in court, and other independent evidence, had their own significance. If a witness

altered an account, contradictions could be brought out through legal procedure. Revati wrote down the finer points. That day she understood for the first time how much care the language of a court demanded. It was easy for a newspaper to print 'Witness Changes Statement'. But without asking when, before which officer, what was changed, and why, the sentence remained incomplete.

In the meantime two strangers approached Premji Makwana on separate occasions. Outside the municipal office the first man told him to forget old quarrels and attend to his family. On another occasion Savitri had to hear someone in the lane remark that Premji talked too much. Premji could not tell what evidence there was of an explicit threat, but the hints alone were enough for fear to take up residence in their home. Their son Dilip began resisting the journey to school. 'What you saw won't change,' Savitri told Premji. 'But who will protect us?' Premji remained silent. He would not speak falsely against anyone; the thought of endangering his loved ones by speaking the truth troubled him just as deeply.

One evening Premji went to Desai's office. He explained in detail the social pressure he had felt since making his statement to the police. Desai told him how to put his complaint in writing, inform the police officer concerned and request whatever lawful protection was available. He did not assure Premji that, in 2002, any comprehensive witness-protection scheme was immediately available everywhere. He explained the difference between what the local administration was obliged to do and what happened in practice. 'If I name that man in court,' Premji asked, 'is his punishment certain?' 'No,' Desai answered. 'Your testimony will be one piece of evidence. The court will decide on the basis of all the credible evidence.' Premji took no comfort from the answer, but it was true.

A city newspaper printed a photograph of Salim's charred shop. The report described the family's losses, but its headline was extravagant: 'Conclusive Proof of an Organised Mob Conspiracy'. Salim told the journalist that his account must not be presented as such a final conclusion. The reporter's young assistant admitted that the headline had been altered during editing. A fresh disagreement arose within the family. Jamila wanted the world to know what they had suffered. Salim wanted the report to be accurate; otherwise, when questions were raised in court, people might accuse them all of exaggeration. Saira wrote in her notebook: 'Our home burned. We do not need a lie to make that fact larger.'

May grew hotter. By day the roof of the relief camp became unbearably warm. Hakim Yusuf's old respiratory illness began troubling him again. Jamila joined the queue for medicines. A young doctor examined him, prescribed appropriate treatment and warned that prolonged exposure to dust, smoke and crowded conditions could make him worse. Salim decided to look for a safe room to rent. But the shop was destroyed, the house burnt, money was scarce, and the landlord required an advance. Arrangements at the relief camp were temporary, yet the road back to ordinary life was long. In the meantime, the school supplied an authenticated duplicate of Saira's secondary examination record. With that one sheet of paper, the family found its first solid foothold in the future.

Mukund Joshi, a teacher at a local school in Ahmedabad, helped Salim trace the public records relating to his daughter's enrolment. He had been a customer at Salim's old shop. The school register still contained details of Saira's examinations; the prescribed process was followed to certify them. 'Because an old copy survived in this office, a girl's education can now be saved,' Mukund said. 'And what of the child whose name was never written down at all?' Salim asked. 'That child's rights do not disappear,' Mukund replied. 'But establishing them becomes much harder.' The exchange revealed the distance between the administration's routine records and the incomplete lives of the citizens they were meant to serve.

One evening at the camp the conversation turned to old songs sung at places of worship. Hakim Yusuf recalled a folk song from his childhood, only half of whose words Saira understood. Kantaben had come to visit as well, and she hummed a Gujarati lullaby her mother had sung. Faiz asked whose song was the right one. Yusuf laughed. 'They are different,' he said. 'That is why both should be heard.' Outside, people were still searching one another's names for reasons to be afraid; inside, a small child's question found its answer through music. The moment did not heal the wounds of what had happened, but it brought into view the human ties that remained.

In June, rumours spread about the camp's future. In some places the government arrangements were being wound down; elsewhere, volunteer groups continued their assistance. Salim's family still could not return to their old house. With help from an acquaintance, they found two rooms to rent, where the ceiling fan turned slowly and road dust drifted through the window. On the first day Jamila cooked rotis over the dry hearth. At the meal Faiz asked, 'Is this our home?' 'We will live here for now,' Jamila answered. 'And our first home?' he asked again. Jamila could

not reply. Salim said, 'The walls of a house can be built again. Our first duty was to keep the people who lived within them alive.'

One day Premji came to visit Salim in the rented rooms. He said he was thinking of changing his statement. Salim was stunned. 'You won't say what you saw?' Premji's voice trembled. 'I said I saw the man's face. But in all the noise, did I truly see it clearly, or did fear make me believe I recognised him? Now I am not sure.' Salim knew that Premji had spoken with considerable certainty before. 'Has the doubt come to you only now,' he asked, 'or are you frightened of someone?' Premji looked out into the courtyard. 'It's difficult to tell the difference,' he admitted. Salim was filled with grief, but he did not instruct Premji how to testify. 'Try to distinguish what you truly believe,' was all he said. 'Our house did not set itself on fire.'

After those words, Premji lay awake all night. 'What you saw, you saw,' Savitri told him. 'Don't invent what you didn't see. But why should you be ashamed to admit you're afraid?' 'If I say I felt threatened,' Premji replied, 'the police will ask where the proof is.' 'You must still know whom you saw, and you must not name someone you didn't see,' Savitri said. 'But hiding your fear won't make the truth whole.' That night Premji wrote three distinct sentences in his mind: 'I was near the scene'; 'I saw a face in the crowd that looked familiar'; 'I identified that person with certainty.' At the third sentence his hand stopped.

Revati had returned to Delhi and her studies. She kept the papers from Gujarat, Saira's letter and Desai's notes separately in her iron trunk. 'What have you learnt from this work?' Shivnarayan asked. 'First, that a wounded person's account may naturally be incomplete,' Revati answered. 'Second, that an incomplete account is not necessarily a lie. Third, that if I fill its gaps with guesses of my own, I commit an injustice.' Her father listened for a long time before saying, 'Add one more thing. The witness's fear is also an event. Fear cannot take the place of evidence, but it should not be ignored.' Revati wrote that fourth lesson at the back of her notebook.

In July one part of the police investigation moved forward. Preparations were under way to file charges against certain people, but there were differing accounts of the events. Vinay Desai explained to Salim that the first information report, statements recorded by the police, medical records, seizure documents and other evidence each had a different place in the proceedings. Filing a charge-sheet did not by itself establish guilt. Salim was growing weary of hearing such things. The total value of his ruined shop, the money needed for his daughter's

education and the following month's rent felt more immediate. Yet if the legal inquiry were abandoned, the question of who bore responsibility for the fire would remain unanswered. He tied up the bundle of papers once again.

Meanwhile, proceedings began to record certain witnesses' statements in accordance with law before a judicial magistrate. Premji's name was also proposed. He was told that any statement made before a judicial officer must be voluntary, not words written at someone else's direction. Premji waited for his court date. He was still uncertain which parts of his first statement to the police he would stand by and which he would correct. Savitri wanted him to speak of his doubts as well. Salim wanted him not to forget the familiar face he had initially said he recognised. Between those two wishes Premji was trying to discover the actual shape of his own memory.

As the court date approached, an unsigned letter appeared at Premji's house. It contained no explicit threat, but one sentence read: 'Remember the route your child takes.' Savitri trembled as she read it. Premji wanted to burn it. 'If this really is an attempt to frighten us, keep it safe,' Savitri said, stopping him. Premji showed the letter to Desai, and a copy of a complaint was submitted to the police concerned. It was never established who had sent the letter. Desai noted each fact separately: when it had arrived, the handwriting, the envelope and who had received it. 'The value of evidence lies not in its size,' he said, 'but in whether it can be verified.'

The August rains came. Water stood in some of Ahmedabad's lanes, and the soaked walls of burned buildings began crumbling anew. In a corner of their rented rooms, Salim set up a small table and resumed his bookbinding work. Harshad tried to bring him modest orders for binding notebooks from a school he knew. At first Salim hesitated to accept the help. 'When you do the work, you will be paid for it,' Kantaben said. 'This isn't charity.' Her words preserved both his self-respect and his livelihood. Saira wrote names on the covers of new books, while Faiz made boats out of little scraps of paper. Such small tasks take on enormous meaning when life must begin again after violence.

That month Naseema and Kusum published the first accounts of their student assistance fund. The number of books received, who had been given them and how many remained—all were recorded plainly. The principal commended their care. A student asked whether private donors' names should be included. 'Record them if the donors agree,' Naseema said, 'but there is no need to publicise the personal misfortunes of those

receiving the books.' On a separate sheet Kusum noted the progress of Saira's certificates: school duplicate obtained, application incomplete, question of accommodation unresolved. She kept that sheet apart from the donation accounts. The obligations of assistance were not the same as the right to privacy.

In September Premji arrived at the judicial magistrate's building. This was not the office handling Salim's ordinary claim for compensation. Here a voluntary statement connected with a specific criminal investigation was to be recorded. Desai had explained only that Premji should say what he himself had witnessed; the law was not meant to fashion a statement to suit somebody's wishes. Savitri waited outside. Premji carried no large file, only a cloth handkerchief, which he folded over and over. Salim had not accompanied him. He understood that, when a witness was making an independent statement, the presence of the affected family might itself amount to pressure.

The judicial officer asked whether Premji was making his statement voluntarily. Premji said he had come of his own free will, though he had been frightened in recent days. Asked to describe the scene, he first spoke of the fire, the smoke and the people running. Then came the question of the man named in his initial statement to the police. Premji was silent for a while. The officer gave him time to say what he had seen. 'I saw a face that looked familiar,' Premji said. 'At that moment I believed it was a particular person. Now I cannot say with certainty that it was him.' Alongside this admission, Premji described the attempts he believed had been made to frighten him.

Thus, before the judicial officer, Premji departed from an important part of his earlier statement to the police. But that did not mean that the first statement had simply vanished, or that the new statement alone had proved the accused either innocent or guilty. The circumstances of both accounts, the value of other independent evidence and the weight of any testimony given at a future trial would have to be examined through the appropriate legal process. Premji did not know how to understand all these distinctions. Leaving the room, he felt only that one burden had slipped from his shoulders and another had settled there. Savitri needed only to look into his eyes to know that nothing had become simple.

Salim heard the news from Desai: Premji had not made an unequivocal identification. Anger came first. He wanted to shout that the truth of what had happened to the family whose home had burned must not be diminished because someone was afraid. But Desai said, 'Salimbhai, the damage to your home, the seized objects, the accounts of

injuries and the existence of other testimony do not disappear because of one sentence spoken by Premji. It is the court's task to determine the limits of what he actually saw.' 'So the guilty will escape?' Salim asked. 'It would be wrong to draw that conclusion yet,' Desai replied. 'We must also examine the other evidence in the investigation.'

That evening Salim placed the old bunch of keys on the table of his new workshop. They no longer opened any gate, but they brought back the shape of his former home. 'Father, did Uncle Premji lie?' Saira asked. Salim was silent for a long time. Then he said, 'I don't know. Fear can make a person's eyes see wrongly, and it can make him hide what his eyes did see. Without evidence I cannot say which happened.' 'Then what should I write?' Saira asked. 'Write down what we ourselves heard,' Salim answered. 'Don't decide for yourself what was in another person's mind.'

That night Revati wrote a long letter from Delhi to her father, Shivnarayan. She described the dispute over Premji's identification but kept the witness's name and sensitive personal information out of the letter, in a secure place. She wrote that it would be unjust to call a witness a deceiver merely because his statement changed during legal proceedings; yet an assertion of intimidation also needed evidence. She asked how an advocate could make truth audible when its voice trembled in the judicial process. At the end she wrote about Saira: 'She wants to study history, but her first history is written on the burnt walls of her own home.'

Shivnarayan read the letter and opened the drawer of his desk. Inside lay a copy of the seizure record from Neelkanth Sah's first case, in which an entry bearing a dead man's name was disputed. He took it out and examined it. The burnt house in Gujarat and the seized ledger in Darbhanga belonged to separate events; no single criminal network connected them. Yet they raised a common question: when someone's name is written down, who verifies what it means? The writer, the witness, the investigator, or the court? Shivnarayan wrote back to his daughter: 'To honour evidence is not to disregard suffering; to respect suffering is not to pass judgment without evidence. Holding the two together is the difficult discipline of an advocate's life.'

Hakim Yusuf had grown weaker during these days. Jamila helped him sit up on his cot and gave him warm water. One day Yusuf asked Saira what she intended to study. 'History,' she replied. 'And what will you write in your history?' he asked. 'What I saw. And when I didn't see something, I will say I didn't see it.' Yusuf smiled. 'Be sure to write the name of the shop in your book,' he said. 'Not just the name of the shop,'

Saira replied. 'I'll write the names of all the people who made it possible. Kantaben's name, Harshad's, and Premji's too.' Yusuf closed his eyes. The names did not all signify the same thing, but each belonged to a life that had the right to survive.

One day word came from Vinay Desai's office that work was continuing on other aspects of the investigation. Certain physical evidence needed examination, seizure records needed copying, and different witnesses' accounts needed to be compared. Salim wanted the guilty punished quickly. Desai cautioned that a poorly supported charge brought in the name of speed could fail at trial. They spoke at length about the difficult question of how the rights of the accused could coexist with a victim's desire for justice. 'Time has become terribly heavy for me,' Salim said at last. 'Yes,' Desai answered. 'Delay can itself become an injustice. But punishing the wrong person in haste is not justice either.'

On a November morning Kantaben reopened her sewing room. One old customer returned, then another. Harshad told her that the remains of the abusive writing on their doorway had now been painted over. 'The wall has been painted,' Kantaben said, 'but I have no idea whether the mind of the person who wrote those words has changed.' She invited Salim's family to evening tea. Jamila hesitated at first. After many days she found the courage to go near the old neighbourhood again. That evening, over cups of tea, they talked about ordinary things: the price of sewing, the approach of winter, Faiz's studies. The story of the fire sometimes silenced them, but it was not the only subject they spoke of.

On the way back from Kantaben's house, Salim stopped at the site of his old shop. Part of the iron shutter was still bent out of shape. He stood there silently for a while. Saira was beside him. 'Father, will books be bound here again?' she asked. 'If it is possible, yes,' Salim replied. 'But the shop will not be as it was.' 'Why not?' 'Before, I used to join the pages of books together. Now I know how difficult it is to join the torn pages of people's lives. Some pages will never be found again.' Standing there, his daughter saw not defeat in her father's face but a weary endurance.

As the year neared its end, new dates for 2003 were being entered at Shivnarayan's office. The forthcoming examination of evidence in Neelkanth's case, inspection of the original land records in Jodhpur, and papers concerning legal aid for a family in Gujarat were kept in three separate files. Revati opened her study trunk and reread her father's reply. She remembered that in 2000 the ledger in Neelkanth's case had contained the name of the dead Ramkishun; in 2002 Saira's living name had been written incorrectly; and Premji's certainty about the name

belonging to the face he had seen had faltered. There was no hidden director behind these three events. Each revealed the human limitations of names, fear, memory and proof.

That night Saira wrote a sentence on the last page of her notebook: 'I saw our house burning, but I did not see the faces of everyone who set it alight.' She stared at the sentence for a long time before adding another beneath it: 'It takes courage to say what one has seen; it also takes courage not to claim to have seen what one has not.' She closed the notebook and placed it beneath her pillow. Outside, the first cold wind was blowing. Far across the city lamps burned in many homes, while others remained in darkness. The record of Premji's changed statement was preserved in the court's files; the other evidence of damage to Salim's house existed separately; a new copy of Saira's educational certificate lay in her bundle of papers. Nothing had been decided finally that night. Yet three different questions had risen from the ashes of their home: who had set the fire, who had seen it, and how would those who survived rebuild their lives?

In the last week of December, the portion of Premji's statement before the magistrate that was available as a certified copy reached Salim's lawyer from Vinay Desai's office. Desai read it and fell silent. The name clearly recorded in the original police statement had not been identified with certainty by Premji himself before the judicial magistrate. Whether that change arose from fear, a failure of memory, or both, the document could not say. Desai took the application seeking protection for the witness from his cabinet. Outside, the year's last evening was descending. He understood that evidence of the damage caused by the fire remained, but a crucial link in identifying those responsible for setting it would now face difficult cross-examination in court.

Chapter 6 — The House of the Silent Witness

Darbhanga and Jodhpur, January–December 2003

At the end of Poush, the old courthouse veranda in Darbhanga lay as deserted at daybreak as a railway station closed in the last hours of the night. A leaf was falling from the peepal tree in the courtyard; beneath it, the wooden bench left outside all night was damp not with rain but with dew. Ramvilas, the court clerk, opened his office and picked up a broom first. He knew that a day in court began not with people's faces but with the order of the files. The first bundle contained a maintenance petition, the second a rent dispute, the third the trial of Neelkanth Sah. One word was written in red ink on the outside of Neelkanth's file: EVIDENCE. Ramvilas had never thought the word ordinary. When a piece of paper became evidence, it had not only to be kept safe; it had also to be opened before a question that concerned somebody's life.

Neelkanth had opened his shop at first light. After his release on bail, his first wish had been for his old customers who bought on credit to return. But over more than two years the market had ceased to look at him as it once had. Someone would come for rice and count out extra money, as though determined to avoid the old relationship of credit. Another would greet him quietly but never fail to glance towards the back room. Nirmala had learnt to recognise these looks. She did not search for suspicion behind every customer, yet a silence had settled in the house, a silence present even in ordinary conversation. Amresh was now approaching fifteen. Returning from school, he wrote accounts of lentils and oil on clean ledger pages, while his father's old ledger lay locked in the court's record room.

That morning Shivnarayan Jha was reading a letter from Revati in his office. Revati had come home from Delhi for the holidays; she was in the final stage of her practical legal training. The stories of Salim Ansari and Saira in Gujarat had stayed with her. The evidence of the family's burnt home and Premji Makwana's changing account of an identification had taught her that a witness's silence did not invariably signal a lie. Neelkanth's silence in Darbhanga, however, was different: he knew something about the writing on the forty-fifth page, but did not seem willing to tell the whole story. 'If a client deliberately withholds something,' Revati asked her father, 'what should an advocate do?' 'First

make certain that he has understood the question,' Shivnarayan answered. 'Then establish what he is obliged to answer and what belongs within confidential consultation. You cannot turn his silence into proof of innocence simply because it suits you.'

Revati laid two documents before her father. One copy of the seizure list from 2000 gave the number of loose pages as thirty-three. The other gave thirty-five. An order had been made to send part of the original ledger for expert examination, but the report had not yet arrived. 'The number has changed,' Revati said. 'Are we to assume that a sheet was added or removed?' Shivnarayan looked up. 'All it means at present is that the two copies differ. A miscount, a copying error, or an actual alteration of the material—each possibility needs proof. If the prosecution cannot explain the chain of custody clearly, its conclusion will be weakened. But this discrepancy alone does not make every seized object disappear.' Revati wrote the three possibilities on a separate page. Her earliest studies had begun in just this way: by drawing a boundary around conjecture.

Mathuranand Kapari was also at the courthouse that day. He had signed the seizure list in 2000 and had subsequently told the court the limited facts he had personally observed. His son Rajiv had married and opened a separate shop. People still asked Mathuranand whether Neelkanth would be found guilty. Tired of the question, he had shortened his answer: 'I saw the ledger on the table. It isn't for me to decide the crime.' Some customers called him courageous for saying so, others a coward. He had learnt that neither public praise nor public blame could measure the truth. He had come to court that day on a different matter. The next witness in Neelkanth's case was a young wholesaler whom he had known earlier. Mathuranand gave him no advice about the substance of his testimony, saying only, 'Listen to the question and say what you know. If you don't know, say that too.'

The new witness was Prabhakar Mahto. He ran a small wholesale grain business on the outskirts of Darbhanga. According to the prosecution, certain abbreviated marks in Neelkanth's ledger matched payment details in Prabhakar's possession. Prabhakar did not appear nervous, though he repeatedly put a hand into his pocket, where he kept a small silver coin given him by his father. Before he entered the courtroom, the public prosecutor told him only to explain what the records available to him showed, without guessing. Prabhakar smiled. 'I keep accounts, sir. Guesswork ruins a business.' The prosecutor was pleased with the reply, not yet realising that the defence was about to extract some inconvenient questions from those very accounts.

When Judicial Magistrate Vimalakant Mishra arrived, he first disposed of a few short applications. Neelkanth's case was then called and the prosecution witness brought before him. Prabhakar gave his name, described his trade and explained how he had known Neelkanth. The prosecution showed him certified copies of several receipts. Prabhakar said that grain was supplied regularly to Neelkanth's shop, though he had also heard discussions of cash payments under other heads at certain times. On hearing the words 'I had heard', the magistrate directed that what Prabhakar had personally witnessed and what he had heard from others be recorded separately. Prabhakar identified his actual receipt; it bore his signature. The figures on the copy were read aloud in court. Revati noted that this evidence established the existence of genuine transactions in grain, not every inference that might be drawn beyond them.

'Was grain delivered against this payment of fourteen thousand?' the prosecutor asked. 'Some goods were delivered,' Prabhakar answered at first. 'When you say some,' the court asked, 'what does the rest represent?' Prabhakar looked at his papers. 'The original bill was for twelve thousand eight hundred. The balance was an adjustment against an older debt.' The prosecutor asked what transaction the older debt related to. 'I can say that only after seeing my original ledger,' Prabhakar replied. 'I cannot be certain now.' Shivnarayan listened carefully. The prosecution hoped to show a flow of money beyond ordinary commercial dealings, but the witness was setting the limits of his own recollection. The court ensured that the defence would have a proper opportunity to inspect the receipts.

Shivnarayan stood. 'Have you seen betting at night in Neelkanth's shop?' he asked Prabhakar. 'No.' 'Have you seen anyone placing a wager?' 'No.' 'Who entered the figures on your own receipts?' 'My clerk, and often I did it myself.' 'So not every amount was written in your hand?' 'No.' Shivnarayan paused, then asked, 'Do you have an original record to support what you call an adjustment against an older debt?' 'It should be in an old trunk at home. I'll have to look for it.' Shivnarayan did not attempt to belittle the prosecution. Instead, he said that if the record was found it should be placed before the court through the lawful procedure. Relief appeared on Prabhakar's face. He had thought the lawyer was intent on proving him a liar; now he understood that the questions were also directed towards the limits of his memory.

Shivnarayan's next question, however, was difficult. 'How old was your clerk in the year 2000?' 'Nineteen or twenty,' Prabhakar said. 'His name?' 'Naresh.' 'Where is he now?' Prabhakar was silent for a moment. 'He left the job two years ago.' 'Do you know how he could be contacted?' 'I know

the name of his mother's village, but I don't have a definite address.' A new name entered the court record: Naresh. Its appearance did not automatically strengthen or weaken the prosecution's case, but it gave the possibility of multiple hands in the ledger a specific avenue of inquiry. Vimalakant Mishra directed the parties to make appropriate applications, in accordance with the rules, for any additional evidence required. For the first time Neelkanth lowered his eyes, as though the name Naresh was more familiar to him than anyone had expected.

During the recess Revati asked her father, 'Does Nilkantji know Naresh?' 'I suspect he does,' Shivnarayan said. 'But until I have asked him, I won't treat that as a fact.' Neelkanth was called into a separate room for legal consultation. At first he said that many clerks had come and gone in the wholesale market, and it was difficult to remember every name. 'Very well,' Shivnarayan said calmly. 'But I have a specific question: did Naresh ever make entries in the accounts at your shop?' Neelkanth began to deny it, then fell silent. He drank some water. 'For two or three days at a time, perhaps, when my hand was hurting.' Revati noted that he had not said this before.

'When you said that you had not written every page of the ledger yourself,' Shivnarayan asked, 'could Naresh be one example?' Neelkanth lowered his shoulders. 'Possibly.' 'You aren't certain?' 'No.' Father and daughter both found the answer uncomfortable. At last Neelkanth said, 'I wrote some pages. The boy at the shop wrote some. The ledger recorded credit given to customers. But certain people used to come and have the results of games entered, and I was careless about that, by my own reckoning.' Shivnarayan stopped at the word. 'When you say results of games, explain exactly what you mean.' 'One or two people would talk about money to be paid or received according to a game's outcome. Sometimes I adjusted their amounts against credit accounts. But I do not admit to all the allegations being made.'

Revati suddenly felt cold. For years she had thought of Neelkanth as a merchant whose ledger contained some disputed pages. Now the client himself had spoken of money connected with wagers. No anger appeared on Shivnarayan's face. 'Is there any written record of this?' he asked. 'Whatever is in the seized ledger,' Neelkanth said. 'I can't remember everything.' Shivnarayan made clear the limits of confidential consultation between advocate and client: he would not present false facts in court as a defence. Acknowledging that one had written certain entries and accepting particular criminal responsibility were two different questions. No public confession was prepared on the spot; the facts still needed examination.

When Revati came outside, Amresh was in the courtyard repairing the chain of his bicycle. He had taken leave from school to accompany his father. 'Will Father be cleared today?' he asked. Revati offered no easy assurance, any more than she had before. 'A witness has spoken today. The decision will come later.' Amresh wiped black grease from his fingers. 'At school today a boy said everything in the ledger was Father's crime. Another said the police invented it all. Whom should I believe?' 'You can ask your father questions,' Revati said. 'But the court is investigating. It takes patience to understand something that lies between two such absolute claims.' 'Does patience come easily to you?' Amresh asked. Revati laughed for the first time. 'No. I have to learn it too.'

In the last week of Magh, a letter arrived from the expert's office. Examination of the disputed pages was delayed because the original handwriting, the quality of the available samples and differences in ink presented separate questions. The letter identified no writer. Dinanath Prasad was disappointed when he read it. He had hoped a scientific report would put an end to doubt in court. But a colleague in the government office explained, 'Comparison of handwriting can provide an opinion about the writer's identity. It cannot necessarily establish exactly when every page was written.' Dinanath prepared to submit the letter to the court by lawful means. In his memory the exhaustion of the night of the seizure, the open cupboard door and the haste of the officer preparing the inventory remained vivid. He had decided that he would not conceal the frailty of his memory behind any claim of official certainty.

At home Dinanath's wife Sumitra had grown weary of the long case: nights at the police station, mornings in court, then preparation of records. 'You come home and even here you talk about nothing but files,' she complained. 'If a mistake was made, people will say the police did it deliberately,' Dinanath replied. 'And if you did the right thing?' Sumitra asked. Dinanath was silent. The ordinary silences in a police officer's home appeared nowhere in the written proceedings of the court, but they too were part of the price paid for the judicial process. His ten-year-old daughter was to play a truth-loving king in a school drama. 'Is telling the truth so difficult?' she asked him. 'Sometimes the difficult thing,' Dinanath answered, 'is not to claim you saw what you only heard about.'

Meanwhile, the question of Ramkishun Mahto's identity moved forward. With Kamleshwar Das's help, Revati obtained the address of his son Gangesh Mahto. Gangesh lived in a village near Benipur and spent half the year doing agricultural work in Saharsa. After consulting her father, Revati went to make some preliminary inquiries. She was no

police investigator, so she introduced herself clearly and told Gangesh that no private information would be made public without his consent. Gangesh gave the year of his father's death, the date recorded in the local death register and particulars of an old ration card. 'What has my father to do with your case?' he asked. 'He worked in the fields all his life, and used to go to the city market to sell ghee and grain.' Revati explained that the same name appeared in an old account and that the identity of the person remained to be established.

Gangesh took an iron trunk from the lean-to outside his house. It contained his father's wallet, copies of old land records, a wedding invitation and a thin notebook. The first page bore Ramkishun's handwriting; he had used it to record farming expenses. 'I don't know everything about whether Father used to lend money in the city or borrow it,' Gangesh said. 'But I remember one thing: before his death he went to town to collect payment for grain from his fields.' 'From whom?' Revati asked. Gangesh searched his memory. 'Perhaps a Sahji. But which Sah, I cannot say. There were several traders by that name around our village.' Revati recorded the uncertain answer as something to investigate, not as written proof. She did not touch the papers in the trunk, telling Gangesh only to keep them safe.

Outside, Gangesh's wife Malati was opening a sack of paddy. She offered Revati water and asked, 'Can a case be brought again in the name of someone who is dead?' 'The deceased is not an accused person in this case,' Revati said. 'But if his name appears in someone else's records, its meaning must be properly examined.' Malati looked at her keenly. 'My mother-in-law used to say Ramkishun kept papers in the house because promises made by word of mouth so often failed. Now those papers are his memory.' Revati realised that a death register supplied only the final date in a life; it could not disclose a person's entire web of financial relationships. Yet one thing was clear: the Ramkishun named in the list from 2000 could not be described, without inquiry, as a living account holder.

At the beginning of March, the question arose in the Darbhanga court of calling Gangesh as a witness. Shivnarayan did not immediately insist on his testimony. First he wanted independent grounds for connecting Gangesh's father to the name on the forty-fifth page of the ledger. The prosecution also agreed that a matching name alone was insufficient. The magistrate heard that examination of the original documents was still pending. 'The court cannot visit the home of every person who shares a name,' he said. 'But if identity is decisive to the meaning of a disputed entry, lawful presentation of the necessary

evidence must be considered.' Revati learnt more about procedure from that single sentence than from many pages of her textbooks: a court was not an institution for satisfying curiosity, but for examining relevant facts in dispute.

After the hearing in Darbhanga, Shivnarayan received a letter from Pareek, the lawyer in Rajasthan. A date had been fixed to inspect the original 1982 revenue map in the Marudhar land dispute. Pareek wrote that the north mark on the copy was doubtful, the line of an old rainwater drain had been only partly reproduced, and the educational trust's new map did not show it at all. Shivnarayan advised him in reply: 'Before deciding that the copy is defective, examine the original's structure, date, scale and history in government custody. Kusum's observation is an important lead; do not turn it into a final conclusion.' After sending the letter he looked at Revati. 'A mark in one case cannot answer the question in another,' he said. Revati nodded. She remembered both the ink on the forty-fifth page and the north mark in Rajasthan; their resemblance lay only in the lesson of caution, not in any shared crime.

At that time in Jodhpur, Kusum was studying old water sources in her geography class. Professor Rathore asked the students whether signs of water in a desert could always be identified by water still present at the site. Kusum mentioned the well and drain at her home but did not refer to her family's lawsuit. 'A line drawn on a map may have a history on the ground,' Rathore said. 'And something not drawn on the map may nevertheless exist on the ground. But you must not substitute the picture in your own mind for an authenticated map.' The other students heard an academic observation. For Kusum it was the worry that kept her family awake at night. Every morning her father, Ramdev Mandal, walked to the well and studied the dry course of the old drain. Building work was suspended under the court's limited order, but a court order could not make crops grow.

Differences over the educational trust were increasing within Ramdev's household. His son Vimal argued that they should relinquish some of the disputed claims if adequate compensation was offered. Kusum said that accepting money before the ownership boundary was settled would leave the questions of future access and drainage unresolved. Jeevani Devi listened to both. 'We need a way for money and a way for water,' she said. 'Why have you made them enemies?' 'All I want,' Ramdev answered, 'is for the rim of the old well not to be filled in one day without a word to us.' 'And if the original map supports the

trust?' his daughter asked. Ramdev brushed the soil from his hands. 'Then the truth will be against me. I ask only that the truth be seen.'

On the day fixed for inspection of the original map, representatives of both sides gathered in a small room of the revenue office: Pareek; Bhandari, counsel for the trust; the survey officer; and Ramdev, seated apart. Kusum had no official authority to act as an inspector, and waited outside. The officer opened the register and described the original document's condition. Its edges were worn, and old ink had spread in one place. Pareek pointed to the orientation of the original north mark; Bhandari maintained that the orientation used in the trust's map agreed with it. The old line of the drain, however, ran into the edge of the paper, where its full shape could not be discerned. The officer recorded the inspection without declaring either party to be the owner. Both lawyers agreed that, if necessary, they could seek a court-supervised measurement of the land on site.

Outside, Pareek told Kusum, 'Your doubts weren't entirely groundless, but we found no evidence that the north mark had been printed the wrong way round.' Kusum did not look disheartened. 'And the line of the drain?' she asked. 'It is incomplete. A conclusion based on it would be difficult.' 'Then shouldn't we examine the soil along the old drain?' 'An examination of the soil is one thing; legal demarcation is another. If the court appoints an expert, the method and the questions to be answered will have to be defined.' Ramdev glanced at his daughter. He was disappointed, but did not regard the day as a defeat. One misunderstanding had been cleared away: turning a map around did not, by itself, alter north. The next question for inquiry concerned the relationship between the boundary and the drainage channel.

At the educational trust's office, Sharad Kothari read the report of the inspection. 'Construction has been held up for so long,' Prahlad Vaidya said. 'Offer more money and get the farmer to leave.' 'A disputed right cannot be settled by money alone,' Sharad answered. 'But the students' need for rooms is real too.' The principal urged that hostel construction continue on the undisputed land while the court's order concerning the boundary near the well remained fully in force. Prahlad rose and left, dissatisfied. Sharad wrote in his diary: 'An institution that claims to teach a sense of justice must build its own buildings on lawful foundations.' He did not know that in the years ahead his institution would face financial and administrative disputes of an altogether different kind. For now his struggle concerned the boundary of a field and shelter for students.

When Revati returned to Darbhanga, an unusual quiet prevailed at Nirmala's house. The shop was open, but Neelkanth sat in the back room. Nirmala said he had scarcely slept for several nights. Amresh had opened one of his father's old exercise books to practise writing, but his father immediately made him close it. 'Not that book,' he said. 'Why? There's writing in it,' Amresh asked. Neelkanth did not answer. 'Father is tired,' Nirmala said. Amresh went inside, but a new fear had taken root in him: the shadow of wrongdoing lengthened not only because of the figures written on the paper, but because his father fell silent at the sight of them.

Revati asked Nirmala privately when Neelkanth's hand had begun to hurt. 'In the rainy season he used to suffer from an old arthritic pain,' Nirmala said. 'Perhaps a boy named Naresh wrote accounts for him once or twice. My memory of it is rather vague.' 'Did you see Naresh?' 'Once or twice. He wasn't a relative. He came with a wholesaler.' 'Did you see the writing on the forty-fifth page?' Nirmala shook her head. 'No. I never saw every page that was written in the ledger.' Revati attached particular importance to the answer. Nirmala could have invented certainty in support of her husband, but had chosen not to. That one limited statement increased her credibility in Revati's eyes.

That evening Revati read a letter from Saira Ansari in Gujarat. Saira wrote that she was continuing her education and that part of Salim's old shop was being brought back into use. Premji's changed statement had made questions of trust difficult for the family, but Saira had not given up her resolve to study history. At the end she wrote: 'A witness should be able to say that he did not see what he did not see. But he should not conceal, out of fear, what he did see. I am trying to put the distinction between those two things into words.' Revati placed the letter on her desk. Neelkanth's case, Ramdev's dispute and Salim's ordeal were not linked by any one crime. Each family faced its own difficulty in seeking a truth that the law could recognise.

At the beginning of Vaishakh, the expert's report reached the Darbhanga court. Ramvilas, the court clerk, checked its receipt, seal and attached pages before placing it in the proper record. The report said that the handwriting on several disputed pages of the ledger showed significant similarities to the admitted samples available, but that no sufficiently definite opinion could be given about one abbreviated name entry on the forty-fifth page. The formation of some numerals on that page differed from other samples; differences in the colour of the ink did not establish who had written them. Outside, some of Neelkanth's supporters promptly declared that the whole ledger had been proved false.

Others announced that the expert had proved every crime. Ramvilas gathered up the papers. 'The report is cautious about half of what it says,' he observed, 'and the market has turned it into a complete proclamation.'

The prosecution submitted the report and requested that the expert appear before the court to explain it. A date was fixed according to procedure. When the expert appeared, Shivnarayan's first question was very brief. 'Can you determine the writer of every page simply by looking at the handwriting of the accused person present here?' 'Not by sight alone,' the expert answered. 'An opinion is formed on the basis of comparison and analysis, and even that has its limits.' 'Were similarities found with some of the samples?' the prosecutor asked. 'Yes, on several pages.' 'And the name on page forty-five?' Shivnarayan asked. 'No definite conclusion.' The court recorded both answers clearly. The report was neither entirely worthless nor supreme proof. Revati saw how restrained the language of science could be, and how much more certainty the language of the marketplace demanded.

At the next hearing, Sub-Inspector Dinanath Prasad was questioned about the discrepancy in the number of sheets recorded on the two copies of the seizure list. This time he made no attempt to retreat from what he had said earlier. 'One copy says thirty-three and the other says thirty-five,' he acknowledged. 'How many loose sheets were there originally?' the prosecution asked. 'I can say what is confirmed by the seizure record made at the time,' Dinanath answered. 'A later count cannot reconstruct the exact order of every object on the original night.' Shivnarayan asked whether a separate account by the officer who prepared the list was available. Dinanath referred to the papers that existed, and where his memory was uncertain, said, 'I don't know.' The magistrate made clear that the significance of the discrepancy would be assessed with all the evidence in the final decision.

Outside the courthouse a police colleague spoke sharply to Dinanath. 'Why are you so cautious? What if the criminal gets away?' 'My duty is to say what was written down,' Dinanath answered. 'If the pages were counted differently, we must find out whose error it was. How can we be sure that pretending the two counts were identical would catch a criminal?' His colleague fell silent. Dinanath too feared that his department might think him a weak officer. But he was a father who taught his daughter to speak the truth. When he came home that evening he found her rehearsing her play. 'Father, did I play the king well?' she asked. 'Yes. But more important than playing a king is learning

the courage to acknowledge your own mistake.' The girl did not fully understand, but smiled all the same.

When the Ashadh rains began, news came of Naresh's whereabouts. Prabhakar's former clerk was now keeping accounts at a printing press near Samastipur. Revati immediately wanted to meet him, but Shivnarayan insisted that every contact with a witness must be lawful and transparent. The prosecution and the court were informed; his attendance could be secured under the rules if necessary. Naresh sent a letter himself stating that he had worked as Prabhakar's clerk in 1999 and 2000 and had occasionally made account entries for shops in the market. He acknowledged the name of Neelkanth's shop, but could not say without looking which pages, if any, he had written. One word in the letter held Shivnarayan's attention: 'occasionally'. 'Both the dates and the responsibility lie hidden in that word,' he told Revati. 'They will have to be clarified in court.'

Naresh looked tired when he appeared in court. He spent his working days more among the smell of ink than among ledgers. The prosecutor asked who he was and showed him certain figures written in the ledger. Naresh said one style of writing numerals looked familiar. The magistrate intervened. 'Finding a style familiar is not the same as identifying it as your own work. Which are you saying?' Naresh tried to smile. 'I think I used to write figures in that manner, but I cannot say on that basis alone that I wrote these.' In cross-examination Shivnarayan asked whether he had ever entered daytime credit transactions at Neelkanth's shop. Naresh said yes. 'And accounts of betting at night?' 'I have no direct knowledge of that work,' Naresh replied. Neelkanth took no reassurance from the answer; the questions of his commercial memory and his actual responsibility remained open.

After Naresh's testimony, the prosecution introduced certain financial aspects of the documents. An independent complainant had spoken of losing money through wagers, but said he had not personally witnessed any payment to Neelkanth. Another record contained marks apparently corresponding to the results of certain games; the parties disagreed over what they meant. The magistrate allowed each witness to be questioned within the bounds of what that witness knew. At one hearing the prosecutor exclaimed, 'How can so many coincidences occur together?' 'The number of coincidences may raise questions,' Shivnarayan replied, 'but it does not relieve the prosecution of proving every necessary element of the allegation.' The court heard both sides and fixed another date. Through this prolonged process Neelkanth's ordinary trade gradually

regained some stability, but every fresh hearing left another night of unease behind in his home.

During Sawan, Amresh entered a school debate on 'Delay in Justice and Haste in Justice'. He did not name his family's case. He said that a wrong decision made in haste could injure an innocent person, but endless delay suspended the lives of the accused and the victim alike. The teacher asked where the middle path lay. 'Work should be done on time,' Amresh replied, 'but every question must be heard fully.' It sounded an ordinary answer in the schoolroom, but to Nirmala it was grave. Sitting on the school veranda, she had watched her son's voice change since the first day of his father's case. On their way home Amresh asked, 'Mother, does Father tell us everything?' Nirmala stopped walking. 'I don't know everything myself,' she answered. 'But we won't imagine what we don't know and on that basis make him either guilty or innocent.'

That night Nirmala asked Neelkanth directly, 'Have you ever kept accounts of money from games?' Neelkanth was silent for a long time. He was confronting the question not in court but within his own home. 'Not once—several times,' he said at last. 'People quarrelled over the amounts they had won and lost. At a market intermediary's request I added up the figures. I thought I was keeping accounts of credit, but now I understand that keeping such accounts can itself carry a responsibility.' Nirmala's voice shook. 'Then why didn't you tell me before?' 'I was afraid. All the allegations would fall upon me at once.' Nirmala lowered her eyes. 'You must have the courage to acknowledge what you did. But don't take upon yourself what you did not do.' It was not legal advice. It was a difficult moral demand made by a wife of her husband.

In Bhadon, Shivnarayan held another extended consultation with Neelkanth. Neelkanth recognised his own handwriting on some pages. Alongside commercial entries, he said he might have adjusted certain amounts connected with the outcomes of games, but denied writing the new date and amount below Ramkishun Mahto's name on page forty-five. Shivnarayan told him that the private consultation was not immediately a matter for cross-examination in court. The next course would be determined by the lawful rights of the accused and the stage of the trial. 'But,' he added, 'I will not claim before the court that you never went near any accounts relating to games. Such an absolute denial does not agree with your own account.' Neelkanth nodded slowly. For the first time he understood that acknowledging the truth of a lesser allegation could sometimes be harder than denying every allegation at once.

After the consultation Revati asked her father, 'Can we call that an admission of the offence?' 'No,' Shivnarayan said plainly. 'Acknowledging handwriting, partly describing financial dealings and admitting every legal element of the alleged offence are different things. The police, the prosecution and the court each have their own roles. Do not turn confidential legal consultation into sensational material.' 'Then has the basis of the defence changed?' Revati asked. 'The basis was always the proper testing of evidence. If you imagined our duty was to erase every inconvenient fact, that basis was wrong. We will not concede unproved assertions by the prosecution; neither will we invent falsehoods for the client.' Revati wrote in her notebook: the advocate is not the owner of truth, but a participant in its lawful examination.

At the beginning of Asin a letter came from Kusum in Jodhpur. She wrote that preparations were being made for a proposed site measurement under the court's directions. The remains of the drain beside the old well were visible, though no one could establish their age without an expert's opinion. Students at Marudhar had set up a temporary library. Naseema Bano and Kusum had again made the assistance fund's accounts public, and books had been sent to Saira Ansari. Revati was pleased to read the letter. The court's interim order had given the farmer limited protection, while the students had found another way to pursue their education. It was possible to preserve the dignity of both sides if each recognised the other's needs. Kusum wrote at the end: 'My father is struggling to save the well; I want the hostel to be built too. If the survey tells the truth, both will find a way forward.'

During Kartik, the Darbhanga court discussed the list of the prosecution's remaining witnesses. The expert's opinion, Prabhakar's receipts, Naresh's limited testimony and Dinanath's account of the seizure were now part of the judicial record. A separate application concerned the availability of certain certified documents obtained from Gangesh Mahto's family. The prosecutor argued that the name Ramkishun might also refer to an old debtor. Shivnarayan replied that an original record, not an argument alone, was needed to support the proposition. The magistrate directed the parties to confine themselves to relevant evidence and not prolong the trial through unnecessary testimony. After that order both sides agreed on one point: the remaining stages of the trial should move forward in the coming year. The exhaustion of waiting was plain on Neelkanth's face.

When Nirmala heard that a decision might be approaching, relief came to her together with fear. For so long the question at home had been the next hearing date. Now it was the judgment. She looked at

Amresh's old exercise book, in which he had written as a child, 'Writing a name does not establish guilt.' On the next page now appeared the young man's signature, its letters steadier. 'Are you angry with your father?' she asked. 'About some things, yes,' Amresh replied. 'But I'm his son. That won't change.' Nirmala rested a hand on his head. From the back room near the doorway Neelkanth had heard them. To him the boy's brief answer seemed to hold two truths together: the relationship remained; responsibility had yet to be faced.

One evening in Aghan, Shivnarayan opened an old box in his office. Copies of Neelkanth's ledger, letters about the Jodhpur map, and information on Saira's school records sent from Gujarat lay in three separate bundles. 'I keep feeling that the three stories share a single thread,' Revati said. 'A thread of human questions, not of criminal prosecution,' her father replied. 'Someone's name was written incorrectly; the direction of someone's land was unclear; somebody's memory of a face faltered. All require evidence. But in court each case will proceed on its own facts.' 'Then how will this story of twenty-seven years become one?' Revati asked. Shivnarayan smiled. 'To say that the country is one does not make all its lawsuits one lawsuit. Different people sit beneath the same roof on the courthouse veranda; that doesn't make the shapes of their sorrows identical.'

Late that night Neelkanth went into the back room of his shop. New ledger pages now occupied the space left by the seized book. He opened one and wrote in his own hand: rice, five kilos; oil, two seers; credit, fifty-four rupees. Then he stopped his pen. Within that ordinary account he remembered the peace of his former life. A few years earlier he had believed that recording a name and an amount made a relationship clear. Now he knew there could be a distance between the meaning of a figure, the writer's intention, the actual use of money and the trust of another person. He called Nirmala. 'If I have done something wrong, I will bear its consequences,' he said. 'But I did not write that page about Ramkishun.' 'Then speak the truth as it is, in the same voice, to the very end,' Nirmala answered.

One day a certified copy of the death register arrived from Gangesh Mahto's home. Revati saw that Ramkishun Mahto's death had been registered in 1995, though the spelling of his father's name differed from that in another old document. 'So it has been proved that this man was no longer alive in 2000,' she said. 'The record supports the fact that the person whose death is registered was not alive in 2000,' Shivnarayan answered. 'But we still have to establish whether the name in the disputed ledger belongs to that same man or to another, and whether the sum

bearing a new date was copied from an old debt or entered for some other reason.' Revati wrote down the distinction once again. It seemed to her that truth in a courtroom seldom disclosed the whole sky at once. Sometimes a small window opened, only to reveal another question beyond it.

One day, on hearing Gangesh's name, Neelkanth recalled an old credit relationship. While Ramkishun was alive, he had at times kept accounts for grain supplied by him. Neelkanth could not clearly remember whether he had dealt directly with Ramkishun's son after the father's death. 'If an old amount was carried over into a new ledger,' Revati asked, 'whom do we call the writer?' 'I don't know,' Neelkanth replied. 'I say that plainly. It isn't an excuse.' Revati studied his face. She did not decide whether it was a genuine failure of memory or fear of criminal responsibility. She told her advocate father only that a gap in memory could not be forced into a definite assertion.

That month Shivnarayan received a letter from Principal Rathore. The temporary library established by Marudhar's students now contained books about agriculture, water, history and law. Kusum had kept two photographs of the old drain and her measurements on site separately, without treating them as substitutes for an official judicial demarcation. Shivnarayan showed the letter to Revati. 'The farmer's daughter is learning what I have been teaching in court for so many years,' he said. 'And she has opened a library for students beyond her own household,' Revati replied. 'Sometimes justice can be seen outside the words of an order, in the conduct of citizens.' A faint expression of satisfaction came over her father's face.

At the year's final hearing in December, Vimalakant Mishra fixed the next procedural date. The order was simple: examination of the available evidence would continue, and the remaining necessary questions would be determined according to law. Outside, people asked one another when Neelkanth would be convicted and when he would be released. Shivnarayan offered no prediction. Revati told Amresh only the next date and what the court had actually ordered that day. Beneath the old peepal tree, the courthouse bench was once again wet with dew. It looked no different from the beginning of the year, but many new pages had been added to the court file. Their meanings clashed with one another; the magistrate's next task was to evaluate those conflicts in accordance with law.

When everyone had gone, Ramvilas, the court clerk, gathered the file and put it away in the cupboard. He glanced once at the preserved copy of

page forty-five and closed the folder. No one spoke. Yet in a distant lane Amresh was ringing the bell of his bicycle; at home Nirmala was preparing the evening meal; in Jodhpur Kusum was drawing a new plan of the well's drainage channel; and in Gujarat Saira was writing in her history notebook about the home that had survived. In all these houses testimony was present in different forms: paper, soil, memory, silence. One thing was now clear in Neelkanth's case: he acknowledged that some writing was his, but denied the new entry associated with the dead Ramkishun Mahto's name. That was his own account, not the court's final finding. In the coming year it would have to stand before the evidence.

Chapter 7 — The Sea's Devastation

Little Andaman, December 2004–January 2005

The twenty-sixth of December. Sunday dawn had not yet fully broken. The sea air at Hut Bay on Little Andaman ordinarily carried the smell of salt, but that morning, before Shishir Haldar noticed the smell of the water, he felt a strange trembling in the earth. He was tightening the rope of his small boat. The ground beneath his feet shook so violently that he had to grasp a bamboo post to remain standing. Shishir, who had spent his life beside the sea, had witnessed many storms. He had seldom known the earth itself to rise before the sea did.

At home, Sudha was washing rice. At the first shock of the earthquake, an earthen pot fell, and Anish woke crying. His elder sister, Mousumi, caught his hand and ran towards the door. Sudha told everyone to get outside. There was fear in her voice, but she had to turn that fear into instructions. Grandmother Kalimani was sitting in a corner of the courtyard; when she tried to rise, her knees seemed about to give way. Shishir abandoned the boat, ran back and lifted her by the arms. When the shaking ceased, the neighbours stood looking at one another for a few moments.

After the first terror, the sea appeared unnatural. Water whose waves always touched the stones of the landing place seemed to be retreating. Some children shouted from a distance that the exposed seabed was visible. Shishir knew from experience that when water abandoned its familiar ways, it was no longer safe to remain on the shore. He told Sudha, 'Take the children to higher ground. Forget the boat and the nets.' Yet he himself turned back through the doorway to collect a small bundle of clothes left inside.

Sudha first steadied Grandmother, then pressed Anish against her breast. Mousumi remembered her school exercise books inside the house. 'My examination,' she said. Sudha had no time to answer. Their neighbour Basudev was coming towards them shouting, 'Up! Go up! Don't look at the shore!' From the sea rose a roar that the word storm could not begin to describe. All Sudha remembered afterwards was that she had not let go of Kalimani's hand, and that Shishir had appeared in the doorway one last time.

At the first impact of the water, the house's bamboo wall folded as though an invisible hand were bending a sheet of paper. Pushing the children and Grandmother ahead of her, Sudha struggled towards a raised earthen platform. Within moments, the road, the landing place, the shadows of the coconut palms and the voices of people disappeared beneath the water. One of Anish's shoes came off, but Sudha made no attempt to retrieve it. Only one thought mattered: they must all stay alive. Before she could even ask where Shishir was, the water struck again.

When the force of the first great wave subsided, the land was no longer what it had been before dawn. Kalimani had a cut on her cheek, one of Mousumi's arms was scraped, and Anish was trembling. Sudha clung to a thick tree branch. 'Shishir!' she called, using her husband's name. Only human cries and the sound of splintering wood answered. Far away an overturned boat was visible, but there was no way of telling whether it was Shishir's or somebody else's. Sudha called his name again. The sea gave no answer.

People continued to gather on high ground until afternoon. Some had no idea where their homes were; others could not find their children or their mothers. It was a calamity in which nobody had the chance to tell the whole of their own suffering. Anyone capable of supporting two people tried to lift a third. An elderly fisherman named Harihar dragged his injured leg along the ground, warning everyone that the water might return and that no one should go down to the shore. Nobody could explain the danger scientifically; experience had become their safest instruction.

That day Anish understood for the first time how hunger and fear could pull a person in different directions at once. His stomach was empty, yet he felt ashamed to ask for food. Mousumi wiped his face with the wet end of her sari. 'First we need drinking water,' Grandmother said. Sudha searched for a surviving water pot. There was water everywhere around them—the sea—but finding water fit to drink had become difficult. Salt was no longer merely a taste in the mouth; it marked the boundary of life itself.

Towards evening, a local teacher, Raghupati Nair, began recording the names of the survivors. He had a half-soaked register in which school attendance figures had once been entered. He tore out the first page and made a new list: alive, injured, missing. His hand trembled as he wrote. To put 'missing' after someone's name did not mean that person was dead, but the word carried an unbearable uncertainty. Giving Shishir

Haldar's name, Sudha said, 'Do not write that he is dead. The search is still going on.' Nair raised his pencil and wrote, 'Absent; search required.'

They spent the night in a damaged schoolroom. Part of its roof had survived, and the people sat on the sodden floor. The teacher kept the children away from the walls. Kalimani tried to tell a story about a cyclone she had lived through as a child, but her voice failed at the second sentence. To make Anish sleep, Sudha told him, 'Your father went to the boat. He must be looking for us.' She knew herself that she had no evidence for this reassurance. But she could not give the child an even deeper darkness than the one surrounding them.

At dawn the following day, a local rescue party went down to the coast. They found part of Shishir's boat; the rope of a fishing net was tangled in a coconut tree. They found no man. Sudha sat for a long time holding the piece of wood in her hands. 'The boat did not survive,' Basudev said, 'but sometimes a man catches hold of a tree higher up and lives.' 'Keep his name on the missing list,' Harihar said. 'Do not record a death.' Both statements held possibilities of truth, not a verdict. Sudha understood that when the earth erased the evidence, even finding out whether someone dear to you was alive became an ordeal of its own.

Uneven reports came from the different islands of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. Somewhere a landing place was destroyed, somewhere communications had failed, and somewhere seawater had penetrated deep inland. People heard about military and civilian rescue teams, but help took time to reach each settlement. Nair told the others only what he had seen for himself. He stopped people from saying things such as, 'Everyone on that island has been wiped out.' 'Write down what has been confirmed,' he would say. In his little water-damaged register, he wanted to keep information and rumour on separate sides of the page.

On the third day, Anish sat beside the school's register and noticed a scrap of paper. It bore the first letter of his father's name. The paper had begun to dissolve in the water, and the lettering was indistinct. 'This belongs to my father!' he said excitedly. Nair laid it in the sun to dry. 'It may,' he said. 'It may not. If it is yours, keep it safe.' Sudha heard compassion rather than harshness in the answer. The teacher had not extinguished the child's hope, but neither had he entered hope into the record as fact.

In the old school attendance register, Mousumi's name stood on the line below Anish's. Sudha suddenly remembered the wooden trunk at home that had held her marriage papers, Shishir's boat-registration certificate, the ration card and the birth records of both children. Shishir

used to keep the trunk locked. 'I didn't save the papers,' Sudha said. For the first time Kalimani replied sharply: 'You saved the children. There is no document greater than that.' But Sudha knew that when she went to a government office, this answer would not be enough.

Even amid the sea's devastation, the smallest structures of ordinary life began to re-form. One group cooked food, another cleaned wounds, a third went about collecting information on the missing. People who had lost their own boats gathered the remains of other people's fishing nets. There were disputes too: who should receive water first, who should get medicine, who needed a blanket most? 'Give it first to those who cannot walk,' Kalimani said. A new, unwritten rule took shape. It bore no official seal, yet many people followed it.

By the fourth day, some of the first organised relief supplies had reached the school: medicines, dry food, sheets and information about temporary camps. A member of the military party did not say his name; he simply lifted an injured old man and carried him outside. Anish watched a soldier in uniform walk very gently as he supported Kalimani's wounded foot. For the first time, trust began to return to the boy alongside fear. The sky outside was blue, although salty mud left by the sea still covered the ground.

A long queue formed in the relief room to have names entered. A government worker had sheets of white paper before him. He asked for the head of each household, permanent address, number of family members, damage to the house and means of livelihood. Sudha gave her name. 'Husband?' he asked. 'Shishir Haldar. Missing.' In his haste, the young man writing the entry turned 'Shishir' into 'Shishira'. Sudha stopped him. 'His name is Shishir. There is no a at the end.' The young man wrote it again and corrected the name. In that tiny correction, Sudha felt something like her husband's presence.

'Papers for the house?' came the next question. Sudha shook her head. 'The water took them.' 'Papers for the boat?' 'Those too.' 'Then how will you prove that the boat belonged to him?' The young man asked the question and turned his attention towards the next family. Before Sudha could speak, Raghupati Nair stepped forward. 'I can identify this family from the school's roll and the old settlement list. The neighbours will testify as well.' 'I'll enter that in the remarks,' the official said. 'Another office will conduct the final verification.' Sudha understood that the first road towards receiving assistance began with the accurate spelling of a name.

That afternoon, when a health worker noticed the increasing swelling in Mousumi's foot, she was taken to the first-aid room. Tamil, Bengali, Hindi and the words of several local languages mingled there. A nurse working beside the doctor explained matters to the children one by one. 'Will I be able to run again?' Mousumi asked. 'Keep the wound clean and rest,' the nurse said. 'We cannot decide too soon.' There was a possibility of recovery in her words, but no promise of a miracle. Anish thought that the doctor and the teacher were now saying the same thing: do not pretend to know what you do not know.

That evening a young woman arrived with relief supplies. Her name was Devjani Lakra. She had moved from Jharkhand to Port Blair some years earlier and was associated with a small voluntary health-literacy group. As she wrote down people's names, she told them, 'Whatever name you give me, I'll read it back. If there is a mistake, we'll correct it here and now.' Sudha watched in astonishment. The hurried pages of the government office and this young woman's care seemed to belong to different worlds. Devjani's group had little money, but its members were willing to give their time.

Devjani carried a red cloth bag. Along with medicines, it contained blank sheets, pencils, a little thread and strips of cloth for bandaging. 'How long will your people remain on this island?' Sudha asked. 'As long as we can,' Devjani replied. 'But for now I can tell you what help is available. I cannot promise permanent resettlement.' In her group's register, she recorded Shishir as a missing person and gave Sudha a copy. For the first time since the disaster, the family held a newly issued document of its own.

Only Sudha understood what that sheet was worth. The school's soaked register, the initial relief list and Devjani's written account agreed with one another, yet none established ownership of the boat. 'Ma, do papers stay alive?' Anish asked. Sudha hesitated before answering. 'If we look after them, they do. But papers cannot tell the whole story of a person.' The boy did not hear this as a playful riddle. He could see that, now their house was gone, the weight of papers in his mother's hands had increased.

Memories of Shishir returned through every object. Sitting on the high ground, Anish recalled the day his father had taken him out in the boat for the first time. 'You cannot tell how deep the sea is from the colour of its current alone,' Shishir had said. 'Once you go away from the shore, the water beneath you keeps changing.' As he untangled the fishing net, his father had taught him the names of different parts of the

sea. Now Anish looked towards the water and understood that those words had been his father's teaching, not the sea's promise.

Night after night Kalimani told stories of Shishir's childhood. She spoke of how, as a little boy, he had fallen into the water and his father had pulled him out with a long bamboo pole. 'He never gave up the water,' Kalimani said. Sudha listened to her mother-in-law but offered no answer. She knew that hope often sheltered behind memory. Yet such memories could also work like medicine that kept a person alive. Listening to Grandmother's story, Anish managed to sleep for a little while that night.

On the fifth day, two lists were made: one of survivors and the other of the missing. Names from the same family appeared in both places, while some people were listed nowhere. Nair's small register was passed to an administrative assistant, who said it could not be the sole basis for the official record; it would have to be checked against other sources. Some were angered by this caution. 'I am sitting here alive before you,' an elderly woman asked. 'Must I produce still more proof that I am living?' Nobody had an immediate answer.

Standing in the queues, Sudha learned what it meant to become, overnight, a petitioner for relief rather than a fisherman's wife in her own home. Her self-respect had not diminished, but the way people looked at her had changed. Some officials spoke with sympathy; others had grown brusque through exhaustion. Sudha kept repeating her requests: 'Food for my children, medicine for my mother-in-law, and news of the search for my husband.' Nothing more. She had not yet even reached the point of thinking about asking for a permanent home.

One day Devjani explained that boats and fishing nets had been destroyed in many places; along with food, people would need a way to begin earning their livelihoods again. 'Even when he had a boat, Shishir brought home grain from the fields,' Sudha said. 'Without the boat, what work will I have?' 'Did you mend fishing nets?' Devjani asked. 'Yes, sometimes. I sorted the fish. I kept the accounts of the prices too.' 'Then your labour needs to be named in the documents,' Devjani replied. Her words awakened the first note of a long-suppressed anger in Sudha.

Attempts were made to resume the children's education. Beneath a tree, Raghupati Nair made them write the alphabet. Some had no exercise books; others held pencils broken in half. Gathering them together, he said, 'We cannot begin today exactly where we left off yesterday. But we can begin here.' In place of a notebook, Mousumi

traced letters on a flat stone. The sound of the sea frightened Anish, but then he silently watched the letter sha his sister had drawn.

That evening an elderly man came to the relief room saying he had seen someone resembling Shishir on another part of the shore. Sudha sprang up. 'When? Where? Did you see him yourself?' Devjani asked. The man's answers were vague: perhaps three days earlier, perhaps somebody else. Devjani recorded what he said but told Sudha, 'We will try to investigate. We cannot reach a conclusion on this evidence yet.' Hope stirred again in Sudha, and with it her body began to shake. That night she understood for the first time how exhausting false news could be.

During the last days of December, the crackle of paper began to outnumber the roar of the sea. New administrative registers arrived with the relief supplies, assigning a number to each household. Because part of the settlement had sunk beneath the water, identifying the sites of the old houses was difficult. Consulting maps of the terrain, officials asked which tree had stood before a house, which path had run behind it, how far away the well had been. Sudha answered, but the path she described no longer existed. The sea had taken her husband and changed her geography as well.

An elderly boatman recounted a story that had survived the disaster: during the first impact of the tsunami, those who recognised the way to higher ground had saved many lives. But many others had not understood the meaning of the sea's sudden withdrawal. The schoolteacher discussed the experience with the gathered people. 'Children should be taught how to recognise a disaster,' he said. An official listened. He gave no promise, but wrote the suggestion in his daily register. On that sodden ground, the thought of a future warning system was beginning to take shape.

Devjani advised everyone to wrap whatever papers remained in separate pieces of cloth. She had earlier stayed near a family whose boat-registration document had lost its lettering as it dried. Sudha found a partly decayed corner of the marriage certificate bearing Shishir's name. There was no home left to salvage, but the paper had been caught behind the wood of the broken trunk. Shishir's name was still legible; his father's name and the month of the wedding had blurred. 'We shall have a copy made of whatever can be read,' Devjani said. 'We will not fill the blank spaces with guesses.'

The more intently Anish gazed at the paper, the more he tried to see his father's face. He was frightened by the thought that, after only six days, its features might already be fading in his memory. 'Do you

remember Father's voice?' he asked his sister. Mousumi was silent, then repeated something their father had once said: 'Learn to loosen the knots in a net; tearing it is easy.' Anish tried to smile, but the smile stopped halfway. That night the children were not trying to imitate their father's voice. They were trying to understand what his words had meant.

After five nights, a written notice was put up in the relief camp announcing that arrangements would later be made to obtain copies of certain permanent records from the relevant offices. For the present, the administration was giving priority to saving lives and arranging immediate shelter. Some demanded boats first; others demanded houses. Sudha could not think either demand wrong. Without a boat it was hard to earn food, without a roof it was hard for children to endure the night. But for those who had lost the original papers to their land, even the site of a permanent home could become a matter of dispute.

In one settlement, two families claimed the same stretch of coastal land. Before the disaster the boundaries had been plain: the water drained between two coconut palms, then came a path, and beyond it the houses. Now one palm was gone, and so was the path. The heads of both families had survived, but the sea had washed away the map of the property they disputed. 'We shall make no decision now,' an official said. 'There will be a site inspection; old records and witnesses' accounts will all be considered.' 'Where are we to live all that time?' an impatient young man asked. No government form contained an immediate answer to his question.

After seeing that dispute, Sudha tried to recall the landmarks around her own home: a mango tree to the left of the doorway, an old piece of timber from an overturned boat on the right, a narrow drain at the back. The sea had ripped out the mango tree by its roots; the drain had filled with water. Only a leaning stone remained, a stone Shishir used to set upright every year. Sudha and Anish went to look at it from a distance, regarding it as the last witness to their home. A guard would not let them advance. 'The ground is still unsafe,' he said. Sudha turned back. With her house gone, even the road that led to it had been closed.

On the first morning of the new year, the sea was an extraordinarily clear blue. Many people said they had never seen water so blue. Its beauty frightened Sudha. That something so beautiful could be so destructive was a new lesson in her life. Devjani came with a small group to meet the women. She asked who could sew, mend nets, cook, dry fish, keep accounts or teach children. At first the women did not recognise their

everyday work as the 'skills' she was asking about. Gradually, however, the answers multiplied.

'Sudha ties the knots in fishing nets,' Kalimani said. 'Shishir taught her after she came to this family as a bride.' Sudha did not smile. 'I don't know how to sail a boat,' she said. 'We are not discussing sailing today,' Devjani replied. 'As the settlement is rebuilt, nets, food, accounting and the care of children will all be useful.' She wanted this to be seen not as charity but as respect for labour. For the first time Sudha looked down at the lines on her own hands. The old cracks left by sea salt were still there.

On the second day of the new year, news arrived that some missing people had reached safety on other islands. Names were read aloud in the relief room. Sudha listened to every one of them. Shishir's was not among them. But when she heard the name 'Shirish Haldhar', she became alert. The paper contained incomplete information about age, home and family. 'Could this be my Shishir?' she asked the teacher. 'I cannot say for certain here,' Nair answered. 'We will request verification.' A written request to compare the two names was prepared. It offered a new ray of hope, but there was still no reason to call it the truth.

A volunteer whispered that Shirish Haldhar was alive. Sudha ran to Devjani, who took her by the hand and seated her. 'For now, the list contains only a name, not a verified identity. I will not take your hope away, but I cannot describe unconfirmed news as certain.' Sudha burst into tears. 'It is as though my whole life hangs on a single letter. Where am I to go between Shishir and Shirish?' Devjani had no answer. She simply gave Sudha room to cry.

That day Sudha witnessed another family's tragedy. An elderly woman found her son's name on the list of the dead, although he was lying injured at another relief centre. The entry was eventually corrected, but the false report had plunged his family into a night of profound darkness. When the teacher asked for the correction to be made in writing, he insisted that the original entry not simply be erased: the reason for the change and its date should also be recorded. 'Someone may ask tomorrow why the name was changed,' he said. 'The record should then be able to tell its own history.' The young administrative worker found this sensible.

One evening a dispute broke out at the camp despite everyone's misfortune. Residents of the settlement said that spending from outside relief funds should be clearly accounted for. Some volunteers felt hurt. 'We work day and night,' they protested. 'Why this distrust?' Devjani addressed both sides. 'Asking for accounts is not an accusation. Money

received in the name of people's suffering must be open to scrutiny by those people. But no individual should be humiliated without evidence.' The small group accepted this rule. Sudha listened as it became clear that transparency could strengthen the dignity of social service.

Shishir's boat had not been financed through gambling debts or wagers. He had taken an ordinary loan and repaid some of its instalments. After the boat was destroyed, a representative of the moneylender came to ask how much remained due. At first Sudha said nothing; later she asked the teacher to examine the papers. The lender's old ledger had also been partly destroyed. Some said that debts ought to be cancelled after a calamity; others pointed out that lenders themselves had obligations. Sudha saw that a natural disaster did not automatically dissolve people's economic relationships; it made their legal complexities greater.

Relief arrangements gradually expanded. Broken landing places, disrupted communications, the availability of ships and aircraft, and difficulties in delivering medicines made it impossible to reach every family at the same time. At a public meeting an official said plainly, 'We cannot resolve every question now. Our priorities are food, medical treatment, shelter and the search for the missing.' Some reacted angrily to the admission, but Sudha found those words more useful than impossible promises.

In the first week of January, a group from Port Blair arrived to inspect conditions at several relief centres. Among them was an advocate, Malvika Sen. She explained that the destruction of documents in a disaster did not extinguish all rights, but different claims required different evidence and procedures. People crowded around her: some needed a house, some a boat; some needed to establish the death of a family member, others to enrol children at school. What Malvika saw was not one enormous lawsuit but thousands of distinct questions arising from thousands of lives.

Sudha told Malvika about Shishir. She showed her the damaged marriage paper, the missing-person list and the separate list of survivors. Malvika listened to everything before speaking gently. 'The question of declaring a missing person dead must be approached with great caution. While the search continues, the evidence presented to a court or office must reflect that fact. Immediate relief for survival and a claim to permanent property rights are not the same application.' 'Will there be anything in my children's names, then?' Sudha asked. 'Our first task is to preserve the evidence available to protect their rights.'

A young man in the camp asked Malvika, 'How can we go to court without papers?' 'There are witnesses in court as well,' she replied, 'and copies of registered records can be obtained. But we cannot invent what we do not know.' At that, Devjani showed her Nair's register. Malvika examined the original dates of the entries, who had written them, and the later corrections, page by page. 'This register may be of assistance,' she said. 'But its value will depend on what the person who wrote it actually saw and what was merely reported to him.'

Anish had heard the word court on television news. He imagined a very large building in which everybody had to tell the truth immediately. 'Will you find my father for us?' he asked Malvika. The people around them fell silent. Looking into his eyes, she said, 'I can help put the papers in order so that information reaches the people conducting the search. I do not know where your father is.' Anish remained quiet for a while, then said, 'Then we will get all the papers right.' There was no childish excitement in his words, only a difficult resolve.

Malvika explained how to request copies of the old boat register from the municipal office. She made no promise of legal success on Sudha's behalf; instead, she helped prepare a written application. It set out the boat's possible registration number, Shishir's full name, the identity of the settlement, details of the old loan and an account of the documents that had been destroyed. Raghupati Nair promised to supply a copy of the school's registration records later. For the first time Sudha understood that losing one's papers was not the same as losing one's rights, although the former could make the latter much harder to establish.

On 8 January, word arrived of government announcements concerning wider measures for relief, temporary shelter, the children's examinations, livelihoods and rehabilitation. The people sitting in the school listened cautiously. Some eyes brightened at the mention of permanent homes. When boats and nets were discussed, Harihar folded his damp hands and sat in silence. A question rose in Sudha's mind: if another boat were provided, who would sail it? 'If Shishir does not return,' Kalimani said, 'it is essential that your name be recorded from now on as having rights to the boat.' Her words did not deny hope; they acknowledged fear of the future.

For the first time, clear relief appeared on Mousumi's face when she heard that the school examinations would be postponed. 'I'll be able to study,' she said. 'Where's the notebook?' Anish asked. Nair put a sheet of paper in his hand. Questions of literature and mathematics returned to the children's lives, though the sound of the sea continued to mingle

with them. Between lessons, the teacher told the children they could go outside if they felt afraid. Speaking about what troubled them was as necessary as remembering what they had been taught.

In the preliminary government register Sudha appeared as 'Sudha Devi'; in the voluntary group's register as 'Sudha Haldar'; and in the school's old parents' register as 'Sudha Shishir Haldar'. These different versions of her name did not contradict one another, but the official comparing the records grew suspicious. 'Where names have been recorded differently,' Malvika explained, 'other facts of identity must be examined. Birthplace, family members, witnesses and available documents together establish who a person is.' Sudha reflected that a human life was written down in fragments on different sheets of paper, and the court tried to fit those fragments together.

Then the answer arrived concerning the possibly living man named Shirish Haldhar. He was a different person on another island, of a different age and parentage. Sudha gazed at the paper for hours. The man was alive, but he was not Shishir. In Anish's presence she said, 'I hoped because the name was wrong. Hoping was not my crime.' Kalimani sat stunned. Mousumi took Anish outside, looking after him as an elder sister should. For the first time that day, no one in the family called out their father's name.

Malvika returned once more and made it clear that, even while Sudha's husband remained missing, properly supported applications could be made for the children's relief, shelter, education and whatever other assistance was available. The complex questions of a definite date of death and proof of death were separate matters. 'If I keep hoping he is alive and wait for him, will we lose the help?' Sudha asked quietly. 'There is no general rule saying that hoping a person is alive makes you ineligible for assistance,' Malvika replied. 'Every scheme has its own conditions. We will examine those conditions.' Sudha felt relief and uncertainty together.

One day Anish sat with Devjani counting relief supplies. As he counted sacks of rice, he asked, 'If all the names are written down, will that stop people stealing?' 'Writing down names does not make people honest by itself,' Devjani said, 'but it makes checking easier.' 'And if the person writing makes a mistake?' Anish asked. 'Then someone else will check it and record the reason for the correction. That is why witnesses and copies are needed.' The boy's questions had passed beyond the schoolroom and entered a new kind of public education.

One January morning Basudev took Sudha near the old landing place. Among newly deposited sand and overturned timber, someone had found a small iron plate. Two digits of an old boat number were still legible on it. 'Shishir's boat had a plate like this, didn't it?' Basudev said. 'See if you recognise it.' Sudha picked it up and examined it, but she could not be certain. She remembered the colour of Shishir's boat, its ribs and the shape of its prow, but not the numbers on the plate. She did not try to turn hope of a new life into a false certainty. 'Perhaps,' she said, 'but I cannot be sure.'

Before the plate could be attached to the written application as evidence, Malvika advised them to verify where it had been found, obtain the discoverer's account and establish its identity. Basudev was offended. 'I went to all this trouble to bring it, and you still doubt me?' Sudha told him, 'You mean well by me. But if we call the wrong plate part of our boat, another family's rights may be destroyed.' Basudev's anger subsided. For the first time, he understood what a difficult act of generosity it was to remain scrupulous about the truth even in one's own grief.

In one corner of the relief camp, a family was arguing about a child's date of birth. The school register gave one year, the medical paper another. 'I remember the day,' the mother said, 'but somebody else did the writing.' Sudha recalled something her own mother had said: a family preserved its lineage through memory, an office through paper. When the two differed, poor people were trapped between them. The woman from that family asked Sudha, 'Did you find your documents again?' 'Some of them,' Sudha said. 'Some are still in the sea.'

Raghupati Nair prepared a special register for the surviving children. Its first column recorded their names, the second their former schools, the third their present shelters and the fourth contact details for their guardians. Where parents were missing, he wrote 'Search continuing'. Some volunteers told him that this was merely school work. 'A child's education cannot be separated from a child's identity,' Nair replied. 'If a name is recorded wrongly again, the child's troubles will not end even after the disaster does.'

One evening Mousumi gave the teacher a short letter she had written to her father. It said, 'Father, we survived. Anish is here too. Grandmother's foot is getting better. Where are you?' The teacher read it without speaking and arranged for it to be kept in an empty envelope. There was no address to which the letter could be sent. Even so, Mousumi

wanted the words to exist on paper. To her, keeping words was not a way of letting go, but a way of keeping her bond with an absent person alive.

Sudha prepared another written statement in her own name. It was neither a charge sheet nor sworn testimony before a court. She simply set down her clear recollections of the time and place where she had last seen Shishir, the condition of the house, the family members and what had happened during the rescue. 'Should we put an approximate time where you are not certain?' Devjani asked. 'It was the dawn of 26 December,' Sudha replied. 'I do not know the time by the clock.' The sentence made her statement less dramatic but more truthful.

After reading the statement, Malvika explained that if someone's account was later presented in court, questions could be asked about its source and the circumstances in which it was recorded. 'What you are writing down today may assist with verification tomorrow,' she said clearly, 'but I shall not assign it a legal value at this stage.' Sudha accepted the caution. With her husband still absent, she felt it would be wrong to decide every small question of their lives in advance. Perhaps the courts, too, took time so that decisions would not be made merely in the heat of injury.

A local official came to the camp and announced that scientific assessments would be made to select safe sites for the permanent rebuilding of damaged homes. People wondered where those whose ancestors had lived beside the sea could go without losing their sense of who they were. 'If our houses are put up on the heights, how shall we keep our boats down below?' Harihar asked. 'If houses are built below again, how will the children be saved?' Kalimani replied. Between those two questions lay the difficult policy of rehabilitation. No single decision could provide equal relief to every family.

Sudha now had three papers safely in her possession: a copy of the school record, the details from the missing-person list, and the surviving fragment of the marriage certificate. A fourth was her copy of the application for an extract from the boat register. Devjani sewed a small pouch in an inner fold of cloth for her to keep them in. 'The water may come again,' she said. 'This time keep another copy somewhere else.' Sudha decided to leave one copy with Nair and another with Devjani. That simple distribution reduced the risk of losing the papers; the family's future was still uncertain.

On the first day of Magh, a letter arrived stating that an individual named Shishir Haldar appeared in an available old index to the boat-registration records, but further searching would be required to obtain a

sufficiently clear copy of the original entry. Sudha read the words slowly. Appears in the register: that small phrase felt to her like a patch of solid ground taking the shape of Shishir's boat. Yet the presence of his name in a boat register was not proof that Shishir was alive. Sudha could now make that distinction herself. Kalimani placed the letter against her head and closed her eyes.

That day Anish was solving an arithmetic problem in the temporary schoolroom. The teacher asked how many boats would remain if one of three sank. Some children answered, 'Two.' Anish's pencil stopped. Nair changed the question. Outside, Anish told him, 'Sir, it's easy to count boats in a book. When one boat sinks in the sea, people can disappear with it.' The teacher touched the boy's head. 'It's all right if you don't do mathematics today,' he said. Anish closed his notebook and sat beside his sister.

In the evening Sudha and Devjani sat outside the newly built shelter. Devjani spoke of her little daughter Mira in Jharkhand. 'She asks why her mother has gone so far away.' 'Tell her it is because people's homes were broken,' Sudha said. 'I tell her that rebuilding the houses will take time, but trust between people has to start being built now,' Devjani replied. 'And if trust breaks?' Sudha asked. 'Then keep an account of it, as you keep your papers, and learn to judge people anew.' The two women remained silent for a long time.

That night in Magh, Sudha dreamed of Shishir. He sat in a boat and called from far away that a knot in the net had come loose. Sudha woke, her heart pounding. She looked at the sleeping faces of Anish and Mousumi, then drew the blanket over Kalimani's feet. She told no one about the dream. She knew a dream was not evidence in court; in a woman's mind, however, memory and hope could meet. The two worlds could remain distinct without destroying one another.

The following morning she went to the relief office and asked for an acknowledgement that her application for a copy of the boat register had been received. The official examined the paper and stamped it. At the sound of the small round stamp, Sudha's eyes filled with tears. The sound contained neither her husband's name nor the boat, the house or the value of what had been lost. But it did establish one thing: she had submitted her petition and the office had acknowledged receiving it. She now had a fixed point from which she could ask again.

White light fell across the sea that day. Seeing the paper in his mother's hand, Anish asked, 'Will this paper bring Father back?' Sudha sat beside him. 'No, my child. Paper cannot bring a person back.' Anish

lowered his eyes. Sudha went on, 'But when somebody says that Father never existed, or that the house was never ours, we will be able to say that we were here. We had our own lives.' Anish took the paper and kept it safe.

That evening Raghupati Nair closed the attendance register he had saved. On the page where he had first written 'Absent; search required', he now added a note: 'Family's written petition received; report on search awaited.' The space next to Shishir's name was still empty. Yet Nair understood for the first time that an empty space did not necessarily signify nothingness. It could also mark the right to wait. At the landing place, a piece of wood from a broken boat moved with the water. Far away, in the shelter, Anish practised reading his father's written name. The sea gave no answer. The family preserved the letters of its question.

Chapter 8 — The First Judgment

Darbhanga, December 2004 — Parallel Events

That morning the Darbhanga courthouse lay under such a dense blanket of fog that even the upper branches of the peepal tree opposite were scarcely visible. The watchman pushed wet leaves aside with the tip of his stick as he opened the gate. Jagdish, the tea seller, was kindling charcoal in his little brazier; smoke from the ashes mingled with the mist. Here the day's first sounds came not from a judge but from paper and its handling—the thud of a stamp, the opening of cupboards, the creak of loosened file strings. Four years earlier, Neelkanth Sah had been brought into this veranda between policemen. Today he had come on his own feet, in compliance with the conditions of his bail. Yet its brickwork still recalled to him the mud of that first night.

Nirmala was with him. Before leaving home, she had taken the lentils off the stove, handed the keys to Amresh and told him to keep an eye on the shop's accounts. Amresh was no longer a child; he was almost as tall as his father. Closing his school notebook, he said, 'I'm coming too.' 'What about your studies?' Nirmala asked. 'I've waited four years for this one day,' he replied. 'I won't be able to concentrate on a book without hearing what happens.' Nirmala heard not obstinacy but the plea of an exhausted family. All three set out together. At the turning into the lane, Neelkanth stopped. His shop's old shutters had been newly painted, but the wood above them still bore scratches from the police search.

At Shivnarayan Jha's office, Revati had been arranging the records since the previous night. She had made four separate bundles: the original seized ledger, the witnesses' statements, the expert opinion and the records concerning the disputed page. Small marks along the outer edges would help her find particular sheets in court. She had a fifth page as well, not of mockery but of questions. On it she had written: 'What was seen? Who saw it? When? What was merely assumed?' Shivnarayan glanced at it. 'This time, write down the limits of the answers alongside your questions,' he said. 'Long speeches will achieve little today. Why should the magistrate accept what the record does not support?'

Revati remembered Neelkanth's first appearance, four years earlier. Then she had possessed a law textbook and very little experience. Today

she could open the records herself and disagree with her father, the advocate. She feared that the prosecution would take two or three genuine accounts of wagers and label the entire shop an illegal betting establishment. She also feared that the defence might seek to discard all the evidence because of one contaminated page. 'I don't want us to say anything that portrays Nilkantji as a spotless businessman,' she told her father. 'I still remember his own words.' 'Spotlessness is not the question the court must necessarily decide,' Shivnarayan replied. 'The question is whether the particular elements of the alleged offence have been established.'

At the courthouse, the record clerk Ramvilas was untying the file strings. Four years of familiarity had taught his fingers to recognise the thickness of individual pages. The original ledger's page numbering, the two copies of the seizure list, the government expert's signature, the witnesses' depositions and the court's orders were kept in their separate places. People had begun to gather at the doorway. Some were on Neelkanth's side, some were merely curious, and some had come because word had spread through the market that something would be decided today. Ramvilas laid a hand on the papers. 'This is not a market fair,' he said. 'We shall all hear what the magistrate says. But who has the right to pronounce the verdict before the decision?' The crowd stepped back a little.

When Judicial Magistrate Vimalakant Mishra entered the courtroom, the prosecutor stood beside the records. The court settled the sequence for the remaining formalities of the trial and the final arguments. The accused had already been questioned in the manner prescribed by law about the circumstances alleged against him. In his answers, Neelkanth had acknowledged some commercial entries, denied other matters and refrained from expressing certainty about facts he could not establish. The magistrate made it clear that private consultations with counsel were not automatically evidence against anyone: the decision would rest on material lawfully brought onto the judicial record. Revati wrote this in her notebook again. The boundary between truth spoken at home and evidence placed before a court had always fascinated her.

The prosecutor presented his case in three parts. First, there were indications that records of wagers had been kept at Neelkanth's shop alongside legitimate trading accounts. Second, certain numbers corresponded to the results of games and to cash payments. Third, the seized objects together with the witnesses' accounts supported an inference that Neelkanth had participated knowingly. He showed the magistrate several pages, but the judge asked, 'Has it been established that

every page is in the same hand?' 'No, Your Honour. The expert has identified similarities on several pages but has offered no definite opinion on some of them.' 'Then confine your conclusion to that extent,' the magistrate said. The prosecutor turned a page and resumed his argument.

He first read Sub-Inspector Dinanath Prasad's account of the seizure. He linked the objects allegedly recovered from the rear room of the shop with the limited observations of the independent seizure witnesses, Mathuranand Kapri and Rafiq Ansari. But two numbers stood out on the page Revati had marked: thirty-three and thirty-five. The two copies of the seizure record gave different counts of the loose sheets. 'Is there a concrete explanation for this discrepancy?' the judge asked. 'It may have been a clerical error,' the prosecutor said. 'A possibility cannot substitute for an explanation,' the judge replied calmly. 'The court will examine the limits of the available evidence. Was there an error, were the items altered, or were they counted in two different ways? Which of these has been confirmed?' The prosecutor admitted that the record contained no definite resolution of this particular question.

The admission might have set the veranda whispering, but the judge moved directly to the next question. 'Does a discrepancy between two seizure lists mean that every entry in the original ledger ceases to exist?' The prosecution answered that it did not: the availability of the original ledger, the seals on the objects and the other testimony would still have to be evaluated separately. Shivnarayan did not dispute this. His purpose was not to argue that a single numerical error brought the whole alleged offence crashing down. He wanted to ensure that the difference between the two documents was not treated as additional proof of guilt. The court framed its inquiry within those limits. Revati realised that opposing sides might still share certain foundations of law.

During the recess, Nirmala sat on the last bench of the veranda. Amresh brought her a glass of water. She did not even touch it. 'How much of your father's wrongdoing might be proved?' she asked her son, as though growing older must have given him answers about the law. 'I don't know,' Amresh said quietly. 'But if Father did something wrong, saying he didn't won't make it disappear.' Nirmala watched his face. The boy who had once wanted only to play with his father now spoke with both tenderness and severity. 'What will happen to our home, then?' she asked. 'The home is still here,' Amresh said. 'But not everything will be as it was.'

Dinanath Prasad stood beside a pillar some distance away. His part as a witness was complete, but he had come to hear the final arguments after

obtaining permission. One question still troubled him: the error in the count of pages at the time of seizure. Had he performed his duty that night? He trusted that he had, but he could not fully explain how the numbers in the two copies had come to differ. Mathuranand arrived at the courthouse on business and stopped when he saw him. They had spoken very little to each other over the intervening years. 'I didn't say I had seen what I hadn't seen,' Mathuranand told him. 'Neither did you. Don't torment yourself over that.' 'It isn't only that,' Dinanath replied. 'A document written by my hand can change someone's life.'

Mathuranand remembered one detail of that old night. He had seen the ledger lying on the table during the raid, but had not seen when it was taken from the cupboard. Rafiq Ansari, too, had arrived after certain objects had already been placed on the table. Both had made the limits of their direct knowledge clear in court. Those limits helped Neelkanth's defence without rendering everything Dinanath had done worthless. 'I used to think that giving evidence in court meant choosing a friend or an enemy,' Mathuranand said. 'Now I understand that sometimes a man can tell the truth and preserve a friendship, while at other times staying silent for friendship's sake can itself be a wrong.' Dinanath said nothing; relief showed through the fatigue on his face.

When the hearing resumed, the prosecution raised the matter of Prabhakar Mahto's receipt. A payment of fourteen thousand rupees, a grain bill of twelve thousand eight hundred, and the alleged old balance —the figures were known to both sides. The prosecution argued that such an adjustment suggested financial dealings beyond ordinary commerce. 'Prabhakar himself said he could not determine the nature of that outstanding amount without the original old ledger,' Shivnarayan observed. 'How can uncertainty stand in place of proof for the prosecution?' The judge turned to the record. 'Which part of this payment has been directly connected to unlawful wagering?' The prosecution referred to another witness who had heard about money lost but had not seen anyone hand the money to Neelkanth. On this point, the scope of the argument was steadily narrowing.

Shivnarayan did not begin his reply at once. In a grave, almost paternal voice, he requested the court to examine again the sequence of evidence recorded in an earlier judicial order. The judge permitted it. Revati passed him the page. It contained Naresh's testimony: Naresh had been Prabhakar's accountant; he had sometimes made credit entries at Neelkanth's shop; certain numbers in the ledger looked familiar to him, but he could not say with certainty that he had written one particular disputed page. 'This testimony does not establish that all Neelkanth's

pages are innocent,' Shivnarayan said. 'It establishes only that more than one hand may have written in the same ledger.' The judge nodded. The prosecutor did not contest that limited proposition.

The discussion turned to the expert opinion. The prosecution pointed to similarities between certain entries and specimens of Neelkanth's handwriting. Shivnarayan conceded that the opinion could not be disregarded. He insisted, however, that the expert had expressly been unable to reach a definite conclusion about the brief entry of a name on page forty-five. 'Different ink is not proof of the date of writing,' he said, 'and similarity of handwriting does not, by itself, explain the financial purpose of every number.' The judge had the expert's actual words read again from the record. A kind of pause descended upon the courtroom. Those outside who expected final truth from the mere invocation of a scientific expert now saw that science itself could acknowledge the limits of its knowledge.

The magistrate paid particular attention to the question of Ramkishun Mahto. A certified extract from the death register, obtained through Gangesh Mahto, recorded a death in 1995. Yet the father's name was spelled differently on an old document, and the possibility of another man with the same name in the market had been raised. 'An old liability may have continued under this name,' the prosecutor said. 'That cannot be ruled out altogether.' 'It cannot be wholly ruled out,' Shivnarayan replied, 'but neither can it be wholly accepted. The author of the page bearing a new date, the actual person concerned and the financial reason for the entry are all unproved.' 'Does the death-register entry alone establish that the disputed entry was fabricated for fraud?' the judge asked. 'No,' Shivnarayan answered plainly. It was a very short answer, but Revati's trust in her father deepened because of it.

Revati reflected that there was an easy path: to call every mention of a dead man's name a conspiracy. That would please Neelkanth's supporters. But it would erase both the possibility of another person of the same name and the reality of an old debt. In life, matching a name meant more than comparing letters or numbers: it required lineage, village, parentage, the date of a transaction and the memory of witnesses. She recalled Kusum's letter from Jodhpur: the remains of an old drain by the well were visible, but without measurement no one could say when the drain had been built. The likeness between these matters lay not in crime but in the method of establishing evidence. The papers of a household, the field of a village and a trader's ledger belonged to separate disputes; behind every name, however, lay some material fact upon the earth.

The following day the prosecution presented the second part of its closing argument. Neelkanth's shop, it contended, had been used to record wagers under cover of legitimate trade. If the court examined the available evidence only in isolated fragments, it might miss the larger network. The argument had force. 'To describe the whole picture,' the magistrate asked, 'must we not establish the authenticity of its individual pieces?' 'Circumstantial evidence has cumulative strength,' the prosecutor replied. 'Certainly,' the judge said. 'But repeatedly adding together matters for which there is no firm foundation does not create certainty.' The prosecution prepared a list of some direct financial entries and indications of responsibility. The debate gradually converged on a more limited allegation.

At this point Shivnarayan made a difficult choice. He did not seek to defend the morality of every transaction in Neelkanth's business. 'The fact that a trader keeps accounts does not entitle him to a certificate of purity,' he said. 'If there is lawful evidence supporting particular acts connected with wagers, let that evidence be examined. But connections that have not been demonstrated cannot be established by rumours in the market.' Revati understood why this argument was necessary. In private consultation their client had mentioned irregular entries, but those confidential statements were not public evidence. The defence rested its case on the facts in the judicial record, not on a comprehensive and false denial.

Neelkanth listened from his chair. Again and again he wanted to stand and say, I know the mistakes I made, but don't make me the mastermind of every crime. His advocate had explained that there were proper stages and occasions for speaking in court; words spoken impulsively could have consequences that were difficult to undo. He laid his hands on his knees. An old pain was stirring there. Over four years of litigation, that physical discomfort was nothing new. What was new was the anger he now felt towards himself. Acts he had treated as ordinary, perhaps for a small profit or in the name of friendship, had entered the accounts of his wife and son's lives.

After the recess, the magistrate examined the earlier record of Neelkanth's personal answers. He continued to make clear the legal limits of the accused's responses. Neelkanth had acknowledged making certain business entries; he had admitted that he had no clear recollection of some matters put to him; and he had denied running the entire alleged illegal betting operation. The court treated those answers neither as automatic proof of innocence nor as a confession. The prosecution still bore the burden of independently establishing its case.

Revati found fresh meaning in an old principle from her legal studies: the prosecution could not write whatever story it wished into the empty spaces left by an accused person's silence or limited answers.

That evening, when Shivnarayan returned to his office, a letter awaited him. Advocate Pareek had written from Jodhpur that a new date had been set for demarcation in the Marudhar land dispute. Kusum had raised questions about the old well; construction of the hostel had not resumed on the portion where work was suspended. Having read the letter, Shivnarayan told Revati, 'Here you examine figures in accounts; there they examine lines on a map. Both kinds of paper change people's lives.' 'But the methods of examining them aren't the same,' Revati replied. 'In Jodhpur there is land; here there is writing. In some places you have to set foot on the ground to verify the truth; in others you depend on witnesses' memories.' Shivnarayan nodded. 'And sometimes you have to bring the two together.'

That night Shivnarayan himself reopened the list of old depositions. His attention fell on one witness: Madhav Thakur, who ran a small cloth shop in the market and had testified in court in 2001. He had claimed that he sometimes saw papers recording the results of games at Neelkanth's shop, but an important portion of his statement had escaped public notice. Madhav said that one evening two men had shown Neelkanth 'old accounts' and Neelkanth had calculated the difference between cash amounts for them. Madhav had not seen a wager being placed, nor had he seen anyone hand Neelkanth money lost in a game. His understanding of the nature of the paper was an inference. Shivnarayan saw that proving a wide-ranging betting operation on the strength of this witness would be difficult, although questions about the reality of some financial dealings would remain.

Revati read Madhav's statement again. 'If he didn't actually see a wager,' she asked, 'how can the court regard any offence as proved?' 'Direct eyewitness testimony is not the only route,' Shivnarayan replied. 'A limited charge may be proved through a chain of circumstances, reliable documents, admissible statements and a genuine connection between the acts concerned. But in this case we must remember that matching numbers alone is not sufficient. Above all, the magistrate must write his reasons clearly.' 'And if our client receives the benefit of every doubt?' Revati asked. 'Even then, we cannot erase the moral question raised by the facts that have been acknowledged. A court's decision and a family's self-examination do not follow the same path.'

That night, there was no open argument in Amresh's home. After dinner Neelkanth took a small balance scale from his father's old wooden box. One pan had been slightly crooked for years. He placed the scales on the table and looked at them. When weighing rice, he sometimes straightened the pan, but once, having neglected to do so, he had let a customer leave with too little. He had gone after the man and delivered two extra handfuls of rice. Today he remembered that small incident. With money and ledgers, putting things right was not so simple. Money that moved because of other people's losses and winnings might have passed without his ever seeing its original source, but he could not wholly evade responsibility for having calculated the accounts.

Nirmala came into the room. 'Why have you taken out the scales?' she asked. 'The same thing weighs differently in these two pans,' Neelkanth said. 'How will the court weigh what is inside me?' Nirmala put down some water and sat. 'The court does not have to weigh your mind. It will consider the evidence before it. What you concealed from me is another matter. On the first day you told me that every ledger contained accounts of rice and lentils. Now you yourself say you also recorded some accounts connected with games.' Neelkanth did not reply. 'I shall not abandon you,' she went on. 'But do not tell me, in front of our child, that the police alone are responsible for this family's suffering.' That sentence wounded Neelkanth more deeply than four years of court appearances.

The following week Revati was searching the district library for a book on the professional responsibilities of advocates. As she read, her mind returned repeatedly to how difficult it was for a client to tell the painful parts of his own story. Why, she wondered, were people taught from childhood not to lie, only to select fragments of truth when they feared humiliation? In court, those fragments appeared in one form; at home, they became fissures in relationships. She opened her notebook and wrote a short reflection: 'No one wishes to hand another the full burden of his own wrongdoing; nor should anyone be compelled to carry the burden of another person's wrongdoing.' She did not send a copy to Amresh. She knew that a family's suffering was not merely material for a literary lesson.

In Kartik, the Darbhanga court fixed the remaining days for final arguments. In his closing submission, the prosecutor acknowledged that the writer of page forty-five had not been definitely identified and that no decisive explanation had been found for the difference between thirty-three and thirty-five. Nevertheless, he urged the court to evaluate together the handwriting on several other pages, the shop's accessibility, Madhav's limited observations and the signs corresponding to the results

of games. 'We are not claiming that every allegation is equally strong,' he said expressly. 'But what has been proved must not be ignored merely because other matters remain uncertain.' Shivnarayan responded to that statement not with visible opposition but with heightened attention. The prosecution was now presenting its strongest case within the genuine limits of the evidence.

When Shivnarayan rose to make his final submission, an extraordinary stillness settled over the courtroom. He did not begin by recounting the four-year history of the hearings. He opened a ledger. 'Your Honour, this book contains rice sold on credit, oil, deposits of cash and certain abbreviated signs that have been connected with the results of games. We do not ask the court to deny that these things exist. The question is which entries have been reliably connected to a particular purpose, a particular author and a particular legal responsibility.' He marked the pages separately. 'Where eyewitness testimony is incomplete, an inference cannot be called direct evidence. Where an expert is uncertain, we ought not to make him certain. And where a commercial receipt exists, we cannot turn it into an account of crime without adequate reason.'

In the middle of his argument Shivnarayan glanced at Neelkanth. 'An accused person's civil rights do not shrink because his standing in the market has deteriorated. By the same token, his shop's past acts of service do not make an offence lawful. The court's authority and duty are different: to determine the truth of specific charges.' Vimalakant Mishra paused his pen and looked up. 'Which evidence do you accept as authentic?' Shivnarayan did not deny the authenticity of numerous original commercial entries; he challenged their use as proof of an offence. In that answer the boundaries and dignity of his defence were plain. Revati wrote in her notebook: 'To accept evidence is not to accept every meaning assigned to it.'

Outside, Amresh sat under the old peepal tree. A woman who had come to court with a small child was waiting for someone. The child stared at a sweet seller passing along the road. Amresh felt in his pocket and found that he did not have even ten rupees. The family business had begun running again, but four years of lawyers' fees, copies of records, travel and diminished trust in the shop had almost exhausted their savings. He had never spoken of these calculations to his friends. He had felt that to question his father publicly about the alleged wrongdoing would shame the family. Yet he was also hurt that nobody spoke of the distress suffered by those who had lost money because of his father's actions. He kept searching for an answer between the two.

Ramvilas, the record clerk, entered that day's closing order in clear handwriting. The judge fixed a date for pronouncing judgment. As people came out, they began asking who would be punished and who would be acquitted. Ramvilas found those questions the hardest of all. No judgment had yet been written, but stories had already begun circulating through the market. One small newspaper announced a decisive turn in the betting case. Another said the four-year prosecution was collapsing. Both headlines struck him as careless. Neither contained the actual words of the order: 'Date fixed for judgment.' Ramvilas placed one copy in the file and counted the remaining papers.

When Dinanath returned home, he told his wife Sumitra, 'The arguments ended today. Only the judgment remains.' 'Then why are you afraid?' she asked. Dinanath admitted that the court would not overlook the error in the investigation. 'What if a guilty person goes free?' 'If you conceal your own mistake, you weaken the foundations for punishing anyone guilty,' Sumitra said. 'The investigator's task is to keep a truthful account, not to write the verdict.' Their daughter came and sat beside him with her practice sheet. On it she had written: 'Speaking the truth takes courage.' Dinanath smiled. He could not yet explain to his daughter how difficult such a simple schoolroom sentence became in a court record.

Three days before the judgment date, a letter arrived from Kusum. In Rajasthan the dispute over the well's boundaries continued; official measurements showed two old maps indicating different directions. Principal Rathore had told the students that they must respect the court's orders, but there was no reason for the teachers to stop holding classes. Naseema Bano and Kusum had added a new book to the temporary library: an elementary introduction to the Constitution of India. Kusum's last line read: 'We are waiting for an answer that will save someone's land without interrupting another person's education. But even if the decision goes against us one day, we will not stop reading the papers.' Revati kept the letter separate from her case file. The outcome of that struggle was independent of the criminal trial in Darbhanga, but the lesson in judgment and discernment was the same.

On the morning of judgment, Neelkanth woke very early. Nirmala found him sprinkling water and sweeping in front of the shop. There was no particular need to clean it, but the work of his hands moved with the fear in his mind. 'Haven't you eaten yet?' she asked. 'I'm not hungry,' Neelkanth replied. Nirmala put two small rotis on a plate. 'Don't go to court on an empty stomach.' Amresh put on his blue school sweater. As Neelkanth shut the house door, he touched one edge of the doorway, as if

to confirm the continuing existence of his home in the midst of four years of judicial struggle.

The courthouse veranda was more crowded than usual that day. In Jagdish's tea stall people were reading the newspaper reports. Some said that Neelkanth would be proved innocent; others that he would be sent directly to prison. When Shivnarayan arrived, the crowd did not fall silent. It began asking him even more questions. He gave no prediction. To the family he said only, 'We shall hear the decision, read the written order and then decide what comes next. Today we must not allow the court's words to be replaced by the market's words.' Revati held her notebook, but for the first time she kept it closed. Today she had come to listen.

Vimalakant Mishra entered the courtroom carrying the judgment. Its opening lines identified the prosecution, the charges and the duration of the trial. He explained that the court was examining the allegations under the older local statutory provisions applicable to games; moral condemnation alone could not support a conviction. He then read the summary of the evidence. Mathuranand Kapri had stated that he had not witnessed the entire seizure process; Rafiq Ansari had arrived after certain items had been brought out; Dinanath had acknowledged the discrepancy in the number of sheets recorded in the two copies. The judge had taken this defence objection seriously, but he declined to treat every part of the original ledger as unproved on that ground alone.

Next came the expert opinion. The writing on several pages resembled available samples of Neelkanth's hand; on the disputed name on page forty-five, no definite finding about authorship was possible. The court held that such a limitation did not in itself destroy the expert's credibility; his opinion would be used only within its stated bounds. Prabhakar's receipt for grain was accepted as proof of a legitimate sale of goods; the alleged unlawful purpose of the additional amount remained uncertain. Naresh's testimony supported the possibility of multiple hands in the ledger, but it did not identify the author of every page. Revati listened intently to each sentence. The court was sorting the evidence into distinct categories.

When he came to the entry bearing Ramkishun Mahto's name, Vimalakant Mishra lowered his voice slightly. 'The fact of the death in 1995 of the person named in the death register is relevant,' he said. 'But it has not been established beyond reasonable doubt that the name in the disputed ledger necessarily refers to that person. The presence of a new amount beside a dead person's name does not, by itself, prove that the

accused committed forgery.' On that particular allegation, the court found the prosecution's evidence insufficient. Neelkanth's shoulders relaxed for an instant. Nirmala looked at him but showed no satisfaction. The judgment was not yet complete.

In the next part, the judge discussed certain specific accounts connected with written signs denoting local game results and adjustments of cash. Supporting evidence included proof concerning the authorship of ledger entries, the limited direct observations of an earlier witness, and the combined circumstances of the relevant dealings. He explained that this chain of evidence established a limited role in which Neelkanth had knowingly maintained accounts of unlawful wagers for a period of time. But the evidence did not suffice to establish a wider betting operation, the full claim of collecting money from numerous customers, or the alleged deception associated with page forty-five. The court had decided the allegations individually; it had not delivered a verdict on whether Neelkanth was, as a whole, a 'good' or a 'bad' man.

Neelkanth was convicted on certain limited counts and given the benefit of reasonable doubt on others. As Nirmala heard the words of the judgment, her eyes filled with tears. She could not decide whether they were tears of joy or sorrow. Had every charge been proved, the family's fear would have been greater still. Had none been proved, how were they to understand the moral mistakes Neelkanth himself had admitted? The decision now stood apart from both harsh extremes. Amresh looked towards his father. Neelkanth's lips were pressed together. The boy knew that the family could not record this day in its history with a little phrase such as 'He was acquitted' or 'He was punished.'

After the judgment, an old complainant for the prosecution stood in the veranda. His name was Ramapati Thakur. Years earlier he had lost his household's savings through the temptation of gambling. The judicial record clearly marked the limits of his evidence: he knew about his own loss, but had not personally seen Neelkanth control every transaction. Seeing Neelkanth now, he said, 'What I lost was not only money. Nobody in my home trusts a word I say any more.' Neelkanth could not summon the courage to answer. 'I hear about the sorrow in your home,' Ramapati went on. 'To whom shall I speak of the sorrow in mine?' His voice held more exhaustion than revenge. The question could not enlarge the bounds of Neelkanth's conviction, but it reopened his memory of the harm his dealings had helped cause in other lives.

Revati stood a little way from that conversation. She knew that not every element of Ramapati's personal loss had been proved against

Neelkanth in this trial. Yet the man's pain was real. 'My legal answer will not console him completely,' she told her father. 'The law must say clearly what it can establish,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Understanding the suffering that remains takes the mind of a citizen. But it would not be justice to substitute that suffering for an additional conviction.' Revati offered Ramapati water. He drank it and went away. The court subsequently began hearing submissions on sentence, but the question he had asked in the veranda stayed with her.

The court allowed separate time for submissions on the extent of punishment. Arguments were heard about Neelkanth's previous life, the limited nature of the offence proved, the long duration of the trial, his dependent family and the applicable statutory provisions. The prosecution reminded the court of the public interest and the social consequences of irregular financial dealings. Avoiding emotional stories unsupported by the evidence, Shivnarayan requested a limited sentence. The judge made clear that the question of possible remedies available to different people who had suffered financial loss would not be automatically exhausted by this single judgment. After sentencing in accordance with the law, the court imposed the prescribed financial penalty, while the acquittals on the other charges remained in force. Once copies of the order were available, the parties would have whatever legal avenues of appeal the law permitted.

Outside, the questions began. 'Has he been let off?' one neighbour asked. 'Was he punished?' asked another. Amresh heard them both. The answer he thought right was not a simple one. 'Some charges were proved,' he said. 'Others weren't. Read the written judgment.' A neighbour laughed. 'So there's no straight answer?' 'A straight answer doesn't have to be a short answer,' Amresh replied firmly. Nirmala listened. Four years earlier someone had asked this child whether his father was a thief. Now the boy himself was explaining to others the limits of a judicial decision. That change in his maturity seemed to inscribe half the family's life into a single day.

As Shivnarayan came out of the courtroom, he told Revati, 'Do not trust the news reports before reading the judgment in full.' 'I have understood one thing,' she replied. 'I cannot turn charges the court found unproved into guilt through newspaper speculation. And I cannot erase the limited guilt it found proved simply because the family has suffered.' A tired smile came over her father's face. 'Today you have completed one chapter of the book,' he said. 'It will take a lifetime to understand it.' Revati touched his hand. Amid the dust and sunlight of the courthouse, she felt that her real life in the law had begun.

Neelkanth sat alone with Shivnarayan in his office. 'Shall I appeal?' he asked. 'First we shall read the written order and see which findings may be challenged on legal grounds,' Shivnarayan replied. 'We shall exercise your rights, but I shall make no false promises.' 'If I do not appeal, will people say I have accepted every crime?' 'There is no end to what people will say. The court's order contains a decision on each charge. The question of appeal depends on legal grounds and your own decision, not merely on your reputation in the market.' Neelkanth's voice dropped. 'I told my wife only half the truth as well.' This time the advocate had no legal answer to give. He simply listened.

When they returned home, Nirmala lit the stove again. She felt an urge to visit the temple, but anger was mixed with that desire. 'We did not win everything today,' Neelkanth said quietly. Nirmala set down a pot and looked at him. 'I did not wait four years to win. I wanted what happened to become clear. Accept what was your fault, and do not take on yourself what somebody else wrote.' 'Have you forgiven me?' Neelkanth asked. Nirmala thought for a long time before answering. 'Forgiveness is not a judicial order that can be written on a single date. It will take time to rebuild my trust. But I am still here in this house.'

Amresh opened his notebook to write down what had happened in court that day. On the first line he wrote, 'Father is guilty', and stopped. He wanted to write on the next line, 'Father is innocent', but that too seemed incomplete. Finally he wrote, 'The court considered different matters separately.' Beneath it he noted that the two seizure lists gave different counts, although the ledger also contained certain genuine financial entries. At his age he did not possess the technical language of law, but he did not want to reduce his family's judgment to two words. Neelkanth saw his notebook. 'Are you writing about me?' he asked. 'I'm writing what the court said and what I understood,' Amresh replied. His father remained silent.

That night Revati also received a letter from Saira. Her student life in Gujarat had resumed; she had managed to obtain copies replacing some of the educational records lost in the burning of her home. Saira wrote that for many days, whenever her old name was called at school, her eyes had filled with tears. 'If I abandon my studies, those who burned our home will have won,' she wrote. Reading the letter, Revati understood that Neelkanth's judgment and Saira's struggle had no criminal connection, yet they shared the fierce desire to recover names and records after injustice. She read part of the letter aloud to her father. 'Testimony like this does not always reach the courts,' Shivnarayan said, 'but history needs it.'

In the final week of December, reports of cold weather came from across the country. The Darbhanga court was finishing its year-end work. Ramvilas recorded the receipt of an application for a certified copy of Neelkanth's judgment. Whether either side would appeal was not yet known. He kept the papers safe and made space for the new year's files. Each lawsuit in the office's old cupboard seemed to him like an unfinished human story. Even a file in which judgment had been delivered did not contain an entire life. Beyond it lay families, markets, fields, schools and the fresh fears of each succeeding year.

On 26 December, an unimaginable calamity struck the distant sea. The first reports of the tsunami reached Darbhanga over the radio. Revati was sitting near a bed. The news spoke of boats, houses, missing families and difficulties in bringing relief to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. 'They must have lost their papers there too,' she told her father. 'First their lives must be saved,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Then will come the work of recovering documents, matching names and establishing rights to homes. Even when no paper survives, what truly happened does not cease to have happened—but proving it becomes difficult.' He did not yet know that Anish, a child in the Andamans searching for a fragment of his father's boat number, would one day become acquainted with the questions of a court.

Neelkanth was weighing lentils in his shop when the news came. A customer said that the sea had swept away many homes. Neelkanth listened closely to the radio. His own suffering through the trial did not suddenly become insignificant, but he understood that for some people the immediate question was not the date of a court hearing but how to stay alive. He considered contributing a little from the family's savings. 'We should help,' Nirmala said, 'but we have debts at home too. Whatever we can afford, record it clearly.' That night, for the first time, Neelkanth entered a donation in his new ledger with his own hand, noting the amount, the name, the date, the reason and where it had been received. There were no secret figures in that new entry.

Before closing her notebook on the year's last night, Revati wrote a summary of the court's judgment: 'Responsibility for what is proved; no presumption of guilt for what is not.' On the next line she added, 'A citizen's life continues after the court gives its decision.' What she had learned as Shivnarayan's pupil through four years of litigation would now be tested in different forms over the years to come. The new age of the right to information, changing banks, digital records, students' rights and new lists containing hundreds of names still lay beyond her

knowledge. But she knew that every new document ought to begin with a question: what human being stands behind this name?

In the last hours of the night, Neelkanth stepped outside his house. Some shops at the far end of the market were closed. He remembered how many people used to visit his back room to have accounts connected with games calculated. He remembered some faces, but not others. Both the court's limited punishment and its rejection of the unproved charges were present in his mind. He looked up at the sky. The stars were barely visible. 'Come inside; it's getting colder,' Nirmala called from the doorway. He turned and said slowly, 'There is something I keep thinking about. The court has settled the account of what I did. But who will account for what others wrote in my name?' Nirmala was silent for a moment. 'We must find out what we do not know,' she said. 'But come into the house now.'

By dawn, fog had descended on the market once again. The paper recording the courthouse's first judgment lay in a cupboard; the household's new ledger lay on the shop table. Neelkanth Sah's name was written on both, but the two documents meant different things. One was the outcome of four years of trial; the other held the hope of ordinary trade in the days ahead. Far away beside the sea, another family was searching for paper on which to record the name of its lost boat. The people in those two places did not know one another. Yet in different corners of the country, the same difficult question was beginning to rise: when a name on paper becomes separated from a human life, who will bring them together again?

PART TWO

Records, Rights and the High Court

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Chapter 9 — The First Right to Information

Darbhanga and Kamalpur, 2005

The first chill of Kartik had not yet properly descended upon the Darbhanga courthouse. The earth remained warm until afternoon, but in the morning, sitting beside the office window, one could sense the darkness of winter entering the smell of the soil. Revati Jha was opening an old cupboard in her father's office. In its upper compartment lay the certified judgment in Neelkanth Sah's case. For four years those papers had been before her eyes almost every day; now they had become a closed, settled file. Beside it was a thin blue envelope addressed from Kamalpur Middle School, Biraul. The sender's name was Sharda Devi. Revati did not yet know her.

Inside the envelope were a four-page letter and an old copy of the school's scholarship register. The letter began plainly: 'I teach at the school. My children's names are in the attendance register, but although their names also appear in the scholarship register, the money has not reached them. At present I want only to know how much money the government gave the school, on what date it was received, and in which document its distribution was recorded.' Sharda went on to name three girls from her village. Some lines had been crossed out. At the end, in small handwriting, was a question: 'I heard on the news that there is now a law under which one can see papers. May I ask for them too?'

Revati read the letter again. She saw not impatience in Sharda's signature but care. The woman did not seem eager to call anyone a thief; she wanted information. Revati carried the envelope inside. Shivnarayan Jha sat by the window. Before him lay a short application from Neelkanth concerning compliance with the remaining conditions of his sentence. The court had delivered its judgment, yet the implementation of that judgment was still unfolding in the life of the family.

'Look, Father,' Revati said. 'A teacher has written to us. A pupil's name appears in the disbursement register, but the scholarship never reached her. She wants to see the government records.' Shivnarayan adjusted his spectacles. 'Can a teacher not obtain the accounts of her own school?' 'The headmaster told her to ask the block office,' Revati replied. 'The block office told her to ask the school. She has written all that in the letter.' Shivnarayan drew a long breath. 'Sending people from door to door is a very old practice. Now there is a new law. But the doors of an

office do not open of themselves merely because the words of a law have been set down on paper.'

The new Right to Information Act had received presidential assent in June. Certain institutional provisions had come into force immediately; its wider rights became exercisable from 12 October. Shivnarayan had noted this distinction between the dates on a small sheet pinned beside his desk. 'The twelfth of October has passed,' Revati said. 'Can Sharda apply now?' 'She can,' her father replied. 'But she must ask for records that already exist. A public information officer will not investigate the question, "Why did someone steal?" and provide an answer. Ask instead for copies of the sanction order, details of money received, the payment register, the list of recipients, and certified evidence of distribution.'

Shivnarayan added another question. 'The children's names are in this letter. Do not needlessly circulate their private details. Understand the limits of the public record and obtain any necessary consent from their guardians.' Revati realised that her father's earlier experience had its place under the new law as well. In Neelkanth's case, a name appearing in a ledger was one thing; establishing its connection with an offence was another. Here too, having a name entered in a register and actually receiving a scholarship were distinct matters. In both situations, paper had come to stand in for a human being.

The road from Darbhanga to Kamalpur began as a paved highway and then divided into two unmade tracks. Beside the pond, makhana leaves lay spread like a fallow field. Women cutting grass, girls carrying baskets upon their heads, and farmers returning from the rice harvest could be seen along the way. News of the new law had not fully reached these people, but everyone knew about the shortage of books and the measures of rice served at the school. Revati wrote to Sharda, asking her to prepare an application. She would come to meet her the following week.

Sharda Devi taught in the school veranda. Inside the classroom, four rows had been divided into six groups. Third-standard pupils were practising addition and subtraction; those in the fifth were writing the names of India's rivers, while two girls took turns reading from the same book. A girl named Phulwa kept a flower she had made with needlework in the corner of her exercise book. 'Why is that flower in your lesson?' Sharda asked. Phulwa laughed. 'The picture in the textbook has worn away, so I made one myself.' Sharda smiled too, but her eyes rested on the torn page of the book.

The school was said to have five sanctioned teaching posts. Three teachers taught regularly. One was ill; the status of another post was

described differently in contradictory records. The headmaster, Gaurishankar Yadav, spent his mornings sorting bundles of papers. He was not a bad man. The school roof leaked, the hand pump had been broken for days, and the teachers' monthly honoraria did not arrive on time. He carried the exhaustion of struggling with all these things. Yet when Sharda asked to see the scholarship register, he suddenly became rather severe.

'Are you accusing me of theft?' the headmaster asked. Sharda closed the exercise book she held. 'No. I merely want to see the records. Phulwa's mother has come to ask four times. What should I tell her?' 'The money comes from the block office. It does not always arrive in one instalment.' 'I know that. But the register gives a payment date against Phulwa's name, while her mother says she has not seen a paisa of it.' 'There is a difference between the date money is received and the date it is paid,' Gaurishankar said. 'Approval may have come through the office, with the cash distributed later.' 'That is precisely why we need to see both sets of papers,' Sharda replied.

Just then Phulwa's mother, Saryu Devi, arrived at the school gate. She held two handfuls of half-ripe paddy; she had come straight from the field. There was sweat on her forehead and earth on her feet. 'Teacher, will there be some money for the child's clothes?' she asked. Sharda told the pupils in front to continue reading and took Saryu aside. 'I am asking for the accounts,' she said. 'I cannot give you a definite answer yet.' Saryu fell silent. The paddy loosened slowly in her grasp. 'If her name is there, I understand there must be money too,' she said. 'But how did the account of what never reached our house manage to reach the paper?'

In that brief sentence Sharda saw the difficulty the law faced. Words could be entered into a government record; village life demanded that their meaning be verified. Sharda told Saryu when she would next meet her. She did not promise that the money would certainly come. 'Let us first see the register,' she said. Saryu gathered the paddy firmly in her hands and walked out. Her departing footprints remained in the wet earth of the veranda.

In the week following 12 October, Revati came to Kamalpur. The people sitting in the school veranda began addressing her as 'the lady lawyer'. 'I have not come here to dispense justice,' she said. 'I have come to understand the accounts that have been written down.' Sharda laughed at this. The two women spread their papers across an old table on the veranda. Inside, the children recited their multiplication tables in rhythm; outside, two women asked questions—scholarships for which

month, for girls of which class, who had been due how much. With each name, the circumstances of an actual household began to unfold.

Revati defined the request precisely: scholarship funds sanctioned between 2002 and 2005; copies of orders sending money from the block to the school; the school's receipt register; certified information from the publicly disclosable portions of the distribution records; sanctioned teaching posts; and any available statements of expenditure. She expressly said that unnecessary personal details concerning medical conditions or families were not sought. The application contained no accusation. After reading it, Sharda asked, 'Should I not write, "Why was the scholarship not received"?' 'We shall work that out from the documents,' Revati said. 'Frame the request so that the office is asked for what it possesses and cannot easily evade.'

After reading the application, Gaurishankar said, 'You are going all the way to the block office without even calling me?' 'Sharda has already requested access to your school's own records,' Revati replied. 'Now the application for papers held by the government office must go to the designated officer. You too can arrange to provide the documents available at the school, if you wish.' Gaurishankar's face relaxed a little. 'You run a school every day, and then you must account to three different offices. Still, I do not want to hide anything.' 'Then begin now,' Sharda said softly. The limewash was peeling from the walls of the block office. On its inner veranda stood a chest filled with old accounting registers; the word 'Education' on the paper stuck to it had nearly disappeared. By the time Sharda and Revati arrived, the noon bell had rung. Outside a window, a teacher was trying to settle someone's record of absence. An employee remarked, 'An application asking for information? This is the first such application I have seen here.' 'Who is the designated public information officer for this department?' Revati asked. The employee looked across at Baleshwar Jha. 'The government order has come,' Baleshwar said, 'though the office is still setting up its new register. There is no obstacle to receiving an application.'

Sharda handed him the papers. 'What will you do with this information?' Baleshwar asked. 'I teach the pupils at the school. I want to know about the aid sanctioned in their names.' Baleshwar smiled. 'Until now people in the village went round and round submitting requests simply to meet officials. Now they will demand copies of the records.' Revati could not tell whether there was mild amusement or anxiety in his voice. She merely asked, 'Could you stamp an acknowledgement of receipt?' Baleshwar opened a thick register, entered the date, briefly described the subject of the application and assigned it a receipt number.

Sharda regarded that thin slip of paper much as a pupil regards the marksheet recording her first success in an examination. It brought her no money that day and established no official's guilt, but it was written proof that her question had reached the proper door. 'Keep the acknowledgement safe,' Revati said. 'The counting of time begins from today. Ordinarily, the information officer must decide within thirty days. If the record is unavailable, the reason must be given in writing; if part is withheld, the legal grounds must also be stated.' 'And if there is no reply?' Sharda asked. 'There is the route of a first appeal. But allow the prescribed period to run its course.'

As they emerged from the officer's room, a small quarrel was taking place in the courtyard. A teacher whose honorarium had been unpaid for two months was demanding a correction to his records. 'The file has gone to Patna,' an employee said. 'The file may have gone wherever it likes,' the teacher replied, 'but the cooking hearth of my home is still here.' Revati stood still for a moment. She feared the consequences of Sharda's application. If the records were made public, they might reveal not just thieves but mistakes for which no single person could readily be blamed. A teacher's unpaid wages, a pupil's missing scholarship, a delay in construction—the causes of all these might be concealed in different rooms of the same office.

The ordinary routine of Kamalpur school did not change during the last week of October. At dawn Saryu went into the fields with her sickle; at noon Phulwa came to school and worked at subtraction. But Sharda now wrote the date in her notebook every day. One day Phulwa asked, 'Teacher, why do you keep counting the days?' 'I am waiting for a reply to a letter.' 'Whose letter?' 'The government's.' Phulwa looked astonished. 'Does the government write letters too?' Sharda smiled. 'People who work for the government do. When the answer arrives, we shall read it and discover what sort of letter it is.'

Some villagers disliked Sharda's actions. At the market, a trader said, 'The school will close in this tangle of papers. The children will stop studying and start going to court.' An old man replied, 'Keeping the school open does not mean keeping its papers shut.' An anonymous person spread the rumour that Sharda coveted the headmaster's position. It hurt her when she heard it, but she did not immediately counter with an accusation of her own. She told her fellow teacher Rukmini Mandal, 'I came here to teach. Keeping the institution running is everyone's responsibility too. But if asking a question is taken as proof of ambition for office, who will have the courage to ask?'

At first Rukmini was silent. Then she described something that had happened in her classroom. Rain had begun pouring through the roof. Three girls had huddled in a corner to save their books. Sharda had requested a tarpaulin from the office, yet the accounts showed the previous year's expenditure on roof repairs as complete. 'Sanctioning repairs and actually carrying them out are different things,' Rukmini said. 'So much work is half done and half abandoned, yet the records say it is finished. That is what I want to see.' Sharda took her hand. 'We must not write our conclusion in advance. Come, let us first find a way to keep the rain out.'

Malti Paswan, who cooked the school meals, worried about one word more than any other in her daily work: weight. The quantities in the grain sacks did not appear to match those in the register. Sometimes fewer sacks arrived; sometimes there were more children at school; sometimes a holiday reduced the amount cooked. Pointing to the iron weighing scales in the schoolyard, Malti said, 'Write down as much rice as I take out. Do not enter against my name the grain that never arrived.' 'Who is accusing you?' the headmaster asked. 'No one has accused me yet. But when the papers are opened later, my name will be the first they see.' In that fear was concealed an ordinary employee's concern for justice.

Before Chhath, the market at Kamalpur filled with activity. Saryu Devi was preparing to sell earthen lamps and bamboo offering trays. Her husband's income was uncertain; work at the brick kiln had stopped during the rains. Phulwa's elder sister Jasoda had left school and gone to her marital home. In this Sharda saw a helpless question: if assistance was delayed, would the child who suffered the consequences ever return to school? On paper the difference between two dates of payment might be only a few days. In a life, that same delay could sometimes put an end to education.

At dawn on Chhath, the red sky was reflected in the water at the ghat. Saryu stood holding her basket of offerings. Sharda met her there. 'I shall educate my daughter,' Saryu said. 'If she does not receive a book, I shall buy an old one from the market. But I must know where the money went that came in her name.' 'The prescribed time is nearly over,' Sharda said. 'As soon as a reply arrives, I shall read it aloud to you.' Saryu then made a particular request. 'You may read it, but do not ask me to sign. I cannot write; I can give my thumb impression. Read everything aloud to me first.' Sharda fixed those words firmly in her mind.

In the second week of November, the school received the department's first reply. The headmaster himself brought the envelope to Sharda's

class. ‘It is a copy of the response to your information request,’ he said. ‘It has been sent through me.’ Sharda first finished the children’s reading lesson, then opened the envelope. It contained three pages: the total grants sanctioned to the school, a summary of expenditure on certain dates, and a list of sanctioned teaching posts. The signed scholarship-distribution register was missing. In its place were the words: ‘The detailed distribution list is likely to be available at school level.’

‘The reply says the list is at the school,’ Sharda told the headmaster. ‘Which copy do you have?’ Gaurishankar thought for a moment. ‘It may be in the old chest. We keep papers from seven years. We shall search.’ ‘I will help look,’ Sharda said. This time Gaurishankar did not object. ‘Yes, but do not handle the records on your own. We shall search in the presence of the employee responsible for the accounts.’ Revati saw proper caution in this reply. Concealing original records was wrong, but an unregulated collective search without arrangements for their preservation was also risky.

Revati had gone to Patna that day. She received Sharda’s news by telephone. ‘The reply is incomplete,’ she said. ‘Try to obtain from the school whatever has been said to be there. Look at whether the department has given reasons for anything it has not supplied. We shall decide about the first appeal afterwards.’ ‘Are you going to court?’ Sharda asked. ‘No,’ Revati said plainly. ‘Where information has been withheld, we must first use the remedies provided by the Act. A criminal complaint about falsified accounts is a separate question for later. Do not mix the two.’

The chest in the school’s old room was opened. Its pages had yellowed; rats had gnawed one corner. At Gaurishankar’s request, Baleshwar from the block office came to help find the old scholarship register. Sharda, Rukmini and Malti stood at the doorway. Baleshwar arranged the bundles by year: a list of names from 2002, a leave register from 2003, salary statements from 2004, scholarship sanctions from 2005. Everything had become mixed together. Among damp sheets in one bundle were ink stains that made the writing difficult to decipher.

‘These are original entries from earlier years,’ Baleshwar said. ‘I shall make no alteration to them. Whatever copies we prepare will be checked against the originals.’ Gaurishankar thanked him. Sharda noticed a sheet bearing Phulwa’s name; a horizontal line had been drawn through the space for payment. Another summary showed the full scholarship amount for that class as disbursed. ‘There is a difference between these two pages,’ Sharda said at once. ‘The summary may record the block’s

total allocation, not the payment made to an individual pupil,' Gaurishankar replied. Sharda said nothing. She had to examine that possibility too.

That evening Gaurishankar told his wife Sita at home, 'We had to open the chest at school. People imagine that headmasters write every paper in their own hands. Five officials have changed there in ten years.' 'Are the papers correct, then?' Sita asked. 'I cannot say that all of them are. Some accounts go back to before I took charge.' 'If you do not know, say you do not know. And tell the truth about what you do know.' Gaurishankar could find no argument with which to answer his wife.

In the first week of December, Revati returned to Kamalpur. By then the thirty-day period following Sharda's request had expired, and some of the information sought was still unavailable. Together they prepared an inventory of the material they possessed: a copy of the original application, the office acknowledgement, the partial response, and details from two pages shown to them from the school chest. 'Make the appeal precise,' Revati said. 'Ask for the information requested but not supplied, or a statement of the lawful reason for withholding it. The appellate officer is not a criminal judge. His function is to examine the decision about disclosure.' Sharda's first appeal contained no sarcasm. She stated that the information officer had supplied the aggregate sanctioned grant but had not supplied the complete details of funds actually received by the school, copies of the scholarship-distribution register, or certain records concerning the teaching posts. 'Let appropriate copies of available records be supplied to me, and let any non-availability of records be expressly stated in writing.' Revati was pleased by this sentence. The existence of the record must be established before accusations were made: it was her father's old lesson.

Sharda was exhausted by so many papers. 'When I teach children, the words must be simple,' she said. 'Here half a day is spent over a single word.' 'Then shall we give it up?' Revati asked. 'No,' Sharda answered at once. 'If I do not read my own school's records, how can I teach a child to write the truth?' She laughed at her weariness. Revati understood that this woman's courage lay not in a raised voice but in the discipline of her everyday practice. Sharda's classes still went on regularly; the desire to expose a lie had not drawn her away from the curriculum.

A brief meeting was arranged in the room of the block office's first appellate authority. That day the records relating to the appeal were examined in an ordinary administrative proceeding, not in an open court trial. The officer, Umashankar Prasad, read the particulars of the

application and asked the information officer where the remaining records were. 'Some have been found in the school chest,' Baleshwar said. 'The block's salary statements are kept elsewhere. The originals must be examined before certified copies can be issued.' 'Then why was the position not clearly explained in the written reply?' the officer asked. Baleshwar had no ready answer. 'We have little experience of applications of this kind,' he said. 'Lack of experience cannot take the place of the rules,' the officer replied.

Sharda was given an opportunity to speak. 'We have examined two lists at the school,' she said. 'In one, the space for payment against Phulwa's name is blank; in the other, the entire amount for her class is shown as distributed. I want an explanation of that difference, but first I want the copies, so that I do not accuse anyone wrongly.' 'You are a teacher?' the officer asked. 'Yes.' 'Why did you not first tell your headmaster?' 'I did. He told me to ask the block office. The block office sent me back to the school.' Umashankar did not smile. He merely asked his clerk to record the observation for his order.

Umashankar did not decide the matter immediately. He said he would issue a written direction after examining the inventory of available records, the copies held by the block office and the question of supplying the appropriate information within a specified period. Outside, Sharda asked, 'Was that a court judgment?' 'No,' Revati said. 'It was the appellate process under the Right to Information Act. Its purpose is to decide whether information was or was not supplied. If the records have been falsified, there is a separate legal route for investigating that.' Sharda nodded. The difference between a small officer's room and the judicial forum of a court was becoming clearer to her.

In the middle of December, a bundle arrived at the school from the education office's accounts section. The sealed envelope contained not certified copies but photocopies of old statements requested for preliminary scrutiny. Gaurishankar called Sharda. 'Look at these,' he said. 'The summary of teachers' salaries has been included with the scholarship accounts. I think the reconciliation of the earlier years has gone wrong.' 'Is an incorrect reconciliation a crime?' Sharda asked. 'Not necessarily. Sometimes mistakes happen. But when a discrepancy that ought to be corrected is ignored for a whole year, further questions arise.' At this first frank admission, Sharda felt a little of her trust in the headmaster returning.

The accounts section had arranged the teachers' names not alphabetically but by category of post. There were four headings:

headmaster, assistant teacher, temporary arrangement and sanctioned vacancy. As Sharda turned the pages, her eyes stopped at one name: Madhaveshwar Mishra. A post was recorded against it, together with monthly attendance and a summary of sanctioned pay. She remembered that everyone at school had called him 'Madhav Babu'. Years ago he had taught the children about rivers and drawn a map of the Kosi on the classroom wall with his own hands. But he was no longer alive.

'Why is Madhav Babu's name here?' Sharda asked. Gaurishankar bent closer to the page. 'It may relate to arrears from the past. Salary arrears can be released after a death. The amount shown in a copy may be a sanction, not an actual payment.' 'But this is dated 2004,' Sharda said. 'The year after he died.' 'That is why we need to examine the complete original pay register and the receipts,' Gaurishankar replied. 'Do not draw a conclusion from one sheet.' For the first time, Sharda saw his caution not merely as a means of defending himself but as necessary legal judgment.

Sharda remembered Madhaveshwar's home. His wife was Kalavati Devi. They had two sons; the elder had left his studies to take charge of a shop in the market. Madhaveshwar had died in Chaitra 2003 after a prolonged illness. Sharda had been at school that day. Children throughout the grounds had wept. His photograph still hung on the wall of the headmaster's room, dust gathering on its glass. Beneath that photograph, the salary entry written today seemed strange to Sharda: memory and official accounts were moving at different speeds through time.

That evening Sharda went to Kalavati's home. There was a small tulsi shrine in the courtyard, and rice was drying in a corner. Seeing her, Kalavati invited her inside. 'Is there something from the school?' she asked. Sharda did not put her question directly. First she asked after the children and spoke of Madhaveshwar's old lessons. 'He used to tell the pupils that a river looks small on a paper map, but the water does not obey the map,' Kalavati said. The two women laughed together for a moment. Then Sharda raised the matter of the salary statement.

Kalavati was surprised, though not angry. 'Some arrears of salary were paid after his death,' she said. 'I gave my thumb impression on two or three papers. I had to go back and forth for a very long time. It did not all come in one payment. I no longer remember the exact amounts.' 'Do you still have the papers?' Sharda asked. 'They must be in the old chest.' Kalavati brought out a bundle wrapped in a small piece of red cloth. There was an old photograph of the couple from their marriage, a death

certificate, a deposit receipt and some written notices concerning salary arrears. Sharda made a mental note of the documents and their order, but took nothing away without permission.

Kalavati's elder son, Naveen, came in. 'Mother, who is looking through these papers?' he asked rather sharply. 'I saw your father's name in the school accounts,' Sharda told him. 'We need to establish whether they record legitimate salary arrears or a different kind of entry.' Naveen's eyes reddened. 'When my father was alive, he kept making rounds of offices for his pay. After he died, we went around carrying papers. Now, if his name comes up years later, people will say we took money we were not entitled to.' 'No one has been accused,' Sharda reassured him. 'We are trying to learn the truth before making an accusation. The papers are necessary to protect your mother's rights too.'

Naveen's harshness gradually subsided. He agreed to let a copy be made of his father's death certificate, on condition that the original remain at home. Sharda accepted. As she was leaving, Kalavati caught her hand. 'Whatever money was due in Madhav's name should rightfully have come to me. But if someone shows him as teaching after his death, whose rights does that entry serve?' Sharda gave no answer then. She herself did not yet know whether the record showed attendance or only an order for payment of arrears.

Since the Diwali of Kartik, the paddy of Aghan had been harvested. The smell of straw drifted along the road to Kamalpur. When Sharda reached the school, Gaurishankar was standing with a file. 'We have found Madhav Babu's old pay register,' he said. 'There are entries from the year after his death, but different columns seem to mean different things. Here it says "arrears sanctioned"; elsewhere there is something like "attendance". We must reconcile it with the accounts office.' Sharda looked inside the file. The same name did indeed appear on different pages with different meanings.

A letter was sent to Revati. She replied from her office in Darbhanga: 'Obtain separately a copy of the death certificate, a certified copy of the pay register and the details of actual disbursement. But do not publicise Kalavati's private information. It would be wrong to take a story of possible misuse of her husband's name to a newspaper before completing the lawful processes of inspection and appeal.' Revati's final line read: 'Questioning an entry in a record is not the same as accusing a person.' In the closing days of December, written directions on Sharda's first appeal arrived. The officer required the office to clarify what records were available, furnish such copies as could lawfully be supplied, and give

written reasons for any unavailable documents. The order pronounced no school employee guilty of any crime. Sharda marked two words on one page in red pencil: 'certified copies'. She understood that seeing a paper and obtaining a copy certified by its official source were different matters. She telephoned Revati. 'Be patient now,' Revati said. 'When you receive the lawful copies, preserve them and compare them with the originals. What you say afterwards will have a firmer foundation than before.'

When the new copies arrived, a thumb impression appeared in the purported register of Phulwa's scholarship receipts. An impression stood beside Saryu Devi's name, dated to the month of Bhadon 2004. Saryu's face changed when she saw it. 'That is not my thumb impression,' she said. Sharda did not immediately declare it forged. 'Try to remember when you have given your thumb impression at school,' she said. 'When the girl was enrolled, and once in the meal register. But on this day in Bhadon I was at my mother's house. My daughter had a fever, and I was there with her.' 'There may be witnesses who can confirm that you were there,' Sharda said, 'but the original record will need to be examined too.'

'You people keep talking about papers,' Saryu said angrily. 'I am telling you I never received the money. How many times must I say it?' Sharda made her sit down where she stood. 'As few times as necessary,' she said. 'But if an accusation is made against someone, that person also has a right to be heard. I want to lessen your suffering, not create another injustice.' At first Saryu was silent. Then she said quietly, 'Why is the road to justice so long for the person whose money has gone missing?' Sharda could find no answer to that question anywhere.

Revati met Saryu and Sharda in Darbhanga. She kept the certified copy of the register, Saryu's account and the school's response in separate bundles. 'I shall not make a final statement about the thumb impression yet,' she said. 'But if someone's signature or thumb impression has been used without consent to show receipt of a payment, there is a legal route for a complaint concerning suspected forgery. Whether an application to the police or a complaint before a judicial magistrate is appropriate must be considered separately according to the circumstances.' Shivnarayan, who sat nearby, intervened. 'Saryu must understand that she is responsible for the truth of her own statement in court. I understand her anger, but she should speak only of what she knows herself.'

Saryu looked at Shivnarayan. 'I cannot write,' she said, 'but why would I lie?' 'Knowing how to write is not the only proof of truth,' Shivnarayan

replied. ‘But if something in your memory is uncertain, you must say that too. Do you remember the precise date in 2004, or are you connecting it with the time you went to your mother’s home?’ Saryu thought. ‘I did go to my mother’s house, but I did not count the dates. The fields were flooded. Jasoda’s maternal uncle came to fetch me.’ ‘We can look for testimony about that,’ Shivnarayan said. ‘Do not conceal the limits of your memory.’

For the first time, Sharda accompanied Saryu to the veranda of the judicial magistrate’s court in Darbhanga. The written complaint presented there did not declare anyone guilty without proof. It briefly set out the allegedly false receipt, the school records and Saryu’s personal account. A court employee explained the procedure for lodging the application. A time was set for Saryu to state on oath what she knew. She said she had not received the scholarship money and had not acknowledged its receipt at the school on the date in question. Other parts of her statement remained subject to examination of the evidence.

‘You do not accept this impression as yours?’ the judicial magistrate asked. ‘I do not know who made the impression,’ Saryu replied. ‘But I did not put my thumb on a paper to receive that money. That much I remember.’ ‘Did you see anyone at the school doing such a thing?’ ‘No,’ Saryu said. ‘So I shall not name someone for an act I did not see.’ In that simple reply was something of Shivnarayan’s teaching over many years. Revati glanced at Saryu. The woman could not read, yet she could state plainly in court the limits of what she knew.

The court fixed a date for the next examination of the complaint in accordance with the law. No one was arrested immediately, nor was any finding of a forged impression recorded. Outside, Saryu asked, ‘Even after all I said, nothing has happened today?’ ‘Today your statement entered the court’s record,’ Revati replied. ‘That is no small thing. But proving a crime is a different journey.’ Saryu was not satisfied at that moment. She wanted the scholarship money for her daughter. The court’s process moved at its own pace. The two kinds of time did not coincide.

In a corner of the veranda stood Nirmala Sah with her son Amresh. They had come to obtain a copy of a subsequent document relating to Neelkanth’s earlier judgment. Revati went over to greet them. Amresh had grown taller. Seeing Sharda and Saryu, he asked, ‘What are they here about?’ ‘The accounts for a school scholarship,’ Revati replied. Amresh was silent for a moment. Then he said, ‘Names in a ledger again?’ Revati remembered his childhood question: ‘Is Father a thief?’ Now the young man understood, from experience, the social consequences of records.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but this time the name belongs to someone whose daughter goes to school.’

‘How old is the little girl?’ Nirmala asked Saryu. ‘Nine.’ ‘Does she study?’ ‘Yes, but she has only half a set of books.’ Nirmala took an exercise book from the small cloth bag she carried. ‘This was left over at our shop. Take it.’ Saryu hesitated, but Nirmala said, ‘This is no replacement for her scholarship. She should receive that as her right.’ After those words, the small gift ceased to be charity; it became a bond of respect between the women. Revati saw that Nirmala, who had stood in the same court veranda five years earlier, could now understand another woman’s distress without waiting for a judgment.

Standing in the courthouse veranda, Sharda studied the faces around her. One person carried papers about ancestral land; another was caught in a marriage dispute; another had come about a son’s arrest; yet another held wage records. The matter of her school was a small thread among them. Yet tied to the end of that thread was the future of a girl like Phulwa. ‘If you remember one thing on your way home from school,’ Revati told her, ‘remember this: coming to court does not mean breaking every relationship. The headmaster, the teachers and the parents will still have to run the same school tomorrow.’ ‘That is what I find most difficult,’ Sharda said. ‘After I asked questions, a neighbour stopped speaking to me. Yet in front of the children I still call that household’s boy by his name.’ ‘That is the strength of your teaching,’ Revati replied. ‘If a crime is proved, responsibility must be determined; if there has been an error, it should be corrected; and if some allegations prove false, the reputations of the innocent must be protected as well.’ Sharda moved on. Her eyes fell on an old woman seated on the opposite veranda, struggling to form the first letter of a name correctly. Sharda helped straighten her paper. The old woman thanked her, not knowing that the woman who had helped her was herself setting out on the long road of a written question.

On returning to the village, Sharda told the headmaster about Saryu’s complaint. Gaurishankar went pale. ‘A case against me?’ he asked. ‘The question is one of investigating the suspicious receipt in the record,’ Sharda said. ‘The court has not held anyone guilty.’ Gaurishankar sank into a chair. ‘Those old registers were here when I took charge. If the signature is not mine, I must have the opportunity to defend myself too.’ ‘Of course,’ Sharda replied. ‘That too is one purpose of obtaining the records—to establish their source.’

That evening Rukmini was marking the pupils' essay books at school. Phulwa had written five sentences under the title 'My School'. The first: There is a neem tree at my school. The second: We study there. The third: Rainwater drips through the roof. The fourth: We do not have enough books. The fifth: My teacher reads papers. Rukmini smiled at that last sentence and did not mark it with red ink. To the girl, teaching lessons and examining school records were no longer separate activities. They were part of the story of the same school.

At night Sharda was comparing, in her notebook, the details of the documents she had seen at Kalavati's house. The first recorded Madhaveshwar Mishra's death in Chaitra 2003. The second referred to salary arrears sanctioned after his death, which Kalavati acknowledged receiving at one point. The third was a summary from the block accounts register. Here a new discrepancy emerged. Against certain months in 2004 the words were not merely 'arrears sanctioned' but 'salary calculation on the basis of regular attendance'. Those words did not fit with a lawful summary of arrears.

That night she wrote to Revati. 'Madhaveshwar Babu's wife acknowledges receiving salary arrears. But in the old register the calculation for certain months after his death appears to have been made on the basis of attendance. It is unclear which officer made the entries and when. Examination of the original records is necessary. I should like your opinion.' As she wrote, Sharda felt uneasy at spreading out so many papers about a dead teacher. She remembered Madhaveshwar's smile. While drawing the map of a river in a lesson, he had said, 'A channel that appears straight on paper is often crooked across the land.'

The following day Sharda went to Madhaveshwar's photograph on the school wall and wiped the dust from its glass with the edge of her sari. Gaurishankar entered. 'You are here?' he asked. 'I am looking again at the map of the river Madhav Babu used to teach,' Sharda said. 'Seeing his name in the register reminded me of his lessons.' Gaurishankar looked at the photograph. 'He was a good teacher. I attended his funeral.' 'You did?' Sharda asked, surprised. 'Yes. I know his family. If the old accounts are wrong, the truth matters to me too.'

At that moment Baleshwar arrived from the block office carrying a certified copy. Against three dates the document recorded Madhaveshwar Mishra's name, marks in the school attendance column and amounts of salary sanctioned. Gaurishankar immediately examined the record number of the document from which the copy had been made. 'Which register does this come from?' 'The original is preserved in the block's

treasury-linked records,' Baleshwar replied. 'The officer has sent a separate letter asking that its source be checked against the relevant files.' 'Are these months not after his death?' Sharda asked. Baleshwar nodded. 'Yes. That is why we need to see the original.'

In the fading evening light, the school veranda became deserted. Neem leaves drifted down upon the earth. Sharda placed the certified copy inside a book so that its corners would not bend. On one page stood the scholarship distribution total; on another, the disputed receipt against Phulwa's name; on a third, Madhaveshwar Mishra's recorded attendance after his death. These three papers were not proof of a single crime. It was possible that they arose from three separate errors. It was also possible that some entries had been made deliberately to deceive. Without investigation, neither conclusion was justified.

Sharda closed the register and added a final sentence to the letter she was sending Revati: 'I can say that salary has been entered in the name of a dead man, but I do not yet know who received the money.' She looked at the sentence for a long time. That night she recalled the story Revati had told her of page forty-five of Neelkanth Sah's disputed ledger. A name had stood upon a page, but the real part played by the person behind it remained uncertain. Now a deceased teacher's name was present in government accounts, although another person had been teaching from his empty chair for years.

At the door, the school watchman Shankar Paswan stood waiting to shut the shutters. 'Teacher, have you still not finished with the papers?' he asked. 'The papers are finished,' Sharda replied softly, 'and that is when the questions begin.' The watchman did not understand. He fastened the bolt. Inside, the old map of the river on the wall disappeared into shadow. The channel drawn on paper was straight, but outside, water followed its own course across the earth. No crime had yet been proved in court. Only a name stood at odds with the time in which it had been written.

Chapter 10 — The New Law Against Money Laundering

Darbhanga, Kamalpur and Mumbai, 2005–2006

The rice harvested in Aghan lay drying on the threshing floors of Kamalpur, but the entries in Sharda Devi's school register had not yet dried into certainty. On one page, Madhaveshwar Mishra's name appeared against dates in 2004. The teacher had died in 2003, yet he was marked present in later months. Sharda sat for a long time with her finger upon that page. She felt no exhilaration at the thought of catching a thief. She feared that, if lawful arrears paid to a widow after her husband's death were mistaken for something else, the woman's dignity would be wounded needlessly. Yet if someone had continued to use the dead teacher's name, to remain silent would be an injustice to the children at the school.

When Sharda's letter reached Darbhanga, Revati Jha was separating two files on her desk. One concerned Phulwa's disputed scholarship; the other held the page recording Madhaveshwar's alleged attendance. Shivnarayan Jha was pleased to see the separation. 'Papers found in one chest do not prove one and the same crime,' he said. 'First establish when the order for payment of salary was issued, into whose account the money went, and who marked the attendance. Arrears paid to a widow and a salary drawn in the name of a living teacher are two different things.' 'That is why Sharda is not hurrying,' Revati replied. 'She has her suspicions, but she has not named an accused.' Outside, people were gathering in the court veranda with their pleadings for the new year.

That day a thick periodical arrived by post. Its cover concerned a new economic law. Revati turned its pages; the legislation enacted to prevent money laundering had come into force on 1 July 2005. Shivnarayan grew serious. 'A new law does not make every old rupee the proceeds of crime,' he said. 'We must understand the connection among property derived from an offence, the specified underlying offence, and the attempt to conceal the taint upon the money.' 'If a person earns honestly abroad and sends money home,' Revati asked, 'why should such suspicion fall upon him?' 'There may be reasons to investigate a suspicion,' her father said.

‘Suspicion alone is not a decision.’ At the time, Revati did not fully grasp the meaning of that brief reply.

A client from Darbhanga came to the office that afternoon. Her name was Gopi Devi. From an old bag she took an airmail envelope and placed it on the desk. ‘My son Keshav works with a construction crew in Dubai,’ she said. ‘He sends his monthly earnings. They used to reach me regularly. This time the bank says the recipient’s name does not match.’ Revati examined the papers. Keshav had written his mother’s name as ‘Gopi Paswan’, whereas the bank’s old register recorded ‘Gopi Devi’. Her father’s name and the village address were the same. ‘My son earns his money with the cracked skin of his own hands,’ Gopi said. ‘How have I become two different people on a bank document?’ Revati did not answer immediately.

Gopi’s daughter-in-law Malti had come with her. In Malti’s arms was three-year-old Anjali, eager to look towards the peepal tree outside. ‘We are short of money to buy wheat,’ Malti said quietly. ‘Keshav says he sent it fifteen days ago. The bank says there must be an inquiry.’ Shivnarayan took the documents. They bore the name of the remitting institution, the date, a reference to receipt and the bank branch. ‘Through whom did Keshav send this?’ he asked. Malti pointed to the paper. ‘Through an authorised place where all the labourers from his company go. He himself told us to keep the receipt.’ ‘The receipt has been preserved properly,’ Shivnarayan said. ‘But the bank entry and the remitter’s papers must be reconciled.’

Revati did not tell Gopi that the new money-laundering law had caused her payment to be withheld. The bank’s letter mentioned only a mismatch of names. She prepared a request for a written explanation of the reason, the payment’s status and the documents necessary to correct the discrepancy. ‘Bring the papers that establish your name consistently,’ she told Gopi. ‘But we shall also examine whether the bank is demanding more evidence than necessary or keeping the payment for months without adequate reasons.’ Gopi understood that filing papers would not put money in her hands at once. Disappointment remained on her face, but at least she now knew which door to question.

That evening Shivnarayan ran a finger along the corner of an old judgment. He remembered page forty-five of Neelkanth Sah’s ledger. Neelkanth had acknowledged certain transactions but denied an entry in the name of the deceased Ramkishun Mahto. Now there was the attendance sheet of the dead Madhaveshwar at Sharda’s school and two different names for the same living woman in Gopi’s bank. In all three

events, paper had taken the place of a person. Yet they were not all the same offence. ‘Father,’ Revati said, ‘sometimes I feel that the forgetfulness of records has grown more powerful than human beings.’ ‘Records do not forget,’ Shivnarayan replied. ‘The people who create them, read them and believe them make mistakes.’

In the first week of January, an opportunity arose for Revati to visit Mumbai. A legal seminar was to discuss the early interpretation of the new anti-money-laundering legislation. She also obtained permission to enquire about the status of Gopi’s complaint at the head office of the bank in Darbhanga. Before leaving, she wrote to Sharda: ‘Wait for proof of the actual payment concerning Madhaveshwar Babu. Request that the original register be preserved. If the block officer agrees to an inspection, obtain written confirmation.’ Sharda’s reply was brief: ‘I shall not turn my questions into accusations; but neither shall I abandon the questions.’ Revati placed the letter in her file and set out on her journey.

Arriving from the morning train at a Mumbai suburb, Revati found the city moving at a pace unlike the vehicles of her village. People walked quickly through the crowds, though their faces did not all carry the same hurry. One read a newspaper, another held a tiffin carrier, another asked after home on a mobile phone. Hearing a labourer speaking Maithili in the local train, Revati stopped to listen. He was telling a companion, ‘Mother is ill at home. This time I sent the money late.’ She remembered Gopi’s house. Legitimate money arriving from abroad and livelihoods circulating within the city flowed through the arteries of the same Indian family.

Lawyers, bankers and financial investigators had brought their separate vocabularies to the seminar. One official described how criminals’ efforts to make illicit funds appear innocent posed a formidable challenge. A bank compliance lawyer warned that if proper records of customers’ identities and activities were not kept, legitimate customers might also become the objects of false suspicion. Revati wrote: ‘Matching names, tracing sources, identifying the real beneficiary, establishing a link to a specified predicate offence: four separate questions.’ The next speaker asked his audience to remember that the purpose of anti-money-laundering law was to trace the proceeds of crime, not every rupee arriving from another country. For a moment, the hall fell quiet.

A senior jurist explained that the Act had been enacted in 2002 but came into effect on 1 July 2005. Its structure at commencement should not automatically be treated as identical to later amendments. The

specified scheduled offence, its alleged proceeds and the particular role of an accused person lay at the centre of the law. Revati wrote this down carefully. She suspected that many people, hearing the new term 'money laundering', would begin to apply it to any bank transaction they disliked. She had learned from her legal studies that careless use of such a label could gravely damage a person's reputation.

During a break in the seminar, a gentleman approached Revati. 'Have you come from Mithila?' he asked, introducing himself as Abhijit Jha, who worked in a bank's legal-compliance department in Mumbai. His family came from Madhubani. Without revealing private details, Revati described the general nature of Gopi's problem. 'Differences in the forms of names, old branch entries and remittance instructions from abroad often call for verification,' Abhijit said. 'But the bank must give written reasons for the delay. It is not right to treat the customer as a criminal.' 'How often do disputes like this come to your bank?' Revati asked. 'Often enough that I have learned to look for a family behind every sheet of paper.'

The next day, Revati accompanied Abhijit to observe a public hearing in a consumer dispute. The forum was dealing with an older case involving a delayed credit of funds received from abroad. The complainant's lawyer alleged deficiency of banking service; the bank had sought time to complete reasonable checks. The presiding officer examined the written record, the period of delay and the evidence demanded of the customer. No final decision was made that day. Revati noted that a claim about banking services and a criminal charge of money laundering were not substitutes for one another. A deficiency in service had its own remedy in the proper forum; a crime, if one had occurred, required investigation through its lawful route.

In the forum's old room, the fan was so noisy that papers beneath it kept fluttering upward. A clerk placed a heavy rubber block on the pages to hold them down. 'Was the person whose payment was delayed told the reason in time?' the presiding officer asked. The bank's representative said that an internal examination had been necessary. 'It may have been necessary,' the presiding officer replied, 'but the limits and reasonableness of informing the customer must also be considered.' Revati observed that the forum's inquiry concerned fair access to a service, not the investigation of an offence. A single word could carry different duties in different legal forums.

In her written statement, the elderly complainant Neelima Devi had said that because of the delay her daughter's school admission fee could

not be paid by the deadline. The bank's officer questioned whether the loss was attributable entirely to the bank's delay or partly to the family's other financial difficulties. The woman's lawyer produced the last date for payment of the fee, the bank's receipt acknowledgement and copies of earlier correspondence. The presiding officer imposed no immediate penalty. Instead, he required both sides to provide a clearer written account of the actual cause of delay and its connection with the alleged loss. Revati sensed greater judicial strength in that limited direction than in a dramatic declaration. The forum had not dragged into its authority a matter outside its jurisdiction.

Neelima Devi sat by a window afterwards. Revati greeted her respectfully. 'My son is abroad too,' the elderly woman said. 'He sent money for his daughter's education. The bank said there would be an inquiry. I told them that the school deadline would not wait for their inquiry.' Revati wanted to mention Gopi's case, but restrained herself out of concern for confidentiality. She asked only, 'Does your son send letters along with the money?' 'Hardly any letters now. His voice comes over the telephone. But when money is held up, anxiety enters that voice.' Revati understood that in the homes of migrant workers, a shortage of trust often arrived even before the shortage of money.

Hearing this, Abhijit said, 'An employee ordering a verification may have just one day in mind; in the customer's home, that same day can mean the absence of food. Managing the distance between the two is one of banking's real difficulties.' 'Does that make a bank officer guilty the moment a question is raised?' Revati asked. 'No. Protecting other customers' money and the public's trust is also his duty. But he cannot evade questions about the reason for a hold, its duration and the evidence required.' They compared their notes on the day's proceedings. In his notebook Abhijit underlined: 'An account freeze, a delayed payment and suspicion of crime are three different things.'

Leaving the legal library in Mumbai, Revati came to a small bank branch where the customer-complaints procedure was written in small letters beneath a large signboard. Some women and elderly customers could not read the fine print. A watchman asked their names and directed them towards the counter. Revati thought that formally complying with a law requiring information to be displayed was one thing; enabling ordinary people to understand it was another. That was why Sharda did not merely read the school registers to herself: she read them aloud in words Saryu could understand. Revati drafted a request in simple language for the bank at Darbhanga, so Gopi could explain the difference between her two names.

At lunch Abhijit told her a story from his family. His father had worked in the postal service in Madhubani. Men from the village who had gone abroad sent letters to their families through his hands. Many letters contained no money, but a little packet of scented oil or a child's drawing. 'Father used to say that every envelope has two addresses: the one written outside and the one carried in the heart,' Abhijit said. 'In the bank's books only the outside address survives.' 'That is why so much testimony is needed in court,' Revati replied. 'The letters on a page do not disclose a person's entire circumstances.' After lunch they returned to their respective work.

Outside the hearing room, an old man asked Revati, 'Daughter, if money arrives from abroad, is it presumed to be tainted?' 'No. Money earned by hard work elsewhere does not bear the mark of guilt.' The man's name was Haridas; his son worked in construction in Oman. 'My boy has not come home for a long time,' he said. 'The money he sends carries news of his face. How it would hurt if a bank placed him on a page of suspicion.' Revati remembered the words. What the legal discussion called a 'remittance' was, for that old man, his son's labour.

That evening Abhijit took Revati to a small library. It contained old commercial journals, reports on foreign trade and books of banking regulations. 'Accounts can be irregular in a village school, and in a big office too,' he said. 'But imagining a crime as soon as you see a large sum is not scientific examination.' 'My father says that one page of a ledger can testify, but cannot pronounce judgment,' Revati replied. Abhijit laughed. 'One day I shall repeat that to my colleagues.' Evening was descending outside. The salt smell of the sea travelled on the air, and the last line of sunlight seemed caught in the glass of Mumbai's buildings.

A written response to Gopi's bank complaint came from the head office. The branch was being asked to obtain the necessary papers to correct the form of the account name; a wrong beneficiary reference number had held the remittance instructions in temporary verification. The bank officer acknowledged that this reason had not been clearly stated in the original letter. 'Can the bank confirm in writing that the customer was not informed of the complete reason for the delay at the proper time?' Revati asked. The officer hesitated. Abhijit, who did not work for that bank, waited outside and took no part in its internal decision. At last the officer furnished a revised explanation, but would not commit to a payment date. Revati accepted the reply with that limitation made clear.

On the train back, Revati began talking to an elderly woman seated beside her. The woman said her son had once worked in a Mumbai mill and now sold clothes. 'You are a lawyer?' she asked. 'Must every question go to court?' 'No,' Revati replied. 'It is better to resolve as many disputes as possible through written explanations, corrections and fair settlements. But if a right is obstructed, the door of the court must remain open.' The woman laughed. 'Then you do more work outside court than inside it.' Revati reflected that the remark was not an insult but a profound truth about a life in the law.

Then a letter arrived from Abhijit. He sought Revati's general legal opinion concerning the name of a trading firm. The firm claimed to do business with foreign merchants, but a complaint had arisen about differences between the named company on an account and the records of actual delivery of goods. 'At present this is only a question of contract and documentation,' Abhijit wrote. 'It would be wrong to call it money laundering without an investigation.' The letter named the firm: 'Sehgal Trading House'. Revati saw the name for the first time. No conclusion about wrongdoing accompanied it; the Sehgals were one of the city's long-established trading families. Yet Abhijit had noticed a particular discrepancy in the dates of the documents.

Revati wrote back, advising that the parties to the business dispute, the original invoices, actual delivery of goods and bank records be examined separately. 'Do not treat the name of a company, the family of one of its directors and the actions of an individual employee as a single piece of evidence,' she wrote. On the telephone, Abhijit said, 'That is how I see it too. But one customer wants to make a public accusation against another trader.' 'Gather the evidence first,' Revati replied. 'Otherwise revenge and commercial rivalry will take the place of facts.' Until then, the Sehgal family was only a name upon a page to her, not a collection of human beings.

Before Phalgun arrived, an unexpected scene unfolded in Keshav Paswan's home. The bank sent Gopi Devi notice that once the correction of her name and the remittance instructions had been reconciled, the money would be made available. Malti did not believe it at first. She went to the bank, where an employee examined the papers and completed the necessary formalities. The delay had held up many of the household's expenses, but at least no criminal allegation had been laid against the actual source of the money. Gopi's first act was to buy warm clothing for her granddaughter Anjali. 'Shall I tell Keshav we have received the money?' Malti asked. 'First tell him this too,' Gopi replied: 'the earnings of his sweat have reached us by right, not through anyone's charity.'

That evening Revati received a letter thanking her from Gopi. It gave no amount of money, only the colour of Anjali's new sweater. Revati read it aloud to Shivnarayan. 'It is good that you resolved the dispute without needlessly turning it into a criminal charge,' her father said. 'But if a genuine deficiency in the bank's service caused loss, ask the family whether they want to pursue a lawful remedy for compensation. The decision is theirs.' Revati agreed. The hard language of the Mumbai seminar and the gentle voice of Gopi's household remained together in her mind.

Meanwhile, in Kamalpur, Sharda Devi saw a new tarpaulin over the school roof. Headmaster Gaurishankar said a small sanction for repairs had been received. 'What happened about inspecting the original register showing Madhaveshwar Babu's attendance?' Sharda asked. 'The block officer said the copies would be compared with the record. I too want this allegation not to hang needlessly over my office.' 'The first necessity is that the original record remain secure,' Sharda said. Phulwa sat reading inside. When the point of her pencil broke, Rukmini sharpened it again. The struggle to examine the register had not driven ordinary school life from its course.

Sharda visited Kalavati Devi. Madhaveshwar's widow had again opened her bundle of old papers. 'I did receive salary arrears,' she said. 'But if anything was drawn in later months on the strength of an attendance entry, it never reached my home.' Sharda examined the papers carefully. There were two clear receipts for amounts paid and a third entry whose source was uncertain. Without speculation she wrote another request to the block office, asking for the nature of the payment, the sanction order, the recipient's details and the source of the attendance marks entered after the date of death. 'I am reading your husband's name,' she told Kalavati, 'not to cause you sorrow, but to understand what the records actually say about him.'

At the block office, the clerk Baleshwar grew uncomfortable when he read Sharda's questions. 'My superiors will be angry with me for searching through such old papers,' he said. 'I have accused no one without examination,' Sharda replied. 'Give me copies of what you find and a written account of what cannot be found.' Baleshwar was silent for a while. Later he admitted that one page of the old pay register was kept at the branch office, while the original of another was said to be at the district accounts office. 'The dates recorded in the two places do not match,' he said. Sharda was astonished. What had become clear to her was not proof of theft but the possibility of defective custody and maintenance of records.

Sharda had to come to Darbhanga. Revati placed copies of the two pages in separate files. Beside Madhaveshwar's name the first said 'arrears sanctioned'; in the second he was marked 'present' in months after his death. Shivnarayan recommended a formal application to inspect the original register and examine the actual movement of funds. Phulwa's scholarship case was proceeding separately; it should not be mixed into this matter to construct a broad accusation against one person. 'Everyone in the village says that once the court is mentioned, the school will be disgraced,' Sharda said. 'But by failing to ask questions we also disgrace the children's future.' 'You are defending the school,' Shivnarayan said gently, 'by defending the truth of its records.'

After Revati's return from Mumbai, discussions of financial law became more frequent in her office. One day Neelkanth Sah himself came to see them. His shop now dealt regularly in rice and pulses. 'People in town say that under the new law every old gambler's property will be confiscated,' he said. 'After my earlier judgment, people have begun pointing fingers at me again.' Shivnarayan set down his paper. 'The court's judgment established only what it found proved. No one can declare that property will be confiscated without examining when the new law came into force, which underlying offences it covers, and what connection any property has with the proceeds of crime.' Neelkanth breathed more easily. Revati saw how readily a half-heard report about a law could become a source of fear.

Neelkanth raised another question about his old case. 'The page bearing Ramkishun Mahto's name was not used to establish my guilt, but who wrote it? The judgment never answered that.' 'A judgment cannot answer a question beyond the issues tried,' Shivnarayan said. 'If new evidence becomes available, there are legal avenues appropriate to it. But do not attach anyone's name on conjecture.' Neelkanth fell silent. That page of the ledger seemed to him an inexhaustible shadow upon his life. Revati felt that it echoed, almost involuntarily, the story of the deceased teacher's page in Sharda's school. But imagining the same hand behind both might make an attractive story, not a true one.

One morning in Magh, Abhijit telephoned again. 'If it is not improper for me to refer once more to Sehgal Trading House, there is a different fact,' he said. 'Tell me,' Revati replied. 'There is a discrepancy between the delivery date in the company's trading contract and the date of the payment instruction at the bank. One party says the goods arrived late; the other says that date concerned a separate consignment.' 'There is a prospect of resolving that dispute once the original documents are obtained,' Revati said. 'I have suggested taking an opinion from a local

commercial specialist,' Abhijit replied. For the time being, this was only a commercial disagreement. Revati would not allow fears of the future to obscure the facts of the present.

The office of Sehgal Trading House stood in an old commercial building in Mumbai. Its senior partner, Sudarshan Sehgal, took pride in thirty-five years of experience in import and export. A younger member of the next generation, Vikrant, had begun coming to the firm; having studied accountancy, he wanted to understand his father's business. 'Commerce runs on trust,' Sudarshan would say. 'Paper is its memory.' 'How can trust survive if the papers do not tally?' Vikrant would reply. These exchanges between father and son were ordinary office arguments, not confessions of a crime. Yet the documents brought to Abhijit suggested that the memory of records could sometimes differ from a merchant's memory.

One day a small trader arrived at Sudarshan's office with a complaint about a supply of goods meant for export. His name was Mohanlal Mehta. He said that only half the ordered quantity had arrived. Sudarshan showed him the warehouse receipt. The figures on the two papers differed. Vikrant intervened. 'First consider whether the papers for separate consignments have been combined.' 'Half the goods arrived at my factory, and I bear the full loss,' Mohanlal said harshly. Sudarshan agreed that day to have the dispute examined in writing. The courthouse door was still far away, but the discrepancy between the papers had already become a real cause of profit and loss.

Back at his factory, Mohanlal had the goods counted again. The old register listed five kinds of cloth, whereas the parcels from the warehouse appeared to be missing two varieties. A worker named Vasudev said that one truck had arrived late because of the rain. 'Then why does the receipt show the full quantity?' Mohanlal asked. 'I did not write the receipt,' Vasudev replied. 'I unloaded the goods.' Because of this distinction, Mohanlal changed the language of his complaint. At first he had written 'forgery'; later, on his lawyer's advice, he wrote 'discrepancy in quantity and suspected breach of contract'. The change of words did not reduce his loss, but it brought the weight of the accusation into line with the evidence.

Until then, Sudarshan Sehgal had regarded any customer's complaint as a personal insult. One day Vikrant said to him, 'Father, if we hide the documents, we shall destroy with our own hands the very trust we want to preserve.' Sudarshan grew angry. 'I am not hiding documents. An employee's error caused the wrong date to be entered.' 'Then prepare a

new paper openly recording the correction, but preserve the old one.' His father looked at him for a long time. 'The law you have studied is fighting the old habits of my trade,' he said. Vikrant laughed. 'If the habits are sound, there is no reason for them to fear paper.'

The two sides met before a commercial mediator. This was not a court, but a place to explore the possibility of a settlement on the basis of their written contract. 'My workers are waiting for wages,' Mohanlal said. 'If the goods do not arrive, production will stop.' 'Our warehouse accounts show the goods leaving,' Sudarshan replied. 'Then examine the loading record, the acknowledgement of receipt and the date of payment,' the mediator said. After several hours of discussion, the whereabouts of one consignment became clear; the dispute over the other remained unresolved. Vikrant saw that when evidence was incomplete, the word of the loudest trader did not become final.

That night Mohanlal told his wife that the dispute remained unsettled. 'Did you go and call Sudarshan a thief?' she asked. Mohanlal was silent. 'I said it in anger.' 'If he cheated you, fight with evidence. But if it was a mistake, making a crime out of the mistake will increase both sides' losses.' Mohanlal looked at his daughter, who was doing her homework after dinner. He thought how reputation could be destroyed in the marketplace in one day but take years to rebuild. The next day he instructed his lawyer to remove any categorical accusations from the complaint that went beyond the available documents.

Vikrant met his fellow student Naman by the sea. Naman was studying financial accounting and dreamed of doing business abroad. 'The limits of trade are no longer set by paper but by customers in distant countries,' he said. 'It is easy to know the name of a customer far away,' Vikrant replied, 'but hard to understand what he actually does.' Naman laughed. 'You sound like a lawyer.' Vikrant thought that if an opportunity to work abroad came his way, he would create a new arrangement distinct from his father's old business. At that time his dream was ordinary ambition. He could not see the allegations, choices and consequences of the next twenty years of his life.

Night settled over the old commercial buildings of southern Mumbai. Sudarshan opened a page from an old account book and showed it to his wife. 'My father came to this city empty-handed,' he said. 'He began with a little shop. Now people see one discrepancy in a document and begin suspecting us all.' 'Your father's hard work is part of your capital,' his wife replied calmly, 'but a customer's rights are true too.' Sudarshan shut the book. That night it became clear for the first time between father and

son that reputation might be inherited from one's forebears, but its defence had to be earned through everyday conduct.

In the following week, Abhijit heard from a colleague that many traders were frightened by the implementation of the new financial law. Some were calling an ordinary tax inquiry money laundering; others applied the name to routine payments from abroad. In an internal training session he raised an example. 'If a payment received through an authorised overseas channel is held up by transliteration differences in a customer's name, first check the name and the instruction. If the quantity on a commercial invoice does not match, that may also be a contractual question. Do not put every matter in one category before establishing the underlying offence and the connection to criminal proceeds.' His senior officer appreciated the distinction.

When Revati heard of this brief training session, she remembered her first year in court. Shivnarayan had made her examine every mark on the seizure papers in Neelkanth's case. At the time, young Revati had felt that such caution delayed a decision. Now she understood that without caution a decision might go in the wrong direction. Judicial speed was necessary, but speed and haste were not the same. In her notebook she wrote: 'When examining the source of money, do not forget the dignity of the human beings who live by it.' She did not read the sentence from any platform; she kept it as a private memorial to what she had learned.

Vikrant stayed late at the office, matching old files. In the corner of one page he found a small internal marking resembling 'S-19'. 'What does this code mean?' he asked his father. 'Probably a sequence from the old warehouse ledger. Ask the people who counted the goods first,' Sudarshan replied. Vikrant kept a copy but could make no sense of it yet. The next day he discussed fresh opportunities for financial transactions with a friend. His future decisions were still open; a reader could not convict him in advance by the light of accusations that would arise in 2026.

In Darbhanga, Revati told Shivnarayan about what she had observed in Mumbai. 'What did you learn most of all about this law?' her father asked. 'Do not fear money simply because it comes from abroad. Do not call a large sum a crime simply because it is large. And do not make an old case into a new offence merely by invoking a new law. First examine source, role, the time when the law applies, and the connection.' Shivnarayan smiled. 'If you carry that lesson into practice as a lawyer, much harm will be prevented.' Revati noticed the marks of weariness on

his face. Time was slowly making him an old man, but his mind was still keen when it came to questioning an argument in court.

Another letter from Keshav arrived at Malti Paswan's home. This time he had sent money on schedule. 'Tall buildings are rising where I work,' the letter said. 'Every day I climb an iron ladder. When I look down from there in the evening, I remember the mango tree at home.' Malti read the letter aloud to Anjali. 'Can Father see our village?' the child asked. 'No,' Malti replied, 'but the village can see him.' Gopi Devi laughed when she heard this. The international journey of money was no substitute for the family's reunion. Whether Keshav would return the next year was still uncertain. For now, however, the household hearth was burning regularly again.

A local newspaper carried a headline about the new economic law: 'Strict Vigilance over Money from Abroad'. The article failed to distinguish lawful remittances from the proceeds of crime. Hearing the news, a neighbour told Gopi, 'Your son sends money from overseas. Be careful.' 'My son is lifting bricks, not stealing,' Gopi replied. 'Let whoever investigates examine the papers. If they cannot understand my son's exhaustion, let them at least examine his receipts.' She did not become an expert in law by saying this; she simply knew the truth about her household's earnings. Revati kept the newspaper cutting in her file, as a reminder of the damage a half-told headline could do.

Meanwhile, a letter from an official arrived concerning the Kamalpur school dispute. A date had been fixed for comparing the original records, and instructions had been given to preserve the relevant pages. Sharda showed the letter to Rukmini. 'No one has been found guilty yet,' Rukmini said. 'That is exactly why an examination is necessary,' Sharda replied. While the midday meal was being prepared, another woman named Malti Paswan—the school cook, not Gopi's daughter-in-law—wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sari and stirred the cooking pot. Sharda was repeatedly reminded by her work among records that even when two people had the same name, their lives were different.

On the day of inspection, a representative of the district office, an accounts employee from the block and the school headmaster were present. Sharda was allowed to examine the public portions of the records, while private documents were treated with due care. The representative set out separately the date of death, the order sanctioning arrears and the original page recording attendance. He did not declare anyone guilty. In a corner was a printed instruction requiring that corrections to official records be made with the prescribed notes. Sharda

saw that one page was incomplete: it contained the accounting entry for an amount, but the evidence of its actual receipt was said to be in another register. The location of that register had not been established.

Sweat appeared on Gaurishankar's forehead. 'The school's name will be ruined,' he whispered. 'Its name will be ruined if we leave what is wrongly written and call it correct,' Sharda replied. 'If there is an error, correct it; if there is a crime, investigate it; if the money is lawful arrears due to a widow, protect her dignity.' The officer paid attention to her words. 'No conclusion is safe without details of the actual disbursement,' he said. The school bell rang. Sharda returned to her classroom. Phulwa was writing the names of rivers in her new exercise book.

One evening Revati asked her father, 'What do you think the new money-laundering law will change in ordinary social life?' 'Time will tell,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Its purpose is necessary: to prevent networks that present the profits of crime as untainted property. But if careless inquiry makes Gopi's legitimate remittance or arrears in Sharda's school look like crimes, independent judgment is needed to protect the innocent.' 'And if an actual criminal is concealed among the papers of a large trading house?' Revati asked. 'Then lift away the screen of paperwork, but do not forget the order in which evidence must be established.' There was severity and compassion together in that answer.

Another unexpected letter arrived from Abhijit. It reported that the first attempt to reconcile the parties in the dispute involving Sehgal Trading House had failed. Abhijit's brief note said: 'There is disagreement about the times of signing the trading documents and receiving the goods; the evidence needs independent examination.' Revati placed the letter in the file of an ordinary commercial dispute. Beside it lay the successful correction of Gopi's name, with Sharda's incomplete school register on top. All three papers concerned money, yet it would have been untrue to give all three the same meaning.

The next appearance in the complaint concerning Phulwa's scholarship was taking place before the magistrate at Darbhanga. Saryu Devi came, leaving her work in the fields. Headmaster Gaurishankar arrived too, carrying copies of available documents. The court had found no one guilty. The magistrate asked whether the original register containing the disputed thumb impression had been preserved. 'I did not place my thumb impression to acknowledge receipt of that money,' Saryu said, 'but I have given my thumb impression on other school papers.' The magistrate had the distinction recorded. It would have been

convenient to treat all impressions as the same; it would not have been the truth.

In his statement, Gaurishankar said that some of the distributions in that year had occurred before he took charge. Sharda, who had not witnessed them directly, described only the records she had received and what she herself had seen. Listening outside, Revati heard that a former assistant employee of the school had indicated where the attendance registers were kept. The magistrate defined the scope of the further inquiry and fixed the next date. Leaving court, Saryu asked, 'Has the day my daughter receives her money gone still farther away?' 'This proceeding concerns possible culpability,' Revati replied. 'We shall continue making a separate request to the department for the scholarship amount actually due.' Saryu felt defeated by the distinction between the two paths, but she did not surrender her voice.

In the veranda, Gaurishankar approached Revati. 'In the village they are calling me a thief,' he said. 'I have not accused anyone beyond the evidence,' Revati replied. 'The original records in your custody must be kept safe. If something happened before you took charge, give us the dates and details of the officials concerned.' Gaurishankar's eyes were weary. 'Am I to run the school or examine papers?' he asked. 'Keeping correct accounts of money sanctioned in children's names is also part of the work of education,' Revati said. Gaurishankar had no answer.

That day Revati noticed a small boy who had come to court with his mother. In a corner of the veranda he was drawing circles on the floor with a piece of chalk. His mother asked, 'Why does the court take so many days?' Shivnarayan, approaching from a distance, answered, 'Sometimes there is unnecessary delay, which we all have a responsibility to reduce; sometimes proper examination of evidence takes time. Those two delays are not the same.' Revati took the file from her father's hand. There was weariness of years in the old advocate's voice, but his patience towards testimony remained.

That evening Phulwa sat beside her mother after returning from school. Saryu did not recount what had happened in court. She said only that the question of the school money was still under examination. Phulwa opened her exercise book and asked, 'If the money does not come, shall I have to stop studying?' Saryu stroked her head. 'Why should you stop? The money is my right; studying is yours.' Sharda had heard this simple distinction before; that day Saryu was saying it again in her own words. Even if the court's papers took time, the girl's education must go on now.

In his bedroom Shivnarayan took out an old notebook. On its first page he had written: ‘Understand the person’s role behind the name.’ Beneath it, when she was a child, Revati had written: ‘Does everyone tell the truth in court?’ Her father smiled at the question. The question first raised in the magistrate’s courtroom in 2000 had still not received its complete answer in 2006. Yet experience had taught him that to protect the truth one must keep open a path between suspicion and inquiry. The form of documents would change, judicial forums would change, the means of crime would change; the need for human judgment would not.

On the last day of that month, the goods at Sudarshan Sehgal’s office were counted again. One disputed consignment in Mohanlal’s case had been traced, but the parties still disagreed about the loss caused by the delay. Vikrant placed a sheet before his father with two separate columns: matters established and matters still disputed. Sudarshan was irritated at first. Then he read the page and said, ‘Write down what has been proved. Do not call what remains unproved a lie.’ Vikrant was surprised by the simple instruction. Amid the commercial disagreement, his father was still acknowledging a duty to the records that mattered more than a show of personal pride.

In Madhubani, Abhijit’s father was putting away his old postman’s bag. After reading his son’s letter about the complexities of banking in Mumbai, he wrote back: ‘Writing a person’s name correctly is also a service. When I delivered post and found a village name wrong in an address, I would ask the people. If I had simply returned the letter, who would have listened to the person waiting for it?’ Abhijit read the letter and remained silent for a long time. The rules of his workplace and his father’s everyday care seemed to him two forms of the same meaning. He mentioned the idea from the letter to Revati. She smiled, but felt its social weight inwardly.

At the beginning of Chaitra, Sharda sat in the school veranda writing a letter. It made three requests: the original source of an incomplete payment; the record identifying who had entered the attendance marks; and the date when the scholarship had actually reached the pupil. Mango blossom was appearing outside. Phulwa brought a little leaf from home and put it on Sharda’s desk. ‘Teacher, the mango tree is flowering,’ she said. Sharda laughed as she looked at the leaf. ‘Yes, and if the tree stays healthy, it will bear fruit.’ ‘And if the paper stays good?’ Phulwa asked. ‘If the paper is read properly, no one will be deprived of what is theirs.’

The following day in Darbhanga, Revati was completing the draft of a letter to Abhijit. ‘Financial disputes of this sort may become serious,’ she

wrote, ‘but do not draw conclusions from the name of a family, a company or a foreign country. Beyond the reach of the evidence, the court has no licence to speculate.’ As she sealed the letter, her eyes fell on the book of the new law lying on the table. Its pages were clean, its letters printed. Outside that book, in the lives of the people, lay so many questions untouched. Revati understood that in the years ahead she would have to study not only law but also the fear, labour, greed and memory that travelled with money.

In the last light of evening, Revati was closing the gate of her office. Across the road a rickshaw-puller counted the day’s takings; beside him lay a bank employee’s coat; farther away a boy selling tea was fitting the lid onto a tin. These people’s earnings had travelled by different routes before returning to their homes. Money derived from crime might sometimes attempt to hide among the records of just such ordinary lives. But if ordinary life were treated as indistinguishable from the shadow of crime, justice would lose its own foundation. Revati fastened the gate. An evening bell sounded from a distant temple. The letter bearing the name of Sehgal Trading House lay safe on her desk, but the story behind it was for time itself to write, not yet for any court.

Chapter 11 — The Second Record of Marudhar

Jodhpur, 2006–2007

In Jodhpur, the light of dawn takes its colour from the earth. Even beneath a clear sky, the night's dew leaves its mark on the walls of houses, the damp stones of wells, and the leaves of neem trees. One morning in Phagun, 2006, Ramdev Mandal stood for a long time with his hand resting on the well's stone rim. The water had diminished; the dispute had not. Of the three red stakes driven beside the well four years earlier, two had been removed following a court order. The third remained half buried in the sandy earth, as though someone had lacked the courage to withdraw a statement once made. Ramdev's son Vimal was now in the final year of his accountancy studies. His daughter Kusum was studying geography. The chest containing the family's papers was treated with as much reverence as the grain store. But grain changed each year as it was earned and consumed; the dispute recorded in those papers remained stubbornly where it had begun.

Filling her water pot, Jeevani Devi said, ‘If we're going to court today, we must ask two things. First, when will the survey be completed? Second, who will remove the new stone placed on the footpath across our field?’ ‘Advocate Pareek says the commission's report has arrived,’ Ramdev replied. ‘We'll understand more once we've seen it.’ ‘In four years they haven't worked out which side of a well is north and which is south?’ Jeevani retorted. ‘Put me in our field and I'll tell them without a map. But who will treat my word as equal to a piece of paper?’ Ramdev tried to smile. He knew his wife had reached the heart of the matter. Kusum emerged from the house with a page torn from an exercise book. On it she had drawn the well, the footpath, the drain and the college boundary wall in lines of different colours. ‘Ma,’ she said, ‘I'll write down what you've seen. We won't pretend to have made an authorised survey in court. But you can testify to the history of how the well was used.’

An admission notice was to be displayed at Marudhar College that day. Before applications opened for the new academic year, a group of students had demanded publication of the rules governing hostel accommodation, fee concessions, compliance with reserved places and assistance for students in financial hardship. Ishwardatt Rathore, who taught history, stopped beside the noticeboard on his way out of class. The sheet listed various categories of fees but gave no clear number of

rooms actually available in the temporary hostel accommodation. Naseema Bano was now a senior student. Four years earlier she had been the girl who walked in from a distant rented room; the confidence of early adulthood had come into her bearing, but the difficulty of catching the morning bus had not disappeared. She asked Rathore, ‘When will the list for women who come from outside the city be put up? A schedule of fees doesn't give us a place to live.’

‘Write to the trust's secretary,’ Rathore replied. ‘I'll request the information as a teacher. But remember that demanding a building on disputed land would violate Ramdev's rights.’ ‘I've understood that for four years,’ Naseema said. ‘Kusum is my friend. But why hasn't even a small, safe residence been arranged on land that isn't in dispute?’ Rathore had no answer. He could see that some people had turned a necessary judicial restraint into an excuse for complete institutional inaction. Naseema said to her friend, ‘Our struggles aren't separate. Your field must remain protected, and we must have a safe place from which to pursue our studies. Yet the trust's papers describe these two demands as opposites.’ Kusum took her hand. ‘Then write it in words that can hold both things together.’

By noon the students had assembled on the library veranda. Vimal had come to the meeting at his sister's request. Rakesh Meghwal, who travelled by bus every day from a village thirty-four kos away, held up a fee receipt. ‘There's tuition here, then a separate laboratory charge, then a development charge. My father's name appears on a government list of people said to be eligible for assistance. But at the accounts office they told me to pay everything first and bring the papers afterwards.’ Some students immediately called this proof of discrimination. Rathore intervened. ‘Rakesh's complaint deserves examination. But first establish which assistance comes from the state government, which is the institution's own provision, and which admission rules apply. If we stage a protest invoking a provision that does not apply here, we'll weaken our genuine demand.’

News of the meeting reached the trust's secretary, Prahlad Vaidya, by evening. Entering Sharad Kothari's office, he declared, ‘Rathore is inciting the students. Construction of the hostel is held up by Ramdev's lawsuit, but they blame us for everything.’ Sharad Kothari removed his glasses. ‘Have you read the students' written demands?’ ‘Not yet.’ ‘Then how have you decided they're at fault?’ Vaidya had no answer. ‘The disputed strip is subject to an injunction,’ Kothari continued. ‘Two rooms in our old building are empty. Why has nobody considered using them? And publishing the fee schedule is not an act of charity; it's an

administrative responsibility.' Vaidya said the old building needed repairs. Kothari directed him to have the costs assessed. But he did not know that a copy of a survey report prepared in that very office a few months earlier did not agree with the original revenue record.

Ramdev, Jeevani and Kusum sat in Suresh Pareek's office. Pareek opened a thin report headed 'Site Inspection of the Disputed Khasra Boundary'. Three pages contained distances, the well's orientation, the wall's present position, and an appended map. 'Where is my well on this paper?' Ramdev asked. Pareek placed his finger on a point. Kusum stopped as soon as she looked at the sheet. 'The north arrow in this appendix matches the one on the 1982 copy,' she said. 'But the worn edge I saw when I inspected the original revenue map isn't here.' 'A new report needn't reproduce the frayed edges of an old paper,' Pareek replied. 'What matters is how the measurements were taken.' Kusum read the final line: 'Demarcation on the basis of the records presented.' At that moment, the words 'on the basis of the records' seemed heavier to her than the earth itself.

Pareek explained that the court had ordered a description based on a local inspection, but the inspector's task was to record the existing physical situation; the final determination of ownership belonged to the judge. The report also enclosed a technical note by Hariram Joshi, an assistant surveyor in the land-records department. According to his note, the old dispute about orientation could be resolved from the available copy. 'Did he see the original?' Kusum asked. 'The report doesn't say,' Pareek replied. 'We'll raise that question at the next hearing.' 'Don't say everything is false,' Ramdev said at once. 'Keep what is right as right. Ask about what we don't understand.' Four years of litigation had changed the way he spoke. Once he would simply have said 'my land'; now he had begun to add 'and what evidence proves it?'

Meanwhile, another kind of movement filled the courthouse. A young man hurried away from the copying office with a document; two elderly brothers involved in an inheritance suit avoided each other's eyes; a woman waited for an order concerning her marriage. Four years earlier this crowd would have bewildered Ramdev. Now, seeing a file in every hand, he thought of the court not merely as a building of stern pronouncements but as a meeting place for lives left unfinished. Rajnikant Bhandari arrived with a representative of the trust and greeted Pareek respectfully. Repeated hearings on opposing sides had taught the two advocates a professional caution. Neither took the other's answer as an admission in advance, but both understood the need to supply copies of papers in good time.

Before Judge Sudhanshu Mathur, arguments began over the value of the technical note. ‘Your Honour,’ Pareek said, ‘we need to clarify the difference between the measurements in the report and the basis of the old map. We are not asking you to reject the report outright. We ask for an opportunity to question the author of this particular part.’ Bhandari replied, ‘The report was submitted in compliance with the court's order. Mere disagreement by one party cannot justify its rejection.’ ‘Both positions are acceptable within their proper limits,’ the judge said. ‘The method of preparing a report is not beyond question. But we are not deciding ownership today.’ Arrangements were made, in accordance with procedure, for Hariram Joshi's explanation and the production of the relevant original records. Outside, Ramdev asked, ‘Another survey, then?’ ‘First we'll establish the basis of what they're calling a survey,’ Pareek replied.

That night Kusum drew two diagrams in her notebook. The first showed the footpath and the well wall described in the 1978 sale deed. The second reproduced the directional mark on the certified copy made in 1982. She stopped before drawing a third. Her university geography textbook said that mapping the position of any point on earth required a stable reference, a scale and a reliable direction. The directions she remembered from the shadow cast by her mother's hand did not amount to an authenticated survey, but she could not dismiss them as altogether worthless either. She took her notebook to her teacher, Rathore. ‘The first discipline of study,’ he told her, ‘is to write “I do not know” wherever we do not know.’ Kusum wrote those words at the top of the page.

Rathore introduced Kusum to Lalit Chaturvedi, a young lecturer in the geography department who taught surveying methods. He studied her notebook. ‘Your question is reasonable,’ he said. ‘But a drawing made at home cannot become an official survey for the court. I can explain the history and methods of surveying; I cannot replace a court-appointed expert.’ ‘What if the north arrow was copied incorrectly on the old map?’ Kusum asked. ‘Then comparison with the original is essential. If the mark on the original is unclear, one must examine nearby fixed reference points, earlier descriptions of the boundary, and the present conditions on the ground together.’ The conversation gave Kusum confidence in a method rather than any expectation of victory. On her way home she thought that the earth did not protest the lines drawn across it; human beings quarrelled over what those lines meant.

The question of admission records was growing more urgent too. Naseema, Rakesh and Kusum prepared a joint petition on behalf of the

students. It set out four demands: published admission criteria, the fee-concession provisions actually applicable, the number of hostel places genuinely available, and a definite mechanism for hearing complaints. Rakesh wanted to add a sentence: 'Discrimination is taking place.' 'Where it has happened, describe the student's particular case and the facts,' Naseema said. 'Look at the papers before declaring every official guilty.' Kusum added, 'If we can ask to see the map of our field, why shouldn't college students be able to ask for an account of the fees?' The students agreed. As they signed, one young woman said, 'Don't print my name. My family will stop my education.' Naseema respected her fear; her name was not put on the public list without her consent.

Prahlad Vaidya's first response to the petition was anger. To him the students' argument seemed an insult to the trust's generosity. But Sharad Kothari said, 'A donation does not give the donor a right to demand gratitude. If a college admits students through a public process, the students must be able to understand its rules.' He called for a breakdown of the fees from the finance officer. One heading was obscure: 'General Facilities Contribution.' 'Who fixed this contribution?' he asked. 'The previous executive committee,' came the reply. 'A copy of its resolution?' The officer fell silent. Kothari looked at Prahlad. 'It must be in the old file,' Vaidya said. Kothari ordered that the file be produced and, if it could not be found, that the uncertainty be acknowledged in writing. The students were not to be given false assurances.

That evening Jeevani Devi was sitting on the embankment of her field when Naseema came to see her. 'Auntie, we've submitted our demand about accommodation for the women again,' she said. Jeevani offered her water. 'Is the college far from your home?' 'Very far if I miss the bus.' 'Our Kusum can walk there. But what footpath is safe for a woman after dark?' Naseema was silent. 'I won't surrender my land,' Jeevani went on, 'but I won't oppose your having somewhere to live either. If one day the trust's people ask me whether they can build rooms somewhere else, away from the disputed strip, I'll be glad.' Fingering the edge of her scarf, Naseema asked, 'Will there be any paper recording what you've said?' Jeevani laughed. 'If you need a paper, Kusum will write one.'

A sharp debate about reservations arose on campus that same week. Reading newspaper reports of the legislative debate concerning central institutions of higher education, some students assumed that identical rules had immediately come into force at every private college. Rathore told his class, 'Don't put state provisions, university affiliation requirements, the nature of this institution and the country's current legislative debate into one indiscriminate list. Support and opposition are

equally incomplete without consulting the correct source of the rule.' 'But who will give a chance to understand the rules to someone who can barely reach a school?' Kusum asked. 'That is precisely why they need to be expressed in language the public can understand,' Rathore replied. Naseema wanted copies of the admission notice to reach village schools. Rakesh added that the actual fees must be stated clearly too. The discussion moved away from slogans and towards the lives of first-generation students in their own villages.

One day a village student named Megha came to the admissions office carrying her certificates. Someone had marked the wrong box on her application, and a clerk had returned the form on that account. Naseema advised her to request a correction in writing first. The clerk examined the form again, checked it against the appropriate documents and corrected the mistake. 'I've had to catch the bus for three days for something so small,' Megha told Kusum. 'A small error on paper can become an enormous thing in someone's life,' Kusum replied. That day Rathore asked his class whether the success of an educational institution should be measured only by the number of students who passed, or also by the number who could not even reach its first doorway. Nobody had an immediate answer.

Two weeks later the trust's executive committee approved a proposal to repair two old rooms for temporary accommodation for women students. It did not solve every problem: capacity was limited, the water supply incomplete, and a woman attendant had yet to be appointed. Naseema nevertheless called the decision a beginning, not a victory. An investigation into Rakesh's fee complaint was also started. The records showed that funds had been sanctioned for an assistance scheme, but the list of beneficiaries had not been updated for the new academic year. An accounts clerk admitted that many students had not been given correct information when filling out their forms. Whether this was an administrative lapse or someone had deliberately denied them an opportunity remained to be investigated. The students' demands became more disciplined than before.

Rakesh's home stood in a small settlement far from the city. In years when the monsoon failed his father worked as an agricultural labourer; at other times he broke stones. When word of the admissions petition reached home, his father was frightened. 'Is my son taking the trust to court?' he asked. 'Not to court, Babu. I only want to see what the rules actually say.' 'Will looking at rules fill your stomach?' his father demanded. Rakesh showed him his fee receipt. 'If the assistance comes on time, I can save next month's bus fare. I won't have to give up my studies.'

His mother stood silently between them. Picking a handful of grains out of the wheat she was winnowing, she said, ‘People told us to educate our child. Why should we be frightened when he asks what the rules are?’ His father said nothing. The next day he gave Rakesh his old wage register, marked with thumbprints. ‘Learn to keep your papers. I never did, and many times I had to trust someone else to keep account of my labour.’

At Kusum's house that night, Vimal raised another worry. ‘Babuji, the land dispute is costing more and more. When I finish my studies I'll look for accounting work.’ Ramdev looked steadily at him. ‘Why give up what you wanted to study and go to work?’ ‘We owe money, there's Kusum's tuition, and the well needs repairing.’ Jeevani Devi said, ‘We all carry a share of the household burden. But a decision made under pressure can shape years of our lives.’ Sitting beside his father, Vimal wrote down the family's income and expenditure on a sheet of paper. Court fees, copying charges, reduced harvests, college accommodation—all came together on that one page. ‘This page shows the family's troubles,’ Ramdev said, ‘but it isn't an order for Kusum to leave college.’ Vimal smiled. ‘Then my work will be to keep a proper account of those troubles.’

One day Suresh Pareek received two letters from the revenue office. The first contained an earlier account of the inspection of the original 1982 survey register; the second referred to Hariram Joshi's technical note of 2005. Comparing the dates, Pareek saw that on the day the note was prepared, Hariram had supposedly examined the original map in the revenue archives, yet the original inspection register contained no entry under his name. This was not conclusive by itself—some inspections were entered in different ways. But a note claiming to conform to the ‘original record’ made it necessary to ask whether its author had actually examined that original or merely a certified copy. Pareek wrote to Bhandari, enclosing the letters, and suggested that both sides assemble the agreed records before the issue was raised in court. Bhandari replied, ‘The question is proper; nevertheless, permission to inspect an original and the authenticity of a copy are different matters.’ At first Ramdev thought this cautious correspondence painfully slow. Then he understood that a charge made too quickly could take a long time to substantiate.

Hariram Joshi was a long-serving junior employee in a government office. His daily work involved examining field boundaries, comparing copies of documents and giving departmental officers information about conditions on the ground. He worked among piles of records with limited resources. There was no reason to presume, before hearing him, that he was a man accustomed to deceit. One morning, after sending his

daughter to school, he reached the office and found a notice requiring his appearance in court. His colleague Gokul asked, ‘Did you write something wrong in the Marudhar case?’ ‘I can't yet say whether I wrote something wrong,’ Hariram replied. ‘I remember what I saw. But I'll have to find out how the word “original” came into the page that was prepared.’ ‘But the signature is yours,’ Gokul said. Hariram fell silent. He considered looking up the dates in his old diary at home, though he understood that private recollection would not be enough to replace the court record.

Before the hearing, Prahlad Vaidya and Sharad Kothari had a sharp exchange at the trust's office. Vaidya wanted to apply for the interim restraint to be lifted on the strength of the site report. ‘Four years have passed. The students call me incompetent.’ ‘The answer to the students' questions is to improve their accommodation, not to occupy disputed land,’ Kothari replied. ‘But the report supports us.’ ‘Let its basis first be made clear. If the court then considers it proper, it will issue an order.’ ‘You are so cautious that the institution has come to a standstill,’ Vaidya said. Kothari remembered his earlier years as a craftsman. ‘You cannot stitch a garment cut to the wrong measurements, Vaidyaji. The foundations of an institution carry more weight than cloth.’ Behind the sentence lay not merely moral conviction but long experience in his trade.

Hariram Joshi came face to face with Ramdev for the first time in the courthouse veranda. Ramdev was about to rise on seeing him, but Pareek stopped him with a gesture. It would be improper for a witness to discuss disputed facts with one of the parties before the hearing. Hariram kept his distance too. In a small notebook Pareek had written his questions: When did you see the original map? Is there an entry in the inspection register? What fixed reference point was used for the measurement? Which portions of the technical note are based on your own observations, and which on a copy held by the office? Bhandari wrote his questions as well: What was the purpose of the report? If no original was inspected, how reliable were the available records? Judge Mathur wanted these questions to become an orderly examination of facts, not a theatrical occasion for personal accusation.

Hariram took the oath. Pareek began with straightforward questions about his position, experience and signature on the note. Hariram acknowledged that the signature was his. ‘In this note, have you written that the current line agrees with the original directional mark on the old revenue map?’ ‘Yes, those words are there.’ ‘Did you personally examine the original map?’ Hariram hesitated for a moment. ‘A certified copy was

made available to me at the office. I did not open and examine the original map myself.' Silence settled over the courtroom. 'Then the words "original directional mark" were not written on the basis of your own inspection?' Pareek asked. 'The copy was described as reproducing the mark on the original, and I put it that way,' Hariram replied. 'My choice of words should have been clearer.' The judge had his answer recorded precisely.

Pareek did not want this single admission to invalidate the entire report. 'Did you visit the site?' he asked. 'Twice,' Hariram replied. 'What did you see?' 'The well's present enclosure, its distance from the boundary wall, the decaying remains of the footpath, and the old course of a water channel.' 'Did you take all those measurements yourself?' 'I took some distances myself; others I took from the measurement records of the local inspector appointed by the court.' 'Did you distinguish the measurements you took from those taken by someone else?' Hariram opened his papers. Two figures carried a small mark beside his signature, but the sources of three others were not clear. He agreed that the different sources should have been identified separately. 'Do you acknowledge that limitation in your report?' the judge asked. 'Yes, Your Honour,' Hariram said. Revati was not there, but in Jodhpur, seated beside her father, Kusum heard in that answer not a small victory in court, but a necessary restraint in the service of truth.

Bhandari rose. 'Was the copy authenticated by the archives, or was it merely an unverified photocopy?' 'It bore the office stamp and certification,' Hariram replied. 'So does failing to see the original automatically make every figure in the copy wrong?' 'No.' 'Is the present location of the well, as you observed it on site, correctly recorded?' 'I have described accurately what I saw.' 'Did you determine ownership?' 'No. I commented on the relationship between the map and the present site.' Turning towards the court, Bhandari said, 'Within these limits the report remains useful.' 'Those limits have now been made clear,' Pareek replied. 'That was all we asked.' The judge stopped them. 'This court is not a forum for punishing a witness simply because he admits an error. But neither can we leave undisturbed a conclusion whose basis has been weakened by that error.'

Outside, Ramdev asked Pareek quietly, 'Does this prove the well belongs to me now?' 'No. Today we established that some parts of the note were not based on direct inspection of the original. That does not automatically extinguish all the other side's rights. We need a fresh, reliable survey.' Ramdev nodded. Disappointment and relief came together. For four years a line on a document had frightened him; now

the limits of that line were clearer, but the boundary of the field remained obscure. ‘This court gets people to tell the truth,’ Jeevani said, ‘but how long it takes.’ ‘The courage to speak the truth is no small thing,’ Pareek replied. ‘And to call the suffering caused by delay a small thing would be an insult to you.’ His words contained both professional restraint and an acknowledgment of a judicial delay he could not explain away.

Back in his office, Hariram opened his old diary. On a page from Ashwin, 2005, he had written: ‘Marudhar; copy of map; western well.’ The next page recorded an inspection elsewhere. Looking at the diary, he told a colleague, ‘This alone doesn't prove that the copy in the government record is wrong. But I was mistaken in remembering that I had seen the original.’ ‘Could you be punished?’ the colleague asked. ‘I must answer for any carelessness in my work. Hiding the facts won't make the error smaller.’ He prepared a written explanation for the court, stating the limits of his knowledge and proposing, if necessary, a joint survey in the presence of the original records. He had not abandoned his wish to protect his position, but neither had he decided to lie in order to keep it.

When news of the hearing reached the college, confused arguments broke out again. Some said fraud by the trust had been proved; others said the farmer's claim had collapsed. Standing before a student gathering, Kusum spoke plainly. ‘The court has made no finding of fraud. The author of one technical note said he used a copy and wrote about the original map without seeing it. That admission means the basis of his statement must be examined.’ A young man asked, ‘Don't you want your father to win?’ ‘Of course I do. But a victory obtained by writing down something false will collapse at the next survey.’ Naseema stood beside her. ‘We want a hostel,’ she said, ‘but not on the strength of a false map. Kusum's question isn't the enemy of ours.’ For the first time the students saw that a farmer's claim to his land and the demand for accommodation for women could be voiced from the same platform.

Rathore raised the matter at a teachers' meeting. ‘When we teach history, we distinguish a primary source from a later interpretation,’ he said. ‘If we refuse to make that distinction in the problems facing our own institution, our teaching is meaningless.’ The principal, Mahendranath Pathak, replied, ‘A teacher's duty isn't confined to teaching. We must protect the institution's reputation too.’ ‘Reputation cannot be protected by resisting the truth,’ Rathore said. ‘The students have submitted their demands peacefully and in writing. Why should we call that indiscipline?’ A senior teacher observed that a public controversy

could affect admissions. ‘Keeping questions hidden won't increase admissions,’ Rathore answered. ‘Verifiable rules and proper facilities will strengthen parents' trust.’ In the end the meeting decided to clarify the admission notice and give the students an account of the state of the hostel repairs.

Ratanaram Bhati visited Ramdev's house that night. Four years earlier he had offered an uncertain recollection of the old boundary stakes. Now he said, ‘The stones of the channel my father used to clear should still be at the edge of the field.’ ‘Are you certain it's the same channel?’ Kusum asked. ‘I'm certain water used to flow here. I couldn't tell you its measurements or the year.’ Kusum opened her notebook and recorded his account without calling it established evidence for the court. ‘Ratanaram, don't say anything about our case that you don't truly know,’ Jeevani told him. Bhati laughed. ‘You've all become lawyers yourselves.’ ‘The court teaches a person how heavy the burden of an oath can be when the facts are incomplete,’ Ramdev replied.

At the beginning of the rains, clouds of dust rose into the Jodhpur sky. The trust's executive committee went to inspect the old building intended for temporary hostel accommodation. Sharad Kothari, Vaidya, Rathore and three student representatives were present. Strips of lime plaster were peeling from the ceiling; water was likely to collect in the courtyard; the lighting at night was inadequate. Naseema displayed her list. ‘Simply writing down the number of rooms doesn't make a residence safe.’ ‘Do you expect everything to be perfect already?’ Prahlad Vaidya asked. ‘No. We want a clear statement of what exists, a date and a responsible person for what is unfinished. Until the repairs are done, no woman should be housed in an unsafe section.’ This time Vaidya heard practical caution rather than defiance. For the first time he wrote down not only the cost, but the risks as well.

The investigation into Rakesh's fee complaint disclosed a crucial distinction. The deadline for applying to the institution's own assistance fund was posted on the admissions-office noticeboard, but a separate deadline applied to the documentation for state-linked assistance to eligible Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students. An employee in admissions had treated the two lists as one, telling several students to apply again. Whether this was deliberate exploitation by an individual or simple disorder in the office could not immediately be decided. Principal Pathak issued a written correction and formed a committee to reconsider applications from students excluded through confusion over the deadlines. Rakesh presented his receipt. ‘Why didn't you come earlier?’ a committee member asked. ‘I came three times. The first two times they

told me to come tomorrow. The third time they said the deadline had passed. I have nothing in writing to show those three visits, so this is only my testimony.’

After the committee meeting, Rakesh told Naseema and Kusum that he still had no final answer about his assistance. ‘People will say we've won,’ he said, ‘but I still have to pay my fare home today.’ Naseema offered some money from her meagre savings. ‘You have your own rent to pay,’ Rakesh said, refusing. ‘I'll find work.’ Kusum mentioned her brother Vimal, who helped a local bookseller reconcile his accounts two days a week. Vimal found Rakesh some work preparing book lists. This modest help did not settle the question raised by their campaign, but the characters' friendship showed itself in daily responsibilities rather than speeches alone. Watching them, Rathore revised an earlier judgment of his students. He began to understand that beneath the anger of the young lay calculations about livelihood; the language of ideals alone could not explain it.

For the next stage of the civil suit, Pareek arranged in order the original map, the certified copy of 1982, the sale deed of 1978, the site-inspection diagrams and Hariram's written explanation. Bhandari likewise identified the parts of the report that could still be relied upon. Judge Mathur asked what fresh examination might be possible while ensuring the original documents were protected. ‘Measurements of the present boundary markers by an independent technical officer, inspection of the original record, and comparison in the presence of both parties,’ Pareek proposed. Bhandari agreed, adding that the new examination should not prevent the trust from building on its uncontested land outside the disputed area. ‘The limits of the interim order remain clear and unchanged,’ the judge said. ‘The new examination is only to clarify the facts; it is not a prior determination of title.’ The parties were given an opportunity to make written submissions on the officer's qualifications, the expense and the scope of the exercise.

Meanwhile, Sharad Kothari's health was failing. One evening he came to the college library and examined the old donation register. Against his first contribution stood its purpose: ‘To make library books available to students who cannot afford to buy them.’ Prahlad Vaidya stood nearby. ‘I once wanted to give books,’ Kothari said. ‘Have I become too absorbed in attaching my name to a building?’ ‘Buildings are necessary too,’ Vaidya replied. ‘Certainly. But if a building's foundations bury the question of a neighbour's rights, how long will the stone bearing my name endure?’ For the first time Prahlad remained silent for a long while. He knew that after Kothari's death much more of the trust's

responsibility might fall upon him. That fear altered the meaning of every hasty decision he had made in recent years.

When Prahlad returned home, he told his wife Saroj, ‘Everyone at the college thinks I'm a hard man.’ ‘What do you think you are?’ she asked. ‘I build buildings, and people call me the farmer's enemy.’ ‘Are you building buildings, or trying to get the papers approving them completed quickly?’ she asked. He stared at her. ‘Are those different things?’ ‘They can be. A woman student asking for a safe room is in favour of a building. A farmer trying to protect his well is in favour of farming. You've turned both into your opponents.’ Her words left Prahlad exhausted rather than angry. He studied the old project drawings late into the night. For the first time he glimpsed the possibility of a plan that kept the route to the building separate from the footpath through the field.

As part of her geography course Kusum was carrying out a short study of local water sources. With the college's permission, she recorded the outlines of three old wells in the city, the paths taken by rainwater, and the positions of footpaths. When including her family's well, she told her teacher plainly that the site was the subject of an ongoing civil dispute involving her family. Chaturvedi praised the disclosure. ‘It is wrong to hide your own connection with the subject of research,’ he said. ‘But having such a connection doesn't make every observation automatically false. The question is whether you describe your method of measurement, discuss its limitations, and allow for results that contradict your expectations.’ Kusum left a page blank where her original hypothesis ought to have appeared. She resolved to redraw the diagram when the new measurements arrived. In this restraint she found a deeper meaning in her father's struggle: loving one's rights and keeping evidence disciplined were not incompatible.

One afternoon in Asoj, the first heavy rush of rainwater swept down through Ratanaram Bhati's orchard. It flowed to one side of the supposed course of the old channel, but silt collected near the northern marker of the well had diverted it. Ramdev hurried to see. A message was sent to Pareek saying that there were photographs of the day's flow. The advocate replied, ‘Observations of natural drainage may be useful, but today's water is not proof of where the boundary stood in 1982.’ Ramdev laughed as he read it. ‘The court has even taught me to doubt rainwater.’ ‘Not the water,’ Jeevani said, ‘the conclusion drawn from it.’ Kusum recorded her mother's reply in her study. That brief exchange contained the whole lesson of four years of litigation.

When a letter from Pareek in Jodhpur reached Revati Jha, she was examining the payroll records of Sharda Devi's school in her Darbhanga office. In one place the deceased Madhaveshwar Mishra's name appeared in the attendance register for a later month; elsewhere a surveyor had spoken of the original map's directional mark without having seen the original. Revati placed the two files side by side but did not conclude that similar errors meant identical offences. 'What do the people in Jodhpur say?' Shivnarayan asked. 'Hariram himself admitted the limits of what he knew. At the school we still don't know who made the entry.' 'In both places,' her father said, 'the courage to acknowledge what we don't know matters. But investigating an error in a record must not become an attack on the dignity of the person concerned.' At the end of her letter to Pareek, Revati asked him to send a copy when the order for the fresh survey was made.

That night Shivnarayan opened the old file on Neelkanth Sah and looked at a page. The disputed entry under Ramkishun's name had not become the basis of a criminal conviction. Yet the actual identity of the person who had written in the ledger remained unresolved. 'The law doesn't provide a final answer to every mystery,' he told Revati. 'Failure to prove a charge does not mean the event could never have occurred; and finding an administrative error doesn't necessarily mean a crime has been committed.' 'Then the storyteller needs a place apart from the courtroom,' Revati said. Her father laughed. 'The last chapter of the life a storyteller witnesses can extend much further than a court order.' Revati remembered a former classmate from Delhi who had left law to study journalism. She thought that the court was one archive of a society's stories, but people's memories lived beyond judicial files as well.

The year 2007 had begun. The public noticeboard at Marudhar College was prepared once again for admissions to the new academic year. This time it clearly stated the number of available hostel places, the state of repairs to the temporary rooms, and each separate category of fees. Rakesh's application for assistance was reconsidered. After his eligibility and supporting documents were examined, some assistance was sanctioned. The reasons for refusing the rest were given in writing. 'I haven't received the whole amount,' Rakesh said after reading the decision, 'but at least I now know why.' 'And if the reasons are wrong, there's a way to seek a correction,' Naseema said. Watching them, Kusum reflected that one form of justice lay in the final decision and another in a person's receiving an answer to a question. No one, however, imagined that these limited improvements had put an end to inequality throughout the education system.

There was no unusual crowd in court on the day the fresh survey was ordered. Ramdev wore his old white turban; Jeevani had secured a copy of the original sale deed within the folds of her sari; Kusum had left her notebook at home. After hearing the parties' submissions, Judge Mathur determined that independent technical assistance would be obtained to examine the availability of original records, fixed boundary markers, the present conditions at the site, and discrepancies between conflicting copies. The order also made clear that the earlier limited interim injunction would remain in force, no final finding on ownership had been made, and both sides would be entitled to object to the new officer's report. Bhandari read one sentence with particular care: ‘If the original record is unavailable, its absence and the alternative sources relied upon shall be expressly stated.’ Pareek's pen paused beside the same words. Both knew this was the minimum safeguard against repeating the old error.

After the hearing, Hariram Joshi caught sight of Ramdev from some distance near the courthouse entrance. He did not approach him, and Ramdev did not approach Hariram. But something in Ramdev's anger towards him had changed. Had the man stubbornly insisted on a falsehood under cross-examination, how much longer might the lawsuit have wandered in confusion? Hariram's admission did not establish Ramdev's ownership, but it had made the direction of the inquiry clearer. Ramdev said to himself, ‘Not every hand that writes an error belongs to a criminal, and not every hand that takes away a right is visible.’ Carrying that thought, he descended into the outer veranda. Vimal steadied him and asked, ‘Babuji, is there hope now?’ ‘I hope to see the truth,’ Ramdev replied. ‘If the land turns out to be mine, I'll keep it. If it doesn't, I won't write a false claim against the earth.’

That evening a revised drawing for the new hostel arrived at Sharad Kothari's office. Nandlal, the contractor, explained that part of the building could be constructed on the uncontested land while keeping the footpath open. It would cost more than the earlier plan and take more time. Studying the drawing, Kothari said, ‘We mustn't diminish a person's rights merely because it will cost more to respect them.’ Prahlad Vaidya did not immediately object this time. He asked only, ‘When can we give the students a reliable estimate of the time?’ ‘When the calculation is complete,’ Kothari replied. ‘We'll say what we know, and make equally clear what we don't.’ Prahlad was changing his old language: instead of empty assurances that the work would be finished quickly, he began to give accounts of verifiable stages. That night he told Saroj that the hostel had been delayed, but perhaps for the first time it was proceeding on a sound basis.

At home Jeevani drew water from the well and poured it into the little bed of tulsi plants. Kusum put two pages of land maps into the chest and wrote on a third, otherwise blank sheet: ‘Awaiting the new survey.’ Beside it was a copy of the admissions notice, now clearer about the limited hostel places and the assistance rules. She saw that four years of litigation had ceased to concern land alone; it had become a question of making an institution answer for what it put on paper. That night, after visiting the temporary hostel room, Naseema wrote to Kusum: ‘The door now has a secure lock, but the water pipe is still unfinished. I'll write that down too.’ Within that single line, her friend's education, Jeevani's well and Ramdev's footpath remained alive together.

A cool wind rose from the western edge of the field that night. As Ramdev closed the chest, he remembered something his father used to say: ‘The earth reads no one's name; people read their own names and make boundaries out of them.’ He understood now that the writing of boundaries might change, but to alter or preserve it without examination would be equally unjust. Far away, the new electric lamps of Marudhar College were burning. Beside the unfinished hostel building, the field's old well gleamed. Kusum sat writing near the window: ‘The surveyor gave one of his conclusions without examining the original map. He admitted the mistake. Now there will be a proper survey.’ She stopped her pen. At the dark edge of the paper stood the history of the coming year, which she could not yet know. But one thing was clear: decisive words spoken without evidence sooner or later return to the courthouse door.

Chapter 12 — Chandrayaan and the Accused

2008: Ludhiana, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Darbhanga

The crowd that gathered at the factory gates in Ludhiana on the last evening of Bhadon could hardly have been mistaken for a political rally. There were no flags in people's hands, only wage slips; one man had a letter from home in his pocket, another was calculating a child's school fees in his mind. Before sunset the gatekeeper had already shut one half of the main gate. The looms could still be heard inside, but compared with the previous week there were strange pauses in their rhythm. Ram Lakhan Paswan stepped away from his machine and examined his palms. The skin was split across his fingers, between the fine fibres of cloth and the black grime of oil. Not a single rupee for extra work had come into those hands that week. A notice at the factory said that a downturn in overseas markets had reduced new orders. Ram Lakhan did not understand the economic language of the announcement. He understood only that Sunita's school fees were due at the end of the month, and that his younger son Deepak's shoes had torn again.

Sunita waited outside the gate for her father. At sixteen, she still carried an old schoolbag over her shoulder. She loved mathematics, but there was no pleasure in that day's arithmetic. When her father emerged, she asked, ‘Late again today?’ Ram Lakhan smiled. ‘If I had been late it would have been a good thing. I'd have earned overtime. Today there was hardly any work inside.’ Sunita read the notice pasted to the factory wall. ‘Global financial crisis,’ she pronounced softly. ‘How has this global crisis come into our home?’ Her father's answer was short: ‘When work stops in a market far away, our machines fall silent here.’ For the first time Sunita felt how the bread in her home depended on invisible threads of trade stretching across vast distances.

That day the factory manager, Dharampal Khurana, had called the workers' representatives into his office. Two separate files lay on his desk: one containing export orders, the other wage accounts. ‘The crisis didn't begin in our own yard,’ he said. ‘The buyers overseas have reduced their orders.’ Baldev Singh, the senior workers' representative, replied, ‘If buyers across the sea stop buying, the hearths in our homes go out. What justice is that? When the factory made profits, they benefited from our labour. Why shouldn't the risk be shared more fairly in a crisis?’ Dharampal gave no immediate decision. His accountant quietly slid

across a sheet on which the names of several temporary workers were circled in red ink. Seeing his own name, Ram Lakhan went silent. Baldev demanded the written basis for the list. That question would become the first document in a labour dispute, but no answer came that evening.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha was reading the week's newspapers. They reported the crisis affecting commerce in Mumbai, banks in America and India's export industries. Revati sat nearby, with the Kamalpur school records and fresh information about the Jodhpur land dispute before her. ‘Father, the question we faced over Neelkanth's ledger in the Darbhanga court seems to be appearing again in a Ludhiana worker's wage slip,’ she said. Shivnarayan looked up. ‘Don't assume that two events are the same because their outward forms look alike,’ he warned. ‘A line in an account may be wrong, but its consequences fall upon a living person beyond that line. First discover how the document came into being; only then consider who may be at fault.’ Revati recorded the sentence in her diary. She did not yet know that before the year ended it would sustain her through an entirely new set of events.

Early in Kartik a letter arrived from Bengaluru, written by Niranjan Jha, the son of Shivnarayan's sister. Niranjan had long worked on technical aspects of satellite communications and belonged to an engineering group associated with the Indian Space Research Organisation. His letter disclosed no details of any confidential experiment. He wrote only that India was approaching the launch of its first lunar mission, and that no great dream could be fulfilled without the rigorous discipline of countless small tests. ‘People will see a light in the sky,’ he wrote, ‘but behind it lie nights spent questioning papers, calculations and instruments.’ Shivnarayan read the letter aloud to Revati. ‘We have to examine old pages again and again in court too,’ she said. Her father laughed. ‘Yes, but in the court's calculations a human being's liberty is always at stake.’

In Bengaluru, Niranjan sat down to supper with his wife Maitreyi and their eight-year-old daughter Avani. Placing a paper moon she had made at school on the table, Avani asked, ‘Babu, when you go near the moon, can you hear it making a sound?’ ‘Signals from the instruments there reach the earth,’ Niranjan explained, ‘and scientists interpret what they mean. A signal isn't simply a sound; it carries information.’ ‘What if the signal is wrong?’ Avani asked. ‘Then we investigate. Is the instrument faulty? Is there an error in the measurement? Or have we misunderstood? We don't write down our favourite conclusion first.’ Maitreyi smiled. ‘I wish schoolteachers would remember that too. Before accusing a child of something, they should hear what the child has to say.’ Niranjan gazed

quietly at the moon his daughter had made. In that moment the discipline of scientific life met the conversations of home.

On the morning of 22 October 2008, PSLV-C11 lifted off from Sriharikota carrying Chandrayaan-1. Watching the launch on television, Revati set aside the papers in her Darbhanga office for a few moments. The broadcast commentary accompanied the image of smoke, fire and a spacecraft rising into the sky. 'A new chapter for our country,' Shivnarayan murmured. 'And behind every line of it, calculations checked and checked again,' Revati replied, remembering Niranjan's letter. Far away, at the Mumbai bank where he worked, Abhijit Jha stood before a television with his colleagues during a short lunch break. At the end of the day somebody scrawled on the Ludhiana factory noticeboard, 'Chandrayaan launched successfully.' Ram Lakhan stared at the words. The insecurity within the factory had not lessened. Yet the thought that human beings working together had achieved another kind of result gave him strength for a moment.

That evening Avani asked her father over the telephone, 'Is there a place for my paper moon?' 'Your moon will stay on the table at home,' Niranjan replied, 'but if you keep studying, your questions about the moon can take you a very long way.' He made it clear, too, that the launch had succeeded but the work of the scientific mission still lay ahead. 'Then why is everybody saying we've won everything today?' Avani asked. 'The first gate on a difficult road has opened. We still have to travel the rest of it.' That sentence would reach Revati in a letter. She thought of the distance that similarly lay between a court's interim order and its final judgment.

In the first week of November, Abhijit Jha stood at the window of his Mumbai office, looking towards the tall buildings along the sea. Examining lawful remittances from abroad, commercial payments and account holders' identities was part of his daily work at the bank. That day an employee of a small business, Ramesh Saw, came carrying his employer's instructions. Overseas orders to his factory had fallen, and a commercial payment made late was held up by the bank. 'Sir, my employer says the money is here but he can't get his hands on it,' Ramesh said. 'What am I supposed to tell the workers?' Abhijit showed him the reason in writing: a number on the commercial reference document was unclear. He assured him that once authenticated papers were received, a decision would be taken within the rules. He could not simply set the rules aside and release the money. Ramesh was disappointed, but for the first time he had been given a written account of the reason.

Ramesh had originally come from a small village in Madhubani. His father was an agricultural labourer. Ramesh kept records of goods entering and leaving a Mumbai warehouse. His title at the small trading firm that handled shipments of cloth and machine parts sounded grand, but his wages were modest. ‘Ramesh understands all our paperwork now,’ his employer, Sudhakar Deshmukh, would say. ‘He'll go to the bank, the warehouse and the transport office.’ The praise brought responsibility, but danger as well. Ramesh noticed that the letters of his name were not identical on the identity card and old employment certificate he carried in his pocket. In his village his name was written ‘Rameshwar’; in the city everybody called him ‘Ramesh’. It had never occurred to him that the two forms had been entered differently in different offices.

On 14 November came the news that Chandrayaan's lunar-impact probe had completed its planned descent procedure. Niranjan told Shivnarayan on the telephone that scientists would continue interpreting the signals from the instruments. ‘We record the limits of our measurements too,’ he said. ‘A good judge speaks in much the same way,’ Shivnarayan replied. ‘Accept only what has been established, and no more.’ Revati remembered Hariram Joshi's admission in Jodhpur that he had not seen the original map. Scientific measurements, land surveys and testimony in court belonged to different worlds, but they shared a boundary of principle: one could not claim as direct knowledge what lay beyond one's own observation.

By the middle of November the notice about reducing contract workers at the Ludhiana factory had become more definite. Dharampal Khurana said that overseas purchasing had declined and payments from some regular customers were also coming late. Baldev Singh asked for the wage register and the original details of working days. ‘All we're told is that there's less work,’ he said. ‘Put down how much less, and how many days each person has worked.’ Ram Lakhan's name appeared on the temporary list. Sunita's examinations were approaching. At home she offered to earn a little by tutoring younger children in the evenings. ‘Your own studies come first,’ Ram Lakhan objected. ‘How can my education and your wages be separate accounts?’ Sunita replied. ‘My books come from your loom.’ Her father was silent. Then, for the first time, he asked his daughter to read the factory's written notice aloud.

Meanwhile, an old colleague of Shivnarayan's sent a letter to Darbhanga. It concerned a possible dispute over identity documents at a Mumbai trading firm. Shivnarayan showed it to Revati but offered no immediate legal opinion. ‘We must see the original documents,’ he said. Revati wrote to Abhijit Jha, who was familiar with banking records.

Abhijit replied that he could not disclose a customer's private information without lawful authorisation, though he could explain the general procedure for correcting a name. Revati was not displeased with his answer. She understood that an honest bank employee's respect for the limits of his authority helped protect many innocent people.

When the first reports came from Mumbai on the night of 26 November, Abhijit had finished work at the bank and was on his way home by suburban train. In the station crowd people were calling one another on their mobile phones, some astonished, others afraid. Until then the city had sounded like an ordinary day—handcarts, cars, trains, and tea sellers. Now word spread that shots had been fired at several locations. Abhijit decided to take shelter at an acquaintance's home. He telephoned his family. 'I'm safe, but we don't have the full news from the city. Please don't spread rumours.' At the other end of the line his mother asked just one question: 'Son, does your voice sound all right?' 'Yes, Ma,' Abhijit said. The insecurity of that entire night was pressed into the short answer.

The terrorist attacks in Mumbai from 26 to 29 November dealt the country a profound blow. Public reports described innocent people killed, members of the security forces, families held hostage, and difficult rescue operations. People in Darbhanga, Jodhpur and Ludhiana heard the news through the different fears and experiences of their own lives. Revati sat speechless before the reports in Darbhanga. 'This is an attack upon the country,' Shivnarayan said. 'We have a duty towards the victims.' Then he added, 'But the guilt of anyone convicted in court must be established by evidence. To turn every person under suspicion into the same person because we are afraid would not be justice.' Revati understood the gravity of his words. It was not a night for drafting a lawyer's speech. It was a night of mourning.

At the time, Ramesh Saw was stranded with other warehouse employees in a secure office in the city. The movement of several consignments had been suspended. An officer at one branch had instructed staff to recheck the entry passes for goods. When work resumed, the number on Ramesh's identity card did not match an old warehouse register. 'Get this document corrected first,' Sudhakar Deshmukh told him. Ramesh looked at his old application. One letter of his name was different, and the office stamp on the certificate had faded. He assumed it was an everyday clerical error that a fresh copy would remedy. But when part of a consignment of valuable components was found missing from the warehouse, the office's suspicion suddenly became much more serious.

The city was in the grip of fear, but the complaint about missing warehouse goods had its own distinct character. The trading company's manager had informed the police in writing that the accounts did not tally with certain expensive machinery components. The report named Ramesh as the employee responsible for making entries in the goods register. Investigating officer Suresh Patil first called for the office papers and then took Ramesh's statement. 'Did you sign the entry pass on this date?' 'I recorded the count of the goods. The stamp on the entry pass belongs to the office.' 'Why do you use different forms of your name?' 'My village certificate says Rameshwar; my work identity card says Ramesh. The office used the shorter version.' Suresh studied the faint stamp while listening. He was beginning to form a theory, but the foundation of his training was that a theory was not enough to prepare a criminal charge.

During the investigation, the warehouse watchman, Jagdish Shetty, said that one night Ramesh had come to the office after normal hours and taken away a sheet of paper. Ramesh admitted coming late, but said he had been instructed to correct a discrepancy in the goods-receipt register. Sudhakar Deshmukh did not immediately acknowledge giving any such instruction. 'I don't remember,' he said. To Ramesh those words sounded as mournful as a crow's cry. Only yesterday the man had praised his work; today he could not remember an instruction he had given him. Ramesh felt anger alongside his fear. 'Ask for my work notebook,' he told the police. 'It contains the instructions the owner wrote.' The investigating officer began looking for it.

Abhijit learned of the case because of the warehouse company's banking transactions. He did not breach customer confidentiality, but sent a written suggestion to a colleague in the bank's legal department: the bank's duty was to give authentic answers from the records it held, not to declare anyone a criminal. In a personal letter to Revati he wrote, 'After a night like that in Mumbai, people have less patience. But this commercial dispute has its own facts. If you need any records, request them through the prescribed procedure.' Revati did not immediately decide to go to Mumbai. She first tried to contact Ramesh's family. One document gave the name of his father's village, a settlement in Madhubani where a teacher known to Shivnarayan lived.

In Madhubani, Ramesh's father, Gangaram Saw, sat beside his clay hearth. Ever since his son had gone to Mumbai, household expenses had been met regularly, but for the past two months less money had arrived. After hearing of the terrorist attacks in the metropolis, he had barely slept for three nights. When Ramesh called, he asked a question before

he could even feel relief: 'You're alive and safe, aren't you?' 'I'm safe, Babu, but there's trouble at work.' It took Gangaram a while to understand. Why, he wondered, would a city that had been attacked be occupied with an ordinary dispute about warehouse paperwork? His son explained, 'Babu, the city's suffering is one thing; the records of my work are another. But right now people are suspicious of everything.'

Revati contacted a lawyer friend in Mumbai, Nalini Deshpande, known for her straightforward manner. 'If Ramesh is arrested,' Nalini said, 'first examine the grounds, whether he was informed of the allegations, and whether he has access to legal assistance. The city's suffering after the attacks is profound, but this commercial case is separate. If a journalist puts the two together in a sentence, the court ought not to accept that as evidence.' The conversation reassured Revati. She remembered learning much the same lesson from her father in 2001, during a separate case in Darbhanga involving fears over security.

One day in the first week of December, Ramesh was arrested in Mumbai. The investigating officer's written record alleged that certain commercial entry passes at the warehouse had been deliberately altered and that the alterations might be connected to the shortfall in one consignment. At the moment of arrest, Ramesh gripped in his fingers an old thread of rudraksha beads his mother had given him. He did not admit wrongdoing. The original seized papers still had to be sent for expert examination. The investigation was at a preliminary stage; no guilt had been established in court. A colleague asked, 'I work in this office too. Why haven't they arrested me?' Ramesh gave no reply. He understood that answering the police's questions was one thing; listening to a neighbour pass judgment upon him was quite another.

At the first appearance before the judicial magistrate, the prosecutor set out the need for further investigation. 'Examination of the original seized documents, the signatures in the register and the actual count of the goods remains to be done,' he said. 'Certain questions must be put to the accused.' Nalini Deshpande, appearing for the defence at the family's request, asked whether the accused's rights had been observed during questioning following his arrest. The magistrate first examined the records of the arrest and production before the court, and then heard the limited submissions from both sides. The hearing concerned whether custody was justified for further investigation, not whether guilt had been proved. The court made that distinction explicit. Inside this courtroom the documents of a particular commercial allegation were being considered, not the grief of the city after 26/11.

Ramesh wanted to tell the magistrate just one thing: ‘My name is different on the two documents, but I'm the same man.’ Nalini assured him that evidence on this point would be produced at the appropriate time. In the written remand order, the magistrate stated the investigative requirements and the limits of the material available; the accused's entitlement to lawful assistance and contact with his family was recorded. Outside, Nalini telephoned Gangaram. ‘It isn't a case of looking at a document and imposing a sentence on the spot. We'll apply for bail at the next appropriate opportunity. For now, collect the original records.’ Gangaram fell silent. He remembered where his son's childhood school certificate lay: in his own old wooden chest.

That day in Ludhiana, Sunita came home with a small book on law from her school library. Her teacher had assigned an essay on workers' rights. Sunita was using her father's wage slip as the basis of her essay, but she found the printed abbreviations difficult to decipher. She asked Baldev Singh. ‘If words have to be written for evidence,’ Baldev said, ‘they ought to be put in plain language. But the court will follow its own rules.’ ‘I haven't been to court,’ Sunita replied. ‘But when words on a page cut down the days my father is paid for, don't I have a right to know what they mean?’ Baldev sighed deeply. ‘Bring that question to our next meeting.’ Sunita wrote the title of her essay: ‘The Wage Slip and the Fire in the Hearth’.

At Marudhar College in Jodhpur, the students organised a science seminar to mark Chandrayaan's successful launch. Kusum, Naseema and Rakesh came from their different departments to attend. Ishwardatt Rathore, the geography teacher, gave an accessible talk on the moon's topography, remote images of the earth, and methods of surveying. ‘If we can examine images of the moon from so far away,’ Kusum asked, ‘why is it so hard to measure the old position of our well?’ The hall burst into laughter, but Rathore did not dismiss the question. ‘Because a satellite image, historical ownership of land, and legal records are three different things,’ he said. ‘The methods of measurement may appear similar, but questions of rights also involve dates, documents and human conduct.’ Kusum was satisfied that the complexity of her question had been taken seriously.

After the seminar Naseema went with Kusum to the library. Marks left by the old damp still showed beneath the fresh paint on the walls. They looked through a book of maps. ‘You've kept Saira's old admission papers safely, haven't you?’ Kusum asked. ‘Yes,’ Naseema replied. ‘But keeping them safe isn't enough. You need a school and an office willing to recognise them.’ Kusum spoke of the original copies of the land

documents kept at home. ‘We keep our papers safe too. The court has ordered another survey because the line on one document doesn't agree with the line on another.’ Taking her hand, Naseema said, ‘One piece of paper can protect a person; another can keep her trapped for years. But that doesn't mean we should abandon papers altogether.’

Shivnarayan arranged to travel to Mumbai with Revati. He was growing older, but the sharpness of his gaze had not diminished. ‘I won't be the principal advocate in this commercial case,’ he said. ‘Nalini knows the procedures and records of the courts here. I'll help the family put its documents in order.’ Revati smiled. ‘I've watched you acknowledge the limits of your role since I was a child.’ ‘Knowing one's limits isn't defeat,’ Shivnarayan replied. ‘Claims to unlimited authority in court often weaken the truth.’ Their purpose in travelling was not to examine the investigation into the attacks on Mumbai, but to assemble an authenticated sequence of personal documents for an employee under arrest.

Gangaram Saw opened his chest and took out his son's school certificate, a copy of his birth particulars and an old employment paper. The edges of the sheets had yellowed with sweat and age. ‘This says Rameshwar; in the city they say Ramesh. I've always called him Ramesh too,’ he told Revati. She explained that supporting documents might resolve the small variation in his name, but the allegation concerning the missing goods needed a separate answer. ‘Will they consider my son innocent after this?’ Gangaram asked. ‘These documents will help clarify his name. The court will examine the evidence concerning the alleged offence separately. I won't give you a promise I can't support.’ The old man wiped his eyes. He needed consolation, but he found her clear answer better than a false assurance.

In Mumbai, Revati and Shivnarayan met Abhijit Jha at a tea shop. Traces of the exhaustion of that night still marked Abhijit's face. ‘The city is slowly returning to work,’ he said, ‘but the wounds in people's minds, the ones we cannot see, run very deep.’ ‘Historians, journalists and the victims themselves have a right to write about those wounds,’ Shivnarayan replied quietly. ‘In this case we must consider only the person against whom documents have been presented.’ Abhijit supplied a publicly available description of the bank's general procedure for correcting a name, not any confidential entry belonging to a particular customer. Revati placed it in her file. An old principle came before her again: a bank, too, bore the responsibility of observing its proper limits.

Ramesh's old work notebook arrived at Nalini Deshpande's office. It contained dates, vehicle numbers and ordinary details about goods transported to the warehouse. One page bore a short notation resembling Sudhakar Deshmukh's signature: 'Prepare the delayed slip again.' Nalini did not immediately treat it as decisive evidence. 'Whose handwriting is this? Who held the original notebook? When was this mark made?' she asked. Revati said handwriting examination might be useful, but information about the continuous custody of the original notebook was necessary too. Shivnarayan remained silent. He was remembering page forty-five of Neelkanth's ledger from the year 2000. He had learned then that even an admissible document did not answer every question in a story.

In her first substantial written submission, Nalini said that the investigation was still at an early stage, but Ramesh had a settled family address, older records of lawful employment, an explanation for the different forms of his name, and a willingness to cooperate. The prosecution replied that the missing goods and possible alteration of records could not be explained away merely by variations in his name. The court sought confirmation of certain original documents and asked about the progress of the necessary investigation. Bail was not decided that day, but a further date was fixed to avoid unnecessary delay. Ramesh's family left the courthouse not with an assurance of success, but with a definite list of tasks: certified copies of documents, the address of an old colleague, and a second count of the warehouse goods.

A second count of the warehouse goods proved the hardest task of all. Ramesh's former colleague, Hemant Kulkarni, said that one consignment had been placed in the rear storeroom and might never have been entered in the main register. Sudhakar Deshmukh rejected the possibility outright. 'Our system doesn't work like that.' 'If the system is perfect, why have we found a shortfall today?' Hemant asked. His question accused no one of a crime; it pointed only to a discrepancy in the count. Investigating officer Patil recorded the two statements separately. He called for an inventory of the rear storeroom. Some crates were found there, but not all. It was too soon to say whether this reduced the scale of the allegation. Nevertheless, the total given in the first report could no longer be relied upon.

Sudhakar Deshmukh sat alone in his office that night. Before him lay an order cancelled by an overseas customer, a fresh estimate of the loss of warehouse goods, and the news of Ramesh's arrest. 'If Rameshwar turns out to be innocent, what will become of our company's name?' he asked his accountant. 'Lodging a complaint and proving a crime are different

things,' the accountant replied. 'But if we knowingly conceal our own mistake, that will be our wrongdoing.' Sudhakar fell silent. He remembered Ramesh's years of labour: reconciling registers late into the night, answering customers' letters, reporting damage to warehouse goods accurately. Another fear began to take hold of him: had the owner's own disorder somehow become an employee's alleged crime?

When copies of the case papers were placed before Shivnarayan, he read Ramesh's first statement alongside the warehouse owner's supplementary statement. 'There is a difference here,' he said. 'First it was said that his late-night entry was unauthorised; later the employer said he couldn't remember giving permission. Ask why the recollections differ.' 'We won't conduct the entire cross-examination at a bail hearing,' Nalini cautioned. 'We'll use the necessary documents to show the seriousness of the charge and the position of the accused in relation to it.' Revati accepted that limit. Baseless certainty could weaken the defence. She wrote in her notes: 'A change in a sentence is not in itself final proof of guilt or innocence. The circumstances in which the statement was made must be examined.'

In Ludhiana, Baldev Singh was fighting a separate struggle. The factory management issued a third list reducing the working days of some labourers. Ram Lakhan's name appeared on it too. Baldev asked whether the reductions applied to everyone in the same category or whether particular people had been singled out. Dharampal said production had fallen and machines in some departments were being kept idle. The workers replied that the interruption of work had reduced the days of many temporary employees in rotation, while there had been no cutback in the permanent accounts office. The dispute could not be resolved in a moment. 'This time don't bring only slogans,' Sunita told her father. 'Ask everybody to bring their earlier wage slips.' For the first time Ram Lakhan saw his daughter put forward an opinion among the workers. He was proud, but also afraid her studies might suffer.

On a cold December day Sunita was invited to give a short talk on science at a school event. She had read about the launch of Chandrayaan and seen photographs, but she did not fully understand the technical details of its instruments. 'Should I say only what I understand?' she asked her teacher. 'Yes. Where your knowledge is incomplete, make it clear that you're offering a supposition.' On stage Sunita said that her country could send instruments as far as the moon, and that the achievement represented years of work by craftsmen, engineers, people who made calculations, and scientists. Then she asked, 'If a village school like ours doesn't even have a balance in its laboratory, how will the dream of

science reach every child?' The assembly was silent for a moment. Then the students applauded. She went home carrying both pleasure and her question.

In Bengaluru, Niranjan received a letter from Avani's school. The children wanted to visit an exhibition about Chandrayaan, but the school lacked the means. Niranjan discussed with his colleagues the possibility of arranging suitable materials for a public science display. There was no question of releasing sensitive information from private experiments; published images of the moon and ordinary scientific methods could be used for education. 'Avani tires herself out counting stars,' Maitreyi said, 'but she'd be happier still if she could put those pictures up at her school.' Niranjan reflected that a scientific success was not confined to the instant of launch. Carrying some of its light to schoolchildren was a responsibility too. His thoughts went to students in places such as Ludhiana who struggled to understand scientific questions because they lacked equipment.

At the next hearing before the Mumbai magistrate, a certified copy of the original school record and older employment documents were produced to explain the two forms of Ramesh's name. The prosecution said the inquiry into the missing goods was continuing; a fresh comparison of the original warehouse register with the actual stock was under way. Nalini argued that the accused had a settled address, a family and an undertaking to cooperate, while the original documents were in official custody. Any concrete apprehension that he would abscond or destroy evidence needed to be supported on its own merits. The court heard both sides and set down its reasons. Ramesh's personal responsibility, if any, would ultimately be tested at trial, but the magistrate concluded that the present circumstances were sufficient to justify bail.

Ramesh's eyes filled with tears when he heard the bail order, but he had not been acquitted. Outside, Nalini told him, 'The investigation and the possibility of trial remain. Observe the conditions in the order; avoid unnecessary contact with witnesses; never conceal a document.' Ramesh bent his knees to touch his father's feet. Gangaram caught his hands and raised him. 'Come home first.' Shivnarayan watched from a little distance away. He remembered the day Neelkanth Sah had first been granted bail. 'Remember one thing,' he told Revati. 'Bail is not proof of innocence, and refusal of bail is not proof of guilt. A person's dignity and the discipline of a trial are distinct questions.'

Sudhakar, the warehouse owner, was displeased when he heard Ramesh had been granted bail. ‘The bail order is the court's,’ his accountant said quietly. ‘The investigation hasn't ended.’ Instead of losing his temper, Sudhakar ordered a fresh stock check. It emerged that the labels on two old crates might have been exchanged with those belonging to another consignment. Some goods still remained unaccounted for, but the total loss stated in the first report was no longer an unquestionable fact. Investigating officer Patil entered the new information in the case diary. He did not consider the accused's release a personal defeat; on the contrary, the direction of the necessary inquiry was becoming clearer. ‘How long are we going to drag out all these questions?’ a colleague asked. ‘Until the facts have been counted correctly,’ Patil replied. ‘A false accusation does injustice not only to the person accused, but to the real victim as well.’

At the railway station in Mumbai, morning crowds gathered as Ramesh prepared to go home. In some places a shadow of mourning remained; in others the bustle of ordinary business had returned. He saw that the front page of a newspaper discussed security arrangements, the inside pages reported the commercial downturn, and a small corner carried an article about Chandrayaan's scientific investigations. Grief, livelihood and curiosity were recorded on the same sheet of paper. He remembered sunsets in his village. Mumbai's magnificent buildings had always made him feel small, but now he understood that to correct a mistake in his name his father had reached into the papers in his old chest. Sometimes a document smaller than a person's home could save that person from an immense calamity.

On the train back from Mumbai to Darbhanga, Revati rested her head against the window. Shivnarayan was half asleep. She remembered asking her father, when he first took her to court, how quickly a guilty person could be identified. After so many years of experience, the answer was no longer simple. Some allegations against Neelkanth had been proved, others had not; the question of Ramdev's land remained undecided; the difference in the forms of Ramesh's name had been clarified for the purposes of bail, but the goods dispute continued. She wrote in her diary: ‘Even within a court's decision, some of life remains undecided.’ Then she added another line: ‘Today I will not turn one person's fear into a swift verdict on another person's guilt.’

At the final workers' meeting of the year in Ludhiana, Sunita gathered the courage to read her essay. A financial downturn, she read, was a word from far away, but its effects appeared directly on the papers recording a worker's days. Keeping accurate records before a legal dispute arose was a

need shared by the whole community. ‘We'll write down the different dates of all our complaints,’ Baldev said after listening. ‘The days we received work, the wages we received, and every place where the figures don't agree.’ Ram Lakhan took his wage slip out of his bag and placed it on the table. Twenty others brought out their papers. This was no courtroom, but if a court asked for documents in the future, the labour done that evening would matter. A young temporary worker named Naveen Sah stood in the doorway watching. His eyes were not on the papers but on the faces: worn by days of unemployment, yet recovering the courage to ask questions.

Naveen had knocked on many doors since losing his job the previous month. His village was near Darbhanga, though he was living with his maternal uncle in Ludhiana. His schooling was incomplete, but he was good with figures. An acquaintance offered him a job in an office connected with private financial services on the outskirts of Chandigarh. He was told that the work involved keeping written accounts, customers' receipts and commercial papers; the wages would be twice what the factory had paid. ‘What's the company's name and registration information?’ Naveen asked. ‘Come and meet them first. They'll explain everything,’ the acquaintance replied. For a moment Naveen was tempted. His mother's medicine, the family's debts and the stagnation of his own life came to mind together. But a sentence he had heard at Sunita's meeting held him back: ‘Find out where the papers come from.’ He asked the acquaintance for a written offer.

The offer eventually arrived, bearing an ordinary address and a vague description of the work. Naveen saw an office telephone number but no full identification of the officer offering employment. ‘Why is it so difficult to put that in writing?’ he asked his acquaintance. ‘Are you looking for a job or preparing a lawsuit?’ the man snapped. ‘I'm looking for a job. That's why I'm asking.’ Naveen made no decision that night. For the future of this story, the significance of the offer was, as yet, only this: unemployment could push a person towards a decisive choice on the basis of incomplete information. There was still no evidence that the person making the offer was guilty of any wrongdoing.

On the last day of the year, Shivnarayan was putting away a copy of the old Neelkanth case in his small library in Darbhanga. Revati arrived carrying another bundle of papers. ‘What are these?’ her father asked. ‘A chronology of the Mumbai case. I've been reading it to help a friend, not as counsel for my own client. Nalini is the advocate handling it.’ Shivnarayan smiled. ‘Good.’ He took out an old newspaper carrying news of Chandrayaan and laid it beside Revati's papers. Beneath the picture of

the moon was a report saying that the mission was opening a new phase of scientific exploration. ‘Behind that picture are people who check every measurement again,’ Revati said. ‘And behind this file,’ her father replied, ‘are people whose lives can be changed by a measurement made wrongly.’

In a letter home at the end of December, Niranjan Jha recounted an incident. At a school exhibition, Avani had been explaining a picture of the Moon to another child, but a label on the picture had been put the wrong way round. The children laughed, and Avani fell silent in embarrassment. Niranjan told her that discovering an error was not an occasion for ridicule but an opportunity to correct it. Avani turned the picture round, set the label right, and explained to her friends that scientists checked their calculations precisely to prevent mistaken conclusions. At the end of his letter Niranjan wrote, ‘In a single year a country knows sorrow as well as achievement. Neither diminishes the truth of the other.’ Shivnarayan read those words and remained silent for a long time. It seemed to him that they offered the proper account of the year.

In the village near Darbhanga, Gangaram could not find complete peace even after his son Ramesh returned. The young man was out on bail, his employment was uncertain, and the proceedings arising from the commercial allegations in Mumbai were still to come. Yet something in the household had changed. When a villager remarked, ‘Well, if the court let him go, he can't have been guilty,’ Gangaram answered quietly, ‘The court has not decided guilt yet. My son is out, and I shall see that he honestly attends on the next date.’ The villagers stared at him in surprise. Many people heard a legal word as the simple announcement of victory or defeat. Through his own suffering, Gangaram had learnt a distinction of greater consequence.

In Ludhiana, Sunita prepared a plain notebook. On the first page she wrote her father's name; on the second, his days of work; on the third, the wages actually paid; on the fourth, the explanations given for days deducted. She insisted on recording the date on every page. ‘I am not going to court now,’ she told her mother when asked. ‘But if I ever do, I want papers I can rely on more than my memory.’ ‘There is also the testimony of people, beyond anything written on paper,’ her mother replied. Sunita smiled. ‘We shall keep both.’ At the end of her notebook she wrote, ‘Question for next year: a full accounting of wages.’ In seeking an answer to that question, Sunita was beginning to find the courage to speak more clearly among other people.

In Jodhpur, Saira Ansari was now a college student. Naseema and Kusum had helped her obtain new educational records after her old ones were destroyed in the fire of 2002. Hearing the news about Chandrayaan, Saira put up a picture of the night sky above her village at a science exhibition. Someone at the gathering asked, ‘Was the trouble over your old school certificates finally settled?’ ‘The records that were needed have been accepted,’ Saira replied. ‘But where does one go for a certificate of the memories of a home that burnt down?’ The questioner fell silent. Saira pointed again to her picture of the Moon. ‘People work patiently together to understand something so far away. Why can we not show the same patience in understanding another human being who lives close to us?’ That night Naseema preserved those words in her diary.

At the school in Kamalpur, Sharda Devi asked her pupils about the events of the year. One said Chandrayaan; another mentioned the news from Mumbai; a third spoke of the bridge that had broken in the rains. ‘Madam, why do so many different things happen in the same year?’ Phulwa asked. ‘A year does not tell a single story by itself,’ Sharda answered. ‘People find its meaning in their own lives.’ She asked the children to write on one page something that had made them happy, and on another something that had caused them sorrow. On Phulwa's first page was Chandrayaan; on her second were the three days her father had been without work. Sharda realised that writing the history of a country and reading a village girl's school diary were different tasks, but both were necessary. The inquiry into the deceased Madhaveshwar Mishra's salary records was still continuing; she would not let that dispute keep her pupils from their studies.

In Mumbai, Abhijit's colleague Farhat Sheikh had lost a friend in the attacks. No one at the office could quite bring themselves to question her about her grief. One day Abhijit quietly placed the ordinary work records on her desk and asked whether she needed a few days' leave. ‘Sometimes work helps to steady the mind,’ Farhat said. ‘But do not turn the lives of those who died into nothing more than numbers in the news.’ ‘An acquaintance of mine is facing a commercial prosecution,’ Abhijit replied. ‘Some people say, at a time like this, why worry about paperwork? But I do not believe that the city's grief and a worker's legal rights are opposed to each other.’ For the first time Farhat looked directly at her colleague. ‘Both must be protected,’ she said. ‘The memory of the dead and justice for the living must not be abandoned as if one made the other unnecessary.’

In her office, Nalini showed Ramesh's correspondence register to a junior advocate named Meghnath. ‘Even when the papers are in order,

witnesses may still be needed,' she said. 'And if we want a witness to tell the truth, we must not begin by frightening them.' 'How long will the investigation into the missing stock, which is the central allegation, take?' Meghnath asked. 'I will not guess at a date,' Nalini replied. 'But at every hearing I shall ask what real progress the investigation has made.' On a sheet of paper she wrote down three matters: the original stock-count records, the source of authority for the written instructions, and the accused man's documents. Meghnath wanted to combine all three into one forceful argument. Nalini stopped him. 'We must not arrange what has not been proved into a straight and compelling story merely to place it before a court.'

The women workers at the Ludhiana factory held a meeting of their own. Champa Devi, who sorted cloth, said that with work declining their days were being cut even more than before, yet they had received no written reasons for the decisions. Sunita asked everyone for names and dates. 'But how will you keep these pages safe?' Champa asked. 'What if they are lost?' Sunita prepared two notebooks, an original and a copy, and advised Champa to keep a record of her own at home as well. Such simple precautions were not a means of concealing any offence; they were a way for workers to preserve the memory of their labour. Ram Lakhan listened from a distance. He felt that, through her education, his daughter was learning that the meaning of a signed page could not be separated from the life of the person who had signed it.

Shivnarayan met an old acquaintance from his native village. 'We have reached the age of travelling towards the distant Moon,' the man remarked, 'and yet the cases in our courts have grown no smaller.' 'The calculations behind Chandrayaan are different from the procedures of a court,' Shivnarayan replied. 'We should take pride in the scientists' achievement and still question delays in the courts. Neither truth cancels the other.' 'And what about severity after the attacks in Mumbai?' the acquaintance asked. 'Firmness against crime and protection of an innocent person's rights are not enemies,' Shivnarayan answered. 'Where there is evidence against someone, let there be a trial. Where there is none, do not make suspicion a permanent part of that person's name.' That day he felt his daughter's education had borne fruit, because Revati could now answer such questions for herself.

On the last evening of the year, Revati looked out from her office window as lamps began to light along the street. Beyond them stretched the life of a country in which Chandrayaan had risen from Sriharikota, innocent people had died in Mumbai, work had diminished in factories, farmers still waited to protect their land, and a warehouse employee had

gone to court to establish the correct form of his own name. These events did not arise from one cause. Their suffering, their hopes and the grounds on which their truths rested were different. Yet Revati could discern one need shared by human beings: before a decision is made about anyone's future, the facts must be examined. She closed her notebook. A postman had left a letter at the gate. It had come from Ludhiana and enclosed a signed list of the wages owed to the workers. Revati opened it and read. The first name was Ram Lakhan Paswan. Beneath it, in newly formed letters, someone had written: 'My daughter Sunita will also bear witness to these accounts.'

Chapter 13 — The Workers' Unpaid Wages

2009–2010: Ludhiana

The mist of Magh hung over the factory gate in Ludhiana as though the light of dawn had been denied permission to enter. The whistle sounded, but the line of people waiting outside was shorter than it had been the day before. Ram Lakhan Paswan pulled his old coat close across his chest. The cloth bag on his shoulder was unusually light. Instead of a tin of rotis, it held three months' wage slips and the notebook Sunita had written.

Sunita had accompanied him as far as the gate. She was preparing for her final school examinations, yet that morning, instead of opening her textbooks, she was studying a copy of her father's attendance register. Of the two notebooks she had prepared the previous year, one remained at home and the other was with Baldev Singh. 'Babuji, we must not come back today without a written answer,' she said. Ram Lakhan tried to smile. 'At the factory, answers don't come on paper. They come from the whistle.'

The tea stall against the factory wall was a regular meeting place for the workers. Champa Devi held up her fingers. 'They called me in for fifteen days in the month, but the slip says ten. If I didn't work those five days, where did these needle pricks on my hands come from?' Her job was to sort pieces of cut cloth. The names of workers at the machines went promptly into the attendance register; the days worked by women doing the sorting were often calculated from the contractor's ledger instead.

Adjusting the end of his turban, Baldev Singh said, 'Don't go carrying your papers separately. First put everything into one list: those whose wages have been delayed, those whose working days have been deducted, and those who were taken off the job without a written reason. These are three different things.' He had himself spent years as a mechanic repairing weaving machines. His speech contained few grand legal terms and many concrete examples drawn from work.

At the entrance Kirpal, the security guard, checked each worker's slip. Naveen's name was not on the list. After losing his job the previous year, he had visited an alleged finance office on the outskirts of Chandigarh, but had returned on seeing the uncertain terms of its appointment letter. Now he sometimes did small jobs at the factory and sometimes copied numbers from registers. He told Sunita, 'Never think paper is a light

matter. My name wasn't on the employment list, but it's there against last month's deducted wages.'

Inside, Dharampal Khurana looked out at the mist through his office window. Export orders had fallen the previous year, and two payments from foreign buyers were overdue. But the factory had not closed. Whenever a little work came in he summoned a small group; sometimes he sent a worker home after half a day, without explaining the reason to everyone concerned. Dharampal had his own anxieties about his family and debts, but those anxieties could not justify deductions left unexplained on the wage slips.

Two registers lay before the accountant, Harjeet Kaur. One contained the factory's internal whistle and gate attendance records; the other was contractor Harnam's payment list. Some names appeared in both, others in only one. Harjeet noticed a difference of two days in Ram Lakhan's recorded work. 'If this is a mistake, it should be corrected now,' she told Dharampal. 'Ask the contractor first,' he replied. 'But the wage slip was issued under the company's stamp,' Harjeet said.

At noon, four workers led by Baldev were allowed to meet Dharampal. Ram Lakhan opened his notebook. Champa showed the days deducted from her wages. Naveen displayed the blurred impression on his old appointment letter. Dharampal listened to them all, then said, 'The market is in recession. We have liabilities too.' 'Financial hardship doesn't erase written evidence of days worked,' Baldev answered. 'If there was no work, put that in writing. If someone worked, give a correct account of the work.'

Dharampal was silent for a moment. Baldev's demand could not be answered merely by taking cash out of the till, for the dispute over accounts now reached into his own office. 'I'll give you a written statement within seven days,' he said. 'For everyone?' Baldev asked. 'For those who submit applications.' 'Then we'll submit them together.' In that brief exchange, the first outline of the following year's litigation was drawn.

When Ram Lakhan returned home he placed his bag on the table. His wife, Phoolkumari, was tending the fire in the hearth. 'Did you get anything today?' she asked. 'A promise of seven days.' 'The rent falls due in seven days,' Phoolkumari replied. 'A promise won't fill the landlord's account.' Sunita looked at her sleeping younger brother. No one in the house made emotional declarations about their shortage of money. The measure of rice and the date rent was due were harsher than any argument.

Sunita opened her mathematics notebook. One page recorded five days deducted, another a discrepancy of two days, and a third the evidence that a machine had been running even on a day called a holiday. She put a question mark beside every entry. Phoolkumari watched her. 'Why are you leaving your studies to deal with these papers?' 'This is studying, Ma,' Sunita replied. 'When the numbers are wrong, the account of a life goes wrong with them.'

Seven days later, a single-page reply came from the factory. The company acknowledged a fall in production, explained why wage payments had been delayed, and referred certain discrepancies in attendance to the contractor's records. It contained no calculation of the days worked by any individual labourer. Baldev read it. 'An answer has been written,' he said, 'but no answer has been given.' 'It still doesn't say where my five days went,' Champa added.

The small veranda of the city's labour office was another world from the factory gate. Here applications were read in lowered voices, and the corners of files kept curling beneath the fan. Baldev, Ram Lakhan, Champa and Naveen arrived together. Sunita sat outside writing down everyone's names. Looking at their application, an assistant asked, 'Which claims concern deductions, and whose employment has been terminated?' Baldev paused.

The employee explained that a separate procedure before the designated authority under wage-payment law was available for questions of delayed wages or deductions contrary to the rules. Questions concerning the state of work at the factory, termination of employment and collective industrial disputes could also take the route of conciliation. 'You may put all your complaints into one petition,' he said, 'but don't assume they can all be resolved in a single order.' Listening from outside, Sunita saw for the first time that the law had more than one doorway.

Ram Lakhan hesitated as he was about to put his thumbprint beside his name. He could not sign. 'Babuji, shall I read it aloud?' Sunita asked. 'The applicant must understand and consent before placing a thumb impression,' the employee said. Sunita read the entire statement aloud, gave the dates of the deductions, and asked her father, 'Is anything here wrong?' 'One month's entry has been left out by mistake,' Ram Lakhan said. Another line was added.

Champa Devi could write her name, but she could not read the words 'unauthorised deduction' in the application. 'I want the money for my five days of work,' she said. 'Do these words mean what I'm trying to say?'

Baldev explained their full meaning in plain language. Only then did she sign beneath her name. Sunita realised that words written on paper truly belonged to a person only when the person for whom they were written understood them.

Dharampal came to the first conciliation meeting with Harjeet and a company adviser. Three workers sat beside Baldev. At the outset the officer made clear that they were attempting a mutually agreed settlement; the final adjudication of the underlying rights would not take place at this table. Dharampal produced the production-order records. Baldev presented the workers' separate record of days worked. The officer gave the parties time to check the two sets of records against one another.

After the meeting Dharampal spoke sharply to Harjeet. 'Why did you show the office register in front of the workers?' Harjeet remained calm. 'I showed only a record prepared inside the company. Hiding it won't change the numbers,' she said. 'If you want, I'll prepare a proper written response. But I won't put my signature on false accounts.' Dharampal did not answer.

There was little colour in Ram Lakhan's house at the end of Phagun. His young son drew a yellow line on the wall. Phoolkumari made vegetables with spices bought on credit. Sunita was studying history for her examinations, but the factory documents kept intruding upon her reading. When she encountered an examination question on 'the benefits of industrialisation', she wrote not only about production in large factories but also about workers' wages. Reading her answer, her teacher said, 'The argument is good. But give dates and sources for your examples.'

Meanwhile, the women at the factory held a separate meeting. Champa wanted all their names included in the joint application, but Lajo Kaur said, 'If my family finds out, they'll stop me from going out to work.' The contractor had threatened Kamla, a recently married woman, that she would never get work again if she protested. 'No one's name will be included against her wishes,' Sunita said. 'But everyone should keep her own record of the days she has worked.'

Sunita prepared a small illustrated sheet for the women, with spaces for the date, hours worked, the name of the person supervising, and whether payment had been received. It did not seem to her like a library exercise or a school examination paper. She thought of it as preserving the memory of people's days. Champa asked her child to read the sheet aloud

once. By the time the first evening lamp was lit, five women's working days had been recorded.

At the beginning of Chait, an old machine in the factory broke down. Iqbal Hussain, who operated it, was resting for two days after a minor injury to his hand. The company register marked him absent, although the guard's notebook contained a report of the day on which he had been injured. 'I need a different kind of assistance,' Iqbal said. 'Payment for the deducted days is one question; treatment for the injury is another.' Baldev advised him to preserve his medical papers, for a workplace accident could give rise to a separate legal claim.

Sunita went to Iqbal's home. His wife, Nazia, opened the door with a smile, but inside the room the smell of medicines mingled with the odour of machine oil. Showing his hand, Iqbal said, 'It's not a serious injury. But even a small stitch can stop a man from working.' His four-year-old daughter was making a doll from a bright scrap of cloth. Sunita saw that the factory's discarded scraps became children's toys in this house, yet selling them would not buy their father his medicines.

In this Ludhiana settlement, doors stayed closed by day and people brought chairs out into the open lane at night. Sunita had once taken it for ordinary neighbourliness. Now she understood that every family in the lane had a case of its own: illness in one household, school fees for a daughter in another, treatment for an aged father in the village in a third. Unpaid wages were not merely figures in an office. They could stop time in so many homes at once.

The company's lawyer, Arun Suri, was preparing papers for the first hearing before the designated authority. He was young but knew the ways of a courthouse veranda. 'These people's list is false,' Dharampal told him. 'Is every date on it wrong?' Arun asked. 'Not all of them. There may have been mistakes by the contractor.' Arun was explicit. 'Then we won't argue that the whole list is untrue. Separate out what can be admitted first. If we deny something in court and the records later establish it, the company's credibility will suffer.'

Reconciling the attendance records, Harjeet Kaur discovered that two of Ram Lakhan's days appeared against an additional night shift in the company's register but not as ordinary working days in the contractor's. Signatures confirmed Champa's attendance on three of the five disputed days; the other two required separate examination. In Naveen's case, the documents recording the date his work ended and his final payment could not be found. In a corner of her notes she wrote: 'Three workers, three different situations.'

Meanwhile, a man from an outside group requested a meeting with Baldev. He claimed he could turn the workers' struggle into a great campaign, put up a platform and get their names into the newspapers. In exchange he wanted permission to collect donations in the group's name. Baldev asked his companions, 'Has this man seen our wage register?' No one answered. 'The workers must first understand their own claims,' Baldev said. 'We haven't given anyone the right to make a business out of our suffering.' Sunita remembered the exchange, for a loud voice on a platform and the right figures in an office were different kinds of work.

One afternoon in Jeth, Sunita's school held a meeting for parents. 'You'll pass your examinations, won't you?' Phoolkumari asked. 'I'm good at arithmetic,' Sunita replied. 'I still make some mistakes in language.' A teacher said, 'This girl always writes about things she has observed. But the anxieties at home are consuming her studies.' Phoolkumari felt concern, not humiliation. On their way home she told her daughter, 'I can look after your father's papers too. Don't abandon your books.' Sunita agreed, although she knew books and records would go on travelling together through her life.

On the day of the first hearing before the wage-payment authority, Baldev carried a bundle tied with red tape through the veranda. Outside, Sunita held her father's bag. The officer first examined the parties' identities and the question of jurisdiction. The company's advocate argued that some claimants were not direct employees but worked under a contractor, so their claims ought to proceed by a different route. The workers' representative answered that the actual payment arrangements and the slips issued under the company's authority were themselves evidenced by its records.

'Don't confuse the admissibility of a claim with the question of the amount owed,' the officer said. 'First we must establish the working relationship and who is responsible for payment.' Ram Lakhan held on to his slip. He had no wish to speak loudly, but every page of Sunita's notebook seemed to him like a day of his own labour. The officer did not complete the taking of detailed evidence at the first hearing. The parties were given time to produce the original registers, and another date was fixed.

'Have we won or lost today?' Champa asked as they came out. 'All that has happened today,' Baldev replied, 'is that our account has been entered in the proper place.' Champa was disheartened. 'My children will ask whether I've got the money. What shall I tell them?' 'Tell them the company has now been asked to produce its original registers,' Sunita said

quietly. 'When they come, the calculation of your days will be questioned too.' She knew this answer could not take the place of food.

Some weeks later there was a hearing to compare certified copies of the company's internal and external registers. Harjeet was called to explain how the documents had been prepared. She stated the limits of her responsibility. 'I issue wage slips. The gatekeeper's initial attendance record and the contractor's handwritten list come from other places.' 'Do you personally supervise every worker on every day?' the company lawyer asked. 'No.' The workers' side then asked, 'Were slips issued with your signature?' 'Yes.'

The officer examined a corner of one slip. Beside the amount deducted stood the word 'absence', but there was no explanation of why the worker had been treated as absent. Harjeet said some working days had been entered twice in the original register when shifts changed. 'Then the two registers do not agree,' the officer said. 'I need to understand on what basis the actual days worked were determined.' The defence requested reasonable time. For the first time, Sunita saw the numbers in her notebook become the language of justice.

Back home, Dharampal stood before an old photograph of his father, Karnail Singh Khurana. His father had founded the business when the factory possessed just six machines. Beneath the photograph was written: 'Industry through Trust.' Dharampal reflected that no businessman could always pay in full each month when customers delayed their payments. But he could also see that altering the documents recording workers' attendance raised a question of dishonesty quite apart from a customer's delay.

That night Dharampal summoned Harjeet. 'Bring all the registers together within three days. Prepare corrections for any errors in payment,' he said. 'The contractor's original notebook?' Harjeet asked. 'Have it brought from there.' 'And if he doesn't provide it?' 'Then record in writing that it wasn't produced.' It was Dharampal's first immediate acknowledgment of the problem, though he did not yet grasp the extent of the miscalculations inside his own office.

Late that night a young worker, Jagdish, came to see Sunita's family on the roof. Someone at the contractor's office had told him he might get regular work the following month if he left Baldev's group. Jagdish's mother was ill. 'What would you do in my place?' he asked Ram Lakhan. 'I can't lend you my courage,' Ram Lakhan replied. 'But don't write down as false what you know is true on paper.' Jagdish went away without another word.

On the day the first monsoon clouds gathered, the sound of machinery grew louder again. A few export orders had returned. The workers wanted to rejoice, but the old accounts were still unsettled. Baldev made it clear that new business for the factory was welcome; it did not cancel what was already owed. Sunita inscribed his words in her mind: new light must not become a pretext for erasing old shadows.

Meanwhile, Champa's husband, Jagmohan, came home and said he did not want to see his wife at the courthouse. 'People will say the woman of our house is quarrelsome,' he said. 'Is it quarrelling to ask for the money for days I've worked?' Champa asked calmly. Jagmohan had no answer. Later that night he watched his son searching for the money to pay school fees. He picked up Champa's slip and counted the days one by one. On the morning of the next hearing, he stood outside their home and wished his wife well.

One day in Sawan, a stranger approached Baldev and introduced himself as a journalist. 'I'll report that all the workers in your factory have been reduced to slaves,' he said. 'That will be the headline.' 'Our evidence doesn't support that headline,' Baldev replied. 'We're raising questions about five days' wages, attendance registers and proper working conditions.' 'Then how can I make it a big story?' the journalist asked. 'You needn't enlarge our suffering. Print the correct account of our working days.'

Sunita heard the journalist's question. She thought that falsehood might bring a small victory quickly, but the trust built around truth endured longer. In an old envelope she placed a job advertisement and a wage slip showing deductions made in 2008. She wrote the date at the top of a fresh page and, beneath it, not her own name but the words 'Workers' Days of Labour'. A record, she thought, was not made for personal fame. It existed because everyone had a right to an account of their own work.

At the beginning of Bhadon came the hearing of evidence before the wage authority. Four parties waited in the veranda: Ram Lakhan's group, the contractor Harnam, the company's representatives, and the witnesses. Sunita had returned after sitting her examinations. She had no right to give evidence that day, for she had not directly witnessed the working days in question; she had only helped her father preserve his records. She accepted that limit not as an insult but as a rule of proof.

Ram Lakhan was questioned about when he began work, his shift, his wage rate and the customary method of payment. He answered slowly. 'You say you worked until the night of the fourteenth. What written

evidence supports that?' The workers' representative produced not Sunita's notebook but a certified copy of the gatekeeper's entry register. 'I came through that gate every day,' Ram Lakhan said. 'When the whistle stopped, I went out.' The company's lawyer conducting the questioning wanted the matter of the records established from documents themselves, not from memory alone.

'Were there also days when you went home early?' Arun Suri asked. 'Yes. Once my child was ill, and I went home after half a day.' 'Are you claiming a full day's wages for that date?' 'No. Only what is due for half a day. I'm asking for what I worked.' The adjudicating officer had his answer recorded. Ram Lakhan's admission gave a more reliable picture of the days actually worked than a claim supported by declarations alone would have done.

Champa's testimony raised a different question. On certain days her presence had not been entered fully in the factory's internal register, because the contractor kept a separate notebook for the women's sorting team. 'I sorted cloth in the room behind the main hall,' she said. 'The factory whistle was my whistle too, but my name went into another notebook.' 'Who handed you your payment each day?' Arun asked. 'Harnam's clerk. But the slip carried the company's stamp.' The officer asked for both copies.

The contractor Harnam's attendance list was brought in with an attendant. Champa's face hardened when she saw it. On some days her name appeared as 'Champa', on others as 'C. Devi'. Harnam maintained that both referred to the same person. 'Then were any days counted twice because of these two names?' Arun asked. Harnam denied it at once, but when he examined two pages of the original register, his voice became quieter.

The officer examined a signature at the bottom of a page. Beside the word 'received' was a thumb impression. 'That isn't mine,' Champa said. The officer explained that the authenticity of a thumb impression had to be determined by appropriate examination; an immediate declaration could not by itself establish the fact. Harnam's clerk was not present. He was directed to attend the next hearing with the records.

Outside, Champa broke down in tears for the first time. 'I came to claim five days' wages. Now I find my thumb on another man's paper.' Sunita brought her some water. 'You have every right to say firmly that the mark isn't yours. But the court must have time to examine it as well.' Wiping her eyes, Champa asked, 'If it's proved to be false, will I get the

money for every day?' 'No,' Sunita replied. 'There will have to be a separate decision about whatever is proved.'

Back at the office, Harjeet examined a copy of the page. Beneath the signature she used when certifying payments were two different kinds of stamp from the contractor's clerk. She did not immediately write a conclusion to the government investigator. Instead, she sent the management a letter requesting preservation of the original documents. She dated her own copy and kept it. Her husband thought she was taking an unnecessary risk. 'I'm not taking the workers' side,' Harjeet said. 'I'm standing for the true meaning of the records. Why should I carry the burden of a false signature?'

Jagdish's name now arose in a separate dispute. He had received a letter removing him from work because production had fallen; the letter stated that the period of temporary employment had expired. Jagdish claimed to have worked diligently at the same machine for years, while the employer repeatedly broke up his service into separate periods on paper. The company maintained that he was a casual worker employed through a contractor. This question was distinct from deductions for days worked. Baldev helped him prepare a conciliation application concerning an industrial dispute.

After receiving the employer's letter, Jagdish climbed to the roof and stared for a long time at the empty road. His mother was coughing inside. He told no one how afraid he was that the debts incurred for her treatment would grow. Sunita came with a book; Jagdish sometimes helped her with difficult questions in arithmetic. 'What does your mathematics say now?' he asked. 'That it's wrong to treat what remains as zero,' Sunita replied. Jagdish tried to laugh but could not.

At Baldev's meeting someone proposed stopping the factory machines for a day over Jagdish's dismissal. Some agreed; others could not bear another loss of wages. 'Babuji's unpaid earnings and Jagdish's job are two separate claims,' Sunita said. 'If we stop everyone's work, who will listen to those who don't want to stop?' 'The form of a protest must also be decided by consent,' Baldev replied. The meeting did not decide on an immediate stoppage. Everyone agreed instead to submit a collective petition in writing.

The petition passed through many hands before it was finalised. An older worker named Harbans insisted that a phrase such as 'the factory is a thief' must not be written without proof. Champa argued that deductions from payments were clear in the documents, and the complaint must not be weakened. At last they wrote: 'There are

discrepancies in the available records of our working days and wages; we request proper examination and payment.' All agreed on that sentence.

In November 2009, news from the year's last agricultural markets reached the factory settlement too. Paddy was being harvested in the fields of Punjab, but grain for the workers' households had to be bought in the market. Ram Lakhan remembered the fields in his own village. He had left the land for an industrial city so his children could go to school. Now he felt there was little difference between the uncertainty of rain over a field and the uncertainty of a factory whistle.

One Sunday Sunita brought her school certificate home. Her results were good, and the headmistress had advised her to attend college. Ram Lakhan was delighted when he saw the paper, but Phoolkumari asked about their money. 'Our daughter's education will cost a great deal,' she said. 'Don't think of my unpaid wages as a household debt alone,' Ram Lakhan replied quietly. 'Her education is contained in that money too.' Sunita folded the certificate and set it on the table.

At last the contractor's clerk, Ratanlal, appeared at the hearing. He was asked in whose presence the thumb impressions in the payment register had been made. At first he said that every worker received payment in person. Questioned about the days recorded against Champa's name, he added, 'Sometimes the leader of a group collects the money.' 'Was there written authorisation?' the officer asked. Ratanlal looked at the register before replying. No authentic authorisation could be produced then and there.

Defending his client, Arun Suri pointed out that the copies of the register had passed through many hands. 'What if an error was introduced into the copy?' he asked. The workers' representative requested production of the original. The officer directed that the original register be made available. Champa understood perfectly well that the confusion in one witness's testimony did not prove her entire claim, but she also understood that her question could no longer be kept outside the documents.

On the last day of December, Harjeet prepared a new comparison sheet. She accused no one in the office papers; she simply recorded the differences in days shown by the original gate register, the production-room attendance and the payment slips. The same kind of discrepancy appeared against nine names. Among them were Ram Lakhan, Champa and a worker who had left his job three months earlier. Harjeet put a question mark beside his name.

On the first morning of the new year, a greeting for the new production year was written on the factory wall. Beneath it hung a small notice in Baldev's hand: 'Next date for the application concerning unpaid wages: Phagun.' Sunita stood looking at the two notices together. She realised that a new year of production and an old year of judicial accounting could proceed side by side. Industry might advance along its road, but no calendar could erase the unfinished days left behind by its workers.

As the first winter of 2010 drew to an end, Sunita collected the documents she needed for college admission. An employee at the institution showed her the fee schedule and explained that scholarship applications had a separate deadline. She remembered news from Sharda Devi's school in her village, where a girl had not received money despite her name being on the register. This time, she decided, she would keep a copy of every fee document and application. Her father's wage case had taught her that much.

Ram Lakhan wanted her to study, but one day he found himself saying, 'Daughter, what if we can't meet the expenses of your second year?' Sunita placed her examination certificate on the table. 'If I don't enrol, I'll never get as far as the second year,' she said. Phoolkumari laughed. 'Now the girl's talking like a lawyer herself.' 'I'm not a lawyer,' Sunita protested. 'I've practised reading papers.' But inwardly she understood that the ability to read a document could open a road through life.

At the factory Dharampal was considering taking on more workers because new orders had arrived. A bundle of old applications remained before him. 'If there have been errors, make the appropriate payments as you go,' Arun Suri advised. 'Every day the sums are withheld adds to the cost of the dispute.' 'You sound like the workers' lawyer,' Dharampal said. Arun smiled. 'I'm your lawyer. That's why I'm saying this. Defending incorrect entries will not protect the company.'

One day the contractor Harnam met Dharampal privately. He explained that absence from work was assessed differently for the women's sorting team, and so differences between the two registers were natural. 'If production is recorded for a particular day, how could the worker be absent?' Dharampal asked. 'Perhaps another team did the work,' Harnam replied. Dharampal examined the original pages. For the first time he understood that an assumption would not do: he needed actual evidence of attendance to support an account of a particular day's work.

At the next hearing before the wage authority, the company submitted a correction statement. It admitted an error in the calculation of two days worked by Ram Lakhan and offered to pay the amount. It also acknowledged three days' unpaid wages owed to Champa. The remaining two days and the disputed thumb impression were still being examined. 'If I accept this, will my other claims disappear?' Ram Lakhan asked. The officer explained that he should agree only after understanding the limits of what the written acknowledgment covered. The workers' representative and the company's advocate reviewed the form together.

Ram Lakhan put his thumb impression, rather than a signature, on the receipt for the accepted amount covering two days, but had it recorded that his claim concerning the other alleged deductions would continue. Champa did not immediately take the money offered for three days. She wanted the calculations and the decision concerning the authenticity of the thumb impression to be recorded in writing. The officer explained that receiving an undisputed sum separately would not automatically extinguish the remaining dispute, provided the documents made that clear. Champa agreed.

News of that small relief reached the settlement in two forms. Some said the factory had been defeated; others that the workers had sold themselves. At the first public meeting Baldev rejected both claims. 'We didn't come here to defeat anyone. We came for the proper wages for the days we worked. Keep a safe account of what has been accepted, and examine the evidence for what hasn't.' Sunita had learned that after a hearing ended in court, a trial conducted through rumours continued outside.

Meanwhile, Jagdish's employment dispute took a decisive turn. Before the conciliation officer, the workers produced slips showing continuous service, while the company presented the contractor's short-term appointment letters for separate periods. The officer asked both sides about the actual circumstances in which Jagdish's employment had ended. No settlement was reached. A report was prepared concerning the further appropriate statutory course for the dispute. 'Your job hasn't been restored at this stage,' Baldev told Jagdish. 'The papers show only that the dispute is not over.'

Jagdish returned home that day and sat beside his mother. 'Today they argued about my service,' he said, 'but I'm hungry today.' 'You have skill in your hands,' she replied. 'Find other work, but don't abandon your claim to justice.' Jagdish did not chase the tempting offer of another

uncertain office, as he had done the previous year. He began temporary work at a neighbour's small machine shop and kept the papers relating to his old claim safe.

On Sunita's first day at college, a teacher asked the students, 'Why have you come to study?' Some said employment, some knowledge, some their family's wishes. 'I want to understand words that, once written down, can deprive ordinary people of their rights,' Sunita answered. A few students smiled. 'Which words?' the teacher asked. 'Attendance. Deduction. Consent. Responsibility.' The teacher fell silent, then said, 'In that case your education began at home long ago.'

To pay the first month's college fees, Phoolkumari took on sewing work from three households. Her sewing machine was old, but its needle worked with precision. One day Champa came to see her. 'I need a dress stitched for my daughter,' she said. Phoolkumari lowered the price. Champa objected. 'Your work deserves its full price too. If I'm asking for the full value of my labour, why should I make yours cheap?' The two women laughed, their hands resting on one another's.

In the factory accounts office, Harjeet came upon an entry that startled her. The payment list recorded seventeen days' wages for a man named Hardev Chauhan, yet the gatekeeper's entry register contained no trace of the name. At first she supposed he might be an outside repair worker. 'That's possible,' Dharampal said when she asked. The contractor Harnam made excuses rather than show her the papers. Harjeet did not declare him dishonest. She wrote a letter requesting verification of the name.

A few days later a man named Hardev came to the office himself. He said that in earlier years he had delivered machine parts, but had never been a regular worker. He did not know why the list bore his name and a payment for seventeen days. Harjeet asked for his old identification details. He grew annoyed. 'I can give you documents, but don't look at me as if I'm suspected of theft.' 'I need your help in verifying your name,' Harjeet replied, 'not to accuse you.'

This incident was separate from the dispute about days deducted from Ram Lakhan's wages. It did, however, reveal how deep the problem of matching names and payments in the factory registers might run. Dharampal ordered an independent audit of the accounts. Baldev learned of it not through the news but through a formal letter from the company. 'If it's an internal mistake, correcting it is in the interests of the government, the company and the workers alike,' he said. 'But if forgery is found, it will require a separate investigation.'

One autumn day the hearing of the remaining wage claims resumed before the authority. The parties produced the old registers, production records and proofs of payment. Of Champa's two disputed days, one had adequate supporting evidence of work; the evidence for the other conflicted. The officer made clear to the parties that uncertainty over that one day could not be used to deny the right to payment for the remaining days that had been proved.

After the amounts accepted on an interim basis, the decision on the remaining questions was reserved. Arun Suri told his client that paying what was undisputed had been proper; they would await the decision on the contested portion. Coming outside, Champa said, 'Today I've learned that one page can contain three days that are correct, one that is disputed and one that isn't proved.' 'Not all five days on a page are the same colour,' Sunita replied.

The city was busy with Dussehra festivities. Bundles of brightly coloured cloth were stacked outside the factory. One day Sunita heard from her friend Amandeep that some customers had reduced their business with the company because of the court case. At home she asked Ram Lakhan, 'What if our claim costs people their jobs?' 'How can we be certain their jobs will be saved if we accept false accounts?' he replied. 'The industry can keep running and its workers can receive the right wages. Both are possible.'

Meanwhile, a new customer order reached Dharampal's office. He arranged a meeting with the workers' representatives. 'I can't keep this business going while fighting with you all the time,' he said. 'We haven't come to shut it down either,' Baldev replied. 'We want written rules for payment, a reliable basis for recording actual attendance, and a way to appeal.' Harjeet suggested a simple attendance system in duplicate so workers could inspect their own record of days worked if they wished. Dharampal agreed.

At the end of the meeting Champa said, 'Everything must be read aloud to us before we sign.' Dharampal stared at her in surprise. 'What's so difficult about that?' 'If it wasn't difficult, why would our wages still be unpaid after all this time?' Champa answered. No one in the office laughed. Harjeet lifted the sheet before her. 'We'll provide simple instructions in two languages. Anyone who can't read them will have them read aloud.' Everyone agreed to the proposal.

At the final hearing in Kartik, the designated authority pronounced a written order. Payment of withheld wages was directed for the working days supported by the records. The company's explanation concerning

financial difficulties and inconsistent registers was recorded as bearing on certain delays, but deductions for which it could establish no lawful basis were not upheld. Champa's claim for one disputed day was disallowed for want of sufficient evidence; she was informed about other legal remedies available to her. Beside each person's name, the order set out separate reasons.

Ram Lakhan's eyes grew tired as he read the order. Sitting beside him, Sunita read one page after another aloud. 'Have we won completely?' he asked. 'The order covers what has been proved,' she replied. 'What wasn't proved hasn't been declared false. The court simply couldn't accept it on this record.' Ram Lakhan folded the paper and put it away. For the first time he understood the limits of judicial language as both sorrow and satisfaction.

Arun Suri explained the statutory possibility of an appeal to Dharampal. Dharampal read every page of the order. 'If I don't appeal, will people take it as an admission that I'm a criminal?' he asked. 'This is a decision concerning wages,' Arun replied. 'Its meaning lies within that area of law. Complying with a statutory obligation does not automatically amount to admitting criminal guilt.' Dharampal reflected that a proper system might do more to protect his business reputation than prolonging uncertain litigation. He directed payment of the amounts established.

The following week, part of the payment Champa received went towards her daughter's school fees. When the teacher asked why the payment was late, Champa replied, 'The money for my days came late.' 'Where was it, Amma?' her daughter asked. 'Caught inside the papers,' Champa said. The child opened her notebook and wrote slowly: 'Keep the name right on the paper.' She had learned that lesson not from a schoolbook but from life at home.

Baldev held a small meeting. 'Our claims haven't all ended in the same way,' he said. 'Jagdish's dismissal will go before another forum. The papers concerning treatment for Iqbal's injury have been kept separately. We'll see that the wage order is obeyed, and each month we'll check whether the new attendance system is working.' The meeting remained quiet. After so many days of conflict, people wanted a cheer of victory; Baldev was still finishing the count.

That evening, as Harjeet closed a drawer in her office, she noticed an old letter. No reply had yet come to the request to verify the name Hardev Chauhan. This was a question separate from the amounts adjudicated in the wage dispute; it would be wrong to hurl it into public

view as an accusation. Harjeet wrote a reminder, filed a copy among the office's secure records, and closed the drawer. She could not imagine that the question of a name, money and the real person behind them might, years later, travel in another form to courts elsewhere in the country.

Sunita was returning from the college library with a history book when her friend Amandeep showed her a newspaper. Debate was growing in Delhi, he said, over expenditure on public contracts, major events and allegations of corruption. 'Now every movement will go to the cities,' he declared. 'Whose movement?' Sunita asked. 'Anyone who's suffered injustice.' She smiled. 'Before you say the word movement, you need to know whose claim it is. If you don't examine the account of my father's five days, will your news find a place for him?' Amandeep folded the newspaper.

At home Sunita placed a certified copy of the order and her father's old slips into an envelope. She dated it and added a sentence: 'The name that is written must have its own voice.' That night Phoolkumari paid the last of their overdue rent. 'You people keep a lot of papers,' the landlord remarked as he wrote the receipt. Phoolkumari held out her hand for it. 'Because of those papers,' she answered quietly, 'today we know exactly how much we've paid.'

Two days later Sunita visited Jagdish's temporary workshop. He had removed a wheel from a small machine, but his eyes kept returning to the door. 'Any news from the labour office?' she asked. 'Only the date of the next hearing. The employer's side will submit its documents.' Sunita was about to show him a copy of Ram Lakhan's order, then stopped. One family's happiness ought not to be laid carelessly over another's unfinished sorrow. Jagdish himself asked, 'Your babuji got some of his money, didn't he?' She nodded. Jagdish breathed out in relief. 'Then there's proof that days locked inside papers can sometimes come out again.' He turned the wheel once more. The machine's faint sound filled the courtyard. Sunita understood that the end of one person's struggle did not end another's; nevertheless, even a small result could give another human being courage and hope without deception.

Night deepened. Far away, the factory whistle announced the end of the second shift. Ram Lakhan opened the window to listen, then shut it. Inside, Sunita was studying, her younger brother was asleep, and Phoolkumari was putting the last stitch into her sewing. The case over unpaid wages had been resolved in part; Jagdish's struggle remained; an unanswered name lay in Harjeet's secure file. Mist was descending again

over the city, but the receipt lying on the table at home could be read clearly.

Chapter 14 — The Platform of the People's Movement

2010–2011: Delhi, Sonpura and Ludhiana

In October 2010, the air of Delhi carried a mingled smell of dust, water and celebration. After the Commonwealth Games ended, some coloured streamers still hung above the streets, while the workers who had completed contract jobs around the venues searched for their next employment. Newspapers carried accounts of the medals won by Indian athletes, and beside them questions about public construction expenditure and the prices charged for materials. Revati Jha read both stories on the same page. Victory and accountability were not enemies, but in the clamour of victory the voice demanding an account was often lost.

She had come to Delhi to understand the papers in a separate appeal. Shivnarayan had been invited to a gathering of advocates concerning an old sessions-court judgment, but his health had prevented him from attending. 'Listen to the speeches, but look at the courthouse veranda too,' he had told Revati. 'That's where people come to understand the true face of their state.' She stayed with her former classmate Urmila Vats, who lived in Delhi and reported on public expenditure for a small newspaper.

Three bundles of papers lay on Urmila's table. The first concerned the organisation of the Games, the second the construction of a reading room by a local municipal council, and the third copies from a contract dispute being heard in court. 'What do the papers in this third bundle have to do with the Games?' Revati asked. 'Nothing directly,' Urmila replied. 'People are questioning the huge expenditure on the Games, but in our district even twenty-five chairs for a small reading room are stuck in the paperwork. I wondered why the questions asked about accounts in the capital shouldn't be asked about the village reading room as well.'

The documents came from Sonpura, a town northwest of Darbhanga. Two years earlier its municipal council had sanctioned a grant to build a public reading room and hall. Separate estimates had been drawn up for repairs to a room in an old school, for windows, bookshelves, fans and audio facilities. The accounts showed payment in full, yet Maheshwar Das, the caretaker of the library, had written to Urmila: 'One door of a cupboard still hasn't arrived, and the wiring for a fan is hanging out of the wall.'

Revati examined the pages. 'The work being unfinished doesn't by itself mean theft. First we need to know the contractual completion date, which goods were recorded as received, and what the terms of payment were.' Urmila smiled. 'I wanted a story and you've given me questions.' 'A story built on sound questions will last longer than a slogan,' Revati said. Urmila was not offended. She wrote down five questions among her papers.

Maheshwar Das, who looked after the Sonpura library, was no senior official. He was sixty-five, his forehead often damp with sweat, and his days were spent among the smell of old paper. If a book's page tore, he glued it back together. When children came to study for examinations, he kept the doors open for another hour and a half at night. If the fan funded under the municipal contract were installed, the children would suffer less in summer. That was why he had been making rounds of the council office for months.

One Sunday Sharda Devi came to see Maheshwar. At the Kamalpur school she had previously sought the help of the Right to Information Act in examining scholarship records. 'You know how to read school papers,' Maheshwar said. 'Help me understand the accounts for this reading room.' Sharda made three headings on a sheet: Sanction, Receipt, Use. 'Where money was sanctioned, ask whether the goods arrived. If they did, who received them? If they did not, on what grounds was payment made? Put your questions in that order.'

That day children sat around a long table in the new library building. One wanted a book for a recruitment examination, another history, another agricultural information. Sarayu Devi had brought her granddaughter Phulwa. 'Teacher, why is there more empty space than books in this cupboard?' Phulwa asked. 'We'll investigate why the books that should have come have not yet arrived,' Sharda replied. Maheshwar liked this answer. Instead of pronouncing, as before, that everyone was a thief, he began drawing up a list of questions.

Elsewhere, Raghupati Narayan, the proprietor of Ujjwal Nirman Sahakar, the cooperative that held the contract, sat discontentedly in his office. He maintained that the council had ordered additional repairs after the original work, but had withheld payment for the extra work. In his account, the absence of certain items from the reading room was not the contractor's failure but the result of a change in where they were stored. His lawyer, Pratibha Chaudhary, looked through the documents. 'You're bringing a civil claim for money owed by the council,' she said, 'but why does its payment register bear your signature acknowledging

receipt in full?' 'That was an account of an advance,' Raghupati replied. 'What the paper says is not an advance but a final receipt,' Pratibha said. 'That difference must be explained.'

Hemant Mishra, a junior accountant at Sonpura Municipal Council, had the complete set of accounts, but he did not know where all the pages originated. He had been appointed in 2009; some orders from the first year had been passed to him by his predecessor. His authority to sign was limited, and a few pages carried a round official seal whose date seemed to have been added afterwards. Questions troubled Hemant, but he refused to believe that saving his job and telling the truth had to be opposing duties. He kept a separate copy of the original entries and sent his superior a written request to reconcile the records.

At the beginning of winter the reading room was raised at an open meeting of the municipal council. 'There are so many urgent matters in this town,' the chairperson said. 'What is the point of all this dispute over a cupboard door?' 'If the work is small, the account will be small too,' Sharda Devi replied without anger. 'Then surely giving an answer ought to be easier.' A few people applauded, but Maheshwar did not. He asked when the council would supply its records and when the children using the library would see the fan repaired.

When Revati returned to Darbhanga, Shivnarayan listened closely to her account. 'A question about public expenditure can go in three directions,' he said. 'Citizens can request information; an audit can be conducted; and if there is evidence supporting an offence, the route to the police or the competent court opens. Putting all three on one platform and shouting a slogan doesn't make it law.' Revati agreed. 'But seeing people together on a platform can help us recognise whose problems are alike,' she replied. Her father smiled. 'Then we need the ears of the platform and the eyes of the court.'

At the same time, Sunita Paswan was reading an article on public accounting law in the college library in Ludhiana. The new arrangements required by the order in Ram Lakhan's wage case had been put into effect at the factory, but Jagdish's employment dispute remained unresolved. Sunita saw a common question beneath the factory wage register and the municipal contract ledger: to whose labour, goods and rights did the amounts recorded on paper actually belong? 'The Games were held in Delhi, there was an uproar over the accounts, and now everybody's protesting corruption,' her classmate Amandeep said. 'Protest is right,' Sunita replied. 'But every claim must be examined as my father's

was. Otherwise the voice of someone genuinely owed money will be lost in the crowd too.'

In the last month of 2010, Maheshwar Das put up pictures of Indian athletes' achievements in the library. Small children counted the medals. 'If the Games went so well, why are there mistakes in the expenses?' one girl asked. 'Athletes win through their own work,' Maheshwar replied. 'Other people keep accounts of public money. We can honour the first and investigate the second.' The girl glanced from the pictures to the empty cupboard beside them. It was there that she learned her first lesson in counting.

In the first month of the new year, Urmila's article appeared. Its headline read: 'Sonpura Reading Room: A Difference Between Goods Sanctioned and Goods Seen.' She did not assign a price to every item, because some figures were unclear. What had been observed she described as observed; what had only been reported she attributed to the source. She printed the council's reply in full rather than leaving an empty space for it. The chairperson said that the final audit was still pending. Some readers called Urmila a coward. Others, for the first time, cut the article out of the newspaper and carried questions to the council office.

Raghupati Narayan was furious. Craftsmen working at his workshop had become anxious about future contracts because of the report. 'We'll bring a defamation action,' he told Pratibha Chaudhary. She read the entire article. 'Where your reply is printed and the questions arise from records, let's first put your accounts in order. If there's a factual error, we'll write to the editor for a correction. Unfavourable reporting and false reporting are not the same.' Raghupati laid the paper on the table in frustration. For the first time he understood that a lawyer's job was not to endorse every burst of anger from a client.

At the end of January, the library's oversight committee received a response to its Right to Information application. Four dates were written differently across the copies. The list of sanctioned materials named thirty-four books; the inventory register showed twenty-eight. A payment voucher for a fan bore the municipal storekeeper's signature, but there was no corresponding entry in the public library's receipt register. 'Where did six books go?' Maheshwar asked. 'First establish whether they were actually purchased or merely entered by name,' Sharda replied. 'Losing books and never buying them are two different things.'

A senior council officer verbally told Hemant Mishra to close these discrepancies as 'reconciliation of records' from the previous year. Hemant politely asked for written grounds. 'You're a new employee. Since

when have you become so particular about rules?' the officer demanded. 'The rules are what protect me,' Hemant replied. 'If I receive an order in writing, I can examine the reasons behind it.' That evening his mother noticed he was not eating. 'Son, what have you to do with this war over papers?' she asked. 'The signature I put on something today is one I'll have to answer for tomorrow.'

In the second week of February, the first substantive hearing of Raghupati's civil claim for the contract dues took place in the Sonpura civil court. Pratibha Chaudhary read out the contractual conditions. Haridev Sinha, the municipal council's lawyer, argued in reply that additional work required written sanction and that adjustments against earlier payments were also outstanding. 'What admissible evidence is there that the disputed work was completed?' the judge asked. Raghupati's side produced photographs of the construction site; the council produced copies of payment orders. The building appeared in the photographs, but the photographs did not establish every item of work specified in writing.

Revati sat among the spectators. The reading-room committee had sought her advice, but she was not a party to the civil suit. After the hearing Maheshwar pressed her: 'Why didn't you tell the judge the books were missing?' 'Your question matters,' Revati explained, 'but the parties' claims in this suit are different. We'll request the records and seek an investigation of public property through the appropriate route. We won't stand up in the middle of court and make accusations without cause.' Maheshwar planted his walking stick on the ground. 'So there are many doors in the law.' 'There are,' Revati replied, 'and with so many doors comes a greater responsibility to choose the right one.'

Outside the court that day, Sharda recalled the scholarship case at her school. 'I was very angry at first because the name of the late Madhaveshwar Mishra continued to appear in an attendance record,' she said. 'But the investigation revealed that two registers served different purposes: one recorded payment orders, the other attendance. When we compared them, new questions arose, but it would have been wrong to call anyone a thief without examining the evidence.' 'But won't such caution help a real thief escape?' Maheshwar asked. 'Caution protects the truth, not the criminal,' Revati replied. 'Truth takes time. A false accusation can be made in an instant.'

At the beginning of Chait, the news from Delhi changed. Preparations for a public movement against corruption, demands for legislation and arguments about transparency in public life grew intense.

Urmila observed a gathering in the capital for herself. Students, retired officials, homemakers, farmers, office workers and unemployed young people stood together. Their slogans varied, as did their hopes. 'Without a bribe, my pension papers don't move,' an elderly woman said. 'I want recruitment examinations to be transparent,' said a young man. 'Grants are announced, but they never reach me,' said a farmer.

On 5 April 2011, Anna Hazare began his fast in Delhi. Urmila was reporting this real event of national importance. She saw the enthusiasm of thousands before the platform, the organisers' repeated announcements, volunteers distributing water, and messengers competing to carry the news. In one line she wrote: 'The demand is shared, but every story of hardship is different.' When the fast ended on 9 April and she returned home, her article contained not only exchanges among leaders but also the names and grievances of ordinary people she had met in the crowd.

Inspired by this awakening in Delhi, Sonpura formed a Public Accounts Study Circle. A local teacher, Arpana Devi, undertook to coordinate it. Sharda, Maheshwar, two young traders, a retired survey worker and three students attended the meeting. 'We are not here to campaign for or against any political party,' Arpana made clear at the first gathering. 'We want to reconcile the accounts of the materials purchased for the council's reading room. If someone is guilty, let the name emerge through evidence; if innocent, let that person's dignity be protected.'

Another person who had helped initiate the platform was Kailash Mallik. He spoke loudly, turned small questions about documents into sweeping declarations, and knew how to draw a crowd. He owned a printing shop that produced banners and leaflets. 'If we don't assemble a crowd, the officials won't look at the papers,' he told Arpana. 'Let me make the slogans.' 'Make them,' she replied, 'but don't print accusations we can't prove. And keep an account of all expenses where everyone can see it.' Kailash agreed, though the conditions seemed to weigh upon him.

Around the same time Sunita participated in a discussion at her college in Ludhiana. 'What is the fundamental right at the heart of a people's movement?' the teacher asked. Some said expression; others association. 'The right of the people in whose name a meeting is held to have their real demands heard,' Sunita said. A ripple of laughter passed among the students. She continued: 'In Ram Lakhan's wage claim, one day was established, another wasn't, and some amounts were admitted. If we call everything injustice and leave it there, the actual calculation of payment

gets stuck. A public movement needs the same care.' The teacher urged her to write out her experience in greater detail.

At a neighbourhood tea stall, Arpana and Kailash had their first open disagreement. Kailash showed her a bold leaflet: 'All the Money for the Reading Room Has Been Looted.' 'What records support the claim that all the money is gone?' Arpana asked. 'The building is standing. Children are studying there.' 'People won't listen to half the truth,' Kailash said. 'So we should turn half the truth into a complete lie?' she replied. 'Acknowledge the work that has been done. Prove what hasn't. Otherwise the people actually responsible will profit from being able to laugh at our exaggerations.'

Kailash postponed printing that leaflet, but at night he had another draft prepared in his shop. It named no one, merely displaying enormous figures and indistinct outrage. 'How much of this is true?' his younger brother Digambar asked. 'It's meant to wake people up,' Kailash replied. 'If you need a lie to wake them, they'll go back to sleep,' Digambar said. Kailash did not become angry with his brother, but he shut the draft away in a chest.

On the night of 2 April 2011, people stood outside the Sonpura reading room before radios and a small television set. When the news came that India had won the Cricket World Cup, children seized one another and jumped with delight. Maheshwar Das raised his walking stick in the air. Old schoolmates of Kusum and Naseema were among the crowd. 'Look how hard the sons of our country work,' an elderly farmer said. Standing a little way off, Revati understood that this moment of shared joy could not be diminished by allegations about corruption in a public contract. In the same country, celebration and grievance both claimed their rightful place.

The day after the cricket celebrations, a notice was found hanging on the reading room's door. It was signed 'Public Awakening Committee', but bore no author's name. It alleged that a secret group had swallowed all the money for the reading room. Maheshwar took it down. 'Don't tear it up,' Arpana objected. 'A notice like this may itself need examination. But don't frighten the children by treating it as established truth.' 'Who hung it here?' Maheshwar asked. No one answered. The reading room's broken fan, meanwhile, remained motionless.

In Raghupati's civil suit, the council produced the original stores register. The judge pointed out that the supply and installation of the same item were entered on different dates. For Raghupati, Pratibha Chaudhary argued that goods might be purchased, held in storage and

installed later. Haridev Sinha replied that final payment for some items depended on an installation certificate. The judge ordered both parties to produce the original agreement containing that condition. The small direction inspired no slogan on the platform outside, but it gave Maheshwar considerable hope.

After the hearing Raghupati stopped Maheshwar on the road. 'You look after a reading room. Why are you ruining my name?' 'I have never written your name anywhere,' Maheshwar said. 'I've only asked for an account of the goods.' 'My workers did the work. Who will pay their wages?' Raghupati demanded. 'They must be paid the proper price for their work,' Maheshwar replied calmly. 'But is the price of a fan that never arrived also the price of work?' Raghupati said nothing. Faced with a question so concrete, he felt for the first time that he must re-examine every entry in his accounts.

Hemant visited the council warehouse. In an old cupboard lay papers, wires, two fans and various metal parts. 'Some of these may belong to the reading room,' said the storekeeper, Mahadev Saw. 'Are there identifying marks?' Hemant asked. Mahadev showed him a small slip that had been soaked by rain and was half obliterated. Only 'Va-12' was legible. Hemant did not immediately claim the goods as the reading room's. He recorded each item's outward description, quantity and the date it was found in the warehouse, then informed the council of the inspection.

The new information from the warehouse encouraged Maheshwar rather than disheartening him. 'If the fan is here, why isn't it where the children are?' he asked. 'We need an answer supported by evidence,' Revati said. 'Check whether the item found in the warehouse matches the payment register. If it does, there's been an error in its transfer. If it doesn't, other questions arise.' Arpana decided the circle would hold a public meeting after that examination, not before.

In Delhi, Urmila was busy again towards the end of April. The national anti-corruption movement had prompted many views about Parliament's role, the wording of proposed legislation and the rights of citizens' groups. Some favoured rapid change; others urged care for the institutions through which laws were made. 'What if people's moral demands clash with parliamentary procedure?' Urmila asked a senior legal scholar. 'People have a right to exert pressure and criticise the government,' he replied, 'but the final text of a law must be made through constitutional procedure. Neither silencing the people's questions nor abandoning the procedure is acceptable.'

When Urmila's article was read in Sonpura, a member of Kailash's circle said, 'Thousands gather in Delhi. We need a thousand people here as well.' 'How many members does the reading room have?' Arpana asked. 'Perhaps a hundred.' 'Then first make an accurate register of those hundred,' she replied. 'Anyone else who wishes to join is welcome, but numbers in a crowd are no substitute for truth.' Kailash offered to become the group's treasurer. 'Be treasurer,' Arpana said, 'but be prepared to answer questions at the next meeting about every receipt for money received and spent.'

The circle held its first public meeting in May. Farmers raised the question of an unfinished irrigation canal. A schoolteacher described delays in scholarship payments. A young man with a disability spoke of the difficulty of entering public buildings because of their steps. Maheshwar displayed the reading room's list of books. 'These questions belong before different authorities and have different remedies,' Arpana announced at the opening. 'We'll keep a separate register for each.' Some were disappointed; they wanted one great manifesto. Yet those whose suffering had gone unheard for years felt reassured to see their names written down.

Sunita did not attend the meeting; she was busy with examinations in Ludhiana. But Amandeep sent her news that some people wanted to add the industrial workers' wage dispute to a leaflet issued in the name of a 'national movement'. Sunita wrote back: 'Jagdish's dismissal is a separate case. Compliance with the wage order already made is essential. No one may print my father's or Champa's name on a platform without their consent.' Baldev pinned the letter to the factory noticeboard.

One day Urmila came to Sonpura and asked to inspect the circle's accounts. Kailash showed her a red-bound ledger. The first page listed donors, the second the microphone, the third leaflets, the fourth travel expenses. 'Everything is open,' he announced proudly. Urmila checked the sums against the names. The total on one page did not agree with the receipts for it. 'Someone must have made a mistake in writing it down,' Kailash said. Urmila did not accuse him of a crime. She wrote down two questions: why did two receipts bear the same serial number, and why was the printing bill dated before the meeting? Kailash asked for time to answer.

Arpana raised these questions at a public meeting. 'We're fighting corruption,' one activist said. 'If we begin questioning our own accounts, our enemies will laugh.' 'If we refuse to open our own accounts, they ought to laugh,' Arpana replied. 'We're teaching people to ask questions.

They'll question us too. That's not an insult; it's the test of a movement.' Maheshwar Das spoke softly. 'We asked for the accounts of those who bought a fan for the library. Why shouldn't we ask for the accounts of those who print leaflets for our platform?'

For the first time Kailash felt guilt and anger together. His shop had incurred real expenses, volunteers had eaten meals, a microphone had been hired; but in the haste of keeping records, some receipts for liabilities had been entered twice on the same page. His younger brother had paid certain expenses in cash, leaving no proof of them. Whether this was error or deliberate manipulation was something even he could not say without an impartial review. More than the loss of his reputation, he feared being the person most questioned at a meeting dedicated to transparency.

When the first rain fell, the library roof began leaking again. Maheshwar and Phulwa lifted the books onto higher shelves. Outside, the anti-corruption posters grew wet and their ink began to run. Wiping an old book with a soft cloth, Sharda said, 'You may raise the grandest slogans, but if this roof has holes, the books won't survive.' 'And questioning where the money meant to repair the roof went won't save the books either, if the work is never done,' Arpana replied. The two women stayed up until midnight drying books.

In July 2011, Revati was busy preparing a separate case before the Patna High Court. Sharda sent her copies of all the applications concerning the reading room. Revati remembered Shivnarayan's constant advice: 'A lawyer does not borrow the public's anger; she reads its facts.' She wrote back that the municipal council's statutory records and the original documents in the civil suit would need to be examined. If a specific basis for alleging forged signatures emerged, the appropriate criminal procedure could be initiated separately. An allegation of unfinished work did not by itself prove forgery.

That month an important page was produced in the civil court. The council submitted a document described as the 'final receipt of materials'. At the bottom stood 'M. Das' and a looping signature. 'Was a portion of the payment withheld on the strength of this document?' Pratibha asked for Raghupati. 'The document records final receipt, so it establishes the limits of the remaining claim,' replied Haridev for the council. 'Who is M. Das?' the judge asked. 'Where is the designation? Where is the original?' Haridev requested time until the next hearing to answer.

Outside, Maheshwar saw a copy of the document. His hands shook. 'That isn't my signature,' he said. Revati stopped him from shouting the

accusation in court. 'Your name is Maheshwar Das, but M. Das could be someone else too. Let's examine the original and speak on the basis of the office register and the date.' Maheshwar produced his old appointment letter, where he had signed his full name. On the disputed document stood 'M. Das', and at the top, instead of 'Library', appeared the words 'Municipal Stores'.

Because of this question Hemant searched the council's staff register. A temporary employee named Manmohan Das had worked in the municipal stores that year. He remained there until the end of 2010, then moved to another town. The discovery did not settle whether Maheshwar's signature had been forged; it merely created another possibility. Hemant made a written request for the original document. 'You're trying to save everyone,' an older employee told him. 'I'm neither saving nor trapping anyone on the strength of a guess,' Hemant replied.

Urmila checked three times before reporting the development: first Maheshwar's statement, then the copy of the staff register, and finally the meaning of the contract. Her headline was: 'Questions over Signature on Receipt; Original Sought from Council.' Kailash was unhappy with it. He wanted 'Forged Signature Exposed'. 'Maheshwar is the one saying it's forged; the court has not said so,' Urmila replied. 'Once the inquiry proves something, we'll write it.' A shadow crossed Kailash's face. Would such caution ever draw people to a platform? he wondered. Yet after reading Urmila's article, an elderly former employee volunteered to show his old appointment letter.

In the first week of August, a government report concerning the public audit of the Commonwealth Games was presented in Parliament. Newspapers carried accounts both of the success of the sporting performances and of inquiries into irregularities in contracts. Revati wrote to Urmila: 'The questions about public money in this report are serious, and so too are the athletes' achievements. One truth cannot erase the other.' Urmila wrote a piece in two independent parts, setting out the audit findings separately from an earlier conversation with a woman medal-winner.

Kailash brought the newspaper report to a meeting in Sonpura. 'Look, the auditors have raised questions about the Games in Delhi too. Should our small reading room not be investigated?' 'It should,' Arpana agreed. 'But don't take the contracts examined in the capital and link them to ours as if one criminal network were behind both. Similar questions about procedure, expenditure and responsibility are one thing. A claim that the same people arranged everything is another.' 'How will the

public understand such fine distinctions?' a young man asked. 'By being taught,' Sharda replied.

On 16 August, as another phase of the anti-corruption movement began in Delhi, many people sat before their television sets. Reports spread of an arrest, protests and a fast. Arpana telephoned Urmila to understand what was happening in the capital. Urmila was in the crowd, but her voice was clear. 'Some here have suffered directly from corruption. Some have come to see a moment in history. Others want to slip in with their party's slogans. It would be wrong to paint them all in the same colour.'

Near Urmila stood a woman receiving a pension. After her husband's death, she had spent months going from office to office with her pension papers. She did not know every detail of the proposed legal structure for a Lokpal, but she wanted a system that made offices answerable. On the other side, a law student raised questions about Parliament's role, the independence of the judiciary and timely remedies for complaints. Urmila wrote down both sets of words. One was no less real than the other.

On 19 August, a new scene of fasting began at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan. Urmila was reporting from there. Volunteers distributed bottled water, doctors monitored people's health, and organisers on the platform signalled to journalists. On one corner of the platform was written a single word: 'People'. 'In whose voice do the people speak?' Urmila wondered. She found the answer not on one platform but among individuals: a young man's job, an elderly person's pension, a student's scholarship, a farmer's payment for a crop.

One evening in Sonpura, Kailash proposed a 'Grand Meeting Against Corruption' the following week, at which every complaint about local contracts would be gathered into one sweeping charge sheet. 'A charge sheet belongs to the language of a court or the record of a competent investigation,' Arpana said. 'A platform leaflet cannot take its place. We'll prepare a memorandum stating clearly the facts we have.' 'You've locked the movement inside papers,' Kailash exclaimed angrily. 'Not locked it inside them,' Sharda replied. 'Made it responsible through them.'

The next day Maheshwar inspected the original receipt of materials held at the warehouse. The writing of 'M. Das' appeared similar to that in two older office documents, but it would have been improper to draw a conclusion without expert examination of the handwriting. The storekeeper Mahadev Saw reported that Manmohan Das had received some deliveries in 2010. Meanwhile, the six books missing from the

library were found in a girls' school two lanes away. The teacher said the books had been sent temporarily for examination preparation, but no copy of an authorising transfer letter was available.

Finding the six books gave Maheshwar some relief. 'You see,' Sharda said, 'the allegation that all the books were stolen would have been wrong. Some things were transferred elsewhere without written notice. That mistake must be put right.' 'And the fan?' Maheshwar asked. 'There's no fan in my classroom either,' the schoolteacher replied. Arpana entered in her register: Physical whereabouts of six books established; transfer letter unavailable; position of fan and wiring still undetermined. These incomplete conclusions troubled Kailash. He wanted one clearly defined enemy, but reality kept presenting him with different faces.

Meanwhile, a letter arrived for Revati from Urmila in Delhi. Urmila wrote that the anti-corruption movement brought together people with widely different views, but every public demand required fair examination. Revati replied: 'A public assembly may demand a change in law; a court must decide a specific dispute. They have different places, but each can teach the other accountability.' At the end of the letter she repeated an old saying of her father's: 'No accusation without evidence, and no silencing questions for fear of an accusation.'

On 27 August, before the public meeting in Sonpura, the civil court heard the reading-room case. Raghupati's side produced the original agreement and photographs of some completed work. The council produced an acceptance form recording that the building repairs had been accepted but the final inspection of the fan and bookcase fittings was still pending. 'If inspection of the fittings remained pending, what was the basis for entering payment in full?' the judge asked. Haridev Sinha said he needed time to obtain a clear statement from the accounts department. The court fixed another date and ordered preservation of the original records.

Outside, Pratibha Chaudhary told Raghupati, 'Your claim for additional work hasn't ended, but you must explain the actual position of materials about which the original contract was not silent.' For a moment Raghupati remembered the workmen in his workshop. 'I've paid the craftsmen,' he said. 'Then produce proof of it,' Pratibha replied. 'The court will consider errors on the council's side as well. But one party's incomplete accounts do not become the other party's complete truth.'

That day Sharda, Maheshwar and Arpana read a copy of the court's order. Kailash wanted to announce at the meeting that the court had 'accepted that corruption took place'. Arpana showed him the page. 'The court has ordered only that the records be preserved and an explanation obtained. If we call that a finding of guilt, we'll weaken the strongest argument our meeting has.' Kailash lowered his head wearily. Again and again he felt that precise language about genuine questions diminished the excitement of gathering a crowd. Arpana believed the larger the crowd, the greater the harm falsehood could do.

In Delhi that same day, Parliament was debating different approaches to the Lokpal. Urmila's report recorded separately the positions of the government, the opposition and the public movement. In the evening she filed a story saying that the parliamentary discussion had opened a political way forward, but the work of making a law remained unfinished. 'The people's voice struggles to reach the language of the law,' she wrote, 'and the language of the law seeks meaning in people's lives.' Reading the sentence, Revati looked towards her father. 'Do you like that exchange?' Shivnarayan asked. 'Yes,' Revati replied, 'because it doesn't make any one side the owner of the whole truth.'

On 28 August, when the fast ended, sweets were distributed in Sonpura. 'Now corruption in our town is certainly finished!' Kailash announced into the microphone. From the back of the gathering Maheshwar replied, 'The fan in our reading room still isn't working.' Laughter rose from the crowd, and the sentence changed the course of Kailash's speech. 'Very well, let us have that fan repaired first,' he said. Arpana raised her hand. 'The reading-room fan can be a symbol of the town's accounts. But it must actually be made to work as well.'

After the meeting Arpana once more asked Kailash for copies of the income and expenditure records. Kailash brought his brother Digambar's printing register. Of the two receipts bearing the same serial number, one was a copy of the order and the other acknowledged payment. That removed the suspicion that the expense had been counted twice. But an entry for an unidentified donation remained: eighteen thousand seven hundred rupees. Kailash said several supporters had given the money together. 'Their names, the date, their confirmation of the gift?' Arpana asked. Kailash could not give a complete answer.

In private, Digambar told his brother, 'If you run a movement on money from unnamed people, tomorrow someone will say they paid for the right to dictate a speech.' 'I'm no one's puppet,' Kailash answered. 'Microphones, platforms, posters, water—everything costs money.' 'Of

course it does,' Digambar said calmly. 'But if you don't know the source of the money, the decisions about spending it should at least be made openly. Otherwise there'll be no documentary defence.' Kailash looked up at the sky outside. The sounds of celebration were fading, and the red-bound ledger grew heavier in his hands.

The following day Arpana put a proposal before the study circle: no remaining part of the anonymous donation should be used until the donation register had been fully reviewed; available receipts should be shown for expenses already incurred; and the factual report on the reading room should be kept separate from the dispute over the platform's finances. Some members said so much self-examination would break the movement apart. 'If unexamined accusations are its only foundation, perhaps it ought to break,' Sharda replied. 'If it rests on genuine public suffering, questions will strengthen it.' The proposal passed by a majority, although Kailash was absent.

At the same time, the initial petition for a separate complaint by Maheshwar was prepared before the judicial magistrate in Sonpura. His complaint was limited to this: a receipt for materials bore a signature reading 'M. Das', which was being attributed to him, but he did not acknowledge it as his own. Advocate Revati advised that no definite charge of forgery should be added against anyone before the original documents, the identity of the employee concerned and the dates were examined. In his preliminary statement to the court, Maheshwar maintained that limit. The magistrate fixed the next date for preliminary examination of the complaint. No one had been declared guilty.

Outside, Maheshwar asked tiredly, 'Why so many doors for one signature?' 'If a single name is enough to make someone a criminal,' Revati replied, 'then years from now some unknown paper might appear in your name as well.' Maheshwar understood the reasoning, but delay was hard in real life. 'How long are the children at the reading room supposed to wait?' he asked. 'Let the legal inquiry continue,' Revati said, 'but at the same time demand that the council provide a working fan and the books immediately. Receiving a service and obtaining a criminal judgment concern different rights.'

In the first week of September, the municipal council issued a small repair order for the fan. Work also began to stop water leaking through the library roof. Maheshwar started seating the children inside again. For the first time, Phulwa felt the faint breeze of the repaired fan. 'Is the case over now?' she asked Sharda. 'No. Getting the fan to work is one task.

Giving a correct account of the money spent on it is another. But it is true that the fan is working.' Phulwa opened her book and began to read.

In Ludhiana, after the August news, Sunita held a small meeting with the women at the factory. Jagdish's employment case was proceeding, and Harjeet's file concerning Hardev Chauhan remained open. 'There were public meetings in Delhi, and Parliament debated the matter. That's good,' Sunita said. 'But we still have to check every day that attendance at our factory is recorded correctly. If we forget our own companions amid the cheers from Delhi, whose victory is it?' Champa and Phoolkumari nodded in agreement.

Back in Delhi, Urmila included Sonpura's experience in an article. A people's movement, she wrote, demands accountability from the state, but voluntary organisations too must find the courage to open their donation registers. Kailash was not presented as a criminal in the story. Both his explanation and the circle's decision to review its accounts were printed. After sending it, Urmila thought that despite her years in journalism, an empty space on a page still tempted her to leap across the distance between suspicion and proof. Resisting that temptation was the discipline of her profession.

Shivnarayan was placing copies of the Sonpura papers in the library when Revati asked him, 'You said earlier that we need the ears of the platform and the eyes of the court. What do you think now?' 'Add the waiting children in the library,' he said. 'The platform must listen, and the court must examine evidence, but life's needs exist today. If work needed for life is held up for years in the name of judicial caution, we'll have to think again about our own work too.' Revati saw that as her father grew older, he was becoming not harder but more complex.

That night, before closing his shop, Kailash opened the red ledger again. Beside eighteen thousand seven hundred rupees, the space for the donor's name was empty. In his own hand he wrote: 'Confirmation of donor pending.' Then he told Digambar, 'I won't print another leaflet until we have a written account of where this money came from.' 'What about the movement?' his brother asked. 'The movement belongs to the people. It shouldn't come to an end because my shop closes.' For the first time, his voice held none of the loud certainty of victory; there was a weary wisdom beyond winning and losing.

Three documents lay together on Revati's desk: the 2004 judicial judgment in Neelkanth Saw's case, the order concerning Ram Lakhan's unpaid wages, and a fresh application for the original records of the Sonpura reading room. They belonged to different years, different people

and different areas of law. Yet Revati saw a slender thread running through them: before treating something written in a person's name as true, one must hear that person's voice. September rain beat against the window. Somewhere in the distance people were shouting slogans against corruption; inside, a woman was carefully writing down the date of her next hearing.

Meanwhile, a schoolgirl named Bindu sat writing beneath the new fan in Sonpura's library. Her essay was entitled 'The Future of My Town'. She did not write that all officials were bad, or that all protesters were good. She wrote of a town where medicines would one day reach the hospital on time, school libraries would be complete, farmers would receive payment for their crops, and anyone could question the accounts of the reading room without fear. Maheshwar looked at her notebook. 'Who taught you all this?' he asked. 'You were all arguing,' Bindu replied. 'I was listening.'

A few days later Arpana, Sharda and Revati went together to the council's public noticeboard. It displayed a new account of the work being done on the reading room, but it said nothing about the donation register. That was the study circle's own responsibility. 'Our fight is with the government,' Arpana said, 'but our first duty is to keep our own word.' 'You can't demand trust from others,' Sharda replied. 'You build it by accounting for your own actions.' Revati said nothing. She continued looking at the dates on the paper.

A sheet from the previous day's newspaper blew across the courthouse veranda. On one side was an old photograph of the cricket victory, on the other the crowd at a public meeting against corruption. A corner of the page had become wet, but both pictures remained distinct. Shivnarayan picked up the sheet and put it in a bin. He knew that history's images were printed in newspapers, but their meaning unfolded slowly in people's homes, schools, fields and courts. The platform of the people's movement had left its voice behind. Now its words would have to stand the test of records and action.

Chapter 15 — The Woman Who Became a Witness

2012: Delhi, Darbhanga and Ludhiana

One morning in November 2012, a woman sitting on the veranda of a sessions court in Delhi was not reading the paper she held in her hands. It bore her own name, the number of her case and the date of an event after which even looking at dates had become difficult for her. Conversations in the corridor, the footsteps of advocates, the voice of a boy selling tea and the sound of the courtroom door opening went on together. Among all those sounds, one returned to her again and again: the ticking of a clock. The old clock at home had stopped, yet she felt an invisible clock still running within her.

The woman's name was Madhavi Karn. Revati had already explained to her that protecting her identity outside the courtroom was her right. Madhavi had come to Delhi from a village near Samastipur. By day she worked in the accounts room of a training institute; in the evening she studied; at night she returned to a small rented room. She dreamed of becoming a teacher. She saved money towards that dream, made notes and went to the library on her days off. What had happened in the middle of the year had not ended the dream, but it had placed question marks all along the road towards it.

Revati sat with Madhavi a little way from the courtroom entrance. She had no authority to conduct the principal prosecution: at the sessions court that responsibility belonged to the public prosecutor, Amal Das. Revati was there to assist the complainant, having studied the records and understood the likely sequence of questions. She did not drill Madhavi in answers. She had said only, 'Say what you remember. Say what you do not remember as well. You need not always answer a lawyer's question in the way the lawyer expects.'

'What if I left something out when I spoke earlier?' Madhavi had asked. 'Then explain why, if you can,' Revati replied. 'Leaving something out does not automatically make everything else false. But the court will examine the importance of the omission. I cannot shield you from that, nor will I attempt to.' Madhavi found an uncomfortable truth in the reply. She wanted the court's help, not a promise someone had invented to console her.

Inside the courtroom, Judge Kaveri Bhatnagar was preparing to begin proceedings. The allegation was that Shekhar Malhotra, a senior employee of the institute, had committed a grave sexual offence against Madhavi against her will. Shekhar denied the allegation. The incident was said to have occurred one evening in June. After investigating, the police had filed a charge-sheet, and once the preliminary judicial procedures were completed, the case had reached the sessions court for trial. Nothing at this stage established that the accused had been proved guilty.

Arrangements had been made for the proceedings to take place in camera. The crowd outside was not admitted. The journalist Urmila remained outside; she wanted to report on the case, but understood the restrictions on publishing statements made inside the courtroom and disclosing the complainant's identity. Before testimony began, the judge reminded everyone present of the confidentiality of the proceedings. For the first time Madhavi understood that a closed door was not invariably a form of imprisonment; sometimes it was a way of protecting a person's dignity.

Amal Das began with ordinary questions. 'What work did you do at the institute?' Madhavi explained that she kept orderly copies of admission-fee accounts, student assistance-grant records and payment receipts. 'Why were you in the office that day in June?' 'The scholarship list needed checking again. I missed the evening bus. Two colleagues who were with me had already left.' At first her voice was low, but her words were distinct.

The questions continued. Madhavi described the events of that evening as far as she was able. She offered no unnecessary elaboration of any scene. She said that the accused had used force despite her refusal, and that she had immediately experienced fear and helplessness. The court's recording official took down her words. During the prosecutor's examination Madhavi asked for water, and the judge permitted a recess. Shekhar sat quietly with his counsel, Avinash Batra. No conclusion about his guilt or innocence could be drawn from the expression on his face.

Madhavi's mother, Janaki, waited outside. She could not hear the witness's voice, yet every footstep along the veranda sounded to her as though it were coming from her daughter. When Madhavi had decided to leave their village for Delhi, Janaki had put into her hands a little money saved from ceremonial gifts. Her father, Ramnaresh, had said, 'Don't delay your studies.' After the incident, both parents had at first considered bringing her home. But their daughter had asked, 'If I go

back, who will complete my education?' That question contained both the love of home and the will of an individual.

The police had first learned of the incident two days after it occurred. Those two days had been discussed at length at home. Madhavi had spent the first night shut inside her room. On the second day she had told a woman colleague. The colleague was frightened: employment, social condemnation and the family's likely response all showed in her face. On the third day, a worker from a women's support centre explained to Madhavi her right to appropriate medical care and to make a complaint to the police. The worker was not acting for any political party. Her responsibility was to offer help while respecting the woman's decision.

The medical examination recorded certain observations. The doctor explicitly stated that she could not speak beyond the timing of the examination, its direct findings and their limitations. The truth of Madhavi's account did not rest entirely on the medical record, nor did an absence of injuries by itself prove her allegation false. Revati read this point with particular care. Speaking to her father, Shivnarayan, she had said, 'In court, the written record of a body and the testimony of a human being ought to listen to one another, not silence one another.'

Police officer Sudhir Rawat had recorded the first account. Madhavi's statement was later also recorded before a judicial magistrate. Those two records occupied different positions in law. The defence was entitled, during trial and under the applicable rules, to raise questions about relevant inconsistencies. But a statement recorded by the police did not in itself take the place of evidence given directly before the court. Madhavi could not express that distinction in legal language; nevertheless, the next several months of her life depended on it.

When the principal questions of the first day were over, the judge fixed the next hearing. As Madhavi emerged, Urmila moved a little farther from the door. She did not want to ask what had been said inside. Instead she asked only, 'Do you need help getting home?' Madhavi shook her head. 'I'll manage.' For the first time Urmila understood that some of the most useful questions a journalist could ask were the questions she chose not to ask at that moment.

That evening Revati returned home to find Shivnarayan reading old papers. On his desk lay a copy of the disputed signature, 'M. Das', on a receipt for materials at the Sonpura reading room. 'In one place,' Revati said, 'there's a name on a piece of paper, and the person says the signature isn't his. In another, a woman speaks about what happened to her body, and people want first to inspect the letters on a page.' Shivnarayan

replied, 'Evidence must be tested in both places. But let us make it an instrument of justice, not a weapon against a person.'

Revati spent much of the night turning over the case papers. She saw that there was an attendance register in the institute's entrance office, that two employees held keys to the door, and that the rear entrance of the building was sometimes left open. The police had photographed that door, but there was no complete description of the lighting at the site. She wrote a question in her notes: what independent source could confirm the time of the incident? Rather than manufacture an answer, she preserved the question.

Elsewhere in Delhi, the bulb in Madhavi's rented room flickered. She sat with a book open, but even after reading the same line three times she could not grasp its meaning. Her classmate Bimla brought tea. 'Will you come to class tomorrow?' she asked. Madhavi thought for a moment. 'I will. If I give up studying because of the court case, the number of things taken from me will only increase.' Bimla stayed beside her without offering a sermon.

Two weeks later came the day of cross-examination. In the meantime Madhavi had submitted an application for leave to her institute, but had received no reply. A notice recording her absences was displayed on an office board. 'They can certainly count the days against my name,' she said. 'But in which register will they record the reason for those days?' Bimla suggested looking into separate legal remedies concerning employment rights. Revati explained that the employment question and the criminal trial followed different paths; a solution to both would not necessarily come from the same court.

Avinash Batra was preparing the defence. His client, Shekhar Malhotra, had maintained from the beginning that Madhavi's allegation was unfounded. Shekhar's family, too, lived in fear. Neighbours questioned his wife, and his daughter heard her schoolmates whispering. Avinash told him plainly, 'My task is not to humiliate the complainant. It is to test the evidence for the prosecution's claims. Your family's pain is real, but it does not make the other side's account untrue.' Shekhar turned away in displeasure, yet could not make his advocate withdraw the words.

Avinash's first question in court concerned time. At precisely how many minutes past five had Madhavi left the accounts room that evening in June? Madhavi said she did not remember the exact minute. She remembered the departure time of the last bus. Avinash showed her the attendance register, in which the institute's guard had noted that the

main door was closed at half past five. Madhavi answered that she had left through the rear door that day. The judge directed that her partial recollection of the time and her statement about the exit used be recorded.

'Did you mention the rear door in your first statement in June?' Avinash asked. 'I told the police I hadn't left through the main door,' Madhavi replied. 'I couldn't read what they wrote.' Avinash pointed to her signature on the record. Madhavi acknowledged that the signature was hers, but added, 'That doesn't prove I wrote every word myself.' The judge directed that the relevant portion be examined in accordance with law.

Avinash argued that a person making an allegation ought to have a consistent recollection. Amal Das responded that the court itself would determine how far small discrepancies in time bore on the central issue of the offence. The judge reminded both sides that the purpose of cross-examination was to test credibility, not to win a contest of words between advocates. Whenever a question threatened to become an exercise in emotional humiliation, she stopped it.

Avinash raised the medical report. His point was that, since the examination had taken place after the alleged incident, certain physical observations could not establish the exact time at which it occurred. 'I am not telling you the time from the doctor's paper,' Madhavi said. 'I am telling you the time as I saw and experienced it.' The judge did not require the complainant to offer an expert interpretation of medical findings. She made clear that the doctor's evidence on that subject would be heard separately.

When Avinash asked an inappropriate personal question, Amal Das objected. The judge asked about its relevance and ruled on the limits of the inquiry. For the first time Madhavi felt that although she was obliged to answer questions in court, she was not obliged to endure the insult contained in every question. She was exhausted, and there were tears at the corners of her eyes. Yet she continued to choose her own words. Cross-examination was a test of her account, not the dissolution of her personhood.

During the midday recess Janaki gave her daughter water. Days of lost sleep showed on her face. 'Won't telling such an old thing again and again make the wound deeper?' she asked. 'The wound grows deeper when everyone says it never happened,' Madhavi replied. 'If I am heard even once, it will be easier to go forward.' Janaki fell silent. She was beginning to understand that her daughter's courage was not a pain the mother

could make disappear; it was the preservation, in the midst of pain, of the right to make her own decisions.

Outside in the veranda, Urmila was reading a study on women's safety. Sharda had sent her a letter from Sonpura in Darbhanga about the difficulties schoolgirls faced in travelling to and from classes. One girl had stopped attending evening classes because the road between her home and school was deserted. Another girl's father wanted to withdraw her from school. Urmila understood that a single trial inside a courtroom could not stand for the condition of all women in the country, yet social fear entered each small decision in their lives.

That evening Revati wrote to Sharda in Sonpura. 'Ask the girls which part of their journey to and from school is hardest. Use their answers to demand lighting, public transport and a safe route. There is no need to wait for a tragedy.' Sharda replied that a broken streetlight near the school had remained dark for a year despite repeated references to it in municipal applications. For her, women's safety was not a manifesto; it was the responsibility to get that light working.

Meanwhile in Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan met her fellow workers in a room. They discussed women's long shifts at the factory, the hardship of returning home after the night shift without reliable transport, and the contractor's behaviour. 'The court examines what I'm owed in wages,' one worker said. 'But who will see that I reach home safely at night?' Sunita proposed submitting a written request to management for clear guidelines and arrangements for safe travel. One lawsuit could not meet every need for social reform.

At a later hearing in Delhi, Dr Shruti Narang appeared. She spoke only of what she had personally observed at the medical examination in June and recorded in her notes. Asked to estimate the time, she explained the limits of what could be inferred. 'This record does not establish the entire circumstances of the incident, the identity of those involved, or a final conclusion about consent or its absence.' Both prosecution and defence tried to read her opinion in their own favour. The judge directed that the limits of the expert evidence be recorded.

Avinash asked whether the signs mentioned in the medical report might also arise from other causes. Dr Narang described the range of possibilities and added that a definite answer required assessment of other reliable evidence. In re-examination Amal Das asked whether the report had excluded every possible explanation. 'In medical science,' the doctor replied, '"not observed" and "did not occur" are not the same thing.' Her

words brought neither side a final victory, but made the testimony more honest.

On another day the security guard, Niyamuddin, was called. He had worked at the institute entrance for fifteen years. His handwritten register recorded that the main door had been shut at five-thirty on the day in question. 'The rear door?' Amal Das asked. 'That wasn't my post.' 'Then can you tell the court whether it was open or shut that evening?' 'No.' The court needed to learn to hear answers in which a witness acknowledged the limits of what he knew.

In cross-examination Avinash asked Niyamuddin how late the accused usually remained at the office. 'Sometimes he stayed, sometimes he didn't.' 'Did you see him that day?' 'In the morning.' 'In the evening?' 'I don't remember.' An easy route for the prosecution's inference was closed: the guard could not give direct evidence that the accused had been present that evening. Madhavi listened silently. Her own account pointed in one direction, but the work of verifying other records could not be left to the memory of one woman alone.

Tension was growing inside Shekhar Malhotra's family too. One night his wife, Meena, said, 'I know you as my husband, but I did not see what happened in the office. I do not want you to be guilty, and I do not believe I have the right to call another woman's suffering false.' Shekhar rose angrily and then sat down again. Meena did not take his silence as a confession; she simply allowed what she did not know to remain unknown. That single decision revealed the difficulty of her moral position.

One evening Revati sat with her father in his old room. Shivnarayan had been taking on less work for some time. 'If hard questions in court break a complainant,' she asked, 'how do we also protect the accused's right to a defence?' 'A question may need to be hard,' Shivnarayan replied. 'It does not need to be degrading. The judge must consider both relevance and the woman's dignity. An advocate must not destroy a human being out of an appetite for victory.'

That night Madhavi opened her notebook. The first page held exercises in English grammar, the second mathematical formulae. On the third she had written a few days earlier, 'Who am I in court?' Today she added an answer: 'I am not merely a case. I am a witness to my own life.' Then she returned to the first page and finished the grammar exercise. Her education was still a struggle, but not a campaign of vengeance against anyone. It was a struggle for her future.

In the last week of November a letter arrived from the institute. It asked Madhavi to explain her absences, without referring to her complaint. 'They know everything,' Janaki said angrily, 'yet on paper they write only "absent".' 'We must answer what is written in the letter,' Revati said, 'and raise your need for protection in a separate application.' In this way a single event was spreading along three distinct paths: criminal justice, security of employment and the rebuilding of a personal life.

Revati read the institute's rules for employees. Nothing was displayed on the office notice board about women's safety at work. When she mentioned the Supreme Court's earlier Vishaka guidelines, the manager said that the institute was small. 'The smallness of an institution does not diminish a woman's dignity,' Revati replied. But she did not try to force this question into the criminal trial before the sessions court. A safe workplace, a system for hearing complaints and remedies under the terms of employment required separate institutional action. Madhavi wanted to be able to return to the office one day without fearing that speaking in court would cost her her job.

Madhavi wrote her reply herself: 'For reasons of health and judicial proceedings I have been unable to attend work regularly during this period. Kindly consider the necessary leave and arrangements for my safety at the workplace.' 'You haven't written the whole story of the case,' Bimla said. 'Every office register does not need to contain everything about my life,' Madhavi replied. 'What is necessary is enough.' Determining the boundary of her own words was a new kind of strength.

Revati's friend Urmila attended a meeting in the newspaper's editorial room. A young reporter proposed a detailed human-interest story under the heading 'The Courage of the Victim'. 'In the name of courage,' Urmila asked, 'how many clues will you print about her family, neighbourhood, school and employment? What if people work out her name from those clues?' The editor said, 'No testimony from the closed proceedings without permission, and no identifying details.' The young reporter discovered that the right to publish news and an individual's right to privacy could come into conflict.

In Sonpura, Sharda Devi collected accounts of the girls' journeys to school. One lived a mile and a half away, another passed an abandoned pond, while a third had to walk past a group gathering outside a small liquor shop. Sharda noted the places, the times and the actual difficulties. 'What will you do with all this?' the headmaster asked. 'First a village

meeting, then an application to the relevant office,' she replied. 'Discussing fear is not enough. We have to make the roads safe.'

At the meeting one father said, 'I won't let my daughter go out in the evening.' 'Then how will she do night duty if she becomes a hospital nurse?' Sharda asked. He had no answer. An elderly woman said, 'Women went out to work in my time as well, but who ever counted us?' Her words carried the experience of generations. The question arose whether safety meant shutting women inside their houses, or building a society in which they could move safely.

The prosecution's next witness in Delhi was Shobha, an accounts assistant at the institute who worked with Madhavi. She did not claim to have witnessed the alleged incident. She said that afterwards Madhavi had spoken to her while frightened and distressed. The defence asked Shobha for the exact date in June. At first she said, 'It may have been the eleventh,' but then acknowledged that she did not remember the date with certainty.

Avinash produced a sheet of paper: Shobha's own application for leave. 'Were you absent from the institute for two days that week?' 'I was away for two days,' Shobha said, 'but I was there on the day Madhavi spoke to me.' The dated signatures in the register were unclear. The judge directed that this point should be checked against the original register and other office records. The uncertainty made neither Shobha's entire character trustworthy nor untrustworthy. The evidentiary question concerning one particular date remained open.

Shobha's family had also been unsettled after the incident. 'Why are you going to court?' her father had asked. 'There's a risk in speaking about something you didn't see.' 'I won't say I saw what I didn't see,' Shobha had replied. 'But why should I hide what I heard and the condition in which I saw her?' Her answer offered reassurance to Madhavi, but also defined the limits of her evidence for the court. Supporting someone's account and witnessing the event directly were two different things.

Amal Das met Revati in the prosecutor's office. 'There are some differences about time in Madhavi's statements,' he said, 'but her account of the central allegation is consistent.' 'Did you obtain the complete photographs of the rear door and the staff movement register?' Revati asked. 'The police collection is incomplete. If other necessary material is found, we will have to place it before the court by the lawful procedure.' Both understood the duties of their respective roles and the limits of

judicial process. Haste to secure a conviction could not take the place of truth.

Around this time Shivnarayan's health declined somewhat. Some evenings it was difficult for him even to open a book. Sitting beside him, Revati recalled a scene from Neelkanth Sah's trial in 2000: the entry bearing the name of the dead Ramkishun. Her father smiled. 'That man admitted some mistakes, but not every allegation. The court saw the difference. And in this new case?' 'Here the allegation concerns a person's body and dignity,' Revati said. 'Even so, we must not abandon care in examining evidence. The complainant's safety in speaking and the accused's fair opportunity to defend himself are two necessities within the same judicial system.'

As December began, evening descended earlier over Delhi. Clothes had been hung to dry on the roof of Madhavi's rented building. The wind kept trying to send a red dupatta tumbling down. Bimla picked it up and brought it inside. 'The colour runs,' she said. Madhavi laughed. 'Then we'll wash it twice.' After months, she had laughed about something ordinary. Bimla realised that a small laugh like that would never appear in a judicial order, yet the life that remained to be lived depended upon such moments.

Elsewhere, Shekhar Malhotra's wife Meena attended a voluntary legal-aid meeting. She hesitated to identify herself. An elderly woman advocate told her, 'Your family's situation is difficult. But it would be wrong to pressure the complainant or circulate her identity in order to influence public opinion. You may seek help for your child.' Meena decided to speak to her daughter's school. Even the dignity of an accused person's family had a place within a just procedure.

One evening a few young men on a city bus were discussing women's safety. 'More police on the streets and everything will be all right,' one said. 'What about buses running on time, streetlights working at night and complaints being heard?' another replied. A woman in the next seat added, 'And families trusting their daughters.' The three measures were not opposed to one another. Madhavi listened from her seat. She wanted to ask why people remembered rights only when they were afraid. But she said nothing and got off at her stop.

In the second week of December a further round of cross-examination began. Avinash took a plan of the rear entrance from his file. 'You say you came out this way. How far is it from the main staircase?' Madhavi offered an estimate. Avinash showed her the measurements of the site, revealing a difference. 'I wasn't measuring distances at the time,' Madhavi

said. The judge observed that exact measurements of the scene would have to be established by an expert or the site records; a witness's estimate was a different kind of evidence.

'Whom did you see first when you came out?' Avinash asked. Madhavi thought for a moment. 'No one at first.' 'And then?' 'A yellow streetlamp to one side.' 'And another person?' Madhavi's hands began to tremble. The judge directed that she be given water. Avinash lowered his voice. 'I'm only trying to understand the sequence of events at that time.' Madhavi closed her eyes. She was remembering a woman's voice: 'Sit here.'

The defence questions were not finished that day. Madhavi said she needed a short break, and the judge gave her time. During the recess Revati did not suggest any new story. 'Examine for yourself how real this emerging memory is,' she said. 'If you're uncertain, say so. If the recollection is clear, tell the truth in your evidence.' 'I remember a woman,' Madhavi replied. 'But I never mentioned her name before.' Revati understood the significance of the question without trying to direct the answer.

After the recess Madhavi returned to the witness stand. The judge asked whether she was ready to continue. 'There is something I did not say before,' Madhavi said plainly. Everyone seated in the courtroom became attentive. The judge allowed her to speak without interruption, while also recording that the relevance and admissibility of the new information would be examined through the legal process.

'After coming out through the rear door, I sat down at the corner of the steps. Poonam Sahni, who did the cleaning, came by. She gave me water. She let me wipe my face with a corner of her shawl. She stood with me for a while, and afterwards I went out to the road.' Madhavi's voice broke once and steadied again. 'I didn't give her name before because I was frightened she would lose her job.'

Avinash immediately consulted the earlier statements. 'You did not mention this woman in your first account to the police?' 'No.' 'Or in the statement before the magistrate?' 'Not there either.' 'Why?' 'She had asked me not to bring her name into any dispute at the institute. She had two small children. I was afraid of people at that time too. I thought it was enough to say what had happened to me.' 'Why have you decided to say it here now?' Avinash asked. 'Because you asked whom I saw outside. If I didn't say it, I'd be hiding half my memory.'

The judge did not immediately accept the new account as true. 'You say Poonam met you after the incident, not while it was happening?' 'Yes. I

do not remember seeing her while it was taking place.' The distinction mattered. Poonam might be a witness to Madhavi's condition immediately afterwards; she could not yet be described as an eyewitness to the alleged offence.

Amal Das requested an appropriate opportunity to investigate the new name. 'The defence also needs a full copy of this new account,' Avinash said, 'and an opportunity to examine and cross-examine the prospective witness. This information has appeared for the first time in the middle of the trial. It cannot be relied on simply because it has been stated.' The judge agreed that the prosecution should submit an application concerning the person's availability, relevance and necessary legal steps. The defence would be heard, and the court would make an appropriate order.

Outside the courtroom Madhavi did not look back. Revati accompanied her to a quiet corner of the veranda. 'Have I done wrong?' Madhavi asked. 'We must understand both things: why you withheld the name out of fear for someone else's livelihood, and why you gave it when asked in court. You have explained your reason. Now the court will decide what weight the new statement carries. We cannot call something true when we do not yet know it.' Madhavi did not look contented, but a heavy embarrassment had given way to a measure of clarity.

Avinash met his client privately. 'Now they're bringing in another woman,' Shekhar said. 'It's all made up.' 'Tell me what you know,' Avinash replied. 'To call a witness false, we must examine her role, the records and her account. My own conclusion without examination will be of no use in court.' 'What if she says she saw Madhavi?' Shekhar asked. 'Then we'll ask when, where and in what condition. If she didn't see the incident itself, her evidence must be heard within that limit. The responsibility for deciding your guilt still rests with the court.'

Finding Poonam Sahni's address was not easy. She was not a regular employee of the institute, but worked through a private cleaning-service enterprise. Its contract had changed after June that year. Against Poonam's name the staff register said 'transferred', but the address was incomplete. One official said she had gone back to her village; another said she now lived in west Delhi. Amal Das asked the investigating officer to verify her address and employment records by the proper legal process. No one's private home address was turned into material for a news story.

The disputed 'M. Das' signature at Sonpura's reading room returned to Revati's mind. There the question was how to distinguish Manmohan Das from Maheshwar Das; here the name Poonam offered a new

possibility for evidence about an evening. In neither matter did finding a name amount to finding the final truth. How troubling, Revati thought, that identity was so natural in ordinary life, yet became such difficult ground for proof in court.

By mid-December Delhi had grown colder. One night Madhavi went to south Delhi to visit an old friend from the hostel. The bus was crowded on the way home. Bimla had urged her to find safe transport if she was going to be late. Madhavi recognised the affection in the advice, but also a bitter question: because the safety of every route could not be assured, every woman had to go on calculating the danger for herself. Back in her room, she wrote in her diary that a safe city could not depend solely on the caution of its citizens.

On the night of 16 December a terrible incident occurred in Delhi. From the following morning the language of the news changed. Reports emerged of a young woman subjected to gang sexual violence and severe brutality; her male companion had also been injured. Madhavi's hands trembled as she read the reports from the hospital, the police and the streets. But she did not see that young woman's life as an extension of her own story. Every victim, she understood, had a different family, different dreams and a different experience. It would be wrong to turn another woman's suffering into part of her own public image.

From 17 December, voices of protest began to rise on Delhi's streets. Students, women, men, medical workers, teachers and labourers demanded public safety and accountability. Urmila went to gather news. Many speeches reached her from the platforms, but she noticed an ordinary student carrying a small sheet on which she had written, 'I should be able to get home at night.' Among grand political declarations, that demand was not a small one.

Some demanded immediate and severe punishment. Women's-rights workers argued that proper investigation, a more sensitive police force, public transport, education and reform of judicial procedure were equally necessary. A young advocate objected: 'Deciding guilt before a trial is not justice.' There was agreement and disagreement in the crowd. Urmila gave the different voices separate places in her report. Public suffering did not require unanimous assent to a single idea.

Madhavi listened to the news in her room. Janaki telephoned from the village. 'There's a huge crowd in Delhi. Come home.' 'I'm in the middle of my studies and the case,' Madhavi replied. 'I'm safe, Ma. The crowd isn't there for me, but their questions meet mine.' Janaki was silent for a while. Then she said, 'May you find people beside you on the road you've

chosen. And remember to eat and sleep properly.' The ordinary love of a mother carried the weight of an uncertain future.

In reporting the Delhi protests, Urmila did not mention Madhavi's case. 'You've been attending proceedings outside that sessions courtroom for so long,' her editor asked. 'Wouldn't a comparison be useful?' 'Those proceedings are confidential,' Urmila replied. 'I will not give a crowd the right to open the door to one woman's life without her consent.' The editor agreed. Respect for privacy was essential even to a just expression of public outrage.

In Sonpura, Sharda discussed the news from Delhi with the schoolgirls. She did not call the crime appalling and then lecture them to stay at home. Instead she asked, 'Which light on your way is broken? Which vehicle doesn't run on time? Which office refuses to hear a complaint?' The girls wrote down their answers. Arpana submitted the paper at a municipal council meeting. 'You're using a national event as a pretext for local politics,' one councillor said. 'Local problems are not outside the country's concerns,' Arpana replied. 'It is the municipality, not the Supreme Court, that must order a broken streetlight to be repaired.'

In Ludhiana, Sunita and Champa sat with the women workers of the factory at a small meeting. One worker described her journey home after a night shift. The contractor's representative said, 'Families should make their own arrangements.' 'When the factory requires women to work at night,' Sunita asked, 'whose responsibility is it to ensure that they can leave safely?' They discussed ways of reporting inappropriate behaviour and preserving evidence. Jagdish's old wage dispute remained a separate matter. The connection between the two struggles lay in lived experience, not in a judicial file.

As the movement in Delhi intensified, Shivnarayan listened to the radio. 'The country's anger matters,' he told Revati. 'But a judge must not allow anger to fill the place that belongs to evidence.' 'And the court must not be so calm,' Revati replied, 'that a complainant's voice can no longer be heard.' Her father looked at her. 'Then we have the language of a court: it must neither disregard emotion nor turn emotion itself into proof.'

On the evening of 23 December Revati received a copy of an application concerning the police investigation. Poonam Sahni's name had been found in the cleaning company's staff register, but her attendance entries had been crossed out and rewritten three times within a month. The prosecution wanted the original register summoned before

the court. A copy of the notice had been sent to the defence. As Revati examined the paper, she considered that alterations in the original book might also be ordinary bookkeeping errors. A crossed-out line was not, by itself, a declaration of crime.

Poonam, meanwhile, lived with her two children in a small settlement in west Delhi. Her wages had fallen under the new contract. When she heard that a government employee wanted to question her, she grew afraid. 'I didn't see anyone being beaten or assaulted,' she said. 'You only need to say what you saw,' the official replied. 'No one needs you to speak about anything you did not see.' 'What if I lose my job again?' Poonam asked. The official did not offer an instant guarantee, but explained the available assistance and possible legal protections. The price of a truth of this kind often fell most heavily on a vulnerable person's life.

A neighbour advised Poonam to write a letter. She wrote that one evening in June she had seen a young woman in distress near the institute's rear staircase and had given her water. She had not witnessed any incident taking place. In her written account she did not claim complete certainty about the precise date and time. She kept the letter with her, unable to decide to whom she should give it. Her children had their exercise books open around her. A mother's fear and the ordinary homework of childhood occupied the same table.

At the next hearing before the sessions court, the prosecution submitted an application concerning the original service register and Poonam's prospective evidence. Avinash Batra objected in writing that the late emergence of the name affected the defence's opportunity to prepare. The judge said the court would follow an appropriate procedure, determine the permissible scope of the new evidence and protect the right of the defence to cross-examine. No decision on anyone's guilt was made that day. The issue was simply how a possible source of truth could be heard fairly.

Outside the door Revati and Avinash spoke quietly to one another for the first time. 'Today one more witness has been added to your side's list,' Avinash said. 'If ten more names appear tomorrow, when will this trial end?' 'Your objection is fair,' Revati replied. 'But if a necessary witness is found, it is also difficult to refuse to hear her merely because of the delay. Both sides should have an equal opportunity to test what she actually knows.' Avinash agreed, folded his hands in farewell and walked on. The contest inside the court had not turned into personal enmity outside it.

That evening came news that the young woman attacked in Delhi on 16 December was in an extremely serious condition. When news of her death came on 29 December, the country sank into grief. Urmila wrote a short article for her newspaper. She did not reduce the woman's life to a symbol of sorrow. She asked what concrete steps would follow to improve public safety, medical help, accountability in investigation and respect for dignity in court. She regarded clarity of questions amid outrage as a duty of journalism.

Madhavi listened to the cold wind outside her window. She remembered her first day in court in November: the closed door, the water, the judge's quiet questions. Now millions of people on the country's streets were grieving, but her own case continued at its own pace. 'I want this not to happen to another woman,' she said. 'But my court will tell me what has been proved in my case. A crowd cannot become a witness for me.'

On the last day of the year Sharda was preparing a new attendance register at the school in Sonpura. Bindu, Phulwa and other girls had submitted a small petition to repair the broken light near the school. A municipal electrician came, inspected the wiring and said the work would be done within a week. The girls wrote down the date. 'When an official makes a promise, learn to record the day,' Sharda told them. 'And when the repair is completed, record that too.' The lesson was not about fear but about the practical exercise of citizens' rights.

In Ludhiana, Sunita prepared a proposal to inspect the first wage register of the new year. She still remembered the unexplained name of Hardev Chauhan from the old dispute, but did not connect that name to any new offence at the factory without evidence. If Hardev really had worked there, he had a right to his wages; if someone else had used his name, different questions arose. Her experience of the courts had taught Sunita that before joining a name to a person, one must search for the truth of a life.

Shivnarayan was arranging some letters in his old wooden trunk: Neelkanth's judgment from 2000, reports of the 2004 tsunami, the 2005 information request and the public discussion of women's rights in 2012. 'These are different cases,' Revati said, 'but the same question keeps returning to me: how much opportunity does a person get to speak?' 'Add a second question,' her father replied. 'Once a person has spoken, how shall we test those words fairly against the evidence?' The two questions could stand together without destroying one another.

The court list arrived for the first week of January. The lawful procedure for notifying Poonam had begun. Her possible evidence had not yet become the final truth of the record. The prosecution was preparing to produce an original service register; the defence wanted its handwriting and dates verified. 'When she comes, I will thank her,' Madhavi said on hearing this. 'Not yet,' Revati replied. 'First let us hear her own truth. What she says may differ from your memory. That is possible too.' Madhavi accepted the difficult answer.

That night Madhavi put aside her course book and opened a blank page. She wrote, 'To be a witness is not merely to stand in court. It is also to know the limits of what one says.' After a while she closed the page and began studying for the next day's examination. Far away, candles lit in mourning around the city were slowly going out, but a small bulb burned above her desk. In its light she was trying to read the future of a better society.

The following morning an old letter from Jodhpur arrived on Revati's desk. The Marudhar land dispute had been listed for a new hearing in the High Court. Kusum wrote that the farming families wanted justice without setting their soil against the students' education. Revati read the letter and carefully closed the file of Madhavi's case. In one court the unresolved question concerned a woman's statement; in another it concerned a farmer's map. She would carry the same lesson to both: the truth written on paper is incomplete until human lives have been heard.

Chapter 16 — The High Court's Questions

Jodhpur and the Rajasthan High Court, December 2012–January 2013

The first post of January was arriving in Darbhanga. Dew still clung to the courtyard when Revati Jha opened a yellow envelope. Inside were a letter from Suresh Pareek in Jodhpur, a copy of the Rajasthan High Court's cause list and a two-page summary of an appeal. The corners of the papers were worn. A hearing in the old land dispute had been fixed for 15 January. Revati's eyes went to the papers from her own visits to Delhi in November and December. On one side lay the question of Poonam Sahni's prospective testimony in Madhavi's criminal trial; on the other, the boundary of a field in Marudhar. The two paths of judicial responsibility did not intersect, yet both demanded time from the same human life.

Sitting on the veranda, Shivnarayan Jha folded his newspaper. Seeing his daughter with the letter, he asked, 'Is it about Jodhpur?' Revati nodded. 'Ramdev Mandal's appeal. After the trial court's final judgment, the error in the original survey has again become central to the first appeal.' Shivnarayan read the papers, his eyes stopping at one line. 'It says here that Hariram Joshi withdrew his claim to have seen the original map. When did he make that admission?' 'During the trial in 2006. A fresh survey was carried out in 2007, but its report remained disputed. Years later, at the end of 2011, the civil court delivered its judgment.' 'Then the High Court has to read the whole record already made,' Shivnarayan said slowly, 'not listen to a new story.'

At that time leaves had fallen around the well at Ramdev Mandal's house in Jodhpur. Two stones in the old rim had come loose again. Whenever Jeevani Devi drew a pitcher of water, she checked the firmness of the wall. To her the land dispute was not a matter of passages in documents. It included where rainwater would flow, how small children would pass the well safely in winter, and whether the shade of two trees behind the house would survive. Ramdev coughed at night. His knees made it difficult to walk even as far as the raised boundaries of his field. Nevertheless he asked personally about every hearing date.

Kusum Mandal opened the trial court's judgment before her father. On its corner she had written three words in red ink: 'The footpath remains.' In 2011 the court had recognised the educational trust's registered sale deed for its main parcel of land. It had also accepted certain declarations concerning Ramdev's ownership of the field to the

northwest. But it had not recorded a clear, decisive finding on the old footpath beside the well or the right of drainage. The judge had held that harm to the claimed rights from the proposed construction had not been proved, and on that ground had rejected part of the wider request for a permanent injunction. The farming family had appealed against that rejected portion. The trust also found one limitation of the order difficult, but its separate objections had been entered in the legal sequence.

'Babuji,' Kusum said, 'we aren't asking the court for the right to humiliate anyone this time. We want a clearly marked path. The soil that is ours should remain under our rights. The land the trust bought should remain under its rights. And the course followed for years by rainwater must not disappear from the papers.' Ramdev looked at his daughter. 'You've studied so much that you can say what is in my heart in three lines,' he said. Kusum smiled. 'I learned it from reading the papers in your case. This was a different lesson from school.' From inside the house Jeevani called out, 'But we can't save a village path in court simply by calling it what is in our hearts.'

The following morning Revati reached Jodhpur. Through the bus window she could see stone-coloured stretches and rough, dry earth. The city's old blue walls stood beside new commercial buildings and long queues of college buses. She remembered her first visit in 2002. Kusum had then been a college student, Naseema her friend, and Rakesh Meghwal had endured the crowded bus every day. Now Kusum taught in a school and studied books of law on her own. Naseema worked in social assistance, and Rakesh had completed his studies and taken a job in a small office. The trees on the campus had grown taller, but the direction of the disputed well was still entangled in the court record.

Suresh Pareek had spread three maps across his desk. 'This copy has the orientation marks of 1982,' he said as Revati arrived. 'This one contains the commission's lines from 2002, and the third shows the fresh measurements from 2007. Putting one on top of another doesn't solve the problem. Each has its own source and its own limits.' Revati opened a page of the verbatim testimony. 'These are Hariram Joshi's actual words?' 'Yes. He said he had not seen the original map himself and had written on the strength of a certified copy. But he had correctly marked the position of the well he saw on site. Students took this admission as proof of fraud by the trust. I told my client not to draw that conclusion either.'

'How did the trial court assess that?' Revati asked. Pareek showed her a passage. The judgment accepted Hariram's description of what he had

seen on site, but did not treat the unreliable portion concerning the orientation of the original copy as a definite basis. Even so, no separate issue had been framed concerning the actual width of the old footpath beside the well or the continuous use of the drainage route. 'That is the centre of the appeal,' Pareek said. 'We are not asking for the whole field to be surveyed again. We want one necessary and undecided question tested by a fair method.' 'But if the remaining parts of the judgment stand on the evidence already available,' Revati replied, 'there is no reason to overturn them. The court should hear a limited prayer.'

Sharad Kothari's health had become fragile. His original chair at the trust's office stood empty, although he still managed occasional visits to the library. Prahlad Vaidya was now secretary. He had prepared a thick file on the expenditure and inconvenience to students caused by years of halted construction. Revati did not ask to meet him; she had decided to avoid informal conversations with parties about disputed facts. But she accepted an invitation to speak at a public meeting on campus about student assistance, hostel capacity and the possibility of building on land that was not in dispute. Representatives of all sides attended.

At the meeting Naseema stood up. 'For eleven years the word "hostel" has appeared in every appeal for donations. Six years ago two rooms were repaired. We hoped then that incoming female students would have a safe place to stay. How many places have been added?' Prahlad consulted his papers. 'Twenty-three.' 'How many girls applied for admission last year?' Rakesh asked. 'Eighty-six.' The gap became plain in the silence. 'Then extending the building over the path to a farmer's well is no just solution,' Kusum said. 'Build on undisputed land. Improve what already exists.' Pain showed on Prahlad's face, but he could not strike out the figures.

In the evening Sharad Kothari summoned Naseema to the library. The old man's hands were trembling. 'Daughter,' he said, 'when I made my first donation, I wanted shelves for books. Now so many papers have been produced in the name of a building that people have forgotten the purpose of putting books inside it.' 'Where will students live without a building?' Naseema replied. 'But we must not take someone else's land in its name.' Kothari agreed. 'Winning a lawsuit and providing an education are not the same work. I want the trust to fulfil its responsibilities within its lawful rights.' His voice held no anger, only the fatigue of many years.

On the morning of 15 January a little sunlight fell on the stone steps of the Rajasthan High Court's veranda. Outside each courtroom hung a list

of names. Advocates hurried by in black robes with files under their arms, while litigants searched for their lawyers' faces. For the first time Ramdev had come so far to sit in the High Court complex. Tucked into his waistband was a small paper on which Kusum had written, 'Footpath, well, drain: three separate matters.' Jeevani had come with him. Pareek had explained that the arguments in the appeal would mainly be conducted by the lawyers; if the judge needed a party's statement, the appropriate procedure would be followed. That was enough for Ramdev to understand.

The trust was represented by advocate Hemraj Bhandari. On the veranda Bhandari and Pareek greeted one another respectfully. They had opposed one another in many civil matters. Seeing Revati, Bhandari said, 'Pareekji has spoken of your arguments. This is a question about an old survey, not a matter for public excitement.' 'I too want a clear reading of the record,' Revati replied. Bhandari smiled. 'The words of a record are often clear; disputes grow over their meaning.' 'Sometimes the record itself is obscure,' Pareek said. 'This time we have both problems.' Just then the court attendant called the matter's number from the cause list.

The first appeal was listed before a single-judge bench of Justice Padmaja Rathore. Revati rose. In her hands she had no papers in four colours, only a volume with three marked sections: the sale deed, the examination of the witness in 2006, and the judgment of 2011. 'What is the appellant's principal grievance?' the judge asked. 'Is the entire sale being challenged, or only one portion of the rights?' 'My Lady,' Revati said clearly, 'we do not ask that the educational trust's entire lawful purchase be cancelled. Our objection concerns the unresolved questions of access to the well near the boundary, continued use of the footpath and drainage of water.'

The judge read the relevant page. 'The trial court says there was insufficient evidence for a permanent injunction. Are you relying on further evidence or alleging an incorrect assessment of evidence already on record?' 'Mainly an incomplete assessment of the existing evidence,' Revati replied. 'There is a separate application concerning additional records, but the court will decide its admissibility independently. We do not ask that the appeal be treated as a fresh trial.' The judge nodded and looked towards Bhandari. 'The respondent's reply.'

Bhandari began his submission. 'For ten years the trust has used this area under a registered sale deed. Much of the construction shown in the plan stands on undisputed land. The width of the footpath now claimed by the appellant was not clearly specified in the original plaint. A defect

in a survey must not be made grounds for reversing the whole judgment.' 'Did the trial court frame a separate issue concerning use of the footpath?' the judge asked. Bhandari paused. 'Not under a detailed heading, but the evidence was considered under the general question of title.' 'On which page?' Bhandari turned through the file. For a minute the rustling of papers was the only sound.

Revati did not interrupt him. Bhandari read a passage from the judgment mentioning the well's existence, but not discussing continuing public passage or the direction of the drain. 'The existence of a well, the path leading to it and the right to conduct water are three different facts,' the judge said. 'They require different evidence. I need to know which issues the trial court actually decided.' Revati silently remembered the three words on Kusum's little paper. The judge's questions followed the same sequence, but this did not mean Ramdev's claim had succeeded automatically.

The next question concerned Hariram Joshi's evidence. Revati showed the judge the correct page from 2006. 'Here the witness says he did not see the original map and drew his conclusions from a certified copy. He then confirms that he personally observed the position of the present well. The appellant asks that these two parts be given different weight.' 'If the copy was certified,' the judge asked, 'does not seeing the original necessarily invalidate it?' 'No,' Revati replied without hesitation. 'But where different copies contradict one another in their orientation marks, we must examine the source of the witness's confidence. His incorrect claim to have seen the original reduces the weight of that part of his account; it does not destroy every other observation he made.'

'Failure to produce the original map is a difficulty of the government archives,' Bhandari replied. 'My client is not its custodian. The commission measured distances on site; it would be wrong to dismiss that work merely because of one erroneous remark.' 'That is a significant objection,' the judge said. 'The full burden of a defect in a government record cannot be placed upon a private party. But we must examine the foundation of any report upon which the decision depends.' Agreement and disagreement were present at once in the hearing. Out on the veranda Ramdev could not hear the subtleties, but sentences were being entered in court that might determine the route through his field.

'What did the new survey of 2007 find?' the judge asked. At Pareek's direction Revati opened a large map. It marked an old culvert on a canal, the distance from the main road and the position of the well's rim as fixed reference points. 'The new report establishes the well's present

position. But it mentions two versions of the old drain's course: one in a revenue copy, the other in the memories of local witnesses. The commission expressly says a final conclusion is difficult without verifying the old fixed boundary markers.' 'The same commission,' Bhandari objected, 'found that the outer edge of the building under construction stands a sufficient distance from the well.' 'The distance of the building wall,' Revati replied, 'and the independent existence of the footpath are different questions.'

Justice Rathore removed her glasses for a moment. 'What relief does the appellant seek? A complete retrial, or determination of a limited factual question?' 'If the available evidence permits the court to decide, that is the proper course,' Revati replied. 'If the court concludes that an essential fact was not examined at trial, we request that a limited question be referred under the appropriate legal provision. We do not ask that the whole trial begin again.' 'And we submit,' Bhandari said, 'that an appeal must not become an opportunity for a party to fill gaps in its evidence.' The judge directed that both submissions be recorded.

During the midday recess Kusum met Revati outside. 'Will our path be saved?' she asked at once. 'I cannot say yet. The court will first decide whether the question of the footpath was adequately heard in the earlier judgment. Even if further examination is ordered, that will not amount to winning the appeal outright.' Disappointment crossed Kusum's face. 'They've been examining this question for twelve years,' she said. Revati did not smile. 'That is precisely why we must not make false promises about a certain result.' 'A hearing date won't draw water from the well for us,' Jeevani said softly. 'But if the court writes down which path must not be blocked for now, we can carry on with the work of the house.'

During the court's lunch recess Prahlad Vaidya sat studying the trust's accounts. He was thinking about the rising cost of construction. A building that could have been erected for relatively little money in 2002 would cost far more in 2013. 'The farmers keep delaying us in court,' one trustee said. Before answering, Prahlad read a letter from Sharad Kothari. It directed the trust to begin the other section of the hostel immediately on undisputed land and await the court's order concerning the disputed area. Prahlad reflected that it would be unfair to place all the blame for delay on the farming family. The trust had itself lost years through its internal decisions. For the first time he wrote that thought in his diary.

That evening an unusual guest came to Ramdev's home at dinnertime. Ishwardatt Rathore, a college teacher, arrived carrying an old geography textbook. He said he had not come to become anyone's witness at the

trial, but at Kusum's request to help understand the social history of the old drain. Revati was there too. Rathore showed them a diagram of changing watercourses during the rainy season in Rajasthan's arid terrain. 'We cannot say the present flow of water has always been the same,' he said. 'In this soil the traces of a footpath and a drainage channel may lie close together. To distinguish them we need fixed reference points.' 'Then was the path my father saw a lie?' Ramdev asked. 'Memory need not be false,' Rathore replied gently. 'But what is remembered and proof of a legal right are different matters.'

Kusum wanted to take out a copy of an old khasra revenue register. Revati stopped her. 'If this paper was not produced earlier in the appeal, we cannot suddenly treat it as decisive and put it before the court. We first need answers about its source, the history of its availability, and why it was not produced at trial.' Kusum grew agitated. 'A bag has been lying here for years. I found it while cleaning this morning.' 'Write a verifiable account of that,' Revati said. 'The court does not take additional evidence simply for our convenience. Its necessity and the legal conditions have to be satisfied.' Jeevani brought the bag forward. 'It was in my room. I didn't mean to hide it. But I didn't understand every copy inside it myself.'

The paper in Kusum's hand was not the original survey register of 1982, but a photocopy of part of an older ledger. Some letters were blurred. 'It mentions a small drain to the west,' Rathore said, 'but does not make clear which field it belongs to.' Revati noticed a revenue office's copy-approval mark at the top, while half the certifying signature had been cut off. 'Give a record only the importance it can bear on its own,' she said. 'We will not put into a speech what is missing from the page.' Anger rose briefly in Ramdev: he knew the history of his field, yet the paper could not carry the whole weight of his belief. Then he lowered his head.

On another day Naseema and Rakesh went to inspect the hostel rooms. Rainwater came through a thin crack in the roof of the old building. Four girls lived in one room, although the permitted number should have been smaller. 'There isn't an evening bus from my village,' a new student said. 'If I can't get a place here, I'll have to stop studying.' Naseema asked for her name to be recorded, but not for her private details to be put in a public statement. Rakesh wrote to Prahlad requesting temporary safe accommodation and repair of the toilets, not construction on the disputed land. The small decision showed the students' growing maturity. They knew that educational facilities could be demanded without diminishing a farmer's rights.

Prahlad began drafting a reply. At first he wrote, 'All facilities will be available once the litigation is over.' Then he remembered Sharad Kothari's old advice and crossed the sentence out. His new answer said that repair of the roof and water facilities in the undisputed building would begin immediately, while expansion of the hostel on another available site was under consideration separately from the land dispute. The letter went on the college notice board. Some of the students' anger subsided, but trust would return only when work was completed, not merely when a letter was written. Naseema mentioned this in her brief notes.

At the second hearing in the High Court, the application concerning additional evidence came up first. Revati submitted the details of when a certified copy of the 1982 record had become available from the archives and the attempts made to retrieve it. Bhandari objected that the party had enjoyed opportunities over many years; at the appeal stage, documents could not be admitted merely to repair omissions in its proof. Before ruling, the judge asked, 'If we disregard this page, can we decide the legal question in the appeal on the record already available?' 'That is for the court to decide,' Revati replied. 'We ask only that the reasons supporting the application be examined in writing, not that the material be accepted automatically.'

The judge studied the documents for some time. 'Older letters concerning attempts to obtain a copy of the record are available, but the original source of the newly produced photocopy is not yet completely clear. I will not immediately admit this page as additional evidence. The application will be disposed of in conjunction with the assessment of the existing record.' Revati felt both hope and disappointment. Immediate acceptance might have opened one way forward, but it could also have led to new disputes over cross-examination and delay. The court's restraint imposed a condition on both sides: no one was to dress an incomplete document in the costume of complete truth.

The judge then read the trial court's list of issues. Title to the land, the validity of the sale deed and the justification for a permanent restraint were three clear headings. But the regular use of the footpath and the specific right of drainage had not been framed as separate issues. 'The witnesses answered questions on those subjects,' Bhandari said. 'Giving answers,' Revati replied, 'is not the same as allowing the opposing party a full opportunity to prepare for that particular issue. The court must see whether the scope of cross-examination was adequate.' 'Was this a public road,' the judge asked, 'or a private right of passage? Those expressions have different legal meanings.' 'Our case rests on the farming family's

longstanding private use,' Revati replied. 'We are not seeking a declaration that it is a public road.'

The judge marked her papers at that answer. 'This clarity should have been in the original plaint.' Revati did not argue. Ramdev's case had not been presented in perfect written form from the first day; many words had been lost as village experience was translated into written law. But if an initial defect had left a real question of rights undiscussed, the extent of the court's responsibility required argument. Bhandari's submission was not weak either. 'If a new kind of claim is now being made,' he said, 'my client must have a fair opportunity to defend it. The land we purchased has remained uncertain for years.'

After the hearing Revati explained to Kusum, 'The High Court's question is no longer only about the survey. Was this specific claim of right truly contained in the prayer in the original suit, or are we creating a new claim now? The court will examine that boundary.' 'I said from the beginning that we needed a path to the well,' Kusum replied. 'I know,' Revati said. 'But the court will also look at how it was written in the pleadings, how the opposing side understood it and which matters the witnesses were examined on.' Kusum could not yet tell whether the distinction would preserve her right or simply postpone a decision again.

Ramdev visited his old friend Ratnaram Bhati. The man had grown old, his sight weak, but the memory of the village watercourses remained with him. 'You won't change what you said in your testimony?' Ramdev asked. Ratnaram steadied his breathing. 'How can I change what I saw? But I can't give measurements for every year of where the rainwater flowed when I was a boy. I told the lawyer that too.' Ramdev nodded. The reply was not a complete support for his case, but he did not want a witness who claimed to know more than his memory held.

Meanwhile Bhandari met Prahlad. 'If the farmers claim a private path, we might examine the possibility of reserving a defined passage in the trust's building plan. But making such a proposal must not automatically amount to admitting title or another right.' 'Then settle it outside court,' Prahlad said sharply. 'A settlement must be voluntary,' Bhandari replied. 'Both the farmers' difficulty and the students' interests need a lasting solution. A single word on paper could start another ten-year dispute.' Prahlad's patience was thinning, yet for the first time he considered redrawing the construction plan.

When Sharad Kothari heard the news, he opened his old register of donations. Many years before, he had written there: 'Library, scholarships, safe accommodation for female students.' Nowhere had he

written a word about a right over a disputed well. He wrote to the secretary: 'If the trust builds many buildings but cannot protect the girls' education, its purpose will remain unfulfilled. And if it builds by driving out a farmer, it will have lost the moral standing needed to provide an education.' The letter was not a legal defence, but an institution examining itself. Prahlad kept it in his personal file, although he lacked the courage to read it at a public meeting.

On the eve of the third hearing, Revati received a call from Shivnarayan in Darbhanga. His voice was tired. 'When are you arguing?' 'Tomorrow. The court will examine the wording of the original plaint and the issues framed at trial.' 'I will offer just one caution,' Shivnarayan said. 'When your client's suffering is very clear to you, you are tempted to treat it as proof. A court will not accept that temptation.' 'And when an error is found in the record,' Revati replied, 'we're tempted to assume everything the other side says is wrong.' Her father laughed. 'You've become more cautious than I am.' Revati remembered her first days in the Delhi trial: Madhavi's testimony, Poonam's possible account, Avinash Batra's measured objection. The pain of litigation changed cities; the test remained the same.

Kusum was awake late that night. A small image of the moon trembled in the water of the well. Jeevani came outside. 'Are you reading the maps again?' 'No, I'm reading one of Father's old letters.' In it Ramdev had written to his father in the village that while labouring in Rajasthan he had managed to buy a little land, but found it difficult to preserve water in the well during the rains. The letter was not proof of ownership in court. It held a person's solitude, his effort to make a patch of earth his own and his dream of a new home in a distant place. Kusum put it back into the family trunk, not into the evidence file. She understood that every important paper did not have to be submitted in court; some were kept for the memory of a life.

Ramdev sat up in bed. 'Kusum, I'm tired,' he said. His daughter went straight to him. 'Babuji, rest.' 'I will. But listen: if you continue the case after me, save the path to the well. Don't bear a grudge against the trust for land it lawfully owns. I remember that student sitting under the tree with no roof to shelter him from the rain.' Kusum's eyes filled. 'You've taught me all this before, Babuji.' 'It is hard to live by what one has heard.' Night had deepened, but for the first time Kusum saw so clearly the dwindling strength of her father's body.

At the third hearing Justice Rathore read a line from an old prayer on the appeal record: 'Unobstructed use of the customary footpath to the

well.' Bhandari acknowledged that those words appeared in the original suit, but said the precise limits and legal foundation of the right had not been fully described. 'Then it would be inaccurate to say there was never any claim of this kind,' the judge observed. 'There was a claim,' Bhandari replied clearly, 'but the scope in which it can be recognised is disputed.' The court kept that distinction on record. Revati understood that an advocate's real success was not in declaring the other side defeated, but in making an obscure question clear.

On the next page was the order for the independent survey of 2007. 'What did the trial court ask the survey witness?' the judge asked. 'There were questions about distances, fixed reference points and the present position of the well,' Pareek replied. 'But there was no separate determination of the continuous use of the path to the well or the old right of drainage.' 'There is direct testimony against use of that path too,' Bhandari said. 'Some witnesses say the main course taken by water has changed with time.' 'It was for the trial court to frame a clear issue and weigh that testimony,' the judge said. 'I must now consider whether a limited finding of fact is necessary to dispose of the appeal.'

Revati kept her final principal submission brief. 'My Lady, let the farming family's pre-existing lawful rights be examined. Let the educational trust's lawful title to its land not be burdened with unnecessary uncertainty. Portions of the record already clarify the limits of the parties' claims. But it is difficult to call the judgment complete if a question the trial court did not clearly examine is left unanswered. We bring no new allegation of criminal wrongdoing. We do not describe an error in a copy as forgery. We ask only that the decision rest on evidence heard from all parties.'

'Our client provides institutional education,' Bhandari said in reply, 'but claims no special privilege in law because it is an institution. Nor does the appellant acquire a right automatically because he is a farmer. The actual questions are the duration, nature, extent and legal effect of an earlier use. If the court refers an issue for further examination, both parties should have equal opportunities, a clear scope and a fixed time. Beginning the entire dispute again without cause would squander judicial resources and further damage both families' lives.' The judge paid particular attention to this final request.

As the hearing ended, the judge asked, 'How old is the farmer?' 'Very elderly, with failing health,' Pareek replied. 'And the present state of the trust's construction?' Bhandari explained that some work on undisputed ground had been completed, while the limits of the interim restraint

were being observed along the disputed edge. 'The court's work is not to stop people growing older,' the judge said. 'But haste is no excuse for an incomplete decision. An order will be issued.' The parties went out. No one proclaimed an immediate victory. Ramdev sat on a bench and drank water, Kusum steadying his hand. Some distance away Prahlad sat on another bench. They saw one another but did not speak.

That evening Revati visited an old bookshop in Jodhpur. Law books, old revenue glossaries and collections of maps surrounded her. 'What subject are you looking for?' an elderly bookseller asked. 'The procedure for civil appeals.' He brought out a heavy volume containing notes on many earlier judgments. Turning its pages, Revati thought that the legal system preserved the experience of hundreds of disputes before each new dispute began, yet no precedent knew the complete story of a living person. Law offered principles, judges tested records and advocates put questions; in the end, the litigants themselves had to live with the consequences.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan sat beside the evening lamp. Nirmala Devi had brought him a short message from Neelkanth Sah's home: Amresh was now studying at college. After his earlier sentence Neelkanth had changed his business, but the disgrace of the first case still returned from time to time. 'People's memories do not change as quickly as a court order,' Shivnarayan said. He telephoned Revati. 'Has the Jodhpur order come?' 'Not yet.' 'Good. When it comes, we'll read its words. We won't rely on a newspaper headline.' Revati laughed at that. She had grown up inside this training since childhood.

One morning the following week the court's order became available at Pareek's office. It was not a forty-page final judgment, but a limited appellate order giving reasons. Having reviewed the trial record, Justice Rathore held that several aspects of the well's present location and the rights under the main sale deed had already been considered. But there were no sufficiently clear issues and determined facts concerning the specific questions of customary use of the footpath and drainage. Retaining the remainder of the appeal before itself, the High Court referred limited issues to the trial court for findings of fact under its appropriate powers in Order XLI, Rule 25 of the Code of Civil Procedure. This did not mean that the entire suit had been set aside and ordered to begin again.

The order framed two limited questions. First, what did the available evidence establish about the nature, duration, location and legal basis of the alleged earlier use of a footpath along the edge of the specified parcel

to Ramdev's well? Second, if a lawful right of drainage were established, would the trust's proposed boundary enclosure or construction obstruct it? The trial court was directed to afford the parties a fair but limited opportunity to present evidence confined to these questions and to send its reasoned findings to the High Court within the prescribed period. The appeal itself would remain pending in the High Court.

The court also clarified the interim arrangements. The parties were not to alter by force the existing conditional access to the disputed well. No new permanent construction could take place along the disputed boundary without further orders. Nothing in the order prevented the trust from carrying out lawful work on its undisputed land. These arrangements were intended only to preserve peace pending final determination, not to declare title or rights conclusively. Reading that passage, Prahlad Vaidya drew a deep breath. At last he understood that the order did not simply impose a restraint: it also left a path open for undisputed educational work to proceed.

When Kusum received the order, her eyes went first to the words 'appeal retained'. 'So after all these hearings there is still no final decision?' 'No,' Pareek said. 'The High Court has identified an important unanswered question. The trial court will make factual findings on it, and then the High Court will decide the appeal finally. This is limited judicial progress, not complete victory.' Kusum read the page again. She remembered an old notebook in which she had written in 2007, 'Awaiting the new survey.' Now she wanted to write over it, 'Awaiting answers to the questions.' She knew that during the decade the country's law had not necessarily changed very much, but the life of her family had changed with every hearing date.

Ramdev was silent for a long time after hearing the order. Then he asked, 'They won't close the path to our well in the meantime?' 'That is what the interim arrangement addresses,' Pareek replied. 'Neither side can forcibly change the situation without the court's permission. But the order has not permanently recognised your claim.' Ramdev touched a stone on the ground with his fingers. 'What I asked the court to hear has been heard once more. At my age, even that is a great deal.' Jeevani objected at once. 'Not enough. We need a path to live by, and a final paper too.' Ramdev looked at her. 'Yes, you are right as well. We need both.'

The following day the students met at Marudhar College. Rakesh read aloud the passage allowing work to continue on undisputed land. Prahlad was present too. 'Your education is not the enemy of my home,' Kusum

said. 'And the path to our well is not against the hostel. I want the building to be built, but not by erasing people's rights.' 'Why should safe accommodation for the students wait for the final judgment?' Naseema asked. 'The trust can repair and improve what stands on its own unquestioned land now.' For the first time the farmer's daughter and the trust's secretary agreed on one proposal: urgent improvements to the small hostel in the undisputed eastern section.

On hearing of the proposal, Sharad Kothari decided to make a small grant through the trust, with an explicit condition: the money was to be used only for safe student accommodation and essential repairs to the library. Its accounts would be made public. 'I will put the dates of the work on the notice board,' Prahlad said for the first time, 'and display the expenditure when it is finished.' 'The students will help inspect it too,' Rakesh replied. 'Don't treat that as distrust of the trust. Open records are the basis of confidence.' Prahlad nodded. For the first time the old hardness of resistance had diminished in his voice.

As they left the meeting, Revati said to Pareek, 'It seems possible for the trust's work to continue while the farmers' rights are heard.' 'Yes,' Pareek replied, 'but documents recording social understanding and judicial orders determining rights will remain different things. If there is a settlement, it must be lawful, with the parties' express consent entered in the record. Otherwise the dispute will return tomorrow.' Revati kept the distinction in mind. She remembered the Andaman family displaced by the 2004 tsunami, for whom the papers promising rehabilitation and an actual roof had remained far apart for years. Courts across India did not know one another, yet in many places the distance between records and lives was much the same.

A young legal trainee called Meghraj had joined Pareek's office after Revati's arguments. He sympathised with the farming family, but said that his father worked as a craftsman for the trust. 'Our household will earn a living when the hostel is built,' he said, 'but the water from my uncle's field runs through this same channel. Does becoming a lawyer mean seeing only one side's pain?' 'An advocate's duty is to protect a client's lawful case,' Revati replied. 'But no one is entitled to deny the humanity of the other side. Present the best evidence for your side, and understand the limits of the other side's evidence too.' Meghraj copied the answer into his training notebook.

On the last Saturday of January the courtyard of Ramdev's house became the scene of a small community work party. Stones scattered along the field ridge were cleared away and the loose rim of the well was

repaired, but no one touched the disputed boundary. Naseema brought two students. Instead of undertaking the measurements, Rakesh carried pitchers of water. A craftsman came on Prahlad's behalf to inspect the safe placement of stones near the well; he did not set up any new boundary post. The gathering was not a substitute for the court order, but an ordinary act of mutual help. Jeevani served everyone bajra rotis and buttermilk. Kusum watched her. After years of conflict, people of different opinions were sitting together in the family courtyard for the first time.

'How is your Saira getting on with her studies?' Ramdev asked Naseema. She replied that after a long struggle, the difficulties caused by the loss of the girl's certificates had been resolved. Her family had reached Marudhar after the violence. Saira had continued her education and now helped incoming students fill out applications. Ramdev nodded. 'Once her papers were burned. Now she prepares papers for other people. You see, a human life cannot be contained inside documents.' 'And yet without those papers,' Naseema said, 'she couldn't have entered school.' In their exchange Kusum recognised a new meaning in an old question: life was larger than any record, yet an error in a record could wound it deeply.

On the train back to Darbhanga, Revati opened her notes from the hearing. On the first page she had written, 'State the client's claim clearly; do not call unproved matters proved.' On the second was the judge's question: 'Three distinct rights in the claim.' On the third stood Bhandari's admission: 'The claim existed; its scope is disputed.' Revati had once imagined that a successful argument ended with the declaration that the opposing side had been defeated. Now she understood that it might instead consist of correctly defining a question, not annihilating the adversary. She wrote to her father with that thought. She explained the High Court's order precisely and added, 'I haven't won the case, but I have managed to put the question the earlier proceedings left unanswered clearly before the court.'

Shivnarayan replied, 'That is why your argument mattered. Remember, a court order can never measure the whole of a person's suffering. That does not make the order trivial. When the court opens an appropriate way to correct an error, there can be both peace and accountability in the act.' He enclosed a copy of Neelkanth Sah's old judgment. Revati opened it and saw that in the decision of 2004 the judge too had found some allegations proved and others unproved. Time, place and offence were different, yet the insistence on not passing beyond the limits of the evidence was the same.

The first light rain of the new month fell in Jodhpur. The soil beside the well grew damp. Jeevani saw water flowing along one section of the old drain, then stopping near a loose stone. She called Kusum. 'Look, the water finds its own path.' 'Yes,' Kusum said, 'but today's flow doesn't prove that it has always gone that way.' Jeevani laughed. 'You've begun to see courtroom language in everything.' 'No, Ma,' Kusum replied. 'I'm learning to see the course of water and the course of a court case as different things.' Ramdev sat on the well's platform listening. A faint contentment appeared on his face after a very long time.

Meanwhile the trial court issued its hearing list for the limited fact-finding on the special survey questions. Kusum wrote down the date in her notebook. This time she did not write 'Final judgment', only 'Answers to two questions'. The trust prepared its documents, the farming family considered the limits of its testimony, and the students watched the repairs to the hostel. No party held the whole truth of the country in its hands. All were practising the difficult discipline of becoming answerable for their own actions.

Through the train window Revati watched the city recede. She remembered the small magistrate's courtroom in Darbhanga in 2000, where a single account book had altered many lives. In the High Court in 2013 she was no longer the young woman learning from others; she was an advocate making her own submissions. Yet one question from that first day remained with her: how does one understand the actual account of a life behind the name written on paper? The well in Marudhar, Neelkanth's ledger, Madhavi's testimony, Sunita's wage register—each belonged to a different event, but each demanded the same labour of measuring the distance between the words in a record and a human truth.

The train moved on. In one room an elderly farmer eased his knees and waited for his next hearing; in another building a student looked at new accommodation for her studies; in a court record room a file concerning two limited questions was being set apart. Revati closed her notebook. She knew that one day this judicial method would be tested by an economic network so vast that thousands of names appeared together in its records. But that future was still invisible. The truth of this morning was only that the court had opened a way to hear a question left unanswered—and that old footprints could still be seen on the path to Ramdev's well.

PART THREE

Digital Money and a Changing Country

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Chapter 17 — The Deal Within the Game

Delhi, Darbhanga and Ludhiana; May–November 2013

In the heat of May, an old radio was playing on the veranda of Shivnarayan Jha's home in Darbhanga. The newsreader spoke of arrests over alleged spot-fixing in a major cricket tournament. Newspaper in hand, Shivnarayan listened without a word. The tea in the cup before him went cold. Revati came out of the house, where she had been putting the papers of the Jodhpur appeal in order. Hearing the broadcast, she asked, 'Babuji, do the allegations in the newspaper concern the rules of cricket or criminal law?' Shivnarayan removed his spectacles. 'First we must establish who did what, what assurance was given to whom, and whether all the necessary elements of a particular offence are present. Breaking the discipline of a game is one thing; proving a crime in court is another.' Revati remembered the first day of Neelkanth Sah's case in 2000, when the mere sight of a ledger had made everyone impatient to pronounce judgment.

That day Amresh Sah stood outside his father's old shop. After the court's verdict and his sentence, Neelkanth Sah had reduced his business considerably. He now dealt in grain brokerage and kept accounts for household goods. Amresh played cricket, but had given up his dream of captaining a team; instead, he taught village children to bowl in the evenings. On hearing the radio news, a friend laughed and said, 'If a player changes the course of a match for money, the whole game has been sold.' Amresh replied, 'Does an accusation against one player mean every player has been bought? If one player has done wrong, bring evidence against that player. If, in the name of saving the game, you destroy an innocent person's name, you won't save the game either.' He had learned the distinction from his father's life, although he still found it difficult to explain to his friends.

Revati received a call from Delhi from the advocate Arunima Dutt, with whom she had worked on a women's safety case some years earlier. 'This is a separate case arising from a local cricket tournament,' Arunima said. 'No connection with the national news has been established. But the police believe a sponsor, a former player and two account holders were involved in a criminal conspiracy. One young man's family has approached me. Could you come to Delhi?' Revati asked, 'In whose name are the case papers drawn?' 'The first appearance has taken place before the magistrate. The FIR refers to cheating, breach of trust and alleged

illegal betting. I'll send you a copy of the original.' 'I'll read the papers before offering an opinion,' Revati said.

In south Delhi, a local organisation called Sarathi Youth Cricket Club held a tournament for aspiring players every year. The ground was not large, but those who practised there carried dreams of a national stadium in their eyes. A few local traders provided equipment; a branch of a cooperative bank contributed a modest sum towards the prizes. This year the name of an outside publicity firm, Sehgal Sports Consultancy, had been added to the event. At the mention of the firm, an old set of commercial records from Mumbai surfaced in Revati's memory. Some years earlier, while examining papers concerning Gopi Devi's lawful remittances from abroad, she had encountered a business group with the name Sehgal. But a shared name could not establish a criminal connection. She decided first to examine the firm's legal registration and identify the actual parties concerned.

Arunima's Delhi office was small: a bookshelf to the right of the door, two chairs to the left and an iron desk between them. Three files lay on the desk. The first held the local tournament's rules, the second the police's initial information, and the third a letter from the family of Raghav Mishra. Raghav had come from Darbhanga to study in Delhi. To meet the cost of his education, he kept score at the tournament. The police alleged that he knew in advance of a predetermined incident during a match and had conveyed that information to someone who was staking money on it. His family maintained that he merely recorded the scores as events occurred. Arunima was candid. 'I am inclined to believe the young man, but my belief is not evidence. That's why I asked you here. You experienced this distinction in the old ledger case.'

Revati opened the first file. The sponsorship agreement placed responsibility on the organisers for fair play, accurate scoring and payment of the stipulated prize to the winner. The second file contained the police allegation that advance information about a particular moment of play had been passed to an outside betting circle. In the third was Raghav's own statement: 'I wrote in the scorebook what I saw. I knew nothing beforehand.' Revati asked, 'Where is the original scorebook?' 'The police say it has been seized,' Arunima replied. 'But the page count of the notebook in the seizure list does not agree with the club's copy.' Revati stopped for a moment. Without warning, the discrepancy between thirty-three and thirty-five pages in the seizure of 2000 returned to her mind.

Raghav's mother, Padma Mishra, was staying at her brother-in-law's house in Delhi. When she came to Arunima's office, she carried a small bundle of makhana brought from home. Seeing Revati, she said, 'I will not tell the court that my son could never make a mistake. But if he has made one, someone must explain to me what it was. Back in our village everyone says Raghav sold the match. Now even the schoolteachers cannot meet my eyes.' Revati spoke gently. 'First I shall read the record. I will tell you what has an answer, and I will not invent answers to what does not.' Padma put the bundle on the desk. 'Have something to eat,' she said. 'So many people here read my son's name, but no one remembers the days when he went hungry.'

The next day the application concerning Raghav's custody was heard before the judicial magistrate. As soon as Padma entered the courtroom, she tried to catch sight of him, but Arunima explained that court proceedings followed their own order. The public prosecutor said that a covert arrangement to make money lay behind the tournament, and that Raghav, entrusted with keeping score, had exchanged information. Assisting Arunima, Revati examined the prosecution's written grounds. The police claimed to have found a message on Raghav's phone: 'Remember the final over today.' Her first question was: who had sent those words, and to whom? Were they an ordinary reminder about a match, or a signal of a prearranged deception? Both meanings were possible. In court, however, one could not choose between them by conjecture.

The magistrate asked the prosecution, 'What stage has the examination of the accused's phone reached? What specific purpose now requires his continued custody?' The police officer explained that statements from two other people remained to be taken and analysis of the seized electronic device was under way. Arunima said, 'We have no wish to obstruct the investigation. But my client has a fixed address and a college admission record, and undertakes to appear whenever the investigators require him. The court should examine each accused person's role separately.' The magistrate made no finding of guilt. After considering the available material and the need for custody, the court passed an order for a limited period. Outside, Revati explained to Padma that this was neither a trial verdict nor the end of suspicion. 'Then when will there be justice?' Padma asked. 'I cannot give you a definite answer yet,' Revati said. 'But at every hearing it is my task to put forward what is proper.'

At the other end of Delhi, practice had resumed on the club's old ground. Aniruddha Thakur, who had learned fast bowling there at

fifteen, was teaching children to run. Another former player of the club, Naveen Rana, had also come under a cloud of suspicion. His name appeared in an initial police statement, though he had not been arrested. Naveen's sister Shalini was a schoolteacher. Near the ground, parents repeatedly asked her whether Naveen had really sold a match. Shalini had stopped answering. She possessed no evidence with which to establish her brother's innocence; yet she was exhausted from having to explain that his guilt had not been proved. The cricket ground had turned the veranda of her home into a courtroom.

Naveen Rana came to meet Revati himself. His clothes were clean, but his face bore the marks of many sleepless nights. 'On the day of the tournament I played an easy ball badly,' he said. 'Such things happen in cricket. Now people say I did it deliberately.' Revati asked, 'Did anyone speak to you beforehand about altering the result?' 'No.' 'Were you paid anything?' 'Nothing apart from the prize money and my regular coaching remuneration.' 'What can support these answers?' Naveen fell silent. 'How do I prove something I did not do?' Revati said, 'The principal burden of establishing the charge lies with the prosecution. But preserve whatever papers you have that may clarify your account. Don't add guesses merely to reassure me.' For the first time, while speaking of the game he loved, Naveen came close to tears. He said nothing.

Arunima sent a written request to the tournament committee to preserve the original scorebook, the rules, the prize-distribution records and any available video recording of the match. A separate letter concerning the state of the police investigation went through the legally prescribed channel. Confidential seized material could not simply be obtained without a court order. Revati made it clear that the defence would not attempt to persuade witnesses to alter their statements. She told Padma, 'You may ask Raghav's classmates how they are, but do not put pressure on them about their evidence. If a witness has something important to say, let it come forward through lawful means.' Padma nodded. These rules seemed remote amid the crowds of Delhi, yet she resolved to follow them for her son's sake.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan reopened an old file. During Neelkanth's trial, an incomplete page had become the source of the gravest doubt. Now every page of the newspapers carried a different allegation about cricket. A student who had come to seek advice about studying law heard him say, 'You cannot understand a new event without knowing the history of the rules. There are older judgments concerning skill and chance. But you cannot cite them to claim that every accusation of cheating, betting or collusion automatically disappears. Nor is it justice

to pronounce someone a criminal merely because a charge has been made.' The student asked, 'Then should I read newspapers or law books?' Shivnarayan smiled. 'Read both. But read first the documents actually placed before the court.'

Meanwhile, Amresh Sah was organising a small tournament for the village team. Behind the ground lay a pond in whose water the shadows of trees trembled. His father Neelkanth said, 'I don't understand the rules of cricket. But I recognise the faces of those who put money on the game. They see players as pawns in their own accounts.' 'Then should we keep the children away from cricket?' Amresh asked. Neelkanth shook his head. 'No. Teach them that those who play on the field win and lose through their own effort, while the greedy men sitting outside want to turn that effort into merchandise.' Amresh was taken aback by his answer. The shadow of his father's old crime had always shamed him, but that day Neelkanth taught him a difficult lesson: the experience of wrongdoing could also teach a person to change.

That evening Revati received a call from Sarabjit Kaur, who worked at a bank in Chandigarh and knew the family of one of Shivnarayan's former clients. 'I read in the news that you're working on the sponsor's accounts in the Delhi tournament,' she said. 'I have a general question. If an account shows a prize payment, does that alone prove it was betting revenue?' 'No,' Revati replied. 'One has to examine the purpose of payment, the contract, the true beneficiary, the timing and other evidence.' Sarabjit said, 'A bank's task is to record transactions, not guess at every customer's intentions. But unusual transactions must be reported for examination under the rules.' Revati copied her words into her notebook. Years later, thousands of account holders would pass through a test of this very principle. For now that future remained unseen.

In the first week of June the police submitted a supplementary report. It referred to the alleged message recovered from Raghav's phone, the times of calls among three individuals, and the outcome of one over in the tournament. The prosecution was constructing an argument that part of the match had been predetermined for an outsider's benefit. Reading the copy of the report, Arunima said, 'Establishing when a call took place and proving what it meant are two different things.' 'But we cannot dismiss the contact as meaningless simply by saying that,' Revati replied. 'Raghav himself must explain whom he was speaking to about work at that time.' Raghav was not present; a meeting with him had to be arranged through lawful procedure. Meanwhile, one number appeared repeatedly in the police papers, yet no authenticated record establishing whose number it was had been appended.

The Delhi rains were late. Children ran over the dry earth of the field, while the Sarathi Youth Cricket Club's office had been locked for three days. Its president, Brijmohan Gupta, insisted that false allegations had been made against the club. Its secretary, Irfan Ali, said that the police had taken the original income-and-expenditure register as part of the investigation, making it difficult to answer anyone's questions. A newspaper called the affair 'An Entire Tournament Sold'. Naveen's sister Shalini cut out the headline and pasted it into her notebook. Beneath it she wrote: 'How many matches? Which player? What evidence?' She kept the questions not to defend anyone but to preserve her own memory. The distance between what had happened and what was printed hurt her every day.

One morning in July Revati examined an authorised copy of the scorebook. An unusually high number of runs had been conceded in one over. The prosecution regarded this as support for its claim that the event had been arranged. Revati had obtained lawful permission to view the available recording of that day's play. The bowler's first two deliveries were poor; a fielder made an error on the third, and then the batsman struck a difficult shot. Seeing the footage did not automatically prove the incident innocent. Both mistakes of sporting skill and criminal collusion were possible. Yet the recording clarified one question: the prosecution's written description called the incidents 'five errors by the same player', whereas two had involved another player's participation. Revati marked the difference without making an immediate declaration of innocence.

'At what stage should we use this?' Arunima asked. 'When the court is properly placed to consider that fact,' Revati replied. 'It may be mentioned to the necessary extent at the bail hearing, but the full assessment of evidence belongs to the trial.' Arunima was reassured, though not delighted. Revati's approach to law rarely displayed a swift victory; it respected every limit of the record. Families in distress did not receive quick answers from her, but there was less chance that she would later have to retract what she had said.

At the next hearing on Raghav's regular bail application, the police said that further material from the electronic examination was coming in and that the accused had been in contact with people outside the tournament. Arunima referred to his life as a student, his permanent address, his family responsibilities, his willingness to cooperate with the investigation and the present state of the evidence. The court granted bail subject to conditions that had to be observed. Outside, Padma took Raghav's hand, but Revati immediately told her, 'This is not an acquittal. You must be just as careful now as you needed to be before.' Raghav

asked, 'Can I return to college now?' 'We shall have to look at the court's conditions, the college's separate rules and your actual circumstances,' Revati replied. Having a bail order in one's hand did not open every door that life had closed.

When Raghav reached home, his younger brother Arpit had hidden the cricket bat behind a cupboard. 'Where has the bat gone?' Padma asked. Arpit answered, 'People in the village say cricket is a disgraceful game.' Raghav stood by the window for a while. Then he brought out the bat and wiped it clean. 'The game isn't disgraceful,' he said. 'A person greedy for money can do wrong anywhere. Giving it up isn't the answer for me.' Padma looked up. 'Finish your studies first.' Raghav sat down quietly. He had to earn his family's trust all over again. The happiness of obtaining bail was brief; no one knew how many months it would take to change the villagers' opinion of him.

When Revati returned to Darbhanga, Shivnarayan was teaching a new law student from an old volume of judgments in his office. He asked her, 'Was bail granted?' 'Yes, with conditions. Much in the documents remains unclear, but we're not yet in a position to say that every allegation is false.' 'What difference did you notice from your first case this time?' Shivnarayan asked. 'Neelkanth's ledger bore a signature in ink. Here there are call times, fragments of images, bank entries and moments of a game as it unfolds. Everything seems visible, yet the meaning of each thing depends upon the others. The more we can measure, the more we have to ask what exactly was measured.' Shivnarayan listened and closed his old notebook. 'Then the next generation of lawyers will have to understand machines as well as papers.'

That evening Amresh was finishing a game with the children on Darbhanga's small ground. When Revati arrived, he said, 'You examine the meaning of every ball in court. What am I supposed to teach the children?' 'Teach them that losing is part of the game, but fixing the price of a defeat in advance is a betrayal of it. And when someone makes a mistake, don't immediately say he has been bought.' Amresh laughed. 'We'll have to teach the parents that lesson too.' Two boys ran home carrying the ball. The last redness of the sun spread across the pond. For Amresh the game had offered a way out of his father's former trade; for Raghav it was now necessary to find a way out of an accusation made in the game's name.

A week later Arunima received a letter from Irfan Ali, the club's assistant secretary. It mentioned an unusual entry in the organisers' accounts: 'Fee for external consultancy'. The amount was far greater than

the tournament's total prize money. Irfan wrote that he did not know the purpose of the payment. The register bore an indication of the president's approval, but no description of the services actually supplied was available. Reading the letter, Revati said, 'Without the original accounts and the relevant party's response, this is not proof of an offence. But it raises an independent question. We must not automatically connect it to Raghav's alleged phone message.' Arunima asked Irfan to submit the records through the proper legal channel. Revati put the new financial information in a separate file as a lead worthy of examination.

In the first week of August the police placed additional papers before the court with their detailed report. The prosecution's account of the alleged acts now focused principally on two people: Shailesh Mahajan, who managed the local event's finances, and Abhinav Seth, a representative of the outside sponsor. As for Raghav, the police said he had carried information about the game. Evidence concerning the allegation that Naveen Rana had influenced the result was still under separate investigation. Arunima read the file index. Several entries connected with Shailesh were clear, but Abhinav's identity appeared in only one signed letter. 'A name has been attached to a piece of paper,' Revati said, 'but who actually signed it? We shall have to ask.' She remembered again the limited opinion of the handwriting expert in Neelkanth's case, when the disputed page of the ledger had failed to become decisive.

Brijmohan Gupta, the tournament committee's president, came to see Revati unexpectedly. He entered the office in a clean dhoti and pressed kurta, with sweat glistening on his forehead. 'Save my organisation,' he said. 'Children have played there for twenty-five years. Now every donor is withdrawing. I want the court to be told that the entire tournament was innocent of wrongdoing.' 'I am not the lawyer for your organisation,' Revati replied, 'and no one can certify the moral innocence of an entire event without an inquiry. Make the original records in your possession available. Conclusions must come from evidence.' Brijmohan was somewhat offended. 'You lawyers make everything difficult.' 'We do not make a simple life needlessly difficult,' Revati said. 'Nor will we call something simple when it really is difficult, and make a lie of it.'

After Brijmohan had left, Arunima asked, 'Was he trying to put pressure on us?' 'He wants to save his institution, which is understandable,' Revati said. 'But the desire to protect an institution's reputation cannot take the place of evidence.' Just then a letter arrived from Padma. Raghav had returned to his village and resumed his studies,

but a group of classmates at college was spreading insults about him. Padma wrote: 'I am beginning to understand that witnesses do not stand only in court. They stand at the door of one's house as well. Every day of our lives we must explain ourselves before someone.' Revati read the letter over and over. Those words revealed a deep gulf between legal procedure and the informal verdicts of society.

That week a small public gathering took place outside the Delhi cricket ground. Shalini, Naveen's sister, was there with the coach Aniruddha, several parents from the club and young players. The meeting was about integrity in sporting institutions, not a demonstration for or against any accused person. Shalini said, 'I ask that we teach children to keep prize money and remuneration openly accounted for, and not to accept the pressure of outside financial greed. But at this gathering I will not declare anyone guilty.' A parent objected, 'The accused should be barred from the ground for life.' Aniruddha replied, 'When wrongdoing is proved, the rules must be firm. But what lesson do we teach if a child's dream is cut short on an allegation alone?' The meeting ended without agreement. Even so, many parents thought for the first time that protecting a sport also required evidence and due process.

Across the national cricket world the news was deafening. On one side were the May arrests by the Delhi police and inquiries by cricket's governing bodies; on the other was the game's immense international popularity. Different reports gave different accounts of names, figures and allegations. Shivnarayan clipped the dates of actual events from old newspapers, but did not introduce those clippings as evidence in Revati's separate local case. He told her plainly on the telephone, 'A photocopy of an inquiry at national level cannot establish guilt in your small case. Similarity of names, similarity of legal questions and an actual financial connection are three different things.' 'I know,' Revati answered. 'But the din of the news has already written its verdict in the minds of the people outside the bail court.'

One day a young journalist named Noor Jatay came to Revati's office. She reported on sport for a small Delhi weekly. 'I was at the ground on the day of the tournament,' Noor said. 'Two other papers gave the opposite meaning to a photograph I published. In my report I identified a man as the organisers' treasurer. Another paper called him a player. I sent a correction, but it was never printed.' Revati asked, 'Have you kept your original notes, the time of the photograph and the published issue?' Noor opened her bag and took out some papers. 'Yes. But I haven't come to save Raghav. I want what I wrote not to be changed without my permission.'

'Your right to request an editorial correction is a separate matter,' Revati said. 'Any facts relevant to the case must reach it by lawful means.'

In Noor's photograph an elderly scorekeeper could be seen sitting in a corner of the ground. His name was Dayanand Prasad, and Raghav had trained under him. Dayanand's first statement in the police record was short: 'I was writing down the scores; Raghav was nearby.' 'During the final over that day, Dayanand became ill,' Noor said. 'Raghav took over the scoring for a little while.' Revati did not immediately add this to the file as an established new fact. 'Did you see that yourself, or did someone tell you afterwards?' Noor thought for a moment. 'I saw Dayanand get up. I also saw Raghav sit down after him. I heard later why Dayanand was unwell.' Revati wrote: 'Direct observation: change of position. Reported reason: another source.' For the moment she was satisfied with writing no more.

Dayanand Prasad lived three lanes from the ground. He was old and hard of hearing, but his memory was clear. Revati and Arunima had sent advance notice requesting a lawful meeting with him, and his son was present. 'I felt dizzy that day,' Dayanand said. 'I handed the scorebook to Raghav. But how can I say whether Raghav knew something about the final over beforehand? I wasn't inside his mind.' Arunima asked, 'Did you keep a carbon copy of the original scorebook?' Dayanand looked towards his son. From an old trunk the son took a torn notebook containing handwritten scores for the day. Revati did not immediately take it into her own hands. 'This is an original private record,' she said. 'We must determine how it can be lawfully produced in the investigation. Its present condition, provenance and sequence of custody must be recorded.' Dayanand was surprised. 'Has even a scorebook become an object for the court?' 'If the court finds it relevant, yes,' Revati answered. 'But first it is the notebook in which you wrote down a day of your life.'

At the final hearing in September, the prosecution placed before the court the grounds for framing charges against several people. One central question was whether there was enough preliminary material linking money received from a sponsor, the alleged manipulation of a match and transactions with an outside betting circle to justify proceeding to trial. The public prosecutor said, 'At this stage the court is not deciding whether each fact ultimately proves guilt. It is making the necessary prima facie assessment of the material available.' Arunima replied, 'Even a prima facie assessment cannot dispense with the elements of the offence. Raghav kept score. To make him a participant in a fraud involving the match, the specific acts attributed to him and the grounds for saying he knew what was happening must be clear.' The magistrate

continued to write a separate question against each accused person's name. Revati saw that it was easy to tell a collective story in court, and hard to prove the individual role of each person in it.

In the order framing charges, the court did not accept every prosecution allegation alike. It found a preliminary basis for trial on certain alleged financial deceptions involving Shailesh Mahajan and Abhinav Seth, while recording the lack of sufficiently clear material for other, wider allegations. As to Raghav, the court held that the phone message and his part in the tournament provided grounds for proceeding on a limited charge, but expressly stated that the order was not a finding of guilt. Revati was disappointed; she had hoped the case against the young man would not proceed. 'Read the court's reasoning,' Arunima said. 'We will defend him within the limits it has set.' Outside, Padma could not understand why, even after obtaining bail, her son had to appear yet again for proceedings on the charge.

That day on the courthouse steps a young player from the club, Arjun Kumar, came up to Raghav. 'When I saw your name I was frightened,' he said. 'But you kept score for so long, and I never saw you change anything for your own gain. I want to say so in court.' Raghav answered at once, 'Say what you saw. Don't enlarge your memory in order to defend me.' Arjun was astonished. 'I want to save you, and you're stopping me?' 'If you say something untrue, it may later be used against me. Tell the truth. Only as much as you saw.' Listening from a distance, Revati felt that the months on bail had changed Raghav inwardly. He was learning to understand not just the disgrace attached to his own name but the fragility of the grounds on which truth must stand.

In October Dayanand Prasad appeared in court as the first prosecution witness. In view of his age, the magistrate ensured that the necessary comforts and opportunities for rest were provided. Dayanand gave his name, occupation and account of the day in question. He said the primary responsibility for keeping score was his, but Raghav had taken over for part of the final over. The prosecutor asked, 'Before the incident, did you see Raghav having an unusual conversation with anyone?' 'I heard him speaking to a man,' Dayanand replied, 'but I couldn't make out all the words. There was a great deal of noise on the ground.' 'Who was the man?' 'I didn't see his face clearly.' The court recorded the uncertainty exactly as he expressed it. The prosecution tried through several questions to elicit a firmer answer, but the witness did not move beyond the limits of his knowledge.

During cross-examination Arunima asked Dayanand, 'In your first statement did you say that you yourself kept the score until the beginning of the final over?' 'Yes.' 'And now you say that Raghav took over part of the last over?' 'Yes, when I felt dizzy.' 'Is the writing in your notebook at that time in a different hand?' Dayanand considered the question. 'My sight is poor now. Let an expert examine the page; I won't guess.' Arunima paused before asking the next question. From the photograph of the notebook she herself could not say that the handwriting was demonstrably different. The magistrate noted the form of the question and directed that the witness be given an opportunity to answer within his direct knowledge. Dayanand breathed out. The firm certainties of the news outside had not found their way into this elderly man's testimony.

The prosecution's second witness was Lakshmikant Bansal, who maintained the organisers' accounts. His testimony dealt with entries for prizes, ground rental and external consultancy fees. The prosecutor showed him a page concerning the special payment. Lakshmikant said he had made the entry himself, but the actual decision to pay had been taken by the president and the financial manager. In cross-examination Arunima asked, 'Did you yourself receive and spend the amount?' 'No.' 'Did you see the services shown on the invoice actually being delivered?' 'I received the bill; I did not see how the service was performed.' 'Was Raghav involved in approving this payment?' 'He was a student scorekeeper. I saw his name on none of the approvals.' The answer did not remove every allegation against Raghav, but it exposed the limits of one broad inference advanced by the prosecution.

After the hearing, Shailesh Mahajan's lawyer met Revati in the corridor. 'It would be wrong to put all the blame on my client in order to save yours,' he said. 'I have not placed blame on anyone,' Revati replied. 'I have questioned who actually authorised each payment.' 'The prosecution suspects us on the strength of invoices alone,' the lawyer said. 'Services were provided, and we will present the evidence at the appropriate time.' Revati smiled. 'Then we agree on one point: recording an invoice and establishing that a service was performed require different examinations.' They walked away in opposite directions. Such small agreements between opposing lawyers in a courthouse corridor could matter, though they had no evidentiary value in court merely because they had been expressed.

That night Arunima received fresh police information about an absent witness. A young man named Dipendra Bhatia, who had worked in the financial manager's office, had travelled abroad. The police papers identified him as an accounts assistant, but the date of his departure did

not match one witness's account. The witness had said Dipendra was present at a meeting in Delhi two days after the match; preliminary travel records suggested he had already left the country by then. 'If both records are correct,' Revati said, 'either the witness remembers the date wrongly or the meeting took place on another day. Travel abroad does not establish guilt; nor, until the original travel documents are verified, is the impossibility of his presence established.' Arunima found patience in this caution, though the story grew more tangled.

A mild chill began to settle in November. In a Ludhiana factory, Sunita Paswan was arranging old copies of wage registers. Before leaving her employment, Harjit Kaur had taught her to keep honest accounts. An unresolved entry under the name 'Hardev Chauhan' again caught Sunita's eye. She knew that thousands of people bore the same name; even when she saw 'H. Chauhan Agency' in the Delhi cricket news, she did not immediately imagine a connection. She kept the newspaper cutting, however. Smoke rose from the factory chimney, and the workers' struggle still concerned their wages, health and housing. Those were the principal truths of her days. The financial mysteries of Delhi's cricket world had not yet made any direct claim upon her life.

Sunita's younger sister Deepika was learning to play cricket at the village school. She wrote, 'When I bowl, Master Sahib says there is speed in my arm. But the ground is small, and the boys say cricket isn't a girl's game.' Sunita replied, 'Speed does not mean only throwing a ball a long way. There is also the speed with which you stand up for your rights. You have a place on the playing field; keep playing without giving up your studies.' She said nothing in the letter about the Delhi case. Thousands of girls like Deepika were learning to bowl their first ball, apart from cricket's national controversies. Far from the clamour of the news, the first steps of sport and the small victories of education were advancing at their own pace in homes such as these.

In Delhi another copy of the tournament accounts was obtained. Lakshmikant Bansal's register referred to a second invoice for services provided by Sehgal Sports Consultancy. There was an unusual difference between the amounts on the first and second invoices. Revati wrote the dates of both, the payment authorisations and the receiving institution's names on separate sheets. 'Is this the same Sehgal business house whose name appeared in the lawful import-export records from Mumbai?' Arunima asked. 'I don't know that yet,' Revati replied. 'A resemblance in words is not enough. It would be wrong to treat two firms as one without verifying their registration, directors, actual operations and signatures.'

Her caution postponed what might have been a major turning point in the story, but made the basis for any such turn stronger.

The police report on electronic evidence included a printout of the phone message. Revati noticed that one page placed it in the morning and another copy placed the same message in the evening. The prosecution suggested that different time-display settings on the device could explain the discrepancy. The defence argued that the printout could not be decisive without examination of the original device, the extracted data and the applicable rules of authentication. Having heard both sides, the court clarified the proper stage for producing and testing the evidence. The discrepancy neither made the message instantly false nor rendered it authentic without examination. Outside, one report announced, 'Prosecution's Central Evidence Collapses'; another proclaimed, 'Criminal Message Mystery Solved'. Both headlines claimed greater certainty than the truth allowed.

Noor Jatay wrote an article titled 'One Over of Cricket, Many Unanswered Questions'. She kept distinct the young players on the ground, the organisers' payments, the contested seized register and the limits of the judicial process. At first her editor wanted to change the headline to 'The Secret of a Sold Match Exposed'. Noor refused. 'My article contains questions, not a revelation.' 'Questions won't attract readers,' the editor said. 'A false conclusion may attract more,' Noor replied, 'but it destroys the readers' trust.' At last the article appeared under its original title. Sales did not rise much, but Shalini, Naveen's sister, placed a copy of the weekly in her school library. She had never met Noor. Even so, one carefully qualified sentence had offered her family support.

Revati sent her father a brief account of the Delhi case. Shivnarayan wrote back: 'In the history of financial crime we make the same mistake again and again: we assume the person who writes down the figures owns the money, while the person who profits may remain absent from the records. But don't make the opposite mistake either. Some people who keep accounts really do participate in crimes. Establish each person's part by separate evidence.' Revati kept the letter on her desk. The legal thinking that had begun with the first page of Neelkanth's ledger was finding a new form in cricket's digital age. The letter held her father's experience, but there was no need to make it a quotation in court. This time it was private ethical guidance from a father to his daughter.

On the final day of the hearing Naveen Rana stood with his sister in the courthouse corridor. The state of the criminal investigation against

him remained uncertain, and the club's disciplinary proceedings were pending separately. A journalist asked, 'If you're innocent, why are you silent?' Naveen replied, 'What I know, I will say before the proper forum of inquiry. Refusing to answer a newspaper's question does not establish a crime.' Shalini took his hand and led him away. For the first time that day she understood that silence in the face of public condemnation was not always an admission of guilt. Sometimes it was a person's decision to wait until the right place to speak his truth.

After Dayanand Prasad's testimony, Raghav slowly recovered something of his ordinary life. He sat an examination at college, but even in the examination hall one sentence from the phone returned to him: 'Remember the final over today.' He tried to recall when he had written it and to whom. He remembered telling a friend to be present in time to help keep score in the final over, but the available copy of the message did not fully agree with his recollection. 'I think that's what I said,' he told Revati. 'But I'm not sure.' 'Acknowledging uncertainty is also part of giving a proper account,' she said. 'Don't claim more than you remember.' Raghav accepted the answer as one of his life's hardest lessons.

The last month of the year was approaching. Arunima and Revati prepared separate lists of the next prosecution witnesses, the available electronic records and the tournament's financial papers. Shailesh Mahajan was getting his defence documents ready; questions about the registration of Abhinav Seth's company remained unanswered. The court fixed the next date. There had been no final conviction, no miraculous document that unravelled the whole affair. Yet from the scorebook to the direction of the external payments, a question had grown clearer: if any of the money truly came from crime, who was its ultimate beneficiary, and by what lawful route could that be proved?

On the night train from Delhi to Darbhanga, Revati lay awake for a long time. In the berth opposite, a father was showing his son a cricket ball. The boy asked softly, 'Babu, is someone who loses a bad player?' The father laughed. 'No. Losing teaches you to play again.' Revati looked out of the window. Outside lay dark fields, scattered lights from houses far apart, and between them the steady movement of the train. She remembered Ramdev Mandal's well, Sunita's wage register, Madhavi's testimony and Neelkanth's old ledger, all together. The causes of those events were different, but in every one of them somebody else's interpretation had been laid upon a human name. It was the court's work to question that interpretation.

When she reached home in Darbhanga, Shivnarayan asked, 'Has the match been decided?' Revati smiled. 'The match on the field ended long ago. The court is still trying to determine what it meant.' 'Then the game has changed its name,' Shivnarayan said quietly. 'Now it is a game of people's reputations, ownership of money and evidence.' 'Not a game of evidence, Babuji,' Revati corrected him. 'An examination of evidence.' Shivnarayan laughed as he looked at his daughter. 'You're right. I've allowed the image of the game to occupy the courtroom for far too long.' In a corner of the veranda lay a small ball sent by Amresh Sah with an invitation to the village children's tournament. Revati picked it up. How many people ran to catch this simple round thing, she thought, and how many more sat outside the field keeping accounts of the profit they hoped to make from that running.

When Revati opened her office the next day, two envelopes had arrived. The first came from Jodhpur, giving a new date for the limited examination of facts concerning the footpath to the Marudhar well. The second came from Mumbai, in answer to a request for a certified copy of public registration records relating to Sehgal Sports Consultancy, whose name appeared in an older commercial document. The enclosed response said two institutions with similar names had been registered at different times, and that the current address of one differed from its earlier address. None of this established a crime. Revati put the papers in separate files. On one she wrote, 'Marudhar: Land'; on the other, 'Cricket: Financial Source'. She did not combine them.

That evening an unfamiliar young man came to see Shivnarayan. In a low voice he gave his name: 'Dipendra Bhatia.' Shivnarayan was startled. He knew from Revati's letters the name of the accounts assistant who had gone abroad in the Delhi case. 'I want to tell you something,' the young man said, 'but first I want to know how what I say will be tested in court.' Instead of immediately deciding whether he was innocent or guilty, Shivnarayan offered him a seat. 'First tell me what legal assistance you require. Keep separate what you saw yourself and what you heard from others. And do not ask me to conceal or alter any record.' The young man opened his bag. Inside were an old appointment letter and a small wage ledger. Part of the address on the first page had been erased. Shivnarayan looked at it, but before reading he asked, 'How long has this paper been in your possession?'

Outside, children ran through the lanes of Darbhanga in search of a cricket ball. Inside, the pages of a document were being opened slowly. The next court date was still some way off, but a new witness had knocked at the door of Revati's life. He did not bring the complete

answer to a crime, only the presence of a possible witness whose words would have to withstand the testing of time, an opposing party and the court's hard questions. Even so, Shivnarayan felt that the story had travelled far, from the betting ledgers of the twentieth century's last years to the digital world of the twenty-first. And across that distance one thing remained unchanged: once a person's name was written down, the account of that person's life was greater than the name itself.

Chapter 18 — The Road to Mars and the Right to Identity

2014: Jodhpur, Bengaluru, Delhi and Darbhanga

It was a Magh morning in Darbhanga. Before the first sunlight reached the veranda of the old house, Shivnarayan Jha sat opening the bag he took to court. Opposite him was a young man named Dipendra Bhatia. He had arrived the previous evening without an appointment and, after introducing himself, had remained silent for a long time. Shivnarayan had not pressed him to speak. He came again at dawn, this time carrying a small cloth bag. The corners of the pages he took from it looked curled, as though by damp sea air. 'How much blame belongs to someone who saw a false name entered in a document but said nothing at the time?' he asked. 'First separate what you saw from what you knew,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Then we can understand your duties, authority and intentions at that time. Until then I will not measure your guilt.'

Dipendra had been an accounts assistant at the Delhi cricket tournament. His name had appeared in an earlier letter from Revati, so Shivnarayan was already on his guard. The young man said that some invoices were in his handwriting, but the signatures authorising decisions belonged to others. He was troubled by the conflict between his date of departure abroad and a witness's claim that he had attended a meeting in Delhi. 'I wasn't in India that day,' he said. 'But if I concern myself only with clearing my own name, who will answer for the improper payments that were made?' Shivnarayan did not take either document into his hands. 'Revati is already involved in defending an accused person in the matter you're speaking of. Your interests and her client's may conflict. You need advice from a lawyer of your own. Do not leave any papers with me. They must be properly preserved and presented through lawful procedure.' Dipendra was not immediately reassured, but for the first time he understood that legal assistance did not mean a promise to keep everything hidden.

Revati telephoned that afternoon. Shivnarayan told her only that a possible witness was seeking independent legal advice. He did not disclose the young man's account or the contents of his papers. 'Babuji, how frightened was he?' Revati asked. 'A frightened man sometimes speaks the truth, and sometimes speaks in the language of his fear. One must have the patience to listen, but not be in a hurry to call his words proof.' Revati had the next hearing of the Delhi cricket case before her. She had

kept three things in separate files: the time of a message, the handwriting in a scorebook and the second copy of an external consultancy invoice. One telephone call could not settle those questions.

In Delhi's January cold, Revati looked at an old map hanging on her office wall. The map showed the states of India; on a small slip of paper she had written Darbhanga, Jodhpur, Ludhiana and Mumbai. The cases in these four places were not part of the same crime. Yet in each place a line in a record had changed a person's life: the boundary of land, a worker's wages, a seizure register, a game's score. The present generation placed greater certainty in words written on a computer screen. From experience, however, Revati knew that behind the glowing letters on a screen were still human hands, human errors and human interests.

Meanwhile in Jodhpur, Kusum Mandal was walking towards her father Ramdev's well near Marudhar College. There was a light winter chill after Paush, but the desert earth was dry. A wooden stake stood at one end of the old footpath to prevent vehicles bringing building materials for the hostel from entering the disputed portion. Following the High Court's order, the subordinate civil court had fixed a date for a limited examination of facts. Kusum hoped for a resolution, but feared that lines on another map would once again erase from the papers a path her family had used for years. 'Kusum,' her father said, 'water from this well matters to me, but the college children's education matters too. If the court finds a way for both rights to exist, that will be my victory.' Kusum could not smile. She thought of the number of families whose lives stood between 'two rights'.

Naseema was writing a notice for a meeting of women students in the library. Saira, displaced by the violence of 2002, was now in the final year of her degree, and everyone still remembered her long struggle to obtain her school certificates. That day a new application arrived at the hostel. At the top stood the name 'Manasvi', but the old admission register attached to it bore another name. 'Whose record is this?' Naseema asked. The student standing before her answered, 'Mine. I do not recognise myself in the name written in the earlier register. I want the right to study under my own name.' Her voice was calm, but the fingers holding the papers trembled.

Manasvi had been admitted to Marudhar College some time earlier. She was a capable student, curious about folk literature and mathematics alike. Some of the institution's records, however, had been created under the identity recorded at her first admission. She wanted those records corrected to accord with her gender identity and name. One clerk said

there was no rule for it; another official demanded additional certificates; a teacher addressed her in class by the name she had chosen. The contradictions caused Manasvi her deepest pain: within the same institution she was a human being to some, merely an old entry to others. 'I am not asking to be admitted again,' she said. 'I am asking for records that say who I am.'

Naseema did not promise Manasvi swift justice. She first asked to see the admission book, the university's applicable rules and the scholarship forms. Kusum arrived too. She remembered her father's land dispute: a line on paper could close a path that existed in the world. 'We'll help you write the application,' Kusum said. 'But state clearly the name you want. Other people will not make that decision for you.' For the first time Manasvi smiled with ease. 'That's all I have been asking,' she said. Saira sat down and opened a notebook. Having lost her own certificates in a fire years earlier, she understood another person's right to an educational identity.

In February the application reached the office of the Marudhar educational trust. Prahlad, the administrator, said, 'If the college changes its original admission entry on its own, it will no longer match the Controller of Examinations' record. We need a lawful procedure.' Manasvi was momentarily discouraged, but Kusum asked, 'Will you request written guidance from the affiliated university, or simply send the student away?' 'I will seek guidance,' Prahlad said. That day Naseema carefully preserved the acknowledgement of receipt. In the history of rights denied or deferred, even a receipt could become an essential memory.

Preparations for the national election were gathering pace. Every day fresh debates arose at the tea stall outside the college: employment, rising prices, corruption, development, water for local farmers, women's education, disillusionment after the anti-corruption movement. Rakesh believed a change of government would bring new opportunities. Naseema asked how policy announcements would reach children excluded from schooling. Kusum's father said the most important questions for him in any political manifesto were irrigation and an unambiguous record of his rights. Amid all these arguments, Manasvi studied quietly in a seat at the back of the library. Her question was not an election slogan; it was the admit card for her next examination.

One day in March, Firdous Kaul came to Marudhar College to give a guest lecture. She taught computer science and explained to the students that the spelling of a person's name and a unique identification number

in a record were different things. 'If two people have the same name,' she said, 'they do not become the same person. And if one person lawfully changes a name, that person does not become someone else.' Naseema took Manasvi's problem to her. Instead of proposing an immediate solution, Firdous asked to see the college rules and the affiliated university's notifications. Her technical understanding told her that simply erasing an old record was not always right: one needed a process that preserved history while correcting the present. Manasvi found hope in that distinction.

The story of Manasvi's home was much larger than the college papers. In a narrow lane of Jodhpur her mother, Binesari Devi, earned her living sewing clothes. Her father worked in transport, far from home for long periods. For a long time the family had been silent about Manasvi's name. When she made her identity clear, her mother had at first been unable to understand. One evening Binesari asked, 'Why does it hurt you to hear the name I've always called you?' 'Ma, don't erase my memories of childhood,' Manasvi replied. 'But I want to hear you call me what I am.' Binesari said nothing. The next morning she called, 'Manasvi, come and eat your rice.' There was no judicial order in those few words, but a door had opened inside the home.

Meanwhile Kusum wrote to Revati from Jodhpur. Her letter mentioned the new date in the land case and, briefly, Manasvi's predicament. At first Revati thought the college administration should be able to correct a student's admission records. Then she read the rules Kusum had enclosed. One scholarship form expressly required the name to be entered exactly as it appeared in the earlier record, failing which the application would be rejected. Revati consulted a senior secretariat official about the legal position. 'It's a social question,' he said. 'What can the court do?' 'When an administrative decision obstructs a student's examination, scholarship or basic opportunity,' Revati replied, 'it may also be fit for judicial scrutiny. But first we need the rules and documentary evidence of an actual refusal.'

On the morning of 15 April 2014, news arrived that the Supreme Court had delivered a historic judgment concerning recognition, dignity and equal rights for people of the third gender. Manasvi came to the college veranda that day not to hold a student meeting but to prepare her next letter. Naseema urged everyone to obtain a reliable copy of the judgment itself. Some students immediately began saying that every office would now change every document at once. Firdous gently stopped them. 'The principles of the judgment are important. Putting them into administrative practice also requires written applications, consistency

with the rules and the necessary action. Our happiness is justified, but don't disappoint Manasvi again with promises we cannot yet fulfil.'

Saira cut out the news report and pasted it into her notebook. Twelve years before, her school papers had been destroyed by fire. Now she saw that even when someone's papers survived, the identity written in them might not be true to that person's life. 'Do you want the traces of your old certificates to disappear?' she asked Manasvi. 'No,' Manasvi answered. 'Let the examining body preserve its history. But let my present certificate bear my correct identity. I have no objection if the connection between old copies and new documents is properly recorded.' Saira nodded. 'I faced the same question when my lost school records had to be reconstructed. A copy isn't the original; it must be a copy verified against the original's basis.'

Prahlad wrote to Sharad Kothari, secretary of the trust, saying that the institution had to make a clear decision. 'We have not denied the student admission,' Sharad said. 'Admission isn't the only matter,' Prahlad replied. 'There are also examination rolls and scholarships.' Sharad spoke of longstanding office procedures. He was afraid of breaking the rules and worried about the institution's reputation. Kusum, once a farmer's daughter and now a representative of women students, said, 'If the rules are unclear, request a written reply from the competent government authority. But it isn't just to leave the entire burden of that uncertainty on the student.' Sharad did not smile. For the first time he wrote the minutes of the meeting himself.

In the last week of April, Manasvi's scholarship application was held up on technical grounds. The registration number was valid, but one name entry failed to match. A clerk sent the message 'Discrepancy in application'. Manasvi stared at those two words for a long time. That night Binesari had accepted a new sewing job to raise money for books. 'Ma,' Manasvi said, 'why should my studies stop over such a small discrepancy?' 'I don't know the law,' Binesari answered. 'But I never imagined writing your name correctly would be so difficult.' Manasvi took her hand, not to console her alone but to ask the question with her.

Revati prepared a draft representation on Manasvi's behalf. She kept the student's own account, her earlier admission documents, the scholarship rejection message and the proper descriptions of the institutions that would need to be named before the High Court in separate order. 'Why is there so little language of feeling on this page?' Naseema asked. 'I haven't removed feeling,' Revati replied. 'The court must be shown the concrete administrative obstruction to the exercise of

a right. The injury to self-respect is an experience; the denial of a scholarship is its documented consequence. Both must be made clear together.' Revati changed one sentence again: she did not call the student a 'person of discrepant identity', but wrote 'discrepancy in the records'. Language itself could become a judgment made in advance.

On the day the Lok Sabha election results came in, the tea stall at Marudhar was crowded. The vote count on 16 May reported that the Bharatiya Janata Party had secured a clear majority in the Lok Sabha. Rakesh hoped for new economic opportunities; Naseema questioned the obligations of public service; Kusum worried about irrigation and the unfinished college hostel. 'An election is a fundamental event in a democracy,' Firdous said. 'But a political change will not alter the facts in a court case.' Manasvi listened to the results, yet her thoughts were on the admit card for her next examination. A private crisis did not become small simply because immense events were unfolding around the country.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan heard the news and telephoned Revati. 'A new government has come in, and people are full of new hopes.' 'Yes,' she said, 'but I still have two sets of court papers to read: one about a student's rights, the other about witnesses after bail in the cricket case.' 'When an age changes, its legal questions change,' Shivnarayan said, 'but the wait is the same for the person whose name is called in court.' Amresh's son was playing cricket in the courtyard. Neelkanth, whose family had once been afraid of the very name of the game during his first case, now told the boy not to fear losing a match, but to beware of cheating for money.

On a hot day in June, Revati and Anurima Pathak, the Jodhpur lawyer associated with Manasvi's case, prepared to file the petition at the principal seat of the Rajasthan High Court in Jodhpur, which had territorial jurisdiction, rather than at the Jaipur Bench. Revati remained in Delhi to provide the necessary legal advice; Anurima was responsible for the local proceedings and arguments. The proposed respondents included the competent state authority, the affiliated university's Controller of Examinations and the relevant officials of the educational trust. The same order was not sought against all of them. The request was for the university to consider amendment of the certificates under the rules, the scholarship office to decide the application, and the college to ensure proper facilities for the student in class.

At the first hearing the judge asked, 'Has the student been barred from taking an examination, or is her scholarship held up because the name on the application does not match?' Anurima replied that the

examination admit-card deadline was approaching and that the university had not yet decided the request to amend its records. Government counsel said the office was in the process of issuing fresh guidelines. The judge asked again, 'If framing a policy takes time, how can it be right for the student to lose the current academic year?' Hope flashed in Manasvi's eyes when she heard the question, but she did not try to predict the court's final position. The judge called for the necessary written replies from both sides.

Outside in the courthouse corridor, a reporter stopped Manasvi. 'Tell us everything about yourself. We'll make you the central figure in a news story.' Manasvi hesitated. 'I will speak about the public aspects of my case,' she said, 'but not every private detail of my childhood is material for your headline.' The reporter was dissatisfied. Naseema did not interrupt; Manasvi had made the decision herself. Saira wrote a short report focused on scholarships, educational records and legal process. She titled it 'A Student's Name, an Institution's Responsibility'.

At the next hearing, the university's lawyer submitted a written reply. Preserving the original registration record, it said, was an administrative necessity; nevertheless, the student's current name and identity could be correctly recorded through lawful procedure. The judge said the student ought to receive a decision within a specified time and should not be needlessly prevented from taking the current examinations. A wider ruling on policy was reserved at that stage, while the competent authority was directed to consider her representation within a fixed period. 'Will you all say a decision has been reached?' Manasvi asked outside. 'An important path has opened,' Anurima replied. 'We can assess the result only when the whole process is complete.' Manasvi found reassurance, not disappointment, in her caution.

When the first few drops of rain fell in Jodhpur, Ramdev Mandal was sitting beside his well. The survey expert appointed under the subordinate court's order had fixed a day to inspect two old maps, local records and the boundaries actually marked on the ground. Kusum had entered dates of use of the footpath in her notebook. Employees of the educational trust would also be present. 'My daughter has learned the language of the court,' Ramdev said, 'but I still understand the language of the land. When was this stone placed? When did the water in this well recede? Which cow walked this path every day? How will such things find a place on paper?' 'Not everything will,' Kusum replied, 'but those who saw them can speak. The land will be measured on the land itself.'

Naseema and Manasvi stood a little way from the survey site, in the hostel courtyard. 'Haven't you grown tired of fighting over land for so many years?' Manasvi asked. 'Growing tired is one thing; surrendering a right is another,' Kusum answered. 'But I see the needs of both sides. We need the college's new rooms too. Why should my family be unable to reach its well simply because the path is closed?' Manasvi agreed. Her own case over a name was similar in one respect: the institution's need to preserve earlier records and the student's right to have her present identity acknowledged did not have to be made enemies. When people thought carefully, some problems moved nearer to resolution; others still required the rigour of law.

In Bengaluru, Niranjan Jha was under pressure from his new responsibilities. He belonged to an engineering group working in association with the Indian Space Research Organisation. Mangalyaan had left Earth on 5 November 2013 and was expected to enter the orbit of Mars in September 2014. Niranjan drew pictures of the stars for his daughter Avani, but never brought confidential technical documents home. 'Why is everyone in your team under so much strain?' Maitreyi asked each night. 'In space, a small error in calculation can change the outcome a very long way ahead,' he replied. 'There is excitement here, but excitement cannot replace measurement.'

Avani was now fourteen. In 2008 she had made a Moon out of paper; now she belonged to the science club at school and asked questions about the atmosphere of Mars, its distance from Earth and the orbits of spacecraft. A boy at school told her that science was too important a subject for girls and that they should study something else. She returned home thoroughly upset. 'Was your question any smaller than his?' Maitreyi asked. 'No.' 'Then why should you abandon your studies?' Niranjan had been listening. 'Science doesn't ask the gender of the person who asks a question,' he said. 'It asks whether the calculation is correct.' The words stayed with Avani.

One evening Niranjan received a letter from Shivnarayan in Darbhanga. The uncle who had been like a father to him wrote of a case concerning a Marudhar student's right to her name. He asked, 'When a technical system changes, what is the appropriate method of preserving earlier records while adding a new identity?' Niranjan wrote back that in scientific data repositories an original measurement was generally preserved, but a transparent history of corrections was attached to it. 'This is not a legal opinion,' he added carefully. 'But the integrity of a record and the truth of the present can be reconciled.' Shivnarayan sent a

copy of the letter to Revati. 'The scientific analogy is useful,' she said, 'but the court must determine the meaning of human rights in law.'

In July Manasvi finally received an admit card under an appropriate academic arrangement. She took her examination, though the university's final administrative decision about the name on her certificate was still pending. Binesari made kheer at home. 'Ma, this doesn't mean everything is over,' Manasvi said. 'I know,' Binesari smiled. 'But after so much struggle just to sit an examination, we're entitled to celebrate that first day.' Binesari did not ask to see her daughter in the newspaper. It gave her greater pleasure to see her come home after taking the examination.

Revati returned to the Delhi cricket trial. A formal communication concerning Dipendra Bhatia had arrived through his independent lawyer. He wished to provide the appropriate investigating authority, through the proper procedure, with an account of the financial events he had witnessed. Because of her duty to Raghav, Revati did not become Dipendra's personal adviser. But to assess a witness's statement the dates had to be checked. The date of a meeting in Shailesh Mahajan's office, the official travel record and the dates of the tournament invoices were at odds. Revati thought, 'If the young man was out of the country, the testimony placing him at the meeting is wrong. But the writing on an invoice could have been done before he went abroad. One fact does not answer two other questions in their entirety.'

One prosecution witness claimed that Dipendra had shown him a financial table at a meeting in Delhi. During cross-examination Revati asked, 'Had you known the young man beforehand?' 'I'd seen him two or three times.' 'On what basis do you remember the date of the meeting?' 'It's written in my notebook.' 'Was that entry made on the day, or later?' The witness became uncertain. The prosecutor intervened, saying that the original writing existed and could be examined. The judge allowed the defence questions within appropriate limits and left the notebook's authenticity to be considered with later evidence. Revati did not immediately denounce the witness as a liar or claim victory.

Outside, Padma, Raghav's mother, asked, 'Will this young man's trip abroad save my son?' 'The evidence against Raghav must be examined on its own footing,' Revati replied. 'An error in somebody else's statement doesn't end every accusation. But when the date in an important piece of testimony does not agree with the records, the difference must be made plain to the court.' Padma found no immediate relief in the answer. 'You all move so slowly,' she said. 'To move slowly can be unjust if we cause

needless delay,' Revati replied quietly. 'But to rush ahead without examination can be unjust too.'

The following week Noor Jatay published an article describing the stage of the cricket trial, the distinction between bail and the charge, and the testing of a witness's memory. Once again the editor wanted a more aggressive headline. Noor wrote explicitly that 'accused person' and 'convicted person' did not mean the same thing. Very few people read the article, but one of Raghav's college teachers put a copy on the noticeboard. 'If you're so careful in the news, readers will get bored,' a student said. 'If judicial caution seems dull,' the teacher replied, 'both the victim and the innocent pay the price of sensationalism.'

In August Kusum received the preliminary survey report on the Marudhar well. Lines on the two old maps did not align completely; years of use had also altered the condition of one narrow footpath. The expert said explicitly that ownership could not finally be determined from the available records alone. Ramdev was not angered by this caution. 'At least the paper now says clearly that it does not understand everything,' he said. Sharad Kothari of the educational trust wanted repairs to the hostel on the undisputed portion to begin promptly. Kusum did not presume she had authority to give permission, but asked her father. 'If there is no dispute over the land, why should I stand in the way of building a home for the children?' Ramdev said.

Naseema read the decision at a meeting of the women students. A group praised Ramdev's generosity. Kusum stopped them. 'He has acknowledged the limits of his rights. It isn't an act of charity. We must understand the distinction.' Manasvi listened from a seat at the back. She remembered the interim directions in her own case. To obtain a right was not to receive someone's favour; nor did exercising that right confer permission to erase another person's legitimate needs. In these small disputes across the campus, a new society was practising this difficult understanding.

Early in September, Avani's school organised a public discussion about Mangalyaan. Niranjan showed no images from restricted control rooms. Using only published material, he explained that since the launch of 5 November 2013 the spacecraft had completed stages of its interplanetary journey and was approaching Mars. A child asked, 'If something that's only a point in the sky can be reached from Earth, why can't a road be built from our village to its school?' Everyone laughed, but Niranjan grew serious. 'These are different tasks,' he said. 'Different institutions are responsible for solving them. But both require work, planning and

accountability.' On their way home Maitreyi repeated the child's question. 'Scientific achievement belongs to the people only when it can also listen to society's questions.'

The atmosphere in Bengaluru was different at dawn on 24 September. The decisive moment had come for Mangalyaan to enter orbit around Mars. Niranjan received information from colleagues that was publicly available, while his own team was occupied with specific technical responsibilities. People across the country waited by their radios and televisions. Avani was up before school. Maitreyi made tea, but the cups went cold. After a few moments of technical uncertainty, success was confirmed: an Indian spacecraft had reached Martian orbit. Niranjan exhaled. His eyes filled, but the first thing he said was, 'The success is recorded. Now the analysis of the data and the scientific work will continue.'

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan sat before the television. Revati telephoned. 'Babuji, have you managed to reach Niranjan?' 'Not yet,' he said. 'Let him do his work today. We'll congratulate him later.' From a corner of the veranda Amresh's son asked, 'Mars is very far away, isn't it?' 'Very far,' Shivnarayan replied. 'But thousands of people on Earth have work to do along the road that gets us there.' The boy asked again, 'Does a court travel so far too?' Shivnarayan smiled. 'A court's journey isn't measured in miles, my son. Sometimes even reaching a person's correct name is a very long journey.'

After Mangalyaan's success, a small science exhibition was held at Marudhar College. Beside her own picture of the sky, Saira displayed three documents marking her life from 2002 to 2014: a replacement issued by her institution for the certificate destroyed in the fire, evidence of admission to her degree course, and her library membership card. 'Why have you put all these in a science exhibition?' a student asked. 'In science, records are preserved and tested,' Saira replied. 'Our education too has a history of evidence. When documents aren't correct, even talent can be obstructed.' An elderly teacher visiting the exhibition said children's names had often been written in different ways in his day. Manasvi listened. She understood that a clerical mistake was not the same as a refusal to recognise identity, although in both cases the student might suffer the consequences.

Niranjan sent a short letter from Bengaluru. Rather than offer a scientific account of the successful mission, he described something his team had felt: 'When we check a number, our duty to keep the fact correct is greater than our desire to prove ourselves right. If a calculation

contains an error, what we need is evidence for the correction, not shame.' Shivnarayan forwarded the letter to Revati. She was then examining two certified registration records relating to Sehgal Sports Consultancy. Niranjan's words sounded familiar. One company's name resembled another's, but their registration numbers, dates of incorporation and addresses differed. If she treated the two as one and built an allegation on that basis, even the investigation of a possible real offence could be led down the wrong road.

Dipendra's independent lawyer, Vidyadhar Patil, sent Revati a formal letter requesting that the defence make no public statements prejudging the matter of Dipendra's name. Revati replied that her side was making no public allegation; it sought to examine the dates and documents available in court. The correspondence between the two lawyers was ordinary, but important. A boundary had to remain between the interests of a potential witness and an accused person's right to a defence. 'Do you believe the young man's account?' Shivnarayan asked. 'I haven't heard his account,' Revati replied. 'I examine the records before the court. I put a process of testing in the place of belief.'

In the first week of October, Manasvi received an incomplete response from Marudhar College's office. It said the temporary hold on her scholarship application had been lifted, but the university's separate procedure for issuing a final certificate under her corrected name was still pending. Manasvi gave Anurima a copy. 'We must tell the court precisely what relief has been granted,' the local lawyer said. 'We must also make clear what remains unfinished. It would not be proper to announce only a victory.' 'My final examination result may arrive in the meantime,' Manasvi said. 'What if it's issued in the old name?' 'Then we shall explain what has happened and seek appropriate directions,' Anurima replied. 'But we won't make a document treating an event that has not yet occurred as if it had happened.'

At the next High Court hearing, government counsel acknowledged that the scholarship office had removed its temporary hold. The university's lawyer said written guidelines for correcting names and gender identity in records were being prepared. Anurima asked when that process would be completed and when the student's result documents would be issued. 'The petitioner's difficulty concerns the present academic term,' the judge told the government side. 'A general policy would be welcome, but one student's papers must not remain suspended indefinitely.' On the basis of the necessary records, the court directed that an administrative decision be made within a fixed time,

while leaving the question of preserving the original admission register to the relevant institution's rules.

After the hearing, Binesari Devi asked her daughter, 'When will I have to give my testimony?' Manasvi laughed. 'Ma, this isn't a criminal trial; the court is reviewing administrative decisions. Not every witness has to stand in a witness box.' 'Whenever I hear the word court, I think of giving evidence,' Binesari said. 'Your voice matters to me,' Manasvi replied, 'but my right is not founded only on your acceptance. I speak for myself about who I am.' Binesari was quiet for a while. Then she said, 'I am your mother. I had to learn how to listen to you. I won't hide my mistake.'

One teacher at the college opposed the case. Changing names in institutional records, he argued, would weaken confidence in the examining body. Instead of debating him, Firdous Kaul asked a question. 'If a government certificate correcting a student's date of birth is issued, can an institution make a rule that preserves the history of the original entry while issuing a new certificate?' 'Yes, if there is such a rule,' the teacher said. 'Then rules are needed here too,' Firdous replied. 'But remember that an ordinary error in a date of birth and a person's gender identity are not the same kind of question. Human dignity cannot be discarded merely for the sake of making accounts match.' The teacher did not answer. The discussion was not over, but its language had changed.

That day Saira and Naseema put a public notice for students on the college wall. It listed the procedure for correcting names, help with examination forms and the official office where complaints could be registered. No one's private details were published. Manasvi insisted that the notice should not present her own name as its sole example. 'I want the next student who comes here,' she said, 'whether a woman or a man, to find a way of getting necessary papers corrected without having to go to court.' 'That's precisely why we need written institutional rules,' Naseema said. Students copied the notice into their notebooks.

The report on the limited survey of Ramdev Mandal's well also reached the subordinate court. The surveyor acknowledged that some lines on the older maps had faded with time, but current measurements and earlier testimony allowed two possible interpretations. Counsel for the trust presented its case, and counsel for the farming family presented theirs. The judge did not immediately make a final determination of the boundary; another date was fixed to consider supplementary questions for the surveyor and evidence of the old footpath's use. Outside the

courthouse Ramdev's young grandson asked, 'Grandfather, did you win?' 'The court is still listening,' Ramdev answered. 'When the hearing isn't finished, there's no call to shout about victory.'

For a few days Shivnarayan's health was poor in Darbhanga. Revati urged him to rest, but he was putting the pages of Neelkanth's old file back into order. 'Look at the mark on this page,' he told his daughter. 'In 2000, one name belonged to a man who had died. We wanted to know who had written it. Now I hear about Manasvi's name. In the first case we had to investigate the misuse of a recorded name; in the second, a person's right to correct one. How many different questions of justice can live inside that single word, name!' 'That's why the work of the courts doesn't follow a single crime forever, Babuji,' Revati said. 'The relationship between paper and human beings takes a new form in each age.' Shivnarayan laughed. 'You write that story. I'll keep the courthouse ledgers for now.'

One evening Noor Jatay was arguing with her editor. An article in a foreign newspaper had praised India's scientific achievement with Mangalyaan while also mentioning poverty in the country. A local paper reduced it to an anti-India attack; another printed only the celebration of the scientific achievement. 'Both facts can exist together,' Noor said. 'A great achievement in space and inequality here on Earth. But if we quote a report, we must read its actual words and quote them accurately.' 'Are you going to write about Mangalyaan or about the courts?' her editor asked. 'Both,' Noor replied, 'but I won't imagine a secret financial connection between them without evidence.'

Noor's article mentioned the small science exhibition at Avani's school. Avani asked her father whether it had been right for her name to appear in the newspaper. 'If you asked a question at a public event and the journalist gave the proper context, that's fine,' Niranjan said. 'But your consent and privacy must also be respected.' Maitreyi added, 'Preserve your questions, whether people praise you or laugh at you.' Avani wrote in her notebook: 'Scientists who reach Mars keep changing their questions. Even after writing one answer in an examination, I should understand why the question was asked.' In those words lay the growing scientific confidence of her generation.

In the first week of November the university issued Manasvi's corrected statement of results. It bore her current name, while the connection to her earlier admission number remained protected in confidential administrative records. The scholarship office also issued its decision: the cause of the unannounced hold had been removed, though actual

disbursement would follow a separate administrative procedure. Manasvi went home and showed her mother the result. Binesari held the page against her breast for a long time. 'So nothing can stop you studying now?' she asked. 'Many other obstacles may come, Ma,' Manasvi said. 'But I am here, in this document. That is a great thing.'

Revati read the final status report in the student's case. On the information available to the court, the principal relief sought by the individual petitioner had been obtained, but wider questions of institutional rules remained for administrative and legal consideration. Anurima said a proper account of compliance would be submitted to the court so that needless litigation did not continue. 'Can I do something for other students?' Manasvi asked. 'You can write about your experience, assist other students, and make lawful representations for the policy that is needed,' Anurima replied. 'But do not assume the right to speak for someone else without their consent.' Manasvi accepted this as a new responsibility.

Meanwhile, the source of an old financial letter in the cricket trial became clearer. Dipendra's official travel record supported his claim that he had been outside India on a particular day. But the possibility remained that he had written on the tournament invoice before going abroad. The prosecution acknowledged an error in one witness's date for the meeting and sought an opportunity to produce additional evidence. The court directed that copies of the new material be supplied to the defence. 'An error has been found,' Revati said, 'but no one needs to conceal it. The prosecution will clarify its account and we shall test it.' She did not turn the event into publicity for a victory.

At the courthouse entrance Dipendra and Raghav unexpectedly came face to face. Dipendra stopped for a moment, and Raghav tried to recognise him. Neither spoke. Vidyadhar Patil, Dipendra's independent lawyer, led him away in another direction. Arunima reminded Raghav that informal conversation with a possible witness was inappropriate in a pending case. Raghav lowered his head. He remembered the days on his college playing field. Whether he had been involved in a crime was still being examined; but keeping silent outside the courtroom had become a separate and difficult test for him each day.

The hands of the old wall clock in Shivnarayan's home moved at their quiet pace. Revati gave him a brief account of the Dipendra matter without disclosing details of any potentially confidential consultation. 'If a mistake is found in a date, one piece of testimony is weakened,' Shivnarayan said. 'That does not make everyone innocent or everyone

guilty. Two companies are not one merely because their names resemble each other. And a record may look correct without its meaning being correct. Remember those three things.' 'Now add a fourth,' Revati answered. 'A person speaks for herself about her identity. She cannot be imprisoned inside a mistaken entry.' Shivnarayan nodded with humility.

At the beginning of December a small gathering took place in the Marudhar College library. Students had arranged publicly released images of Mangalyaan, science books and literary magazines in several Indian languages. Saira read a poem translated from Gujarati into Maithili about the memories of a family that had lost its home. Kusum read a short essay of her own on water for the fields. Manasvi spoke of her experiences of identity and education. Naseema had made clear beforehand that the meeting was not merely a celebration of a court decision, but a collective reflection on everyone's dignity within an educational institution. No person's private story would be published without permission.

At the end of the meeting Firdous Kaul was attending to an old computer when she explained digital records to the students. 'When a name changes, the history should be preserved,' she said. 'But preservation of history is no excuse for handing out someone's personal information to everyone. If an institution later contracts out its record-keeping to an outside company, it will need written lines of responsibility and restricted access.' Kusum recorded the point in the students' meeting book. She had no idea how large Marudhar's digital systems would grow over the next decade, or how these same questions would return in a new form.

Another date had been fixed in the land dispute involving Ramdev's family. On the way home Kusum told her father, 'Manasvi's results have been corrected. I hope she won't face further obstacles to studying now.' 'That's very good,' Ramdev said. 'But what about the decision on our footpath?' 'Still pending. The court will ask further questions about the surveyor's two answers.' Ramdev gave a quiet laugh. 'Making one student's name right is work for the country too, and so is setting right a farmer's path. Not every task is finished in a single day.' That evening the cattle walking along the path seemed taller than their shadows. The well water was still, but the time of the dispute was passing.

In Bengaluru, Avani had finished writing her annual school essay on the success of Mangalyaan. 'Why have you written that the study of possible failure lies behind success?' Maitreyi asked. 'Babu says the calculations were repeated at every stage,' Avani replied. 'If we never look

for mistakes, how can we trust that we're right?' Maitreyi smiled. 'That works in human dealings too. You need courage to let what you take for truth face questions.' Niranjan read the essay and placed a hand on Avani's head. Mars was far away, but the first lessons of scientific thinking were being learned at the family table.

On the last day of December Revati travelled home from Delhi to Darbhanga. Looking through the train window at dry fields and the lines of canals, she remembered the people of the past year: Manasvi, Kusum, Naseema, Raghav, Noor, Dipendra and Avani. One had found relief through an order, another's case remained unfinished, another's skill had earned greater respect. In her small notebook Revati wrote: 'Law is a disciplined path in the search for truth, but the whole life of truth cannot fit inside a legal order.' She closed the notebook. That night, in her father's house, a few old case files and new manuscripts lay on the same table.

Shivnarayan was again looking at page forty-five of the old ledger, the disputed writing on which had never been completely resolved in the first Darbhanga case. It was a copy of a historical court exhibit, not confidential material from a new inquiry. 'Babuji, have you kept this page all these years?' Revati asked. 'Not because all the cases are parts of one conspiracy,' he answered. 'Because one page taught me something: whoever makes an accusation must provide evidence; whoever conducts a defence must respect the limits of the facts. And whoever seeks justice must have a road open to the court.'

Outside, Amresh's son arrived at the doorway carrying a cricket ball. 'Babuji, where is Mangalyaan now?' he asked Shivnarayan. 'Circling Mars,' Shivnarayan said. 'Niranjan will be able to tell you more accurately.' 'And the court files?' the boy asked again. Revati laughed. 'They're all in their proper places. Some have been decided; some hearings will go on.' The child picked up his ball and ran outside. The sunlight was fading. Within the walls the law books stood quietly; outside the children wanted to invent new rules for a game of their own. Revati watched from the window. She understood that the distances between planets could be calculated, but each generation would have to work afresh to shorten the distance of respect between one human being and another.

Chapter 19 — The Sentence Written on the Screen

2015: Jodhpur, Jaipur, Delhi and Darbhanga

In the second week of January, a notice appeared on the door of the library at Marudhar College. It said that the room housing old manuscripts would remain closed because rainwater was seeping through the roof. At first the students regarded it as an ordinary notice of repairs. But three weeks passed after the room had been shut, and neither had the roof been repaired nor had arrangements been made to bring the books out. Vivek Meghwal, a final-year student, needed two books from that room for his research. The librarian refused to give him the key. Vivek entered his name in the complaints register. He had no idea that this small entry would one day give rise to arguments in the High Court about the provenance of digital records, a citizen's speech and the authority of an educational institution.

Vivek came from a small village east of Jodhpur. His father worked as a stone carver; his mother divided her days between agricultural labour and the household. When an instalment of his scholarship failed to arrive on time, Vivek had given up his rented room and moved to a shared bed in the hostel. He searched the second-hand book market for textbooks, and in the evenings earned part of his food expenses by teaching mathematics to younger students. He had no desire to become famous in politics; the library table was more familiar to him than the platform of the students' union. But in January the hostel's water supply stopped, the dining hall accounts were not posted on time, and the details of expenditure approved for library repairs remained unclear. He therefore combined all three questions in a single written representation and submitted it to the student welfare office.

In the office, a clerk named Jagmohan picked up an old file and said, 'Your representation has been received. Wait for a reply.' 'How many days?' Vivek asked. Jagmohan gave no answer. Outside, Manasvi, Naseema and Kusum were sitting with the other students in the veranda. Because of the correction made to Manasvi's academic record the previous year, the students regarded her as someone experienced in drafting written applications. She told Vivek, 'Be precise about the number and basis of your demands. Write what you have to say in such a way that no person's name is ridiculed.' Kusum advised him to set out the hostel's water problem separately. Naseema said, 'If there is no reply, we'll ask what the

next procedure is. First, keep a record.' Vivek made two copies of his application, obtained a receipt stamp on a separate sheet, and went home.

That night Vivek wrote a short note on his old computer, mingling Maithili and Rajasthani words. He had little practice writing in his mother tongue, but at Kusum's urging he made the language plainer. He added the final sentence himself: 'Keeping the library door shut will not extinguish the fire of questions; it is the fire of a longing to open books, not to burn anyone's home.' Earlier in the note he had asked for the public disclosure of scholarship details, dirty water flowing from the taps and the expenditure sanctioned for repairs. He posted it to a small social-media group of students he knew and sat down to study. He did not imagine that by dawn someone would begin trying to change the meaning of his words.

The next day an image was circulating on mobile phones outside the hostel. At the top were Vivek's name and profile picture; beneath them, in red letters, were the words: 'If the door remains closed, there will be fire.' The rest of the original note had disappeared. Two students surrounded him. 'Did you threaten them?' they asked. Vivek opened his phone and showed them the entire text. Some accepted his explanation; others said that the image was on everyone's phone and could not have become a falsehood so quickly. By evening, a harsher message about setting fire to an office had circulated from an anonymous account. Students linked this anonymous message to Vivek's note, although none of them possessed evidence that the two had been written by the same person.

Mahendra Lodha, secretary of the college disciplinary committee, issued a show-cause notice to Vivek. It accused him of disturbing student peace, creating fear for the safety of property and diminishing the institution's reputation. A one-page image was attached; the complete original note was not. Vivek stopped short when he read the letter. His examinations were three months away; if he had to leave the hostel, studying would become difficult. He met Firdous Kaul, who taught computer science. 'Do not rush to answer after looking only at the image attached to the allegation,' she said. 'Keep a secure copy of the original material that is yours. Ask where the image that has been circulated came from. And do not claim as yours a name that is not yours.'

In her office, Firdous made a note of the time entered in Vivek's attendance register, but did not take possession of his phone. She understood that a teacher's inquiry and a forensic examination conducted according to law were different matters. Vivek put together a

written record of his original note, the time of its publication and the messages available to his friends. Kusum, Manasvi and Naseema each stated separately that they had seen the original sentence. None, however, had direct knowledge of every anonymous message. 'I will write what I saw,' Naseema said, 'and not what I did not see.' Kusum repeated her words. Outside, a small dispute among students had already turned into a question for the wider movement.

At his first appearance before Mahendra Lodha, Vivek showed him the original note. 'The words in your notice are not the whole of what I wrote,' he said. 'The institution's safety is my responsibility,' Lodha replied. 'Safety is a legitimate concern,' Vivek said, 'but the person making an accusation must look at the evidence.' The committee accepted his reply, but the following day issued an order temporarily barring him from the hostel. The letter said the allegations were still being examined, yet the examinations were drawing near. Vivek took his books, clothes and little padlock and left. His roommate Aman remained looking at an empty bed.

Kusum arranged temporary accommodation for Vivek in a rented room belonging to someone known to her family. That night his father said over the telephone, 'Everyone in the village is asking why you were thrown out.' Vivek's voice grew unsteady. 'Babu, I did not write anything about burning anyone's home.' 'I believe you,' his father said. 'But how will we get rid of the paper the college has sent?' 'First I'll give them the truth in writing,' Vivek replied. 'After that I'll follow whatever procedure is available.' When the call ended, he reread the original sentence in his note for the first time since the dispute. The image of fire had seemed to him an apt expression of his anger. Now he understood that the force of a metaphor could be turned against its author too.

Revati was in Jaipur for a hearing in an old land dispute when Kusum telephoned. She first told her that the report on the limited survey of Ramdev Mandal's footpath was moving forward; then she recounted everything that had happened to Vivek. 'Are the institution's rules, the show-cause letter and the written reply all available?' Revati asked. 'Yes, but we don't know the original source of the image.' 'Then before rushing to court, seek interim relief from the institution's competent appellate authority,' Revati said. 'And don't yet declare it a forgery. Whether the image has been cropped or altered is a matter for investigation.' She advised Kusum to prepare a separate written representation as well.

By the beginning of February the divisions among Marudhar's students had deepened. One side said that students could not be given unrestricted licence for indiscipline. The other said that Vivek had been expelled from the hostel for asking questions. Kusum kept her distance from both proclamations. 'The library roof really does leak; that is an administrative problem,' she said. 'What Vivek's words mean is another question; whether the image is authentic is a third.' At a student meeting the three questions were put into separate resolutions. Someone proposed surrounding the office, but Naseema argued that threats and pushing would weaken Vivek's case. The meeting agreed on a peaceful representation and a request for information.

Meanwhile in Delhi, the Supreme Court was nearing its final consideration of an important case. Across the country there was debate about whether the broad and vague wording of Section 66A of the Information Technology Act allowed excessive control over citizens' expression online. Revati was reading the public account of the proceedings, but there was as yet no police allegation against Vivek under that section. The Marudhar dispute had arisen from a disciplinary order made by an educational institution. 'A rule does not become applicable merely because someone has heard its name,' Revati told her assistant. 'The present dispute must be tested against natural justice and the basis of the written decision. Constitutional principles may supply context later.'

In the first week of March, Manasvi returned to the university office. Her experience of getting her academic identity corrected the year before had taught her patience. 'Please tell the student where the image attached to the show-cause notice came from,' she asked Lodha. 'The committee examines material at its discretion,' he replied. 'Let the committee examine it,' Manasvi said. 'But the person asked to answer an allegation must also have a chance to understand the full meaning of that material.' Lodha was silent for a moment. That day he had received confidential information that the anonymous threatening message might have come from a group outside the campus. But its source remained uncertain, and he did not think it right to present such vague information to the students as evidence.

At a small study session, Firdous laid three sheets of paper before the students: a printout of the complete original note, the cropped image in circulation and the text of an anonymous threat. 'What would we need to prove that the same author produced all three?' she asked. The students offered various answers: a name, a picture, a telephone, a time. 'Every indication has limits to its reliability,' Firdous said. 'The presence of a name is not conclusive proof of identity. Similar-looking images are not

conclusive proof of a common source. Nor can the discovery of an objectionable statement justify declaring someone's ordinary criticism an act of violence.' She cautioned them that this was an exercise in digital literacy, not a forensic report prepared for legal proceedings.

On the morning of 24 March 2015 news arrived of the Supreme Court's judgment. In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, Section 66A had been declared unconstitutional. Revati obtained and read the original judgment. She saw that the Court had addressed permissible restrictions on expression separately; its conclusions on Section 69A and the responsibilities of intermediary platforms were not identical. In their enthusiasm she did not tell the students that no one could now be held accountable for anything written online. Instead she wrote: 'The principle frees a citizen's voice from unnecessary fear. Real threats, defamation and lawful questions of discipline still require their own distinct examination.'

When news of the ruling reached the student group, Shashank Tripathi, who had publicly spoken in favour of discipline, looked again at the cropped image on his phone. He remembered the severity of his first words. He went to Vivek's room. When the door opened, he said, 'I called you guilty without hearing the whole account. But I still want to know how the first message spread.' Vivek invited him to sit. 'My own writing does use fire as a metaphor,' he acknowledged. 'But that fire was not meant to burn homes. If you ask me questions, I'll answer. How can I accept responsibility, though, for words I did not write?' Shashank read the original note with his own eyes for the first time. He resolved to retract his earlier accusation publicly, but made no claim to know who was ultimately responsible.

One of the college administrators, Vibhuti Bhatnagar, was troubled by the dispute. His concern for the institution's reputation was genuine; he was also thinking about the possible decision of a donor to the new library building. 'News has gone out that there is an atmosphere of violence on campus,' he said at a meeting. 'First let order be restored.' 'Will that order last without an inquiry into the truth?' Firdous asked. 'I'm not presuming Vivek guilty,' Vibhuti replied. 'But while we bring him back to his studies, the institution must not be humiliated.' 'It is not right to stop a living student's future in order to preserve the honour of a building,' Kusum said. The meeting ended without a decision, but for the first time Bhatnagar requested the underlying material on which the disciplinary order had been based.

Noor Jatay arrived in Jodhpur. Years of reporting on the 2013 cricket case had made her wary of people who saw only half of a record. In Vivek's case she examined the college's written order first, and then Vivek's original statement and the cropped image. A local correspondent told her, 'Write it as a story of colleges suppressing every voice.' 'That too would be an unverified conclusion,' Noor replied. 'Whether the college failed to repair the roof can be checked. There is an order excluding Vivek. Whether anybody made a threat requires different evidence.' With his family's consent she discussed the crisis affecting his education, but did not publish their private address.

That evening two tables in the hostel dining hall became the scene of a bitter exchange. Aman said that with Vivek's bed empty, the cost of the room had risen. Raghaven, a friend of Shashank's, said that inflammatory language had to be opposed. 'And if someone else made the actual threat?' Manasvi asked him. Raghaven fell silent. Older tensions of caste and wealth ran between the students as well. Some regarded Vivek's poverty as a weakness; others wanted to make him a student leader. Vivek was not present in the dining hall, yet decisions were being made in his name. On the wall Naseema wrote a line: 'Give the person you are talking about a chance to speak.'

At the beginning of April, Vivek's application reached the university's appellate authority. His principal requests were that the temporary hostel ban be lifted, his admission to the examinations assured and the complete underlying record of the charges provided to him. The authority called for a report from the institution. As an immediate measure, it directed that Vivek be allowed into the general section of the library to prepare for his examinations, while the hostel question remained pending. This limited relief gave Vivek a little breathing room. The rent on his room, however, was a heavy burden on his father. He resumed teaching mathematics in the evenings, while his friends assumed that the arrival of an official order had made all his problems disappear.

Revati already had in her office a copy of the Supreme Court's 2014 decision in *Anvar P. V. v. P. K. Basheer*. She read its central point and explained it to her assistant Manju: special legal rules govern proof of the source and the manner of production when a printout of an electronic record is tendered as evidence. But a college disciplinary committee is not a court, nor does the High Court decide every fresh factual dispute in full in writ proceedings. Vivek's case would first show that the institution had acted without examining the material underlying its decision, or without giving the student a fair opportunity to reply. If detailed forensic

examination became necessary, it would proceed through the appropriate mechanism. Once Manasvi understood that distinction, she revised the wording of the application.

Firdous obtained a copy of an authorised communication from the college office. It identified the person who had supplied the image to the disciplinary secretary only as a 'student representative'. No written statement from that person was attached. Firdous wrote to Bhatnagar asking that the institution clarify who had submitted the image that had harmed the student, when it was received, and how it had been kept in the institutional record. Bhatnagar answered that the university was examining its departmental material. Firdous gave the student a copy of her letter. She did not conclude that the secretary had deliberately altered the image; administrative carelessness was still possible.

Meanwhile, the old Marudhar footpath dispute returned to the court list. Kusum, representing Ramdev's family, attended on one hearing date carrying the notice of Vivek's hearing as well. Revati smiled. 'Two different legal questions in a single day: the path to the water in a well and a student's path to the books.' 'A sheet of paper can be used to block either one,' Kusum answered. Revati explained that the laws, courts and possible outcomes in the two matters were different. 'Even so,' Kusum said, 'a person gets lost in the shadow of the papers.' Revati wrote the sentence in her notebook. The limited technical examination of the footpath was not joined to Vivek's case, but in Kusum's life the two responsibilities continued side by side.

The drains in the hostel were deteriorating. One night, during a storm, water entered two rooms. Vivek no longer lived there, but his friend Aman telephoned him. 'The question you asked still hasn't been answered.' 'Before taking pictures of the drain, send the authorities written notice,' Vivek said. 'List the books that got wet in the rooms.' 'After everything, you're still thinking of the office route?' Aman asked in surprise. 'If something is true, follow a way of proving it,' Vivek replied. 'After becoming a victim of a false picture, I won't give up making a true picture.' This resolve did not extinguish his anger; he was learning to turn it into work.

Vivek's first examination fell at the end of May. At the entrance, the guard paused over his admit card: on an old list relating to the hostel, Vivek's name had been marked in red ink. Vivek panicked. Naseema hurried to the academic office and returned with a written order making it clear that he was not barred from the examination. The guard read it and let him pass. When Vivek took his seat in the examination hall, the

first question was familiar, but his hand trembled for fifteen minutes. He pressed his right hand against his left palm and then began writing. Outside, Naseema was thinking of how months of a student's work could be endangered by a single ambiguous mark on a piece of paper.

After the examination Vivek telephoned his mother. She had returned from the fields. 'Did you manage your paper?' she asked. 'Yes, Ma. Some of it was hard, but I wrote my answers.' 'Will the college give you a room again?' 'The hearing is still pending.' His mother said quietly, 'I don't understand the rules of the city. But whoever wrote the paper that stops your education ought to see your home once.' Vivek was silent. He heard more exhaustion than anger in her words. He wondered whether, if he had written about his mother's labour in the fields instead of a metaphor about fire, someone could have cut out and changed the meaning of that as well.

One day Noor Jatay showed the draft of her report not to Revati but to her editor, Faheem. 'You say the source of the image is disputed,' Faheem said. 'If the original post is available, where is the dispute?' 'Anyone can see the original text,' Noor answered. 'But I still don't know who made the cropped image that reached the office.' 'Then don't write that the maker of the image is a criminal.' 'I haven't written that. I've written only that the original source must be examined before a decision is made.' When the story appeared, some readers praised Noor's courage, others called her biased. Instead of answering reactions all day, she preserved copies of the underlying material.

In the last week of June the administrative appeal was decided. The authority found that the full original statement had not been annexed to the show-cause notice, and that no clear limit had been placed on the duration of the restriction. It directed that Vivek be allowed to return to the hostel, while leaving the institution free to reconsider the disciplinary allegations through a proper fresh process. The letter did not declare Vivek innocent; it changed the earlier order because of procedural defects. Vivek obtained relief, but after his examinations he had only a month left to spend in the hostel. He wondered how much it meant to receive permission to re-enter the home from which one had been expelled when the lost time could never return.

Mahendra Lodha read the appellate order with a feeling of unease. He had become a university employee in his youth, and many times listening to students' complaints had seemed to him a waste of time. Now he read every sentence in the order. 'We've lost the appeal,' a colleague said. 'The decision means that the procedure we adopted was inadequate,'

Lodha replied. 'Whether the student is guilty will be examined again. But I accept that the first proceedings were defective.' His colleague was astonished. The admission did not immediately restore Vivek's trust, yet it opened a small path towards self-examination within the official himself.

At the beginning of July, Marudhar's executive committee decided that the new hearing of the student matter should be held before suitable persons. Firdous, who had helped Vivek during the first inquiry, did not join the decision-making panel. She kept her role as an adviser distinct. The committee included a law faculty member, a woman professor and the student welfare officer. Vivek was given revised particulars of the allegation, but was also shown an old confidential note containing the word 'fire', without an identified author. 'How can I answer this,' Vivek asked, 'when none of you can tell me who wrote it?' 'We shall consider the weight it deserves as evidence,' the chairperson replied. 'Explain the meaning of the sentence you yourself wrote.'

Vivek reread his first letter. He acknowledged that his language had been sharp when he demanded disclosure of the institution's expenditure. 'I wrote that closing the door to books would not put out the fire of questions,' he said. 'I accept that fire as a metaphor may frighten some people; that much may have been a failure of judgment in my language. But I did not threaten to burn the building, nor did I incite anyone to do so.' 'And if someone understood your words as a threat of fire?' the chairperson asked. 'I would ask that person to read the whole sentence. They have the right to understand it, but a claim against me must not be accepted without evidence.' Silence fell among the student representatives at the hearing.

Professor Devyani Rathore asked, 'What documents support the questions you raised about the hostel water, library expenditure and scholarship?' Vivek placed before her three representations bearing receipt stamps. 'These are the basis of my complaints. They contain no personal insult.' Devyani examined each document. Lodha explained that approval for repairs had been granted but the building materials had arrived late. The chairperson observed that a delay in repairs did not in itself entitle a student to use violent language, but neither did it justify evading questions about the institution's expenditure. Through the open window, the hot air of the grounds entered the dark afternoon. An ordinary student's complaints now occupied the centre of a legal discussion.

Shashank was called as a witness. He admitted that he had first seen the cropped image on a friend's phone, and could not remember for certain who had sent it to that friend. 'On what basis, then, did you publicly say that Vivek had threatened to set a fire?' the chairperson asked. 'I took the image to be the complete sentence,' Shashank answered. Vivek did not look towards him. 'Later I read the whole sentence,' Shashank continued. 'My first conclusion was wrong.' 'Acknowledging a wrong conclusion matters,' the chairperson said. 'But we must still examine the source.' After the hearing Shashank apologised to Vivek. Vivek did not promise forgiveness, but he listened.

Then an unexpected letter arrived. Kanak Sethi, who ran an informal page called *Student Information Mirror*, wrote that he had made a short image for his first report because Vivek's complete text was too long. He maintained that he had not intended to change its meaning. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that removing the words 'not to burn anyone's home' had created confusion. The letter made no admission that he had created the anonymous threatening message. The committee summoned Kanak in person. 'I wanted a headline that would be popular,' he said. 'And when popularity changed the meaning,' Professor Devyani asked, 'who suffered the harm?' Kanak could not answer.

Kanak's mistake was real, but there was still no basis for treating him as the author of the entire anonymous threat. Firdous laid particular emphasis on the distinction. A new student said that the account carrying the threat had been created outside the campus; another suspected a rival student faction. 'Look for evidence behind your conjectures,' Firdous told them all. 'If an act takes on the character of a crime, the competent authority must investigate it. A student meeting is not a court to pass judgment on someone's name.' That evening Kusum wrote in her room: 'The difference between two images changed one person's life. But in our eagerness to discover the cause, we must not ruin the life of another innocent person.'

The following week Revati had to go to Delhi in connection with the old cricket case. Raghav Mishra's defence had requested a clear copy of the records concerning Dipendra Bhatia's travel abroad. A prosecution witness corrected an earlier date in his account. The trial judge directed that copies of the material be supplied to both sides. 'In court, an excised sentence and a wrong date can both be dangerous,' Revati told her colleague Arunima. 'But their consequences depend on the evidence in that particular case.' 'Is your student dispute taking the same course?' Arunima asked. 'That case is not about determining criminal guilt,' Revati replied, 'but about fairness in a disciplinary decision and the

verification of records. The same lesson takes different forms under different laws.'

Noor Jatay met Revati as she left the cricket hearing. She asked whether the original source of Vivek's image had been found. 'Kanak's partial admission has clarified one stage in the making of the cropped image,' Revati said, 'but the person behind the threatening message remains unknown.' 'Should I publish a correction?' Noor asked. 'Decide that for yourself on the basis of your facts. If you want legal advice, I'll give it, but I'm not your editor.' In her next report Noor included Kanak's admission, Vivek's own reconsideration of his language and the administration's incomplete investigation. A simple headline such as 'Vivek wholly innocent, administration wholly guilty' seemed wrong to her.

Meanwhile, repairs finally began at the university's main library. Workers were removing the old plaster from the ceiling. Kusum visited the building site and noticed that the slope for draining water had been laid in the wrong direction. Her father's dispute over the land around his well had already taught her the importance of drainage. She prepared a short technical report, which an engineering lecturer checked and signed. Instead of bringing the repairs to a halt, the new report led to a correction in the method of work. 'I wrote about fire,' Vivek said with a smile. 'You put the water on the right path.' 'Writing about fire makes people afraid,' Kusum answered. 'Changing the course of water saves books. They're two different ways of doing things.'

In August the internal committee issued its written findings. It noted the sharpness of Vivek's original note, but held that there was insufficient basis to establish that he had written the alleged violent threat. It acknowledged that the first image had been incomplete and that a severe hostel restriction had been imposed on that basis without proper procedure. Vivek was nevertheless given general advice to exercise care in public discourse. He felt relief when he read the letter. But the next instalment of his scholarship remained blocked: in the department's computer register, the flag 'disciplinary matter pending' had not been removed. A new crisis opened between the decision and its implementation.

'If the committee has not established the threat against me, why is this mark still here?' Vivek asked at the office. Jagmohan examined the old file. 'A copy of the new order hasn't reached the scholarship department.' 'Then from which door to which door must I carry the paper?' Vivek asked. Jagmohan handed him a form. For the first time Vivek felt anger

surge through him in earnest. He resisted the desire to tear the letter to pieces, and telephoned Naseema. 'Have you obtained a receipt stamp?' she asked. 'Submit a written request that the departments themselves send the next communication. If they don't listen, an appeal is still open.' Vivek added another page to his file.

This time Revati prepared a narrowly framed writ petition in the High Court. Its principal requests were to remove the blockage on the scholarship and to ensure due procedure under the court's directions. She did not ask the court to conduct a new and complete trial of the facts underlying the original disciplinary allegation. Attached to the petition were copies of Vivek's original note, the first cropped image, the initial order, the appellate relief and the later committee's findings. Questions concerning the unidentified author of the anonymous threat were described as unresolved. 'To write that we know what we do not know,' Revati warned her assistant, 'is one of the greatest weaknesses in advocacy.'

Registering the petition in the Jaipur court complex, Vivek was frightened for the first time by the scale of his own case. An ordinary hostel dispute had reached the High Court. Shivnarayan telephoned Revati. 'If a route to relief is still open within the institution, make that clear to the court. The High Court is not the first court for taking evidence.' 'We're asking for enforcement of the relief given on appeal and for its effect on the scholarship decision,' Revati answered. 'The institution has admitted its responsibility, but the register has not been corrected.' 'Good. Keep the question as narrow as the court needs to resolve it.' Revati revised the final paragraph of the petition.

At the September hearing, counsel for the college initially submitted that administrative mistakes involving a student could be remedied within the institution. 'Why, then, has the petitioner's scholarship remained blocked until now?' the judge asked. Counsel explained that the departmental communication had been delayed. Revati produced the date of the appellate order and the receipt for the new application lodged with the scholarship department. The judge observed that the institution's two statements were not mutually inconsistent, but implementation of the decision had been needlessly delayed. There was a limited discussion of the public obligations of an aided educational institution. The court called upon the respondent to file an affidavit specifying dates, reasons and the decision expected. This was not a final judgment on the entire dispute.

Outside court Vivek asked, 'Did we win today?' 'Today the court asked the institution for an answer,' Revati said. 'That isn't a final conclusion of victory or defeat.' 'What will happen to the image someone altered?' 'The incompleteness of the first image came before the committee. The authorship of the anonymous threat is a separate question. If someone makes a particular criminal complaint, it will be investigated by a separate process. This writ concerns the scholarship and the integrity of the relevant records.' Vivek nodded, though the boundaries were hard for him to accept. He wanted every hurt arising from the same event to be set down in a single order; the court's procedures did not follow that wish.

Back in Marudhar, Kusum recounted the hearing to her father. 'In my footpath case,' Ramdev said, 'for a long time the court would ask for an answer to one question and I would want to tell it about the suffering of a lifetime.' 'Does that mean the court is small?' Kusum asked. 'The court isn't small. Its power rests upon the question brought to it in the papers. We must speak our minds in society too.' For the first time Kusum heard her father explain the matter so simply. Water from the family well still reached the fields along a restricted route; resolution of that problem was scheduled for a separate hearing.

The college's report acknowledged administrative reasons for the delay in the scholarship. The department had indeed removed the adverse mark from its computer register, but said that a fresh approval would be needed to release the payment previously withheld. At the next hearing, counsel presented a definite timetable for payment. Revati made sure that Vivek would receive a copy of the written communication. The judge recorded the institution's report and assurance, adding that the petitioner could seek an appropriate remedy under the rules if there was further delay. The court neither imposed a fresh penalty nor pronounced an acquittal in respect of the original disciplinary allegations. Through this process Vivek began to obtain the principal personal relief he had sought.

Vivek's former roommate Aman was pleased at the decision, but had a different question. 'Have we at least got the details of the library repairs?' 'The roof has been repaired,' Vivek replied. 'But the full account of the expenditure still hasn't been put up on the office noticeboard.' 'Then will we write another post?' Aman asked. Vivek laughed briefly. 'We will. But first we'll raise the original question at a meeting. We'll try to keep everything we write complete. If someone cuts it, that's a different problem. Fear isn't a reason to stop asking questions.' Shashank came to the meeting too. He admitted his earlier false accusation and read aloud

the complete original statement before the students. Noor Jatay made a short news item of this public correction of a mistake.

Kanak Sethi appeared at the office to answer a separate disciplinary notice from the university. The committee examined the limits of his admission: he had shortened the image, but there was no proof that he had composed the anonymous threat. 'I wanted this clipping to make me famous,' Kanak said. 'Later, when the accusation of violence began, I was afraid to tell the truth.' 'Do you realise,' Devyani asked, 'that because of your fear another person lost his place in the hostel?' Kanak fell silent. The disciplinary decision directed him to issue a public correction and enter an explanation in the institution's records. Any other conduct that might attract a penalty under the applicable rules was left for separate examination. Vivek did not demand revenge at the hearing.

There was still no confirmed identity behind the anonymous account from which the explicit threat to burn the office had been sent. A complaint had been forwarded to the competent authority, but the university did not record in its decision that either Kanak or Vivek had written the message. 'Leaving some questions unanswered is not cowardice when the means of verification are not yet available,' Firdous told the students. 'But people want answers,' one student replied. 'Wanting an answer does not create evidence.' The severity of her own words echoed in Firdous's mind as well, for new rumours on campus were casting suspicion on new people every week.

In October the Marudhar University library fully reopened. On the first day, students entered the old manuscript room slowly. The smell of the newly repaired ceiling mingled with the wood of the cupboards and the dust of books, creating a strangely familiar atmosphere. Vivek requested the two books his research had left unfinished. The librarian entered his name in the register and smiled. 'The door is open now.' 'May it stay open. That's all,' Vivek replied. Sitting at a reading table, he remembered the first complaint he had submitted in January. As he turned the pages, he saw a note left in the margin by an earlier student: 'Have the courage to ask questions.' The unknown student's name was not there, but the words had survived.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan was arranging his old case files. Revati told him the year's events over the telephone, almost chapter by chapter. 'Whom did the court find to be in the wrong?' he asked. 'Failures of due procedure and delays in payment were corrected,' Revati replied. 'The meaning of the original statement and the author of the anonymous message remained questions for separate inquiry.' 'You have shown more

patience in this than your father did,' Shivnarayan said. 'When I was young, I wanted one decision to bring every matter to an end.' Revati laughed. 'The forty-fifth page of your first ledger case is still unanswered.' 'That page never made me stop asking questions,' Shivnarayan replied, 'but I never made evidence against anyone out of imagination.'

That year Revati had come to feel a new kind of responsibility. In 2000 she had been observing the court veranda; in 2015 she was trying to find a way between the failures of an institution's administration and the injury suffered by a young person. On one side was the college's autonomy, on the other the right to expression; on one side the reliability of an image, on the other public safety; on one side a student's accountability for his words, on the other the proportionality of the administration's decision. A complete victory for either side might have made an easier story, but Revati did not want justice to be easy. She was growing attached to the discipline of limiting each person's responsibility to what that person had actually done.

Noor Jatay went to Mumbai again to report on the cricket trial. A friend of Raghav's told her that the dispute over the date of Dipendra Bhatia's journey ought to invalidate every allegation against Raghav. 'A wrong date in one witness's account does not by itself disprove the entire charge,' Noor answered. 'Equally, the circulation of an image in a false form does not automatically prove that someone has said nothing wrong in some other context.' Her article kept the questions of betting, the integrity of the game and the accused person's fair trial separate. As she sent it to her editor, she remembered a picture of the library at Marudhar. The students in it were holding books, not flags. She found herself smiling.

Meanwhile in Bengaluru, Avani was preparing a short essay for her school's science exhibition. Her father Niranjan, who had worked on Mangalyaan, asked, 'Have you identified the sources of your pictures?' 'Some came from books and some from pages published by public scientific institutions,' Avani said. 'Then distinguish what you saw yourself from what you read in a book.' Avani smiled. 'Papa, can a science picture give a wrong impression too?' 'If you cut off part of a measurement, even an accurate figure can produce a false conclusion.' Far away in Marudhar, Avani had not read about Vivek's dispute, but the same lesson about evidence was reaching the two families in different forms.

Naseema was preparing a list of Maithili, Urdu, Rajasthani and Gujarati periodicals in the old Marudhar library. She noticed that

students often wandered away from an original meaning after reading an English translation of a thought expressed in their mother tongue. The dispute over Vivek's word 'fire' reminded her of the claims of language and context. She told the librarian that public notices should contain not just an order, but complete reasons expressed in a suitable language. 'It is difficult to provide every language,' the librarian replied. 'Then at least let the language you do provide be understandable and complete,' Naseema said. In this small exchange, the rights of a reader became connected with the linguistic rights of literature.

At a bank training session in Chandigarh, Sarabjit Kaur listened to a discussion of the new digital arrangements for paying scholarships. The officers spoke of convenience, greater speed and correction of errors. 'If an old adverse flag remains in the register and payment is blocked,' Sarabjit asked, 'which branch will give the student proof that the record has been corrected?' The instructor said there was an application procedure. Sarabjit insisted that the responsibilities of the departments should be defined in writing, instead of making customers run from one office to another. This matter had no connection with any criminal network; it was an ordinary question of administration. In the approaching era of digital banking, however, the question would return in many people's lives.

In the second week of October Revati delivered a lecture at a law college. A student asked whether, following the striking down of Section 66A, anyone was free to write anything on social media. 'The Constitution protects expression,' Revati said, 'but lawful restrictions have not ceased to exist. Threats, incitement to violence, defamation and other specific forms of conduct must be examined under the laws applicable to them. It matters greatly that the vagueness of Section 66A was struck down; but we also have a responsibility to read what a court's decision actually means.' Another student asked, 'What about college rules?' 'Proper institutional discipline is possible,' Revati replied, 'but a student should not be punished without being heard.'

At the end of the lecture a young woman came to see Revati separately. Her problem concerned no crime: a letter in her name had been misspelt on her university admit card, and for three months she had been going from office to office seeking a correction. Revati explained how to make a formal application and what internal remedies were available. At that moment she recalled Manasvi's earlier correction of her academic record and the flag in Vivek's scholarship register. Why should there be such a gulf between a constitutional ruling at the national level and a student's right to have her own name written correctly? Revati had no ready

answer. 'First submit a written request to correct the error and keep a copy,' she told the student. 'Consider going to court only if it becomes necessary.'

In November the students' assembly decided to hold an open discussion on the use of social media. Vivek, Shashank, Kanak, Manasvi, Naseema and Firdous were all present. Kanak admitted publicly that when making a short image he had failed in his duty to preserve the meaning of the sentence. Shashank said he should not have made a severe accusation without reading the original text. Vivek said that fire had been the language of his anger, and he would choose his metaphors more carefully now; but he would not surrender the right to ask about the college's spending. They took no collective oath. They merely drew up written rules: original context, clarity about sources, personal dignity and the right to disagree.

After the meeting, Bhatnagar spoke to Firdous alone. 'Do you think the problem is over?' he asked. 'The problem has changed. Now we have to decide rules for preserving papers, access to digital records and the limits of information about students.' Bhatnagar said the university had invited proposals from an outside company for a new student management system. 'What information about students will be given to the company?' Firdous asked. 'Which official will be responsible? How will old records be corrected?' 'Give me a written report on these questions,' Bhatnagar said. Firdous agreed, but added, 'Simply bringing in a new machine does not make a system more truthful.' The remark was becoming an important thread for the decade ahead.

An old neem tree stood in the courtyard of Shivnarayan's house in Darbhanga. When Revati came home for the December holidays, her father showed her two pages from a notebook. One related to the record of Neelkanth Sah's old trial, the question of whose handwriting appeared on it having never been fully resolved. The second was a letter Revati had written as a child: 'Why should someone who did not do it be punished?' 'Babuji, have you kept this letter all these years?' she asked. 'When a question follows you all your life, you don't feel like throwing away the first time you wrote it down.' Revati sat beside him. She understood that codes of law change, but the earliest questions about justice travel from one generation to another.

In the final week of the year, Vivek received the overdue instalment of his scholarship. He sent some of the money home, used some to repay his rent arrears and bought second-hand books with what remained. 'Is everything all right now?' his mother asked over the telephone. 'Some

things are. But the days that were lost haven't come back.' 'Those days won't return,' she said, 'but your education is continuing. That's a great thing.' Vivek looked out of his window at the evening in Jodhpur. The light falling over the city's stone houses was slowly fading. He understood that the greatest force sustaining a student was not a court order alone, but the faith of a family.

On the last day of the year, Firdous placed a new note in the old room of the Marudhar library about safeguarding students' identity records. She wrote that before an institution hired an outside computing service for convenience, it must define the limits of data access, the procedure for corrections and responsibility for errors. Bhatnagar received the note, but much of the work remained unfinished as the year ended. On the desk lay the printed proposal from a new service provider alongside old admission registers and scholarship files. Meanwhile the papers relating to Vivek's small social-media dispute were tied into a separate bundle: neither the final history of a crime nor universal proof of innocence, but a painful lesson learned by a student and an institution.

Checking the train time for Delhi, Revati wrote her reckoning of the year in her own notebook. A student's criticism, whether just or harsh, must be heard; a digital image, whether genuine or cropped, must be tested; the author of an anonymous threat must not be identified by imagination; and a limited court order must not be turned into a verdict on the whole of history. At the bottom of the page she wrote a line: 'An accusation attaches to a name; to see the human being within that name is judicial discernment.' She closed her bag. In the crowds at the station, students debated on mobile phones, workers were travelling home, and a small boy was asking his father why the numbers written inside a train kept changing.

Through the train window Revati saw the last light of the city. She remembered Manasvi's corrected results sheet, Vivek's reopened library, Ramdev's unresolved footpath and Raghav's continuing trial. In each story there was a written record, but the record was not the whole person. Far away in Darbhanga Shivnarayan listened to the ticking of a wall clock; in Jodhpur Vivek was opening the first page of a new book; in Delhi Noor was checking the sources for her next report. In Marudhar's computer room, an employee stamped the proposal for a new student management system and put it away. He did not know that the expansion of this world of students' names and personal records would bring new kinds of convenience and new kinds of danger in the years ahead. For now, it was still 2015, and the dispute that began with a

sentence cut from a student's writing had given him back a complete sentence.

Chapter 20 — The Last Night of Cash

2016: Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Darbhanga and Jodhpur

In the first week of November, no mist had yet spread over the roof of the old textile factory in Ludhiana, but the air at dawn had already turned cold. Sunita Paswan reached the factory gate before the whistle for the first shift. Inside were cotton dust, the smell of the dyeing room and the even rhythm of the looms. New machines had been installed in one part of the factory two years earlier; its owner, Dharampal Khurana, regarded them as a sign of progress. Sunita knew that the new machines had increased the speed of work, but relief had not reached every worker's life in equal measure. In her hand was a small notebook in which she kept the accounts of wages; since the time of her father's old dispute, the notebook had gradually taken on the character of a record.

That morning Ramlakhan could scarcely walk. An old pain in his knee worsened in winter, yet he insisted on rising from his bed and going to the factory. 'Babu, it's the day for your medicine. I'll have your attendance entered,' Sunita said. Ramlakhan laughed. 'If having someone else put my name on the attendance sheet could bring me wages, I'd be sitting at home.' In that bitter laughter Sunita heard an entire history: the deduction of 2010, the testimony given before the authority, two days of unpaid wages that had slipped from memory, and the two different registers that had passed through Harjit's hands. Every day's pay still mattered if the family kitchen was to keep going.

In the factory accounts office, Manpreet Sandhu now sat at Harjit Kaur's old desk. Before leaving the service, Harjit had written down rules for correcting registers, but no one could say for certain whether the institution's new computerised system followed them fully. Manpreet had to reconcile measurements of cloth, production time and workers' working days. She had heard of an old unresolved entry under the name Hardev Chauhan. Instead of treating the name as conclusive proof of fraud, she marked it 'verification pending' and kept it separate. Sunita trusted her because of that small act of care.

Three families came to Sarabjit Kaur's bank branch in Chandigarh that day to open new accounts. In the first family, a daughter was studying at university and would now receive her scholarship directly into an account. An elderly member of the second had questions about when a pension would arrive. The third was a small trader seeking a way to accept digital payments. 'Convenience for people has increased,' the

branch manager Jasmeet Singh said. 'Someone who once had to visit a bank ten times can now do a great many things from home.' 'Yes,' Sarabjit replied, 'but we also have to make sure that someone whose name has been written wrongly doesn't end up making twenty visits instead of ten.' She remembered Manasvi's earlier experience with her student records.

Inside the bank a new employee, Narendra Pal, was displaying his performance figures. 'The target this month is fifty new accounts. We're in touch with several factories. Once the names and certificates have been collected, everything will become convenient.' 'Who will bring the names and certificates?' Sarabjit asked at once. 'The people opening the accounts will be present themselves, won't they?' Narendra suggested that a representative of an office could collect everyone's papers. Sarabjit made it clear that convenience and verification of identity were distinct matters; each customer's rights and consent must be protected. She did not speak harshly, but after the conversation Narendra put his papers in order again.

At the beginning of November, Shivnarayan Jha was cleaning his old office in Darbhanga. Revati had come from Delhi for two days. Page forty-five of the old ledger, the decision in Neelkanth Sah's trial, the order relating to student Vivek's social-media dispute and the Marudhar survey papers were all tied in separate bundles. 'Of all these papers, what do you remember most?' Revati asked. 'Not the names of the documents,' Shivnarayan said. 'The lives behind them. Someone's plate filled with rice, someone's books, someone's footpath across the land.' 'And the court?' 'The court tries to hear those lives within the rules. It is our duty to help it succeed.'

On the evening of 8 November, the second shift was about to end at the Ludhiana factory. People were tired and expecting no particular news. Sunita reached home and put lentils on the stove, just as old Channan Singh, who lived nearby and kept a radio, turned up the volume. In an address to the nation came the announcement that the old five-hundred- and one-thousand-rupee notes would cease to be legal tender for ordinary transactions at midnight. At first no one understood. Phoolkumari set down a bowl of water. 'Then the two thousand rupees in my trunk have turned into paper?' Sunita listened closely. Arrangements for depositing the notes and a specified period for doing so were also being announced. She wanted to understand the whole matter before answering her mother.

Ramlakhan untied a knot in his old dhoti: two five-hundred-rupee notes and a thousand-rupee note. He lifted them one by one and stared at them, as if the figures written on them had changed that night. 'These are wages I earned at the factory,' he said softly. 'What is wrong with them?' Sunita did not take the notes out of her father's hands. 'There is nothing wrong with your wages. The government is saying we can deposit them in a bank. We'll find out the rules.' 'Then how will we buy rice tomorrow?' her younger brother asked. Ramlakhan could not answer. No book of judicial decisions offered an immediate answer to that question.

At a shop in Ludhiana, the owner was putting away his old ledger of cash receipts. A customer came with a five-hundred-rupee note and asked for milk. The shopkeeper said he did not have change. 'I earned this note by working,' the customer protested. The shopkeeper had troubles of his own: he had to pay a wholesaler the next morning. Standing a little way off, Sunita listened to them. Neither man seemed a criminal to her. One lacked a means of spending his money; the other lacked the smaller notes with which to return change. A third customer paid by mobile phone, collected his goods and left. Sunita saw that the conveniences of the new system had not arrived in every household at the same moment.

That night, as the news spread, messages began arriving without pause in the staff group of Sarabjit's Chandigarh branch. Jasmeet Singh told the employees clearly that no one was to explain rules to customers on the basis of personal guesswork rather than official directions from the Reserve Bank of India. The closure of ordinary public banking business on 9 November, the opening of deposits and limited exchange on the tenth, identity formalities and the examination of old notes—all became the employees' responsibilities in a single night. Sarabjit telephoned home to say she would return late for two days. 'Will you get anything to eat?' her mother asked. Sarabjit laughed. 'Right now the numbers in customers' accounts are racing faster than my hunger.'

Narendra Pal sat late in the manager's office. A trader called to ask whether he could arrange for the cash belonging to many workers to be deposited together through him. Narendra was ready to offer the service, but Sarabjit was watching him. 'We need a correct account record for the person whose money it is,' she said. 'We won't enter a nameless bundle of cash in our books.' Over the phone the trader said, 'They're all little people. Where will each of them find the time?' Sarabjit answered that proper identification also protected the customers. When the call ended, Narendra asked, 'Must it be so difficult?' 'If the easy road means writing

the wrong name, somebody may spend the rest of their life paying its price.'

On 9 November a meeting was held with Dharampal Khurana in the factory accounts department. Wages were due in the second week of the month. Some workers received cash; others wanted money transferred to their accounts. Dharampal looked worried. 'We can no longer use the cash we have in store as before. Our customers have also held up payments. We need new arrangements.' Manpreet said that payment into an account was possible where written consent had been obtained; for the other workers, their consent and the applicable rules would have to be respected. Dharampal sighed. 'We'll have to change the system. But our duty to pay wages on time remains.'

Baldev Singh, an old intermediary for contract labour, arrived late at the meeting with a proposal: deposit the bundles of old notes belonging to all the labourers through one common factory account, and settle their wages later. Manpreet objected that such an arrangement could obscure the individual workers' ownership of the money. Sunita, who had been invited as a representative, asked, 'Our wages aren't goods in the company's warehouse. First put right the deductions from each person's pay.' Dharampal stopped Baldev. The production books and wage registers would first be reconciled, he said; the workers' representatives would then be consulted again about unresolved questions.

At dawn on 10 November the queue outside the bank stretched from the gate to the road. Some carried old notes in bags, others passbooks, pension letters or savings set aside for a wedding. A pregnant woman stood leaning against the wall. Sarabjit asked the guard to arrange seating for elderly and unwell customers. The branch employees put out a pitcher of water. These small measures could not remove the immense administrative difficulties, but they made waiting bearable for some. 'Today the bank door feels like a courthouse,' an old man said. 'Everyone has brought their papers and is waiting for their turn.'

Phoolkumari did not want Ramlakhan to go to the bank; his knee would not endure a long queue. Sunita arranged his passbook, identification and notes. After finding out the formal rules concerning deposits by an account holder and the need for authorised representation, she set out with her father so there would be no mistake. On the way their neighbour Suraj asked, 'Will they question every note we have?' 'If they ask where the money came from, we'll show them the wage records,' Sunita said. 'Asking questions is no crime. Refusing someone the chance

to answer can be unjust.' Ramlakhan looked at his daughter. Once he had taught her to write her name; now she was protecting his wages.

A middle-aged woman in the queue said her husband was in hospital and she wanted to change the family's saved cash to buy medicine. Another elderly customer worried about travelling from a distant village to the bank. A young man explained mobile payment facilities, but an older man's eyes could not make out the tiny letters on the screen. Sarabjit came out of the office. 'Whatever has a definite rule will be done according to that rule,' she said. 'If someone is facing difficulty, register the problem in writing. We won't offer assurances without checking.' 'Will rules make rice?' an irritated customer demanded. 'Not rules,' Sarabjit said calmly, 'but money deposited under a false name can make even your rice disappear.'

By noon Ramlakhan's old notes had been deposited in his account. Sunita looked at the receipt and understood that the money was now in the bank, but withdrawing all of it immediately in cash was not possible under the new limits. On the way home Ramlakhan said, 'The figures for my money are safe on paper now, but a sack of rice cannot eat paper.' 'We'll have to decide which needs come first,' Sunita said. 'Medicine and food first.' At home Phoolkumari was counting coins kept in an old household box. For generations, women's savings had lived in little boxes; under the new arrangements even those savings had become a subject for bank papers.

On the second day of banking, an elderly widow named Meenakshi Devi came before Sarabjit. After her husband's death, the formalities for transferring a bank account into her name had not been completed. She wanted to deposit the cash he had left, but the account documents did not agree. A junior employee said there were too many people that day and she should come back tomorrow. 'If you knew how I would find the fare to come back,' Meenakshi answered quietly, 'you wouldn't say that.' Sarabjit accepted her application, wrote a clear list of the necessary documents and explained what other lawful means might be available. The woman could not obtain an immediate solution, but for the first time someone had listened to her problem.

That week the telephone rang constantly in Revati's Delhi office. One trader wanted to know whether possessing old currency immediately established a crime. Another asked what the rules governing deposits of old notes meant. Revati did not give everyone the same answer. 'We must know the date, where the money came from, whose account it is and which notification applies,' she said. 'A government announcement

doesn't make every note lying in a household the proceeds of crime.' Shivnarayan, listening on the telephone, said, 'Remember, in Neelkanth's ledger case in 2000, not every figure represented the same offence. Learn to read names and numbers separately.' The thought settled again in Revati's mind.

The wage day in mid-November arrived at the Ludhiana factory, but the workers did not receive their full pay. Dharampal Khurana explained that some customers' payments were delayed and the changed cash situation had made cash disbursement difficult. Part of the pay of regular employees reached their accounts; opposite the names of many contract workers, however, the word 'outstanding' remained. Baldev offered to open new accounts for all the labourers at once. 'Opening accounts may be useful,' Sunita said, 'but last month's unpaid wages are due today. Opening an account and clearing an arrear are two different things.' Champa Devi named the cost of milk for her child. Dharampal had no immediate answer.

A worker named Manohar said he would accept his wages in large notes because he could find a way to deposit them at the bank. Champa objected. 'When the notes can no longer be used for ordinary transactions, how can handing them over as today's wages count as solving the problem of payment?' Manpreet explained that lawful means of payment and the rules currently in force had to be observed. Dharampal set Baldev's proposal aside. 'I don't want to deprive anyone of the fruit of their labour,' he said, 'but there is a genuine shortage of usable cash.' 'The difficulty is yours; the suffering is ours,' Sunita answered. 'A court will hear these as two separate facts.' For a while the room was silent.

Outside the factory, people were far from unanimous. Some said that hardships had to be endured for the country's good. Others asked which office would keep an account of the suffering of small workers. An elderly Sikh worker named Gurmeet said, 'My son called from abroad and said that action against counterfeit currency and tax evasion is necessary. I believe that too. But someone ought to count the hunger in my stomach.' No slogan could hold both his truths together. Sunita decided that at the next meeting of representatives, they would begin not with protest but by counting the names, amounts and days of wages actually due.

That night, at home, Sunita opened the copy of her father's old wage order. Some years earlier the authority had granted relief over a two-day deduction and directed a separate examination of the remaining dispute.

One thing was clear in the order: a claim for wages required a substantiated account. Sunita spread a fresh notebook before her. 'Ramlakhan Paswan—outstanding October wages'; 'Champa Devi—days approved'; 'Manohar—contract particulars'; 'Gurmeet—leave authorised'. She wrote each person's account and then compared it with the attendance register. 'Will all that writing get you the money?' Phoolkumari asked. 'Sometimes writing alone won't,' Sunita answered. 'But when someone says nothing is due, what will we have to show if we've written nothing?'

Two days later, Sunita proposed electing five representatives at a small meeting inside the factory. Each shift should have a representative, she said, women workers should have their own representation, and nobody's name should be put on a list without consent. Baldev called it an attempt to stir up a labour agitation. 'Writing down names isn't an agitation,' Gurmeet said. 'It's understanding the wages we're owed.' Dharampal listened from a distance. He was afraid production would stop, but Manpreet said that putting the accounts in writing and submitting them would actually make scrutiny easier. The dispute was becoming a question not only of money but of the right to be heard.

One day Sarabjit was completing the day's reconciliation at the branch when Narendra Pal arrived with forms for three customers. All three names were associated with the same industrial group. There were photocopies of customers' signatures on the forms, but part of the primary information was unclear. 'The company's authorised representative says all the workers have consented,' Narendra said. 'Where are the records of each person's consent?' Sarabjit asked. 'Who verified their identities?' Narendra became uncomfortable. 'Madam, there's tremendous pressure to get the work done.' 'Record the pressure in the register,' Sarabjit replied, 'not a false verification.' She returned the incomplete applications for proper processing. Narendra's face fell, but Sarabjit did not regard his silence as immediate proof of a crime.

That evening, over tea with a colleague, Narendra complained that Sarabjit found questions in every document. 'Once a wrong name enters an account, it can take months to correct,' the colleague said. 'Carefulness is no bad thing.' Narendra gave no reply. He was remembering his family's debts. His father's medical treatment had cost a great deal, and his sister was waiting for the roof of their house to be repaired. Financial distress made him human; it did not automatically authorise wrongdoing. A broker from outside called him. Narendra saw the ringing telephone, but did not answer.

One morning in the first week of December, Manpreet found two different statements in the factory's accounting system. Against Ramlakhan's name, one showed payment in full; the other showed arrears. First she checked whether the second entry was a correction report. The sources proved different: one was a daily attendance sheet, the other the approved payment register. Why they differed was unclear. 'If the money hasn't been paid, what kind of error is it to write "paid" in the register?' Sunita asked. 'An error is possible,' Manpreet replied, 'but I won't name anyone before checking the source.' She requested a written explanation from the accounts department.

The name Hardev Chauhan surfaced again. An old dispute over payment for seventeen days under that name was still unresolved; now a fresh computer-generated copy showed him as a permanent worker. Manpreet telephoned the former employee Harjit Kaur. 'As far as I know, Hardev used to come to deliver parts,' Harjit said. 'That's what I know, not final proof. Compare the old entry register, the original source of payment and the person's own statement.' Even after retirement, she refused to declare someone guilty without a basis. Her judgment reassured Sunita. There were irregularities inside the factory, but it did not follow that every one of them had the same origin.

When Revati came to Ludhiana, Sunita showed her the list of outstanding wages. Revati remembered Sunita from the 2010 case. This time she had computer-generated wage statements, the factory's handwritten registers, bank payment slips and individual accounts from workers. 'We shall separate three questions,' Revati said. 'First, are wages legally due? Second, what were the lawful mode and time of payment? Third, why is there a wrong entry in the records? Answers to the first two will not automatically answer the third.' Sunita smiled. In her notebook she made three separate marks for those three questions.

Meeting Revati in his office, Dharampal Khurana said, 'You understand how many families here will lose their livelihood if my industry closes, don't you?' 'I do,' Revati answered. 'But you cannot protect an industry's survival by withholding the value of work people have already done.' Dharampal promised to review all sums due. Baldev intervened to say that the workers could deposit the old notes in the bank, so there was no need for a dispute. Revati clarified that the possibility of making a deposit did not replace all the employer's legal obligations concerning wages. The date of payment, its method and actual receipt all mattered.

After this conversation Dharampal asked Manpreet to prepare a list of acknowledged arrears. She showed clearly that amounts for certain days were outstanding to fifteen workers. For others there was a dispute over the calculation of attendance. Dharampal acknowledged in writing that he would pay the accepted arrears, but requested a week. Sunita consulted the workers. 'A written timetable for paying the agreed amount is reasonable,' Gurmeet said. 'But what if it's delayed again?' 'Then we'll turn to the legal process again,' Champa answered. 'For now, take a copy of what has been admitted.' The representatives agreed. Their basis was not trust, but a written undertaking.

A week later, not every admitted payment had arrived. Money reached some workers' accounts, while payment remained on hold for others whose account verification was incomplete. One letter in Manohar's name was wrong in his bank passbook. He had to return to the branch. Meanwhile the date for paying his child's school fees approached. He thought of pawning a few ornaments. Sunita advised him to obtain the bank's reason in writing first, then ask the factory for a lawful alternative means of payment. 'I can't read,' Manohar said, 'but however many sheets you give me, I understand their worth.'

In the second week of December, Sunita and Revati arranged applications before the competent authority appointed under the Payment of Wages Act concerning delayed wages and disputed deductions. Champa, Manohar and Ramlakhan set out their specific claims separately. Jagdish's old dispute over termination of service remained before another appropriate labour forum and was not added to these applications. Before filing, Revati told Sunita, 'We will not ask this authority to decide the country's entire economic policy. We will put before it the wages actually owed to these workers and the question of their payment. Knowing the proper extent of your claim is the first condition of winning.'

In the authority's small hearing room there was a map of the state, a table and two old fans. It was cold outside; inside was the smell of paper. Harpal Arora appeared as counsel for the factory. Receiving the applications, he said that the company had not intended to withhold wages, but that an extraordinary change in the currency system had obstructed payment. Revati submitted that specified wages were still due despite the company's written admission. 'What is the latest record of payment for the sums that are not in dispute?' the authority asked. Arora said the statement was being prepared. 'Then submit it with dates in writing,' the authority directed, 'and show separately what each claimant actually received.'

As Sunita looked at the papers, she could hear her heartbeat within her body. Money that meant the price of food at home was being called 'admitted dues', 'disputed days' and 'authenticity of payment' in the hearing room. The transformation both distressed and reassured her. 'I know the currency rules have changed,' the authority said. 'But this forum must decide how much wage was legally due to each employed person and how much was actually paid.' Sunita understood that here it was not silence but numbers that spoke. Yet to turn numbers into truth, the source of every sheet had to be examined.

Harpal Arora, counsel for the factory, produced the first list. It said that payments to a total of thirty-three workers had been completed through the bank. 'The spelling of claimant Manohar's name on this list differs from the spelling in his account register,' Revati said. 'Did the money actually reach his account?' 'The transfer instruction was issued,' Arora replied. 'Issuing an instruction and receiving the money are two different events.' The authority directed that evidence from the bank confirming receipt or return of the payment be produced. In that moment, for the first time, Manohar saw the importance of a single letter in his name. A letter that no one would notice at home had become a wall across the path of his wages.

Hearing Champa Devi's claim, the authority asked the company's position on her attendance during the three days in question. Manpreet's statement confirmed the times Champa had worked, but an older calculation sheet had deducted the amount. Arora made it clear that the company admitted the mistake. 'What has been admitted should not be kept pending under the name of a dispute,' the authority said. Champa listened and exhaled. She did not need the language of courts; she needed to know where the unpaid cost of milk and medicine would come from. 'The order will now be written,' Revati told her quietly. 'We'll also look for proof that it's been complied with.'

Ramlakhan's case was harder. In the company's new register payment for certain days was marked complete, but two pages of the old receipt slips were missing. Arora said that the wages might have been paid because the register said 'settled'. 'To whose hands, when, and by what means?' Revati asked. The authority called for supporting records from the company. Ramlakhan's eyes filled with tears. 'When someone writes only "settled" against the days of my sweat,' he said, 'and my hands remain empty, what am I to understand?' The authority gave him a calm opportunity to state the facts in full. His feelings were heard, but the evidentiary question remained open.

Outside the hearing, Baldev drew Sunita aside. 'If the factory survives, the wages will come. If you take every little difference to court, the owner will shut the place.' 'You call them little differences,' Sunita replied, 'but these are the sums that keep our cooking fires burning.' Baldev said he too wanted the workers' good. 'Then prepare a clear list of wages paid on time,' Sunita said. An awkward smile crossed Baldev's face. He was not accustomed to that kind of public accounting. On one side were real difficulties in supply and markets, on the other the intermediary's personal standing. How much truth lay in each would now have to be shown by the records.

That day at Sarabjit's branch, an elderly housewife named Kesar Kaur had lost the receipt for her deposit. The money was entered in her account, but she wanted a duplicate on paper. 'The money has reached your account, so what do you need the paper for?' an employee asked. 'You say today that it has arrived,' Kesar replied. 'What shall I show my grandson if he asks tomorrow?' Sarabjit had a copy printed for her. Meanwhile an internal alert arrived on Sarabjit's desk: unusual deposit patterns in certain accounts required review. The notice was no declaration of guilt against any account holder. Keeping the list confidential and separate from ordinary customer matters, Sarabjit followed the path laid down by the bank's investigation and compliance department.

One name in the alert was 'Hardev Chauhan'. Sarabjit did not know the man. The paper contained only his name, a limited portion of the account number and a summary of transactions. She did not automatically connect it to the old Ludhiana factory because the name was the same. Thousands of people in India share names. In asking for a systematic examination, she said, 'A person cannot be identified by name alone. Look at which branch holds the account, the actual identity documents, the source of the payment and the authorisation given.' Jasmeet Singh read her note and agreed. The work of a bank meant not merely counting money but preventing human harm through mistaken conclusions.

Narendra Pal was still anxious because of his family's debts. A broker wanted to meet him again, saying that many workers could not get to the bank and that it was necessary to arrange a convenient combined service for them. Narendra replied that every account could be opened only in accordance with the rules. The broker laughed. 'You read too many rules. Who has time for all those pages in a world moving so fast?' Two voices spoke within Narendra. One said that extra income could pay for his father's treatment. The other said that opening an account was an

economic doorway into someone's life, and its key was not something to be sold. Narendra did nothing unauthorised that day, but the broker's pressure remained a part of his life.

Revati spoke to Sarabjit on the telephone about the banking rules. Sarabjit explained that during November the lawful arrangements for deposits, cash withdrawal limits and digital transfers had changed from time to time; every dispute required examination of the instructions in force on its particular date. 'If the company ordered a transfer but the money was returned because of a wrong name,' Revati asked, 'what becomes of the wages due?' 'The bank can provide details of what was actually received,' Sarabjit said. 'The competent labour authority will decide the wages question. I cannot decide it in its place.' Revati liked the clarity of this professional boundary. Every institution had its own work, and justice was strongest when each knew its limits.

By the middle of December some factory arrears had been paid. Dharampal's industry had not closed completely, though production had fallen. One customer reduced an order; another placed a request for some lengths of cloth for the new year. The sound of the machines weakened in one area and grew loud again in another. With part of her payment, Champa could buy medicine for her child. Manohar was still working to correct his name. No answer had been found about the source of payment for Ramlakhan's disputed days. Sunita's list bore two marks in red and black ink: what had been paid and what remained. At the end of the day she lit the stove but did not close her notebook.

At the second hearing before the wages authority, the company produced the bank's record of returned payments. The money had not reached Manohar's account. The company acknowledged this in writing and said it would arrange a fresh lawful payment under his correctly recorded name. The authority ordered that this specific admitted amount be paid within a fixed period. It was also recorded that Champa's acknowledged arrears would be paid. In Ramlakhan's case, the available evidence for certain days was insufficient, so the authority directed that the original accounts pages be presented at the next hearing. It was no complete victory, but it brought a definite change in the lives of the two women and the worker held fast by delay.

Outside the hearing room Harpal Arora said to Revati, 'Your arguments have brought the workers relief, but the company's financial crisis is real.' 'I haven't called it untrue,' Revati replied. 'The wages due are a different matter. Institutions responsible for policy can consider the industry's financial distress, but this authority must have an answer to the

evidence before it.' 'And what about the possibility of fraud behind this case?' Harpal asked. 'If a specific record shows deliberate deception, that requires a separate lawful investigation. Not every accounting error is a criminal conspiracy.' Harpal agreed with the distinction.

One December evening Ramlakhan was sitting in the sunlight outside his house, holding a prescription. Sunita read the court order aloud. 'Will I get all my wages this time?' he asked. 'The company has been given a deadline for what it admits owing. The question of the remaining two days will be heard again.' Ramlakhan nodded. 'I used to think that once you went to court, everything ended in a single day. Now I understand that it asks about one thing at a time.' 'In all these years,' Phoolkumari said, 'I've learned that before going to court we have to keep our papers at home.' Everyone laughed, but their laughter held exhaustion.

In Chandigarh the broker called Narendra again, this time more insistently. 'Forget what we said before. I'll only leave the customers' papers with you,' he said. Narendra replied that no work could be done without the customer's consent and verification. After the call he informed Sarabjit of the approach. She advised him to prepare a written account, recording only the contacts and proposals actually made, not conjectures against the man. Narendra wrote as much as he knew to be true. His father's medical debt was no smaller, but he had managed to draw a boundary within his work. Whether he would continue to honour it was a question for his future.

Noor Jatay, still reporting on the old cricket trial, came to Ludhiana during demonetisation to prepare a short report. She met the factory owner first, then the workers, and finally a bank official to learn the general rules. She saw that each side spoke a truth born of its experience, but no one experience made a complete portrait of the economy. Dharampal counted the difficulties of production, Sunita the days of unpaid wages, Sarabjit the strain imposed by deposits and withdrawals. Noor did not give her article the headline 'Everyone's Money Has Disappeared'. She wrote instead: 'Currency Changed, the Question of Wages Remains'. Her editor said it was less sensational. 'Less sensational is not the same as untrue,' Noor replied.

Revati read Noor's report and telephoned her. 'Have you checked the dates of the factory's outstanding wages against the source documents?' 'I've seen the company's response and the workers' applications,' Noor said. 'What was disputed, I described as disputed.' Revati told her that this care mattered to the ordinary reader. 'And the final answer to your courtroom questions?' Noor asked. 'Some answers have come, some

remain. Saying "we do not know" about what the court does not know is also part of the truth.' After their conversation Noor added a sentence to her draft: not everyone standing in a bank queue owned unlawful money, and not every administrative error was merely bad luck.

Meanwhile, in a village near Ludhiana, a farmer named Tejinder Singh, who had sold his paddy, met the commission agent Harbans Singh to settle an old debt. Tejinder had money to deposit, but the timing of payments to smaller creditors was proving difficult. 'Our accounts have run under the old rules,' Harbans said, 'but now we must learn a new means of payment. The farmer ought to receive the full value of his crop.' He had the amount actually due and the amount paid written separately opposite each customer's name. 'Everyone in the market says commission agents are thieves,' Tejinder asked. 'Why do you make so many records?' 'If somebody has stolen, name the person and produce evidence,' Harbans replied. 'The name of a profession is not proof of a crime.'

A woman's presence at Harbans's shop that day was particularly striking. Parveen Kaur had come to ask for the accounts of the actual sale of part of the harvest from her field. Men in the household took the decisions, but much of the labour of tending the field was Parveen's. She asked whose name was on the account and to whom the payment would be made. Harbans showed her the old ledger and said it held the name of the head of the family. 'My name isn't written in the field,' Parveen said, 'but that doesn't diminish my labour.' Harbans could not answer immediately. He told his accountant to make the actual recipient's name clear when issuing future receipts. Economic reform was necessary not just in bank registers but within households as well.

In a government hospital in Darbhanga, Naresh Mahato had come to buy medicine and was asking about his old notes. A nurse wanted to explain the exact time limits of the special arrangements permitted under the government instructions, but did not possess the complete information herself. Instead of guessing, she asked for the updated order displayed on the noticeboard. Naresh's father sat waiting for an injection. Medical treatment, the price of medicines and the difficulties of cash had all fallen together on one family. After the incident, the nurse proposed displaying public instructions clearly at the hospital's main entrance. Relieving someone's suffering does not always require a great decision; sometimes accurate information is enough.

At the end of the week Sarabjit held a short discussion for the branch's new employees. She showed them two records bearing the same

imaginary name: one with the customer's correct address, the other naming the wrong account branch; in one the transaction had been completed, in the other the money had been returned. 'Which person would you call a criminal?' she asked. 'The one whose name comes up repeatedly,' a young man replied. 'A name's recurrence raises a question; it does not establish a crime,' Sarabjit said. 'Examine irregularities within the rules, provide the records relevant to the question, and understand the importance of giving anyone accused a fair chance to respond.' Narendra sat silently through the discussion. For the first time he saw the everyday work of opening an account as something connected with a citizen's life.

At the end of December, Firdous Kaul was discussing digital payments with students at Marudhar University. Vivek Meghwal, whose scholarship had been restored after the social-media dispute, asked, 'If convenience increases, will wrong records correct themselves?' 'No,' Firdous replied. 'A computer can repeat an error more quickly. Correction needs a person, responsibility and a procedure.' Manasvi described her earlier struggle to correct her identity record. Kusum said that a line on the original map of Ramdev Mandal's footpath had remained disputed for decades. 'What does a line on a land map have in common with a name in a bank?' a student asked in surprise. 'Both can close a human being's path by means of a document,' Kusum answered.

In the last week of December the prescribed period for depositing the notes was nearing its end, and the crowds at the bank grew again. Kesar Kaur took home the secure duplicate of her old receipt. Meenakshi Devi's succession formalities were still incomplete, but her application had reached the department concerned and she had been given a clear date for the next hearing. Sarabjit and Jasmeet had gone many days without leave. Closing the branch that evening, Sarabjit watched the numbers glowing continuously on the computer screen. Behind them was sometimes a farmer in debt, sometimes a patient in hospital, a widow, or a labourer. An error no longer meant to her merely that 'the accounts do not tally'; it meant a day's delay in somebody's food.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan listened to the year's economic debates on the radio. Some speakers said that action against counterfeit money and unlawful cash was indispensable; others said that it had brought excessive pain into the daily lives of ordinary poor people. 'What does your experience tell you?' he asked Revati. 'Two things at once,' she answered. 'The government's stated aims must be tested with figures and over time. But a court can still examine Ramlakhan's unpaid wages today. Debate over policy must not hold up a decision on a concrete right.' 'That is why

the doors of the courts are necessary,' Shivnarayan said with satisfaction. 'Questions should matter more there than slogans.'

On the eve of the new year Sunita wrote a letter to Harjit Kaur. She said that some of the wage arrears were being received, but the old name 'Hardev Chauhan' had appeared again in the new registers. She alleged no crime in her letter; she asked only which old dated receipts would be available for a proper examination of the papers. Harjit replied: 'Keep the old attendance register, records of external supplies and the sources of payment separate. Finding the same name in several records does not establish a connection. Where material is unavailable, write "unknown" in the blank space.' Sunita fixed the reply on the first page of her notebook.

That night, on a train travelling from Chandigarh towards Darbhanga, an elderly trader sat beside Revati. In his hands were a bank deposit slip and a wedding invitation from home. His old savings had been deposited in an account, he explained, but cash withdrawal limits had made it difficult to arrange the wedding expenses. Revati listened patiently. 'You're a lawyer?' the trader asked. 'Can someone bring a case about something like this?' 'If a particular right has been violated, a distinct remedy may be possible,' she said. 'But the court cannot solve every difficulty with a single order.' After a short silence the trader said, 'Then first I must keep my papers and dates in order.'

The train stopped at a small station after midnight. Revati looked out of the window. A tea seller was serving tea in a brass tumbler; a customer paid him with small coins. Nearby, one young man studied his phone and another held an old ledger. The dispute over page forty-five that Shivnarayan had studied in 2000 was returning in a new form in the digital registers and electronic transfers of 2016. The means had changed, but human trust, names, labour and the need to verify them remained. A page showing wages owed to Ramlakhan protruded from the file beside Revati.

When she reached Darbhanga, Revati drank her morning tea with her father. 'What comes first in the new year?' Shivnarayan asked. 'Proof of Ramlakhan's remaining days of wages, the survey in Marudhar's land dispute, and Dipendra's travel dates in the cricket case.' 'Three different questions, three different answers,' Shivnarayan said. Revati laughed. There was a fourth question as well: who really owned the unusual accounts flagged at a bank branch? But Sarabjit's confidential internal information had not come before Revati. Each of the characters was still

within the limits of a different institution. The future had not yet connected them all on a single map of crime.

On the last day of the year, Sunita stopped outside the gate on her way home from the factory. The machines whistled and the workers took their separate roads. Some were trying to understand the final arrangements for bank deposits, others worried about their children's school fees, still others hoped for new work. Manpreet waved from a distance; the search for the remaining receipt register in Ramlakhan's case was continuing. Sunita raised a hand in reply. Two pages now remained in her notebook: one concerned the old wage dispute, the other Hardev Chauhan's uncertain entry. She resisted the temptation to turn both into one established story of crime. At home she wrote on the first page: 'What is owed must be accounted for; what is blamed must be proved.' Then she lit the lamp and checked the time for her father's medicine.

That night Sarabjit left the bank and closed the door of her home. From a distance came the sound of music for the new year. In the final entry of her private notebook for the day, she wrote that most customers of the branch had brought the lawful savings of their own lives, while certain unusual transactions had been preserved separately for due examination. The note found no community, region or profession guilty. Her last line read: 'The value of a rupee is in its denomination, but in the life of the person who needs it, it has another value.' She shut the notebook and tucked a copy of an old bank receipt inside the book beside her pillow. Many years later, one accurate date in that notebook would unexpectedly acquire importance in court.

Chapter 21 — The Name of Privacy

2017: Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Delhi and Darbhanga

On the first morning of July 2017, two separate notices were pasted to the main gate of Marudhar University in Jodhpur. One announced the new Goods and Services Tax system for traders. The other asked students to check their particulars in the new computerised identity register. Vivek Meghwal did not stop before the first notice; he had to understand what had happened to his scholarship account. But a sentence beneath the second brought him to a halt: "Services relating to the hostel and scholarships may be interrupted for those whose information has not been updated." It sounded like an ordinary administrative warning, yet Vivek, remembering the ordeal of the previous two years, wondered what new mark would be placed against his name.

At that moment Manasvi was climbing the library steps. A few people on campus still remembered the story of the correction of her academic identity. She saw students standing in a line with printed copies of their particulars. One clerk sat inside the room while another checked papers outside. "Will my earlier entry also be in this register?" Manasvi asked. "All the old records have been transferred into the new system," the clerk said. "Who is allowed to see them?" At her second question he fell silent. That silence contained not merely a failing of one office, but the great distance between an individual and an institution.

Firdous Kaul learned that the university administration was making its final preparations to launch a student-management system through an outside service provider. She took out a copy of the report she had written in 2015. In it she had recommended that only necessary records be transferred, that the purpose of collecting additional information be stated clearly, that a written route for corrections be established, and that access to each part of the records be properly defined. In two years the institutional buildings had acquired fresh coats of paint and the number of computers had grown, but no definite answers had been written down to most of the questions in her report. "A machine can become new in two years," she told her colleague Kusum, "but if an old mistake survives, it can acquire a new life along with the machine."

Kusum was helping Ramdev Mandal's family in the Marudhar land dispute. Hearing about the office register, she asked, "Surely the student-welfare department decides who needs to see a particular account?" "The institution has the authority to decide," Firdous replied, "but that

decision needs reasons and limits. A student's medical details, an old disciplinary allegation, a shortage in scholarship payments, the private circumstances of a family—all these may be kept in the same room. That does not mean every employee or outside contractor should be able to read them." Kusum remembered the old map of her father's land. A single line marking a footpath, which had led to decades of dispute in court, could become a line in a new colour inside a computer.

Two kinds of files were accumulating that year in Revati Jha's Delhi office. One group of visitors brought legal questions arising from the new commercial tax system; the other brought disputes over the records of students and small institutions. Revati told her assistant Animesh that there was no need to invoke the Supreme Court and immediately turn every question into a great constitutional controversy. "First find out which officer made which order, which rule applies, and what actual harm the affected person has suffered," she said. Animesh wrote the instruction in his notebook. This ordinary sequence of questions in legal practice seemed more useful to him than a lecture on jurisprudence.

On the night of 1 July, the accounts department of Dharampal Khurana's textile factory in Ludhiana remained open late. The Goods and Services Tax had come into force. Dharampal's accountant, Harpal Arora, was busy reconciling the new form of invoices, records of the movement of goods and customers' questions about taxation. For Sunita Paswan, who worked at a machine, the first meaning of the change was simple: the complications of the new accounts must not delay wages once again. "My father's remaining dues won't be withheld on account of this new tax, will they?" she asked Harpal. "Wages already payable are a separate liability," he told her plainly. "A change in tax rules does not erase the account of labour already performed." Sunita welcomed the clarity of that answer, but she did not close her notebook.

Nasreen Begum, who ran a small cloth-dyeing enterprise beside the factory, needed time to understand the new arrangements. She sold her products outside the state, but many of her customers still prepared papers in the old way. A large buyer spoke of imposing a penalty for delay on a small supplier. Nasreen sat up all night examining old ledgers with her daughter Hina, who was studying commerce in college. "Ammi, put your questions to the accountant in writing," Hina said. "Don't put your faith in guesswork where you don't understand something." Nasreen laughed. "I never thought your studies would prove useful in my shop so soon." For her, the national tax reform meant the light burning in her home that night.

A fortnight later Vivek's scholarship payment was held up again. An employee of the finance office said that the new identity register displayed the words “previous disciplinary inquiry” beside his name. After the High Court's limited directions in his 2015 dispute, his scholarship had been restored; in the new system the old remark had returned without its context. Vivek requested a written explanation. “It has come from the computer,” the employee said. “Who told the computer?” Vivek demanded. “Is there a name for the person who wrote it?” The employee said nothing. Vivek took a copy of the 2015 order to Firdous's office.

Firdous spread three papers across her desk: the order of the former student disciplinary committee, the record of the subsequent correction, and a printout of the new system's entry. She examined carefully whether the new remark referred to the former false image or merely indicated the earlier proceedings. “I will not say yet that someone deliberately stopped your scholarship,” she said. “First we must learn which source supplied the new entry. Then we can raise the question of responsibility.” “Why has a mistake admitted two years ago been laid upon my head again?” Vivek asked angrily. “Because it was corrected on paper without properly linking that correction to the old record,” Firdous replied. “This time, don't ask only for your instalment. Ask for a permanent procedure for correction.”

Manasvi faced a different problem. In the new identity register, an old name had been placed in a category that many employees in ordinary offices could easily access. She did not wish the details of her earlier academic records to become visible to people who had no need to see them. She met Bhatnagar, the head of student welfare. “I have given my correct current name,” she said. “Let the institution preserve any necessary legal records, but there must be limits on who can see which information.” “No harm has been done so far,” Bhatnagar said. “If we wait for harm to occur, how late will protection come?” Manasvi replied. Bhatnagar had no ready answer.

Bhatnagar fundamentally wanted to keep the educational institution running. His desk was piled with files about fees, buildings, employees' conditions of service and students' grievances. He saw convenience in the decision to contract out the computerised system. But after reading Firdous's report, he took seriously for the first time the question of whether an institution's possession of information gave it an unlimited right to disclose it. He summoned Pradyumn Sood, a representative of the service provider, to a meeting. Sood explained that the system would shorten queues, allow students to obtain certificates quickly and spare

every office the need to send them from one counter to another. “Who is responsible for correcting mistakes?” Bhatnagar asked. Sood offered general assurances. Firdous demanded a specific written answer.

Sood's company was called Navdwar Records Services. It had an office in Jaipur and worked with several educational institutions. Nothing in the available records yet established any criminal connection involving the company. But the administration's draft contract contained broad expressions such as “improving the quality of services to students,” with no clear limits. “Improving quality is a good aim,” Firdous said, “but don't collect unnecessary information in its name. A student's photograph, contact details, examination results, family financial papers and sensitive personal circumstances serve different purposes.” Sood argued that such distinctions would increase costs. “Saving money cannot mean making someone's private life cheap,” Manasvi replied.

Naseema viewed the argument from another angle. Having helped Saira with her burnt educational records in 2002, she knew what a catastrophe the absence of documents could be. “We used to say that records must be preserved,” she said. “Now we are saying that the door to preserved records must not stand open to everyone. Both things are necessary.” Saira, now a teacher, said over the telephone, “Someone whose certificate has burnt needs another certificate. But handing a surviving certificate to everybody without reason is also an injustice.” This conversation added a new section to Firdous's report: a proper balance between security and access.

The next day, in the students' council room, its president Vivek read a proposal before the members. The proposal did not demand that the university disclose anyone's personal particulars. It asked only that students be informed of the computerised register's purpose, the time allowed for corrections, the responsible official and the terms governing the outside service. “If we don't publicly name the guilty employees, what will make them afraid?” a young man asked. “Circulating names without proof of an allegation would contradict our own demand,” Manasvi replied. “We want to control false information, not compile a list of people whose guilt is uncertain.” The assembly divided over the question, but eventually passed a motion demanding written rules.

The experience of Ramakant Joshi, a lecturer in the mathematics department, was different. Each day he received numerous papers containing examination results. He maintained that the department needed access to information in order to help enrolled students in time. Firdous agreed, then offered an example. “If a student's date of birth is

required for an examination admit card, why should the office have access to the family's entire medical history?" Ramakant thought for a moment. "Only as much as the work requires?" "Yes," Firdous said. "And who will correct an improper entry—that too." An ordinary discussion in an educational institution was becoming a question of administrative policy.

A photocopy of the old map showing the footpath on Kusum's father's land had also been placed in the new land-records system. The record had to be produced in the court hearing the land dispute, but a proposal emerged to use an illustration of the dispute in a university publicity leaflet. Kusum objected. "This is a paper concerning my father's case," she said. "If somebody wants to make it part of an attractive picture for the hostel, the meaning of a dispute still unresolved in court will change." Bhatnagar halted the proposal. That small decision taught Kusum that privacy concerned more than photographs and identity; it also meant preserving context.

In Ludhiana, Sunita was more conscious of the fatigue inside the factory than of complications in the tax accounts. The volume of production was changing; some customers were postponing deliveries while they brought their new billing systems into line. Dharampal Khurana told the workers that the disruption was temporary. "A temporary disruption doesn't mean that our need for food ceases to be daily," Sunita replied. Dharampal was still unable to give a definite date for wage payments. But he acknowledged that paying on time was the employer's responsibility and that disputes over outstanding wages must be resolved separately.

Nasreen's daughter Hina prepared a one-page list: which customers' invoices needed rechecking, which earlier deliveries remained unpaid, and what questions should be put to a specialist about the new tax. She worked diligently in her mother's shop before studying at night. One day a customer declared, "Because of the government's new tax, all your goods have become illegal." "You need a rule and a date to reach that conclusion," Hina replied. "If papers must be changed, we'll correct them. But a rumour cannot wipe out seventeen days of my mother's labour." The elderly dyer Abdul Latif laughed when he heard her. "Now even the papers in this shop are being dyed," he said.

Outside Sarabjit Kaur's bank branch in Chandigarh, a training camp was held on digital payments. Narendra Pal, who had reported an intermediary's unusual proposal to his superiors the previous year, was now explaining basic account-security rules to customers. "Take only as

much identity information as is needed," Sarabjit told him. "If someone doesn't understand, explain its meaning plainly and in writing." "What if the customer is in a great hurry?" Narendra asked. "Haste is no substitute for verification." That day an elderly woman at the branch became anxious because all her messages were going to her son's mobile number. Sarabjit explained the lawful procedure for arranging contact in accordance with the authorised customer's preferences.

The woman's name was Paramjit Kaur. Her husband was ill, and her son worked abroad. She came to the bank herself to meet the household's small financial needs. The language of the forms was difficult for her, but she understood the value of her savings perfectly well. "Show me my passbook," she told Narendra. "I will decide whether or not to tell my son." At first Narendra was inclined to respond according to office custom; then he remembered Sarabjit's instructions and explained the options available to her under the rules. A small line of satisfaction appeared on Paramjit's face. Privacy was not some distant principle. It was the right to make decisions about her own home.

At night Sarabjit was examining the branch's old registers. The compliance department had replied about the matching name "Hardev Chauhan," discovered in 2016: there were two different accounts, two different identities and details from separate branches. On the evidence then available, no certain connection with the Ludhiana wage register could be established. Sarabjit wrote a note: "Similarity of names alone is insufficient." That short sentence averted a potentially false accusation. But another question from the department remained: the purpose for which an outside company had requested customer information was unclear. She preserved the relevant record separately.

In Delhi, Noor Jatay was writing a report entitled "New Tax, Old Credit." She had spoken to three traders, two workers and a tax expert. Her editor wanted a vivid portrayal of commercial distress. "There is a vivid picture," Noor replied. "Nasreen sits up all night making invoices; Sunita asks when her wages will be paid. But I won't write that all trade has collapsed, or that everything has become easy." She distinguished what her interviewees had told her from the independent background to government decisions. Her experience of Vivek's dispute in 2015 had taught her how cutting an original sentence could change its meaning.

Thirty-five days had passed since the students submitted their application at Marudhar. Bhatnagar's office sent an incomplete reply: "The system is under improvement; the welfare of students is paramount." "It is easy to say that welfare is paramount," Manasvi said

after reading it. “Protecting welfare requires specific steps.” Riddhi's father, who taught in the department, remarked that not all university employees were indifferent; some offices faced genuine difficulties. “That is why we want a procedure, not an accusation,” Firdous replied. “The whole institution does not speak with one mouth.” The meeting resolved to send a detailed representation to the registrar, the competent authority.

The representation set out five clear questions: precisely which student details had been placed in the new system; who was permitted access; which official was responsible for correcting old errors; what terms had been agreed with the outside service provider; and how clearly each student was informed of the reason for withholding a scholarship. Manasvi objected to having her personal details read aloud at the meeting. The students accepted her decision. “My case is public,” Vivek said, “but my companion cannot be compelled to make her life public.” The meeting ended that day without slogans, but its written consequences would later reach the court.

At the beginning of August, Revati received a thick bundle of papers from Marudhar. Kusum had enclosed a letter: “The survey papers in the land dispute are separate; the questions concerning the student register are separate. Please don't mix the two.” A faint smile crossed Revati's face. Kusum had not attended law school, but from the first generation of the twenty-seven-year struggle for justice she had learned to keep evidence distinct. Revati divided the file into three parts: orders, replies, and particulars of the students actually affected. She put Manasvi's private papers in a sealed cover, withholding them from office staff who had no reason to see them.

On the telephone, Revati told Bhatnagar that she needed to examine the legal basis for the university's administrative decisions. “You may change the system to serve students,” she said, “but it is not proper to stop a scholarship merely on an employee's oral information.” Bhatnagar put forward his side. Several university services had become faster, waiting times for certificates had fallen, and some mistakes in students' old names had also been corrected. Revati did not deny those gains. She asked only whether a definite written route existed for redressing harm to those who had suffered it. Bhatnagar asked for time.

That week, after class, Manasvi walked to the university's old well. Kusum was standing there. Because of the land dispute, the old route to the well still awaited a survey. “My name is correct in the register,” Manasvi said, “but I have no control over the old history behind it.”

“There is an old line on the boundary of our field,” Kusum replied. “We cannot change that line with our own eyes, however long we look at it. But we can ask the court for a verified survey.” “Who will measure the boundary of my life?” Manasvi asked. “The law can draw lines,” Kusum said, “but people must do the work of preserving respect.”

On the afternoon of 24 August, Revati visited the office of a senior advocate in Delhi. A new judgment of the Supreme Court was being discussed around the table. A nine-judge bench had recognised privacy as a fundamental right in *K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*. Some in the legal gathering were elated; others wondered how the practical limits of the new principle would be defined. Revati insisted on reading the entire judgment. “Does that mean all data collection is now illegal?” a young man asked. “Don't draw such a simple conclusion,” Revati replied. “The right has been recognised; questions remain about which restrictions are justified, which laws apply and what purposes are legitimate.”

Revati telephoned Shivnarayan from Delhi. “Babuji, today's judgment has given a clear place in the Constitution to a human being's privacy,” she said. “Then has the way of correcting a wrong name in an old document also become clear?” Shivnarayan asked quietly. “Not directly. The judgment lays down a fundamental principle. Each dispute must find its own legal route within that principle.” “When we found the dead Ramkishun's name in Neelkanth's account book, my first question was: whose name is this? Now your question is: who has the right to see the document bearing that name? The years have changed, but the human question has moved forward.”

That day, in Marudhar's assembly hall, Firdous was explaining the meaning of the new judgment to students. Privacy, she said, was not simply the convenience of being alone. It was also a question of respecting individual choice and appropriately protecting personal information. But she made clear that the judgment did not abolish an institution's duty to keep lawful records. “Everyone sees my examination results,” a student protested. “Information that must be made public under the rules raises one question,” Firdous said. “Uncontrolled circulation of personal records retained for a necessary purpose raises another. One word cannot answer every problem.”

Before ending the meeting, Firdous gave the students a small example. “Suppose someone discloses a family member's medical condition to an institution as part of a lawful scholarship application. That does not mean the detail should be placed before everyone in the class register.

And if proper verification is necessary for public assistance, the institution should follow the required procedure. Rights and responsibilities do not cancel each other; they bring order to each other." Manasvi wrote in her notebook: "I am not ashamed of my history. But I must have a say in deciding whom to tell it."

The following week Revati arrived in Jodhpur. Kusum met her at the station. Instead of offering to carry her bag, she asked whether the court would hear the matter immediately or whether the university would first be given a chance to respond. "We'll examine the complete record first," Revati said. "There is no reason to abandon the route of internal correction where it is available." "Some students want the computer office closed down altogether," Kusum said. Revati laughed. "Shutting it down makes an easy slogan. Why take away a facility that lets people obtain examination certificates on time? The essential question is who accepts responsibility when something goes wrong." As they left the crowded station, Jodhpur's hot wind enveloped them.

A peculiar stillness filled the university archives. On the table lay an access register, letters about scholarship payments, the old disciplinary order, a copy of its correction and printouts from the new system. Bhatnagar, Firdous, the registrar's assistant and the service provider's representative were present. Revati asked each person one question: "What is the original source of this entry?" The source of the old remark against Vivek was the 2015 disciplinary file, to which a corrective order had subsequently been attached. The remark had made it into the new system; the correction had not. Revati wrote: "Possibility of incomplete migration." She did not write "deliberate harassment."

The question of Manasvi's records was more complex. The institution might need to preserve an old name in its records for limited legal purposes, but employees in an ordinary student-help office had no need for those earlier particulars. Bhatnagar was beginning to understand the distinction. "You're saying access should be restricted, but the original paper should not be erased?" he asked. "The answer depends on the applicable rules, the purpose and the individual's rights," Revati said. "Erasing all history and exposing all history to everyone are both extremes." Manasvi lifted her eyes. For the first time, she felt her question had found a place in the administrative record.

Lines of anxiety had formed on Pradyumn Sood's forehead. He said the contract contained provisions concerning service quality, and the system would be difficult to operate without testing some student information in aggregate. "A general statistical review is not the same as

extensive access to identifiable private records," Firdous said. "Tell us clearly what limits your technical system can accept." "Certain additional improvements are possible," Sood replied. "Then we need in writing how long they will take and who will be responsible if they are not made," Revati said. For the first time Sood agreed to prepare a time-bound proposal instead of relying on verbal assurances.

After the meeting Vivek stood beside the university's old neem tree. "Have you won the case now?" his roommate Aman asked. "I still haven't received my scholarship instalment. It's too early to call it a victory." "Then the court?" Aman asked. Vivek smiled. "If the official accepts the mistake and corrects it, we'll have that recorded in writing. If the payment is stopped again, we'll go to court." This caution marked a change from the old Vivek. In 2015 a sentence circulated after being cut from its context had changed his life. He no longer wanted his anger to raise a fresh cloud of false accusations.

Revati met Manasvi separately. She asked what her principal demand was: destruction of the old papers, correction of her current name, or prevention of improper access to her details. "I want certificates bearing my correct name to reach me on time," Manasvi said, "and I don't want offices that have no need for my personal history to see what the institution keeps for legal reasons. I don't want to obstruct anyone else's education." "Then that's how we'll write the demand," Revati said. "The voice of the person whose rights are affected matters most. A lawyer's language must clarify that voice, not cover it." Manasvi signed her agreement on the paper, but did not share the whole of her private information that day.

Compliance with the High Court's limited directions concerning a survey was under way in Kusum's land case. Revati went there the next morning. Ramdev Mandal sat near the well; heavy work had become difficult for him. "Will they be able to see my footpath on the new computer?" he asked. "The map can be kept there," Kusum said, "but the court's order goes only as far as it goes." "First they called paper the owner," Ramdev said slowly. "Will they call the machine the owner now?" "No," Revati replied. "Rights in the land are decided by evidence and law. The machine is a means of storing evidence, not its owner." A faint contentment came over the old man's face.

Shivnarayan was taking fewer cases in Darbhanga now. He spent much of his day among books. He told Revati over the telephone that he had looked again at the printed copy of the 2004 judgment in Neelkanth's case. Firm proof of a disputed signature had been missing from one page,

and the conclusion on that allegation had consequently remained limited. “What old lesson did the privacy judgment remind you of?” Shivnarayan asked. “When an institution creates a document, its responsibility is not merely to write it, but to use it in the proper context,” Revati said. “The first lesson of the courtroom is to ask questions; the last is to understand limits. You're learning both.”

In the first week of September, the university administration gave a written reply. Arrangements were made to review the adverse mark that had stopped Vivek's scholarship; a proposal to restrict access to Manasvi's earlier identity entry was accepted; and new instructions were issued to improve ordinary student services. But no definite date was given for releasing Vivek's withheld instalment. The answer about the old entries copied by the outside service provider also remained vague. “Acknowledge every correction that has been made,” Firdous said, “and write clearly what remains undone.” In this way the scope of any future dispute narrowed, but the remaining questions grew sharper.

Vivek received a call from his mother. “Will you have to go round the courts again?” she asked. “We've given the university some time for now. But it's difficult to pay the month's rent without the scholarship.” “Your father will send what he's managed to save from stonework,” his mother said. Vivek's voice changed. “No, Ma. First I'll wait for a written decision about the arrears. I don't want to increase the household debt again.” “Fight for your rights,” she said gently, “but don't stop eating while you write your petitions.” Vivek put down the phone and went towards the dining hall. The need to eat did not contradict constitutional principle; it was the immediate reason for invoking it.

Meanwhile an incident involving the correction of a name at another educational institution in Delhi became news. Noor Jatay was writing about it. She did not want to add Manasvi's name to the report because she had no permission to make her private history public. Noor mentioned Vivek's public disciplinary dispute, but kept the personal particulars of those affected by the new system to a minimum. “If you don't put a striking human face on the issue, why will readers care?” her editor asked. “They will read when the question is right,” Noor answered. “A person's unwillingly exposed private story is not merchandise.” Her article that night bore the title “New Register, Old Name.”

The decision to bring a petition before the High Court was not made in haste. Revati first examined the university's governing statute, the government's obligations regarding scholarships, and the legal character of the institution's public educational function. Manasvi's concerns about

the limits of access to personal information and Vivek's claim for scholarship payment involved the same institution, but that did not mean the same legal remedy automatically applied to every aspect of each case. She considered whether a joint petition presenting two distinct demands would be appropriate, and finally framed a limited petition concerning administrative inaction over public financial assistance and fundamental procedural failures. The possibility of a separate statutory or civil remedy against the service provider was left open.

On the first day before the Jodhpur Bench of the Rajasthan High Court, counsel for the respondents argued that the university conducted its services under its own rules and that every technical inconvenience should not be entertained as a constitutional petition. "We have not come to dress up an ordinary consumer complaint as a constitutional case," Revati replied. "At issue are authorised decisions under a government scholarship scheme, money withheld without reasons, and fair procedure in an institution carrying out a public educational duty. We too ask the court first to examine jurisdiction and maintainability." The judge called for a written reply from the respondents and fixed a date for a limited hearing.

Outside the court Vivek asked, "What did the court decide in my favour today?" "For now it has only asked for a reply," Revati said. "Calling for an answer and holding that your right has been established are different things." At first Vivek found the answer disappointing. Then he remembered how people on social media had pronounced him guilty on the very first day of the 2015 controversy. "Then we'll give the court time to hear our answer," he said. "Time, yes," Manasvi smiled, "but not endless time." Revati was pleased to hear them both. Judicial patience and resistance to delay could exist together.

In its affidavit, the respondent university acknowledged that the context of the 2015 disciplinary entry had been incompletely carried into the new system. It maintained, however, that there had been no deliberate attempt to block anyone, and that the delay in scholarship payment arose from a separate financial adjustment. Vivek's side asked, "If these were two separate reasons, why did the old remark appear in the notice of suspension?" The university replied that an employee had used an incorrectly printed statement. The judge directed it to produce the original records, proof of the payment position and a written correction procedure. The order did not find any employee guilty.

In Manasvi's case the university presented preliminary arrangements for reducing general access to confidential records. The court asked how

clearly the time for deciding an application for correction had been fixed. Counsel for the university said a time limit would be added to the new instructions. Both Revati and Manasvi considered the question important. A letter of permission alone did not complete the protection; staff opening documents in offices had to understand the practical limits of their access. The court would not itself design every detail of a technical system, but it could insist on evidence that legal duties were being performed.

At the next hearing counsel for the respondents produced several printed pages. Revati noticed an old date on one and a fresh correction on another. “I want to point out an important distinction in this file,” she said. “An error has been identified, but the independent status of the withheld scholarship instalment is still unclear.” The judge asked whether a reply had arrived from the government's scholarship department. Counsel sought time. Granting a short period, the court observed that uncertain answers were prolonging the student's educational loss and directed that an appropriate administrative decision be made promptly.

After the hearing, Bhatnagar telephoned Firdous. “One matter in court has left me feeling I must stop all my work,” he said wearily. “Don't stop everything,” Firdous replied. “Keep what works well running. Correct only the faulty procedures.” Bhatnagar admitted that some employees, under pressure while learning the new machines, had selected incorrect indicators. “Examine the distinction between inadequate training and individual error as well,” Firdous said. “Haste in assigning blame will carry the institution farther from reform.” Bhatnagar resolved to organise a short training session for his office staff.

At the session a junior clerk said with embarrassment that he had transferred all the remarks in the old register into the new service system in summary form. He had not understood that the corrective order of 2015 had changed the standing of the earlier accusation. Senior employees had not defined the limits of his authority in writing. Bhatnagar recorded his statement. “An individual will be responsible for his mistake,” he said, “but the institution too is responsible for a process that was unclear.” The clerk's eyes filled with tears. He was not absolved of blame, but the actual circumstances of his error had been heard.

Vivek was glad to hear the news, but more important to him was ensuring that future students' scholarships would not be stopped by old, false remarks. “This rule should remain even after my case ends,” he told Aman. “First get your arrears,” Aman replied. “Then we'll celebrate the

institution's reform." They laughed. Aman's father had suffered losses in farming; although he understood the significance of his friend's larger questions, he had not forgotten the daily difficulty of earning bread. That difference strengthened their friendship.

Early in October, Nasreen Begum sat with her accountant near the tax office in Ludhiana. They were following the prescribed procedure for correcting an invoice issued incorrectly for one transaction under the new tax. "Where we've made a mistake, we'll accept it," Hina said as she checked the papers. "Where a customer has withheld money without evidence, we'll ask for that account separately." Nasreen watched her daughter. "I used to think great rules were made only for important people," she said. "Now I understand that proper papers protect small people too." When she returned home, she wrote the workers' payment date on the first page.

The question of Ramlakhan's outstanding wages at Sunita's factory was gradually becoming clearer. A comparison between the old attendance register and new bank records established payment for some days; for others the company's explanation was still awaited. The judicial authority was considering proportionate relief. Meanwhile Sunita received general information from Sarabjit's branch: the match in the name Hardev Chauhan had not established a definite criminal connection. She wrote in her notebook, "Same name; relationship unknown." She gave particular weight to that sentence. In society a rumour attached to one name can alter many lives. She had decided not to repeat that injustice.

Narendra Pal was facing growing pressure in his work on digital account services. A senior official said the crowding of papers needed to be reduced. Narendra agreed, but wanted clear customer consent. "If five consent boxes appear ticked together on the machine's screen, does the customer get an opportunity to read all the conditions?" he asked. The senior official told him to submit a written note on improving the system to the authorised department. Narendra made a note. The previous year an intermediary's proposal had seemed attractive to him; now he was beginning to understand that faster service did not diminish the importance of clear permission and accurate records.

As December approached, a new notice appeared in Marudhar's library: "Separate Office for Record Corrections and Student Assistance." Vivek stopped to read it. He had received part of his withheld scholarship instalment, and the reasons concerning the remainder had been explained in writing. The university had acknowledged the original

error, but the final decision on the outstanding administrative payment question remained pending. Vivek preserved this distinction in his own written account. He did not want to reduce the story to a single word—victory or defeat.

Manasvi was given a procedure for inspecting her earlier records through a specifically authorised official. Access by general offices was curtailed, while essential original documents remained safely with the institution. She was given a written explanation of who would decide a correction application and what internal remedy was available if she disagreed. She did not regard it as a complete solution, but her immediate vulnerability diminished. “For the first time I understand that protecting a right isn't only a matter of declaring it,” she told Kusum. “It means setting small, practical boundaries on what can be done.” “A line drawn in the right place saves a footpath,” Kusum replied.

The High Court's final interim hearing took place in the first week of December. The university presented details of its corrections and the latest position on scholarship payments. Revati said the corrections deserved acknowledgement, but anyone still owed money should not be kept waiting indefinitely without a written decision. The respondents agreed that a competent officer would issue a reasoned order within a fixed time. The court recorded the assurance and directed lawful decisions on applications by the students actually affected. Manasvi's private particulars were not unnecessarily aired in public; only the limited facts needed for judicial consideration were presented. The hearing did not produce a constitutional solution to every information-security question, but it opened a way through two people's immediate administrative difficulties.

Outside the court a journalist surrounded Revati with questions. “Has the High Court declared all the university's digital systems illegal today?” “No,” Revati answered clearly. “The court has given limited directions concerning the named applicants' grievances, the available records and the relevant administrative duties.” Another reporter asked, “Has the service provider been found guilty of a crime?” “No question of criminal guilt was adjudicated in these proceedings,” she said. Noor Jatay copied the exact words into her notebook. She appreciated an advocate's willingness to state the true limits of an order amid the temptation of sensationalism.

Back in her hostel, Manasvi looked at herself in the mirror. For years the form of her name had changed within papers, yet she felt the continuity of her own experience was stronger than those alterations.

Her friend Naseema asked if she felt safe now. “One letter doesn't make a person safe for ever,” Manasvi replied. “But the office that listened to me, the court that questioned needless disclosure—they've given me the courage to speak for myself.” Naseema sat beside her. They remained silent for a while, a silence not of humiliation but of trust.

Vivek had remained at Marudhar for higher studies after graduation, and the library's old room had become an important place for his research. There he wrote an essay entitled “The Individual in the Record.” On the first page he wrote that educational institutions needed information to serve students, but that information could not contain every shade of human feeling. He did not try to make himself into a heroic victim. He wrote about his own mistakes as well: the harsh analogy he had used in 2015, his anger at administrative failures, and his misplaced faith in social media. He saw that self-criticism did not diminish the demand for rights.

In the final class of her teaching term, Firdous asked her students, “How do we know whether a piece of data is true?” “If it's in a government register,” one student said. “If the computer shows a time stamp,” said another. Firdous nodded. “Both are important indications, but you have to examine the source, the context, the history of corrections, and any contrary evidence.” She opened an old page and gave an anonymous example of Vivek's truncated sentence from 2015. Then she showed the different forms of a corrected scholarship record. “Speeding up a mistake is not a convenience,” she said. “Speeding up the correction of truth is.” Several students wrote the words in their notebooks.

As Bhatnagar was closing his office, he met Pradyumn Sood. The provider's company had revised the terms of its new contract. Bhatnagar insisted on written restrictions on the use of additional information, access only by authorised persons according to need, a correction procedure and accountability for records. “All these conditions will slow the work,” Sood said. “A matter that can spend two years in court because of a false accusation may cost less if it is made clear at the outset,” Bhatnagar replied. To Sood it was merely a commercial decision. To Bhatnagar it had become a question of the dignity of an educational institution.

One evening Kusum went to the well on her father's land. The water was low, but the well had not been closed. A limited survey was proceeding under the court's directions. “My footpath isn't fully open yet,” Ramdev Mandal said, “but my account of it has now been recorded

correctly.” “Our university is correcting its students' records too,” Kusum told him. “Have the two cases merged?” the old man asked. Kusum laughed. “No, Babuji. They're different cases. But when something isn't identified in its proper place, people begin giving it any meaning they like.” Ramdev looked towards the sky. The city's lights were far away; stars shone clearly in the well water.

On the year's final wage-payment day in Ludhiana, Sunita told her colleagues to keep receipts for what had been paid separate from written claims for what remained unpaid. A hearing on Ramlakhan's remaining dispute was still scheduled. Dharampal's factory was gradually returning to regular work as it learned the complexities of the new tax system. At Nasreen's shop Hina was writing accounts with growing confidence. Sunita added a question to her notebook: “Who sees a factory worker's personal bank details?” She did not know that in later years it would bring her to the courthouse again. For now she wanted only respect for workers' consent and confidentiality.

In Chandigarh, before the branch's annual audit, Sarabjit circulated a written memorandum within the office. Its subject was the lawful purpose of customer information, correction of mistaken names and impartial examination of unusual transactions. She referred to the general principles of the privacy judgment of 24 August, but not as a substitute for the regulatory duties applicable to banks. Narendra read his copy. He remembered the offer of greater money an unknown intermediary had made him a year earlier. A shortage in his earnings, he thought, might again draw him towards a bad decision one day. To withstand that danger he needed not merely rules but firmness of mind.

On the final mornings of December, Revati was writing a letter in Delhi to send to her father. She did not fill it with a long account of the court's orders. She wrote only: “I'm beginning to understand that people carry not just an identity with their names, but memories and honour. If an institution shuts the door to correcting the papers it writes, those papers become a punishment.” Shivnarayan sent back a single line: “Truth through evidence, restraint through judgment; without both, justice remains half-done.” Revati placed the line at the beginning of her legal notebook.

During those days Noor Jatay was preparing her last article of the year. She wrote a large headline: “India's New Registers.” Beneath it were the stories of three different households: Nasreen's changing tax accounts, Paramjit's wish to choose who received her banking information, and a student demanding the right to correct a name. She did not disclose

Manasvi's private history. As she completed the article, she felt that a country's transformation did not lie only in Acts of Parliament and Supreme Court judgments, but in the ways ordinary people understood those decisions in their everyday work. This time her editor did not change the headline.

On the final evening of the year, the old library room at Marudhar University in Jodhpur was opened. Many dust-covered books had been arranged afresh inside. Vivek opened a volume on his table; Manasvi examined a copy of the new rules at the student-help office; Firdous was closing the computer room. Just then an office assistant placed a copy of an appendix to the provider's old contract in a new file. It still contained one broad, ambiguous phrase: “combined analysis for future service expansion.” Firdous saw it and placed a question mark beside it in black ink. She accused no one of a crime. But she decided that the file would not be closed without a written answer to that question.

Within that small question mark slept a great question of the coming decade. Students' names, workers' bank accounts, traders' tax records, patients' private information—all were gradually finding places in new machines. Convenience was increasing, and so was the possibility of misuse. In 2000 Shivnarayan had paused over the dead Ramkishun's name in a seized ledger; in 2017 Revati had questioned needless access to the past details of the living Manasvi. If one day unusual flows of money should be shown in the bank accounts of thousands of people, what would be the first question: the name written on the paper, or the actual human being's knowledge and role? That day had not yet arrived. The year 2017 was closing its door, and a lamp still burned in Marudhar's library.

Chapter 22 — The Many Meanings of Dignity

2018: Jodhpur, Darbhanga, Delhi, Ludhiana and Chandigarh

One morning in the month of Magh, the smell of old books rose through Marudhar University's library. The cold delayed the opening of its doors, but Saurabh Jha had reached the manuscript room early. His work was to enter the titles of old books, their authors, years of publication and numbers of available copies into a new catalogue. He did not regard the work as trivial. A single transposed letter could prevent a reader from finding a book; an author's name entered incorrectly could make the next generation accept the error as truth. Reading the title of a fifty-year-old Maithili book, he remembered a song his mother used to sing in Darbhanga.

In the morning the library's chief clerk informed him that his one-year appointment was about to end. He had three weeks to apply for renewal. The notice was ordinary, but there was a strange hesitation on the clerk's face. “Submit your application,” he said, “but the selection committee will be considering conduct as well this time.” “Conduct at work, or private life?” Saurabh asked. Averting his eyes, the clerk replied, “How would I know? I've only been asked to deliver the notice.” A file was closed inside the library, but a question had opened in Saurabh's mind.

A few days earlier, a photograph of him standing with his friend Akshay Rathore in the hostel dining hall had circulated through messages shared by fellow students. It showed two young men smiling, holding bags of books. Someone had added an insulting comment beneath it. No permission had been sought to take the picture or to make it public. Some people laughed, some kept silent, and others tried to enter Saurabh's private life under the pretext of asking questions. “Why are we moving about as if we were thieves?” Akshay asked. Saurabh did not reply. He feared not only humiliation but the loss of his livelihood.

That morning Vivek Meghwal arrived at the library. A truncated social-media remark in 2015 had led to the suspension of his scholarship; after prolonged efforts the previous year, correction of the record had begun. “What's happened now?” Vivek asked. Saurabh showed him the notice. Vivek read it before looking at his friend. “It doesn't say a word about your private life,” he said. “That doesn't mean the matter won't arise.” “I won't write an accusation in advance,” Saurabh replied. “I'll apply first and keep a record of my work.” Vivek agreed. He knew how

difficult the road was between the possibility of injustice and proof that injustice had occurred.

Manasvi was emerging from the student-assistance room. The question of correcting her academic identity had reached the High Court the previous year. General office access to her private information had been reduced, while the institution retained the old records securely. “If a university evaluates someone's work on the basis of their private life, how will the person know that was the real reason?” Saurabh asked her. “Often the paperwork doesn't reveal the reason at first,” Manasvi said. “So preserve the dates, applications, replies, scores, committee records—everything. And don't turn yourself into a lie to protect your dignity.” Saurabh silently took out the application form.

In Darbhanga that same week, Anupama Jha was putting the handwritten pages of her new book in order. Her husband had died many years before. In one room of the house stood a tin trunk, old books printed on credit, and periodicals waiting to be posted. The new manuscript was called *The Name of the Body, the Body of the Name*. It did not contain an elaborate exposition of courtroom law, but stories of people who had to explain the meaning of their identity in their own homes, schools or offices.

Anupama's publisher had written that the author would have to meet part of the printing costs and that the final decision on the cover would rest with the publisher. She replied that the original text of the book would not be changed and that remuneration and the distribution of copies must be clearly set out. Her mother had never told her to become a writer, but the stories she had heard in childhood had remained within her. Respect for a language, she reflected, did not wait for an award. A person who could not give a name to suffering in their own language might find even their courtroom testimony incomplete.

In Delhi, Revati Jha was reading two different letters in her office. One concerned compliance with the student-records matter at Marudhar; the other concerned the remaining wage dispute involving Ramlakhan in Ludhiana. The first described the institution's new service-provider rules; the second included photocopies of an old attendance register. “What these cases have in common isn't that injustice has been proved in both,” Revati told her junior colleague. “It is that a sentence on paper can have an immense effect on a person's life. The law must read both the paper and the life.”

In the second week of February, Saurabh submitted his application for renewal. He enclosed the number of books he had catalogued in a year,

reports on the condition of rare volumes, readers' retrieval records and details of errors he had corrected. The head of the department accepted the application calmly. But near the door a committee member whispered, "The qualifications are sound, but one must consider the university's reputation too." When Saurabh heard this, he did not confront the man immediately. He kept the receipt acknowledging his application. To a friend he said only, "I will answer questions about my work, not questions somebody is hiding."

In March a small seminar on "Personal Dignity and the Academic Community" was held in Marudhar's assembly hall. Firdous Kaul said that an institution needed discipline, but that discipline did not confer an unlimited right to inspect a person's private life. Registrar Bhatnagar replied that in university appointments, conduct, responsibility and the capacity to work with colleagues were considered. "From which records are these qualities assessed?" Manasvi asked. "Not from rumours about someone, surely?" "Decisions should not be based on rumour," Bhatnagar said. Everyone heard the answer, Saurabh most intently of all.

At the end of the seminar an elderly lecturer argued that society's accepted standards could not be separated from the institution's rules. "Society has many accepted standards," Vivek asked politely. "If two conflict, on what basis should a public university act?" The lecturer had no immediate answer. Firdous added, "A code of conduct is necessary, but it must apply equally to all employees. Questions will rightly arise if an unwritten rule is suddenly applied against just one person." The discussion did not end with those words; instead, several students began speaking about their own experiences.

When the heat of Baisakh rose, Saurabh received written notice of the selection committee's recommendation. His work-report scores were adequate and his attendance record was satisfactory. Yet the committee recommended against renewal. In the column marked "reasons" it had written: "The collective environment of the campus and overall suitability for appointment." The phrase sounded grave, but contained no specific fact. At first Saurabh laughed. The smile quickly faded. From the next month he could see no way of sending money home. His mother Kamla Devi's eye treatment, his younger sister's studies and his own rent—all depended on that single appointment.

Saurabh went to the head of the department and asked what fact in the report counted against the quality of his work. "It is the collective opinion of the selection committee," the head replied. "It is difficult to answer for every consideration separately." "Then what did the recorded

scores mean?” Saurabh asked. “If I am less suitable, tell me why.” The head took a copy of his application, but went no further than an oral assurance. Outside, Saurabh saw the university's neem leaves turn in the hot wind. For the first time he feared that getting people to listen might be harder than telling the truth about himself.

Akshay Rathore was tormented by his own sense of responsibility. Anger pulled him one way, concern for Saurabh's privacy another. “The photograph was taken with me,” he said. “This is my life too. Why should you fight alone?” “I am with you by choice,” Saurabh replied. “I will not go about carrying an identity card for our relationship just to answer somebody's laughter. If the decision about my appointment is wrong, let it be tested under the rules.” “I'll be a witness,” Akshay said softly, “but only as much as you want to make public.” For the first time they resolved that affection meant not speaking in the other's place, but granting each other the right to be heard.

Manasvi examined the application papers. Before saying anything she counted the columns of marks. Saurabh had made better progress in correcting book-catalogue errors than at the review four months earlier. “Were all the committee members present?” she asked. Saurabh had no attendance register. “First request the records you are entitled to inspect,” she said. “And don't put what you want to keep private into a petition without need.” Saurabh thanked her. He knew her own experience spoke through the advice; it was not pity offered from outside.

As she prepared the first application, the Jodhpur advocate Meena Saraswat explained plainly that a fixed-term appointment did not automatically become permanent. Revati joined them by telephone. “Don't assume a right to renewal merely because the term has ended,” she said. “But when a public educational institution makes selections according to declared criteria, it may have to answer questions about inconsistent or discriminatory conduct. First examine the nature of the institution, the letter of appointment, the selection rules and the reasons.” Saurabh looked momentarily disappointed. Nobody offered an easy phrase of comfort; in that honesty he found trust.

Meanwhile in Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan was witnessing another kind of injustice at the factory. Before the monsoon, wages had been deducted from Champa Devi, a worker in the dyeing section, for days marked “absent”—days when she had actually been sorting goods in another part of the factory that had no regular entry register. The company's representative argued that payment was difficult without proof of attendance. “You took her labour,” Sunita said, “but when the time came

to pay, you made her bear the loss caused by your failure to keep a register for that workplace." Questions about the nature of the work and employment records were raised before the competent authority.

Champa was familiar with disputes over her thumb impression. In an earlier hearing, the context of a paper bearing her print had remained unclear. "This time we will not ask anyone to put a thumb impression on a paper they haven't seen," Sunita said. "Say what you understand in your own language." Champa laughed. "Very few people here understand my language." "Then I'll translate," Sunita replied, "but I won't invent a new account of what you say." For the first time, the importance of interpreting assistance and accurate records in a hearing struck her so deeply.

The factory accountant Harjit Kaur opened an old register. Once again she saw the name Hardev Chauhan, associated with the 2010 wage dispute. The bank's information the previous year had shown two people sharing that name, but one address entered in the industrial register was still incomplete. "Why has this name appeared again?" Sunita asked. "It's in a paper adjusting an old liability," Harjit said. "We cannot explain it without the original voucher." Both women agreed that similarity of names did not justify an assumption. Nevertheless, the incomplete paper raised another question.

At her bank branch in Chandigarh, Sarabjit Kaur was reading new instructions on customer identification. Digital services were expanding, and information displayed on screens was being used more than paper copies. A senior manager suggested collecting as much information as possible at once for customers' convenience. "Why gather information we don't need in the name of convenience?" Sarabjit asked. "And what procedure exists if a customer wants to change their details?" The manager said the rules department would be consulted. He was beginning to grasp that the difference between convenience and excessive collection was not merely technical; it was a matter of trust.

One day an elderly farmer named Sukhdev Singh came to the branch. A helper at the market, he said, had asked him to register his identity in a private company's system to receive payments for his produce, but he did not understand which information would go to whom. "The bank has its own rules," Sarabjit told him. "Examine the outside company's authority separately. Read the paper once before giving consent." The old man laughed. "At my age I'll have to learn to read this from my son." "The decision is yours," Sarabjit said. "Your son can help, but cannot take

your place." Within that small exchange lay a great question for the digital economy of the future.

In Darbhanga, Anupama Jha was checking the proofs of her book. The printer had changed many Maithili words into Hindi-like forms. Anupama corrected them one by one in red ink. "Readers will understand them more easily," the publisher said over the telephone. "Why strip my mother tongue of its forms in the name of simplicity?" Anupama replied. "If a sentence is difficult, improve the sentence. Replacing the language is no remedy." She fell silent for a moment. It seemed to her that the struggle over dignity and form in a small literary printing house resembled the struggle over people's identity records.

In one story in the book, a widow repeatedly went to her village panchayat to have an account register corrected. Anupama had named her Rasdhara. A reader had remarked that the judicial matter seemed incomplete because the story did not describe the legal struggle in detail. "What is spoken in five minutes in court," Anupama replied, "may take five years of waiting at home. I have to write those five years." Noor Jatay later wished to use the remark in an interview, but sought Anupama's permission and asked for its full context.

In the June heat, the Marudhar staff office responded to an application for certified copies of the selection committee's proceedings. Some portions were withheld as internal deliberations about service matters; others were supplied. The names of attending members, broad categories of scores and final recommendation became available. Saurabh had scored well on the quality of his work; the column on conduct contained only a vague remark. The signature of the member who had written it was clear, but there was no separate explanation of its basis. Meena Saraswat wrote requesting an opportunity to inspect relevant non-confidential records so the application could receive fair consideration.

That same month the university administration sent a letter stating: "Renewal is not obligatory upon the expiry of a fixed-term contract." Part of its legal meaning was correct. But it said nothing about Saurabh's particular performance scores or the remark on his conduct. Saurabh and Akshay went to Delhi. Revati seated them in her office. Saurabh spread out his papers first, not the private photograph. Revati read everything slowly. "I see two questions here," she said. "One concerns the rules governing your application for renewal. The other is the factual basis of the alleged discrimination. We will not establish the second through conjecture alone."

Revati's junior colleague said that the social-media photograph was still available on many accounts. “It has already been made public,” Revati replied, “but that does not oblige us to circulate it afresh with the petition. Where necessary, we'll follow an appropriate restricted, sealed or confidential procedure.” Saurabh felt a little easier. He wanted the court to consider his work, not to put the details of his relationship on display for every reader. “Discussing someone's private life further without permission is an injustice too,” Akshay said. Revati listened seriously.

The petition was filed in the first week of July. Revati set out in detail the legal limits on discretion in appointments made by a public university. She did not conceal that Saurabh's appointment was for a fixed term. The authenticated record of his satisfactory work and the vague comment stopping renewal were presented together. The photograph incident appeared as background only to the extent needed to explain the possibility of discriminatory reasoning. The petition claimed no automatic right to a permanent post; it sought an impartial reconsideration of the decision and preservation of the relevant records.

The courtroom was small on the first hearing day at the Jodhpur Bench of the Rajasthan High Court. Outside lay heat and dust; inside came the slow whir of fans. Counsel for the university said, “An appointment ends on completion of its fixed term. An employee has no right to renewal.” Revati did not interrupt. When her turn came she said, “We do not dispute that. The question is this: the respondent institution assessed the applicant's work under its declared selection procedure, yet the final recommendation used the vague phrase 'social suitability.' We need to see what actual grounds support it.”

“Are you saying the respondent's decision arose from personal prejudice?” the single-bench judge asked. “I am presenting facts that give rise to suspicion, not a final finding of guilt,” Revati replied. “Let the relevant parts of the committee proceedings, the selection rules and the applicant's service record be compared. The legality of the decision can then be considered.” Counsel for the university said that a staff code of conduct applied. “Where is the record of a specified breach of that code?” the judge asked. Time was sought for a reply. The court directed production of written material and fixed the next date.

After the hearing, a reporter approached Saurabh in the court corridor. “Have you come to court to assert the right to your love relationship?” he asked. “I've come to ask for the reasons behind an appointment decision,” Saurabh said wearily. “I haven't given permission for my private affairs to be made public.” The reporter suggested that the

matter might become a “national debate.” “A staff member's life need not be plundered to make a national debate,” Saurabh said. Revati advised the journalist to read the court's public order and not to write Saurabh's private story on the basis of speculation.

That evening Saurabh's mother Kamla Devi telephoned. She lived in the Darbhanga neighbourhood where Anupama Jha had her home. “Baua, if you lose the university job, come back here,” Kamla said. “We'll find some way together.” “Ma, I've gone to court over my work,” Saurabh said. “Please tell everyone at home not to ask you things about me.” Kamla fell silent, then said gently, “I'm your mother. It's my work to listen to how you feel; answering everybody's questions is not my work.” Saurabh's eyes filled. A small acceptance within his family gave him more reassurance that day than a final court order could have done.

In August a hearing was held on the Ludhiana workers' wage claim. Ramlakhan said that payments for certain days remained outstanding under the factory's earlier undertaking. The company showed bank records indicating some transfers. Sunita asked whether the purpose of each payment was clear: earlier arrears, current wages or some other adjustment. Both sides laid their accounts before the appointed authority. Champa gave her statement in the familiar form of her mother tongue. Interpreting assistance was made available, but she did not recite a statement learned word for word; she explained the days and places where she had worked.

The factory's lawyer argued that some workers were denying real payments on the strength of old registers. Sunita replied that all money actually received had been acknowledged; the dispute concerned only the remaining days. “Give me a separate list of the days whose payment is disputed,” the authority said. “The same sum must not be claimed twice.” Sunita produced the list she had prepared. A calculation for one day in Ramlakhan's claim proved incorrect. He immediately accepted the correction. The opposing representative was momentarily speechless. “If your calculation is wrong when you seek justice, correct it,” Sunita said later. “That doesn't make the rest of your truth smaller.”

Sunita's firmness impressed Harjit Kaur. At a factory meeting, Harjit stated plainly that checking the papers carrying employees' signatures at the time of wage payment was also the company's responsibility. “We aren't criminals,” Dharampal Khurana said sharply. “I'm not calling anyone a criminal,” Harjit replied calmly. “I want to reduce future disputes. Let workers receive clear particulars of what they've been paid, and let the company retain proof of what it has paid.” Dharampal

thought for a moment and agreed. Victory in this struggle meant not the destruction of one side, but an acknowledgement of responsibility.

During the monsoon of 2018, Anupama's book came off the press in Darbhanga: a modest edition of five hundred copies. The cover was a dusty blue, with a slender line across it and the title *The Name of the Body, the Body of the Name*. The launch took place in a small town library. Noor Jatay was present. More important to her than photographs of the event was the sight of readers sitting down to hear complex experiences written in Maithili. “Is our own language adequate for subjects like these?” a student asked. “It isn't language we lack,” Anupama answered, “but the courage to use it.”

An elderly poet at the gathering said that literature did not need to entangle itself in social controversies. “If literature writes about human life, the door to controversy opens by itself,” Anupama replied with a smile. “A farmer's debt, a worker's wages, a woman's voice and an individual's dignity are not subjects imposed from outside.” “Do you read the language of the courts?” Noor asked. “As much of it as I can,” Anupama said. “But it is no less necessary to listen to the speech of those whom court orders leave outside.” The audience remained silent for a long time after her reply.

A sentence from Anupama's book circulated on a social-media account without her name. A few days later another account attached her name to the sentence while giving it the opposite meaning. The publisher said it would help publicity. “Changing the meaning of a sentence is not publicity,” Anupama replied. “Send a written question, show the original page, and demand a correction.” She did not immediately file a criminal complaint. Having checked the original text, Noor Jatay wrote a short corrective article. The incident differed from Saurabh's photograph, but in both cases the difference between public circulation and original context mattered.

On the morning of 6 September, several people in Revati's Delhi office were waiting for news from the Supreme Court. In *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, a Constitution Bench held unconstitutional the extent to which Section 377 criminalised consensual sexual relations between adults of the same sex. Dignity, equality, privacy and individual liberty were central to the judgment. Revati read the news and first asked for the official text of the decision. She did not want the difference between the emphatic phrases of publicity and the court's actual conclusions to disappear.

Saurabh was sitting outside the Marudhar library when Akshay called. Akshay's voice was trembling. “Have you heard the news?” “Yes,” Saurabh said. “But I still haven't received the decision about my job.” “That's a different matter,” Akshay replied. “Today's judgment won't give you your job back. But those whom the world frightened by calling them criminals have been given a place within the Constitution.” Saurabh gazed at the colours spreading over the distant desert. That day, together with elation, he felt the weight of very old fear—as though someone had opened a shuttered window inside a house, although he still had to open the door himself.

Manasvi came to Firdous's room, remembering her own experience with records. “A decision has recognised the right to a private life,” she said, “but there's a wrong name on an application in one place, an ambiguous remark in an appointment decision in another, and humiliation within a home somewhere else. Each needs a different remedy.” Firdous agreed. “A constitutional judgment doesn't open every social door in one day. But it makes clear which boundaries the state may not cross. The next responsibility is for institutions to examine their rules.” Vivek recorded the conversation in his research notebook, without making their names public.

Over the telephone Revati made clear to Saurabh that the judgment decriminalised consensual private sexual conduct between the adults concerned. It did not automatically recognise marriage, confer permanent appointments or guarantee victory in every employment dispute. “I have no illusion of that victory,” Saurabh replied. “But the committee that speaks of 'overall suitability' must now listen to what the Constitution means by human dignity.” “Yes,” Revati said. “And our next arguments will still rest on the actual records in your petition.” For Saurabh, that restraint was the foundation of hope.

In the second week of September, the university filed an affidavit in the High Court. The respondents maintained that the decision on renewal rested solely on the temporary need for the post, financial arrangements and the selection committee's overall assessment. They denied considering Saurabh's private life. Yet the minutes enclosed with the affidavit bore a handwritten note by one member: “Not suitable in view of the campus atmosphere.” Its author was Shobhnath Purohit, who sat on the committee as a representative of the educational trust. The document mentioned neither a disciplinary inquiry nor any written notice of an allegation.

Requesting the original note, Revati said, “Let the respondents clarify the meaning of this sentence. If it concerns discipline at work, give us the incident, date and record. If it is merely a personal preconception, its place in a public university's decision must be questioned.” Counsel for the university argued that the committee made decisions in its discretion. “Discretion does not mean an absence of reasons,” the judge said. “But the High Court does not replace the selection committee either. The essential question is whether the decision stayed within the lawful criteria.” The order directed preservation of the relevant original records and a clear response.

Bhatnagar met Revati outside the door. He looked exhausted. “There are thousands of students in the university,” he said. “How will the work go on if every dispute reaches court?” “Not every dispute will,” Revati replied calmly. “When the administration gives clear reasons under its written rules, many disputes can end in the office itself. Here an employee is asking about the assessment of his work.” “I haven't said his work was poor,” Bhatnagar said. Revati paused at that sentence. “Then make the written reasons clear. You'll spare both the costs of litigation and human suffering.”

That day Saurabh found an anonymous letter at his door. There was no threat in it, only an insult: “Stop bringing the university into disrepute.” Akshay grew angry when he saw it, but Saurabh restrained him. “I'll keep a copy of this letter, but I won't name anyone without grounds.” He reported the incident to the university security officer. “It could have been anyone,” a guard said. “That's why I haven't accused anyone in my complaint,” Saurabh replied. That night Akshay asked, “Don't you ever get tired of being so careful?” Saurabh smiled. “Of course I do. But if I write names without evidence myself, what would be the meaning of my struggle?”

On 26 September, the Supreme Court delivered its judgment concerning Aadhaar. At a branch training meeting, Sarabjit Kaur read the official summary. It was necessary to distinguish lawful identification for public-welfare purposes, the limits on authentication by private institutions and the effects of specific statutory provisions. “So has taking Aadhaar become forbidden everywhere?” an employee asked. “No,” Sarabjit said plainly. “That would be a false simplification. We have to see which regulatory directions apply to our work. What isn't authorised shouldn't be made into a general requirement without reason.”

At Marudhar, Manasvi read the news of the decision. It brought back her experience of needless disclosure of her earlier name. “Many people

want an identification system because help is denied without papers," she told Firdous. "On the other side, many private institutions demand excessive information. Where is the person between the two?" "The person shouldn't be between them," Firdous replied. "The person should be at the centre. Identification must make life easier, not become its master." Manasvi wrote the words on the first page of her research notebook.

On 27 September came news of another important Supreme Court decision concerning women's equality. In *Joseph Shine*, Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code, concerning adultery, was held unconstitutional. Revati told a junior advocate in her office that moral or civil questions about fidelity within marriage were not the same as criminal offences. The old idea of treating a woman like her husband's property was incompatible with constitutional equality. But the decision did not mean every problem arising in marriage had automatically disappeared.

Nasreen Begum in Ludhiana was thoughtful when she heard the news. Harpreet, a woman working in her small dyeing enterprise, often arrived late because of trouble at home. Harpreet's husband insisted on looking through her mobile phone and grew suspicious when she spoke to customers in the shop. "Reading a court judgment alone won't make fear disappear from a home," Nasreen said. "But you have the right to say what you understand to be unjust." She knew her own limits too: helping a colleague and taking control of her private decisions were different things.

"Will my husband listen now that the court has spoken?" Harpreet asked. "I can't say," Nasreen replied. "But the right to name what is happening to you belongs to you." Harpreet decided to meet a trusted counselling service to explain the actual circumstances at home. She made no criminal allegation at that stage. Sunita said that Harpreet's privacy should be respected at work; the news of her personal life must not become material for mockery in the factory.

Noor Jatay wrote separate reports on the two days' judgments. One concerned the constitutional meaning of decriminalising sexual orientation and consensual private relationships; the other concerned the end of a criminal-law view that treated a wife as marital property. Her editor wanted to combine them under one appealing headline. "Dignity is central to both," Noor said, "but the legal questions are different. If we turn them into a single story, readers will draw the wrong conclusion." The editor agreed to publish two articles.

Anupama kept two cuttings about the decisions for her next discussion with readers. She understood that a court judgment was not the last word of literature, but an opportunity to see old social pronouncements about human dignity in a new light. She remembered something her mother had said: “Listen to the person who speaks in the house; ask the one who stays silent why they are silent.” The language of that saying and the language of a legal judgment were different, but their human meanings spoke to each other.

In autumn Anupama Jha travelled to Delhi. A literary gathering was discussing her book. A young reader asked why the heroine of *The Name of the Body, the Body of the Name* left her home and lived independently, yet received no definite reward at the end of the story—not marriage, a job, or victory in court. “Freedom need not always be measured by the prize of marriage or employment,” Anupama said. “Even gaining the right to make one's own decisions can be a great transformation in a story. But with that right come the needs for food, shelter, work and relationships.” “Then where does the story end?” the young woman asked. Anupama smiled. “Do you think a character's life stops where the writer puts down her pen?”

While preparing her report on the gathering, Noor asked Anupama whether the constitutional decisions of 2018 would alter the reading of her new book. “A judgment gives us a new language for human dignity,” Anupama said. “But we shouldn't throw away an earlier story as false. Instead, a new reader may understand the sources of that suffering and the possibilities of change more clearly.” In the article she sent to her editor, Noor did not make a fictional character into a party to a real dispute. She kept her report centred on the dialogue between literature and life.

In mid-November an internal review meeting was held in the registrar's office at Marudhar University. Bhatnagar, the librarian, a representative of the selection committee and the finance officer were present. Saurabh was given the opportunity to submit a written statement and to be heard. The review was not a final judicial trial, but the institution's reconsideration of its own decision. Saurabh submitted his performance scores, his report on corrections to the catalogue and readers' retrieval records. When he was questioned about his private life, he said, “If you identify a rule related to my work, I will answer. Otherwise, the details of my private life are not a matter for the appointments committee.”

Shobhnath Purohit, a member of the former committee, said that the institution's reputation had been discussed. “Which written code of conduct of the institution did I violate?” Saurabh asked politely. “If someone complained, was I informed?” Shobhnath had no specific document. He said there had been discussion on campus. This time Bhatnagar intervened. “Discussion about someone cannot, by itself, be the written basis for a decision. If there was a disciplinary question, the rules should have been followed.” The tone of the meeting changed with those words.

The librarian acknowledged that Saurabh's work cataloguing books had been commendable. The finance officer said that the availability of funds for the post in the coming session was a separate question. Following Revati's advice, Saurabh made the distinction explicit. “If the post genuinely isn't available, write that. If it is, reconsider the matter fairly under the declared criteria. I don't ask for what isn't mine; I ask that what is just should not be hidden behind vague words.” The review committee decided to prepare a fresh, reasoned decision.

That night Bhatnagar stood beside the university's old building. Memories rose within him of the 2001 land dispute, the construction of the hostel, the corrections to scholarships, Manasvi's name and Vivek's truncated remark. He had not become a different man in a single day. Administrative difficulties still worried him. But gradually he was beginning to understand that correcting a mistaken remark about an employee did not weaken an institution's authority; it strengthened confidence in it. “In future,” he told his assistant, “let the specific criteria be written down before anyone writes 'overall suitability.'”

In the first week of December the university filed a new affidavit in the High Court. It stated that using the vague remark in the earlier decision had been improper and that the question of renewal was under fresh consideration according to the prescribed procedure. Saurabh's appointment had already expired; the university did not promise him immediate permanent employment. It sought time for a new decision. Revati asked whether any remuneration for work already performed remained unpaid. From his papers Saurabh showed that two weeks' pay had been withheld. The respondents agreed to produce an account of the amount.

“This court does not take the place of the university in every selection,” the judge said. “But decisions of public institutions must be reasoned, consistent with their rules and lawful. Unsubstantiated assumptions about an applicant's private life cannot replace an assessment

of work. Let the respondents state a definite procedure for reconsideration." Counsel for the university presented a written timetable. The court took it on record and preserved the opportunity for follow-up compliance instead of treating the dispute about the earlier decision's legal consequences as finally resolved in every respect. No new universal entitlement to employment was proclaimed.

As they emerged, Saurabh asked, "So have I won or not?" "The ground for the vague remark against you has weakened, and an obligation to reconsider has been fixed," Revati replied. "But the final outcome of the appointment remains open. Call it a victory if you wish, but that's the position of the papers." "Will my private life be questioned again?" Saurabh asked. "If it is, we will examine it in the light of the rules and evidence. For now, the path to a proper answer on your application has opened." Saurabh lifted his bag. Inside it was a small letter from his mother that had arrived from Darbhanga that very day.

Kamla's letter mentioned the court in only two lines. She wrote that the old roof of the house was being repaired, his sister's examinations were over, and Anupama Jha had sent a copy of her new book. At the end she wrote: "If your work there ends, we'll open a room for books in the village. But don't close the door of your mind." Saurabh read the words again and again. Acceptance within a family was not a court order, he understood, but it was an essential foundation for enduring life's difficult trials.

That month a partial decision came on Ramlakhan's outstanding wages in Ludhiana. On the available records, the competent authority directed payment for certain days, while noting a lack of evidence on another claim. Sunita presented the outcome to the workers exactly as it was. "Should we be glad to have received half, or fight for the rest?" Champa asked. "Acknowledge what has rightly been awarded," Sunita replied, "and examine the proper remedy for what remains. Colouring justice to match our wishes doesn't increase justice." For the first time, a workers' meeting agreed on a written arrangement for inspecting wage registers.

Harjit Kaur wrote to Sarabjit Kaur about the old name "Hardev Chauhan." For years, papers bearing the same name had found their way beside one another. The bank had already made it clear that its customers had distinct identities; the remaining ambiguity in the factory's accounts was a separate question. "We cannot give confidential banking records to an unauthorised person," Sarabjit replied. "Approach the designated official on the basis of whatever information can lawfully

be verified." Harjit accepted the boundary. The door to an individual's private information was not opened in the name of solving a mystery.

In August that year Anupama Jha had written about an experience during the Kerala floods. A schoolteacher she knew had returned from relief work and told her that floodwater had erased the boundaries of homes, yet people had once more had to enter their names, addresses, family numbers and details of damage separately in relief registers. Anupama wrote that the will to help was essential, but verification of distribution was essential too, because faulty records could deprive those genuinely affected. After reading the article, Meera Lakra, who worked with a rural women's livelihoods organisation, sent her a letter.

Meera wrote that her family's experience of relief work after the 2004 tsunami had taught them a great deal. Making accounts of donations public, preserving the dignity of those receiving assistance and giving clear statements of an institution's expenses were not merely ways of avoiding accusations; they were the ethical foundation of the work. Anupama replied that organisations engaged in service must also have room for criticism within themselves. If an institution did wrong, it should be examined; but one such instance did not justify declaring every service organisation untrustworthy. These ideas would become the basis of their friendship in years to come.

Riddhi Bishnoi in Jodhpur was not yet a regular university student; she was studying in her final year of school. Because of her father's earlier association with Marudhar she sometimes visited the university library. One day she saw Saurabh dusting a page of the old catalogue. "What do you do if a book's name is entered incorrectly?" she asked. "First I look at what the original book actually says," Saurabh replied. "Then I record the date of the correction. If you silently erase the old error, it becomes difficult to understand how it happened." Riddhi remembered the answer. Eight years later it would return to her when she examined a list of five hundred bank accounts, though that day she had no inkling of such a future.

The library superintendent told Saurabh that the budget for the post had been approved for another term, but an open selection process would be followed. Saurabh decided to apply again. He knew the court's order had not handed him a certificate of victory in advance; nevertheless, he now had sound grounds for expecting that the former vague remark could not become a criterion in the new selection. "What if somebody else is selected?" Akshay asked. "If the selection is made on fair criteria,

I'll be disappointed," Saurabh said, "but I won't claim injustice." For the first time Akshay saw his friend so resolute.

On one of the last mornings of 2018, Shivnarayan Jha arrived at Revati's Delhi office. His steps had slowed, but his gaze was as keen as ever. On the desk lay separate papers: the order in Saurabh's case, the survey report on the Marudhar land, and Sunita's wage account. Looking at all three, he said, "Three people, three cases, yet each wants the correct meaning of their own name." "The Supreme Court spoke of dignity in important ways this year," Revati said. "But here in my office dignity sometimes means a day's wages, sometimes a correct entry for a name, and sometimes the right to keep the door to a private life closed."

"Does a court judgment change human beings?" Shivnarayan asked. "Sometimes fear of the law diminishes," Revati replied. "Sometimes an institution corrects its rules, sometimes a family listens for the first time. But courts do not bring about every change. People change themselves too." Shivnarayan laughed. "In 2000 one page of Neelkanth's ledger kept me troubled for nearly four years. Now your papers bear the names of an entire country." "And behind each name," Revati said, "is a different person."

In the evening Revati received a copy of Anupama's book. On its first page the author had written: "Whoever is called by a name must also be heard." Revati closed the book. Beside it lay numerous court files, outside was the sound of the city, and throughout that country people were still seeking a chance to speak. The words of the Constitution, she felt, were not a statue carved in stone; their meanings were continually renewed in school registers, factory attendance books, the pages of literature and questions asked in court.

Night deepened and the Marudhar library closed. Saurabh returned the last reader's book to its proper shelf. He noticed that an old Maithili book had its author's name entered incorrectly in the new catalogue. No one had noticed. He opened the original volume and read the name again, wrote a request for correction and preserved a reference to the earlier entry. There had been a day when his own name became entangled in a legal dispute; now he was engaged in the ordinary work of restoring another author's name. As he closed the door, he said to Akshay, "Come, let's go home." Within those two words he heard all the weariness of 2018, and a new courage.

Chapter 23 — The Moon's Darkness, the Valley's Questions

2019: Sriharikota, Jodhpur, Srinagar, Delhi and Darbhanga

On the first Monday of the new year, Saurabh Jha arrived at the old library of Marudhar University so early that the watchman had to hurry to unlock its doors. Outside, the sunlight had reached only the upper part of the walls. He stood looking at the books arranged in three rows of the same cupboard. Because of the dispute over the renewal of his appointment the previous year, for a long time he had been unable to enter this place with the ease a working person ought to feel in his own workplace. Following the institution's reconsideration, he had been given an opportunity to take part in a fresh selection process, but his post was not yet permanent. There was an odd calm within him. The remark he had described as false and prejudicial had been identified as such in the institution's original records. That had not settled all his difficulties; still, at least the account of his work could now be read again.

Firdous Kaul had left a thin envelope on Saurabh's desk. Inside were three old photographs, a copy of an identity card from a school in Srinagar, and questions about admission. A short letter accompanied them: "My niece Ruhani wants to study science and mathematics. She will be applying for higher education this year. Could you send particulars of the study assistance available to new students in your library?" Saurabh read the letter first, then looked at the girl's photograph. Beyond the hills the sky was white; the girl held an exercise book and a pencil. There was no political declaration anywhere in the picture. He prepared a reply setting out the library's opening hours, scholarship assistance and the separate address of the admissions office.

That day Firdous was conducting a short lesson on verifying electronic records, with Manasvi and Vivek Meghwal in her room. Two versions of a single name appeared on the computer screen: one in a Hindi translation, the other on the original certificate. "If you find two forms in a record," Firdous said, "look at their sources first. You cannot put someone's identity right by making an assumption." Vivek laughed. "A great many quarrels at this university began with one incorrect name." "Not merely the name," Manasvi replied, "but how that name is stored, circulated and interpreted." Firdous glanced towards the window. Students were running on the distant playing field. She was worried about the year

ahead for her niece Ruhani, but for the moment these were ordinary worries: the cost of education, a hostel, meals, the distance from home.

In Delhi, Revati Jha was arranging some letters in her father's old wooden chest. Shivnarayan Jha had taken out the seizure list from Neelkanth Sah's case of 2000 and shown it to her. "Why these old papers now?" Revati asked. "Paper grows old, but the ways of reading it keep changing," Shivnarayan said. "Now photographs from phones, bank records and school lists all come before the courts. It was in that case that I first understood how a single page of a seizure list could change an entire story." Revati put away a letter concerning the updating of Saurabh's employment record. "The questions raised by new laws will remain," she said, "but the old problem keeps returning. A human being is more than the name by which an institution identifies him."

Shivnarayan's health had weakened, though his eyes still shone whenever the discussion turned to judicial decisions. He told Revati that the hardest part of a lawyer's work was not to believe everything a client said, but to say no more in court than the evidence could support. Revati described the separate positions of Manasvi's dispute over her former name, Saurabh's appointment and the orders concerning Sunita's wages. Shivnarayan listened closely. "You bring all these cases together under one word—dignity," he said. "But a judge needs the separate rules that govern each one." Revati wrote the observation in her notebook.

As the heat before the rains began to rise in Jodhpur, Ruhani's school results arrived. Her marks were good, especially in mathematics and physics. Firdous telephoned to congratulate her niece. "Auntie, I want to see pictures of the far side of the Moon," Ruhani said excitedly. "That round surface we see in books cannot be nothing but stone." Firdous asked what had stirred this curiosity. "Some people say that once you reach the Moon you understand everything," Ruhani replied. "Why, then, do scientists go back?" "Behind every question that is answered," Firdous said, "another opens. When you study, be sure to keep your right to ask questions."

Around that time there was increasing talk of the second Chandrayaan mission in Niranjan and Maitreyi's home. Their daughter Avani was writing an article on space exploration for her school's wall magazine. Niranjan explained that a scientific mission had its own dates, instruments, objectives and risks; an enticing newspaper headline could not hold all of those distinctions. Avani wrote about the success of India's first lunar mission, leaving a blank space for the landing planned in the second. "Why leave it blank?" Maitreyi asked. Avani laughed. "Writing

down success before something happens would not be science." Her father laughed too. He did not yet know that, before the year was out, the empty space would become the occasion for a serious lesson within the family.

Meanwhile, the finance office at Marudhar University published a new list of scholarships. Provision had been made to re-examine the papers of students whose names appeared in different forms in the records. Manasvi welcomed the procedure, but demanded one safeguard: only the officials who needed to should see sensitive personal documents; copies must not circulate through every department. Bhatnagar was no longer as inflexible as before in many matters. "The official needs proof and the student needs privacy," he said. "It is not easy to protect both." "Not easy," Manasvi answered, "but possible. If we abandon it because it is difficult, our old mistakes will return."

Firdous wrote to the university registrar asking for ordinary information about her niece Ruhani's possible admission. The office replied that an application would have to be submitted under the rules; a teacher's personal acquaintance was no guarantee of a place. Firdous was pleased. She wanted no special favour, only that the rules should be explained to an applicant. The registrar's letter required the original records from an outside school to be presented at admission, while the institution's published rules specified the possibility of provisional admission when verification was incomplete. She marked that paragraph. It was a small provision, but before the year ended it would become the centre of a major dispute.

In May the results of the Lok Sabha election were announced. At one table in the Marudhar dining hall people discussed the victory; at another, the reasons for the opposition's defeat. Saurabh's colleague Jagdish said that everything would now move in a definite direction. Setting down his tea, Vivek remarked, "The government's direction is one thing; appointments at educational institutions, research and students' meals are another." Jagdish took the reply as political opposition. Firdous intervened. "Criticising someone's opinion is no measure of their love for their country. Voting in an election is a citizen's right; so is asking questions at a university." The conversation ended without a quarrel, but in it many shades of public hope and dissent had been plainly heard.

A young lawyer, Tayyab Ansari, came to Revati's office with a complaint about the cancellation of a Rajasthan undergraduate's admission. The student's original school certificate, he said, had been

destroyed in a fire, but the university's new rules required the original. Revati asked what provision there was for accepting a replacement document. Tayyab opened the papers. They insisted on the original certificate, but also provided for verifying equivalent records. "First make a written application to the office and submit evidence in accordance with the rules," Revati said. "It is hardly right for a lawyer to run to the High Court with every incomplete set of papers." Tayyab thought the advice commonplace; to Revati it was the distillation of twenty-seven years of experience in the courts.

One Sunday Firdous took an old history of Kashmir from her bookcase and began marking pages for Ruhani. Her niece had said that even when she studied science at university, she would not give up reading literature. Firdous's father had taught mathematics at school; her mother had sung Kashmiri folk songs. There had been books in several languages at home. Firdous had once told Manasvi, "People call me Kashmiri, and that is all right. But that one word cannot contain my parents' story, my work or all my questions." Manasvi had replied that errors in her own records had taught her what this meant. The two women's lives were different, yet they shared a resistance to having their identities shut inside a single box.

In the first week of June the whole family began gathering at a fixed place near the television in Niranjan's house. The date of the second Chandrayaan mission was approaching. On a small sheet Avani wrote: "Launch; orbit around Earth; trajectory towards the Moon; lunar orbit; landing." She left a space beside each stage. Maitreyi asked why she did not make a celebratory poster instead. "The celebration of this work is incomplete while the tests are still going on," Avani replied. Niranjan was pleased to hear his daughter speak in this language of honesty. But many people in his office were so conscious of the possibility of failure that even celebration brought them no sense of ease. A scientist's courage was not freedom from uncertainty; it was the ability to work in its company.

News came that the launch scheduled for 15 July had been postponed for technical reasons. The word "failure" immediately flashed in some media headlines. Niranjan telephoned Avani. "They have checked the calculations again. The spacecraft has not taken off; the question of a failed landing does not arise yet. Stopping a launch when a risk is detected in time is itself an essential part of the work." In the blank space of her wall-magazine article, Avani wrote: "Scheduled launch postponed; renewed attempt after corrections." A classmate said the scientists had become frightened. "If they were not afraid," Avani replied, "why would

they check for danger?" Their teacher, listening to both, said that the distinction between fear and caution was an elementary lesson in science.

On 22 July, at forty-three minutes past two in the afternoon, Chandrayaan-2 lifted off from Sriharikota. Revati was in a courthouse corridor, but she saw the news on her phone and sent her father a message. Shivnarayan replied, "The children of this generation will read a sky much farther away than mine." Students applauded in Firdous's classroom in Jodhpur. Ruhani telephoned from her home in Srinagar to say that she too had watched the broadcast. There was nothing political in the conversation between aunt and niece. Chandrayaan entered Earth orbit, and with it the questions of countless children rose towards the sky.

On the same day, Marudhar's admissions office issued a letter provisionally accepting Ruhani's application. She was to study physics, provided verification of her original school certificate was completed. The letter set out the deadline, the rule requiring original documents and the alternative verification procedure available in the event of an incomplete record. "Don't ask for anything on account of knowing me," Firdous told Ruhani. "Apply on the strength of the rights every student has." "I'll follow the rules," Ruhani replied, "but my father's name is pronounced wrongly in one of my school certificates. I have applied for a correction." Firdous laughed. "There it is—another question about a name."

In Delhi, Noor was reading records from several universities for a 2019 report on educational institutions. She knew that Firdous's family lived in Srinagar. She asked whether she might have a longer conversation with them about women's education. After seeking permission, Firdous told her niece that a journalist wished to ask her questions; whether to answer was entirely her decision. Ruhani told Noor on the telephone, "Write about my studies, but whatever I think about any election must not take the place of my marks in mathematics." Noor laughed. To some journalists this might have been an ordinary remark; for her it was a warning to remember the limits of her profession.

In the last week of July, the allocation of hostel rooms began at Marudhar. Manasvi sat at the student-help desk, handing each applicant the rules in writing. One poor student's name had been misspelt; she corrected his application. Saurabh was compiling the list of new students for the library. Firdous saw a notice about a vacant room for Ruhani, but made no personal request to reserve it. She knew that institutional

favouritism could begin with a small private desire, even when one called that desire help in one's own mind.

That evening Shivnarayan told Revati on the telephone that, at the time of the first case in 2000, no one could have imagined that two decades later every student would carry so many records on a phone. “It is easy to keep documents on a phone,” Revati said, “but hard to prove their original source and date.” “And if someone's phone stops working?” her father asked. “Then we must find another means—the post, an acknowledgment from an office, a witness's letter, an official record. Technology is a convenience, not the only doorway to a right.” She did not yet know how severely the coming year would test that answer.

In the first week of August, Firdous received a short call from the family home in Srinagar. Shireen said there was unusual activity around the house, travellers were returning, and school programmes were being cancelled. She could not speak for long. Firdous said in an ordinary voice, “Tell Ruhani to keep her admission papers safe.” The call ended. She tried repeatedly the next day but could not get through. In the absence of news the mind invents story after story within itself. Sitting in her room, Firdous could not read a single line of the syllabus. For her, the situation in the Valley was not yet so much news of a government decision as an unanswered question about her family's safety.

News of the events in Parliament on 5 August spread rapidly through the university. Across the country there was support, dissent, hope and anxiety over proposals to change Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional arrangements and reorganise the state. One group in the dining hall argued that this would open new opportunities for development and a uniform legal framework. Another asked how questions of representation and local consent would be heard. Vivek asked how an ordinary student could receive examination notices if communications were disrupted. A young man immediately called his question opposition to a national decision. For the first time Firdous spoke in a grave voice. “Asking about a student's examination is not opposition to the nation. Disagreement with a policy is not the same as supporting violence. Listen to the question first.” The dining hall fell quiet, but no agreement followed.

In Firdous's class that day the subject was electromagnetic waves. She had drawn the pattern of a wave on the blackboard when a student asked, “Madam, if a message cannot get through, where do the waves go?” Some laughed; others understood that the question reached beyond the scientific illustration. “The service provided by a device, physical waves

and a person's access to communication are different things," Firdous replied. "Science has given us the means, but society decides how to use them. I teach physics in this classroom; human suffering does not ask what discipline you belong to." She returned to the lesson, chalk in her hand, her thoughts beside the silent telephone in Srinagar.

At the registrar's office in Marudhar the final deadline for admission to the new academic session was approaching. Ruhani's name appeared on the preliminary selection list, but her original certificates still had to be matched, she had to appear in person, and the remaining fee formalities were incomplete. Mahesh Gupta, an office assistant, was preparing a list of reminders in accordance with the rules. Firdous went to ask what provision existed if documents could not be delivered in extraordinary circumstances. "I cannot change the rules," Gupta said. "An officer can consider a written petition, but the student will still have to send one." "I don't think it right to write a petition on my niece's behalf," Firdous said. "But I do want to give the institution formal notice of the information I have." She submitted a signed written statement without asking for any personal privilege.

Watching all this, Saurabh remembered waiting for the letter about his own appointment the year before. "If the door through which someone must apply is closed," he told Firdous, "their right ought not to be measured by the speed of the post." "But deadlines are necessary too," Firdous replied. "Other students are waiting. If I ask for justice for my niece, I have to consider their rights as well." Manasvi joined the conversation. She suggested that the registrar issue a common instruction on delays to all students applying from outside the state, rather than grant a concession in the name of one teacher's family. Firdous accepted the suggestion at once.

Ruhani's days in the house in Srinagar were passing differently. Shireen was undergoing treatment for her knee, and there was a young nephew in the house as well. Ruhani kept her school marksheet and date-of-birth document together in an envelope. She hoped that, if she found a way to communicate, she would be able to send word. "If your studies do not begin this year, your life will not end," her father Yusuf said. Ruhani was silent. It was not merely the loss of a year that troubled her. It seemed unjust that an opportunity she had earned through her own hard work should be decided on the basis of an absence whose causes were so uncertain. In her notebook she went on recording the admission dates, acknowledgments from her school and her attempts to make contact, as far as she could remember them.

After 10 August the university was to hold a lecture entitled "Constitutional Change and the Federal System." The registrar said that, as the subject was sensitive, invited specialists should be asked in writing to conduct a balanced discussion. Revati accepted an invitation to join from Delhi. At the lecture one professor defended the constitutional basis of the changes; another raised the question of local representation. Revati made it clear that Parliament's legislative action, the executive's security arrangements and judicial remedies for an individual's right to education were three different legal questions. No single slogan could answer them all. The debate among students grew heated, but the chair gave every speaker an opportunity to be heard.

Afterwards a young man approached Firdous and demanded harshly, "Are you for the government's decision or against it?" "Do you attend the classes I teach?" Firdous asked. "Yes," he said. "Then you know that I ask for evidence in answer to a question. Wanting to know whether my family is safe is not a political ballot." The young man was quiet for a while. Then he said, "My uncle serves in the security forces. He's at risk too." "My concern for your uncle's safety is no less," Firdous replied. "But I too have the right to worry about my niece's education." They did not arrive at complete agreement, but they parted without insulting one another.

On the evening of 15 August Ruhani's entry on the waiting list changed. The words "verification incomplete" appeared beside her name on the computer screen. Manasvi saved a copy, but did not turn the day's entry into a public news item: the student had a right to the privacy of her information. The registrar's office said it was not a final rejection but only a stage in the process. Firdous read and reread that line. "The rules are the same for everyone," some students said. "Equality of rules and equality of actual opportunity to comply with them are different," Manasvi replied. "The university's answer must account for both."

In the second half of August, Noor Jatay came to Jodhpur to write a news report. She met Firdous and said that, amid political arguments broadcast across the country, the private lives of students and teachers were often lost from view. "If you write about my family's worries," Firdous said, "do not turn this one case into a symbol of all Kashmir. Different households are living through different circumstances. Some see the changes as a hope for economic opportunity; some are anxious about disrupted communications; some have suffered violence. Each has its own language." "I will preserve these distinctions in my article," Noor replied. She asked permission to print Ruhani's photograph. Firdous said not without her niece's consent. Noor left the photograph out.

One day Revati spoke to Bhatnagar by telephone and said the institution could learn from Saurabh's case in 2018. “The point is not that a court should immediately grant admission,” she said. “The question is whether the administration used the power available within its own declared rules to consider exceptional circumstances.” “We cannot break the rules for the sake of one student's name,” Bhatnagar replied. “Of course not. Then record why you are refusing the option those rules already provide. Giving reasons makes a decision transparent.” After the call Bhatnagar opened the papers of the old committee. He remembered how much trouble its vague remark about Saurabh had caused the institution.

On the first day of September a familiar postman brought a letter to Firdous's house in Jodhpur. Its edges were soiled, but the postmark was clear. Ruhani had written in her own hand: “All my certificates are safe. The correction letter from the school has been delayed. For many days it was impossible to make contact. I am trying to arrange travel; please inform the admissions office.” The letter bore a date in the final week of August. Firdous sat for a long time holding the paper. For the first time she had news of her niece's safety in the girl's own handwriting. She made a copy but did not turn it into an emotional spectacle for anyone. She immediately petitioned the registrar's office to place the applicant's written wishes and the circumstances of the delay on record.

Gupta examined the letter at the office. “This appears to be in the applicant's own handwriting,” he said, “but I cannot treat it as complete proof that telephone services were shut down.” “Then record what you do and do not accept,” Firdous replied. “I am not asking you to regard everything stated in the letter as proved. I am asking you to consider it before reaching a decision.” Gupta stamped the letter as received. He explained that the next list had to be issued to fill the remaining seats. Firdous acknowledged his administrative difficulty, but said she wanted written reasons for any final decision concerning the disputed place. For the first time Gupta understood the request not as a plea for a personal favour but as a question of the record.

On Teachers' Day, 5 September, a university subcommittee considered Ruhani's application. Some members argued that failure to appear on the prescribed date was sufficient grounds. Manasvi, who was not a decision-maker, submitted a memorandum on behalf of student assistance: a uniform policy should be adopted for delays affecting students arriving from abroad or distant regions; each case should be examined on its own facts; and no vacant place should be held indefinitely. The committee's reply said that, because the certificates had not been provided, Ruhani's

name could not be retained for the next stage. The letter made no mention of any examination of the exceptional circumstances. Firdous read it and remained silent for some time. She knew that the letter would take even longer to reach Ruhani's home.

All the papers were sent to Revati in Delhi. She first made one point clear. "Firdous, you cannot simply become the petitioner in court yourself without legal grounds. We must establish your authority to represent Ruhani." Firdous said an old application contained a handwritten authorisation from her niece, though it had been given for ordinary assistance with admission formalities. "It would not be right to use that authorisation to file an entire judicial petition," Revati replied. "First we shall submit a detailed representation to the university. If fresh signed authority from Ruhani does not arrive, we will have to consider what remedies are open." Firdous grew more impatient at this caution, but understood Revati's professional responsibility.

In the early hours of 7 September many households were watching the planned landing of Chandrayaan-2's Vikram. Niranjan's family had stayed awake all night. Avani sat before the television with her science notebook. The descent proceeded at the expected speed until, in the final stage, contact with the craft was lost. The calculations taught in the classroom and the event unfolding in the sky did not coincide. Maitreyi's eyes filled with tears; there was sorrow on Niranjan's face. But he immediately explained to Avani that Chandrayaan's orbiter was still working: an unsuccessful landing attempt did not make the entire scientific mission worthless. In her notebook Avani wrote in the empty space: "Contact lost; investigation continuing."

Firdous scarcely slept that night in Jodhpur. There was sorrow over the scientific mission on one side, and anxiety for her family's news on the other. "Look," she told Manasvi, "when scientists lose contact with a spacecraft, they don't punish the craft; they examine the data. Our university has decided a student's future simply because she could not make contact." "It is a beautiful comparison," Manasvi replied, "but in court we'll need rules and records. A petition won't succeed on a metaphor from science." Firdous smiled. It was the special quality of their friendship: each listened to the other's distress, but neither allowed affection to take the place of proof.

On 10 September a relative of Ruhani's who had reached Jammu found an opportunity to use a public telephone service and sent Firdous a brief message. Shireen was in ordinary health; Ruhani would try to reach Rajasthan the following week, but no travel date was certain. Firdous put

the message into writing: who had said what, when, what was certain and what remained uncertain. Meanwhile the university issued notice that it was offering the vacant place to another student on the waiting list. That student, Omprakash Bairwa, came from a poor family. His father was a labourer; he too was entitled to a prompt decision. The dispute now lay between the genuine opportunities of two people. It was no longer a simple matter of taking sides.

As soon as Revati heard Omprakash's name, she told her assistant it would be wrong to seek an interim order for Ruhani without hearing his interests. She prepared a written application asking the university to consider both Ruhani's circumstances and Omprakash's accrued rights in accordance with its own rules, and to explore any other available seat, transfer at a later stage or comparable educational opportunity. She specifically did not request the immediate cancellation of anyone's admission. Firdous agreed. She remembered how easily another person's life could become invisible when one demanded justice for someone one loved.

The following week Ruhani finally arrived in Jaipur with her father Yusuf, and they travelled on to Jodhpur. Firdous waited at the railway station. At the sight of her niece she ran towards her, but at first neither could speak. Yusuf's eyes showed his exhaustion. There was much to tell about the situation at home, he said, but first they should understand where the admission stood. Ruhani still had the original marksheet and the receipt for her correction request in her bag. She did not want to be regarded merely as a victim; she was a student who had worked hard for the chance to study. Firdous let her decide for herself when to go to the admissions office.

Ruhani appeared in person before the registrar for the first time. Gupta offered her a chair. “My application was accepted in the original list,” Ruhani said. “I accept that I was late. But where was the hearing about why I was late?” “The committee has prescribed deadlines under the rules,” the registrar replied. “After a deadline is missed, another student must be given the opportunity.” “I am not asking you to remove that student,” Ruhani said. “I am asking why you did not examine the provision your rules contain for exceptional circumstances.” The registrar looked towards Gupta. Firdous had been asking the same question for some time; on the applicant's own lips, however, it had acquired a different force.

After the meeting Yusuf said, “Daughter, if it doesn't happen this year, we'll go back to Kashmir.” “If we have to return, we will,” Ruhani

answered quietly. “But first I want a written answer. This is not only about my place; the rules should make the rights of other students who find themselves trapped like this in future clear too.” Yusuf looked at his daughter and fell silent. He felt both pride and worry. He had not come to conduct politics or advance grand arguments in court; he wanted only to safeguard his daughter's education. Yet even for that modest purpose he was having to pass through the entire machinery of a public institution.

Ruhani finally signed the detailed representation herself. Firdous was there only to assist, and a copy went to Revati's office in Delhi. Revati checked that the authorisation was clearly worded, that the list of papers was complete, and that unnecessary private medical information had not been attached. She told her assistant, “We are not going to give the court the entire life history of a girl who wants to study. We will give it only what a proper review of the decision requires.” In that single sentence lay the practical meaning of the privacy principle recognised in Puttaswamy.

In the first week of October the reconsideration committee's reply arrived. It said that the circumstances of Ruhani's delay had been considered, but the vacant place had already been filled; she would be permitted to apply the following year. There was no discussion of any alternative, nor was it clear which standard in the rule on exceptional circumstances had been applied. Reading the letter, Ruhani said, “The answer they've given me merely repeats the decision. It gives no reason.” Firdous drew her close. She had never wanted to take the matter as far as a court. But the letter's failure to give adequate reasons compelled her to question the legality of the decision itself.

Revati came to Jodhpur from Delhi, accompanied by Shivnarayan. He was no longer fit to argue a High Court case; he had come with his daughter to visit old friends. At their first meeting Revati asked Ruhani, “Do you want the court to restore your cancelled admission immediately?” “I want my papers to be read fairly,” Ruhani answered. “If no seat remains, I want to be told what lawful alternatives there are. I have not come to take away Omprakash's seat.” Revati smiled. Shivnarayan, who had been listening, said, “If a lawyer fails to hear what a client actually wants, the lawsuit brought in the client's name becomes the lawyer's own invention.”

The petition challenged the order issued by the appropriate authority of Marudhar University. Revati arranged in sequence the original selection list, the verification rules, Ruhani's school documents, the limits of proof about her inability to communicate in time, the dates on

which letters arrived, and the committee's two replies. She made clear that the court was not being asked to reach any conclusion on the constitutional decisions concerning Jammu and Kashmir in August. The dispute concerned the lawfulness of a Rajasthan public university's application of its own admissions rules. Drawing that boundary was essential: the attraction of a nationwide political issue could easily cause the precise remedy for a small educational dispute to be overlooked.

At the first hearing the university's advocate, Shridhar Purohit, said, “My Lord, the entire admissions process cannot be interrupted because one student was late. Her situation may be unfortunate, but the rules apply equally to all.” “We do not deny equality,” Revati replied. “The university's own rules allow for consideration where an exceptional obstacle arises. Our question is whether that discretion was genuinely exercised.” “Is there a vacant seat?” the judge asked. “Not according to the preliminary information,” Purohit answered. “Then we are not asking for an interim order removing a student who has already gained lawful admission,” Revati said.

The judge asked again, “To what extent has it been established that Ruhani Kaul's opportunity to receive written information on time was obstructed?” Revati produced the posted letter, the acknowledgment from the school and copies of the university's records. “I do not say these establish every aspect of the circumstances,” she explained. “But they certainly show that the applicant did not simply remain inactive without reason. The committee's decision gives no indication that it examined the papers available to it.” “The current political debate about a unified country is not the subject of this petition,” the judge said. “What I have to examine is the university's responsibility and the words of its rules.” Some spectators in the courtroom were disappointed; they had hoped to hear a sweeping political pronouncement. Ruhani was reassured by the limitation.

The university's advocate raised another point: if relief were granted for one student's delay, many others might make the same demand. “All students in similar circumstances should be subject to the same rules,” Revati replied. “No exemption has been sought for anyone on the basis of a special personal connection. But where discretion has been conferred, there is a duty to exercise it with reasons. The possible rights of other applicants cannot justify an order for which no reasons are given.” The judge directed that her answer be placed on record. Firdous sat in a rear row. She remembered her student Manasvi's earlier question about records. The language was different; the underlying problem was the same: a person must not disappear inside a document.

The court did not order immediate admission. It gave the respondent time to submit a detailed affidavit on the teaching places available, comparable alternative arrangements for study, and the actual grounds on which the application had been considered. Outside, Ruhani asked, “Is that a victory or a defeat?” “For now, a way has opened to examine the reasons for the decision,” Revati replied. “The court does not take discretion into its own hands and distribute every seat. What we need now is a written answer showing that your application received proper consideration.” When Omprakash's name came up, Revati repeated that his already acquired admission must not be disturbed without an order of the court. Ruhani agreed.

Until then Omprakash Bairwa had scarcely heard his own name spoken in the whole dispute. At dawn his father had told him, “Do not abandon your studies and come back to the fields.” Now he feared that the place he had obtained would be presented in the news as a “disputed seat.” Manasvi gave him the opportunity to speak for himself. “I don't know that girl,” Omprakash said. “But if she has been wronged, let it be put right. Why should I lose my admission?” “Your question is fair,” Manasvi replied. “Two people's rights are before us; we must not seek a remedy by destroying the other's opportunity.” Omprakash met Ruhani for the first time at the library door. They exchanged names but did not discuss the dispute. Such silence is sometimes not hostility but the courtesy of acknowledging a difficult situation.

The university's affidavit arrived in November. It gave numbers for admissions, allocated seats, the waiting list and an alternative course not currently in operation. Laboratory capacity limited the number of places in some subjects. Yet an internal report from teachers mentioned the possible availability of an additional teaching group, which had not been considered when the decision was made. Revati did not immediately describe this as proof of a right to admission. “It is an option worth examining,” she said. “The competent academic committee must decide whether it can actually be implemented.” The judge asked the relevant committee for a reasoned reply. The order made clear that the High Court was not to take the place of an expert committee in deciding teaching loads, laboratory arrangements or academic standards.

That same month, on 9 November, news of the Supreme Court's historic judgment concerning Ayodhya spread across the country. In Darbhanga Shivnarayan met his old friends Haji Saeed and Pandit Gaurishankar. Their religious memories and sentiments differed, but they shared a concern for peace in the market. “A court gives a legal decision in a particular land dispute,” Shivnarayan said. “People must still

meet one another every day and do the work of preserving society themselves.” “The order for social harmony is written not on paper but in our conduct,” Haji Saeed replied. Noor Jatay wanted to report on the small gathering, but Shivnarayan asked her to value their actual words more than a photograph.

In Darbhanga that year Anupama Jha was writing a story of waiting outside a court for her new manuscript. “People read a newspaper and learn about a historic judgment,” she told Noor Jahan, “but who will write about the day of the woman who puts lentils on the fire after hearing it?” “You write that,” Noor replied. “I'll write the daily account.” Anupama wrote a scene inspired by Firdous's circumstances but did not use Ruhani's real name. She was mindful that public attention to news and ownership of a person's private life were not the same. With Revati's permission, she asked about the meaning of certain expressions used in court procedure; she did not want ignorance of the law to make the events in her story false.

In the first week of December, Ruhani was studying in the university library on a temporary reader's permit. Because she was not a regular student, she could not enter certain laboratories, but she was allowed to sit in the public reading room. Saurabh gave her a collection of essays on the geology of the Moon. Turning its pages, Ruhani asked, “Even after contact with the lander was lost, did pictures from the orbiter continue to arrive?” “Yes,” Saurabh replied. “Failure in one part does not destroy all the information.” Ruhani closed the book. “Then the loss of one part of my papers cannot destroy my ability to study,” she said. “Not your ability,” Saurabh replied. “But the institution's admissions procedure is another matter. The two have to be brought together.”

In its final report, Marudhar's academic committee stated that all regular first-year places involving laboratory work had been filled. However, the limited provision for “late registration” included in an appendix to the original admissions notice could be used in exceptional circumstances, provided the student completed the necessary instruction and practical work. This possibility had not been considered in the earlier reply. The registrar acknowledged the omission. On reading the report, Revati realised that the petition's central question had at last received an answer—not mere sympathy, not automatic admission, but a definite alternative path under the rules. Even so, she did not declare final victory without examination of laboratory safety, completion of the syllabus and the equal rights of other students.

At the next High Court hearing the university's advocate said the committee recommended late registration for Ruhani, subject to her written agreement to complete the outstanding practical lessons. “Is this arrangement based on this student's personal connections or on a published rule?” the judge asked. “On the appendix to the published rules,” the advocate replied, “and it is available to other applicants in similar circumstances.” “Then the principal defect in the decision has been addressed,” Revati said. “My client asks that unnecessary private health records not be kept in the institution's public register.” The judge regarded this question as proper too. The written order recorded the competent authority's duty to make a revised, reasoned decision and apply the same rules equally.

The court did not write Ruhani's admission letter itself. At its next meeting the committee examined the actual arrangements for instruction and approved her late registration. Ruhani received dates on which she could make up the missed laboratory exercises. When she entered Omprakash's class, no one welcomed her from a platform. It was an ordinary admission, and she valued that all the more. Omprakash moved his notebook aside. “Sit here,” he said. “The light is good.” Ruhani smiled. Sometimes, after so many applications, reports and judicial hearings, all a human being receives is an ordinary place to sit.

In the second week of December the Citizenship Amendment Act received presidential assent. Meetings in support of it and in opposition began in many parts of the country. Some university students debated with copies of the Constitution in their hands. One group said the aim of protecting specified persecuted communities from neighbouring countries was important; another questioned the law's classifications and its implications for equality. Firdous advised them all to read the actual statutory text. Revati made clear that the date an Act received assent, the date on which its several provisions came into force, and a judicial challenge to its validity were three separate matters. Debate at the university was intense, but Manasvi stopped those who began to accuse others of crimes on the basis of their identities.

One evening a draft of Noor Jahan's news report said: “Kashmiri student granted admission by court.” As soon as Ruhani read it she said, “That will make readers think the court directly allotted a seat. Write it correctly: the university reconsidered the matter under its own rules, and the court examined the procedure.” Noor changed the words. “Will you allow your name to be published?” she asked. “Yes, but not my family's medical details. Those were kept in the judicial record where necessary;

they are not news." Noor deleted part of the page. The young student's insistence had furthered her own education as a journalist.

At the family home in Kashmir, Shireen was delighted to hear of Ruhani's admission. Her father Yusuf said their daughter had changed completely after the year's severe experiences. "She hasn't changed," Shireen replied. "She has had the chance to say clearly what she wanted to ask." Mist hung over the mountains beyond the window. The family did not agree on every aspect of the political decisions. There were differences of opinion within the household too. Yet despite them all, everyone was glad that Ruhani's studies would continue. "Your marksheet is proof of your labour," Firdous told her on the telephone, "but society has its own arrangements along the path that allows it to be read." "I'll study those too," Ruhani replied.

On the last day of the year, Niranjan and Maitreyi were discussing the data available from Chandrayaan-2 with an acquaintance who worked in science. Avani asked how the scientific community would describe the mission when one part of the spacecraft had failed to land. "What succeeded will be recorded as a success; what failed will be recorded as a failure," Niranjan said. "It would be wrong to measure the orbiter's work and the landing attempt by a single word." "A truthful account of an unsuccessful experiment can also become the foundation for the next mission," Maitreyi added. Avani opened her old wall-magazine article. She neither erased the enthusiasm she had written at the beginning nor crossed out the later words "Contact lost." The whole story was learning to live with two truths at once.

On the last evening of 2019, Shivnarayan Jha told Revati in Delhi that, at his age, history often looked like a list of court decisions: someone's right recognised, someone's claim unproved, someone else's appeal pending. "But outside those decisions," Revati said, "people go on cooking, studying, farming, working and dreaming." Her father picked up a copy of the old seizure list. "For years the presence of the dead Ramkishun's name on this page troubled me," he said. "The responsibility to understand the person whose name appears on paper belongs not only to the law but to other human beings." Revati remembered the experiences of Saurabh, Manasvi, Firdous, Sunita and Ruhani. The story of twenty-seven years had reached only its halfway point.

That night, in the hostel at Marudhar, Ruhani was writing up the notes of her first experiment. Omprakash was studying in a neighbouring room. A hard wind blew outside. In the library Saurabh was putting pages

back in their proper places before going home. Beside the old records he found a form from a new service provider for students' digital identification and distance learning. The registrar wanted to introduce the system the following year. Saurabh showed the form to Firdous. "Distance learning will be useful," she said, "but decide the limits on students' private information beforehand." Saurabh marked that question on the form. Nobody yet knew how grave the necessity of studying from a distance would become the following year.

Ruhani wrote her final line: "Before declaring absent what an observation has failed to reveal, we must look again." She laid down her pen and gazed at the hostel courtyard in the moonlight. The telephone at her Srinagar home was working that night, but her mind was still burdened by questions that had found no answers. Under that same moonlight, distant homes, scientific laboratories and closed courtrooms were all present with their separate darknesses. The questions had not come to an end; they had found a new path through evidence and patience.

Chapter 24 — Closed Courtrooms, Open Suffering

2020: Ludhiana, Jodhpur, Delhi, Darbhanga, Chandigarh and the Andamans

In the last dawns of Phagun, as the watchman opened the factory gates in Ludhiana, the sound of his keys seemed unusually loud to him for the first time. Inside, the machines were running as before, but talk of an unseen disease spreading in India and abroad had entered the spaces between their sounds. Sunita Paswan arrived carrying a packet of medicines for her father and a small tin of rotis for herself. Champa Devi, standing by the loom, asked, “Sister, what will become of us if this disease comes here?” Sunita had no answer. No clear safety instructions had yet reached the factory; there was only the old inequality between the vehicles bringing goods from outside and the workers' small bags.

Since the previous winter Ramlakhan Paswan had been unable to complete a full shift because of pain in his knees. He had been promised lighter work at a lower wage, but the new register in the accounts department again showed fewer days against his name. “Daughter, keep writing what is owed in your notebook,” he told Sunita. “But remember sometimes that everyone's troubles here are greater than the money due to me.” “Larger troubles do not erase smaller accounts, Father,” Sunita replied. There was no harshness in the words, only a gentle persistence in the sense of justice she had learnt from him.

By the second week of March the factory's orders had begun to change. At times a bucket of water would be placed by the entrance; at others the workers would be told to stand apart, though four of them still had to sit at the same table to pack the products. In his managerial office Dharampal Khurana counted the commercial orders being cancelled by customers. He believed the difficulties were real; so did Sunita. But when he said, “The outstanding wages for the month will be paid once the situation returns to normal,” Sunita asked for a written statement. Dharampal was irritated. “Paperwork at a time like this?” “Especially at a time like this,” Sunita said. “Who will remember later?”

At Marudhar University in Jodhpur, Ruhani Kaul was cleaning the glassware for her first-year laboratory work. Firdous Kaul told her that classes might be suspended for a few days. The students did not all respond alike. Vivek Meghwal's household shared a mobile phone; Manasvi had an old computer; in Omprakash Bairwa's village a network signal could be found only at one particular place in the evening. Ruhani

remembered the disruption of communications at her home in Kashmir in 2019. “Someone who has a screen and a desk at home will study from a distance,” she said. “But what about someone without a roof?” Saurabh wrote the question in the margin of the library's new distance-learning form.

In Darbhanga the dust was being cleared from account books many years old in Shivnarayan Jha's office. Revati was working in Delhi. “If the courts close, where will all the files go?” her father asked over the phone. “The need for justice will not close,” Revati replied. “The form of procedure will change. But we must find an answer to how the voice of someone without a phone will be heard.” Looking through the window, her father saw the rickshaw-puller in the lane. Three times a day the man took passengers to the court gates. The closing of the judicial building meant a question about cooking fires in his home too.

After the announcement on the night of 24 March, the air of the city changed. A nationwide lockdown took effect on 25 March. A new lock hung on the factory gate, and Sukhvinder, who made tea beside it, put out his stove. The watchman, Gurbachan, had tears in his eyes as he locked the gate. His wife worked as a hospital cleaner and could not return home at that hour. Beyond the road, in the houses behind solid boundary walls, people were arranging to stay indoors. In the rented rooms beside the factory, six families shared a single tap. Keeping one's distance was easy on paper and difficult in life.

On the first night at Sunita's home only half the usual amount of food was cooked. Her mother, Phoolkumari, measured out the rice, saying she did not know what would be available in the market. Deepak tried to read a message from school on his phone, but the data had run out. Looking at his old register, Ramlakhan said, “I spent my whole life adding up days. Now the days in this house have begun to be subtracted.” Sunita took the notebook from his hand and opened a fresh page: “Days of lockdown; rations; medicine; wages due; contacts for assistance.” She was making this list not as a shopkeeper's account but to go from door to door among her family and neighbours.

At Champa Devi's house her granddaughter Pari was drawing a map of the Earth in her school notebook. Her teacher had sent the lesson by phone, but the girl had to borrow a neighbour's teenage son's phone for an hour to see it. “For now, keep safe from the sickness,” Champa said. “You can study later.” “Grandmother, the teacher says it's for the examination,” Pari objected. Champa did not answer. In the middle of the exercise book the child had written her signature. The girl who used

to answer loudly in the regular classroom was growing silent at home while she waited for a mobile phone. Sunita could not enter that silence in any register.

Manager Dharampal had a list of employees' names prepared from his office. Some had received partial advances; the wages for others' days in March remained outstanding; and records of the employment of some temporary workers were in the contractor's hands. The accountant, Manpreet Sandhu, said by telephone, “The money available in the company's bank account and the money payable are two different amounts. List the claims you accept separately; give reasons where attendance is disputed.” “Imagine what will happen to me if people take to the streets,” Dharampal said. “It is nobody's plan to take to the streets,” Manpreet replied. “If possible, begin by trusting the list you prepared yourself.”

Baldev Singh took out the old papers of the workers' union. Some members said they should go straight to the police station; others thought it cruel to make people struggling with empty stomachs fight over wages. “The two tasks are not opposed,” Baldev told them. “Today's food is needed today, and earned money must be accounted for.” He contacted a local relief group. The first donation brought flour, lentils and soap; the second promised ten mobile-data packs. “Who should get the ten packs?” Baldev asked. The gathering fell silent. In hard times, establishing a fair order for distribution can be harder than distributing the goods themselves.

In Revati's Delhi home the old chest of court papers had given way to a laptop and headphones as her chief instruments. In the first week of April the Supreme Court issued directions for remote hearings. “We may be able to carry on with this arrangement,” Revati told her assistant Animesh, “but appearing within a screen and being heard in court are not the same thing. If a connection fails and a party's words are lost, the loss may never appear in the record.” “Shall I shorten the files beforehand?” Animesh asked. “Prepare a summary, but do not leave out the original documents. The convenience of a screen cannot replace evidence.”

Jugal Mahto, who rented a room in Ludhiana, became embroiled in a dispute with his landlord over his inability to pay the rent. The landlord, Brijmohan Seth, was himself worried about making the monthly instalment on a loan. “I have no other income,” he said. With folded hands Jugal replied, “I too live here because I pay rent, but the factory gate is closed.” Sunita listened to them separately. She neither turned the

landlord into a monster nor extracted an impossible promise of immediate payment from the tenant. She proposed a written extension of time, an account of the security deposit already paid, and an agreement without threats. By midday the dispute had been put off, not resolved.

In another settlement, however, a rent collector named Raju Bansal, claiming a right to the premises, was threatening to turn tenants out. He tried to throw two women's bedding into the street. Champa and Sunita arrived and stopped him; the neighbours stood at a distance and witnessed what happened. Sunita recorded a short stretch of the scene on her phone, but first saw that the women reached a place of safety. One of them, Shanti, said, "Don't send my face everywhere." Sunita promised she would not. She had learnt this boundary of consent in making records from the earlier experiences of Manasvi and Ruhani.

That evening a local charitable organisation, drawing up its relief list, asked Jugal for an identity card. His card carried his village address, and there was no written tenancy agreement for his room in the settlement. The young man compiling the list said it would be difficult to add his name without proof. Sunita showed him her small notebook, which recorded Jugal's factory shifts and the dates of his room payments. The young man was taken aback. "That isn't official proof." "I am not claiming it is," Sunita replied. "But it is a lead by which you can check that this person lives here. Go and see." The young man took the neighbours' statements and devised a separate process of verification. Not every problem was solved, but Jugal had not remained invisible.

In the second half of April a short video spread on Baldev's phone. A few workers, in the darkness of night, were packing their belongings and preparing to leave beside a railway line. Its caption read, "Everyone is being driven out by force." In fact, some of the people in the scene were asking for a route back to their villages; no one held a written eviction order. "If they are being forced out," Sunita said on seeing the video, "we need clear testimony to that effect. If hunger is driving them to leave, that is also true. Making the two one thing is not justice." Baldev did not become impatient with the caution; he asked which phone held the original recording.

When Sunita first telephoned Revati in Delhi, the evening lamps were being lit. "Sister, there are questions of rent and wages among us. A message on one man's phone says the company has waived its wage obligations; another person says the image was fabricated." Revati began by asking about names, dates and records. She explained that a wage

claim before the labour office and a request to the administration for housing protection would follow different routes. “To understand the image of a message, we need the original message, the sender's identity and information about the phone that received it. Don't find someone guilty from a screenshot alone.” Sunita wrote this down in her notebook.

In the final week of April the local administration repeatedly changed the information about relief camps. Food was at first distributed from a school; later the location was changed to reduce crowding. News of the change did not reach everyone's phone. Champa walked two kilometres to the old location and found the gate locked. On her return she was short of breath. A vegetable seller gave her water on the way; he himself was uncertain about the police permission required for his cart. Reaching home, Champa said angrily, “Why should a hungry person need a mobile phone to find out where food is?” Sunita had the question entered in the local assistance centre's register: notice of food-distribution points should also be conveyed by wall posters, loudspeakers and contacts among workers.

On the first of May came news that special trains for workers would run. Eyes brightened in the settlement, but a heap of questions opened at once. Where should people register? Whose name would come first? Which state had to give its consent? What about health checks? Jugal longed to reach his village near Darbhanga; his wife was pregnant and their two young children were already in the village. Ramlakhan said he would not leave immediately because of his knees and the arrangements needed for family members. Sunita stayed. She yearned for the courtyards of Mithila, but it was necessary to complete the list of those who would remain behind.

One day outside the relief centre a newly appointed volunteer, Rohit, wanted to gather photographs of the workers and post them on social media to increase donations. “I need food,” Shanti said, “but my face is not evidence of someone else's charity.” Rohit was hurt at first, then asked Sunita, “How will people understand the need if we have no photographs?” “Take general pictures with permission,” Sunita replied. “Anyone who wishes to may tell their story. Nobody has the right to make everyone's hunger public.” Rohit lowered his camera. That evening, for the first time, the food register contained a separate box for “consent to photography.”

Preparing to leave Ludhiana, one family packed two bags: clothes in one, schoolbooks in the other. A little boy, Dheeraj, asked, “My certificate is in this one too, isn't it?” “If we don't have the papers,” his

mother replied, “the school in the village will ask for them again.” Because of this fear she packed the documents in a plastic bag even more carefully than the rotis. In her mind Sunita linked the scene to Neelkanth's old account book, Manasvi's records and Ruhani's admission. Again and again, through the changing history of the country, people travelled carrying written testimony to their existence. Yet the weight of their lives was greater than any paper.

In the first half of May, Dharampal Khurana came with a few employees to the factory's closed office to reconcile records. Dust had settled on the machines, and the old production board was frozen on a date in March. Working by telephone, Manpreet had compiled separate lists of wages due. She showed Dharampal that the calculation for work actually performed by regular employees in March was one question, and the dispute over wages during the lockdown was another. “Where attendance is established, provide particulars of efforts to make payment,” she said, “and have the remaining questions examined under the relevant government directions and laws.” Dharampal grew serious. His company was short of liquid funds, but the disappearance of a worker's name did not make the debt disappear with it.

Sunita was reading a notice outside the factory gate when a young man called to her. It was Naveen Sah, who many years earlier had spoken about the temptation of a job offered without written papers. He now did temporary work in a small transport business. “I have two different messages,” Naveen said. “One promises arrears in the company's name; the other says to count March shifts as leave. They came from the same number, but within a few hours the first message was deleted.” Sunita looked at his phone, but before making a copy asked, “Is this your phone? Do you have the entire conversation containing those messages?” Naveen nodded. Sunita drew no immediate conclusion.

Beneath the message on Naveen's phone was a small image—a circular shape resembling the factory's seal. When a photograph was sent to Manpreet, she said it might be the old office seal, but the edges of the digital picture had been cropped. She explained that she had a register of original letters issued, and no entry for this message had yet been found. “See? We've caught the lie,” said a friend of Naveen's. “No,” Sunita stopped him. “We still don't know whose phone sent it, when it was sent, or whether what we see is the original form or something remade. The suspicion is serious, but guilt has not been proved.” For the first time Naveen thought of his phone not just as an object but as a possible witness.

At a bank branch in Chandigarh, Sarabjit Kaur was facing a complicated situation. Some payments to workers had reached their accounts; some accounts had lain dormant for months; and the names of some beneficiaries did not match the institution's list. “We shall have to rely on papers received remotely,” Jasmeet Singh said. “Not everyone can come to the branch.” “That is precisely why our process of verification must be more careful,” Sarabjit replied. “We cannot assume an account holder's consent merely from an employer's list.” The old name Hardev Chauhan came back to her, but she did not declare the new disorder of that year and the recurrence of an old name to be one criminal network.

Sunita's younger brother Deepak stood on a neighbour's roof listening to an online mathematics lesson. The teacher's voice kept breaking up, leaving questions half-written on the page. “If you didn't understand something, watch the recording later,” the teacher said. Deepak had no data left to watch it. That evening he told his mother he would give up studying the following year and look for work at the factory. Serving rice, Phoolkumari said, “Your father has spent his lifetime in a factory so that you may go farther with your books.” “But the books are locked inside the phone,” Deepak replied. Sunita repeated that sentence to herself many times.

In Jodhpur, Ruhani's study room was no longer in a hostel but a small corner of a rented home. Practical demonstrations in science were shown on a screen, but there was no opportunity to touch the equipment. At a faculty meeting Firdous said that an experiment “shown to a student” was not the same as one “performed by a student's own hands.” Registrar Bhatnagar said that arrangements concerning examinations might have to change, but education could not simply cease. “Before changing the rules,” Manasvi asked, “have you identified the students without network access?” The reply was an imprecise percentage. “There are actual people behind that percentage,” she said. “We don't need public access to their names; we need a system for discovering what they require.”

The university's outside distance-learning provider demanded fresh registration for video classes. Its single form asked students to supply Aadhaar particulars, family income, medical information and a photograph. Saurabh took out the old report on data protection. “Why do we need all this to conduct a class?” Firdous asked. The provider's employee said, “The system is the same for everyone.” Bhatnagar did not stop registration immediately, but requested a written proposal to remove unnecessary fields. This time he had learnt something from the experiences of 2017. Saurabh warned students that they were under no obligation to send personal information into public groups.

On the first day of remote classes a teacher asked students to switch on their cameras so that he could hear their voices. In Omprakash's village home the sound of a calf could be heard behind him. Some classmates laughed. The teacher turned serious. “Keep your camera off; answer by voice.” Familiar family sounds carried from beyond Manasvi's window, but she did not wish to be compelled to display her private home. Ruhani received occasional calls from her family in Kashmir and had to leave the class to ask after her elderly grandmother. Classes had been allotted the same hours for everyone, but their clocks ran at different speeds.

In the middle of May, Jugal Mahto reached a government centre to register for travel. The last letter of his name was wrong on the token issued to him. An employee said the correction might appear on the list two days later. Jugal had saved a little of his wages, but rent and food were eating into it. Sunita politely asked the official by telephone to give him an acknowledgment that the error had been reported for correction. “There are hundreds of applications,” the official said wearily. “I understand,” Sunita replied. “But if even one name remains wrong, where will that family go?” The official added a note in the computer. Jugal gave not a word of thanks but one deep breath.

At night a volunteer group was bringing food to migrants walking beside the highway. Baldev went with them. A pregnant woman needed medical attention; a food packet was not her immediate need. One young man in the group first photographed everybody, then began distributing water. “Look, help is not a spectacle,” Baldev told him firmly. “Call a nurse first.” Contacting the district health service took time, but eventually a safe vehicle came for the woman. “To understand the right order of relief,” Baldev said on returning that night, “sometimes you need not only a law book but eyes.” Sunita recorded the name and time of the medical contact in her notebook.

Shivnarayan's office in Darbhanga was closed, but each day he got up from his bed and opened the papers he had put in order. An advocate he knew telephoned to say that most proceedings in the district were restricted. “Quite right,” Shivnarayan said. “There is a duty to protect people from the epidemic. But we must not lose the means of delivering an application from someone in urgent need of relief.” He read Revati an old letter about how a single letter in the seizure list of Neelkanth Sah's case had once caused months of dispute. “Now people are asking that lives be decided on the strength of one image on a mobile phone,” he said. “That is why this year the lessons of evidence will be harder still,” Revati answered.

The local rent dispute grew sharper when Raju Bansal returned to the settlement and threatened to cut off the water to tenants who did not pay. Shanti, frightened, refused to have her family's names made public. Accompanied by a senior acquaintance, Sunita submitted a written petition at the local administration's assistance centre, seeking continued water access, an inquiry into the threats and immediate protection for the families. They did not ask the administration to decide the ultimate question of ownership in every tenancy. The receipt was stamped. Afterwards, exhausted, Shanti said, "My name is on this paper, but people in the lane will read it and recognise me." Sunita kept her copy in a sealed envelope and put no private details on the public list.

Raju himself then went to the local office and said he was merely collecting rent for the owner. His lawyer said on the telephone that the question of entitlement to the rooms was a civil dispute. Sunita listened and said, "Examine what rent is owed; threatening to cut off the water is another matter." The government officer explained to both sides that the means of recovering a private debt were separate from questions of threats and essential services. The preliminary direction stated that the existing water supply must not be interrupted; it did not make a final decision about rent. On the way out Raju said to Sunita, "Are you going to turn everyone into a lawyer?" "No," she replied. "I'm just teaching them to ask for things in writing."

Discussion of the two messages on Naveen's phone spread through the settlement. Some claimed a secret order had been issued to withhold employees' March wages; others said the circular seal in the screenshot was old and therefore the picture must have been fabricated. Manpreet examined the office records available to her and gave a written reply: no approved circular of that date was entered in her register. Dharampal wanted to use this as final proof of his innocence. Sunita disagreed. "It establishes only that no letter appears in the register. If a message went out through some other channel, that question remains." Once the limits of the dispute were made clear, the claims on both sides narrowed a little.

Revati contacted Harmeet Sodhi, a lawyer in Punjab who had previously worked on labour disputes. "It won't be simple to ask a court directly for an order covering every wage claim," Harmeet said. "Before the competent labour authority we need separate facts on wages due, payments and deductions; industrial disputes follow another procedure. But an application for immediate public safety directions properly belongs before the local administration." Revati agreed. She decided that the petition must carry no inflated figures; each worker's account would

be attached with that worker's consent. Sunita gathered not forty names but the first twenty-three she had been able to verify.

In the last week of May the Supreme Court continued to take up the plight of migrant workers on its own motion and issue directions. News of the interim order of 28 May reached Baldev: the burden of travel fares was not to fall on the workers, and arrangements for food, water and registration were responsibilities of the states. Baldev stressed to everyone that they must understand the actual words of the order they had heard reported and how it would be implemented locally. "Does that mean my token becomes a travel pass today?" Jugal asked. "No," Baldev said. "But we can now tell the officer clearly what arrangements your application is entitled to expect." Hope and caution passed in turn across Jugal's face.

At the beginning of June, Jugal finally obtained a place on a travel list. The transport arrangements made by the administration for reaching the station were some distance from the settlements. A health examination took place before departure, and people stood in line with their bags. Jugal offered Sunita the key to his room, but she refused. "Settle the security deposit and the inventory of your belongings with the landlord in writing." "I don't know whether I'll be able to return," Jugal said. "One day's crisis cannot decide that," Sunita replied with a smile. "Go home, and then return whenever you can." Before the train moved, Jugal hoisted the bag containing his children's textbooks above him.

Ramlakhan's knee had swollen badly by then. Ordinary hospital services were restricted, though arrangements existed for essential consultations. Phoolkumari spent the night binding warm cloth around his leg. Sunita arranged a consultation with the doctor by telephone and wrote down the necessary medicines, deliberately avoiding an unnecessary visit to a crowded hospital. The doctor said that both care for the old illness and protection from infection were important. Back home, giving her father his medicine, Sunita said, "Don't insist on travelling now." "I don't want to go anywhere," Ramlakhan answered. "I only want the wounds you have suffered not to remain with you until you are as old as I am." Hearing this, his daughter turned away.

One afternoon in June, Champa Devi received news by telephone from the village: a boy in her sister's family wanted to leave school and start working in the fields. "No mobile phone means no school," the boy had said. "How many homes in the village haven't heard the teacher's voice?" Champa asked. The answer was: many. Sunita contacted Rachna Kaur, a teacher at the local school. She said efforts were being made to distribute printed lessons to a limited number of children. Sunita wrote

down names in the settlement, but did not send the children's private circumstances to any public group. Three days later some books and exercise sheets arrived. For the first time in a month, Pari saw a teacher's comment in red ink in her notebook.

In Jodhpur, Omprakash began teaching children in his village twice a day under a roofed shelter. For health protection he used a small group and an open place wherever local circumstances permitted. He requested sheets of questions and answers from his teachers. “What you are doing is not a formal alternative offered by the university,” Saurabh said, “but it shows the desire to learn.” “I am not a schoolteacher; I'm a student myself,” Omprakash replied. “But why shouldn't I explain a question I understand to a child next door?” Amid shortages of space, books and water, those short lessons created an extraordinary feeling of belonging for a few days.

In the first week of July, Harmeet Sodhi presented to the labour department a date-by-date account for the workers Sunita had verified. The petition did not combine every loss caused by the pandemic into one imaginary total. It separately showed work performed in the first half of March, receipts for payments, sums actually credited to bank accounts, earlier arrears and claims concerning the disputed period. “Do you have everyone's signature?” the departmental employee asked. Sunita explained that some workers had already reached their villages; their express consent and written statements had been collected separately. The officer returned some incomplete forms for correction. Sunita felt hurt, but she understood that submitting incomplete evidence would not strengthen the claim.

An advocate appeared for Dharampal. He said factory closures had reduced income, some employees had received advances, and there was a dispute as to whether certain relief payments should count as wages. “If a payment was made as a donation,” Harmeet answered at once, “you need agreement and accounts before treating it as wages. Provide evidence of any genuine advance as well.” The officer requested period-specific records from both sides; no general declaration was accepted as a final solution. Sunita remembered how, ten years earlier, her father's hand had trembled when he signed a list like this. Now his daughter herself stood composed through the counter-questions.

The preliminary scrutiny of papers revealed something unexpected. In one printed company register, the March workdays of nineteen of the twenty-three employees were clearly entered; beside the other four appeared the word “inquiry.” Among those four, Champa Devi's

attendance was missing for two days, although on those days she had received first aid at the workplace after injuring her hand. A copy of the first-aid register was found, but it was unclear who had provided that paper to the office. “The first-aid entry indicates that she was there,” Sunita said. “Whether she worked the full shift is a separate matter for examination.” Champa looked at her as at a daughter. She had hoped Sunita would immediately declare, “Yes, this is proof.” Yet the caution both hurt and reassured her.

That day an apparent duplicate entry caused confusion at Sarabjit's bank. A modest relief payment had reached one of Sunita's family accounts, but the payment notification appeared twice. Ramlakhan assumed that twice the money had been paid; Deepak was delighted to see it on the screen of his new phone. After examining the actual account ledger, Sarabjit explained that the same transaction had generated two displayed notifications; there had been only one deposit. Sunita put the example in her labour-dispute notebook: “Two lines on the screen; one entry in the bank.” The question of Naveen's two messages rose again in her mind. An image visible on a screen and a proved financial event were not the same.

Around 14 July, a Supreme Court decision on electronic evidence was being discussed in legal reports. Revati had her assistant Animesh reread the provisions of Section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act. She explained that an original record on a mobile phone, a printed copy extracted from it, particulars of the device and the role of a certificate could not all be treated alike. “Technology changes,” she said, “but a court must know how the text before it was obtained.” “What if the official who ought to give the certificate refuses?” Animesh asked. “Then the question arises of seeking its production through the proper judicial process. There is no magical remedy for its absence.” She did not apply the legal principle mechanically to Sunita's case: the forum and the purpose for which the evidence was required had to be examined first.

Naveen asked for a time to show his phone at Harmeet's office. A safe meeting was arranged despite the restrictions on movement. Part of the old message remained on the screen, but when they called the number from which it had come, no one answered. “I used to speak to the office through that number,” Naveen said. Manpreet acknowledged only that the number had been used as a contact for a temporary service provider; it was not then on the list of numbers issuing official sealed orders for the company. “Origin, meaning and authority are three separate questions,” Harmeet said. “An answer to one won't settle all three.” Naveen resolved not to delete anything from his phone.

When they examined the complete conversation containing the message “Treat the March shifts as leave,” an earlier request appeared: “Please give the names and days for which wages are in question.” This showed that the later short sentence might have been an answer to a particular question, not a general order. Yet it also contained an expression resembling “everyone's days,” making its meaning uncertain once more. Rather than debate the grammar of the words, Harmeet requested the original correspondence from the company and any available records from the service provider. An old sentence sounded again in Sunita's mind: sometimes an entire life lies outside the cropped screen.

The July rains brought new troubles with water to the Ludhiana settlement. A drain near the room entrances was blocked; children had to step along planks of wood to get through. Shanti's family still feared Raju's threats, though the water supply had not been stopped. With administrative mediation, the landlord and tenants drew up a written timetable, leaving the dispute over sums owed as a separate issue. “We've saved our home, but the debt remains,” Shanti said. “Because we understood those as two different things,” Sunita replied, “we found separate ways to deal with them.” Shanti told her daughter to clear a corner of the room where schoolbooks could be kept.

From Chandigarh, Revati and the local lawyer Harmeet began preparing for a restricted virtual hearing before the Punjab and Haryana High Court. This case was not intended to determine the full amount of wages owed. It concerned timely consideration of the emergency applications for housing safety registered with the district administration and the procedure for communicating information about available relief. The state's advocate said many employees were carrying additional duties connected with infection control and relief. Revati did not deny the genuine difficulty; she drew attention specifically to Shanti's water supply and the outstanding records concerning the registration of some families. The court first asked the parties to clarify their authority and the limits of the facts in issue.

On the day of the hearing, the camera on an old computer at Harmeet's office was not working. Revati joined separately from Delhi, and arrangements were made for Shanti to appear by phone from a safe assistance room. The judge's voice was clear on the screen, but Shanti's speech broke up three times. “Can the party's words be heard?” the court asked. Harmeet said the connection was interrupted. The court granted a short adjournment to restore it. Sunita did not open Shanti's notebook

and hold its pages before the camera. “Speak in your own words,” she said. “If they cannot hear you, we shall ask for more time.”

At the second attempt Shanti said, “I am not denying the owner's money. I want water and the chance to stay without threats while the lawful process continues.” “Is the water supply presently working?” the judge asked. Harmeet replied that it had resumed after the administration's preliminary intervention, but they sought assurance of regular monitoring. The state's advocate produced a report from the local official. The court issued written directions for the officer to dispose of the remaining applications with reasons within the prescribed period and report on compliance with the arrangements in place. It did not decide ownership of the rented premises or the ultimate rent dispute at this urgent hearing. When the screen went dark, Shanti remained silent for a long time.

Revati called the limited order a necessary stage in the procedure rather than a victory to be proclaimed. A local reporter asked Harmeet by telephone, “Has the High Court approved the workers' unpaid wages?” “No,” he answered plainly. “That matter is separately before the labour authority. This hearing concerned the water supply and the administrative applications.” Noor Jatay supported the correction. She was reporting on the pandemic from Delhi and knew how a false headline printed in haste could mislead the expectations of many families in difficult times. That day she wrote a sentence in her notebook: “There has been a hearing; not everything has been decided.”

After watching the High Court's remote proceedings, Shivnarayan asked Revati over the telephone, “How much weaker does justice become when one cannot see a witness's eyes?” “In some matters personal appearance may be essential; in others an interim order based on documents is possible,” Revati said. “But a party unable to appear on a screen must not lose their rights.” “Then the door of a court is not merely the door of a building,” her father said. Revati laughed. “And when that building's door is closed, it doesn't mean people should be left to make their own way inside. The institution must take responsibility.”

At the next documentary hearing before the labour office, Dharampal's company proposed partial payment. A date was given for crediting to bank accounts the sums due, according to the company's records, for the accepted workdays of nineteen employees; separate particulars were requested for the disputed four. Harmeet said that accepting the proposal must not automatically mean abandoning the remaining statutory claims, and that the record had to say this clearly.

One of Baldev's companions favoured an immediate settlement: “Food must reach the house.” Another said, “Don't sign an incomplete account.” Sunita listened to both and explained each word of the proposal in ordinary language. She did not impose a decision on them.

Some workers accepted the immediately available payment, expressly reserving the remaining dispute in writing. When Phoolkumari saw the money credited to Ramlakhan's account, she wiped her eyes with the end of her sari for the first time in many days. “How much our daughter had to run about for this money,” she said. “Mother, it's the money Father earned,” Sunita replied. “My running about does not equal his labour.” Ramlakhan looked silently at the account book. There was no proclamation of triumph in the house. A list was made for buying lentils, medicines were purchased, and Deepak's data pack was recharged. The first shape of relief won through a legal struggle was ordinary domestic life.

The two disputed days in Champa's case still remained. “I worked for two hours that day,” she told Sunita, “and then I cut my hand.” The factory's first-aid register supported this, but the hours of attendance were unclear. Manpreet agreed to examine the old security-control register, which might establish the times of entry and exit. Dharampal did not oppose this limited inquiry. “Look,” Sunita told Champa, “we must not claim a full shift. We should state clearly the work actually done and whatever is due under the rules.” Champa laughed. “No one could ever hope to learn how to lie from you.” There was affection in the laughter, and weariness from the hard arithmetic of life.

That month Marudhar University was rehearsing its online examinations. The registrar's working group discovered that some students took longer to download question papers. The technology provider wanted all responses visible on a single dashboard. Manasvi asked why the company's system needed access to other material on students' private phones. Firdous made it clear that the information collected should be restricted to what was necessary for academic assessment. “If the rules become too difficult, the examinations will be postponed,” a student said. “Refusing to surrender unnecessary information and holding necessary examinations are not opposing aims,” Saurabh replied. The administration issued a corrective circular, but the real absence of hands-on experiments had not yet been remedied.

Word came from Srinagar that Ruhani's grandmother had fallen ill. She could not go home at once. Over the telephone Shireen Kaul said treatment was being arranged and urged the girl to protect her own

health first. Ruhani tried to hear her grandmother's voice, but other noises overwhelmed the sound from behind the phone. She closed her exercise notes and sat still. Firdous understood that a telephone was not simply a wire carrying messages; at an uncertain moment in life it was a means of hearing the breath of someone beloved. The same instrument that was becoming compulsory for examinations also contained the fear, love and memories of a household.

One evening in August Noor Jatay asked to interview Sunita for a long report. She had written down the question: "What was the greatest suffering of workers during the pandemic?" Before answering Sunita remembered the separate lives of Champa, Jugal, Shanti and Deepak. "There is no single answer," she said. "For one person it was food, for another a home, for another medicine, for another the correct spelling of a name. And for someone else, proof that they had done the work." "Will you give me a photograph?" Noor asked. "Mine, yes. Not Shanti's. I don't have her permission." Noor made the sentence a rule of her reporting.

In the Andamans, Anish Haldar stood in the sea breeze beside a damaged boat after his family's small business had closed. He had not forgotten the difficulties caused by losing family records in the disaster of 2004. During the pandemic he noticed that an elderly fisherman's name was entered incorrectly in a new assistance register. "Because of one letter," he told a volunteer, "the assistance he needs to buy fishing nets for his boat may be held up." He helped gather the papers needed for the correction procedure at the government office. The sea was calm for the moment, but disaster came not only with waves; it also entered through paper. In memory of his father, Anish placed a copy of the document in a secure box.

In September a technical detail emerged in Naveen's message case. The service provider's register linked the number to an older group-notification system. But its records were incomplete as to which specific employee had authorised which message. Manpreet acknowledged that incompleteness in writing. "Now the next question of evidence begins," Harmeet said. "Can the person or institution controlling the system produce the appropriate records and certificate?" Dharampal told his lawyer that the list showed, at least, that the message could not have been an official company order. "Possibly," Harmeet replied, "but the technical examination must be completed."

At this stage Revati exercised an important caution. Before the labour authority, attendance registers, payment ledgers and direct witnesses

could clarify much about the underlying wages owed; Naveen's phone message was potentially supplementary material. She advised them how to make and preserve a complete copy of the message, urged that the device be kept in its original condition, and recorded a reasonable request for the necessary certificate from the service provider controlling the system. "Even if the certificate arrives, that will not automatically make the words true," she told Animesh. "First comes admissibility in law; then meaning, reliability and consistency with the other records. Each is a separate step."

One evening Naveen told Sunita, "While gathering so much evidence, I am afraid I might somehow become the accused myself." "A message arrived on your phone," Sunita said, looking at him. "That does not make you guilty. But before we accuse someone in another person's name, we have a responsibility to investigate." Relief and uncertainty mingled on Naveen's face. He took a page from an old notebook containing a telephone number associated with an insecure offer of work years before. Its final four digits matched the contact number of the new service provider. Sunita did not regard coincidence as proof of identity; on the paper she wrote, "Matching digits—verification required."

By October a few shops in the settlement were opening again, but life had not recovered its former pace. Jugal Mahto telephoned from his village. After a safe delivery, his wife was at home with their newborn child. He said he had not yet decided to return to Ludhiana; opportunities in the village were limited, but the family was together. Sunita congratulated him. After the call she remembered the sound of the factory's silent machines. The stopping of machinery that had once run continuously had become a pause in the life of society. But a worker's life was not merely a wait for the machines to start again; he was thinking out his own way forward.

After many months, Deepak's school undertook an assessment of learning. For the first time Pari wrote a long paragraph in her notebook: "The Road to My Village." She knew what a road meant: the lane through which her father went to work, the stairs leading to her friend, and the roof where a mobile phone could catch a signal. Deepak himself had fallen behind in mathematics, but his confidence was returning as he explained number problems to Pari, who was like a younger sister to him. Sunita could see that the year's learning could not be contained within examination marks. The children's time for study had depended on work at home, fear and the kindness of others.

In November Revati had a long conversation with Shivnarayan. Her father's voice was no longer as strong as before. “This pandemic has come after I have seen so many judgments in my lifetime,” he said. “In court I always thought that bringing forward evidence was hard. Now even being present has become difficult.” “Then we do not need to dilute the rules of evidence,” Revati replied. “We need to improve the means of access.” Shivnarayan agreed. He remembered a poor man in the first magistrate's courtroom in Darbhanga saying, “Read the paper if you want to understand what I have to say.” Now Revati seemed to hear another plea: “Connect the telephone if you want to hear what I have to say.”

In the middle of December, examining her branch's year-end accounts, Sarabjit read an unusual notice. Digital declarations bearing the same outside contact had been attached to payment requests involving several workers' accounts, though the actual transactions in those accounts did not show any clear common pattern. She immediately refrained from reaching a conclusion that any named person had committed a crime. She informed the branch compliance officer and requested examination, under the rules, of the original documents, beneficiaries' consent and records of access to the system. Her thoughts returned to the old unanswered entry bearing Hardev Chauhan's name, but she did not assume that the name on an old list identified the author of new transactions. An old question could cast its shadow across a fresh crisis; the answer still had to be sought in evidence.

On the last night of the year Sunita separated four pages from her notebook. On the first she had written “Days worked”; on the second, “The right to remain at home”; on the third, “Children's education”; on the fourth, “Original proof of the message.” Ramlakhan sat nearby and watched. “Why so many separate accounts?” he asked. “So that if one page is lost,” Sunita answered, “the truth on all the others is not lost with it.” From a distant hospital came the sound of an ambulance on the night shift. Closing the window, Phoolkumari asked, “Next year will be better, won't it?” Sunita gave no answer. Between her pages she placed a blank sheet—for the testimony still to come.

That night, in Marudhar's remote classroom, Firdous gave her last lecture. Some students were present on the screen; beside other names were empty squares. “Today,” she said, “I am leaving you not an answer but a question: how do we prove the absence of someone whose face we cannot see?” Manasvi wrote it down. Hearing the voices from her home in Kashmir, Ruhani looked through the window at the Moon. In Ludhiana, a notice reading “Record not received” flashed beside an old

message on Sunita's phone. She switched off the screen and put the phone away safely. To hear the suffering unfolding beyond the closed courtrooms, justice would have to travel a long way again in the coming year.

PART FOUR

State, Citizens and New Laws

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Chapter 25 — The Price of Breath

Ludhiana, Darbhanga, Jodhpur and Delhi; 2021

When the first warm wind of Chaitra entered a narrow lane in Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan was loosening a piece of old cloth caught on the rusted hook of a window. The previous year she had used it to stop the draught through a gap in the door, so that the winter cold would not aggravate the ageing Ramlakhan's knees. Now the household had new anxieties. Deepak's examination would take place on a mobile phone; the screen of the handset bought with the first instalment of wages received from the factory had cracked down the middle. And when Phulkumari returned from taking warm water to a sick child next door, she said, "The fever is spreading through the settlement again." Sunita looked outside. A year earlier people in this lane had been asking how to get home. Now, for the first time, it was filling with people again, but each person heard another's cough before looking at their face.

The wind carrying dust from the Sutlej mingled with the old grinding hum of the machines. Work was returning to the factory by degrees, though not every shift had resumed. Ramlakhan could no longer put in a full day, so he cleaned small machine components at home. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was trying to secure employment for ageing iron in place of his own body. Ashok Mistri, who did maintenance work at the factory under a small contract, visited him every week. Black lines of oil had settled so deeply into Ashok's hands that even scrubbing them with soap could not remove them. He would joke, "That's the signature of my trade. You can read it without a scrap of paper." His wife Maya took in sewing at home; more than once the fee for their daughter Ragini's schooling had come from those modest maintenance jobs.

In the last week of March, Ashok repaired an old fan for Ramlakhan. Resting a hand on its metal housing, he said, "The heat has begun. If the power goes out this time, I'll rig up a small battery-operated fan." "How much will you charge?" Ramlakhan asked. Ashok laughed. "Your case for unpaid wages has taught me something too. First a proper account of the work, then the price." Sunita laughed at that. She had gone inside to make tea for them when the first sharp wail of an ambulance rose from the lane. Ashok remained watching the revolving blades. When the siren died away, he said, "How would someone who has air to breathe all day understand what a fan is worth?" In the nights to come, the memory of that ordinary remark would wake Sunita again and again.

In the first days of April, Noor Jatay was sending reports from Delhi. Social media carried one unverified figure after another about oxygen shortages, false claims of miraculous medicines, and videos of families weeping in helplessness. Noor told a colleague that no image of a grieving family would be published without its permission. An editor challenged her: “If we don't show their faces, how will people understand the gravity of the crisis?” “Human dignity is not worth less than the crisis,” Noor replied. She kept checking official figures and matching hospital dates. At the same moment, a family's anguish was genuine, a photograph was old, and a message bearing the name of a hospital in another city was being circulated. To take care over the truth was not to deny people's suffering; it was to refuse to spread falsehood in suffering's name.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha kept medicines, a thermometer and an old brass clock on a small table outside his room. The clock ran two minutes slow, but he never corrected it. “Every day arrives in a hurry,” he told Revati on the telephone. “Let the clock keep its two minutes.” Revati told him that much of the court's work in Delhi was again being conducted remotely. People's cases did not stop, but the way they attended proceedings changed. Her father asked, “Who will gather the papers for farmers, workers and families with someone in hospital?” “Where there are people,” Revati answered, “there must also be a way for the documents to reach them.” She did not yet know that within days a call would come from Ludhiana in which the immediate difficulty was not reaching a courtroom but getting through a hospital door.

Ashok first developed a slight fever. He told Maya that his body was hot because he had spent the day near the factory furnace. But on the second day his sense of taste diminished, and on the third he began to struggle for breath while climbing the stairs. Sunita stood at a distance in the doorway of his home. Maya was showing her a photograph of an earlier medical slip. “Have yourself tested,” Sunita told him, “and don't change your medicines on your own without medical advice.” Ashok did not argue. Maya kept calling the hospital helpline, while Ragini drew a picture for her father in the margin of her exercise book: green fields, a fan and an open blue sky. Ashok smiled once when he saw it, then covered his mouth to suppress a cough.

The queue at the government testing centre was long. Volunteers tried to keep people apart, but there was little shade. Some could afford the high fees at private laboratories; others came back the following day. With help from Baldev, a fellow worker at the factory, Sunita found out the proper procedure for collecting and testing Ashok's sample. His

report indicated infection. Seeing his oxygen saturation and difficulty breathing, the doctor recommended an immediate hospital assessment. “Won't steam inhalation help at home?” Maya asked. “He needs to be examined in hospital in this condition,” the doctor replied wearily. “Steam cannot make up for a shortage of oxygen.” In that single exchange, the science of illness and a household's helpless wishes stood face to face.

Satluj Jeevan Hospital, a small private hospital in the city, stood at the far turn of a broad road. A neem tree and two iron benches stood outside. Relatives of patients had once sat there drinking tea; now coloured chalk marked out spaces between them. The employee on duty at the entrance wrote down names, asked about symptoms and made telephone inquiries about vacant places. Maya held Ashok's hand, but had to let it go when he was taken inside. A nurse named Gurpreet Kaur reassured her: “Give us your name, telephone number and the details of the person authorised to receive medical information. We will communicate any updates through the designated contact.” Maya repeated her phone number twice. She was afraid that if she got a single digit wrong, her husband would be lost to her forever in that world beyond the door.

Gurpreet grew hot inside her protective clothing. The mask left a line across the bridge of her nose, and when she went home she looked at her young child from a distance. One night the child said, “Mummy, you never touch my forehead.” She smiled and answered, “Before I can touch your forehead, I must keep my hands safe.” But she knew no rule for washing fear out of herself. At the beginning of every hospital shift she checked patients' names against their respiratory condition, their means of oxygen delivery and the doctors' orders. For days she had not slept enough. Even so, the thought of a single wrong digit in a record frightened her so much that as she wrote, a voice seemed to sound inside her: check again, check again.

Ashok's first medical record noted fever, cough, breathing difficulty and the details of his tests. After examining him, the senior physician, Dr Aarti Arora, said that an infection could affect different patients differently; existing illnesses, the duration of symptoms and the available test results all mattered. Ashok had trouble recalling the name of his diabetes medicine, so Maya sent a photograph of the packet from her phone. “Treatment is not a guess made at a single moment,” Dr Aarti said. “It is continuous observation.” Maya wanted to take comfort from those words, but she understood at least this much: continuous observation meant continuous risk as well.

That same day, an elderly Sikh patient went home after recovering at the hospital. His grandson stood near the neem tree with a box of sweets. The staff did not take it inside, but folded their hands in greeting from a distance. Watching, Maya imagined Ashok coming through the doors again and teaching Ragini how to repair the fan. At home their daughter had drawn a map of the hospital: here the gate, here Papa, here the road home. Showing the map on her phone, Maya asked Gurpreet, "When he comes out along this road, may I wait here?" Gurpreet lowered her eyes. She would not offer a false assurance. All she could bring herself to say was, "We are doing everything we can to treat him. Please keep your phone switched on."

During a night shift, the hospital's oxygen supply became a grave concern. Transport was difficult across the city and demand had risen abruptly. Hospital employees were drawing up daily statements of the supplies they had. Omkar Singh, a technical assistant, checked the pressure in the storage tank and the gauges showing the supply to each department. In his notebook, red pencil marks appeared beside the figures, but some entries gave times on a twenty-four-hour clock and others used the ordinary twelve-hour system. "Use one convention for the times," said the administrative officer, Prabhjot Sandhu. "Otherwise there will be confusion later." "I will standardise them," Omkar replied, "but I won't erase the old figures. First I'll preserve a copy exactly as it stands." He could not know how much that small act of discipline would later mean to a grieving family.

One day Maya stood at the hospital gate for two hours. The calls would not connect, and at home Ragini kept asking whether her father had seen her picture. Sunita put aside her other work and came to the gate. She gave Maya water and asked the information desk for a written point of contact. The employee said it was difficult to provide updates about all the patients at once. Sunita made no scene; she asked them to put in writing the patient's registration number, the authorised relative's name and the time when medical information could be obtained. "Is this what practising court paperwork has taught you?" Maya asked tiredly. "No, Didi," Sunita replied. "It has taught me not to let your question disappear for want of a piece of paper."

Revati was following the news from Delhi. Across the country, courts were hearing matters concerning shortages of hospital beds, medicines and medical oxygen. She read an account of the Supreme Court's taking suo motu cognisance on 22 April and of the issues surrounding essential supplies, but drew no final conclusion from it about Ashok's individual treatment. "A supply crisis at the level of the state and a particular lapse

in one patient's care are two separate subjects for investigation," she explained to Sunita. "Didi, I'm not accusing anyone of a lapse yet," Sunita said. "Maya needs one piece of reliable news each day." Revati recognised the importance of that priority. The grand language of the courts might come later, but the first responsibility was simpler: was the person inside alive, what condition was he in, and whom could the family ask?

One night in the last week of April, the city's electricity supply was interrupted for a short while. The hospital's backup system started, but alarms sounded together in several departments. Omkar read the pressure figures on the main panel and immediately informed the shift supervisor. Not every alarm sounded for the same reason: sensitive equipment might signal a change in electrical supply, while other devices warned of an actual fall in pressure. At Ashok's bedside, Gurpreet saw that the equipment supporting his treatment needed checking again. She called the doctor on duty, Dr Raghav Sareen, who examined the patient and ordered immediate care. What happened during those eight or ten minutes, who was holding which instrument, which message came through first: the answers to each of these questions would later appear in different forms in different records.

At about midnight Ashok had sent Maya a short message: "Tell Ragini to keep the fan running." The words were incomplete, but the language was his own. Maya's phone lay beside her pillow; exhaustion had closed her eyes. When she woke, she read the message and replied at once, "Come home. The fan will run." The status symbol beneath her reply remained unchanged for a long time. She took it to mean the network was bad. At dawn the hospital called to say that Ashok's condition had worsened during the night and that the treating team wished to speak with an authorised member of the family about his critical condition. Maya sprang up without even changing her slippers. "Maa, why isn't Papa answering the phone?" Ragini asked. "I'm going there," Maya said, opening the door.

Dr Aarti met the family in a consultation room set apart from the gate. Deep lines of exhaustion surrounded her eyes. Avoiding difficult medical jargon, she explained Ashok's breathing condition, the supportive treatment he had received, the deterioration overnight and the risks he now faced. "Was the oxygen switched off?" Maya interrupted. The doctor paused. "The equipment alarm and the treatment timeline are being examined. On the information I have now, I cannot give you a definite cause. His underlying illness has also become much more severe." Maya asked again. Dr Aarti did not change her answer. She would not

offer temporary comfort at the price of false certainty. Maya gripped the arms of her chair so tightly that the skin beneath her fingernails went white.

That day Gurpreet told her colleague Simmi that the times entered in the night register did not agree with one another. “When you're completing paperwork between tasks,” Simmi said, “five minutes here or there can slip.” “But a patient's breathing can change in five minutes,” Gurpreet answered. “I've written down what I saw. The exact time the machine sounded its alarm will have to come from the technical log.” Simmi noticed her trembling hands. “I'm not saying it's your fault,” she said. “I'm not trying to declare myself innocent,” Gurpreet whispered. “I have to remember accurately both what I saw and what I did not see.” That night her child again asked her to touch his forehead, and for the first time Gurpreet embraced him and broke down in tears.

Ashok remained critically ill for the next two days. Plates of food at Maya's house would stand almost untouched from noon until night. Sunita sent Phulkumari to sit with her, arranged for Ragini to attend her online lessons at Sunita's home, and carefully filed every hospital update in a small paper envelope. One day Ragini asked, “Can you write a person's breathing on paper?” “Not the breath itself,” Sunita said, “but what was done to save it.” Ragini lowered her eyes. “Then I hope they wrote it correctly.” The answer shook Sunita. The child did not know the language of the law, but she understood clearly what truth demanded.

Ashok died before the last day of April. For a few moments there was silence at the other end of the hospital's telephone call; then the family was asked to come for a consultation. Maya received a medical certificate recording his death, with severe respiratory failure and complications of infection noted among the details. It took her time to grasp that this piece of paper marked the end of a journey that had begun with a living man. He was no longer the father repairing a fan for his daughter; he had become a number in a register. Maya stood for a long time beside the neem tree outside the hospital, looking at the road. Gurpreet folded her hands from a distance. She could find no sentence capable of taking the place of Maya's questions.

Funeral arrangements were restricted by pandemic rules and the necessary precautions for public health. Ramlakhan stood some way off with his eyes closed. Ashok had repaired his fan, but from that day its breeze felt hot to him. Phulkumari brought Maya a little lentil stew. “Ragini keeps asking when Papa will come home,” Maya said. “What am I supposed to tell her?” After a long silence Phulkumari replied, “Sit with

her for now. The answer won't come all at once." Sunita saw that people who, only the previous day, had been disputed attendance marks in a factory wage register were now organising meals for one another. Their helplessness was not equal, but their offers of help had not begun by consulting a section of law.

A relative from Ashok's family arrived and announced on the first day, "Hospitals rob people. File a case and you'll get a great deal of money." Maya stopped him. "Do you have any documents?" she asked. "I read about it in the newspaper." "The newspaper carries the stories of many other people, not what happened to my husband," Maya replied. "I want to know what happened to him." Hearing this, Sunita offered her an old notebook. Maya declined. "This time I'll write my own records. Just tell me where and how to ask for what is right." Sunita remembered Ashok's joke: first a proper account of the work, then the price.

The first application went to the hospital administration. In her own name, with evidence that she was the deceased patient's wife and authorised relative, Maya requested authenticated copies of the records of his treatment: admission papers, observation sheets, prescriptions, nursing registers, relevant tests, the sequence of treatment, orders for oxygen administration and the details surrounding his death. She also asked that the original equipment logs for that night be preserved. A stamp was pressed onto the acknowledgement of receipt. "You won't get this many pages quickly," the young receptionist said. "Give me what is available," Maya replied. "And for anything that will take longer to copy, put its status in writing." On a sheet of paper he wrote "Received." Sunita knew the word was small, but a small word could open a door.

Revati examined the professional rules then governing access to medical records. She explained to Maya that the Medical Council's 2002 professional-conduct regulations prescribed a time limit for providing records at the request of a patient or authorised relative, and that submitting an application and retaining its acknowledgement mattered. But invoking those rules did not by itself establish medical negligence. "Your first right is to receive a faithful account of the treatment," she said. "After that, if a particular failure in the duty of care appears, it will require a separate medical and legal examination." "What if something false is written in the records?" Maya asked. "Then we compare the original source, the time it was written, any record of amendments and the evidence of people who witnessed the events. No single sheet contains the whole truth."

Within three days some copies arrived from the hospital, but not all. In his written reply to Maya's application, Prabhjot Sandhu stated that parts of the physical registers were available, while extracting information from the digital devices required coordination with the service provider. At one point he had written, “Oxygen supply uninterrupted.” Maya read those two words three times. “If it was uninterrupted, why did the doctor say there had been a crisis?” she asked. “Breathing may deteriorate for many reasons,” Revati said. “But we must find out which records the writer relied upon in using the word 'uninterrupted'.” Maya was not satisfied with such a limited answer, yet she did not want an application to a court to make an inaccurate allegation in the heat of emotion.

Omkar handed the management pages from his original notebook. Beside his name was his technical post at the hospital; he had no authority to treat patients. He had recorded that a fluctuation in supply pressure was indicated around a particular time and that the backup equipment was checked. Two entries in the principal record related to that period, but it was unclear whether the equipment clock had been synchronised with local standard time. “A misunderstanding over paperwork will damage the hospital's reputation,” Prabhjot said. “If the time is wrong, write down why it is being corrected,” Omkar replied evenly. “Don't tear out the page.” His superior fell silent. There was no necessity for an institution's reputation and the integrity of its records to be enemies, but in that moment they were being treated as such.

A doctor at the hospital asked Gurpreet, “You monitored the patient properly on your shift, didn't you?” “I have written down as much as I saw,” she replied. “The phone log and shift register can be checked to establish when I informed the doctor.” “Is it so difficult to answer whether the monitoring was proper?” the doctor asked. “A one-word answer would make the patient's entire night vanish.” She was not accusing her colleagues. What she feared was that in a dispute involving the institution, its most vulnerable employee would be made the sole repository of blame. Gurpreet too struggled with her wages, childcare and health, but those social difficulties did not diminish her professional duty towards a patient.

One day Maya brought Ragini to Sunita's house. Beneath her drawing the child had written, “My Papa's Fan.” Sunita helped her smooth its edges. “Didn't Papa get oxygen to breathe?” Ragini asked. Maya hurried to hush her daughter, but Sunita stopped her with a gesture. She told the child, “We don't know the whole story yet. The doctors treated Papa, and his illness was very serious. There is also some information from the

equipment that is being checked. We have the right to understand what we don't yet understand." "Then put a question mark where you don't know," Ragini said. That day, for the first time, Sunita wrote no name beside a question mark in her notebook.

In early May, reports spread of hearings in the country's highest court about medical oxygen, medicines and administrative responsibility. Reporting on the national crisis, Noor Jatay refused a proposal to present Ashok's death immediately as a verified instance of government policy failure. "I will write only what we know," she told her editor. "Ashok's family has asked for treatment records; the actual sequence of supply has not yet been investigated." "You'll take all the edge out of the story that way," the editor said. "An edge sharpened by cutting away a person's name cuts away the truth," Noor replied. She asked Maya's permission before publishing Ashok's name. "Print his name," Maya said, "but not Ragini's photograph."

At a primary health centre in Darbhanga, a rural health worker named Rita Kumari went from house to house asking how elderly people with fevers were faring. She had neither all the instruments of a doctor nor the facilities of a city hospital. Following health-department instructions, she informed symptomatic people about testing and necessary referrals, and explained separately to the women in the village that worsening breathlessness must not be left unattended. "You walk day and night yourself," an elderly woman said. "Who will look after you?" Rita laughed, but when she reached home and saw the blisters on her feet, the laughter stopped. She remembered Aarti, a girl in the first year of school, whose mother could not operate a phone. A written message from the health system did not complete its journey until its meaning had been explained in the language spoken at home.

Once a family in Rita's village wanted to take a feverish patient to Darbhanga in a local vehicle, but the driver refused for fear of infection. Rita did not quarrel with him. She called the assistance centre for accurate information about available transport, contacted a community volunteer and told the family to keep the testing papers together. That night the patient reached the hospital safely, though she gave no guarantee about the outcome of treatment. When Revati heard about Rita from her father, she said, "The right to health may be written on the pages of the law, but it enters a village home by way of its roads, vehicles and telephones." "Then the broken stretch of road is also a question," Shivnarayan replied.

The hospital management called a formal meeting about Maya's application. Dr Aarti, the administrative officer Prabhjot and the hospital's records supervisor, Veena Chaudhary, were present. Sunita and a local advocate, Harmeet Singh, sat beside Maya. Prabhjot said the hospital staff had done extraordinary work through the most terrible period of the pandemic, and severe accusations from families were damaging institutional morale. "I haven't come here to insult an employee," Maya said quietly. "I'm asking for the sequence of the last two days of the man with whom I spent twenty years of my life." "That is a fair question," Dr Aarti said. "The original treatment records should be examined." Prabhjot drew the file on the table towards himself. In that small movement the real dispute in the room became visible.

Veena opened a record on the computer. Beside the patient's name were the time of admission, test times and the entry relating to his death. Yet the digital summary of pressure readings showed a flat line between 11:40 and 12:05; Omkar's handwritten register recorded fluctuations over the same interval. Veena said that under certain conditions the summary system repeated the value from the last entry. "Is that a technical possibility," Harmeet asked, "or a fact confirmed by examining this particular device?" "At present, a possibility," Veena replied. "Then why argue about it unnecessarily?" Prabhjot interjected. For the first time Maya's voice sharpened. "Unnecessary for whom? When that night can never be lived again, not a single minute of it is unnecessary." At the end of the meeting they received a written assurance that the original logs would be preserved.

On Revati's advice, Harmeet began preparing to obtain the opinion of an independent medical expert. He explained that the accepted standard of treatment, the facilities available, the severity of the illness, the actual constraints of the circumstances at the time, and the causal connection between any possible lapse and the resulting harm were all distinct questions. "The fact that something went wrong doesn't establish fault," he told Maya. "And the mere fact that an illness was severe doesn't automatically excuse every lapse." Sunita listened. She remembered the wage proceedings, where the days actually worked had to be reconciled with figures in the register. Here, however, the reckoning of time was not merely about money but about someone's last breaths. She understood that one could learn methods of proving facts in different cases without being able to set a comparative price on suffering.

The hospital's lawyer submitted a written reply. It stated that Ashok's condition had been grave from the time of admission; a trained team had treated him; the best available efforts had been made amid the

pandemic's shortage of resources; and it would be scientifically unsound to attribute his death to an interruption in oxygen supply merely because an equipment alarm had sounded. Harmeet did not strike out a single line of the reply. "Accepting what is true in these statements does not weaken our case," he told Maya. "We will ask for answers to what needs investigating." For the first time Maya saw that speaking on behalf of her own grief did not mean calling every statement made by the other side a lie. Reading the hospital's reply hurt her terribly, but she read it: her husband had been in that place while he was treated, and these were the people who had been there with him.

One evening Gurpreet agreed to speak with Revati by telephone, on condition that she would not be made the public face of an unsubstantiated accusation. She made it clear that she wanted the records preserved and would not disclose confidential information about patients to unauthorised people. "When you give evidence before the proper forum," Revati said, "stay with what you saw yourself." "I heard an alarm from one device, informed the doctor and wrote down the measurements I observed," Gurpreet said. "I don't know what caused the problem inside another machine." Revati respected that limit. Noor Jatay later asked to interview her, but Gurpreet declined to speak publicly. Noor did not treat her silence as an admission of guilt.

One afternoon Sarabjit Kaur met Sunita. At the bank, questions about the succession and nominees of deceased account holders had increased. Maya wanted to know how she might lawfully access the money in Ashok's account to pay the rent. Sarabjit explained the required papers and the distinct positions of a nominee and legal heirs; she also made clear that a bank did not decide claims for compensation for medical injury. "Every task sends you to a different window," Maya said wearily. "Different windows may be necessary," Sarabjit replied, "but institutions have a responsibility to ensure that at each window a person doesn't have to explain their suffering all over again." Maya remembered the words when the time came to submit another application for government relief.

In June, Ragini's school resumed online classes. The pupils were asked to write an essay about the pandemic. Ragini wrote the title, "The Air in Our House." The first paragraph was about the neem tree, the second about the fan her father had repaired, the third about the hospital's closed door. At the end she wrote that one day the windows of every home would open, but there would remain an emptiness in one house that could not be filled. Her teacher gave her high marks and chose not to share the entire essay with the group without her parent's consent.

Maya wept as she read it. It was not that her child's grief had turned into literature; she realised that the questions she was putting into legal documents were already being lived by her daughter in her own words.

That month Revati sought an independent opinion from a medical-law specialist, Dr Navdeep Bedi. He had no connection with the institution providing treatment. On examining the incomplete documents available, he said plainly that the disease had been severe, some treatment decisions appeared consistent with the guidance in force at the time, and no doctor could be declared negligent without establishing the true duration and significance of the equipment alarm. “Ask the questions in order,” he said. “First: did the pressure actually fall? Second: if so, for how long? Third: what effect did that have on the oxygen delivered to the patient? Fourth: was alternative equipment supplied in time? Fifth: which records support the conclusion now being drawn?” Sunita wrote all five questions in her notebook. “And the sixth?” Maya asked. “The one you really want to know,” Dr Bedi said. “Would the outcome have been different? That is the hardest question to answer.”

Meanwhile, Dr Aarti was distressed by the untimely death of a colleague. A young doctor working at the hospital had become gravely ill with the infection and had not survived. Even the gathering to mourn him had been small and restricted. Aarti kept a note he had written in her desk drawer: “Read the patient's name first.” In his memory she resolved that responsibility for every request to amend hospital records should be clearly assigned. “You're increasing the administrative burden at a time of objections,” Prabhjot said. “Without accurate records, doctors cannot even review their own treatment,” Aarti replied. She was speaking not to prove herself innocent but to protect future patients from mistakes. Her proposal, however, was not readily accepted by the management.

The first July rain washed the dust from the lane. Beneath the fan Ashok had repaired, Ramlakhan was helping a little girl with arithmetic. It was Ragini, and three numbers were written in her exercise book: first, second and third. “What is three plus five?” Ramlakhan asked. “Eight.” “And if you take two away from three?” “One,” the girl replied. At that ordinary exchange Maya laughed from the doorway. For the first time in four months the laughter lingered on her face. Then the fan's sound changed, and Ragini rose to inspect the blades. “Papa said if it rattles, a screw is loose.” She fetched a small screwdriver. Before letting her touch the metal, Ramlakhan taught her to unplug the lead. The precautions taught by the dead often continue to live in the hands of those left behind.

In a quiet room of his Chandigarh office, Harmeet prepared the papers for Maya's possible consumer complaint. He advised her about seeking redress before the appropriate commission established under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, for alleged deficiency in medical services and a claim for compensation. But the first page did not declare that "every hospital employee is a criminal." Maya's allegations remained limited: the failure to supply all the requested records; discrepancies between supply-pressure information and the treatment timeline; and possible liability for deficient service if an expert examination established a specific lapse. "Keeping the allegation within its proper limits doesn't weaken it," Harmeet said. "It makes it fit for judicial consideration." As she signed, Maya saw Ashok's old handwriting where he had written his name and her hand stopped again.

Revati drew a firm boundary around the dispute. Civil compensation for medical negligence, the state government's pandemic assistance and the hospital's professional duty to provide records might all be kept in one file, but they were not the same legal entitlement. "Receiving financial relief does not establish that a hospital is at fault," she told Sunita. "And even if the hospital is found free of fault, assistance provided under the rules for a death caused by the pandemic may still be available." Sunita put this into simpler language for Maya. She remembered the year when workers had accepted some outstanding pay while expressly reserving their remaining claims. A single life can generate different documents establishing different rights. She was learning not to muddle them together on paper.

After the complaint was filed, the commission's preliminary process required a reply from the hospital. Maya had imagined that a judge would pronounce the whole truth on the first day, but Harmeet explained the sequence of responses from the parties, verification of records, appropriate expert opinions and, when required, an opportunity to contest the opposing evidence. The hospital objected that extraordinary medical circumstances during a pandemic did not justify inventing a new standard; the test should be reasonable professional care within the resources then available. "I agree that not every death is negligence," Maya said on hearing this argument. "But when the hospital writes that nothing went wrong, and its own books give a different account, I have the right to ask questions." There was anger in her voice, yet beneath it lay a remarkable steadiness.

Because regular physical appearances were restricted during the pandemic, the first hearing was scheduled by video. Harmeet placed a separate chair for Maya in his office so she could consult her advocate

without feeling obliged to show her face on the screen. The hospital's lawyer appeared before the commission. At the outset, the presiding member explained that no finding of medical fault or amount of compensation would be determined that day. The questions were which necessary records had been supplied, which remained outstanding, and who bore the duty to preserve the original digital information. The hospital's lawyer said that most of the file had already been sent to the family. Harmeet compared the lists and supplied dates for the missing documents. The commission directed both sides to provide replies and lists within the specified time. When Maya returned home, she said, “There was no decision today, but someone listened to me.”

When Noor Jatay came to Maya's home, she asked permission before recording. “I will speak,” Maya said, “but my daughter is studying. Please don't keep questioning her.” Noor agreed. While preparing her report, she also sought the hospital's response. Prabhjot said the hospital had treated many patients and respected the family's feelings, but assigning specific blame before the conclusion of judicial proceedings would be improper. Noor published that response without cutting away parts of it. Her report placed Ashok's repaired fan on one side, the recorded pressure-trace on the other, and a clear sentence between them: “The cause is under investigation.” Many readers found the report insufficiently dramatic. Maya, however, felt relieved that her husband had not been turned into an object of sensation.

New information emerged from the technical service provider. The hospital's main system could adjust its time settings automatically, but for part of the year two separate devices had not had their clocks synchronised to the same source. Consequently, some moments in the original logs appeared under different times on the adjusted display. The discovery did not resolve every inconsistency. Instead, it raised another question: was the word “uninterrupted” based on anyone's direct examination, or was it a preset entry used to fill a blank field? Veena retrieved the old configuration document for the digital service. “If it was an ordinary system error,” Prabhjot asked, “why blame the hospital?” “Whatever the source of the error,” Veena answered, “we must examine its effect on the patient's treatment record. The question of responsibility comes after that.” It was the first time she had spoken so plainly in front of her colleagues.

A member of the management advised Omkar to “clean up” the old handwritten register by writing it out afresh. Omkar smoothed the paper and said, “A clean copy is fine. But the original will remain, with its crossed-out figures and crooked time entries.” “Your stubbornness will

drag the institution into a dispute," the man replied. "When a machine breaks down, I repair it," said Omkar. "When a page has a history, I cannot change that history in the name of repair." He was worried about his job; he had an elderly mother's medicines to buy. Still, he did not destroy the page. That night his wife asked, "Will you still have a job tomorrow?" "I don't know," Omkar said. "But what I have written will still be there."

In September, news arrived of fresh government guidelines on assistance to families bereaved by Covid. Maya went to the district office to find out whether she could apply. An employee showed her the form and explained the requirements for official documents concerning a Covid-related death, identity, the status of the next of kin and the prescribed application process. The rules for ex-gratia assistance of fifty thousand rupees had by then been clarified. "Is this compensation for the hospital's negligence?" Maya asked. "No," the employee answered. "This is disaster-related assistance. The decision about a dispute over medical care belongs to another authority." Maya made two separate envelopes from the papers in her bundle. On one she wrote "Assistance"; on the other, "The Truth About the Treatment." Ashok's name was inside both, but they meant different things.

At the preliminary review of her application, an officer requested clarification of the wording on the death certificate. The hospital papers mentioned "severe respiratory failure" and details of the infection, but a particular field in the state's prescribed form was incomplete. Maya had to return to the hospital door. That day Ragini wrote in her homework book, "Maa has gone to get papers." Sunita sought information from an official at the local help desk. It would not be legally sound simply to say, "That particular word isn't on the certificate, so no assistance is possible." The applicable guidance and the grievance-redressal procedure had to be examined. Maya came home with an acknowledgement of her application. She needed help, but did not want money obtained through a false declaration.

Revati read reports of the Supreme Court's directions of 4 October. She told Maya that the established rules had made clearer the routes for applying for death-related assistance, correcting a certificate and pursuing grievances. Officials could ask for the necessary medical papers, and families could expect a proper decision. "If I receive the money, will the case be closed?" Maya asked. "No," Revati replied. "Approval of assistance under a scheme is independent of the question of a specific deficiency in a hospital's services. Some payments may be affected by legal rules intended to prevent double recovery, but the two proceedings must

not be treated as one." "My envelopes don't have two different names," Maya said. "They have two different questions." Revati wrote the sentence in her notebook.

At a hospital meeting, Dr Aarti proposed that unusual incidents relating to treatment should be reviewed internally by a group independent of the staff directly involved in the shift, and that certified copies of available records should be supplied to families. "People will take the procedure as an admission of fault," Prabhjot said. "Conducting an inquiry is not admitting fault," Aarti replied. "Nor is avoiding an inquiry proof of innocence." Veena supported the proposal. Gurpreet agreed to give an accurate account of her shift, but insisted that the review should also record the hospital's full workload that day, the number of staff and the seriousness of the patients' conditions. To understand an event, evidence of the circumstances in which it occurred was necessary.

In early November an expert's preliminary opinion was placed before the commission. Dr Bedi's report made clear that the records available showed Ashok's underlying illness to have been extremely severe, and certain aspects of the treatment appeared medically appropriate; but no definite opinion on causation was possible without an independent technical reconciliation of the pressure alerts, handwritten register and digital summary from the critical night. Maya read the cautious opinion in silence. The hospital's side said that no fault had been established, which was true. Harmeet added that the inquiry was still incomplete, which was also true. The commission issued limited directions to preserve and produce the necessary original records and system details; final determination of responsibility was deferred. "Has justice been postponed?" a relative asked Maya. "No," she said. "A door to the truth has opened."

During those months, news of the farmers' movement came regularly from Punjab's villages into the city lanes. Baldev Singh spoke on the phone with an elderly uncle in his village about crop prices, debt and travel across the border to the protest sites. Sunita heard that some of the farmers' platforms arranged food and water for working-class families, although political speeches and individual hardship did not always speak in the same voice. "A factory worker's problems aren't the same as a farmer's," Baldev said, "but each can understand the other's hunger." "Then when a platform is built," Sunita replied, "there must be room beside the loud voices for those who do the real labour with sickles, cotton and food." She did not know that the next year's story would begin in the farmers' own voices.

At Sarabjit's bank, one family received the government assistance for a Covid-related death. An elderly mother kept looking into her passbook, as if searching for her son's name among the figures. “This assistance has reached you through the process provided for your legal entitlement,” Sarabjit explained gently. “Will the money bring my son back?” the woman asked. Sarabjit made no reply. She simply prepared the next copy required for the application. She understood that a financial institution's role was to ensure the safe delivery of funds, not to measure grief. Maya too received news about the next stage of her assistance application, but she did not stop requesting a written answer about Ashok's hospital file.

One cold evening in December, Ragini opened a closed window. The air outside was shivering with cold; the fan was switched off. “Why run a fan in winter?” Maya asked as she folded a cotton sari. “Papa fixed this,” Ragini said. “Let's see if it still runs.” Maya checked the insulation on the wire before plugging it in. The blades began to turn slowly. The sound was not as smooth as before; a faint rattle interrupted it. “That screw needs tightening again,” Ragini said. Instead of putting the screwdriver straight into her daughter's hand, Maya switched off the fan and said, “We'll learn together.” The moment existed beyond the papers concerning compensation: a child was preserving in her own life a skill learned from her father.

Before the New Year, a formal letter arrived for Maya from the hospital. It said that copies of the original technical supply records were being secured and the necessary information would be submitted to the appropriate judicial forum. But the letter was silent about the family's earlier question: on whose direct evidence had the word “uninterrupted” been based? “If you want, we can prepare for the next hearing,” Sunita said. “We will,” Maya replied. “But the first line of my application will remain as it was.” She opened her notebook. On the first page she had written: “Ashok Mistri, year of birth, home address, wife's name, daughter Ragini.” On the second was the date of his admission to hospital. On the third were her questions. Turning the notebook towards Sunita, Maya said, “Before compensation, I want the truth about his treatment.”

Revati looked at a photograph of that page and remained silent for a long time. In a Darbhanga courtroom in 2000, her father had told her that behind every name entered in an account book stood a living person. Twenty-one years later, behind a time written in a patient's register stood a breath, a family and a half-finished fan. Revati wrote the date of the next hearing in her notebook and, beneath it, Maya's demand. She understood that an order for money could often relieve

material want, but the truth of a night that had passed could be discovered only through a proper inquiry. Outside Ludhiana, people were gathering for a farmers' meeting. One carried earth from a field, another a slip recording wages, and Maya carried the notebook of Ashok's final treatment: three pairs of hands moving forward, each bearing its own question.

Chapter 26 — A Voice in the Name of the Fields

2021: Harnampur, Ludhiana, Chandigarh and the farmers' movement on Delhi's borders

One January morning, dew lay on the empty rice stubble in Harnampur, a village west of Ludhiana. Jaspreet Kaur bent at the edge of a wheatfield and held a young shoot in her hand. Her eyes lingered over the fine green line running through the plant. The holding was three and a half acres, but inside the house its measure was not so simple. Part of the land had come down from her husband Gurnam Singh's father; part had been mortgaged to repay a debt incurred for his sister's wedding; and the produce of what remained fed three generations. Jaspreet was not named as an owner on any document, yet it was her hands that did the work, from selecting the seed to locking the storeroom. Releasing the tip of the leaf, she said, "If the cold has been right this year, the grain should fill out well." "How much good a full head of grain will do us," Gurnam replied, "the mandi accounts will tell." Both spoke their own truth.

Inside the house, old Harbans Kaur was grinding spices beside the hearth. In sixty-six years she had seen so many harvests that she had stopped counting them, but she remembered each year's debt separately. "If you're going to the meeting today, take the papers," she told her son. "Slogans alone won't change the reckoning of a field." In Gurnam's pocket was a handbill edged in red from the farmers' organisation. It mentioned opposition to the three farm laws, the demand for assurances on minimum support prices, and the farmers sitting in protest on Delhi's borders. On the back of the same handbill, Harbans had copied figures for outstanding debts from an old moneylender's ledger. Slogans and liabilities confronted one another on a single sheet.

Jaspreet's daughter Manpreet was studying agricultural economics. Since the pandemic, much of her course had taken place on a mobile phone. She opened a newspaper and read aloud the Supreme Court's order of 12 January: an interim stay on implementation of the three farm laws, directions that the existing minimum support price arrangement should continue, and the appointment of an expert committee. Gurnam breathed more easily. "So can we all come home and farm now?" Harbans asked. "Amma, a stay isn't the same thing as repealing a law," Manpreet said. "The protesters' demands have not yet been met." "And when people debate crop prices and whether buyers can be trusted," Jaspreet added, "those who don't hold the title deeds must also have a voice." Manpreet copied her mother's words into her notes.

A small gathering was held in Harnampur's square. Shamsher Singh, who chaired it, owned a large holding. He spoke from experience and people listened. But when he declared that "all farmers want the same thing," Jaspreet raised her hand. "How many farmers?" she asked. "And the women who transplant, weed and harvest? If they don't own land, will their names be left off the list?" Shamsher looked uncomfortable for a moment. "We respect women in our organisation," he said. "Being included on a list of those to be respected is different from having a member's place, isn't it?" Jaspreet asked. The gathering fell silent. Parmjeet Kaur, seated in the front row, opened a small ledger. "From today we'll draw up a new list," she said. "Each member's labour and contribution will be recorded. Everyone who works the land must have a chance to speak."

Manju Devi was at the meeting too. She had come to Punjab after marrying a man from Madhubani district in Bihar. Her husband Manoj worked as an agricultural labourer; Manju herself went to the fields in the wheat-cutting season and worked in two households for the rest of the year. On paper her name appeared neither among those who owed money nor among those who owned land. "If crop prices go up, will our wages rise too?" she asked. An elderly farmer laughed. "Let the farmer get a price first." Jaspreet looked towards the laughter. "When we demand justice, we must also listen to those who work alongside us. Otherwise there will be a closed door even inside the field." Shamsher did not interrupt. For the first time he had Manju's question entered in the minutes of the meeting.

The following week Sunita Paswan took leave from her factory in Ludhiana and came to the village. Baldev Singh had invited her. The years she had spent disputing wage registers since 2009 had taught her that workers count their days of labour before calculating the money owed to them. "I'm no expert in setting farm prices," she told the farmers. "But if money is collected to support an organisation, I can show you how to keep a record of where it came from and where it went." Parmjeet seated her in the courtyard. In front of them were sacks of wheat, brass tumblers and an old register. "The accounts aren't that tidy," Parmjeet admitted, "but the money isn't disappearing." Sunita smiled. "Let's give that trust the support of numbers."

The organisation's local branch, the Dharti Jan Sabha Committee, arranged relief, discussions among agricultural workers and peaceful demonstrations. It was not an official representative body of the national movement, but a separate voluntary group drawn from Harnampur and neighbouring villages. Shamsher became its president, Parmjeet its

treasurer and Jaspreet the coordinator of contacts with village assemblies. At the first meeting Parmjeet displayed three separate accounts: voluntary contributions, food assistance and travel expenses. “How do you record the value when someone donates provisions?” Sunita asked. “Some people give without putting a price on them,” Parmjeet said. “Then record how many kilos of rice, and the purpose for which the donor meant it to be used. Don't invent figures from guesses.” Some members complained that the finer points of bookkeeping would smother the spirit of the movement. “We need the books to protect that spirit,” Parmjeet replied.

Jagjit Arora, the village commission agent, sat outside his shop. For three generations his family had traded in the purchase, weighing and credit-based sale of rice and wheat. Some farmers called him an exploiter; others regarded him as a friend who lent money when they were in difficulty. In Jagjit's ledger was a debt owed by Jaspreet's family from three seasons earlier, with interest calculated in ways the two sides understood differently. Studying the page, Manpreet said, “Show the principal, the interest, the advance for seed and the deductions after the crop was sold separately.” “Don't you trust me?” Jagjit asked. “I'm putting years of oral trust into writing,” Manpreet answered, “so that neither you nor we can be falsely accused.” Jagjit agreed to open a new account, although a dispute remained about whether his administrative charges were justified.

Another farmer in the village, Rajneesh Grover, did not agree with every demand of the farmers' movement. He grew vegetables on a small plot and sold directly to city kitchens and shopkeepers. In his view, the possibilities offered by new trading routes should not be rejected outright. “The arrangement you find useful for selling wheat is different from the one I have for tomatoes,” he told the gathering. “If I can sell straight to customers, why prevent it?” “My fear,” Gurnam said sharply, “is that big buyers will come, offer high prices at first, then dictate their own terms.” “Rules and monitoring may be the answer to that fear,” Rajneesh replied. Jaspreet intervened. “You are both speaking from experience. Let both opinions be recorded in the minutes. It isn't right to silence a farmer in the name of farmers.”

By late March the heads of wheat were growing heavy. More hours were needed in the fields, yet the committee meetings did not become less frequent. Jaspreet irrigated at dawn, worked in the house through the day, and in the evening met women from four villages. Manpreet noticed that when her father travelled for the protests, decisions at home passed to her mother, but the collective handbills bore only the name “Farmer Gurnam Singh.” “Why is there room for only half the name?” she asked

her father one day. “That's how we're used to writing it,” Gurnam said tiredly. “Habits can change,” Manpreet replied. He said nothing until evening. At the next meeting the first sentence of his speech called his wife a farmer. Jaspreet did not applaud. She simply lifted an empty chair from the ground and placed it in the row where the women were sitting.

Meanwhile, in Ludhiana, Maya was still pursuing the hospital records relating to Ashok Mistri. When Sunita returned from the farmers' meeting and went to her house, Ragini was drawing a fan in her exercise book. “So you work for the farmers now?” Maya asked. “I look after the accounts; I don't make farming policy,” Sunita replied. “The voice of the fields must be their own.” “Everywhere it's a struggle to get a name written down,” Maya said. “Ashok's name in the treatment records, your names in the wage registers, the names of women who work in the fields.” “There is a likeness,” Sunita said, “but they are different cases. Your hospital papers won't become entries in our committee's donation register. We must understand one another's suffering and respect the limits of one another's evidence.”

In April the air held a curious mixture of mustard oil, cut wheat and hospital medicines. During the second wave of the pandemic, the courtyard of the village primary health centre was crowded. One group of farmers prepared to leave for the protest site; another cared for sick elders at home. When Jaspreet's cousin Harkirat developed a high fever, she postponed her journey. “The movement must continue,” Shamsher said. “Only if people survive will there be a movement,” Jaspreet replied. “Don't dismiss safety rules as an insult.” She reduced the number of vehicles in the convoy, had instructions for distancing written out, and suggested that elderly farmers remain in the village and send letters. Not everyone agreed, but disagreement on this point did not measure anyone's loyalty to the movement.

During the Vaisakh harvest, Manju and Manoj arrived in the fields at dawn. Seeing Jaspreet, Manju said, “My daily wage hasn't changed since last year, but oil and medicine cost more. When will our wages be discussed alongside the price of the farmer's crop?” Sweat shone on Gurnam's forehead. “First see how much is left in the farmer's hand after the crop is sold.” “I understand your debts,” Manju replied, “but my household's cooking fire belongs in the accounts too.” Jaspreet stopped them both. “This isn't a contest to decide whose hardship is greater. Let us look together at the gross crop income, the debts and the wages.” That evening Manpreet divided a page into two sections: the expenses of the landowner and the income of the landless worker. Both showed a shortage of money, but the rights at issue were not the same.

When the buying season opened at Jagjit's shop, disputes over the registers became more heated. Rajneesh showed two vegetable transactions, one with a buyer who had paid late and another that had brought him a fair price. Gurnam produced the receipt for a government procurement; he believed that if the declared-price system weakened, a small farmer like him would be exposed to risk. “Is the announcement of a minimum support price the same thing as a legally enforceable obligation to buy every sale of every crop at that price?” Manpreet asked them all. No one had an easy answer. “First we'll read the limits of the present arrangement,” she said. “Then we'll discuss what additional protection we need.” Shamsher was displeased. “You'll exhaust ordinary farmers with so much detail.” “I've spent seventy years living with details,” Harbans replied. “Don't silence me on the pretext of saving me from exhaustion.”

Women from the farmers' groups ran kitchens and relief camps. In outside news reports they were often pictured only cooking flatbreads. Parmjeet stopped a journalist. “We run the kitchens because hungry people can't argue their case,” she said. “But I also have questions about the cost of production, land rent and mandi charges.” The journalist was Noor Jatay. She switched off her recorder and listened first, then asked permission before recording. “If you print an article under my name, could my employers take offence?” Manju asked. “I won't publish your identity without your consent,” Noor replied. “And I won't change the meaning of what you say.” With that assurance, Manju described at length the changing rates of pay and the invisible labour of women.

One day in May, a committee meeting was to be held beside the village canal. Then an order came from the local administration restricting large public gatherings because of the pandemic. Shamsher was furious; the handbills for the programme had already been printed. “It's a way to silence us,” he said. Jaspreet asked to see the order. It specified the area covered, the period of operation and the public-health conditions. Manpreet explained that time-limited, generally applicable restrictions could be justified by the infection crisis; there was not enough evidence yet to say that this one targeted farmers in particular. Shamsher fell silent. The committee postponed the gathering, looked into sending a memorandum through a small delegation, and proposed a meeting with limited attendance in an open space if permission was granted.

On her way back from the hospital that day, Maya met Sunita near a bend in the canal. Maya held a blue envelope containing Ashok's file; Sunita carried a memorandum from the farmers. “Why do all papers

seem the same colour?" Maya asked. Sunita smiled. "Because dust settles on every colour in the same way." Maya laughed for a moment. Then she said, "I want you to tell your meeting that the hospital is to blame for the shortage of air." "I'll tell them about your question," Sunita answered gently, "but I won't turn an unproven allegation into a verdict." Maya was upset at first. Back home, she opened her file and saw that her own application requested an inquiry. The next day she sent Sunita a message: "Raise the question, certainly. Don't pronounce judgment."

After the first rain in June, the earth in the fields looked freshly washed. There were fewer workers available to transplant rice that year, since some migrant families had returned to their villages during the pandemic. Manju telephoned her brother-in-law's family. Back in Mithila, they were worried about flooding. "The weather threatens us in both places," she told Jaspreet. "Here in Punjab the fields need workers; there they must save their own land." Jaspreet raised the question of reconsidering wage rates with Gurnam. He showed her his list of costs, and Manpreet added lines for workers' accommodation and access to safe drinking water. "Where were these items in the accounts before?" Gurnam asked. "Just where the daily work of the household was," Jaspreet replied. "The work was done, but the numbers were never written down."

Meanwhile, the committee prepared a common questionnaire. It addressed not only opposition to the three farm laws but also seed prices, irrigation water, crop insurance, access to mandis, debts owed to commission agents, women's membership and daily wages for labourers. On a separate sheet Rajneesh set out how direct procurement opportunities might be protected while also providing safeguards against the arbitrary power of a sole buyer. "If we print every opinion, people will think the organisation is weak," Shamsher said, studying the pages. "Then write down clearly the matters on which we agree," Parmjeet replied. "Hiding differences will not make us stronger; it will breed mistrust." They decided to publish a consultation paper separately from the organisation's formal demands.

With Covid infections declining in July, some public activities resumed, although people's fear did not immediately subside. The Dharti Jan Sabha Committee applied for permission to hold a one-day peaceful gathering near Ludhiana's old grain market. The application specified the hours, expected attendance, drinking water, sanitation, vehicle parking and an undertaking not to block the route for emergency services. The site adjoined a main road leading to a city hospital. Parmjeet drew a separate map marking pedestrian access, the passage for

emergency vehicles and the meeting platform. “The right to gather is ours,” she said, “but the family sitting inside an ambulance are citizens too.” On that point the committee was unanimous.

The application was acknowledged, but three days before the scheduled date a brief prohibition order arrived from the sub-divisional administration. It referred to “possible obstruction of traffic and risks to public order,” but contained neither an attached assessment nor any discussion of an alternative site. A second line referred to local pandemic precautions without identifying clearly which specific direction applied. Manpreet read the letter over and over. “Are we being forbidden to hold a meeting here, or anywhere at all?” she asked. The employee who had issued the receipt said the order related, for now, to the proposed place and time. Shamsher wanted to tell the press at once that “all the rights of farmers have been abolished.” Jaspreet caught his hand. “Say only what the letter says. If we say more, we weaken our argument.”

Across the road that day, a rickshaw driver named Mohammad Akram was delivering medicines to the hospital entrance. His wife went for treatment twice a week. Akram sympathised with the farmers, but also feared a road blockage. The committee invited him to a meeting. “You may keep the peace,” he asked, “but if a thousand people turn up, where will vehicles go?” “We'll maintain discipline,” Shamsher assured him. “Discipline written on paper won't turn an ambulance's wheels,” Akram replied. Parmjeet showed him her map. With a red pencil he marked a narrow bend. “If two tractors stop here, the road will be blocked.” The committee changed its map. Akram did not become a member, but his knowledge of the actual site was included in the revised application.

A written request for reconsideration was sent to the administration with the revised map. “Why keep knocking at officials' doors?” Shamsher complained. “We applied once and were refused,” Jaspreet replied. “Now we're asking to understand the reasons and to have a chance to correct what needs correcting. We want to pursue this struggle lawfully, not secretly.” The following day an official representative visited the site. He explained that heavy vehicles had previously caused difficulties on the hospital road, though a technical inspection of the limits of the present proposal was still pending. No fresh, reasoned written order came. Three days later the committee cancelled the gathering, while farmers continued to hold small meetings in their homes. There was sorrow in the cancellation, but not silence.

Before leaving for Chandigarh, Jaspreet asked Baldev which competent advocate she should consult. He gave her the name of

Harmeet Singh, who advised people in local labour and consumer disputes about the proper forum for their claims. After reading the application, Harmeet asked three questions first. “Under what authority did the officer issue this order? What did the pandemic notification in force that day say? Why was there no reply to the request for an alternative site?” “We have a fundamental right to assemble,” Shamsher declared. “Certainly,” Harmeet replied. “But the right to assemble peacefully is not an unlimited right to occupy a particular road at a particular time. Ask the court to examine the reasons for this local decision and the adequacy of the alternatives, not to strike down every law.” Jaspreet thought the distinction proper.

Revati was then preparing for a hearing in Darbhanga. Harmeet telephoned her to say that Sunita in Ludhiana had gathered documents for some farmers and that a narrowly framed writ challenging the administrative order was under consideration. “This isn't litigation over the validity of the three farm laws, is it?” Revati asked. “No,” he replied. “This is the separate matter of a local assembly site and a reasoned administrative decision. The national dispute is proceeding through its own channels before the Supreme Court.” Revati agreed that freedom of expression and peaceful assembly under Article 19 of the Constitution could be subject to reasonable restrictions, but the order's vague wording and potentially excessive breadth needed examination. She sent a list of the necessary documents, leaving the conduct of the case in the hands of local counsel.

While waiting outside Harmeet's office, Manju offered to put her thumbprint on the paper. “Can't you sign?” an employee asked. “I can write my name,” she said, “but I haven't had much practice reading whole documents.” Harmeet read out the substance of the petition in simple language mixing Maithili and Hindi. “I don't own a field,” Manju asked. “Can I still be a petitioner?” “You are a citizen who wishes to attend the programme,” Harmeet replied. “The order affects you in that capacity. A deed of sale for land is not the basis of this dispute.” Manju wrote her name slowly. The letters were crooked, but the clearest sentence on the page was her question: why should one have to own land to possess the right to gather?

A petition was filed in the Punjab and Haryana High Court. Alongside the committee, Jaspreet, Manju, Gurnam and two other prospective participants were named as co-petitioners. In its response, the administration said the order had been made because of continuing public-health concerns, the main hospital entrance, uncontrolled tractor movements and the risk of traffic obstruction. A photograph of a crowd

on an earlier day was attached, but the date and its connection to the proposed event were not made clear. Harmeet did not make a categorical accusation upon seeing the photograph. “What day was this taken?” he asked. “If it shows an earlier, different event, how far can it be used as evidence of the actual risk presented by the present proposal?” The government advocate said the officer's intention had been to protect citizens. The dispute turned, even before any judgment on motives, upon whether the decision rested on reasons and facts.

At the first hearing, Justice Sandhya Mehta asked the parties briefly, “What do the petitioners seek: a right to a particular road, or a fair administrative decision on a peaceful assembly?” “The latter,” Harmeet said. “The applicants are prepared to consider changing the time and venue. They seek to know the grounds of refusal, to have their workable proposal examined and to receive a decision free of discrimination.” The judge asked the state's advocate whether an alternative ground had been identified. The reply was that consultations with the traffic department were continuing. The court refrained from granting permission indirectly through an interim order. Instead, it directed the competent officer to hear the representatives of the parties and make a fresh, reasoned decision within a limited period.

On the day of the hearing, Shamsher looked dejected in the court corridor. “We've been deprived of our meeting, and all the court has done is tell them to write another letter,” he said. “If we'd made a thousand people sit in the road without preparing another route, Akram's wife might not have reached the hospital,” Jaspreet answered. “The court has made us listen to others, and told the officer to listen too. That isn't final victory, but it isn't silence.” “We still have to see whether the order is obeyed,” Harmeet added. “The court has not ruled today on national agricultural policy.” The farmers' faces showed exhaustion, but they were also learning how to read the limited relief set down on a page.

Five days later a meeting was held in the administration's office. A traffic officer suggested an alternative open ground in the southern part of the city. The difficulty was that there was little public transport to take elderly farmers there after they got off their buses. “It's too far away,” Shamsher said. “They want to make us invisible.” “We've allowed other gatherings there too,” the officer replied. Manpreet requested the list of approved events from the previous two months, which was available in the public record. It showed that large cultural gatherings, too, had been assigned other grounds instead of the main road. Some of Shamsher's initial suspicion diminished, but the question of accessibility remained.

Jaspreet took Akram and Virendra Kumar, a representative of a city disability-rights group, to inspect the ground. Virendra walked with crutches. Looking at the rough, unpaved entrance, he said, “You're people of the fields. You aren't afraid of soil. But what sort of path is this for someone who comes on crutches?” A municipal employee said a level temporary walkway, lighting, drinking water and sanitation could be arranged for a time. The committee added a new line for these expenses to its budget. “An assembly that speaks of rights must leave its entrance open to everyone,” Parmjeet said. In the revised order, the officer specified the available site, time limits, restrictions on sound, public-health precautions and traffic conditions. The right to dissent survived, but the practical work of exercising it had also come into view.

On the morning of the event, the mats spread over the ground still held a little of the night's dew. Shamsher was checking the wooden platform. Parmjeet sealed the donation box and put two women members in charge of entering each contribution in the register. Jaspreet said Manju should give the first speech. Several men looked surprised. “Not the president first?” Shamsher hesitated for a moment, then handed Manju the microphone himself. Wiping her damp hands on her salwar, she said, “I speak in the name of the fields, but the fields aren't in my name. If agricultural policy is made, where will it make room for daily-wage workers, sharecroppers and women's labour?” The applause that rose across the ground was slow to die away.

Rajneesh stood behind the platform as well. The organisers had given him time to debate. He told the farmers that policy had different effects on different crops and trading circumstances; direct sales could offer opportunities, but there must also be firm protection against non-payment and the danger of monopoly. Some listeners whistled in derision. Jaspreet rose. “Answer an opinion with an argument, not with noise.” Gurnam continued to disagree with Rajneesh, but came to the microphone and asked, “If the buyer breaks a contract, where does a small farmer go?” Rajneesh conceded that resolution of contractual disputes must be fair, accessible and balanced. Neither found a complete solution, but a conversation across disagreement had become possible within the gathering.

When the event ended, Akram's rickshaw travelled to the hospital without obstruction. That evening he told Jaspreet, “I don't agree with everything you've said, but I wasn't delayed in taking my wife today. That didn't make your meeting any smaller.” “And if we now declare that our event caused nobody any difficulty,” Jaspreet replied, “we must verify that too. If a shopkeeper lost business, we should hear about it.” Akram

mentioned Vimla Devi, a flower-seller in the city, whose customers had been fewer that day. Parmjeet proposed seeking feedback from small traders at the next meeting. Using public space was not one party's certificate of victory, but the difficult practice of accommodating many lives.

On a September evening the rice leaves were turning yellow in the fields of Harnampur. Harbans Kaur's knees had grown more painful, so she sat on a cot in the veranda, opening an old bag of seed. Manpreet read her the expenses for the new crop. The income column included projected sales; the expenses included seed, fertiliser, diesel, pesticides, wages, loan instalments and voluntary contributions towards journeys for the movement. Harbans laid a finger on one line: "Women's work in the home." The space for an amount was blank. "Why is this empty?" she asked. "Because nobody pays cash for it," Manpreet replied. "Work doesn't cease to exist because the market puts no price on it." Manpreet wrote a single word beside the line—"Invaluable"—and closed her notebook. She understood that figures were a means of telling the truth, not the whole shape of it.

The Dharti Jan Sabha Committee resolved to hold an open audit. Parmjeet placed the six-month accounts on the table. She began by showing the petrol bills received through her brother-in-law, so no suspicion of favouritism would linger. Two bills bore the same date and amount. "The clerk must have entered it twice by mistake," Shamsher said immediately. "Possibly," Parmjeet replied. "But first let's compare the original receipt, the vehicle's journey log and the method of payment." The inquiry showed that one copy had been attached to the office register and another to the travel file. There had been only one payment, but it had been counted twice in the totals. The committee did not allege that a false bill had been submitted. It corrected the accounts and recorded the date of amendment. Sunita remembered the wage registers of ten years before: a repeated figure did not always mean a repeated payment.

At the same meeting, an amount of ten thousand rupees was found without a clear description. The money had arrived online; the bank entry contained an abbreviated name and did not specify the sender's intended purpose. Parmjeet thought it might have come from a Punjabi family living away from home. Shamsher wanted the sum used for meals. "Shall we spend it on an assumption," Sunita asked, "or message the donor to ask what it was meant for?" Manpreet suggested preserving the incomplete bank details and seeking confirmation from the possible donor. Sarabjit Kaur, drawing on her experience of banking compliance,

advised them plainly that a bank could not arbitrarily disclose private customer information to the committee; they should examine their own receipt records and any information the donor volunteered. The amount was kept apart from funds for immediate use, without an accusation against anyone.

At the village primary school, a teacher who had seen the farmers' new meetings asked whether children might be taught the economics of cultivation. Manpreet brought three plates into the classroom: one containing wheat grains, one chickpeas, the third mustard seed. "Which of these plates will have the same farming accounts?" she asked. "They are all different colours," said one child. "They need different amounts of water," said another. "Exactly," Manpreet said, laughing. "Then how do we work out when a single price rule for every crop is useful, and when it is incomplete?" The children picked up seeds and began asking questions. Jaspreet stood in the classroom doorway, thinking how the words that passed so swiftly in a protest slogan could come to a halt inside a child's single question.

In the first week of October, news reached Harnampur of a tragic, violent incident connected with farmers' protests in northern India. The village was stunned. The committee held a meeting of mourning, but opposed naming any person whose responsibility had not yet been established as a criminal in its printed statement. "People are already angry," Shamsher said. "This will sound cold." "We don't lower the standard of truth to cool the heat of grief," Noor Jatay replied. "Preserve the names and dignity of those who died; let responsibility for crime be determined by a proper investigation and the courts." Manju lit a lamp. She remembered a brother who had disappeared during floods in her village in Mithila. Before turning collective grief into a tale of heroes and enemies, one had to see the mourning within individual homes. That much she understood.

One day Revati met Harmeet in connection with work at a Chandigarh court. Looking over the documents concerning the fresh administrative decision on the farmers' local gathering, she said, "The case was useful, but remember its limits. The court didn't determine a fair price for farmers' crops; it examined the administrative decision against a judicial standard." "I was afraid the committee's enthusiastic members would proclaim the order a national victory," Harmeet said. "Jaspreet has stated clearly in her letter that finding a suitable venue was an administrative question." "The language of rights often grows stronger when it acknowledges limits," Revati replied. She recalled

something her father Shivnarayan had long taught her: never say in court that a fact has been proved when it has not.

In late October, the question of prolonged road blockades and freedom of movement at the borders of the capital came before the Supreme Court again. Some members wanted the local newsletter to declare that the right to protest peacefully was unlimited. Harmeet warned them that the constitutional protection of peaceful dissent was important, but a claim to block a public road permanently could not simply be accepted. Other citizens' freedom of movement and the public interest also had to be considered. Jaspreet changed the line in the newsletter to read, "We will exercise the right to peaceful protest while safeguarding access to public services." At first Shamsher thought the sentence too mild, but his view changed after he himself watched Akram taking his wife to the hospital one day.

Before Diwali, the account of the rice harvest came to Gurnam's house. The yield was somewhat below expectations, but records showed how much grain had got wet and how much had been set aside under the moisture test. Another interest entry in Jagjit's ledger was disputed. Manpreet laid Jagjit's accounts on one side, the bank deposit slip on another, and the household's dates of borrowing on a third. Two days of checking showed that the date of a particular instalment was clear at the bank, but the trader had entered it later in his ledger. Jagjit accepted the correction; Gurnam acknowledged his obligation to pay the remaining debt. There was no miracle, no complete reconciliation. "Both sides deserve credit for the mistake that was corrected," Jaspreet said. "But making the debt still owed invisible would not be justice."

Meanwhile, Manju's husband Manoj returned from his village and said household expenses had risen because his father needed medicine. He wanted to work again in Punjab, but neither the arrangements for travel nor the terms of employment were clear. Jaspreet suggested discussing a written agreement on fair wages, rest and necessary safety measures. "My employer is a farmer and a union leader," Manoj said. "If I ask for a document he'll think I don't trust him." Gurnam heard the remark and felt ashamed. He began keeping a register of labourers' working days and payments on his own farm. Workers' and farmers' interests were distinct yet interdependent; the union's slogans could not dissolve that difficult relationship.

In the first week of November, interviews with young farmers appeared alongside old photographs on the committee's wall newspaper. A young woman named Kuldeep Kaur said that imagining a job in the

city instead of remaining in agriculture was not an expression of shame, but of her desire for education and an independent livelihood. Harbans listened slowly as the article was read aloud. “My father thought leaving the fields was a disgrace,” she said. “But why stop a girl from choosing her own road in the name of the fields?” “Saving farming doesn't mean tying every daughter to this village,” Jaspreet replied. “We must make it a place where those who wish to return can return, and those who wish to leave can leave without fear.” Manpreet remembered her unfinished application for further study. Without telling her mother, she began searching for information about a new scholarship.

At dawn on 19 November, Gurnam heard the news on the radio and ran into the house. The central government had announced that the three farm laws would be repealed. He flung open the door and cried, “Jaspreet, listen!” Harbans raised herself from the cot. Jaspreet listened carefully to the report before speaking. “The announcement matters, but we must also watch the process in Parliament.” Months of exhaustion seemed to drain from Gurnam's eyes. He remembered the cold nights on Delhi's borders, the debts in the village and the arguments at meetings. Shamsher called to talk about celebrations. “Celebrate,” Jaspreet said, “but don't close the books on the kitchens, debts and work. For families who have lost someone, this won't be a day of simple happiness.”

A small gathering was held on the ground the day after the announcement. Shamsher called it a victory for the farmers' endurance. Rajneesh came too. He believed the repeal might diminish some trading opportunities, but peaceful dialogue must continue. A young man made a bitter remark at his words. Jaspreet stopped him. “If we have demanded the right to speak for months, we cannot now close the door on someone who disagrees.” Manpreet proposed that the committee undertake comparative studies of the actual coverage of minimum support prices, different possible approaches to debt relief, mandi reform and wages for labourers. “If even half the strength spent on the struggle now goes into understanding the truth of the fields,” Harbans said, “the next generation will benefit.”

On 29 November, Parliament passed the bill repealing all three farm laws. News came the following day that the Act had received presidential assent. On a small sheet Manpreet wrote down three dates: the interim stay of 12 January, the announcement of 19 November, and the legislative process of 29–30 November. “Why do you need so many dates?” Gurnam asked. “Because a wish, an announcement, a bill and a law are separate stages,” Manpreet replied. “We demanded clear answers from the government and the courts. We must keep the same clarity in our own

ledgers." Jaspreet pinned the sheet to the kitchen wall. Harbans adjusted her glasses to read it. "And the debt on the farm is still outstanding," she said. "Write down that date too."

The committee received an email from a publicity agency. The sender called itself "Jandisha Contact Services," which was not an official arm of any recognised farmers' organisation. The letter offered five lakh rupees in "communications support," on condition that the committee route its public material about meetings and accounts through the agency. One page of the proposal said that numerous social-media accounts would be used together, photographs of earlier crowds could be presented as images of new meetings, and statements attributed to imaginary farmers would be drafted as samples for "emotional impact." In the corner of the page was a reference to a digital donation portal; it was not clear to the treasurer on what terms the funds would reach the committee.

"With that money," Shamsher said at first, "we could help injured farmers' families, provide meals and pay school expenses. It may just be the language of advertising. We can ask them to change the conditions." Manpreet raised the question of verifying the sender's identity, the source of the donation and control over the accounts. Sunita opposed any hurried acceptance. "The suggestion in this letter that we make an absent crowd appear present goes against our own experience," she said. "Money received for relief and the credibility of a public message must not be traded for one another." Parmjeet insisted that the whole proposal be read before every committee member rather than decided by a secret understanding between the president and secretary. A meeting date was fixed.

That night Sunita opened the letter again. On the last page of the attachment were the words "Contact: H. Chauhan." She suddenly remembered an old wage register in which the name Hardev Chauhan had appeared without any corresponding days worked. Later the same name had surfaced in a financial record. She did not immediately telephone Baldev. First she preserved the email's original header, the sender's address, the date of receipt and the attachment in its original form. An initial "H" did not prove the name Hardev; a shared surname did not establish that two people were the same person. In her notebook she wrote, "Similarity of names; identity unverified." Even after taking that care, an old uneasiness returned to her body. Where was the thread leading, this surname that had kept turning up at the edge of documents over so many years?

Two days later the proposal was read at an open committee meeting. Rajneesh said plainly that there was nothing wrong with legitimate publicity, event notices or maintaining a website, but false photographs and invented testimony were unacceptable. “If they make up sentences about my suffering,” Manju asked, “will people laugh or cry believing them to be mine?” “After all the work we've done to have our real names written down,” Parmjeet said, “why should we publish stories under invented names?” Shamsher mentioned the proposed money once more. “People who need help have a right to receive it,” Jaspreet answered, “but raising money by saying that something happened when it did not is a way of deceiving them.” In the end, the committee rejected the proposal by a substantial majority.

The reply sent to the agency said only that the committee would not accept publicity using unverified images, fictional eyewitness statements or unclear financial controls. It did not declare any person or institution criminal. Parmjeet filed the original proposal, the minutes of the meeting and the rejection letter in separate envelopes. Sunita asked Sarabjit only for general advice on how to account for, report to the bank about and lawfully dispose of any unexpected incoming payment; she did not request confidential customer information. “No money has arrived yet,” Sarabjit said. “Keep the documents safe. Don't attach a person's name on the basis of a guess. If anything happens, make a lawful record of it.” The committee felt more certain that the decision to reject the offer was itself an important decision about its accounts.

At the beginning of December, news began to come that the long phase of protest on Delhi's borders was drawing to a close. The farmers returning to their villages brought different feelings with them. Some homes celebrated; some remembered illness, some bodies still bore the effects of cold nights, and in other households the cots of those who could not return stood empty. Jaspreet, Gurnam and Shamsher arranged a gathering of thanks at the village community hall. Nobody's death was turned into dramatic stage decoration. Families wishing to speak about their loss were given space; the silence of those who did not wish to speak was respected. Lamps were lit on the platform for a few moments. Manpreet noticed that after the names of the dead had been spoken there was no place for applause.

Jagjit Arora came to the gathering and said, “I was one of those who thought differently about the trading questions. But you made your accounts public, and that was a good thing.” “I still don't accept all your arguments,” Shamsher replied. Jagjit smiled. “Not everything has to be agreed in a single day. One line of interest in my ledger turned out to be

wrong, and one payment in your accounts was counted twice. Acknowledging that is not defeat." Listening to the two men, Jaspreet thought that uncertain accounts of debt and political disagreement carried a similar danger: declaring the entire existence of the other person false. Learning not to make that mistake was a very slow discipline.

On the day the committee's year-end accounts were completed, Parmjeet kept the door of her room open. Two elderly farmers from neighbouring villages, three women labourers and Rajneesh came to examine the pages. One register recorded food supplies, another the actual costs of vehicles, and a third money received through the bank. Parmjeet showed the note about the unexplained ten thousand rupees: attempts to confirm the donor were continuing; the final purpose remained undecided. "Why have you left this space blank?" Harbans asked. "Because filling in what we don't know is the easiest lie of all," Parmjeet replied. Beside her thumbprint, Manju wrote a short note: "Seen, heard; the rest to be asked." The committee did not fill the page with vows proving its own innocence. It left the way open for future scrutiny of every payment. For the first time Shamsher understood that public trust did not mean closing every question, but keeping up the practice of answering them.

Manpreet placed her application for further study in her mother's hand. It was for a research programme in rural economics and social statistics at Marudhar University in Jodhpur. "You'll go so far away?" Jaspreet asked. "For a while, if I'm selected," Manpreet replied. Harbans called from the doorway, "Take the papers from our fields with you. What you cannot find in a book, learn by setting foot on the soil." On the last page of the application Manpreet had written the proposal for her research: "The Interrelationship of Land Rights, Agricultural Income and Women's Invisible Labour." She did not know that one day, in Marudhar, the survey of Ramdev Mandal's well and Kusum's old notebook would change the direction of her work. For the moment she thought only of a possible train journey and the winter cold at home.

In the last week of December, Sunita went to Maya's house in Ludhiana. On the back of her drawing of a fan, Ragini had added an ear of wheat. "Is that your meeting?" the child asked. "A meeting belongs to many people," Sunita said. "How did you draw this ear of wheat?" "Maa says Papa's hands knew how to repair machines, and a farmer's hands know how to save seed. I've drawn both hands," Ragini replied. Maya looked at her daughter. "I still haven't had an answer from the hospital," she said. Sunita opened her bag but did not take out Maya's file. "Your

question will still be there at the next hearing. Today, look at Ragini's picture." For the first time Maya understood that patience in a legal struggle did not mean staring at papers without rest. Sometimes it also meant sitting quietly beside a child's drawing.

That evening Jaspreet stood alone on the raised boundary of a field in Harnampur. The rice had been cut, and fresh green wheat leaves were coming up through the soil. The title deeds to the land on which she stood bore her husband's and father-in-law's names; her years of labour were not fully present in any registered document. But now her name appeared on the village committee's membership list, her signature was on a court petition, and the date of her decision was recorded in the open accounts. She did not mistake any of these for rights of ownership in the land. Obtaining one right did not erase the absence of another. At that moment she remembered Manju's question: if crop prices rise, will wages rise too? The slogans of the movement were subsiding; the questions were still on the move.

Gurnam came towards her holding a handful of fresh earth. "What a long year this has been," he said. "The year wasn't long," Jaspreet answered. "Our habit of listening was short. It has grown a little now." "And that offer of five lakh?" Gurnam asked. "Shamsher still calls it a missed opportunity." Jaspreet looked at the file containing the preserved proposal and its rejection. "If we say that a story which never happened did happen in return for money, the farmer who speaks the truth will have to borrow somebody else's credibility all over again." The lights of Ludhiana shone in the distance. In Sunita's notebook, the half-clue of the name "H. Chauhan" still lay unresolved: neither a finding of guilt nor a declaration of innocence, only another question awaiting investigation. Jaspreet brushed the earth from her hands and walked towards home along the field boundary. The previous night's dew was settling on the leaves again.

Chapter 27 — The Test of Crime and Bail

Delhi, Darbhanga and Chandigarh, 2022

Rain had fallen all night over Delhi, and on that August morning the drains near the Special Court building still spilled across the road. Before the first hearing, the black coats of the lawyers waiting in the verandah had absorbed the smell of dampness. At one end stood fifty-five-year-old Yashoda Malhotra, holding a small iron box in her bag. It contained no tea: there were six receipts, two brightly coloured employment-training brochures and a fee document bearing her daughter's name. She was not a lawyer. Her name did not appear on the court's cause list either. But for several years those papers had been nearly all she had left to persuade herself that the loss of her daughter Ginni's savings was not simply an unfortunate accident.

After Class Twelve, Ginni had lived in a rented room near Chandigarh while taking computer training. In 2019 an advertisement had reached her from a private institution called Navpath Skill Services. Its glittering pictures held out the prospect of employment and it named the instructors, but it contained no written guarantee of appointment. Ginni paid her fees and attended some classes. Three months later she found the office shut. With the arrival of the pandemic, the dispute subsided for a time. Some said the institution had deliberately cheated its students; others maintained that the business had merely failed. A complaint reached the police, an investigation followed, and a report concerning a specific allegation was submitted to the competent court. Yet Yashoda wanted more than punishment. She wanted to know how the debt incurred through that hardship would ever be repaid.

Standing with Yashoda in the Special Court's verandah was Harishpal Singh, wearing a black turban. His younger brother Paramjit had undertaken the printing of the institution's advertisements. "Did your daughter receive any training?" he asked. "There were classes for a few days," Yashoda replied. "If I call every rupee a fraud, I would be wiping out her hard work as well. But there was a great difference between what we were told when they took the fees and what they did afterwards." Harishpal believed his brother innocent; he did not want to see him cast as an accused. Nevertheless, after listening to Yashoda he said, "That difference should be recorded exactly as it happened." They stood in silence for a while before the first bell rang.

The application due to be heard in the Special Court that day was not Ginni's direct claim for a refund. In a separate money-laundering investigation the Enforcement Directorate was examining the financial roles of two men. The principal accused, Pramod Khanna, was a director of a financial-management company associated with Navpath Skill Services; the second accused, Faizan Ali, had been a temporary accounts assistant with that company. The papers concerning the original allegations of cheating and those relating to money laundering were distinct. The presence of names on a common list was no reason for the court to collapse the two kinds of allegation into a single conclusion. Some accounts showed the fees deposited by parents; others also recorded expenses on advertising, rent and classes actually held. The questions were who knew how much, which money moved on whose instructions, and how any proceeds of crime were to be identified within those sums.

Before going to court, Revati Jha met Faizan's wife, Farzana, in a small room at the lawyers' chambers. Their two-year-old son Arhan slept in her lap, a lock of hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. Farzana opened photographs of her husband's appointment letter, the bank entries for his monthly salary and the hospital receipts. "Didi, I do not deny that he kept accounts," she said. "But the question is whether he knew what the company's owner was doing. I have brought everything we found at home. If he has done something wrong, let it be accounted for. First, though, find out how much authority he had in his work." Revati listened without making a single promise. It was not for her to proclaim the husband innocent; moreover, bail had its own separate legal test.

"Can you obtain the original source of these salary slips?" Revati asked. "They were on the company email," Farzana said. "After the phone was switched off, I opened them on my sister's computer." Revati's attention went at once to the dates. Some entries on the slip appeared to have handwritten corrections. "I cannot describe this photograph as an authenticated original," she said. "We need the company's system records, the bank statement and an independent account of how the letter was received." Farzana was disappointed for a moment. She had hoped that the slip would settle something as soon as it was seen. "Taking incomplete papers to court could harm your case," Revati continued. "Writing plainly what we do not know is also part of preparing a defence." She looked not at the child but at Farzana as she finished, for it was the woman herself who was carrying the weight of the decision.

On the other side of the verandah, Pramod Khanna's son Nihal sat with advocate Kabir Sareen. He held a four-page letter written by his father, describing the expansion of the business, the building's rent and

the losses suffered during the pandemic, but offering no detailed answers about the receipts. “Today’s question is bail, not a final verdict at trial,” Kabir said. “But under this special statute, general assurances will not suffice. We must answer the particular sources and transfers of money identified by the prosecution.” “Father says every payment was for legitimate advertising services,” Nihal replied. “Then where are the service reports?” Kabir asked. Nihal fell silent. “If they exist, obtain them. If they do not, do not invent their existence before the court.”

The suffering of two very different families had gathered in the same verandah; that did not make the roles of the two accused identical. Yashoda’s daughter had borrowed money in the hope of a job; Farzana’s little boy was growing up without his father at home; Nihal longed to see his father released on bail. The police complaint, the investigation under the special statute, the bail applications and any eventual compensation for the victims were four separate paths. Revati remembered the courtroom in Darbhanga in 2000, when numerous allegations had been levelled against Neelkanth Sah, yet the court had examined the evidence for each separately. Twenty-two years later the files were thicker and the system more intricate, but the distance between a human being and the written record was no less difficult to cross.

On 27 July the Supreme Court delivered an important judgment concerning the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. Revati was not in Delhi that day but in Darbhanga with her father, Shivnarayan Jha. When the judgment became available, she marked two pages. The validity of the two stringent bail conditions in Section 45 of the Act had been upheld. The opportunity for the public prosecutor to oppose bail, and the satisfaction the court was required to reach on the available material, formed a demanding test quite unlike the ordinary language of bail. Shivnarayan read one sentence of the news and asked, “Does that mean everyone accused under this law will now remain in prison?” “No,” Revati replied. “The law is stringent, but a court must still examine the facts of each application. A single judgment has not determined any individual’s guilt.”

Shivnarayan removed his spectacles. His hands were no longer as steady as they once had been. “My generation has always understood bail as an initial safeguard of personal liberty,” he said. “But the state’s investigative powers in economic offences have grown. Do not go to court with an easy story of somebody’s innocence.” “Nor shall I treat the prosecution’s version as a conviction the moment I hear it,” Revati said. “We must examine particular evidence within the test that the law prescribes.” Her father gave her his old blue pen. “Before writing

anything for the court, put this question in the corner of your paper: what is the most difficult fact against your own side?" Revati wrote it on the first page of her notebook.

Pramod's matter was called first in the Special Court in Delhi. Madhav Kapoor appeared as special public prosecutor for the Enforcement Directorate. Investigation officer Ananya Rao had brought particulars of the necessary original records and authenticated copies in accordance with the court's directions. Judge Vasundhara Seth turned the file over and asked a single question: "What is the status of the underlying scheduled offence in this investigation?" Madhav replied that a charge-sheet had been filed in the original cheating case registered in Chandigarh, but no final conviction for that offence had yet been recorded. The judge noted that the existence of a charge-sheet and a conviction for money laundering were two different matters. She wanted a clear account of the connection between the allegations in the original complaint, the alleged proceeds of crime and the relevant flow of funds through the banks.

Before Madhav lay a chart of accounts drawn in three colours. The first line ran from the account into which trainees' fees were paid to the financial company; the second ran to agencies providing advertising services; the third showed alleged transfers to a private investor's account. He said that the preliminary examination had found a discrepancy between total deposits and the sum of several recurring entries, and that the legitimate purpose of a portion of the twenty-seven million rupees was still under investigation. "I am not describing that entire total as proceeds of crime," he added. "The prosecution's allegation rests on two identified chains of payments and the instructions connected with them." The judge asked whether the same money had been counted twice. Ananya Rao replied that the revised schedule excluded repeated transfers between accounts; the original register had been preserved separately.

Kabir Sareen opened his submissions. "Your Honour, the movement of money is not in itself proof that the money is criminal in origin," he said. "Training took place, premises were rented, a number of students received certificates, and a number of fees were refunded according to the rules. The prosecution must distinguish legitimate expenditure and establish a specific sum as proceeds of crime. My client was a director, but being a director is not, by itself, guilt." The judge interrupted: "What approved company expenditure was made from the personal account under suspicion?" Kabir produced a copy of an advertising contract. "The contract is material supporting the stated purpose of payment," the judge

said. “But where is the evidence that the service was actually performed?” Kabir asked for time. A work report from an external agency had still not been located.

Yashoda sat inside the courtroom in a place reserved for permitted observers. Much of the legal language was unfamiliar to her. She understood “proceeds of crime” through the memory of selling her daughter’s jewellery, whereas the court was tracing particular sums according to a statutory definition. During the recess Nihal approached her. “Do you hate my father?” he asked softly. Yashoda considered the question for a while. “I want an account of the dreams that were sold to my daughter,” she said. “Would four years of hatred have kept our household going?” Nihal said nothing. “If your father is in the right, let the truth come out. If wrong was done, let that come out too. In neither case should my daughter have to suffer humiliation.”

That afternoon, the hours of waiting seemed very long to Farzana and Faizan’s mother. His mother, Shamima, had brought her son’s school certificate in an old cloth bag. “Ammi, his school papers won’t help immediately here,” Farzana said. “I never saw the days before his birth,” Shamima answered, “but seeing his name written down gives me courage.” Farzana put the certificate back into the bag without argument. Outside the court the water was beginning to dry. Two labourers’ daughters were saying on a mobile phone that they must catch the night bus; a policeman was entering his extra hours of duty. In the building where justice was awaited, everyone’s time was being spent at a different cost.

When the first day’s arguments ended, Kabir Sareen called Nihal aside outside the courtroom. “If this document is genuine, your father will have questions to answer,” he said. A bank payment authorisation had been made using Pramod’s digital credentials, and the device concerned was registered at his office. Nihal said several employees used the device. “Then we need access logs, a list of authorised users and the actual time,” Kabir replied. “It is not enough merely to say that everybody used it.” “You don’t trust my father?” Nihal asked. “Trusting someone and giving the court an answer it can test are two different things,” Kabir said. “It is not my job to remove the difficult facts from his case.”

Revati telephoned Shivnarayan that evening. There was weariness in her father’s voice, but his question was precise. “Your client?” “Faizan Ali. His matter will be heard on another day. I watched the principal accused’s hearing today. There are many records, but the original source and final use of each sum have not yet been made clear.” “Have you seen

all the government investigators' papers?" "No. Only what has lawfully been supplied to the defence. I do not want bank information to which I have no right." "Good," her father said. "A lawyer's curiosity must not cross the limits of her authority." Revati put down the phone and watched drops of water forming on leaves outside her window. How rigid the boundaries of documents were, while the questions of life remained so vast.

In Chandigarh, during that rainy week, Sunita Paswan was opening her assistance room. An old list of telephone numbers of migrant workers who had returned to their villages during the pandemic still hung on the wall. Many of the numbers no longer worked; beside some names someone had written "wages received," while question marks stood beside others. Ramlakhan no longer went to the factory's first shift every day; the pain in his knee had increased. At home, his son Deepak had begun a small motor-repair business. Sitting beside her father, Sunita read a fresh application complaining that a training fee had been taken without a job being provided. "This isn't a wage case," she told him, "but a poor household saves its earnings from labour and places its faith in training. There is a question of accounts here too."

Ramlakhan picked up his old notebook with the sickle drawn on its cover. "Thirteen years ago they entered fewer working days against my name in the factory," he said. "Now another family's daughter has been offered a promise in writing. The colour of the paper changes; the pain of an unpaid obligation remains." Sunita asked whether every such complaint could be taken to court. "Keep complaints that have different remedies separate," her father said. "Do not repeat with someone else the mistakes that were made when we investigated my unpaid wages." He was not issuing an order born of experience to his daughter; he was speaking of his own unfinished struggle. Sunita wrote down the names of legal-aid centres for selected applicants, but did not connect anyone with the Delhi money-laundering case without verification.

At a bank branch, Sarabjit Kaur was preparing for the half-yearly inspection. In her office a junior officer, Jasmeet Singh, was reading revised guidelines on unusual transactions. A lawyer from outside telephoned to ask whether the bank would provide detailed customer information about payments made by Navpath Skill Services. On hearing the name, Sarabjit said, "The bank will respond to an investigating agency or competent authority in accordance with the law. We cannot open a customer's account to a private questioner." After putting down the phone, Jasmeet asked, "Madam, if an account seems suspicious, should we understand all its payments to be proceeds of crime?"

"Suspicion initiates an inquiry, not a conclusion," Sarabjit replied. "Keep the customer's actual business, the source of the transaction and the limits of the order separate."

Jasmeet mentioned an old letter from 2016 in which two accounts bearing names similar to Hardev Chauhan's had been found to belong to different people. Sarabjit stopped her pen for a moment. "On what basis are you connecting that matter with this one?" she asked. "Some of the advertising-service bills carry the name Chauhan," Jasmeet said. Sarabjit immediately cautioned him. "Without a full name, date of birth, company, authority and independent source of payment, it is improper to join people on the strength of a common surname. Thousands of people have the same surname in our system." She explained the general principles of customer identification to him but sent no protected information outside the bank. Here the confidentiality of private papers was not an instrument for hiding crime; it marked the boundary of a person's rights.

Ginni was doing temporary proof-checking work at a small publishing house in Delhi. As she compared electronic pages beside the office window, memories of her training institute returned. Sometimes classes really were held; sometimes instructors did not come regularly; sometimes all the students stared at a list pinned to the wall, hoping for a telephone call about a job. Her colleague Rohan asked, "So some of the computer skills you use here were learned there?" "Yes, there were a few introductory lessons," Ginni replied. "I will not tell the court something untrue about that. But when they took the fees we were told that employment would definitely be arranged within three months. The written document did not say the same thing. It took me time to understand that difference."

"If the case is going on," Rohan asked, "do you want your name in the newspapers?" "Mother still carries the receipts to court in her little box," Ginni replied. "But no one needs to write 'cheated girl' beside my name. I work, I study, I help my younger sister with her lessons. My experience should not be made smaller than the whole person I am." That evening she telephoned Yashoda. Her mother said bail had been argued in the Special Court. "Was there an order about my fees?" Ginni asked. "That is a different path, my child. What was heard today was the bail application of an accused in a money-laundering case." For the first time, the daughter heard her mother speak accurately in the language of uncertainty.

Reema Nagpal, a trainer and witness in the original Chandigarh cheating investigation, was reading her statement again. She had taught classes at the institution for eight months and had received wages during that period. After the management changed, training hours were reduced, employees were dismissed and some students' original certificates were not returned on time. Reema did not know what payments had entered the owner's personal account. What she had seen were the classes, the syllabus and the attendance register. When an investigating officer had asked, "Were all the classes fictitious?" she answered, "No. If you write that, both the students I taught and my own work will be turned into a falsehood."

Reema's statement appeared in the Special Court's immediate hearing as part of the context of documents tendered by the defence, not as conclusive proof. Kabir argued that the institution had provided some genuine services. Madhav replied that the existence of some lawful work did not end the investigation into the alleged cheating that remained. The judge agreed that both arguments were relevant within their own limits. "We must first stay with the specific money alleged to be involved in laundering," she said. "Calling the whole business genuine or the whole business fraudulent will not do." Behind that observation lay Ginni's incomplete training, Reema's actual labour and Yashoda's fees—three things that did not fit into one and the same measure.

At the next hearing the prosecution produced a digital authorisation register. Eight large transfers had been made from the company's financial device. Five entries used Pramod's authorised identity, two used shared office permission, and the time record for one was unclear. Instead of simply reciting the aggregate sums, Madhav traced the sequence in the official usage register. Kabir contended that proof of credentials being used did not independently establish who had used them. "Are the company's entry register for that day, the original server records and the maintenance details for the device available?" the judge asked. Ananya Rao said some digital information had been recovered from the seized device, while authenticated copies of other material had been requested from the service provider.

Ananya's task was not to pronounce somebody a criminal and then finish the story. She was a government investigator whose every mistaken assumption might fail under scrutiny in court. Back at the office she told a colleague, "Check the flowchart again for any double-counting of the same money. An account we have labelled inactive may still receive lawful interest." "With so much care, the time just slips away," the colleague said wearily. "The mistakes we make to save time," Ananya

answered, “will affect both somebody’s liberty and somebody else’s lost money.” There were service regulations and pressure over promotion in her office, but rushing to a conclusion did not suit her.

At home, Ananya’s father, Dayashankar Rao, was a retired accountant. Over dinner he asked, “What did the lawyers say in court today?” Instead of disclosing confidential particulars, she gave a general answer: “Writing a line of figures is easy. Understanding what those figures originally did is difficult.” Her father recalled a cooperative society of his younger years where the same amount had appeared in three documents: receipt, transfer between accounts and final payment. “Anyone who added all three,” he said, “made the society look three times as big.” Ananya smiled at the example, knowing that even this illustration would have no value in court without the primary documents. She had to keep the lessons of life distinct from the limits of judicial proof.

One day, in the course of arguments on bail, the judge showed Pramod the name of a company appearing in the charge-sheet: Ujas Digital Advertising Services. Pramod said it was an external service provider and that bills had been raised for registered work. Madhav pointed out that the amounts on three bills were identical but the service reports were incomplete. Kabir said the advertising campaign had been cancelled during the pandemic and the advance fees adjusted. The court continued to question the actual sequence of documents. Along the edge of one bill appeared the word “Jandisha,” which had also figured in a rejected advertising proposal to the farmers’ committee in 2021. But the court possessed neither Sunita’s private notebook nor the committee’s letter of rejection. A partial similarity of names did not prove that different events belonged to the same network.

One evening Noor arrived at Revati’s office. She was preparing an article on the stringent economic laws of 2022. “One ordinary reader says that anyone arrested must be guilty,” Noor said. “Another says a money-laundering accusation is itself an injustice. I want to avoid both easy sentences.” “The exercise of statutory power must be scrutinised,” Revati replied, “and the losses of victims of financial crime are real too. But do not describe Ginni’s training fees as money conclusively proved to have been laundered by Pramod, and do not treat Faizan’s temporary position as proof of innocence in itself.” “Which side are you on?” Noor asked. Revati smiled. “I stand for my client’s legal rights. But if the evidence in court goes against him, it will have to be answered.”

Noor went to a library in Delhi to read the earlier laws on economic offences. In public debate about financial crime, one side defended stringent bail conditions: large sums could be moved through numerous accounts, witnesses might be pressured and assets spirited away. The other side warned that if investigations dragged on, imprisonment before trial could do irreparable damage to a person's life. Noor recorded both viewpoints. Journalism could not overturn a court's decision, but she could avoid two errors: putting "convicted criminal" before an accused person's name in the first line of a report, or making a victim's experience seem insignificant by reducing it to an "alleged loss." She wrote in her notebook: "Between a court's rigorous questions and the street's easy verdict there is a long silence."

Preparing Faizan's case, Revati reconstructed his employment between 2019 and 2021. He had first been an accounts assistant at a private school; when the school closed, he remained unemployed for six months. Navpath's management company gave him a temporary appointment. His duties included recording the numbers of service providers' bills, entering routine account adjustments and preparing payment registers on the instructions of a senior accounts officer. In one mobile message he had written "All right," which the prosecution treated as approval of a suspect payment. But the preceding part of the conversation, its attachments and the actual limits of Faizan's authority were unclear. Revati did not call that uncertainty direct evidence of innocence. She requested the original exchange, the layers of bank authorisation and the terms governing his employment responsibilities.

Farzana visited her husband's friend Salman, a junior information-systems employee at the same office. "Didi, Faizan's user credentials could be used to enter an amount, but he had no special authority to approve the final payment," Salman said. Farzana brightened at once. Salman stopped her. "I know only that the system worked that way when I was there. I do not know whether the administrative permissions changed afterwards. Do not treat my statement as complete technical proof." For the first time Farzana herself asked, "Where can we find a copy of the written rules?" Salman showed her the publicly available portion of the company's old staff regulations and said the actual system logs would have to be sought through the competent authority.

That day Shamima came back with some toys from a little shop outside the mosque. Arhan was banging a wooden car against the wall. "When your Abba comes home, we'll have him repair his own car," Shamima said. "Ammi, we still don't know whether bail will be granted," Farzana said quietly. "We mustn't give the child a definite

day." Shamima looked at her angrily. "Can't even hope come out of your mouth?" "I do have hope," Farzana replied. "But how are we to live if we give a false date to the person who has to wait?" The question between the two women lay outside the sections of any law, yet the consequences of the law entered every day of their household.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha now went to court less often. Revati's younger brother organised his medicines. In the evenings Shivnarayan sat in the verandah reading a Maithili short-story collection by Anupama Jha. In one story a character was troubled to find his dead father's name in an office ledger. Shivnarayan put a finger on the page and telephoned Revati. "All society's accounts seem to rest on the authority of a name," he said. "In your financial case, does an approval code prove a person's authority, or merely leave a trace of somebody's use?" "That is exactly the question," Revati said. "We need the permissions list for the system, the device history and witness accounts." "Then a lawyer's difficult work," her father said, "is to find the actual act behind the name."

On the second day of arguments on Pramod's bail application, the old submissions were not merely repeated; a new document was produced, a direction letter bearing his signature. It described a specified sum collected from training fees and paid to a service provider as "pre-agreed promotional expenditure." Kabir argued that the letter recorded an ordinary business decision and that Pramod did not know the money was criminal in origin. Madhav said the letter dated from a period when internal reports had already communicated the closure of several training centres. "What is the evidence that the director actually received those reports?" the judge asked. The prosecution produced an official email-receipt record and a meeting-attendance sheet; the defence replied that seeing evidence of receipt was not the same as proving that the report had been read. The court placed the disagreement on record.

Kabir also presented documents about his client's health. Pramod had diabetes and needed regular medication. The prosecution said medical facilities could be provided in prison in accordance with the regulations. Examining the health question separately, the judge observed that ensuring proper treatment was the state's duty, but that the existence of a medical claim did not automatically displace the stringent statutory conditions for bail. Kabir requested a fresh report from the prison medical officer. The court ordered one. As they left, Nihal asked, "Will Father get his medicine?" "We have obtained a separate direction on that," Kabir replied. "Do not confuse it with the decision on bail."

Ginni's old school friend Kavita ran a non-governmental study centre in Delhi. She asked Ginni whether she wanted to testify directly in the case. "I'll say what I saw," Ginni replied. "But my training certificate, my first job application and my fee receipt are three different documents. I still have the advertisement that reached my phone that day, although the original website is closed. If I provide a photograph from the phone, questions about its source and date will arise." "You're well prepared," Kavita said. Ginni smiled. "I learned by matching page after page at work. If someone goes to testify, she must acknowledge the difference between her memory and the original documents."

At the beginning of September, sunlight rather than rain filled the Delhi court's verandah. This time Yashoda Malhotra carried in her little box not receipts but a letter from her daughter. Ginni had written, "Ma, whatever the court decides about bail will not be the final decision about the return of my fees. Take care of your health. I am collecting the papers." Yashoda read it twice. Waiting anxiously at court had seemed to her a duty; her daughter had added to that duty the right to rest. Harishpal Singh had brought an old advertising invoice belonging to his brother. He hoped it would clear him of needless suspicion, but he made no attempt to place the document on the judge's desk without the court's permission.

On the day appointed for Pramod's order, special public prosecutor Madhav Kapoor first summarised his limited submissions. He said the investigation into the alleged scheduled offence had its own independent record, while the money-laundering allegation concerned movement of an identified sum through several accounts towards private use. He stressed that Pramod's admitted role was not merely that of a director in name; he had also written certain important instructions. Kabir Sareen replied that those directions had arisen from business necessities and that the prosecution had not completely traced the alleged criminal origin of every sum. He mentioned the accused's cooperation, settled address and willingness to attend trial. Having heard both sides again, the judge fixed a time for delivering her order.

At the outset of the order, Judge Vasundhara Seth stated that deciding a bail application was not deciding the ultimate truth of the charge. "The prosecution documents will remain subject to cross-examination and legally admissible proof at the full trial," she wrote. She referred to the special conditions under Section 45: the public prosecutor had been afforded an opportunity to oppose, and the court had to examine whether the required satisfaction could be reached on the material available. She set out the date of the judgment, the amended statutory

position and the Supreme Court decision of July 2022. She then examined the evidence as it related to the individual accused; she did not rest the order merely on the seriousness of the charge or on damage to a businessman's reputation.

In Pramod's case, the judge drew attention to two documents. The first was the minutes of a meeting about reports of training centres being closed, at which Pramod's presence was recorded. The second comprised payment instructions issued afterwards, for which the beneficiary company's actual service reports remained unclear. The court did not say that the attendance record by itself proved comprehensive knowledge of a crime. But the available material, it said, raised serious questions about the alleged criminal source of the money and Pramod's decision-making role; the explanations offered so far were insufficient to meet the satisfaction required by the stringent bail test. The court also recorded that some legitimate training had occurred and that this fact was relevant to the defence, while the specific explanations of the two disputed chains of payment were still incomplete.

The court refused Pramod Khanna's application for regular bail. The order said that refusal was not a verdict of guilt; he could challenge it before a higher court according to law, and statutory remedies remained open should significant new material emerge. Regarding his health, the prison medical officer was directed to provide regular reports on his care and to ensure necessary treatment. Nihal's eyes filled, but he did not rush towards his father and interrupt the proceedings. Kabir called him outside. "This is a difficult order," he said. "We shall not decide the next step until we have read its reasons." Nihal folded his father's short letter and put it in his pocket. The first line read, "Look after our home."

Yashoda felt no urge to celebrate the order. "He has not been granted bail," she told Harishpal, "but Ginni's money has not come back either." "And his guilt hasn't been established yet," Harishpal replied. They agreed that the present order was no substitute for compensation to the victims or for the final result of the full trial. Yashoda stopped for tea. She bought one cup for herself and another for the woman who had been sitting with Pramod's son. It was Pramod's wife, Namrata. "For you," Yashoda said, offering the cup. Namrata looked surprised. "Do you know me?" "I can see you standing in the court," Yashoda said. "That much I know." They drank their tea without another word.

Namrata Khanna knew nothing of the inner accounts of her husband's business. She worried about household expenses, her parents' medical treatment and her son's education. Once Pramod's company had

been a source of family pride; now many acquaintances had stopped answering the telephone. At home Nihal asked, “Ma, did the court say Father was guilty?” “No,” Namrata answered firmly. “The court refused him bail. Your lawyer explained that distinction clearly.” “Then what do I tell people?” “Tell them what is true. The court’s order is in writing. We do not need a false victory or a false defeat to protect ourselves.” For the first time in that room, clarity about procedure took the place of fear between mother and son.

As the date of Faizan’s application approached, Revati rewrote her submissions from the beginning. She decided not to present a critical editorial about stringent bail conditions as a substitute for evidence. Her first question was: for which accounts was Faizan an authorised approver? Second: when, and in answer to whose request, had he sent the disputed digital message? Third: what evidence showed that Faizan knew the money’s alleged criminal source? Fourth: was the amount credited to his personal account an ordinary salary or a special benefit from that source? Fifth: according to the prosecution, could he influence witnesses or records? Two pages of emotional pleading could not answer those questions.

After visiting Faizan in prison, Farzana told Revati something he had said. “He noticed a name in the payment register and became cautious, but a senior employee said it was an adjustment of an old bill. Faizan himself never saw the paper relating to that name.” “What name?” Revati asked. “Something like H. Chauhan. But Faizan himself isn’t certain.” In her notebook Revati wrote only, “Oral recollection; original register unknown.” She remembered the earlier Hardev Chauhan affair, and immediately stopped her pen. If a resemblance arising in the lawyer’s mind displaced facts, it could harm both Faizan’s defence and the truth of the old workers’ case. She said nothing publicly to Noor about the possibility.

At the first scheduled hearing on Faizan’s bail, the prosecution requested more time. An authenticated version of one digital access log had not yet been obtained. Revati objected that an accused held in custody should not suffer unnecessary delay in the hearing of a bail application; the court ought to hear the matter on the material already available. Madhav said the new record might clarify the accused’s role and could even assist the defence. “How much time?” the judge asked. “And which specific evidence?” Ananya Rao filed a written status report on the register requested from the service provider. The court allowed a limited period and directed that the lawful availability of the new material to both sides be clarified.

"My client's application must not be heard under the shadow of the order against the principal accused," Revati told the court. "Material relating personally to Pramod cannot automatically be used against Faizan." Madhav replied, "The prosecution also wishes to distinguish their individual roles, but the meaning of Faizan's device-related message still requires investigation." The judge made it clear that refusal of Pramod's bail did not predetermine the outcome of Faizan's application. It was a separate matter; if the prosecution relied on common evidence, it must demonstrate how that evidence related to Faizan. She set a separate date for his hearing. On that day there was no final decision either to grant Faizan bail or to refuse it.

As they came out Farzana asked, "Didi, has nothing happened again today?" "Two things have happened," Revati said. "The court has accepted that the matter requires a separate hearing, and it has fixed a definite date for the new record. But there has been no decision on bail yet." Farzana looked at her. "If each appearance only gives us another date, how many days of Arhan's childhood will stand still?" Revati could find no answer. "I shall object in writing to unnecessary delay," she said. "But if a new document will clarify this man's real role, we need to examine it too." Farzana adjusted the cotton cap on her son's head. "All right. I'll write down the next date. If the paper arrives, we shall read it first."

When news of the separate hearing reached Shamima, she misunderstood it at first. A young neighbour said, "Ammi, Faizan is coming out." Shamima immediately thought of making laddus. Farzana stopped her. "No, Ammi. The court will hear the case on another day. He has not been released." "A date and a decision feel like the same thing," Shamima said wearily. Farzana took her mother-in-law's hand in hers. "For us, a hearing date is a day of our lives. For the court it is a day in the procedure. Their meanings differ. But if we don't understand that, we shall break down every day." Shamima put milk on the stove and sat down to give little Arhan a toy.

That week Noor published a report on the Special Court's orders. Her headline read, "One Bail Application Rejected; Separate Hearing for the Second." The editor wanted something sharper, along the lines of "Mastermind of Multi-Crore Scam Remains in Jail." "The court has not yet established a crime," Noor said. "The word 'mastermind' would go beyond the order." "Then what will readers read?" the editor asked. "They will read which facts the court considered important under the special law's demanding bail test, and why the second accused's position remained separate." A long headline might be less saleable, but the

article gave appropriate space to Ginni's education, Farzana's waiting and Yashoda's receipts.

After reading the report, Pramod's wife Namrata telephoned Noor. "You wrote against my husband," she said. "I reported the court's order," Noor replied. "I also published the comment sent on your behalf." Namrata fell silent, then asked, "Why didn't you give more importance to his illness?" "I included the medical-care directions. The court considered the illness separately; it was not the decisive ground in the bail order. If you wish, I can clarify that portion of the order again in its full context." Before hanging up, Namrata said, "My son will read this article. Let him understand that his father is still an accused man, not a convicted criminal." "I have taken care to preserve that distinction," Noor said.

In the last week of September, Sunita met a former Navpath trainee in her assistance room. His name was Parmanand Paswan. He had not been Ginni's classmate but had attended another batch. He had received some useful training and was working at a warehouse. "I got an education, so all the complaints are false," he began. "Your experience is true," Sunita answered. "But listen also to the student who paid the full fee and did not receive the classes, or was misled by the advertisement. The outcome for one batch does not answer the complaint of another." Parmanand showed her a copy of his receipt. Sunita advised him that, if he became a witness, he should testify only to what he had seen, not appoint himself the judge of other students' fortunes.

That day Parmanand showed Sunita an old group photograph. In it was a plaque marking the opening of the training centre. A sponsor's name was faintly visible in one corner. Sunita studied it, but the letters on the small phone image were indistinct. "Whose company is that?" she asked. "Perhaps a name like Sehgal," Parmanand said. "I'm not sure." Sunita did not treat the picture as a link in a chain of crime. "If you have the original photograph, verify its date and organisers," she said. "Otherwise it would be wrong to write anybody's name on the strength of such a blurred image." Parmanand laughed. "You people don't believe even what is on paper." "Paper gave me my grounds for trust," Sunita replied, "and many times it has saved me from deception too."

That evening Sarabjit Kaur was to speak about "Customer Due Diligence and Rights" at a routine bank training session. She used no real customer's name as an example, only an imaginary table in which a sum moved from one account to a second and then a third. "If you add all three entries, how much business do you get?" she asked. "Three times

as much," the trainees answered. "But the original principal entered only once. The number of movements and the amount at source are different calculations." She went on to explain that reporting a suspicious transaction might be a bank's duty, but publicly declaring a customer guilty was not. "Then what is the value of investigation?" a young trainee asked. "A proper investigation prevents weak indications being turned into proof," Sarabjit said, "and also prevents strong indications from being ignored."

After the Special Court's order in Delhi, Kabir Sareen was examining the possibility of appeal. Nihal was despondent, saying the media had ruined the family name. "Have you obtained that external agency's report your father said he would provide?" Kabir asked. "The service provider says its old server was replaced," Nihal replied. "Do not immediately assume that replacing a server destroyed every record," Kabir said. "Search all lawful sources: tax receipts, email acknowledgments, the termination of the contract, other eyewitnesses. But if you find nothing, do not have a new report manufactured." Nihal looked up. He understood that loving his father did not entitle him to create evidence.

Revati returned to Shivnarayan in Darbhanga. Her father was sitting in the verandah after taking his medicine. "What happened to the two men?" he asked. "Pramod Khanna was refused bail. Faizan's application has a separate hearing date; the final order is still pending." Shivnarayan was silent for a moment, then asked, "Which scene was hardest for you?" "The victim Yashoda offered tea to the wife of an accused. Their legal arguments were opposed inside the courtroom, but outside it their suffering was not." "That doesn't mean the court will forgive everything," her father said. "But such moments keep human beings from becoming nameless in the grip of the law."

Getting up from beside her father, Revati opened the notebook page on which she had written, "What is the hardest fact against your own side?" The difficult fact against Faizan was an ambiguous message saying "All right." It might eventually establish informed agreement to an important payment, or it might have been no more than an acknowledgment of receiving a bill. The difficult fact against Pramod was the coincidence of the dates with his direction letter. He had the opportunity to offer a lawful explanation, but the order gave him no immediate relief. Revati set the two matters down on one page, separated by a line. She knew that a rush to declare someone guilty could cloud the truth of a victim's loss as well.

That night Ginni wrote to her mother. “You kept the receipts safe, and that gives me a basis for claiming my fees,” she wrote. “But check whether the photographs or statements other people want to circulate in my name are genuine. I shall speak about the incompleteness of my training, but I will not erase the lessons I did receive. My new job is small, but I live by my own labour. When you go to court next, take your medicine and some water.” Yashoda placed the letter in her iron box above the receipts. Where the box had previously contained only an account of expenses, it now held a page from her daughter’s present life.

In the room in Chandigarh, Shamima sang an old folk song while putting her grandson to sleep. Farzana wrote the next hearing date in her notebook and placed the hospital bills and salary details in separate envelopes. In one corner of the notebook was Faizan’s estimated annual income; in another, the household’s actual expenses. Between them was an empty line: the order on bail. She did not fill in a date by her own hand. Her conviction about Faizan’s innocence or guilt was powerful, but no conviction of her own could take the place of the court’s decision. She kissed the child’s forehead before extinguishing the lamp and stood for a moment facing the darkness outside.

When Sunita came home late from the Ludhiana factory, Ramlakhan was sitting with a small register open. It referred to an old entry of seventeen days against Hardev Chauhan’s name. “Why have you taken out that page again?” Sunita asked. “The remainder of my unpaid-wage claim is proceeding separately now,” her father said. “But I feel like finding out what this name, which has kept returning for so many years, really means.” Sunita mentioned rumours in Chandigarh and the possibility of a similar name appearing in Delhi’s financial proceedings, then added, “I have no evidence yet that it is the same person.” Ramlakhan closed the notebook. “Then preserve the page bearing the name,” he said, “but don’t add a page of accusation to somebody’s life.”

Towards the end of the year, Avni was gathering new studies about the forthcoming Chandrayaan mission at Niranjan’s home. She remembered both Mangalyaan’s earlier success and the failure of Chandrayaan-2’s landing attempt. “Must we go on rereading those pages of history that remained unfinished?” Maitreyi asked. “Being incomplete and being wrong are not the same,” Avni replied. “The next attempt will change in the light of new findings from scientific tests.” Far away in Darbhanga, Revati was writing the last note in her bail-hearing notebook with her father’s old pen: “The path to conviction, the test for bail, the victim’s compensation, and the individual position of a second accused—four separate answers.”

In the long narrative of those twenty-seven years, 2022 was not a final curtain. Yashoda's receipts still awaited restitution; Namrata's husband remained in judicial custody; Farzana's husband waited for his next hearing; Sarabjit's bank continued its careful scrutiny of documents; and an unverified name survived in Sunita's notebook. The stringency of the law had not automatically ended anyone's suffering; the demand for individual dignity had not automatically annulled questions about money. On a night in Darbhanga, Shivnarayan said only this to Revati: "Where a court finds time to see that two people are in different positions, justice is still possible." "And the questions that remain open," Revati answered, "we shall not write down as verdicts." Dew had gathered on the leaves outside. The New Year's sky was dark, but a small star shone steadily in the distance.

Chapter 28 — The Light of Chandrayaan

Bengaluru, Jodhpur and Darbhanga, 2023

On 14 July, as the rain in Bengaluru fell in little threads from the eaves, Avni took out her mother's old red notebook and sat beside the window. On its first page, in a child's round handwriting, were the words: "I shall go near the Moon, but first I shall ask what I will see when I get there." Below them stood the year 2008, then two dates from 2019, and finally a line Avni herself had added in 2022: "Only by recording what went wrong in the last attempt will we understand the meaning of the next." The launch of the new mission was about to begin on television. She opened the notebook and entered the date, but once again left an empty space after the word *success*. Her father, Niranjan Jha, and her mother, Maitreyi, watched her hand without speaking.

For many years Niranjan had worked in an engineering group connected with space communications. News of launches in his household therefore came accompanied by accounts of failed tests; but he had never presented his modest technical contribution as the leadership of an entire mission. He knew that thousands of hands shared in a spacecraft's success, many of whose names never appeared in a newspaper. Maitreyi taught science in a school and worked with Avni on small Maithili science booklets for children. Avni was now pursuing advanced studies in physics. The questions of the laboratory fascinated her, but so did the stories of rural girls who had been forced to abandon their education. Each of the three had come by a different road to the same television screen.

At midday, Chandrayaan-3 was launched from Sriharikota aboard LVM3. As the brilliance of fire rose from the dust of Earth on the screen, Aman, a neighbour's boy whom Avni thought of as a younger brother, came running down from the roof. "Didi, have we won?" he asked. "Today's launch has succeeded," Avni replied. "Reaching the Moon and landing safely are still ahead of us." Aman nodded, though the instant language of victory in the news made more sense to him. Niranjan placed his old watch in the boy's palm. "When this watch moves, every moment passes," he said. "Every moment of a spacecraft is calculated. We shall not belittle what we have seen today, but neither is it right to say that tomorrow's work has already been done." Maitreyi brought tea. The sound of rain could be heard again, even as news of the craft spread far into the sky.

That day students at Marudhar University in Jodhpur gathered in the library's large hall to watch the launch. Kusum, who chaired the science-outreach committee formed after the old hostel dispute, was there; her friend Naseema had arranged for schoolgirls from the city to attend. In the last row sat a student named Tarabai Bhil. In her village there was no science laboratory beyond school. Her family judged the likely rice crop by the rains and the moisture in the soil. Seeing the light of the launch, Tarabai watched open-mouthed. But when a teacher began explaining "propulsion" and "orbital adjustment" in English, her eyes dropped. Kusum sat beside her and whispered, "Ask what you don't understand." "If I say I've understood it all, I'll be lying," Tarabai replied. "If I say before everyone that I haven't understood, they'll laugh."

Dr Chandana Ravidas was in the hall too. At the university's applied sciences centre, she researched inexpensive instruments for measuring temperature. Her father had once cut and dressed stone, and her mother was an assistant at a municipal school; there had never been a separate room in their home reserved for the word "scientist." Chandana first asked Tarabai, in her own speech mixed with Rajasthani, how far down in a field the earth felt wet. Tarabai began answering eagerly. "It is dry on top. When you reach the darker-coloured soil below, you know the water has got down to the roots." Chandana smiled. "You are already observing. That is where science begins. Now we shall add a way to measure it." No applause broke out in the hall, but Tarabai sat a little straighter.

The following week another document arrived quietly inside Marudhar's administrative building. The Marudhar Experiment and Study Centre, which received assistance under a state science-education grant programme, was served with a show-cause notice. The centre was affiliated with the university under a private educational trust; it had no part in any Indian Space Research Organisation mission. Three years earlier it had received a project to develop low-cost temperature and soil-moisture sensors for schools in arid regions. The initial instruments had not proved serviceable, and an inspection team had recorded the trial as unsuccessful. But the notice raised another question: two payment entries relating to the purchase of the same equipment, and a supplier's receipt bearing an inconsistent date. A state official recommended withholding a new grant and entered the name of Chandana, the project's scientific lead, as "responsible for irregular expenditure."

Chandana cleaned her glasses for the second time as she read the letter. Failure in her experiment was not unbearable to her; at a public seminar she had already acknowledged that the sensors could not

produce stable readings through the extreme changes of temperature between desert day and night. But now financial misconduct had been attached to her name without anyone asking her a question. Vinod Trivedi, the laboratory's accounts officer, held the purchase and payment files. Madhavkumar Poddar, the trust's treasurer, was a different signatory. Chandana had signed the test report, not the payment authorisation. When she asked for copies, the office clerk said, "The inspection team has taken the original bills. You must answer what has been written in the notice." "How can I accept the meaning of papers I have not been allowed to see?" Chandana replied.

Vinod Trivedi had his own story. His elderly mother lived at home, and he was paying instalments on a loan for his daughter's wedding. With the second grant payment held up, he feared for his job. When Chandana questioned him he said, "There are two bills, but one may be an advance and the other a final adjustment." "Then where is the adjustment document?" she asked. "The old computer was replaced. There should be a copy of the accounts." As he said "should," he withdrew his hands beneath the table. Chandana could see his fear, but she could not offer reassurance without evidence. On the file she wrote: "Technical outcome, quantity purchased, order for payment, and receipt of the goods are four separate records." The laboratory's hardest test, she thought, was now beginning outside its glass tubes.

At the beginning of August, Avni arrived in Jodhpur at the university's invitation. Her proposed workshop was entitled "From Measuring the Moon to the Village Field: Instruments, Error and Verification." Chandana welcomed her by showing her the scientific equipment store first. Five unfinished thermometers stood gathering dust. The wire in one had broken; the reading in another stuck; the plastic casing of a third had warped in the heat. Avni picked up an instrument. "How many times did you test them?" "Eighty-five independent runs," Chandana said. "If you count one duplicate, the total appears to be something like a hundred and twenty, but there were eighty-five independent trials." Avni laughed. "Has that care with the figures reached the government file?" Chandana could not laugh. She looked out of the window. "Two languages of numbers are spoken in this building—one in the laboratory and one in the accounts office. At present they are quarrelling."

Chandana then showed her the notice. Avni read it quickly. "An unsuccessful sensor does not automatically make the use of a grant dishonest," she said. "But if the two purchase entries have no explanation, they do raise questions." Chandana studied her. "You sound

like your father: what went right was right, what didn't was not." "My father said that when Chandrayaan-2's landing attempt failed," Avni replied. "But the orbital part of that mission achieved something. Your instruments did not produce a comparable success. Even so, every failure is not a crime of expenditure, and every accounting error is not the failure of a scientific effort." "Is there a language for that in court?" Chandana asked. Avni lifted her phone. "Revati Didi may know it. But first let us find out what all these papers mean."

In Darbhanga, Revati Jha was still keeping track of the dates in a separate bail proceeding before the Special Court in Delhi. Additional records had been called for in Faizan Ali's application; Pramod Khanna's refused bail application was recorded in another file. When Avni telephoned, Revati first asked, "Are you calling about Chandrayaan or somebody's lawsuit?" "Two different things," Avni said. "There is a celebration of science, but a scientist has also received a letter blaming her for financial misconduct without being shown the complete records." Revati listened without interrupting. Then she said, "If there are rules governing the state grant, read them. If there is an expenditure contract, examine that too. Neither side will win in court simply by saying that your experiment failed."

Shivnarayan Jha sat in the verandah waiting for Revati to finish the call. His health was no longer what it had been, but the brightness returned to his eyes whenever he heard a complicated set of facts. Revati summarised the letter. "Who is the grant-making body?" her father asked. "Who made the appointment? And whose order is Chandana objecting to?" Revati's answer contained three different names. "Then don't serve them all on the same platter," Shivnarayan said. "If the question is one of her rights, consider the appropriate remedy. But do not make the accounts of the whole centre identical to an injury to Chandana's individual reputation." He began to cough, and Revati gave him water and helped him sit comfortably. Her father smiled. "I may not go to court now, but I shall not abandon the order in which questions must be asked."

As soon as a copy of the grant rules was obtained, the shape of the dispute became clearer. The state Department of Science Education had given money to the centre for school experiments; the trust was responsible for submitting accounts; the project leader submitted the scientific report. The initial inspection had acknowledged the existence of some physical equipment, but an invoice number was repeated on one purchase receipt. The show-cause notice had been sent to the centre, yet an attached list named Chandana as though she had been personally

found at fault, and her permission to mentor a new project had been temporarily suspended. The rules provided a separate hearing before such an individual restriction could be imposed. Chandana had received no notice of that opportunity. “We can press this procedural defect,” Revati said. “But we cannot ask a court to declare every purchase paper clean when those papers have not yet been examined.”

That evening Kusum and Naseema sat with Chandana in the teachers’ residence at Marudhar. Tarabai and her classmate Rais Kohinoor came too. Rais’s father was a small motor mechanic; Rais could repair the circuit of a thermometer, but found it difficult to read the laboratory’s training notes in English. “The people who teach us say science belongs to everyone,” he said, “but by the time the books reach our courtyard, their language has changed.” Chandana showed him an old instrument. “A defective component is not the end of science. Learn to preserve the evidence of what went wrong.” “And what if the money disappears while you keep testing?” Tarabai added. Chandana fell silent. Speaking over the telephone, Revati said, “Then the money must be accounted for. That is why the student’s question is no smaller than the laboratory’s.”

On the first day of the workshop, Avni wrote two words on the board: “Measurement” and “Evidence.” She gave Tarabai a thermometer, Rais a plain vessel of water and Kusum a watch. They measured the temperature of the same water three times; the scale showed a slightly different reading on each occasion. The students began whispering among themselves. “Which of you is wrong?” Avni asked. “Wouldn’t it be right if we took the average of the three figures?” Rais asked. “An average is one useful method,” she replied. “But we also need to know how reliable the instrument is. Taking the average of inaccurate measurements does not produce an accurate measurement.” Chandana placed her failed thermometer on the table. “This will not be useful until we understand and correct its defect.” Tarabai stretched out her hand to touch it. Until then it had been called a failed instrument; now a door to questions was opening inside it.

At the midday break, Tarabai went with Avni into the university’s rear courtyard. In her village three girls had left school after Class Eight because the school was far away and transport expensive. “You people have reached the Moon,” she said, “and I can still understand only half of the pages in my account book. How can both kinds of progress belong to the same country?” Avni did not instantly deliver a lesson in national pride. “What resources does your village have? How many girls want to study further?” she asked. Tarabai counted them: six wanted to go on; two families would permit it, and four needed persuading. “I cannot

solve every problem in your class here," Avni said. "But the school and the panchayat could sit at one table to discuss this." "Then the first scientific experiment in our village," Tarabai said, "will take place at that meeting."

Meanwhile, Prachi Verma, a state audit officer, arrived at the centre. She had not come to prepare a new report, but to secure copies of the original papers from the previous inspection. The centre's manager said she had already spread word of the laboratory's failure. "I wrote what the records showed," Prachi replied. "I did not undertake a scientific evaluation of the equipment. My questions concern payments and stock receipts." She matched the numbers on the receipts one by one. One bill bore the name "R. K. Equipment Supply"; the other gave the full name as "Raghavkishore Science Services." The company's registered address matched, but the last digits of the payment accounts differed. "They changed the name," Vinod Trivedi said. "Where is the written notification of a change in the bank account?" Prachi asked. Vinod was silent again.

In an old delivery register, Prachi found Chandana's signature. She pointed it out. "It says here, 'Equipment received.'" Chandana examined the page. "I signed on the day the packing of four instruments was opened. That was not a quality certificate. I did not say they were fit for use." "If the language of the document is that ambiguous, it needs correction," Prachi said. "But finding physical goods does not establish that the amount paid for them was appropriate." They looked at one another. On the day of the inspection, Chandana had regarded the government official almost as an enemy. Now she understood that both had a duty to maintain the boundaries of their questions. That respect did not eliminate discrepancies in the records, but it opened a way for conversation.

Chandana's father, Devkinandan Ravidas, came to see her from a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jodhpur. Stone dust still lodged in the creases of his fingers; as contract work had declined, he had begun selling tools in a small shop. Chandana showed him the notice. He read it and sat for a while. "If they have written your name, people will assume you have swallowed the money," he said. "But I still don't know the answers to every question," Chandana replied. "Say what you don't know. Speak clearly about what you do know. Your mother used to say that a fabricated story cannot save one's reputation." Chandana touched her father's trembling hand. The word *verification*, used in her laboratory, no longer seemed separate from an ordinary lesson taught in her mother's house.

In the first week of August, Avni returned to Bengaluru. Niranjan was coming home late from his office, while Maitreyi had begun explaining gravity in the form of a song for the school science fair. Avni burst out laughing. “Ma, the song is lovely. But if gravity on the Moon is weaker than on Earth, what shall we say about the child jumping upwards on the Moon in your song?” Maitreyi picked up the paper. “We shall change it. We must not invent truth for the sake of a folk melody; we should make the melody a path towards understanding truth.” Avni saw a kind of courage in this small correction. She remembered that the centre in Jodhpur had publicly disclosed its unsuccessful experimental results, yet the management was trying to dismiss questions about irregular accounts as “an attack on science.” On her mother’s paper she wrote on a separate line: “Correcting a wrong formula is no disgrace; concealing a wrong bill is.”

One night Niranjan showed Avni an old television recording and reminded her of the dawn in 2019. Communication on the screen had been lost while the country waited in hope for a landing. “Do you remember leaving an empty space on your wall poster?” he asked. Avni opened the notebook to show him. The paper had yellowed, but the writing remained clear. “Many people have learned from that experience while preparing the next mission,” Niranjan said. “What we shall see on television rests on the discipline of repeated testing. But remember one thing always: it is wrong to claim the real contributions of other scientists as your own.” “I told them at my workshop too,” Avni said, “that I’m a student in training, not a member of the mission.” Her father smiled with satisfaction.

By the middle of August, tensions had grown at Marudhar. The trust’s chairman, Anup Mehta, told journalists that a “political conspiracy” was being conducted against scientific research. That day an image arrived on Noor Jahan’s phone. Chandana was standing beside an instrument in her laboratory, with the caption, “Lakhs Spent Without Results.” Noor did not publish it. She first asked Chandana whether the project’s declared aims and actual expenditure figures could be made public. “The scientific report has been published,” Chandana said. “I have not yet been given the original bills.” Noor put her next question to the chairman: “Why allege a conspiracy without a factual basis?” “Because there’s no need to look for one,” he answered. “Everyone understands.” Noor wrote in her notebook, “Everyone understands: not a source for a news report.”

The trust’s management asked Chandana to sign a declaration: “All purchases by the centre are transparent and proper.” “I cannot certify that,” Chandana said. “How can I sign for the truth of a payment

authorisation I have never seen?" "Running this institution requires loyalty," the manager said sharply. "Loyalty does not mean abandoning questions," Chandana answered. "Show me the papers and I will examine them before replying." Hearing her, Kajal, an assistant laboratory attendant, grew frightened; the centre paid her monthly wages. Chandana pressed Kajal's hand. "I know you must think of your family. I do not want my actions to put you at additional risk." Yet she knew that mere reassurance could not remove the imbalance of power within the institution.

By the evening of 23 August, everyone had taken their seats early in the small sitting room in Bengaluru. Chandrayaan-3's Vikram lander was descending towards a region of high southern latitudes on the Moon. The altitude figures diminished on the screen; reports of continuing contact came in; no one in the house touched a cup of tea. The old notebook lay open in Avni's palms. Maitreyi had closed her eyes, but Niranjan said, "Open them. Watch what is happening." When confirmation of the successful soft landing came, none of the three could find words for a long time. At last Maitreyi wiped her wet eyes. "We shall not erase the wound of 2019 from history," she said. "We shall add the page of this success after it." Avni filled the empty space: "23 August 2023: Landing successful."

Voices of celebration rose from the television. Outside, the neighbourhood children were running for fireworks. Niranjan stopped them. "We need not burn fire on Earth and foul the air in order to celebrate a scientific success in the sky. Light lamps, sing songs, teach something at school." "Will people live on the Moon now?" Aman asked. "An instrument has landed in this mission," Avni said. "We cannot draw that conclusion yet. There is a rover named Pragyan with Vikram, designed to make scientific measurements." Maitreyi showed the children a map of the Moon she had drawn by hand earlier. Across its southern region, in thick pen, she had written only, "Caution: approximate boundary." Today a tangible record of an effort made from Earth had been entered there.

That same evening the students at Jodhpur University did not want to leave the library. Tarabai telephoned her mother. "Amma, the Moon you see in the sky after planting rice—that's where a machine from our country has landed." "Will the rains be good now?" her mother asked. Tarabai paused before answering; a celebration of science would not change the weather over their fields. "Not the rain, Amma. But we have learned a new way of understanding the sky. New ways of measuring the temperature of your fields will come too." "Finish your studies first, then

come home," her mother answered. When she hung up, Rais said, "Did you hear your mother? Your education matters to her before Chandrayaan does." Tarabai smiled. "We need both. One is not the other's enemy."

Chandana had made no preparations to celebrate in her laboratory that day. The deadline for replying to the show-cause notice was approaching. The university principal called her. "We need a photograph of all the teaching centre's members to mark Chandrayaan's success." "I shall be in the photograph," Chandana said, "but I want an answer about the inquiry file too. My name must appear not only in the picture of failure but at the proper hearing." "That's an administrative matter," the principal said uneasily. "When a laboratory instrument breaks, it is called administration," Chandana replied, "and when its bill is questioned, it is called science. I cannot accept such a division." She attended the event and watched the news of Chandrayaan with the students, but even amid their cheering she kept her fingers pressed against the edge of her file.

The following morning a local newspaper lay outside Chandana's house. Its headline carried her photograph and the words, "Failed Research Centre in Controversy." The story mentioned the show-cause notice, but the photograph made her appear already guilty. Her father decided not to go to the market. "You should go out," Chandana told him. "If people ask, say an inquiry is underway." "Can I not say you are innocent?" he asked. "You can say I have done my work conscientiously. But I too am asking for a written examination of the bills." Devkinandan slowly regained his composure. "Then if they laugh," he said, "I'll tell them my daughter believes in truth, but not with her eyes shut."

At the end of August, Revati reached Jodhpur. She knew Kusum from the old Marudhar land dispute; this new affair, bringing science into the work of helping students in the hostels, struck her as strange. Chandana's file was divided among three envelopes: the first held scientific studies, the second financial accounts, the third administrative orders. Revati opened the third envelope first. "Who signed this restrictive order? Under what rule has this person been adversely affected without a proper hearing?" she asked. Chandana laid out the papers. "I can argue the procedural legality of this order which is adverse to you personally," Revati said. "But the fact that my client has been wronged does not establish the propriety of every payment made by the trust. Its accounts must still be examined." For the first time in months, Chandana could see clearly the limits of her own case.

Revati sent a legal representation to the state Science Education Department requesting an opportunity for Chandana to inspect the documents, the grounds for the finding of personal fault and a separate hearing. She also wrote to the trust: "Preserve the original purchase receipts, bank payment orders and goods-received records; do not alter any copy." The trust's chairman telephoned her. "You are turning our scientist against us," he said. "I represent the rights of a particular individual," Revati replied calmly. "If your accounts are correct, proper scrutiny will help establish that. If they are not, the students have a right to know." The chairman hung up. Chandana was anxious that the laboratory keys would be taken away. "Keep evidence of any such threat," Revati told her. "Do not make an allegation based on fear alone."

Within days, a departmental letter arrived: the final audit of the grant was underway, and the order imposing the personal restriction had been issued for administrative convenience. No definite date was given for a hearing of Chandana's objections. Revati filed a petition under Article 226 of the Constitution before the Jodhpur Bench of the Rajasthan High Court. She requested that an adverse decision against an individual not be allowed to operate without an adequate opportunity to be heard, that the relevant records be made available for inspection, and that a reasoned decision be given. She deliberately did not ask the court to declare the centre's entire grant expenditure proper or its scientific instruments successful. Placing the first court papers before Chandana, Revati asked, "What is the hardest fact against your side?" "I've said the experiment failed," Chandana replied. "But I don't know every line in its accounts." "Then don't change that answer," Revati said.

Outside the courtroom on the day of the first hearing, Chandana saw Prachi Verma near a chamber. Prachi was sharing a bundle of papers with the government lawyer. From a distance Chandana greeted her with folded hands; Prachi inclined her head. Both knew that personal regard and their respective departmental roles would remain separate in court. Advocate Surekha Parihar appeared for the state. "It would be improper to stop the audit of public funds," she said. "Departmental oversight might be obstructed in the name of this petition." "We are not asking for oversight to stop," Revati replied immediately. "We seek to see the basis of a restriction imposed on the individual reputation and research participation of a scientist, and an opportunity to answer it." "Is the final remedy sought in the petition a decision on all the disputes under the financial contract?" the judge asked. "No, My Lord," Revati answered. "Its scope is limited."

The court called for the original order. The papers contained one communication about suspending the grant to the centre and a separate line imposing a restriction in Chandana's name. The judge asked the departmental officer on what date Chandana had been heard about that line. Surekha examined the papers, then admitted that the accompanying record did not clearly show notice of a separate hearing. "The department needs time to file its response," she said. Revati did not object, but added, "Meanwhile the petitioner's opportunity to participate in new research programmes is being withheld without stated reasons." The court directed a response within a few days and reserved the submissions on interim arrangements for the next date. That day neither was the grant released nor was the scientist declared free of fault. Leaving the courtroom, Chandana said, "The court has read my name. For now, that is my first achievement."

The interim period did not remain empty. The state department agreed to obtain a report from an independent technical expert evaluating the sensors' measurement limits and the development work undertaken. The audit team continued to compile separate lists of payment receipts, bank entries and actual goods in the stores. The technical expert's role was not to inspect approval of payments, just as the accountant's role was not to determine whether the scientist's hypothesis was correct. Noor Jahan made the division explicit in a news report. "Then who is the criminal in the story?" her editor asked. "For now, the story is about who can answer which question," Noor replied. The editor pulled a face, but the report was published. Tarabai read it, and for the first time read all the body of a newspaper story instead of stopping at the headline.

When the technical review was conducted, the experts gave three findings. The instruments had not met their original objectives; Chandana's team had preserved the raw measurement data; and a plan for further modifications, though scientifically reasonable, had not been implemented. Chandana signed the first finding. Her eyes filled at the second. Of the third she said, "That is right. I did not carry out as many improvements as I had planned." "So will the report call you successful?" Rais asked. "It will tell the truth about me," Chandana replied. "That is enough for now." "If the instruments didn't work, what shall we learn from them?" Tarabai asked. "Don't worship a device simply because someone made it. Question it, take it apart and make it again."

Meanwhile, while clearing an old cupboard that had fallen over at home, Vinod Trivedi found a carbon copy of a bank receipt. It bore an amount, but the final digits of the account receiving payment differed

from those in the details examined earlier. “Will you keep that paper hidden?” his wife Ranjana asked. “I don’t even know which document is final,” Vinod replied. “If I submit this, the chairman will be angry. If I don’t, the accusation will eventually fall on me.” “Write what you believe to be true,” Ranjana said, “and say that you don’t understand what you do not understand.” Vinod was about to photograph the paper when he stopped. He searched his phone for an old image bearing the treasurer’s signature, but the time stamp on it was not clear. He decided to preserve the copy and hand it to the independent audit team.

In the second week of September, the matter was heard again. Surekha Parihar filed the state’s response: Chandana had not been heard separately before the adverse personal entry was made; the department was now willing to reconsider the individual restriction. The audit of the trust’s grant, however, remained unresolved. “The opportunity for reconsideration must be real,” Revati said. “There must be proper copies of all relevant records and a clear statement of the allegations.” In a reasoned order the court directed that Chandana be heard and that a decision on the personal restriction be taken within a specified period; it referred to preservation of the original inquiry documents and made no final finding on the merits of the scientific results or the alleged financial irregularities. The petition had obtained its limited remedy. Walking down the court steps, Chandana said, “They haven’t declared my experiment a success, but I have won the right to be heard.” “Being heard does not mean automatically being held in the right,” Revati said. “But being condemned without a hearing is not justice either.”

The trust’s chairman was displeased when he heard the order. He had hoped the court would direct the prompt release of the grant. Instead, the direction to preserve the original receipts felt to him like a new burden. He summoned Vinod. “Don’t send papers all over the place,” he said. This time Vinod answered directly. “It is my duty to supply whatever is available in response to a written request from the government inspectors. I will not make a new document to take the place of an old one.” The chairman fell silent. Never before had such firmness been heard in the employee’s voice. Vinod felt no sudden lightness; he feared he might lose his job. But when he returned home, he could tell his daughter that he had not written “understood” beside something he did not understand.

In October, Chandana’s personal hearing took place on the third floor of the departmental building. Three officials, a clerk, Chandana and her representative were present. Chandana accepted every negative part of her scientific report. When questions arose about the purchase receipts, she

explained the limits of her role in authorising payments. “If you were the project head, why did you not know about the financial errors?” one official asked. “I am not evading the responsibility of a project head,” she replied. “I expected to be shown monthly account summaries; they did not always reach me on time. Questions can be raised about institutional responsibility for that failure. But whether there is evidence that I approved a duplicate payment must be examined separately.” “It says here that all the equipment was received,” the officer pressed. Chandana explained the distinction between the four packages opened and the five inactive prototypes. The hearing lasted a long time; it was difficult to declare anyone blameless on the spot.

Eventually the department withdrew its earlier personal restriction and issued a fresh reasoned decision. On the material available, it said, Chandana’s personal approval of an improper payment was not established at that stage; any question of further administrative responsibility would depend on the audit’s final report. Examination of the trust’s accounts would continue, and the balance of the grant would not automatically be released. Chandana read the written order again and again. When she reached her father, she said, “See, the finding of fault they put beside my name without hearing me has been withdrawn. But the centre’s accounts are still a problem.” “Will your experiments begin again?” Devkinandan asked. “For now, we shall run small student experiments with private support. We won’t seek fresh government grant money before the audit is complete.” Her father laid a hand on her head. This was a victory without noise.

Now Marudhar’s rural science workshops began moving out of the centre’s closed room and into schools. Kusum arranged an old bus, while Naseema prepared the lists of names. Avni sent short videos from Bengaluru on soil temperature, safe ways of measuring well water, and the relation between shadow and time. Maitreyi supplied words in Maithili, Kusum chose examples in Rajasthani speech, and Tarabai added questions from people in her village. Within days an unexpected problem appeared: the class register was full of boys’ names, but only half as many girls had come. Tarabai went from house to house herself. “If we send our daughters out at night to look at the sky, what will the village say?” one mother asked. “We won’t go at night. We’ll measure shadows in daylight. You come too,” Tarabai said. For the first time more mothers than boys attended the workshop that day.

In the courtyard of that school, Chandana showed the children broken parts from an old sensor kept in a box. “This instrument did not work,” she said. “But because of that failure, we are now thinking of a

new plan for inexpensive devices to use on the ground." "If it didn't work, why didn't you throw it away?" a girl named Geeta asked. "We need not keep every failed object," Chandana answered. "But it is useful to preserve a sample that can teach us what went wrong—just as you mark a wrong answer in the margin of your mathematics notebook and solve it again." Geeta opened her notebook; she had crossed out her wrong answer until it was erased. "Will the teacher scold her for showing a mistake?" her mother asked. On a mobile screen Avni replied, "If a teacher takes a question for a crime, ask that teacher a question too." Everyone laughed, but the laughter made a crack in their fear.

Niranjan's health was good that year in Bengaluru, although his ability to travel for many days at a stretch had diminished. Avni showed him the publicly released images from Chandrayaan-3 published by scientific institutions. "Say no more than the pictures themselves show," Niranjan said. "Do not add meanings of your own choosing." "Won't so much caution dampen the children's enthusiasm?" Maitreyi asked. "Ma, caution is not the enemy of enthusiasm," Avni said. "Tarabai no longer wants to leave her studies, because her questions have found a place for the first time." "When you were little, you made pictures of the Moon," Maitreyi said softly. "Now you are writing the names of village girls beneath it." "The Moon was far away," Avni replied, "but perhaps the road to reaching this place is longer still."

Meanwhile, the economic case against Pramod Khanna in the Special Court in Delhi continued at its own pace. The availability of an authenticated record sought in Faizan Ali's separate bail application remained uncertain; Revati followed the file's position through a colleague. There was no evidence connecting the name "H. Chauhan," which had surfaced in a payment register in that case, with Chandana's research grant. An editor known to Noor Jahan suggested a headline: "Network Linking the Nation's Research to a Multi-Crore Fraud." Noor refused immediately. "One matching initial does not establish a network," she said. All those years of court cases had taught her that mystery could sell, but anyone selling the truth had a duty to examine the weak links in that mystery too.

In Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan was meeting a new group at her workers' assistance room. Factory work was gradually recovering, yet the whole of Ramlakhan's old wage arrears still had not been paid. A schoolgirl arrived with a drawing of Chandrayaan for a science project. "Where did you see this picture?" Sunita asked. "On the phone," the girl replied. "But I don't understand the calculations." Sunita arranged for her to meet a mathematics teacher and wrote in her notebook: "The instruments of a

new age are in people's hands, but the time and language to study are not in everyone's hands." "How does your science paper connect with my wage records?" Ramlakhan asked after reading the line. Sunita laughed. "The figures must be true in both, Babu. And in both, a person without power needs the right to ask a question."

At the beginning of November, a small experimental competition was held among Marudhar's schools. There was no large cash prize; the winners would receive books and materials for experiments. Geeta's group estimated time by measuring the length of shadows. Rais made a simple device for displaying water temperature with the help of spare components. Tarabai compared moisture at three points in her field, but on the first day she wrote two sets of readings in reverse order. "Your conclusion is wrong," the teacher said. Tarabai grew frightened. "Where is the mistake?" Chandana asked her. After checking her notebook, Tarabai said, "Not in the measurement. The page headings are reversed." "Then correct the headings, but don't destroy the first page," Chandana said. Tarabai drew a red line through the first error and made a correct table on the next page. Her group received no prize, but everyone applauded when they heard the story of how she had checked her work.

Following the competition, the state Science Education Department proposed a limited scholarship examination. It was separate from the university's research grant, but students who had attended the workshops could be eligible. University professors prepared a list of subject experts. Avni was invited to assist in reviewing questions as a postgraduate student representative. She made it clear that this did not give her authority to decide the final question paper; rules of confidentiality, the prescribed syllabus and declarations of conflict of interest would have to be observed. "If you examine so many rules, when will the exam ever take place?" one member laughed. "Reading the rules is not a waste of time for an examination that may change the direction of the next five years of a student's life," Avni replied.

At the question-review meeting, Avni proposed an example on thermal equilibrium: three identical vessels, two different temperatures and a common measuring instrument. The student was to understand not only the formula but the difference between a result and its evidence. Avni had deliberately put an initially wrong option in her draft so that other members of the meeting could identify and correct it. She wrote, "Unit of the second instrument: degrees, not grams." At the meeting's conclusion the correction was accepted. Avni noted the time and revision date on her own copy of the draft and sent it through the department's secure channel. The rules required the names of all members to be

recorded in the confidential part of the question-paper process. Avni confined her role to review, and did not privately disclose question material to students she knew for the final examination.

In December the scholarship-examination notice was issued. Tarabai was delighted to see the eligibility criteria; girls in higher classes at her village school rarely had such opportunities. “I’ll take it too,” Geeta said, “but I have no money for coaching.” Tarabai divided her practice book with her. One evening an open preparation session was held in Chandana’s old laboratory. Speaking by phone, Avni explained that no one should possess the examination question paper in advance; publicly available syllabus examples could be used for practice. A young man suggested that “special questions” could be obtained for a little money. “What source? Questions from when?” Kusum interrupted. The young man turned his face away. “Do not trust unverified advertising claims,” Chandana told the students. “If you have evidence of anything, give written information to the examination authority.”

But a small thorn from that evening stayed lodged in Avni’s mind. In the momentary photograph of a practice sheet on the young man’s phone, she had seen the words: “Unit of the second instrument: grams.” They matched precisely the wrong option she had written in the first draft of the question review and that had been changed at the meeting. Questions about measuring heat appeared in many textbooks; similarity of subject alone was nothing extraordinary. Yet this particular combination of an incorrect unit startled her. The young man had said the paper came from a private practice group. Avni did not know its actual date, original source or the identity of the sender. She did not immediately make a public accusation that the “question paper had leaked.” She opened her old draft, checked the dates and went to Niranjan that evening.

Niranjan listened carefully. “First question: is the sheet being circulated an actual examination question or a coaching exercise? Second: when was it prepared? Third: who had access to the draft?” he asked. “I don’t yet have the sheet, only a photograph,” Avni replied. “That photograph matches my mistake.” “You are frightened because the students’ trust is at stake,” Maitreyi said. “I don’t want to use half-known facts to call somebody guilty,” Avni admitted. “But if I conceal the information, how will the examination’s integrity be protected?” “Write what you know, with its dates,” Niranjan answered. “Write what you do not know as questions. Seek verification, not an accusation.” Maitreyi placed the old red notebook in her hands.

Avni prepared a limited, confidential letter. She wrote that the question-review draft had contained a particular wrong option, that an official record of its correction existed, and that a fleeting image of an outside practice sheet appeared to show a similarity with the discarded option. She asked the examination authority to examine securely the final version of the question paper, the access logs, the possible source of the practice sheet and the chain through which the drafts had been distributed. Explaining her own role, she requested that she take no part in subject-related evaluation until the inquiry was complete. She showed Revati a copy of the letter solely for procedural advice, without sending confidential question content. “If students’ rights are in question, the original records must first be secured,” Revati replied. “Not every similarity is a leak, but suppressing a genuine concern is improper too.”

Even after Chandana’s personal restriction was lifted, the weariness on assistant Kajal’s face did not disappear. Two months of her honorarium were held up because the grant had been stopped. The trust said the next payment would be made after the government inquiry concluded. Chandana requested a separate account of this matter. “Correcting the order that bore my name has not settled the question of your wages,” she told Kajal. Revati advised an examination of the applicable labour and service rules; a dispute over a grant was not to be treated as an automatic discharge of definite obligations to an employee. Kajal had been afraid that asking for her rights would cost her job. Chandana accompanied her to the trust’s office but did not insist on answering in her place. Kajal submitted the application in her own handwriting. Such a small scene did not appear on the Chandrayaan screen, but this was a light of its own, belonging to the labour that made science possible.

On her way back from reporting in Jodhpur, Noor Jahan stopped for tea at a station. A fellow journalist showed her an old list and said a sponsor of one institution was giving money for political publicity elsewhere. “Put the two together and write a great exposé,” he urged. Noor examined the dates. Several names were unclear, some amounts were estimates and the nature of certain payments was unspecified. “It would be dangerous to join research funding, lawful political support and improper gain simply because names resemble one another,” she said. “If documents exist, we must first check the source, date and authority for the decisions.” “There’s no fire in your headlines,” the journalist complained. Noor laughed. “Fire burns the paper; it doesn’t reveal the truth written on it.” Instead of publishing the list, she filed it among the leads for which evidence was still needed. The next election season was approaching, but her story remained unfinished.

Maitreyi held the school's year-end science assembly. On the first page of her booklet written in her own language, she put these words: "Gravity is not only a story about falling down; it also raises questions of distance, mass and measurement." "Where will you find enough words to teach science in Maithili?" a teacher asked with a laugh. "Where words are not ready, we shall explain the meaning and try a new expression," Maitreyi replied. "Where an English term serves, we shall retain it and identify it. A mother tongue should open the door to science, not conceal its complexity." A girl sang a folk song about the Moon in her grandmother's dialect. When the song ended, Maitreyi said, "The Moon of the song belongs to imagination; the scientist's Moon belongs to measurement. Both look towards the same sky, but they ask different questions." Avni listened quietly to her mother.

On the last evening of the year, all three sat again in the verandah in Bengaluru. On the screen were glimpses of Chandrayaan-3's publicly reported achievements during the year; beside it lay Avni's open red notebook. "Is the Moon's page complete in your notebook now?" Niranjan asked. "The page of the landing is complete," Avni replied. "I do not know when the page of questions will be." Maitreyi pointed to the Moon shining in the darkness outside. "The light in the sky does not erase questions inside the house," she said. Avni looked again at the acknowledgment of receipt of her letter to the examination authority. No one had yet been proved guilty, no order cancelling the examination had been made, but one incorrect unit in a document had become a sign of a question concerning the students' futures. On a fresh page she wrote: "The testimony of a successful landing came in light; the testimony of a fair examination will come from records."

Chapter 29 — The Records of Electoral Funding

2024: Jodhpur, Delhi, Ludhiana and Darbhanga

In the first week of February, the morning sunlight descended into Jodhpur's narrow lanes. In the courtyard of her home, Noor Jahan set down a brass lota and examined a newspaper's printing. Her younger brother had been working with paper since morning; black ink from the press had seeped beneath his fingernails. Two pages lay before Noor—one carried news of an unfinished scholarship examination at a rural school in Marudhar, the other reported the Delhi court hearings on political donations. Looking from one page to the other, she realised how difficult it was to measure in words the distance between what the state announced and what it actually spent. Her editor, Aniruddh Saxena, said on the telephone, "Write about a national issue this time. Explain to our readers why electoral donations concern the public." Noor asked, "I can write about a public question, but am I to make someone a criminal before I have the original documents?" "No," Aniruddh replied. "But the story can begin while we are still searching for the documents."

That day Noor went to the library at Marudhar University. Riddhi Bishnoi was sorting old lists of government expenditure. She had chosen a research topic: public reporting on grants awarded to small institutions, and whether local citizens could actually gain access to those reports. Nearby, Vivek Meghwal held up a newspaper headline. "Is it a crime to ask who was given the money and who finally received it?" Riddhi regarded him silently. "Asking is not a crime," she said. "But writing 'thief' beside a name without an inquiry is another matter. First understand that the list we have records allocations of grants, not proof of payment." Noor picked up the paper. Such caution recalled her earliest lessons in journalism: one sentence in a newspaper could suddenly cast suspicion on years of another person's labour.

In Darbhanga, Revati Jha was taking a brass pen from her father's old cupboard. Shivnarayan Jha rarely went to court now. His granddaughter would read letters aloud to him. Looking over instructions from an old case, he said, "A lawsuit is not only about the claimant's rights. The right to be heard of the person against whom the question has been raised is part of the case as well." Revati smiled. "You said that twenty years ago too." Her father answered, "My understanding was unripe then. Now that the body is weak, the letters seem clearer." On Revati's desk lay a separate file concerning the Delhi money-laundering proceedings. Pramod Khanna's bail had been refused; Faizan Ali's application stood on

a different footing. She saw no grounds for connecting either case to the new reports on electoral finance.

Throughout the evening of 15 February, Noor's telephone kept ringing. The Supreme Court had held the electoral bonds scheme unconstitutional. A five-judge Constitution Bench had examined secrecy surrounding the sources of political parties' funds and the citizen's right to information. In the capital's newsrooms there was a scramble to obtain the judgment first. Noor let the tea on her desk grow cold as she noted its central points: the arrangement for anonymous donations, disclosure of funding information, constitutional questions concerning unlimited company contributions, and directions for information to pass from the bank to the Election Commission. She drew a red line beneath one sentence: "Making information public is not the same as proving a crime." To preserve that distinction amid the excitement of current events seemed to her the first duty of her writing.

At the evening discussion, questions flew from every side of the students' gathering. Rakesh said that political parties raised money to contest elections, and the act could not in itself be called sinful. Naseema replied, "But what wrong is there if the voter who hears promises from a platform wants to know who stands behind them with financial support?" Vivek added, "Call every donor a criminal, and even those who offer lawful support will fall silent." Kusum closed her ledger. "In our village farmers' organisation, we entered separately what the donor of a sack of wheat intended and how it was used. The questions surrounding the country's great political parties are deeper, but the desire to ask for an account is not new." Noor wrote down what each had said, without appending a presumption of guilt to anyone's name.

Two kos from the university stood the building of an organisation called the Lok Samvad Study Trust. Established a decade earlier, it printed booklets on civic education and held discussions on electoral literacy, women's rights and financial decisions in panchayats. Its president, Prabodh Mathur, was a retired teacher; its treasurer, Rama Chaubey, a former accounts officer; and its programme coordinator, Sahar Bano, had conducted community classes for twenty years. Under a state civic-education programme, the trust had been sanctioned a grant of forty-eight lakh rupees for the years 2022 to 2024. This was not money from electoral bonds: its source, conditions and audit were recorded in a separate government register. The trust also received some voluntary donations from individuals, to be used for the purposes specified by each contribution.

Running his hand over the wooden table his father had made, Prabodh Mathur said, “Now, as soon as people hear a journalist's question, they will assume that every institution is engaged in fraud.” Rama Chaubey placed a contract before him. “I'm not afraid of journalists; I'm afraid of our incomplete register,” she said. “We have lists for workshops that have taken place. But part of the invoice from Deeprekha Communication Services doesn't match the evidence that the programmes were held.” Tiny beads of sweat appeared on Prabodh's forehead. “They said they would supply publicity material in four districts.” Rama replied, “Then we need separate delivery challans for all four districts. More importantly, did people actually see the material? An invoice records an amount claimed; it does not prove that the service was delivered.”

Sahar Bano was the one who conducted the workshops on the ground. That week her team was explaining to women in a settlement on Jodhpur's outskirts how to check the electoral rolls. Kamla Devi asked, “What do we do if our name appears on the voter slip but cannot be found at that polling station on voting day?” Sahar showed her how to seek information in advance from the appropriate authority, without treating the rules for voter identification and the electoral roll as identical. Another woman, Karuna, said, “We took your trust's booklet, but parts of the language are difficult.” Sahar made a note immediately: a version in simpler language was needed. Amid such real work, a question about the grant register could lead to all those women's labour being dismissed at a stroke as a mere performance. Sahar would not accept that.

On the first day of March, Noor visited the trust's office. After she introduced herself as a journalist, Prabodh invited her to sit, but the list of questions she handed him made him uneasy. “Why are you asking for the names of my private donors?” Noor said, “I'm requesting itemised records of work done with the state grant, and the annual report you have already published. Why should I begin by printing a private donor's name when no obligation of that donor is connected with a public contract?” Rama breathed a little more easily. But when Noor asked the dates of Deeprekha's payments, she said, “The agreement and the payment process took place at different stages. When the complete file is ready, we'll provide the appropriate copies.” “And when will it be complete?” Noor asked. At that question, the only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock.

As Noor came out, she met Sahar in the verandah. Sahar carried illustrated sheets used in the settlement, with sketches of polling stations and basic information on submitting applications. “Look at these,”

Sahar said. “They were printed, they were distributed, and women have asked questions about them. If two grant invoices need investigating, by all means investigate them. But don't write in your report that our settlement is imaginary.” Noor replied, “I won't draw conclusions before visiting it myself.” For a moment Sahar laughed. “I don't need to be a heroine in your newspaper. I only ask that you don't erase the women who sat in the sun by calling them shadows on paper.” Noor drew a circle around the sentence in her notebook.

Meanwhile, at a bank branch in Punjab, Sarabjit Kaur was reading a new compliance circular. The national news about electoral bonds had brought a flood of questions from customers. Some asked whether banks must make public every donation debited from their accounts; others wanted to know whether the details of private wage payments could be handed to newspapers. Sarabjit patiently explained that the Supreme Court's directions concerning a particular scheme were not the same as the ordinary rules protecting customer confidentiality. A trainee said, “Once one list is opened, every account will be opened.” Sarabjit answered, “When people don't understand where a rule begins and ends, they become needlessly afraid. A bank is neither above the law nor entitled to treat every customer's papers as public property.”

In Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan was transcribing the old accounts of wages owed to her father into a new register. The factory's attendance rolls had been corrected, but not all the arrears from earlier years had been paid. “Every leader speaks of workers in this year's election,” Ramlakhan said. “Speaking about workers and paying their wages are two different things,” Sunita replied. “If an organisation raises assistance in my name, I'll inspect its accounts too.” She remembered the receipts Parmjeet Kaur had taught her to keep during the farmers' movement. Voting, donations and wages belonged to three different bodies of law, yet in Sunita's life all three raised the same question: where had the money written down on paper actually reached? Deepak, now a trained accounts assistant, said that before adding figures one must understand the dates and what the accounts meant. His sister smiled at him.

When news of the court's directions from Delhi on 11 March arrived, the newsroom was thrown into fresh commotion. The deadline for the bank to supply details to the Election Commission had been clarified. Aniruddh said, “Now the names will come out. The moment you spot a donor from our city, make a headline.” Noor objected. “The name may make the headline, but the headline must not contain an accusation. First we must distinguish the date of purchase, the amount, encashment by the party and the publicly available records. Finding a name on the

list is not evidence of an improper benefit." Aniruddh grew impatient, but said with a laugh, "You'll turn our newspaper into a lawyer's office." Noor replied calmly, "Allowing it to become an office for rumours would cost us far more."

That night after the argument, Noor ate with her mother. Nadiya Bano still walked slowly after her illness, but whenever her daughter grew unusually quiet she knew there was an inward struggle. "If you write nothing, will you keep your job?" she asked. "I'll write," said Noor. "But when I use a wrong word, the first blow falls on the household of someone far away." Folding a piece of roti at the edge of her plate, her mother said, "I used to tell your father that our daughter's name would appear in the newspaper. He said, 'Let her name appear, but not at the price of truth.'" Noor fell silent at that. For the first time she felt the difficulty of her profession as a responsibility she carried towards her family.

On the evening of 14 March, many people sat before screens to examine the information available on the Election Commission's website. Noor and Riddhi downloaded separate files. Purchase and encashment details appeared on different lists; connecting entries at once, without checking the appropriate links and dates, would be unsafe. "I won't assume two rows bearing the same amount record one transaction," Riddhi said. Vivek asked, "Then if we can't match the names, is transparency useless?" "Incomplete work is not useless," Riddhi answered. "First establish what the published facts actually say. Where they are silent, look for the evidence that can answer the next question." From this Noor found a title for her new report: 'A List of Names, a Distance from Meaning.'

On 21 March, the Election Commission issued a second public release containing further details received from the bank. Riddhi updated her earlier table without destroying the old entries. She dated every version and marked the links that remained uncertain. "Why keep so many versions?" Noor asked. "Because if my calculations turn out to be wrong tomorrow, I want to be able to say where the error occurred. A corrected list should explain the earlier question, not erase it." During their conversation, a brief line from Anupama Jha's Maithili writing came to Noor's mind: how much darkness survives behind the light that shines upon the face of words. She did not quote the line verbatim; she kept only its feeling within herself.

That night at the trust's building, Rama Chaubey was reconciling copies of bank statements. Under its long-term contract, Deeprekha

Communication Services was to supply publicity materials, conduct training programmes in four districts and arrange the publication of an annual summary. The total proposed value was eighteen lakh forty thousand rupees, with payment due in specified stages. Rama could see that receipts for actual printing substantiated some payments, but the attendance lists for two programmes repeated the same serial numbers. She could not tell whether this was a clerical error, the copying of lists, or an inflated claim about the programmes. She continued checking the figures until midnight, then decided that silence in her position as treasurer would amount to abandoning her responsibility.

At dawn, Rama handed Prabodh Mathur a one-page note. It accused no one of a crime. It contained four questions: the location and date of each programme, the method used to prepare participant lists, and the actual receipt of printed materials. Prabodh took off his spectacles. “The trust's reputation will be ruined.” “Its reputation will be protected by answers to these four questions, not by hiding the note,” Rama replied. “Preserve evidence for what is in order; call what remains unclear unclear.” Sahar was present at the meeting too. She assembled in one file photographs of the workshop in her settlement, independently signed attendance sheets and the participants' consent. “I have notes of what was said from the platform,” she told them. “But I don't know whose invoices are being drawn up behind that platform.”

Towards the end of March, a confidential letter reached Noor. The envelope held blurred copies of two Deeprekha payment sheets and a question written in pencil: “Bills for four events, platforms for two?” There was no signature. Noor decided not to burn the envelope but to keep it in a locked drawer at her office. She understood the difference between a faint copy and an original invoice. “Who is your source?” Aniruddh asked. “I don't know the name. That means these documents haven't been verified.” For a moment Aniruddh looked disappointed; then he wrote on the back of a slip of paper, “Ask the trust for certified accounts and check the facts at the venues.” Noor was greatly relieved by that sentence. Even in the afternoon rush after a story, the road towards verification had not yet closed.

Dust rose into Jodhpur's sky at the beginning of April. Noor accompanied Sahar Bano to the settlement where a civic-education meeting had been held three months earlier. In its centre stood an old neem tree, its roots breaking through the stones of a cracked platform. Kamla Devi sat in its shade rolling bidis. When Noor said she was a journalist, Kamla called her neighbours over. “Were you at the meeting?” Noor asked. “I was. It lasted two afternoons. I asked about the electoral

roll, filled in a form, received a book. They explained again what I didn't understand." With Kamla's permission, Noor wrote down the dates. "Were there four separate programmes?" Kamla shook her head. "I saw only two. I know nothing about the other places." In that small reply lay both the limits of an allegation and the value of testimony.

A seamstress named Rukhsana lived in the same settlement. The treadle of her sewing machine kept moving as she spoke. "After the programme I got five days' work stitching bags with pictures on them. The contractor was someone else. I received my full payment, but I don't know the name of the company on the invoice." Noor asked her to remember the date. Rukhsana counted the days by comparing them with the dates of her daughter's school examinations. "It wasn't April; it was the last week of February," she corrected herself. Noor struck through the date in her first note and recorded the reason for the correction. For a journalist, that little crossing-out mattered: the witness had made her memory more precise; the reporter had not reshaped it to fit her preferred story.

At noon Noor went to Deeprekha's office, on the second floor of a commercial building, with brightly coloured computer-printed samples displayed at the entrance. Its director, Arun Bhardwaj, welcomed her smoothly. "Why has my company suddenly come under questioning?" he asked. Noor described the general subject of the contract without showing him a page of any confidential document. "Not every job is done from the same office," Arun said. "We employ local subcontractors. We have photographs." "Can you confirm the programme dates and name the people who delivered the materials?" Noor asked. "Some bank and company records are commercially confidential. But I'll give you a written reply stating that the work was completed." Noor left her card and said she would allow a reasonable time for an answer before publication.

A junior Deeprekha employee, Biram Devda, brought two glasses of water. He had been with the company only a year. His eyes scarcely moved away from the computer screen. When Arun went out, Biram said softly, "Some images have been used again in the photographic lists." Noor asked at once, "Whose?" Biram drew back. "I don't know. I only make the albums. There was the same photograph on two posters, but the event might have been on just one day." Noor said, "If you want to give a written account of your own experience, I'll read it. But I won't put pressure on you." Biram said nothing. He closed a drawer and returned to his work. As she turned away, Noor checked herself: it was easy, and unjust, to turn an uncomfortable employee's silence into a confession.

At the trust, meanwhile, Rama Chaubey sent a registered letter to the state's grants department. She wrote that internal reconciliation remained incomplete for certain heads of expenditure and requested an independent examination before approval of the next instalment. Prabodh Mathur disagreed with sending such a letter. “If government inspectors come, the work will stop,” he said. “If we write now, there will be a record of the date and time we requested scrutiny,” Rama answered. “If money later disappears, you won't be able to say that no warning was given.” Sahar Bano told them both, “I will not stop the classes in the settlement. But classes need money for rented chairs and books. Don't hold back the working teachers' pay because of this inquiry.” Rama made a separate list in response: arrears supported by proper receipts, disputed invoices and proposed future expenditure.

A group of students submitted a right-to-information application to the state's civic-education department. Riddhi Bishnoi took care with its wording. “We are not demanding every private donor's papers from a private trust,” she explained. “We want the available copies of the government department's sanction orders, instalments released, monitoring reports and utilisation certificates.” Vivek wanted the application to use the word “fraud”. Riddhi explained, “A request for information is not a charge sheet. First examine the records actually held by the government department.” When the acknowledgment arrived, Vivek said with satisfaction, “Now there'll be an answer.” “And if there isn't, there's a route to a first appeal,” Riddhi replied. “The expiry of a deadline doesn't prove the accounts by itself.”

One evening Noor telephoned Revati Jha. She told her the story she was investigating, without suggesting that someone should be arrested on the strength of a blurred page from an unnamed source. “First establish whether the details of the state's contract with the trust are government records,” Revati said. “The private dealings of a subcontractor have different boundaries. If a company brings a civil suit claiming payment for work, proof of performance under the contract may be required. But it would be wrong to treat the courts as instruments for uncovering every fact a journalist needs.” Noor asked, “And what if someone threatens to stop my report?” “Then assess precisely what you intend to publish, the evidence for it, the opportunity given for a response, and the risk of defamation. You may seek legal protection, but don't write conclusions out of fear or excitement.”

Revati's restraint did not surprise Noor. Years earlier, during a case Revati had handled in Mumbai, some people had treated an entry in a warehouse register as proof of every alleged offence; Revati, however, had

not automatically declared the accused innocent either. Noor wrote on the first page of her notebook, “Separate events, separate evidence.” Her editor Aniruddh did not enjoy proceeding so slowly. In the market for news, proclamations came first and corrections afterwards. One day he said plainly, “If you don't bring me a story, I'll send another reporter.” Noor's expression hardened for a moment; then she gathered her papers. “Send one,” she said. “But I cannot say that I've seen what I haven't seen.” He did not stop her that day. The next day he gave her another assignment.

By mid-April, the sound of election rallies carried from the cities into the villages. Flags of different parties appeared on rooftops, but the people who put them up did not all ask the same questions. In Harnampur, Jaspreet Kaur opened her register of agricultural expenses. “The farmers of our village will vote differently,” she said. “Some want assurance on prices, some on irrigation, some on the wages of agricultural labourers.” Gurnam Singh was reading one party's manifesto, Manpreet another's. Both wondered how much it would help voters to know the sources of parties' funds. Jaspreet picked up a fallen grain of wheat. “A person may give a donation because of his beliefs,” she said. “The question is whether the government that comes to power will answer to all citizens, or only to those closest to it.”

Kusum's father was still waiting for the revenue inspector despite the High Court's limited directions in an old dispute over drainage from his field. When Kusum explained the electoral bonds decision, he said, “The right to know the sources of a country's money is a great thing. But why haven't I received the survey record for my own field?” “Different officers are responsible for those two matters,” Kusum replied. “But both raise a question about public records.” Her father showed her an old map of the footpath, carefully preserved in his shoulder bag. “Can you read this?” “Yes. But this one map cannot establish the entirety of our rights.” He smiled. “Now you talk like your lawyer sister.” Kusum knew how hard the language of caution could sound inside one's own home.

At this point Deeprekha sent the trust a demand for payment of the fourth instalment. It stated that all materials had been supplied on time and publicity for the additional programmes had been completed digitally. Rama Chaubey repeated her four questions in reply and proposed a partial payment for work supported by independent receipts. Arun Bhardwaj was furious on the telephone. “There's a conspiracy to ruin my company's reputation,” he said. “We're not denying what we owe for goods you actually delivered,” Rama answered. “But don't pressure us into treating what exists only as a shadow on a list as an actual

object." Arun warned that the company would take legal action. "The original contract and receipts from both parties have been preserved," Rama replied. "Follow the proper procedure." Her hands were trembling when she put down the phone, but she recorded every word in her notebook.

Noor met someone she had not expected to meet: Anupama Jha. The Maithili writer had come to the city for a literary gathering. As she emerged from the meeting, students showed her the trust's booklet on civic education. Seeing weighty expressions in it, such as "the citizenry's right to information", Anupama said, "Ask the women in the villages how much the word 'information' means to them. If nobody can understand our language, the page bearing their rights remains far away." Noor told her about the difficulties of her report. "A writer of fiction is free to invent, because a novel openly declares itself to be imagined," Anupama said. "Readers trust a journalist to tell the truth about events. But even a novelist should not attach a crime to the name of a real person under cover of imagination." Noor laughed. "And the solution?" "Keep sympathy and questioning alive within the same person," Anupama replied.

On the first day of polling, quiet lines of voters formed along the city's main road. Riddhi accompanied her elderly mother to the polling station. Her mother's hand trembled; she slowly wrote her name where she had to sign. As they came out, her mother asked, "You won't ask me whom I voted for?" Riddhi laughed. "No. The vote is secret. But asking about the publicly disclosed sources of a party's funding is a different matter." Her mother took betel leaf from her bag. "So secrecy and information can both be rights, living in the same house." To Riddhi, that simple sentence made the matter clearer than a lengthy research article. When Noor heard of it later, she wondered how many principles of democracy revealed themselves at the gate of a polling station without the use of difficult words.

When the first response to the right-to-information request arrived from the state department, Riddhi read it three times. It included the sanction order and details of the first instalment, but certain attachments to the utilisation certificates had not been supplied, with "inquiry continuing" given as the reason. The response did not clearly identify the specific grounds for any applicable exemption. "They're hiding everything deliberately," Vivek said angrily. "Perhaps the papers aren't yet with the department; perhaps they have been withheld for an authorised reason; perhaps the reply is incomplete," Riddhi said. "We'll ask for the reasons in writing." She filed a first appeal through the

prescribed procedure. It questioned the availability of the public portions of the utilisation papers, not the private bank details of individual citizens. For now her article said not “records were suppressed” but “an incomplete response was received”.

At a meeting of the trust, Prabodh's former colleague Ramswaroop Mehta said that under pressure from journalists and information requests the organisation would abandon education and spend all its time keeping accounts. Sahar Bano replied, “If we stop education in the name of accounts, those who depend on it will suffer. If we abandon accounts in the name of education, trust will suffer. Don't make the two enemies.” She gave them an example of the problem: Karuna's daughter in the settlement had been unable to complete an online college admission form. A volunteer at the workshop had helped her. That assistance amounted to little on a cash invoice, but it meant a great deal in Karuna's house. Yet Sahar did not want one genuine act of help to become an excuse for paying invoices for four imaginary programmes. For the first time, the meeting fell silent before the difficulty of both parts of her argument.

Arun Bhardwaj finally brought a suit in the local civil court to recover the outstanding payments under the company's contract. The company attached its delivery challans, emails and printing receipts to the claim; in its written response, the trust acknowledged some of the material it had actually received and contested the rest. As the court proceedings began, Noor telephoned Rama Chaubey. “Will you testify?” “If the court summons me about original records in my custody, I'll go,” Rama said. “But we must answer journalists' questions even before a court reaches its decision.” Noor reported the suit without presenting its opening stage as a final judgment. Arun had set down his claim on paper, the trust its disagreement on paper; both parties were yet to be heard.

Arun did not attend the first hearing in the civil court. The company's lawyer, Giriraj Tanwar, appeared. Advocate Lalita Chauhan represented the trust, with Rama beside her. The judge first asked the parties to specify the amount in dispute. According to Giriraj, eleven lakh fifty thousand rupees had been received under a contract worth eighteen lakh forty thousand, leaving the balance unpaid. Lalita said that the amount already received included advances and adjustments, while the real dispute concerned performance under four separate heads of service. “Is there any dispute about payment for the services the parties accept were provided?” the judge asked. Looking at her papers, Rama replied that agreement might be possible over adjustment of two small invoices. The

court gave them an opportunity to reconcile the accepted portion and fixed another date for the remaining list of evidence.

After the hearing Lalita warned Rama, “Don't link the plaintiff's recovery suit to suspicions surrounding the Lok Sabha election. The decisive issue here will be proof that the company provided the contracted services. Anyone alleging a connection with political donations must have separate, reliable facts.” “All I want is to put our grant expenditure in order,” Rama said. “Then stay with that,” Lalita replied. “In court, speak to the papers before it. What journalists may suspect and what the public may ask can proceed on their own paths.” At home, Lalita's young son was preparing for examinations, and the fees from this case paid for his books. Legal judgement was no luxury practised in a quiet room; it was a condition of her everyday working life.

As the May heat intensified, Noor wrote her first substantial report for the newspaper. Its title was “Disclosure of Public Political Donations and Accountability for Local Grants: Two Separate Questions”. The first part covered the date of the Supreme Court's decision, the sequence in which the Election Commission had released the records, and the legitimate place of political support. The second set out the local trust's government grant, the workshops actually held, the unfinished reconciliation of accounts and the company's civil claim. Noor deliberately stated that she had no verified grounds for joining the two subjects into an allegation of a single crime. Aniruddh suggested adding the word “scam” to the headline. Noor objected. In the end the duty editor kept her original title. As the paper came off the press, ink stained Noor's fingers, and she felt that her long weeks of caution were now entering the severe examination of the reader.

The responses came from two directions. Some readers called Noor courageous; others said a report that named no offenders was weak. A few of the trust's volunteers felt reassured that their labour had not been dismissed as fictitious. Arun Bhardwaj, however, wrote to say the published doubts about the company's performance were unjustified, and requested an opportunity to have his complete response printed. Noor read the letter carefully. It asserted that four programmes had been held, but supplied no complete record of venues and dates. She told her editor they should publish its factual assertions along with the questions that the missing records left unanswered. “Won't printing a letter against us weaken the report?” Aniruddh asked. “If a report is weakened by hearing the reply, on what grounds can we call it strong?” Noor answered.

When counting began in Delhi on 4 June, the newsroom again filled with people. The Lok Sabha results opened a new phase of political argument, with divergent opinions on the formation of a government and the position of the opposition. Noor's newspaper carried writers who supported government policy and writers who criticised it. She refused an instruction to become a champion of any party. “An election result is a democratic mandate,” she said, “but questions about records of public expenditure do not end with that result.” Aniruddh rose from his chair and went to the window. “You return every news story to the same sentence: ‘Look at the papers.’” Noor replied, “Without the papers, my opinion would be nothing more than my opinion. The public doesn't ask for my opinion; it asks for reporting that has been checked.”

One June evening Avni telephoned from Bengaluru. The question about a particular incorrect option, seen on a practice sheet for a scholarship examination, was still under independent examination. “Noor Didi, I don't know how a photograph of part of my notebook got outside. Some people are saying all examinations are for sale,” Avni said. Noor answered, “For the photograph you saw with your own eyes, ask about the date, the original file and the access list. You cannot judge every examination on the basis of one incident.” “I'm afraid that if someone really saw the question paper, hardworking students will suffer.” After a pause Noor said, “I won't make light of your fear. But the next task after fear is to gather records.” Following that call, Noor opened a fresh page in her notebook for the question of examination integrity, entirely separate from her report on electoral finance.

In July the first fierce shower of rain cooled Jodhpur's hot stones. Water dripped through the roof of the trust's small storeroom. Sahar Bano and four volunteers were lifting boxes of booklets onto higher shelves. In red ink on the side of one box were the words “First phase: six hundred copies”. Rama Chaubey opened it and counted. Three hundred and fifty copies remained; the separately maintained distribution register accounted for those given away. She examined another box. Its label said “Second phase”, but it contained books bearing the same printing year as those of the first. “These may be extra copies,” Sahar said. “Don't take them as proof of a second printing.” Rama wrote, “Same material; separate proof of supply required.” Water from the leaking roof soaked their clothes; amid this difficult work, both respect and suspicion had to be held together.

Sahar's assistant, Kailashi Bhil, brought her little daughter along that day. School was closed, yet the girl's exercise book was filled with exceptionally neat handwriting. “Whose name should I enter in the

register?” Kailashi asked. “The posters were handed out by me, the invoice belongs to the company, and the wages were mine?” “Enter them separately,” Rama said. “Your labour and the price of the materials aren't a single payment.” “I was paid for three days,” Kailashi said. “On the fourth I volunteered. Is there a separate account for that day among the large sums I see against the posters?” For the first time Rama considered how clearly expensive printed objects appeared in financial reports while the workers' time could remain almost invisible. She retained a copy of Kailashi's wage receipt and promised to record the voluntary day's work separately.

The reply to the first right-to-information appeal arrived as well. The authorised officer directed that clearer copies of the available sanction and instalment records be supplied; for certain annexures still under investigation, a reasoned response was required, including consideration of any lawful redaction where necessary. Riddhi did not turn this into a proclamation of victory. “What we have is a direction to improve the procedure,” she said. “There remains a path to the appropriate next forum for the other material.” “Then why hold a meeting tonight?” Vivek asked. Riddhi smiled. “So people may learn how to read the papers we've received. Merely gaining access to documents isn't enough. We must understand what they mean.”

At the meeting, Firdaus Kaul gave a short lesson on the reliability of records. Before her were three images: an export of an original digital receipt, a cropped picture forwarded by telephone, and a graph made for publication in a newspaper. “These three are not the same thing,” she said. “The first may retain information about its source; the second may have lost sequence and context; the third requires us to know the rules by which the figures were calculated.” A student asked, “Does that make a graph a lie?” “A graph isn't inherently false,” Firdaus replied. “But when the method of calculation isn't stated, there are fewer ways to check it.” Kusum listened from near the door. Remembering her own difficulties with private records, Manasvi said, “The right to make documents public and the needless exposure of a person's private life aren't the same thing.” The questions at the meeting were not settled, but by its end they had grown clearer.

At the next civil hearing, some original invoices supporting Deeprekha's claim were produced. The printing press's stamp was clear on one; the printed serial number on another was blurred. Giriraj Tanwar said that the company had subcontracted some work, and not all delivery challans therefore bore the principal company's name. Lalita Chauhan showed the court that the trust's distribution register acknowledged

certain supplies, but the venues, dates and proof of services received at two specified events were in dispute. The judge afforded both sides a proper opportunity to inspect the original records, leaving the final questions of authenticity and incomplete performance for trial. The court reached no conclusion about the political controversy over electoral bonds, which was not an issue in this suit.

Outside the courtroom Giriraj told Lalita, “Your side has acknowledged some of the services. Opposing the entire invoice therefore seems unreasonable.” “There will be a proper reckoning of what has been acknowledged,” Lalita replied. “But there is no question of paying the full sum without proof of the volume of work specified in the contract.” Giriraj fell silent for a moment. “My client says the programmes' online reach was also measured.” “Then produce the source, date and method of measurement for that digital report,” Lalita said. “The number of online viewers and the number of people actually trained are not identical.” The two lawyers were adversaries, but they retained the courtesy of listening to each other's arguments. On the courthouse steps, that small civility seemed a world apart from the slogans outside.

That night Arun Bhardwaj sat in his office examining the budget. His company had lost many contracts during the pandemic, and the burden of those losses remained. One employee's mother was ill; another employee's monthly wages were arriving late. Arun feared that if the outstanding invoice was withheld, the entire office might have to close. But he also understood that an explanation of financial losses did not in itself prove delivery of unfinished work. He summoned Biram Devda and asked to see the original folder containing the old photo albums. “I used this picture on two publicity posters because another image wasn't available,” Biram said. “That doesn't establish that two programmes didn't take place. But the photograph alone doesn't prove that both did, either.” Arun was displeased. “Your job was to prepare photographs, not argue.” Biram did not answer. For the first time he realised that an ordinary employee's accurate words could collide with his employer's worries.

In August, another slip reached Noor. It was different from the first anonymous envelope. It contained four bank digits, the date of an advertising proposal and a mark resembling the signature “H. Chauhan”. “Two initials can't establish anyone's identity,” Riddhi said after seeing it. “It could be Hardev Chauhan, or someone else. The resemblance to a name in our old wage registers or the farmers' organisation's publicity proposal is not enough.” Noor did not immediately forward the slip to Sunita. She reflected that Hardev's name had already appeared in several

ambiguous accounts; it would be unjust to load every unclear page onto him. She marked the slip “Unverified” and put it in a separate envelope.

Sunita was looking again at two entries in the factory's wage register from 2009. One name appeared to belong to a person who had not worked there for many months, yet it still appeared in the company's records. The final legal meaning of that discrepancy remained undecided. When Noor merely mentioned a possibly matching name over the telephone, Sunita said, “If we force your document together with the one I have on the strength of a name, we may create a false link. First find the complete name, the identity and the source of the papers.” Deepak agreed with his sister. “Five people may bear one name,” he said, “and one person may have two accounts. Those are different situations.” The journalist in Noor was a little frustrated by such restraint, but her conscience felt relieved.

Around this time a readers' circle in Darbhanga was discussing Anupama Jha's new collection of Maithili stories. A student asked that if literature always claimed to write “truth”, where was its proof? Anupama answered, “The truth of a story differs from the truth of a certificate. A character's fear, greed, love and remorse emerge through experience. But when we write an event as public history, the liberty of imagination cannot cover an incorrect date.” Revati was at the gathering as well. “A court listens to experience,” she said, “but decides an accusation on evidence.” An elderly reader laughed. “Then literature and the courts are two different sets of scales.” “Different scales,” Anupama answered, “but the human being between them is the same.”

At the beginning of September, Sahar Bano held another class for the women of the settlement. This time the trust rented no room; mats were spread in front of Karuna's house. Noor sat among the audience as an ordinary listener rather than reporting, though she explained the purpose of her presence beforehand. One woman spoke of finding her name missing on polling day; another could not understand the municipal water bill. A third said, “My name is on the receipt, but someone says the women's group has taken the donations.” Sahar explained that they would keep three separate registers: private donations, government grants and voluntary contributions from the settlement. Karuna's daughter brought three colours of paper and wrote the headings in her own hand: “What We Gave”, “What We Received”, “What We Asked”. Not all the women applauded. Some left because their working hours had begun; others quietly started filling in the sheets.

At last the state department sent the trust its interim observations on the grant inspection. The note accepted evidence that two programmes had actually taken place, requested further clarification of the date of another, and ordered a physical reconciliation of one invoice for printed materials. It was neither a finding of guilt nor proof that the entire account had been cleared. “At least they haven't called every programme imaginary,” Prabodh Mathur said after reading it. “True,” Rama replied. “But the one line still outstanding hasn't become correct of its own accord.” Prabodh looked out of the window. The sun was setting. “I founded the trust to provide education,” he said quietly. “Now I'm exhausted from writing answers.” “Those answers are the price of the promise to educate,” Rama said. Prabodh did not argue.

Riddhi showed Noor the first draft of her research paper. It contained a table of sanctioned grants, instalments released, the verified number of programmes that benefited people, unexplained heads of payment, and the sources of available documents. Noor noticed that a printed chart had coloured the amount of eighteen lakh forty thousand rupees and labelled it “Substandard Expenditure”. “Where did this phrase come from?” she asked. Startled, Riddhi called her research assistant. He said that while shortening “Total Contract Value in Dispute”, he had written “substandard”. Riddhi corrected it at once: “Total Contract Value; Disputed Portion of Payment Shown Separately.” “That one word erases all the work the company actually did,” Noor said. Riddhi admitted the error and sent a correction notice with every draft already circulated. Some at the university found such a small public correction ridiculous. To Riddhi it was an obligation of scholarly integrity.

At the October hearing, Krishnagopal Suthar, an employee of a printing press, appeared as a witness. His job was to prepare receipts for printing, not to organise programmes. Giriraj asked about the number of copies printed in two batches. Krishnagopal answered from his register, but said he had not himself seen whether the printed material had ultimately been distributed at all four events. In cross-examination, Lalita obtained his acknowledgment that the registration number of the vehicle collecting goods was incomplete on one challan. “That is an omission,” Krishnagopal said, “but the quantity that left our press is recorded on another receipt.” The court allowed both receipts to be placed on record. On her way out Noor wrote, “Proof of printing is not proof of distribution; the latter question remains.”

Sahar Bano was the second witness that day. She was asked directly whose authorisation had permitted expenditure on training in the settlement, and whose signature acknowledged receipt of the material.

She made clear that she conducted programmes but did not approve expenditure. Producing her attendance register, she placed a finger on the line bearing her name. “I can testify to this day. On the day when I went to see a sick woman at her home, my signature cannot serve as proof of a programme.” The court recorded that limitation. In the corridor Noor asked Sahar, “Won't your organisation be angry with you for giving only that much evidence?” “If it grows angry because I tell the truth, why did it employ me?” Sahar replied. But her voice held not only courage; there was worry in it too about wages being withheld.

One night Arun received a call from his daughter. She was studying abroad and had become frightened by a fragment of news. “Papa, are you a criminal?” she asked. Arun's throat tightened. “The court is examining papers concerning payments due. No crime has been decided,” he said. “Then why does everyone write words like that?” “Some people are in a hurry,” Arun answered. “But I cannot evade responsibility for the shortcomings in my own papers.” When the call ended, for the first time he called for the company's entire payment register and ordered a written inquiry from the accounts officer. Protecting his name alone was not enough: the labour of every colleague and the trust of every customer were bound up in the question.

Even in the year's final month, the civil dispute between the trust and the company had not ended despite partial reconciliation of their accounts. There was a written possibility of adjusting payments for the materials and services both parties accepted; the evidence relating to the remaining claim was still being examined. The state grants department awaited its final verification of how the disputed expenditure had been utilised. The slow process disappointed many. Prabodh wanted every allegation removed in a day; Arun wanted the full invoice paid; Sahar wanted the next class funded on time; Rama wanted every line of the register to recover its proper meaning. Within the same dispute, these four desires did not necessarily cancel one another, yet they did not fit comfortably together either.

On a cold December evening, Noor was writing the newspaper's annual review. She struck out her first sentence: “The entire secret of electoral money has been revealed.” In its place she wrote, “The removal of an unconstitutional system of secrecy has opened new questions about public information.” She explained that publication of the lists of political donations was a concrete step towards the citizen's right to know, but the lists did not by themselves establish that each contribution had bought an improper benefit, a contract or a crime. The local Lok Samvad Trust's contractual dispute was still subject to separate

civil and departmental proceedings. She also published the earlier correction of an inaccurate term and told readers how to examine the original data. Aniruddh read the final copy and said only, “It isn't dazzling, but it will stand.” Noor looked at him and said nothing.

Two envelopes still lay beneath Noor's desk. The first contained dim copies of invoices; the second, a publicity agency's proposal, three inconsistent payment dates and an incomplete contact marked “H. Chauhan”. She took out the papers and circled one date. On that day, the figure in a digital publicity proposal from Deeprekha Communication Services appeared different from the amount in the trust's accounts. Who received the money, how much work was actually done, whether the two proposals concerned the same job—none of these questions had yet been answered. A similarity of names established no certain link with Hardev Chauhan, the publicity proposal from Harnampur or the old factory register. At the end of her note, Noor wrote, “Unclear publicity-company expenditure; no criminal connection established as yet.” It was the last line on the page, but within it the next year's new questions were already waking.

That evening in Bengaluru, Avni placed a new notice from the examination authority beside her old red notebook. Reading it, she understood that some part of the inquiry into the question papers was not yet public. Geeta and Tarabai had opened their own books to prepare for examinations; the worth of their labour was not sealed inside any envelope. Maitreyi wanted her daughter not to abandon her research amid so much anxiety. “You've found a resemblance and a way to verify it,” Niranjan said. “But don't shut the pages of your knowledge because of someone's fear.” Behind a picture of Chandrayaan, Avni wrote a new heading: “Source of the Questions”. On Noor's desk lay the incomplete source of money; in Avni's notebook, the incomplete source of a question. The two stories were different, but both confronted the same difficult lesson of life: resist the temptation to claim that you know what you do not know.

Chapter 30 — Who Stole the Examination Questions?

Jodhpur, Bengaluru and Delhi; 2024

In the late hours of a March afternoon, a grey film of dust settled upon the trees of Jodhpur. As she came out of an old hostel at Marudhar University, Tarabai Bhil held her notebook above her head to shield herself from the sun. A year earlier she had made a mistake in an experiment measuring the moisture in soil, but now the courage it had taken to correct that error startled her less than a sentence she heard everywhere: "This examination makes your life." She carried an old cloth bag containing, besides her books, millet rotis from her mother and a little jaggery tied in a piece of fabric. Her neighbour Geeta walked beside her. Both were preparing for the national entrance examination for medical courses in May. They would sit the same examination, but the paths each had taken to reach it could scarcely have been more different.

Geeta came from a family of motor mechanics. Her father Dayaram spent the day dismantling vehicles with oil-stained hands and in the evening helped his daughter turn the pages of her books. Her mother Rukmini cooked in five households. Geeta had never prepared a glittering speech about why she wanted to become a doctor. During the second wave of the pandemic, an elderly woman in the neighbourhood had died before she could reach a hospital; Geeta had stood for a long time at the doorway of that house, carrying a vessel of water. Afterwards she felt a restless urgency to study the human body: a sick person needed not merely a name for the disease, but another human being who understood in time. She knew the distance between that desire and the marks she would actually have to earn. At night she wrote beside her wrong answers in red ink, "Understand this again."

Tarabai's father worked as a daily labourer in the fields. After poor rains he had to spend much of the year working at brick kilns. Her mother Kamla stitched blankets at home and did embroidery when there were weddings in the village. An old fan had been installed in the cattle shed for Tarabai's studies; in the heat it turned halfway and creaked through the rest of each revolution. "So you're going to study medicine?" an uncle visiting them had asked with a laugh. "I'll try to study," Tarabai had answered quietly. "The examination won't become easy just by looking at my name." That night, after her daughter was asleep, Kamla took from a basket the outstanding payments for two embroidery orders

and counted them. She had intended to keep this reckoning from the girl, but her daughter's education had grown so large a purpose that every coin made a sound when spent upon it.

At Marudhar's science outreach centre, Dr Chandana Ravidas held free question-and-answer sessions twice a week. The dispute over the records of her own research grant had not been finally settled, yet she never treated the students' questions as small. One day Tarabai wrote an equation of chemical equilibrium the wrong way round. "Could you see immediately, on looking at the page, that it was wrong?" Chandana asked. Tarabai nodded. "Then you have acquired the ability to recognise your mistake. Now learn why it happened." From the back Geeta said, "But they deduct marks for mistakes in the medical entrance examination." "Exactly," Chandana replied. "That's why you should make your mistakes on inexpensive paper, not at the real opportunity life gives you. But don't think yourself worth less when you discover an error."

In Bengaluru, Avni still kept the letter about the 2023 scholarship examination inside her red notebook. An incorrect unit in the preliminary draft of a question review had appeared in a fleeting image of an outside practice sheet; she had sent a confidential notice to the relevant local authority requesting an investigation into the similarity. In response, the authority had said it was preserving the original draft, its record of changes and the source of the outside practice sheet. The inquiry remained incomplete. Seeing pictures of Geeta and Tarabai practising on her phone, Avni felt a flicker of suspicion, but immediately checked herself: the national medical entrance examination was administered by an entirely different body. There was no evidence linking it to the doubts raised about a local scholarship question. One must not make a story out of what one does not know.

In the first week of April, an advertisement from Kota appeared on Tarabai's phone. In shining letters it announced the "Sandhipath Study Support Centre", promising intensive practice in correcting errors, admission counselling and trainers available by telephone within a short period. The fee was forty-five thousand rupees, with an additional three thousand for study materials. "So expensive?" Geeta asked in amazement. "Look at this too," Tarabai said. "It says that if the course doesn't help, they'll refund money in proportion to the sessions." Before she had read the smaller print, she telephoned her mother. Kamla fell silent at the amount. Two days later she withdrew money from an old savings account. "I'm putting this money towards your education," she said, "not

buying a miracle." Tarabai heard those words as though they were a prayer.

The advertisement named Devendra Kashyap as the centre's contact person and listed "Sandhipath Service Group" for accounts. When Tarabai telephoned, a young man called Naresh said, "Didi, there's nothing improper about the questions. We offer mock tests and counselling. You'll get a receipt straightaway." "How many hours of classes? Which teachers? And what happens to the unused fee if the examination comes sooner?" Tarabai asked. "It'll all be shown in the app," he replied. Some parts of his English-laced answer were clear, others obscure. Tarabai asked again for written details. An email arrived two days later: eighteen guided sessions, four practice papers and an individual timetable; refunds subject to administrative conditions. No definite dates appeared. Kamla felt reassured at the number eighteen. Her daughter paid forty-eight thousand rupees through the bank and kept the receipt safe.

When Geeta told her father about this arrangement, Dayaram said, "That expense would be difficult for us. But your friend has paid the money, so don't make fun of her. If she doesn't receive the service, she must ask for a written account." Looking at the receipt on the phone, Rukmini said, "In my cooking work, when someone pays me I can count the days and the meals. Why are there no dates for these sessions?" Tarabai could not answer. She imagined such arrangements were ordinary in large educational institutions; for the first time, her confidence depended upon the small print of a document that did not fully reassure her.

During the first week, two recorded lessons appeared on the phone. In one, the teacher's face was absent, and ordinary multiple-choice questions scrolled across the screen. The other covered introductory biology, material Geeta had already heard in a free public lecture. Tarabai wrote to the help number asking for the agreed dates of the sessions and the teachers' names. The reply said, "Special arrangements are being made." On the third day Naresh telephoned. "A senior person at the company has a collection of questions very close to the actual examination. That requires separate access." A chill ran down Tarabai's spine. "What are you saying? The real question paper?" she asked. "I didn't say that much. Better preparation than what people talk about in the market." Tarabai answered plainly, "I want the service I paid for, not unauthorised questions."

The May examination was approaching. One evening a short message from an unidentified sender arrived on Tarabai's phone: “Success guaranteed. Final pages at a separate price.” She showed it to Geeta. “That sounds like unauthorised material. Don't reply,” Geeta said. They preserved the message and its original sequence, but could not know whether the sender was an employee of the centre or an unrelated swindler. When Avni heard about it over the telephone, she said, “Be careful. Keep the payment for legitimate teaching separate from the offer of unauthorised questions. Send no more money. Preserve the written list of services, the payment receipt and the original message.” Tarabai's voice shook. “I haven't done anything wrong, and yet I'm afraid.” “Don't conceal the truth because you're afraid,” Avni answered.

Dawn on 5 May. The sky above Jodhpur was grey, with no real coolness, only the last breath of night air. Geeta repeatedly checked everything for the examination—admit card, photograph, identity document, reporting time and centre. Rukmini put a little curd on a plate; Geeta finished breakfast in three mouthfuls. Dayaram had polished the family's old motorcycle. Tarabai telephoned her mother. “Remember what you've studied,” Kamla said. “Whether anyone hands you a paper or not can't make your mind worth less.” Tears rose in Tarabai's eyes at the sound of her mother's faith. She closed her notebook. She could regard the examination as a gateway; it was not a final verdict on her existence. Yet she knew already that when the examination-centre gate closed, some part of her heart would be shut inside it too.

The long hours of the examination passed differently for the two girls. Geeta was at ease with some of the biology questions; she calculated an answer in physics twice. Tarabai proceeded slowly on the first page, frightened of negative marking. One question recalled a demonstration by Chandana; she remembered not the details of the experiment but its principle, and chose her answer. After the examination, some outside declared that everything had been easy; others said it had all gone badly. Geeta and Tarabai drank water beside a roadside stall. “How did it go?” Geeta asked. “Let's not count every answer yet,” Tarabai said. “Let's get home first.” That small decision felt like the day's first act of freedom.

By evening, however, Sandhipath's service contact had ceased responding. Of the eighteen sessions promised on the app, only two were available, while a circle labelled “Under Assistance” kept turning. Tarabai sent an email: “Service received: two prerecorded sessions. Please supply the dates and teachers for the remaining sixteen sessions and explain the fee adjustment.” She received an automated

acknowledgment, with no actual signature. In both households, talk of the fee replaced the rest that should have followed the examination. Kamla sat quietly at her embroidery frame. “Ma, so much money has gone because of me,” her daughter said softly. Kamla stopped her needle. “I agreed to spend it. If the service wasn't delivered, responsibility for that wrong lies with whoever made the promise. But we must make sure our inquiry lacks nothing.”

Geeta invited her over. As Rukmini served rice, she said, “Sometimes pressure makes us choose an expensive path. Before deciding whom to blame, understand whether there is anything to be ashamed of.” Dayaram advised Tarabai to list in one notebook the bank receipt, the advertisement for the service, the emails sent and the dates of the classes actually held. Page by page she assembled a record grounded more in sequence than feeling. “This list will help in an inquiry,” Geeta said. “I still hope someone will answer the phone and say, ‘Yes, we didn't hold the classes; we're returning the money,’” Tarabai replied. The slow collapse of that hope was no less painful than the news of any examination crisis.

On the morning of 4 June, the results of the national examination were published. Before looking at her marks, Geeta refreshed the website three times. In the house, no one spoke loudly while they waited. Dayaram came in from the workshop, leaving a vehicle half dismantled; Rukmini took the boiling rice water off the stove. Geeta felt joy when she saw her marks, but another question arose at once: under the category in which she had applied, what real chances would she have in the next stage of counselling? “Today we'll look at the examination result,” her father said. “Tomorrow we'll reckon separately with college seats and fees.” He congratulated his daughter without pretending that an unfinished calculation was complete success. In that restraint Geeta recognised the familiar affection of her home.

When Tarabai opened her result, her marks were lower than she had expected. She turned the phone face down on the table. Geeta came to sit near her, but did not offer the easy consolation of “Never mind.” Much later Tarabai spoke of her own accord. “I understand so many of the questions now, but I didn't understand them that day. My chances of getting a seat this year have fallen.” “Will you give up on the other courses you wanted to study?” Geeta asked. “No. When people say there is only one examination in life, I feel as if nobody has read the rest of my family's story.” She told Geeta that her disappointment was deepened even more by the money lost to Sandhipath and by her parents' labour than by the medical entrance result itself.

Meanwhile, news reports were full of questions about unusually high scores, time-related problems at some examination centres and allegations that question papers had escaped into unauthorised hands. Geeta saw unknown screenshots being presented as proof of two contradictory stories. One television channel cast suspicion on every successful candidate; another dismissed every complaint as political theatre. “When I think of our money,” Tarabai said, “I feel as if examination questions really must be sold.” Geeta took her hand. “What happened with your coaching service and the allegation about the country's examination paper are separate matters. If we put them together, even your own complaint will grow weaker.” Tarabai agreed, but amid the agitation of the news it was hard to preserve the distinction.

Hearing of the controversy in Bengaluru, Avni opened her old notebook containing the draft of the local scholarship question. The moment she saw the familiar incorrect unit, a shiver went through her. But she calmly telephoned the local authority and asked for the date by which she could expect a written reply. An officer said the access register for the question review was being examined and the source of the outside practice sheet had not yet been verified. “Have the findings of this inquiry changed because of the new national controversy?” Avni asked. “No. This is a separate scholarship examination,” the officer said. Avni recorded the answer. Someone on social media had tried to attach her old photograph to a story about a national NEET leak. She issued a written clarification: “There is no verified connection between this image and NEET.”

In a Jodhpur hostel, a new student wrote in red letters on a page, “The harder we work, the more we're cheated.” Seeing it, Manasvi said, “The pain is real, but whom does it help to call the labour of every hardworking student a lie?” Vivek Meghwal added, “If rules were broken at some centres, those centres must be investigated. Cancelling everyone's result without evidence could also be unjust.” An angry young man demanded, “Are you on the administration's side?” “I'm on the side of questions,” Vivek replied. “Those who may be entirely innocent have futures too, and so do those who have been deprived.” The hostel debate continued into the night. For the first time, many understood that the integrity of an examination and the rights of its candidates were not opposing causes, but parts of one difficult relationship.

On the advice of an acquaintance, Tarabai and Kamla went to the address Sandhipath had given for its office in Kota. Outside a rented shop in a narrow lane, an old banner had come half loose. A new lock hung on the shutter, which bore the landlord's telephone number in ink. The

owner, Pawan Soni, said by phone that the organisation's staff had not paid the rent for two months, though he did not know exactly how much money they had collected from customers. “Where is Devendra Kashyap?” Tarabai asked. “The rental agreement is in the name of the person who took the office. I have a copy of an identity card, but I cannot verify it,” Pawan said. Kamla touched the shutter. There was no sign of all the equipment the centre had claimed to possess. The classes on a mobile screen had never become teaching delivered before students at a school.

The tea seller in the lane said that some students came in the afternoons and staff spent long evenings talking on mobile phones. “It all seemed fine to me,” he said. “Did you ever see anyone being taught here?” Kamla asked. The tea seller considered. “Twice I saw images on a screen through the window. I don't remember seeing students sitting there.” In her notebook Tarabai wrote, “Tea seller cannot give definite testimony.” It seemed strange that the search for truth so often required a person to say, “I don't know.” In village tales, the wise person always had an answer. In a legal account, preserving uncertainty was itself a responsibility.

Back in Jodhpur, the two prepared a written complaint. Revati Jha had come from Darbhanga that week to examine papers in another case; through Kusum, Tarabai met her. “First question: what service did you believe you were buying? Second: what did you actually receive? Third: which account received your payment? Fourth: is the suspicious message from Naresh verifiably connected with Devendra?” Revati asked. Tarabai answered them in order. Once Revati understood that Tarabai had not asked for a real question paper and had rejected the possible offer of unauthorised material, she told her to record those matters as facts in the complaint. She also warned, however, that Tarabai's account alone could not settle the final findings.

Revati then consulted the young advocate Nalini Deshpande by telephone. Nalini had previously worked on a separate case concerning warehouse records in Mumbai. She made clear that allegations of a national question-paper leak and suspected deception by a private coaching service concerned different jurisdictions and different subjects of proof. “You may get your client's name into the papers by attaching her to a famous controversy,” Nalini said, “but it will make recovering her money harder if the original complaint is turned into a sensation.” Revati agreed and called Tarabai over to read the papers. The application clearly recorded the centre's advertisement, its promise of eighteen sessions, the two lessons made available, the sum paid and the bank

receipt. It did not assert as a fact that a genuine national examination paper had been offered for sale.

Their first visit to the police station was not simple. The officer on duty said that failure to provide a proper educational service might also be a “civil matter”. “That is true,” Revati replied. “Breach of contract does not automatically amount to a crime. But was a false assurance given from the outset to obtain payment? Who actually controlled the office's identity and the beneficiary account? The complaint sets out facts relevant to these questions.” The officer read the application and passed it to his superior. No allegation was proved that day, and nobody was arrested. As they came out, Tarabai said, “I thought that as soon as I submitted the paper, I'd get the money back.” “A criminal inquiry and recovery of private money follow different paths,” Revati answered. “Both take time. It would be wrong to promise any outcome before it occurs.”

At home, Kamla heard a neighbour say that her daughter had “got caught trying to buy an exam paper”. Nobody could say where the rumour had begun. That evening Kamla stood before the village gathering. “I paid for study classes,” she said. “My daughter received a message proposing something wrong, and she refused it. If there was any mistake in what we did, show me the documents and then say so. Don't frighten a family and call it guilty without evidence.” Some people fell silent with shame. But Kamla felt no real relief: an insult might be set aside, while the question of an emptied savings account remained. Returning home, she took out her old ledger and wrote, “Forty-eight thousand: service disputed; recovery outstanding.” Then she called her daughter and showed her the entry. “We'll keep accounts and we'll keep living,” she said. “We'll do both.”

Across the country, news of petitions and protests over the NEET results grew intense. Some students wanted the entire examination held again; others argued that this would destroy months of work by innocent candidates. At home, Geeta wrote two pages of reflections. The first dealt with the secrecy of the question paper and equality of opportunity; the second with the risks of cancelling everyone's examination without reliable data. She wrote, “I want my result protected, but students who may have received an unfair advantage must not be exempted from investigation.” Dayaram read the pages. “You're speaking for your own rights while seeing the rights of others,” he said. “That is part of how a person becomes a citizen.” Geeta was fighting a great fear within herself: if the examination had to be repeated, how would her family find the

time and money? Yet she did not close her eyes to everyone else's questions.

In June there was news of relief for a limited number of candidates affected by lost examination time, and of a re-test. From the national authority's official notice, Geeta understood that the arrangement did not apply to every candidate. In the hostel chat someone wrote, "Everyone's examination is being held again." Tarabai immediately shared the notice and said, "That message is wrong." Earlier she had lacked the patience to read news for herself; after losing money, she had learned the importance of the original notice. Someone mocked her as "the queen of evidence". Tarabai did not reply. She opened her book and wrote in small letters, "There is no shame in asking about what I do not understand."

Noor Jahan came to Jodhpur to report on the controversy. Her editor wanted the headline "Every Examination Answer for Sale". Noor crossed it out. "Evidence of particular incidents involving a confirmed leak is not the same as a claim that all candidates are guilty," she said. She spoke separately with Geeta, Tarabai, coaching teachers and a local law lecturer. Tarabai showed her bank receipt but refused permission for her private numbers to be printed. "Use my name if it's necessary, but not my parents' account numbers or address," she said. Noor respected the request. Before writing the article, she sought a response from Sandhipath through its declared contact address, but the email bounced back. She reported that no clarification from the company had yet been received.

At this time Riddhi Bishnoi was studying public data. "If the distribution of marks looks unusual, does that prove a question-paper leak?" Geeta asked her. Riddhi drew three diagrams on a small sheet: the first showed the chain of security for the question paper, the second its distribution at examination centres, and the third the distribution of results. "They may be connected, but they are not the same thing," she said. "An unusual pattern in marks gives us grounds to inquire. To learn which question reached whom, and when, we need independent sources." Vivek, who was sitting nearby, added, "If a breach in the paper's security is proved, its extent has to be investigated." "And if the extent cannot be established?" Geeta asked. "Then any decision must also consider the interests of candidates who did nothing wrong," Riddhi replied.

At a meeting of her research centre, Avni mentioned the national controversy, but first reported in writing on the progress of the separate doubts concerning the local scholarship question. The department's

internal inquiry had secured a copy of the date register, but the original file for the outside practice sheet was still missing. A member said, “Your wrong option appeared in the coaching question. Surely its meaning is obvious.” “Without the original date and sequence of circulation, several possibilities remain,” Avni replied. “Someone may have seen my draft; an old record may have been shared by mistake; or similar wording from an earlier practice exercise may have found its way into your question. Each route needs to be examined separately.” The committee thanked her for cooperating, but entered no person's name as guilty at that meeting.

Back in Jodhpur, Tarabai brought the receipt from the police station to Revati. During a preliminary examination, an officer of the economic offences branch had requested details of the bank account's know-your-customer records, the company's registration and control of the service portal. The bank's written response showed that the name of the account which actually received the money did not entirely match the name in the advertisement. The difference might, however, be explained by a partner institution, a different registered trading name or a beneficiary deliberately concealed. “A different name isn't a crime in itself,” Revati said, “but it is certainly an unanswered question.” Tarabai reflected on how words that had once seemed exceedingly difficult—“beneficiary”, “transaction number”, “contract”—had become decisive words in her family's life.

The landlord, Pawan Soni, handed the officer a copy of his rental agreement. It bore Devendra Kashyap's signature, but the date and registered address were incomplete. The officer cautioned Pawan to confine himself to what he knew directly. “I took a little rent, but I'm no partner of people who cheat children,” Pawan burst out. “No decision has been made about your guilt or innocence,” the officer replied. “Tell us what you saw; don't imagine what you didn't.” Pawan resented the words, but that evening counted his rent receipts again. His own son was due to sit a competitive examination that year. For the first time he understood that behind the locked shutter lay not only a landlord's unpaid rent, but the hopes of many households.

A private tutor in the city, Medha Saxena, told the investigators that Sandhipath had contracted her to record two online lessons and paid her only half the agreed amount. “Students who see images of my classes might think I was teaching the whole course,” she said. “But I was never shown a list of eighteen sessions.” She supplied her emails, the dates of the recordings and the scope of the lessons. On hearing her name, Tarabai felt relieved for the first time: at least those two lessons represented the real labour of a teacher. “That fact deserves recognition,”

Revati told her. “Part of the service was real. Concealing it while accusing the centre over the whole amount would weaken your own case.”

One day news came from Tarabai's village that Kamla's eyesight was troubling her more. Months of close embroidery had made it difficult for her to distinguish the colours of thread. An examination in the city would cost money, and the wound of forty-eight thousand rupees in her savings account was still fresh. Tarabai looked for a cheap train ticket but then thought her mother ought to receive medical attention without delay. Geeta spoke to her father, and Dayaram arranged with the family to meet the initial examination costs. Kamla was distressed to hear it. “I won't borrow from you.” “You're accepting help, not a loan,” Dayaram said. “If we need help tomorrow, you'll be there too.” In those words Tarabai discovered a meaning of healthcare ethics quite different from anything in a textbook. A student's dream of becoming a doctor begins with examining a real patient's eyes, not with a news headline.

At the beginning of July, a page from Medha Saxena's written statement circulated on social media. An anonymous account claimed, “Teacher admits seeing question paper in advance.” Her original statement contained no such admission; she had answered only about payment for two recorded lessons. Noor verified those parts of the original statement that could properly be made public and wrote a report headed “A Cropped Message Does Not Determine Guilt”. Medha told her on the telephone, “I teach chemistry. Now people are attaching a false crime to my name. My students ask whether Madam will go to jail.” “We'll publish your denial in full,” Noor replied. “But we won't write beyond the facts still under police investigation.” Returning home that night, she added one line to her editorial notebook: “The dignity of a source is no less important than the rights of a journalist.”

In Revati's office, Tarabai read her complaint aloud for the first time. “The institution complained against charged for eighteen regular sessions and supplied two recorded lessons; it provided neither the remaining services nor a proper account of a refund,” she read slowly. At the passage about the messages, her voice caught. “You've written ‘suspicion’ here,” she said. “If it was a proposal to commit a crime, why not write ‘crime’ plainly?” “A crime may have been committed,” Revati replied. “But whose telephone sent the message, who holds the original chain of transmission, and which elements of an offence can be proved are matters for investigation. Your experience is complete as experience; its legal meaning will be decided by a court.” Tarabai was angry for a

moment. Then she understood that this caution was not diminishing her account, but helping it endure.

The investigating officer returned with a new bank response. Tarabai's forty-eight thousand rupees had been deposited into the Sandhipath Service Group account. Some money subsequently went out as what appeared to be regular salary payments, while a substantial portion reached a second service account, in the name of "Akshar Sahayog Network". The inquiry found a discrepancy: the customer-help number on the advertisement had stopped working after a few weeks, but the bank's electronic register contained Devendra Kashyap's initial authorisation mark. The officer did not, on that ground alone, declare the operators of the second organisation guilty. The inquiry required evidence of who actually controlled the beneficiary, the business basis of the transfers and the relationship between the companies. Investigations proceeded by degrees, while the dates for admission counselling drew nearer for the students.

Meanwhile, reports of the NEET hearings before the Supreme Court changed daily. Geeta listened to television accounts of the proceedings but did not mistake anyone's submission for a final order. One day's report referred to a particular centre where a question paper had got out; another discussed analysis of the distribution of marks. Geeta wrote in her notebook, "Where, when, how many candidates? Two questions." Riddhi corrected her. "A third as well: on what original evidence does the estimate rest?" Rain dripped from the hostel balcony. On television, people everywhere were declaring victory or defeat, but Geeta's deeper unease was this: if the court cancelled the whole examination, her hard work would return to zero; if someone who really had obtained an unfair advantage escaped, another student would suffer.

On 23 July, the day the ruling came, Geeta was in Dayaram's workshop. Amid engine fumes and the blows of hammers, news appeared on her phone: the Supreme Court had not ordered a nationwide re-examination. On the evidence available, it had not reached the conclusion that the integrity of the entire examination had been systematically destroyed. The investigation of known leaks and irregularities was not declared closed; identifying those who had improperly benefited and pursuing the related inquiries remained necessary. "So counselling will go ahead now?" Dayaram asked, washing his hands. "Yes, but we'll check the final revised result and the announced rules," Geeta answered. "My marks remain. Working out a fair opportunity from them is another matter." She felt more exhaustion

than happiness, as though breath held for months had been slowly released.

After the notification of revised results on 26 July, Geeta checked her details again. Her marks and category gave her a route to registration, but she understood clearly that eligibility, the right to participate in counselling, and obtaining a seat at a college were not the same thing. Rukmini asked her five times to explain the difference. Geeta did so patiently. "Ma, I haven't lost my qualification. But which college will give me a seat, and at what stage, hasn't been decided yet." "Your education will never be far from the cooking pots and rice in our house," Rukmini said softly. "Whatever college you get, we'll sit down and count its cost together." The words felt more real than the official display of results.

Tarabai was not overwhelmed with despair by the news, but she still found an unanswered anger inside herself. "Your rights have been protected, Geeta," she said. "But the court hasn't decided what happens to my forty-eight thousand rupees." Geeta embraced her. "We shouldn't imagine that this judgment will bring back your money. They're two different paths. I'll go to the police station with you too." "And if I never get another chance to study as I did before?" Tarabai asked. "You have your science notebooks and Chandana Madam's lessons, and there are still many paths ahead," Geeta replied. "But I don't want to erase your anger by giving advice about your future." In the silence that followed, their friendship took on a new form.

Avni read the Supreme Court's detailed judgment of 2 August with care. The court had not denied the existence of particular incidents in which genuine question papers were leaked. Its central question was how far the available material established the extent of their circulation, and whether it was possible to distinguish affected candidates from those unaffected. Its observations also identified serious deficiencies in the conduct of examinations and the need for reform. Avni made a note for her students: "Confirmation of a particular allegation, proof of failure of an entire system, and proportionality of the judicial remedy are three separate levels of decision." Then she inserted "proved" before "failure of an entire system". Maitreyi laughed over the telephone. "Practising clarity of language clarifies the meaning of a judgment." "And data work is just the same, Ma," Avni replied.

At an open discussion in Marudhar, Noor, Avni, Kusum and Chandana spoke with students. "If there was a leak," one asked, "why wasn't the whole examination held again?" "Where a breach occurred

and how far it spread are decisive questions," Avni answered. "There must be evidence that penalising every candidate alike is legally justified." Another student asked, "And what about candidates who received an improper advantage?" "Investigation and appropriate sanctions have their own processes," Kusum replied. "This is the difficult labour of democracy." Looking at the faces of the new students, Chandana added, "Keep a boundary between failing an examination and being accused of cheating; otherwise every hardworking person will carry needless suspicion about themselves."

After the gathering, Avni cautiously reported the latest findings in the inquiry into her local scholarship question. The image of the original wrong option had resurfaced in a student's practice group, but the first transmission could no longer be traced because the phone had been replaced. The question-review committee's finally approved version contained the correct unit, and the old wrong option had not appeared in the actual examination. The investigating officer said no deliberate breach of confidentiality could be attributed to anyone without the chain of transmission. "Then was your suspicion useless?" Tarabai asked. "No," Avni replied. "The suspicion led to a documented investigation; an inability to reach a finding is itself an outcome. Not every suspicion ends by becoming a crime." Her answer reminded Tarabai of her own unfinished coaching-service case.

In Jodhpur, investigators summoned Devendra Kashyap for questioning in the Sandhipath matter. He appeared and said the organisation obtained materials from outside teachers, that a subcontracted provider had failed to deliver the new classes in an orderly manner, and that business failure had delayed refunds. He acknowledged the advertisement bearing his signature but denied any connection with the message offering "guaranteed questions". "From what date was the advertised timetable for eighteen sessions finalised?" the officer asked. Devendra produced an incomplete timetable. Its printed date came after the payment. He said it was a revised programme. The officer requested the original timetable and correspondence with the service provider. The statement was a denial of the allegation, not final proof of innocence.

After Devendra's preliminary statement, his lawyer Harish Mehta said the dispute concerning his client was essentially about service delivery; some lessons had been supplied and a partial refund was possible. Revati did not dismiss this outright. "We don't dispute the services actually delivered," she said. "But the circumstances in which the written promise was made, and whether assurances were knowingly false, must be examined." "Writing an allegation doesn't prove dishonest intention,"

Harish replied. “Correct,” said Revati. “That is why we must consider the original advertisement, the receipts, control of the accounts and the services to which the customer agreed, together.” The two lawyers did not raise their voices, but the timetables of many households were caught within their argument.

One day Tarabai's family also sought advice about the civil process for recovering the money. A local lawyer explained that the appropriate forum for a consumer-service dispute, and the question of jurisdiction, depended upon the particular facts; it would be wrong to promise a definite, general outcome in a claim concerning the services of a training institution. “The expense frightens me more than the names of all these courts,” Tarabai said. “First consider a written demand, the accounts and the legal remedies available,” the lawyer replied. “The police investigation into the criminal complaint will proceed in its own way.” Revati took particular care to warn them against confusing the recovery claim against a private institution with judicial orders in the national NEET controversy. Tarabai tied up her shoulder bag and went home. She had not yet decided to pay any further legal fees.

Suddenly a message came from Sandhipath's old contact number: “Money will be returned next week. Withdraw the complaint.” Tarabai felt a rush of joy. Kamla took the phone and asked, “Does it give a name, a date and a clear method of payment?” It did not. Revati advised them to preserve the original message and not to alter any written statement under pressure. “If money is lawfully received, we'll record that fairly,” she said. “But don't accept a demand to act first in return for an unclear promise that payment will follow.” The week passed. Nothing entered the account. Tarabai wrote a new line in her notebook: “Unverified promise of refund; amount received: zero.” That zero seemed larger than a month's labour by her mother.

Meanwhile, Geeta searched for lists of scholarships and government counselling channels. One of Dayaram's customers said a seat at a private institution could be “guaranteed”. “Which official portal, which lawful seat, which documents?” Geeta asked. “If you ask so many questions, you'll miss the opportunity,” the customer said. “It's not easy to let an opportunity go,” Dayaram answered gently. “But questions from a family paying the money are not an obstacle.” One day Geeta took a bus to the information office of a government medical college. There was a long queue, but the fees, eligibility conditions and order of counselling were publicly displayed on the noticeboard. Standing in line, she wrote down her questions. She did not try to find a secret door.

During those days Tarabai volunteered at a small health camp in her village. She was not a doctor and therefore offered no medical advice; she helped patients with the registration sequence, drinking water and finding the physician. She kept the prescription for Kamla's eye examination with her. “Daughter, have you enrolled in medical college?” an elderly potter asked. “I haven't got admission yet,” Tarabai said. “I'm still studying.” “On the day you enrol, I'll close my potter's wheel and bring sweets,” he said. She smiled at the simple promise. At home she studied the proper procedure for measuring blood pressure, but wrote down the limits of her own ability: “Do not diagnose an illness without training.” This honesty towards science continued outside the examination hall.

In the last week of August, the police prepared a preliminary accounting report. It recorded under separate headings the payments received by the institution from certain customers, the wages paid to two actual teachers, the incomplete service portal and the remaining funds transferred to another business account. Delivery of the full eighteen teaching sessions had not been verified. But the report stated clearly that the preliminary material did not yet establish whose personal use had absorbed the entire amount. Devendra's lawyer attached importance to that uncertainty; the complainant's side questioned whether the advertisement given before payment accurately represented the service. The officer recorded both positions. “The file keeps growing,” Tarabai told Kamla after reading the report, “but there's still no money in the account.” “The papers need to grow,” Kamla replied with a tired laugh. “But the rotis have to keep cooking too.”

At one stage of the investigation, the question of Devendra's custody came before a local magistrate. His lawyer Harish Mehta sought limited, conditional relief on the grounds that no criminal guilt had been established, that the account documents were available and that his client had appeared for the investigation. For the prosecution it was argued that certain original devices and information relating to the accounts still needed to be obtained. After considering the documents immediately before it, the magistrate made a reasoned interim order, deciding the question of Devendra's personal liberty subject to cooperation and preservation of electronic records. This was not a ruling on recovery of Tarabai's money. Outside, someone said, “Look, the accused has been released.” Revati explained, “Bail is not an acquittal, and custody is not punishment. The evidence remains under examination.”

In the magistrate's corridor, Tarabai encountered Devendra's wife Sulekha, who carried a small son in her arms. Her face was drawn from lack of sleep. “My husband says the business suffered losses,” Sulekha told her. “I don't know where everyone's money went. But at school people call my child the son of a cheat.” For a moment Tarabai was speechless. She remembered her mother's emptied account. “I'm not against your child,” she said. “I want the service I paid for, or the money returned. If you know anything about the money, tell the proper officer.” Sulekha lowered her head. The two women walked away in different directions along the corridor; neither woman's suffering cancelled the other's claim.

Noor's newspaper did not make the day's events its lead story, but she wrote an article entitled “Bail, Educational Services and Recovery of Money: Three Separate Questions”. “Readers want a short verdict,” Aniruddh said. “Was the swindler caught, or did he get away?” “If I answer what I don't know, we'll lose the readers,” Noor replied. “The court has decided only an interim question of liberty. Recovery and the merits of the accusation are different matters.” Aniruddh remembered the earlier dispute involving Deeprekha, in which people had called a civil debt a criminal scandal. He left Noor's headline as it was. For the first time it occurred to him that caution itself could become part of the inward rhythm of news.

One day in September, after the opening stage of national counselling, Geeta received notice of a conditional opportunity at a college. It was far away, and the fees and hostel costs still needed confirmation. The family examined papers all night. Rukmini wrote down the income she expected from cooking work in the coming month; Dayaram opened the pages listing workshop rent, tools and debts. “If we can't arrange the money, I'll look at other lawful choices,” Geeta said. “I don't want to break the foundations of our home in the name of a result.” “Your education is a wish we share,” her father said. “We'll share the burden of it too. But don't sign any paper without reading it.” After months of uncertainty, such careful accounting felt like reassurance. Her qualification remained, but turning an opportunity into something real still demanded the family's practical wisdom.

In October, the company's lawyer replied to Tarabai's first written demand for a refund. The reply proposed an adjustment of a fixed amount after deducting the value of the partial service, but contained neither a proposal to make an actual payment on a stated date nor a verified list of the total sums owed to customers. Tarabai's lawyer wrote that discussion was possible over the proper value of the two lessons

actually delivered, but the remaining promise of eighteen sessions and the account of money received through the bank were still unclear. Turning the papers, Kamla asked, “How many rupees did we receive today?” “Not one,” Tarabai answered. “Then what does this reply mean?” “Before, they were saying that nobody had taken any money. Now, at least, they acknowledge a business relationship. But we still don't have a complete account.” Kamla nodded. Progress in the law and the clock of want inside a household ran at different speeds.

In November Chandana Ravidas invited Geeta and Tarabai to an open day at the science centre. The theme was “Success, Failure and Facts”. She showed everyone the first unsuccessful prototype of her thermometer, deliberately placing the old instrument beside the later improved version. “If an experiment doesn't succeed, is the project worthless?” Geeta asked. “If the real cause and evidence are preserved, failure gives us knowledge,” Chandana said. “But if the accounts of expenditure are confused, you cannot dismiss that by saying ‘The experiment failed.’” Tarabai felt that answers to two questions in her own life lay hidden in those words. The examination had not gone as she had hoped, but what she had learned had not been destroyed; inaccurate accounting for a service fee was a separate responsibility.

At the same event, Avni opened her red notebook before the students and recounted the history of a wrong option. In the preliminary draft of a question review, the unit had been wrong; it had been corrected, so the error did not survive in the final version. The reported appearance of a similar error on an outside practice sheet had been investigated, but nobody's guilt had been established. “I show you these papers,” Avni said, “because in scientific discipline raising a suspicion and proving it are two stages. Without the first question there may be no second, but treating the first question as the second is itself an error.” Geeta sat in the audience. She realised that the anxious mind inside an examination hall wanted only answers; to do justice in society, one had to follow the whole life of a question.

At the beginning of December, Tarabai obtained her final bank statement for the period. The debit of forty-eight thousand rupees stood plainly in her account; there was no corresponding partial refund. A new date had been entered on the police inquiry papers, proceedings before the local magistrate were following their course, and the lawyer was explaining the practical cost of certain other available remedies. Tarabai had not abandoned hope of recovering the money, but she no longer built her future plans upon uncertain assurances such as “You'll definitely get it next week.” “My marks didn't bring me within reach of medicine

this time," she told her mother. "But I'll decide whether to use what I've learned in a science-assistant course or prepare for another attempt. I won't sell your embroidery frame to pay a centre like that again." For the first time Kamla laughed openly.

Geeta was preparing to enter a hostel in another city. The family had checked the college's lawful documents, and the arrangements for fees had gradually become clearer through their own means and the assistance schemes available. She pasted a small sheet on the wall: "The patient's name first, the report afterwards." Tarabai came to see her off. "And if you don't get all your money back?" Geeta asked. Tarabai took a deep breath. "Then I'll do what I can for justice. But I won't leave my education locked in that cheat's hands. My mother says the rotis must go on cooking." Geeta gave her an old biology question book. On its first page she had written, "Seek someone who understands real questions, not someone who sells them." They both laughed, then turned their faces away to hide their tears.

On the train returning from Jodhpur to Bengaluru, Avni sat beside the window. A short message arrived from Revati: "Tarabai has not yet recovered the money owed to her. But the original complaint is secure, the bank records are under investigation, and the limits of the bail order are clear." Avni reflected that documents could not be allowed to postpone their final meaning for ever; sometimes justice had to be measured by the time it took to reach the victim's home. She opened her red notebook and wrote, "Geeta preserved her qualification; Tarabai preserved her self-respect. The money has still not returned. None of these three sentences can replace another." Inside the carriage a child was drawing the Moon with a pencil. Avni straightened his paper, but added no lines of her own to his drawing.

At the year's final hearing, Revati stopped at the sight of an old law book in the office. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam had now come into force; but which provisions applied to the date of the alleged conduct, the first stages of an investigation and proceedings already pending before the court could not be determined simply by reading the names of the new enactments. An office assistant questioned the reference to an older law in the first application. "We must read the dates, the alleged time of the offence and the saving provisions," Revati said. "If we invoke the wrong code, we may harm the interests of both the victim and the accused." She placed the old and the new books together on her desk. Outside the window the December sunlight was

fading. A year of questions about examination papers had ended, but the next arguments were about to begin upon the changing pages of the law.

Chapter 31 — New Codes, Old Charges

Delhi, Jodhpur and Ludhiana; July–December 2024

At the first dawn of July, two smells of books mingled in the veranda of a district court in Delhi. The pages of the old, grey-bound Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act had yellowed beneath countless hands; the covers of the newly printed Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam still gave off the sharp scent of fresh paper. Parvati Bhuiyan, a cleaner, was mopping a corner of the veranda when Premnarayan Pandey, a court employee, hurried in carrying a large bundle. “Will all these changes in the books mean that my son's old case must begin again?” Parvati asked. Premnarayan stopped. The books were in his hands, but the answer to such a question was written on none of their covers.

Premnarayan's son Ravi had become a witness in a road-accident case three years earlier. The incident was old, his testimony incomplete, and the sight of the new legal volumes in the bundle had frightened Parvati: would there be another three years of leave from work, travelling expenses and waiting? “The law has changed,” Premnarayan said, “but every case is not born again on the same day.” “Then why have they summoned my son to court again?” Parvati asked. Premnarayan fell silent. He examined the date: the remaining cross-examination of an earlier witness. “That has a separate reason,” he said. “I'll look at the file and tell you. I won't guess.” Wringing out the damp cloth in her hand, Parvati said, “It takes only a guess to cost a poor person two days' wages.”

Revati Jha had arrived in Delhi that day. Her bag held the old red pencil belonging to her father Shivnarayan in Darbhanga, a blue diary and papers from two distinct proceedings. One concerned the 2013 dispute involving the Sarathi Youth Cricket Club in Delhi, in which Raghav Mishra faced trial on limited charges. The other concerned the Sandhipath Study Support Centre in Jodhpur, where Tarabai Bhil was demanding an account of her forty-eight thousand rupees. The covers of both files bore names, dates and the beginnings of the events. As Revati climbed the court steps that morning, she looked first not at the names on the files but at the dates of the incidents. It seemed to her that dates would be the greatest witnesses of all that year.

Arunima Dutt met her at the court gate with a heavy bag slung over her shoulder. “Brought the new books?” Revati asked. Arunima smiled. “I have. But for today's first hearing it is the old book that we'll open.”

She showed her Raghav's file. The initial police report had been registered in 2013, the investigation had begun then, and the framing of charges and examination of prosecution witnesses had also taken place earlier. “My client isn't frightened by the sound of some difficult statutory provision,” Arunima said quietly. “What truly frightens him is that half a sentence from a message sent ten years ago may brand him a criminal for the rest of his life.” “Which is precisely why,” Revati answered, “we must identify both the old procedure and the actual evidence correctly.”

Raghav Mishra was standing outside the courtroom with his mother, Padma Mishra. She had brought a little tin of makhana from Darbhanga for Arunima, but on seeing her son's face she forgot to open it. A few strands of premature grey showed plainly in Raghav's hair. He worked in a small accounts office in Delhi, keeping meticulous records for its clients. “Wherever I write down figures, someone asks whether I'm the man who used to write those cricket figures,” he told Revati. She did not promise that his case would end that very day. “The court will determine what has been proved against you and what hasn't,” she said. “But a new law cannot, merely by its name, diminish your rights in a trial already under way.” On hearing this much, Padma unclenched her hand.

The first half-hour in court was lost to a minor error. On the cause list, against Raghav's case, appeared a procedural section of the new code that had no application to the pending trial. Shashibhushan Sah, a newly appointed employee, explained that the computer automatically inserted the new heading in place of the old template. The public prosecutor asked, “Is this only a listing error, or has the application itself relied on a provision of the new law?” Shashibhushan drew the papers from the file. The substantive application had been prepared under the old Code of Criminal Procedure, but the newly printed cover sheet carried a corresponding section number. It was certainly a small error. Yet an error of that kind could have been used to deprive a party of a procedural right.

The judge heard both sides. Revati showed the date on which the earlier prosecution had begun and the status of the pending trial. The prosecutor also acknowledged that the trial had already been pending before the new code took effect, and that an error in the cause list altered neither the charge nor the character of the offence. The judge directed the employee to correct the record and said that the saving provisions effective from 1 July 2024 must be examined to determine the procedure applicable to the case. The court also made clear that printing a new section number at the head of a page did not automatically invalidate an old proceeding. With his blue pen Shashibhushan entered the date of

correction. It struck him that the first lesson a court taught was not a lecture, but the weight borne by a single letter.

In the afternoon the next stage of testimony in Raghav's case was to be considered. Dayanand Prasad was growing unable to walk because of his age. His earlier statement had been recorded in 2013, and the unfinished portion of his cross-examination had been listed for that day. In Dayanand's old notebook, the scores for the final over appeared in two different hands. "Did you see both sets of figures being written with your own eyes?" Arunima asked. "I wrote my part," Dayanand replied. "In the confusion that day, I didn't properly see whether Raghav wrote the other part." The prosecution pointed to his earlier statement, saying that his memory had been clearer at the time. The judge had both accounts recorded. A memory dimmed by age was not immediate proof of a lie; nor was the earlier statement the final truth.

Navin Rana was sitting on a bench at the back of the courtroom. Once a young player with the cricket association, he now taught neighbourhood children how to bowl, without charge. Outside court he constantly heard people ask, "You worked hard for so many days; then what happened with Raghav?" Navin himself knew that the pain of not being chosen for a major competition ought not to be confused with suspicion of a crime. Listening to Dayanand's evidence, he remembered the dust of the playing field in 2013. He understood that, viewed across ten years, the movement of a single over had assumed different shapes in different people's memories. On a piece of paper he wrote: "I will testify to the cricket I played, not to what I heard about it."

During the court recess, Premnarayan took the newly appointed Shashibhushan downstairs for tea. They sat outside an old bookshop. Its owner, Rahman Mian, was selling little pocketbooks full of the old statutory sections at reduced prices. "What use are these books now?" Shashibhushan asked. "If the new law has come in, why keep the old?" Rahman Mian answered calmly, "My father's lawsuit began in the nineteen-eighties. Facts don't grow old simply because a law book does. If someone raises an allegation about an offence committed twenty years ago, we have to know the rules of that time." Premnarayan laughed as he listened. Shashibhushan put down his teacup and thought: the life of a printed word was measured not by the market for paper, but by people's unfinished pursuit of justice.

Two thousand kilometres away from that Delhi courtroom, Tarabai was calculating the cost of her mother's eye medicine in Jodhpur. By December 2024 she had not recovered a single rupee from Devendra

Kashyap's centre. Kamla Bhil bent over her embroidery needle and said, “If the money you took from your study savings doesn't come back, how will you prepare again?” Tarabai gave no answer. She volunteered as a teacher at Chandana Ravidas's open science sessions, helping younger girls understand the units used in experiments, and revised biology for herself whenever she had a spare hour. At last she said, “Mother, I won't abandon the papers I've filed for the money. But I won't close my books while I wait for them either.”

The first complaint concerning Sandhipath had reached the police station in June 2024; the written sequence of preliminary examination and collection of accounts had begun that same month. The date appeared in the principal police record, but a newly prepared application cited, without explanation, a section of the code introduced after 1 July. Advocate Harish Mehta showed Revati a copy of the page. “This presents the same problem for both sides,” he said. “If an investigation was already under way, it is improper to apply the new framework without considering the procedure that governs it.” “I agree with you on that,” Revati said. “But whether the transaction in May involved the alleged deception is a separate question. A procedural error does not dispose of the underlying dispute.”

Tarabai now held three dates in her hands: the advertisement and payment in April, the written complaint in June and the incomplete report in December. “Whether there was a crime must emerge from the evidence,” Revati told her. “But if the inquiry into the April transaction began in the sixth month of the year, the publication of a new code in July cannot turn the June investigation into a new occurrence.” “Then will the court decide about my money?” Tarabai asked. Revati shook her head. “No. Correcting the wrong statutory section will protect certain rights. The question of repayment will still require its own evidence.” Tarabai wrote this in her notebook, but even as she wrote she remembered her mother's prescription.

Meanwhile Anmol Tirkey, a newly trained lawyer at the legal aid centre, put up a notice board. It carried the names of the three new criminal laws and, beneath them, one sentence: “An old act does not automatically attract a new punishment.” Several people stopped to read it. An elderly man asked, “Will the land dispute in my village come under these laws too?” Anmol ceased smiling and answered seriously. “No. These changes concern criminal law. Not every land dispute is governed by these codes. Show me your file and I'll tell you what forum may be appropriate.” He added a second line to his original notice: “Every dispute has its own law and its own forum.” The questions

gathering before the board did not lessen the following day, but the number of mistaken conclusions diminished a little.

In the first week of September a new subject of conversation spread among the employees of Delhi's district court. Messages had reached the telephones of several litigants, apparently from the court: “Digital verification of an old file is required; failure to deposit the specified fee will affect the next hearing date.” At first sight the language seemed official, and there was even a little emblem at the top. A closer look, however, revealed differences in the emblem's colour and in the sequence of letters. Such a message arrived late at night on Parvati Bhuiyan's phone. It cited a number from a publicly available list concerning Ravi's accident case and mentioned the next hearing date. Parvati froze. She feared that her son might miss his testimony, and feared even more that, after spending her days working at the very doors of the court, someone would accuse her of being unable to understand its papers.

Below the message was a payment code. Parvati sent six thousand eight hundred rupees from her modest savings account. The page that opened after payment announced “Verification complete”, but displayed no official reference number. She did not answer Ravi's call that night. The following morning her hand shook as she mopped the court veranda. “Are you unwell today?” Premnarayan asked. “There's something about the papers,” she said. She fell silent, for she had come to regard her mistake as proof that she was unfit for her job. She did not know that the false message designed to entrap a legitimate litigant had done nothing to diminish her intelligence.

Ravi arrived at midday. Instead of scolding his mother, he examined the payment receipt. “The address on this page is different from the court's website,” he said. Tears came to Parvati's eyes. “Every day I mop the floors of this building, and yet I was deceived by the court's name.” Ravi laid a hand on her back. “I was working on the road when the accident happened. I saw where the vehicle came from, but I didn't know what was in the driver's mind. Today too, tell them what you saw. Don't take another person's wrongdoing for your own crime.” For the first time, those words made Parvati understand the profound meaning of the simple honesty in her son's testimony.

As soon as Premnarayan saw the printed receipt, he summoned Shashibhushan. Together they compared the verified court list with the sequence of messages received. The court record contained no order imposing such a fee. The hearing date had indeed been publicly listed, but that did not mean the court had sent the message. Premnarayan first

informed the officer in charge of his section, then advised Parvati about seeking the appropriate assistance from the police. “No accusation against an employee without evidence,” he said carefully, “and no letting a fraudulent message pass unchallenged through silence.” Shashibhushan wrote down instructions to preserve the original message on the mobile phone, obtain the bank's official transaction details and avoid opening the false link again. Parvati was still trembling, but for the first time her fear had taken the form of a document.

Arunima told Revati about the complaint, and the two women sat with Parvati away from the crowd outside the court. “I need help with the vehicle case,” Parvati said at first, “not another case.” “The two will remain separate,” Revati assured her. “Today's false message will not automatically become evidence in Ravi's old accident case. But if someone used the court's name in September to obtain money through deception, that is a new transaction requiring a separate inquiry.” “Can you get my money back at once?” Parvati asked. Arunima answered plainly, “It is useful to complain to the bank and report the cybercrime immediately. Whether the transaction can be stopped depends on the time and the condition of the accounts. A court cannot guarantee instant repayment without the proper process.” There was disappointment on Parvati's face, but this time there was determination too.

Inspector Madhav Chauhan listened silently to the first account at the police station. “Your name?” he asked. Parvati told him. “When did Ravi send the money?” “I sent the money,” Parvati replied. “Write that properly from the beginning: the savings were mine. My son did not make this payment.” Madhav corrected the register. Her small insistence bore a large measure of dignity: her earnings were not an extension of her son's account, but the fruits of her own labour. The officer recorded that the allegedly deceptive message had been sent in September 2024 and that payment had been made that same week. Accordingly, the relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita would be considered in classifying this alleged new offence, and those of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita for the procedure of investigation. It was not merged with the old road-accident case.

A copy of the new evidence law lay on Madhav's desk. At the police's request Shashibhushan produced the original phone, though the officer continued to examine whether seizure was necessary and what procedure it would require. The police separately sought an image of the message, the time at which it was received, details of the device and formal information about the associated account. “If you take my phone, how

will I speak to my son?" Parvati asked fearfully. The officer explained that preserving the original digital source was important to the inquiry, but that the reasons for needing the device, for how long, and for when a copy could be made would be recorded in writing. For the first time Parvati understood that a proper investigation concerned not merely the convenience of the police but the complainant's daily life as well.

At the bank, Jasleen Sidhu, a trained colleague of Sarabjit Kaur, had recently been transferred to Delhi. Parvati's payment had not gone into an account at that branch, but, in response to a request for coordination, Jasleen explained the proper course for the complaint. "There is evidence that the amount was debited from the sender's account," she said. "But to find who ultimately controlled the account that first received it, we shall need separate authorised records and the details of subsequent transfers." Parvati asked a very simple question. "So the number I see is genuine because it says it belongs to the court?" "A name written on a screen does not make an account the property of the institution named there," Jasleen replied. When she gave examples drawn from hospital bills, school fees and market payments, understanding began to show on Parvati's face.

The following day Noor Jahan came to court to write a news report. An employee had sent her an image of the fraudulent link. Her first headline read: "Suspected Digital Fraud in the Name of the Court." Her editor Aniruddh wanted the incident to sound more sensational. "A data leak from inside the court?" he asked. "We have no evidence of that yet," Noor replied. "The date may have been taken from a public list." "Then readers won't pay attention," Aniruddh said. Noor was silent for a moment. She could see Parvati's trembling hands. "Someone who cleans the court building herself can still be deceived by a false notice," she said. "That is serious enough without our adding anything." This time the headline remained as she had written it.

Noor asked whether Parvati consented to being named in the report. At first she was frightened. "At work people will say that I cannot understand even a single paper." Noor explained that private numbers and bank-account details would not appear in the public report, and that her name could also be withheld. Parvati spoke to her son. "Your story might help others," Ravi said. "But if you're not ready, you don't have to tell it." At last Parvati agreed to give her name, on one condition: the report must not call her foolish. "I sent the money out of fear," she said. "If someone makes a trade of selling fear, people ought to know about it." Noor's pen paused for a while.

A clipping of the report reached Tarabai's telephone in Jodhpur. She read it aloud to Kamla, who stopped at one sentence: “Independently verify any demand for payment sent in the court's name.” “When that message came from Sandhipath telling you to withdraw your complaint, I didn't believe it without a complete name and address either,” Kamla said. Tarabai smiled. “You said the money first, the conditions afterwards.” But her mother's eyes suddenly filled with tears. “What if someone frightens me in the court's name?” Tarabai took her hand. “Then we'll ask the official office. We won't send anything we shouldn't send out of fear of a message.” Even beneath this reassurance lay the ache of an emptied savings account.

In the computer room, Shashibhushan prepared a new table. It held neither a litigant's confidential details nor the name of a supposed culprit. He recorded three distinctions: the date of the event, whether judicial proceedings had begun before the change of law, and the kind of evidence produced. The first row concerned Raghav's 2013 criminal accusation and pending trial; the second, the Sandhipath investigation begun in June; the third, Parvati's separate complaint in September. “Who are you going to show this table to?” Premnarayan asked. “For internal training in the office,” Shashibhushan said. “Not to publish anyone's personal name.” Premnarayan agreed. “Make the examples anonymous. Don't turn a citizen's life into a textbook.”

Raghav's father was no longer alive. On hearing news of his death, Shivnarayan Jha had written to an old friend. Raghav's father had once said, in 2013, “If my son is guilty, let the law take its course. But don't seize everything that belongs to his household merely in the name of an accusation.” Shivnarayan remembered those words. Age made his hand tremble, but he formed the letters clearly when he wrote to Revati. “No one should want the new codes to erase old justice,” he wrote. “If the judicial office forgets the books governing an earlier case, ten years of labour will be reduced to a date. And if the proper route for a new offence is not established, the victim will be left standing at the door once more.”

On a Monday in October an old copy of an electronic message was reopened in Raghav's case. The prosecution submitted a printed sheet on which the words “accounts reconciled” appeared close to the time of a particular match. “How many times was this sentence copied from the original mobile phone?” Arunima asked. “What time was recorded in the first extracted record?” The investigating witness consulted the file. He answered that the office at the time had worked from a copy, and that a note about the device's clock settings was in the investigation register.

The prosecutor argued that an error of that sort did not automatically destroy the meaning of the message. “I am not saying that it does,” Revati replied. “But if the time of the message lies at the heart of the accusation, the method by which that time was established lies at the heart of the evidence as well.”

The judge asked what legal requirements had governed the production of electronic records at the relevant time. Arunima raised section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, concerning electronic records. The prosecution sought an opportunity to produce the certificate prepared during the earlier investigation, the seizure record for the device and the available copies. The court directed that the position concerning the original material and the certificate be clearly stated in writing, after which questions of admissibility and evidentiary weight could be considered at the proper stage. The judge did not pronounce any message finally true or false at that point. Sitting in his place, Raghav heard that his future had come to depend less on the meaning of a word than on the journey by which the word had reached the court.

Deependra Bhatia's name came up again. Years earlier he had been an accounts assistant in Delhi's sports-contract office, and the date on his papers for travelling abroad did not match a witness's statement. Deependra had said in his earlier testimony that he had not personally attended the particular meeting. The prosecution argued that video participation and the possibility of travel left several explanations open; the defence countered that the mere existence of possibilities did not establish a witness's definite presence. The judge recorded both submissions. Separate time was allowed to produce a certified copy of Deependra's travel papers and the relevant office attendance register. Inside the court the tapping of an old pen went on, while once more a sweeping conclusion was deferred.

Outside, Padma Mishra sat at a tea stall. Noor approached her. “Your son's case has been going on a long time,” she said. “Counting the days is easy,” Padma answered. “Living each one is difficult.” Noor asked whether she could quote her in the report. After a while Padma said, “Write what you like, but don't turn my grief into proof of his innocence. I'm a mother. A mother's tears aren't facts.” Noor saw that Padma herself understood the limits of defending her son. Such caution came from a woman who had never attended law school, but who, sitting year after year at the doors of a pending trial, had learned an ethical language harder than the language of the courts.

Leaving court, Revati telephoned Shivnarayan. “Dayanand's evidence?” her father asked. “Old. His memory has weakened, but the notebook survives,” Revati answered. “And the electronic evidence?” “The hearing on the difference between the original and the copy is still to come.” Shivnarayan said, “Remember that delay in a trial is itself a burden on the accused person's life, and on the victim's or society's right to a trustworthy decision. Don't place all the blame for delay on a witness simply because he has grown old.” Revati listened silently. Her father continued, “Ask the assistants who carry files in your office, too: how many times has the cause list changed in those ten years?” His question opened, in Revati's mind, the actual time of thirteen years spent in court.

That evening, after her work was done, Arunima went to a meeting at a small school. The students had invited her to answer questions about the new laws. “If the old book has been abolished,” one asked, “how can anyone still be punished under one of its sections?” Arunima explained that the law in force at the time of an offence and the saving provisions of the new legislation were important: the mere change of a statute's name did not automatically extinguish the punishability of an earlier offence. Another student asked, “Would the lighter or heavier punishment in the new book apply to an old offence?” Arunima spoke of the constitutional prohibition against retrospective penal punishment, adding that a precise answer required examination of the facts, the time and the relevant provision. The legal language was difficult for the pupils. She wrote two dates on the blackboard and explained the matter slowly, through examples.

At the meeting a girl called Nisha raised her hand. “My father says that whenever a call comes in the court's name, we must pay, or the police will come. Is that right?” Arunima remembered Parvati's story. She explained that a personal mobile message or an unfamiliar link must not be taken as authentic merely because it used official-sounding language. Verification through the relevant court's authorised office or an official channel was essential. “I only have an ordinary phone,” Nisha said. “I don't use websites.” “Then there are other ways: the court's help desk, a lawyer, the legal services office, a trustworthy official telephone number,” Arunima replied. “A person should not be denied justice for lack of digital knowledge.” Nisha's eyes brightened. She resolved to explain all this to her father at home.

At the old courthouse in Jodhpur, Harish Mehta and Revati met again over the Sandhipath investigation records. Harish showed her the police's new application, which cited a provision of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita. “The prosecution must certainly be given an

opportunity to correct it," he said, "but first the state of the investigation on 1 July, having begun in June, must be made clear." "In some officers' reports there is a distinction between a preliminary complaint and a formal investigation," Revati replied. "We should examine the actual register and the legal stage reached, not simply the labels." They agreed that a chronology should be filed. Tarabai was not present in court that day; she had an examination session. Revati had recorded the reason for her absence so that the staff would not regard her as a witness at fault.

A few days later the official police record established that, after the complaint was received at the end of June, the formal initial steps of investigation had been entered in the register. This made it necessary to consider the transitional provisions governing a pending investigation. The prosecutor applied to correct the statutory reference in the earlier application. Harish Mehta did not object to the correction of a clerical error; he asked only that its reasons and basis remain in writing. The competent magistrate issued a reasoned order: the record of the investigation's position at the relevant time was to be preserved, the objection concerning the earlier applicable procedure expressly entered, and questions of lawful investigative powers and protections for the parties considered under the governing provisions. This order neither acquitted Devendra nor returned Tarabai's money.

When Tarabai received a copy of the order, the first sentence made her head swim. "There are so many saving provisions, sections and dates here. Where is my money written down?" she asked Revati. Revati pointed to a reference to the sum in the corner of the page. "At this stage the court has reconciled the dates," she explained. "And I am reconciling the cost of medicine," Tarabai said. "Their court is finished; the court in our house is still sitting." Revati did not argue with her. She knew that legal correctness, however necessary an achievement, remained incomplete if it brought no help into the victim's life. She reopened the possibilities of obtaining a bank response and relief for a civil liability, but gave no false assurance about the outcome.

One day Kamla sold a piece of her old embroidery and sent her daughter five hundred rupees. "Mother, save the cost of your medicine," Tarabai said on the telephone. "I need books now, but five hundred rupees cannot build my future for next year." Kamla laughed. "You need money even to write your name on the first page of a notebook. This much I can do." Tarabai's throat tightened. In the light of the phone she could see her mother. "There are plenty of papers in court," Kamla said. "But the letters you write are on paper too. Don't stop studying." Tarabai

could not remember what she studied that night, but her mother's words settled within her.

At the science centre Chandana Ravidas held an open exercise on electronic evidence. She showed the pupils two images, one of a telephone screen and the other a cropped version of the same picture. "Which is true?" she asked. A student immediately pointed to the first. "I won't say yet that the first picture contains the whole truth," Chandana told them. "All we know here is that a part has been cut away from the second." Riddhi Bishnoi, who had brought a register to the session, taught them to record the source, time, device and sequence by which a copy was made. The students laughed that this was more a question for a court than for science. "Accurate measurement and trustworthy testimony rest on the same foundation," Chandana replied. "State clearly what you do not know."

Riddhi was staying in Jodhpur for her research. In old records of expenditure at the Lok Samvad Study Trust she noticed that, across four months of digital copies, the same programme was entered under three different names. "Has someone altered the accounts?" Noor asked. "At present all we have is a difference in names," Riddhi replied. "Perhaps the accounting software changed; perhaps the entries belong to different heads of expenditure. We need to match the actual programme dates, beneficiaries and approvals." Noor was impressed by such patience. Riddhi's research practice was emerging from paper into the stories of living people, but she regarded that movement not as a licence to investigate anything she pleased, but as an added responsibility.

A new complication arose in the investigation of Parvati's complaint in Delhi. Within hours of reaching the first account, the money had been transferred to another. Officers requested documents from the bank, but the first account was in the name of an ordinary labourer who said he had lost his phone a few weeks earlier. The investigator did not take this as an immediate confession of crime. He asked when the loss had been reported, who had access to the account, and what forms of digital authentication were available for the period in question. At times Parvati was overcome by anger, but she remembered her son's injunction: "Say what you saw." The account holder's guilt could not be established from his name alone.

The police sought the assistance of a digital-evidence specialist. Divya Nair began examining copies of the bank transactions and the technical information available about the false payment page. She stated plainly that a screenshot showed what had appeared on the screen; identifying

the original sender, the actual operator of the payment page and any alteration of data required other sources and authentication. Referring to the requirements concerning electronic records under section 63 of the new evidence law, she spoke of gathering evidence about the device, the process of creating the record and its integrity. “What do you mean by a hash?” Parvati asked. “Think of it as a kind of identifying mark for a digital document,” Divya replied. “On its own, it proves no one's guilt.” Little by little, Parvati began to understand.

Divya was training two young men in her office. “The hash of the original message has been preserved,” one said. “So the case is proved.” “Which case?” Divya asked. “That may help establish that the message has not changed. But who sent it? Who was the ultimate user of the account? What claim was made? How was the money transferred? Aren't all these separate questions?” The young man looked embarrassed. Divya did not laugh. When she herself had first joined the police, she had made the mistake of treating a technical value as conclusive proof of a human intention. Experience had taught her that a device could reveal the world, but not every relationship within it.

One day Phulo Devi, the wife of the man whose account was under suspicion, came to Parvati's home. She asked not for charity for her husband, but for a chance to state a fact. “My husband's name appears on the line showing where the money arrived,” she said. “But that week he was working as a mason outside the city.” “My money has gone,” Parvati replied. “I can't say your husband is innocent. But whatever is said against him must rest on the evidence.” Phulo lowered her eyes. “That is all I came to say too.” The two women sat for a while on the same side of the veranda. There was no theatrical reconciliation, but neither was there a permanent verdict of enmity.

Between the files of protracted litigation and the digital shadow of a new crime, Revati's life seemed to be pulled apart. One night, sitting in a small hotel room, she opened three sheets. The first recorded Raghav's thirteen-year wait; the second, Tarabai's unrecovered forty-eight thousand rupees; the third, the six thousand eight hundred rupees Parvati had paid as a false fee. The files differed in size, the judicial forums differed, and so did the rules governing their respective dates. Yet beneath them all sounded the same appeal: “Do not give what I paid or saw another meaning without evidence.” Revati understood that she had inherited her father's work not only through books of law, but through such sentences as these.

In mid-November a legal aid camp was held at the entrance to the district court. Premnarayan Pandey wiped his spectacles and took charge of the registration table. After finishing her shift, Parvati Bhuiyan stayed for a while. “If a case dates from 2022 and the evidence is still being heard, which book applies?” a woman asked. Using the written example on the board, Shashibhushan explained that the arrangements governing a pending trial would be determined by the transitional saving provisions, and that a proper conclusion could be reached only after examining the complete record. Another man asked, “I have received a message in the court's name. Should I pay the fee?” Parvati stepped forward. “Ask the right office first,” she said. There was neither pretence of authority in her voice nor shame at having been deceived.

A young police officer also attended the camp. His name was Ravikant Yadav. He had recently been appointed and had come for training in the new procedural code. Hearing Parvati's experience, he said, “When taking down a complaint I used to ask first how the money was lost. Now I understand that how the fear was created is also a fact.” Anmol Tirkey replied, “The story of that fear matters, but an investigation also needs evidence of the sender's role and an authenticated message.” Each accepted the other's point. This little exchange between a police officer and a legal aid worker outside the court was no ceremonial speech. It was a genuine opportunity for people in public service to learn from one another.

The next hearing in Raghav's Delhi trial arrived. The prosecution submitted written details concerning the old electronic copy available, the seizure record of the relevant device, and the position of the original certificate. Arunima noticed that one page clearly recorded the date of extraction, but the uncertainty surrounding the original setting of the mobile phone's clock had not been entirely removed. The judge examined the papers, recorded the submissions and allowed both parties to advance legal argument on the remaining evidence. It was made clear that compliance with the formal requirements for producing evidence and its actual credibility were not the same thing. Even the presence of an appropriate certificate could not make the meaning of the material automatically indisputable. Raghav rose from his chair and drew a deep breath. He had not yet been acquitted, but neither had a half-established time on a document become the final truth against him.

This time Raghav's mother Padma opened her little parcel of makhana. As Arunima emerged from the courtroom, Padma said, “It's something from home. Please take it.” “This isn't a bribe, is it?” Arunima said, laughing. Padma suddenly looked alarmed. “She's joking,

Mother," Revati said quickly. Touching Padma's hand, Arunima apologised. "Forgive me. Words can carry very far even outside a courtroom." Padma smiled faintly. "In my village, giving a present is an act of courtesy. In a court it can sometimes mean something quite different." Revati remembered that little incident all day. If legal language needlessly turned an innocent gesture of everyday life into something resembling a crime, part of her duty was to explain the difference.

That week Shashibhushan had to send the final, corrected version of the first cause list for signature. He did not destroy the old sheet. To preserve the history of the correction, he marked the earlier copy "Superseded Draft" and retained it in the office record, adding the corrected version to the official list. Premnarayan saw this and was pleased. "An employee will often tear out a page containing a mistake, thinking that then no trace of the mistake will remain," he said. "But the history of a correction ought to survive. Otherwise tomorrow someone will say there was never any such page." Amid the computer templates that changed all day, Shashibhushan felt he had found a simple responsibility: not to erase a falsehood in silence, but to make an honest correction a matter of record.

One afternoon Manasvi came to Revati's office. After her long struggle over her academic identity at Marudhar University, she was now helping new students. She carried a notice: the hostel counselling room had been temporarily closed. "This isn't a criminal case," she said, "but there are questions about documents here too. A student asked for help repeatedly and did not even receive an acknowledgment of the requests." Revati listened attentively. "Not every human distress should become a criminal court file," she said, "but that does not relieve an institution of its responsibility to answer in writing." Manasvi said that Riddhi was coming to examine the expenditure records of the university's new employment-assistance programme. Revati advised her to put student safety, confidentiality and access to help first, and only then consider the proper scope of any inquiry into the accounts. Manasvi agreed.

Riddhi Bishnoi arrived in Jodhpur that evening. Kusum came to meet her outside the railway station. Age had brought a new confidence to Kusum's face; the old dispute over the hostel land had taught her the language of civil rights years before. "How old is the university's employment-assistance centre?" Riddhi asked. "The programme is new, but the building is old," Kusum replied. "One room is locked, and it's unclear who can access the computers kept inside." Riddhi did not immediately demand that the room be opened. "First we'll look at the

written rules for the programme, the source of its grant and the consent obtained for using student information," she said. "You're not saying anything new," Kusum replied, "but putting it into practice is still difficult."

A small group of students was distributing employment leaflets outside the station. The sheets carried glossy pictures and the promise "Guaranteed Appointment". Riddhi kept one. It did not clearly state the fees, and the legal nature of the opportunity was obscure. "I warn students about leaflets like these," Kusum said, "but fear of unemployment is so great that people listen to the inducements." "Has anyone here paid money?" Riddhi asked. "I don't have definite information yet," Kusum said. "I won't put a guess in writing." The two sat at a tea stall and prepared the agenda for the next day's meeting. Through the smoke from the stove, Riddhi's eye suddenly fell on an old name in her research register: an outside financial-services company. Beside the name she drew a question mark, not an accusation.

In December the competent magistrate in Jodhpur issued a certified copy of the written order correcting the page numbering and statutory reference in the Sandhipath investigation. It recorded that the police investigation would continue, the basis of the applicable transitional provisions would be clearly maintained in the record, and the actual source and use of each disputed payment remained to be examined. Harish Mehta explained the order to his client Devendra. "Removing the incorrect provision does not prove your innocence," he said, "but it protects your procedural rights." "When will the case end, then?" Devendra asked. "When the inquiry and the court have completed the prescribed process," Harish answered. "The accounts for unfinished services, the assurances given at the time of payment and any possibly dishonest intention must be examined separately." Devendra lowered his eyes.

After reading the order, Tarabai went to Chandana's science centre. Revati's explanation was beginning to make sense: the date of an alleged offence, the date a procedure began and the source of evidence were three different clocks. Chandana showed her an old laboratory clock whose hands sometimes stuck. "If this clock is twenty minutes slow," she said, "I cannot assume that an event happened twenty minutes earlier. I must check the clock first." Tarabai burst out laughing. "My case is more complicated than that clock," she said. "Yes," Chandana answered. "You also have to examine human intention, which no clock can measure directly."

For her end-of-year review in December, Noor recorded a short conversation with Riddhi and Revati. “Will the new laws bring justice sooner?” she asked. “You can't answer that simply from the names of the statutes,” Revati said. “Staff training, the appropriate forum, timely records, respect for witnesses and citizens' access all matter.” Riddhi added, “Data may accumulate rapidly, but meaning does not arrive at the same speed.” “What, then, is the benefit of change?” Noor asked. “Acknowledge the benefit wherever procedure improves,” Revati replied. “And honour the protections needed for older proceedings. Don't turn justice into a publicity leaflet.” Noor cut the remainder of that sentence from her article, for she wanted the writing to live in people's experiences, not to become a speech.

In Delhi an interim police response arrived concerning Parvati's complaint. Certain bank records had been requested, but the identification of whoever actually controlled the next stage of the transfer was still under examination. The letter contained no finding of guilt against the named suspect, and no definite date for repayment. Parvati took it to Ravi. “Disappointed, Mother?” he asked. “Six thousand eight hundred rupees is a great deal to me,” she said. “But my complaint is still alive on paper. I'll ask again.” That evening Parvati stood before the court gate. Looking at the light falling across its high wall, she thought that justice was also the right of the woman who mopped its floors every day. The cloth she cleaned with did not diminish that right.

Premnarayan was closing the year's final office register. In one corner lay the new codes, neatly arranged; in another, the worn copies of the old laws. He put both sets in the same cupboard, on separate shelves. “How much longer will these old books be needed?” Shashibhushan asked. “As long as a question remains in a single old case,” Premnarayan replied. “And even afterwards, for the history.” Shashibhushan checked the corrected cause list one last time. Above one section were the words “Old Trial: Applicable Savings”; above another, “New Event: Current Provisions”. Between the sheets was an interim note on Tarabai's investigation: “Position in June clarified.” The employee covered her name as he arranged the training papers.

When Revati returned to Darbhanga that night, Shivnarayan was sitting on the front veranda. He held the old red pencil; a new book gleamed on the table. Revati briefly told him the state of all three cases. “The wrong section?” he asked. “Corrected.” “The old message?” “Examination of the evidence remains.” “The fraudulent court fee?” “The account trail is being investigated under the new complaint.” “Then this year's achievement,” Shivnarayan said softly, “has been not

three answers, but three correct questions." "You've been saying that for so many years," Revati asked. "Aren't you tired?" Her father laughed. "I am. But nothing frightens me more than an excellent judgment given in answer to the wrong question." He handed her his red pencil.

In Ludhiana that same week, Sunita Paswan opened an old cupboard of the workers' union's accounts. A portion of Ramlakhan's unpaid wages had been recovered many years before, but the dispute over the remaining register entries lived on in the current proceedings. "Three new laws have come into force," a new colleague asked. "Will our wage case fall under them too?" Sunita showed him the old pages. "Our claim proceeds under the law governing labour rights," she said. "Not every legal change applies in the same way to every life." Baldev Singh nodded. Once he had thought that an order from a higher court would solve every problem a worker faced. Now he knew that the correct wage paid on the last day of the month was itself a concrete test of civic dignity.

Sunita's eye returned to an old, unresolved entry bearing Hardev Chauhan's name. Seeing "H. Chauhan" on a new bank paper, one colleague grew excited. "It must be the same man!" Sunita wrote the two names on separate sheets. "A resemblance between names isn't proof," she said. "First check the employee's identity, the office, the time and the amount." She closed the papers again. No one's enthusiasm was heightened, but the investigation was spared a needless assumption. Outside the factory an evening breeze was blowing. Ramlakhan watched his daughter silently. When he had first handed her the wage register, he had never imagined that it would lead her towards so many other records in years to come.

In the light of the last lamp on the veranda, Revati wrote in her diary with her father's pencil: "The first of July marked a change of law, not the birth date of anyone's guilt or innocence. In protecting an old accusation from improper procedure, do not close the door on a new complaint. In the absence of a certificate, do not automatically take a message as true; nor should the presence of a certificate automatically establish someone's intention." She closed the diary when she had finished. Just then Manasvi called: the counselling room at Marudhar University was closed, one student's written requests had gone unanswered, and Riddhi considered it necessary to preserve the records of an outside employment-assistance company. Revati gently turned down the lamp wick. "Find out first whether the student is safe," she said. "We'll look at the questions in the files tomorrow morning."

Chapter 32 — The University's Locked Room

Jodhpur and Kota; parallel events of 2024

In the old hostel at Marudhar University there was a room with the word "Counselling" painted in blue on its door. Rain and sunlight had half-erased the last letter. A clock above the door kept going, but no one had sat inside the room for a long time. One December evening Payal Raigar reached it and reread the three questions written on the back page of her notebook: Why did sleep not come at night? Why did her hands shake after an examination? And if she failed to find a job that year, with what face could she return home? She had not dared to write the fourth question: Would anyone listen to her? A notice beside the door said that counselling services were temporarily suspended and provided an alternative office telephone number. No one had answered it for three days.

Payal was not a first-year student but in the final year of her undergraduate degree. Her father, Motilal Raigar, worked with wood in a small town near Kota, while her mother Meenakshi sewed and kept the household accounts. Payal had previously spent two years preparing for an entrance examination in Kota. Every morning, as she joined the line entering a huge building, she felt less like a person with a name than a number in a sequence. Those classrooms had not been merely chambers of fear: one teacher had genuinely awakened her curiosity about mathematics. But when the evening examination scores were pinned to the wall, a cold paper hand seemed to fall upon that pleasure. There was little praise for the question she had understood; one wrongly chosen answer, and the difference in marks pursued her through the night. Changing her dream of studying medicine, she had decided to take a degree in statistics, but the first old name of failure still lay exposed within her.

She remembered a rented house in Kota more vividly than much of the world around her. It had four rooms, two table fans, a tap in the corridor and an earthen flowerpot on the veranda. One day her housemate Alia Parveen had told her father over the telephone, "You want to see me become a doctor. I want to study, but sometimes I want to be a teacher too." "Take this examination first," he had replied. "We'll see afterwards." Alia put down the phone and studied all day. That night she told Payal, "Every year my chance to choose my own future is postponed until the next examination." Payal understood that sentence

only much later. At the time, the two girls studied not in revolt but in hope; the trouble was that hope had become the servant of a single mark.

In January 2024 Meenakshi had sent her daughter a newspaper clipping. The central government had circulated guidelines to the states for consideration in regulating coaching institutions, discussing misleading promises of success, the availability of counselling, and moderation in fees and study hours. Payal read the article carefully, then remembered her old teacher Vijaykant Sir in Kota. Before leaving the classroom he used to tell the students, “Making a mistake in mathematics does not make anyone a failed human being.” Yet the institution's advertising displayed only the faces of those with the highest marks. Showing Riddhi the clipping, Payal asked, “Do these guidelines mean that every institution immediately becomes liable to a legal penalty?” “No,” Riddhi replied. “The Centre has asked the states to consider suitable laws and administrative arrangements. Guidance and binding rules made by a state are not the same. But students can still demand that institutions improve their arrangements.” Payal folded the clipping away. What she wanted to know was why her own university's counselling room was closed.

That day she met Kusum near the hostel gate. Years earlier Kusum had fought over the land on which the hostel stood; now, as a teaching assistant, she tried to maintain a conversation between the administration and the students. Payal showed her three earlier applications. One bore an office registration stamp, the second only a postal receipt, while the third showed a computer-generated notification that the message had been delivered. “Twice I asked for a counselling appointment,” Payal said. “The third time I asked only who had the key to the room.” Looking over the papers, Kusum said, “Acknowledgment and delivery of a service are different things. But the three applications are addressed to different departments. First we'll trace where each went.” She seated Payal in her own room and brought her water. The first help Payal received that day was not an order: it was a comfortable chair and five minutes in which no one interrupted her.

Payal did not tell Kusum the whole story of her fear. She said only that as examinations approached food lost its taste and the uncertainty surrounding the next scholarship instalment made her unable to answer calls from home. “I am not in any immediate danger,” she made clear, “but this isn't going well. I need professional help, not advice from a friend.” Kusum nodded. “I'm not a doctor,” she said. “I can listen to you and help you reach a qualified counsellor. I won't read your name aloud at any meeting without your consent.” Payal let out a breath at those last

words. A teacher at her coaching institution had once made fun of her low marks in front of the whole class. Ever since, she had feared even telling anyone she was suffering.

Two days later Manasvi came to the university. The years she had spent securing corrections to the records of her own academic identity had taught her that personal particulars should never become material for gossip in institutional corridors. “Who has been shown the list of students' names?” she asked Kusum. “So far we haven't placed any counselling requests on a public list,” Kusum replied. “The student has not consented to the disclosure of her name.” “Then the first question is whether the person is safe,” Manasvi said. “Second, why the service is closed. Third, the expenditure accounts. If we mix these together, the person becomes evidence against the institution.” Kusum smiled. “You and Riddhi both see the human limits before you see the documents.” “If we don't,” Manasvi answered, “we'll create new injuries in the name of evidence.”

That evening the university notice board displayed the opening date for a new office: “Employment Assistance and Skills Bridge”. In a cupboard behind the classroom were registers containing students' names, contact numbers, courses and training interests. Arvind Pareek, the programme coordinator, was running about all day. He believed that collecting information about opportunities for unemployed graduates was a proper duty of the university. He had received an offer of technical support from an outside organisation, Sangati Financial Services Private Limited: a digital facility for candidate registration, payment verification and distribution of training stipends. On hearing the name, Riddhi opened her old research register. She reached no conclusion about the organisation. She wanted only to establish what document authorised the use of student information and how far that permission extended.

Riddhi's first meeting stalled not over the gleaming promises of employment but over a question from Himmat Ansari, a student sitting in a corner of the hall. Himmat was studying for a diploma in computer science; his father ran a small tailoring shop in a Jodhpur neighbourhood. “The banner for this employment programme says ‘One Hundred Per Cent Opportunities’,” he said. “Has any student actually received an appointment letter?” “Understand the difference between an opportunity and an appointment,” Arvind replied. “We're compiling a register of opportunities, not guaranteeing jobs.” Himmat showed him a picture on his phone that had been circulated by an outside promoter and contained the words “Confirmed Placement”. Arvind stopped short.

“This isn't official university publicity,” he said, “but if it's been circulated in our name, we'll investigate.” A murmur passed among the students. Riddhi studied their faces: in the empty space between hope and distrust, many dishonest trades could take root.

That week Himmat and four companions staged a peaceful sit-in outside the locked counselling room. They made no attempt to break down the door; they asked the student welfare office for a written date when the service would resume. The passageway along the veranda was narrow, and a university vehicle bound for the hospital had some difficulty turning. A security guard told the crowd to clear the way. Most of the students stood up and moved, but Himmat remained standing to speak. By evening a notice had arrived alleging “disruption of academic discipline” and “breach of service discipline”. His evening access to the library would be temporarily suspended, and his eligibility for hostel accommodation reviewed. Before issuing the notice, no written particulars of the allegation or time to respond had been given to him. Meanwhile Payal returned to the hostel, frightened that people might begin discussing her name.

What hurt Himmat more than the notice was the description in a security report: “A group creating an emotional atmosphere over the counselling room.” “Is speaking about distress an act of emotional incitement?” he asked. Naseema, a former Marudhar student who now taught at a local school, explained, “No. But if a passage was blocked or an order disobeyed, the institution will treat that as a separate matter. Your right to present your case is distinct from that question.” Himmat told his companions, “I was not in favour of blocking the way. We'll write exactly what happened, but I won't admit a mistake on everyone's behalf.” “That isn't running away from justice,” Naseema said. “It's giving your claim a language in which it can be fairly heard.” She prepared a short petition in her own hand.

The previous contract for counselling services had expired in August of that year. Two months of payment to the external counsellor, Meera Jain, were outstanding; the file concerning renewal of her appointment travelled back and forth between two departments. Meera worked from her own office outside the university. When a student could not afford a private consultation, she gave information about public healthcare and other available lawful routes to assistance. Kusum explained the situation over the telephone. “I cannot promise an appointment on the university's behalf at present,” Meera said plainly. “But if there seems to be an urgent risk, medical help must be made available at once. For ongoing difficulties, a reliable next counselling appointment should be given in

writing.” Kusum sent one sentence from that conversation to the university, without sending Payal's name or any other student's.

Meanwhile, Alia Parveen's life in Kota had taken another direction. After graduating in mathematics she was teaching at a community learning centre. Her father had gradually accepted that a family's first plan need not be its final decision. When Alia passed the coaching buildings and looked at the students' faces, she recognised her own old exhaustion, but did not give every difficulty the same name. One child was unhappy because of a hard lesson; another was troubled by family debt; a third sought treatment for a serious difficulty of the mind. She told the volunteers, “We cannot read everyone's thoughts. We can listen safely and, when needed, direct someone towards qualified help. We will not make any student's story public without consent.” One day Payal called her. “I sat in front of that locked room again.” “The door was shut,” Alia asked, “but did you find anyone to listen to you?” Payal named Kusum.

That night Alia told Payal a small incident from her school. A pupil had burst into tears after failing to give the correct answer to a question. Rather than pronounce the child a failure, Alia had asked, “What have you understood so far?” The pupil wrote, “I know the first two steps.” Alia taught the remaining two. “An answer can be half wrong,” she told Payal, “but there may be many right beginnings within a human being.” Payal smiled, then stayed silent for a long time. “What you say is beautiful,” she said, “but just hearing words won't make me better. I need an organised way to study, sleep and get help.” “You're right,” Alia replied. This time what passed between the two friends was not reassurance but a shared recognition of reality.

When Registrar Uma Rathore received the students' petition, she understood for the first time that the closed counselling room was more than a delay in a single department. Student welfare said the contract was held up in finance; finance said the attendance report was incomplete; the contracting officer said the budget head had changed. All three offices might be correct according to their own papers, but the student who reached the door meanwhile went away empty-handed. Uma summoned her secretary and issued her first instruction: “For the next seven days establish an alternative help desk, post definite hours when a qualified counsellor will be available, and display clear emergency contact information.” “Should we set up an inquiry committee first?” the secretary asked. “There can be an inquiry,” Uma replied. “Do not make a student stand waiting for the final report before restoring a service.” As she wrote the brief instruction, she remembered for a moment her own

daughter, who had not telephoned for a whole week when she first went away from home to study.

At the meeting about counselling, an elderly professor said, “In my generation there were no such rooms. Students were strong.” “There was suffering then too,” Naseema replied. “There were simply fewer places in which to speak of it.” The professor grew angry but did not answer immediately. Himmat added, “I am not saying that every fear of an examination is an illness. I am saying that when someone asks for help, there should be a living service behind the door, not only a telephone number.” Uma quieted them. “Compassion alone isn't enough to run a counselling room,” she said. “We need trained people, a definite budget, confidential records and a timetable for accountability.” Administrative experience lay behind her words. Kusum recognised that the matter had passed beyond the making of pious statements.

A different tone emerged at the second meeting, on Himmat's disciplinary notice. Security officer Gopal Singh Chauhan showed photographs of students seated in the main corridor. “Movement was obstructed,” he said. “The passage narrowed for ten minutes,” Himmat replied. “We moved as soon as the guard told us. I'm telling you what happened. But why was I barred from the library without anyone hearing my explanation?” “Your name was in the report,” Gopal Singh said. “Was there a hearing before the disciplinary committee?” Uma asked. “The order was issued at once, as an interim arrangement,” the secretary answered. Uma studied the letter. It specified no duration, provided no avenue of review, and had not furnished Himmat with the underlying particulars of the allegation. “Writing the word ‘interim’ does not make an order fair,” she said. “Review the temporary restriction first, and then arrange an informed hearing.”

At that moment Payal sat with her meal in the hostel dining hall. Her friend Isha Valmiki, the daughter of a municipal sanitation worker, asked, “Did you go for counselling? They didn't read out your name in front of everyone, did they?” Payal shook her head. “I don't want my personal information made public yet,” she said. Isha did not press her. She broke a roti from her plate and offered Payal a piece. Then she laughed. “My examination is this week. Mother says if I score badly I had better learn to wash dishes. But when I stay awake for two nights, she's there with milk in the morning.” Payal understood that concern lay behind her family's harsh words too, yet concern sometimes assumed a form in which a child could no longer recognise love. That night she decided to call her father, but first she tried to choose the right words for her distress.

Motilal answered the phone. “Is everything all right at home? Have you received your examination papers?” For the first time Payal said, “Father, I haven't been sleeping properly for some days. The university's help room is closed, but Kusum Didi is helping me. I need to meet a counsellor.” There was a short cough at the other end. “Have you fallen ill?” he asked. “I haven't been examined by a doctor yet,” Payal replied. “That's why I want to speak to someone first. Don't panic, but please don't brush aside what I'm saying.” Motilal drew a long breath. “When my carpenter's square sits crooked on a piece of wood, I measure it again,” he said. “I don't know how to measure what's happening in your mind. Go to someone who does. If you need money, tell me.” Payal closed her eyes. She had not imagined that her father, even in his awkward language, would accept her need for proper help.

A different trouble had found Mukul Meena, a student in the university's new employment-assistance programme. A message reached his phone under the name “Marudhar Recruitment Facilitation”. Someone claiming to be an employee of an outside company demanded seven thousand five hundred rupees for selection verification. Mukul borrowed the money from his elder brother and paid it. Three days later the telephone was switched off. There was no mention of such a fee on the university's official website. At first Mukul kept silent out of shame; then he came to Himmat and showed him the receipt. “I'm a volunteer, not the police,” Himmat told him. “Preserve your account information, the original message and the time. Don't rush to call whoever's name is written there a criminal.” Mukul lowered his eyes. “I just want my money back,” he said. “But what of the loan of trust I took from my family?” Himmat folded his disciplinary letter and put it into his pocket. The controversy over the employment publicity was deeper than he had first supposed.

Asma Begum came with Mukul. She was doing postgraduate work in botany and changed buses every day to reach the university from her ancestral village. Someone had asked her for a fee of five thousand rupees, but she had not paid. The message correctly stated her course and telephone number. “Was that information publicly available on the website?” Riddhi asked. “I gave my number on the application form,” Asma replied. “Not on any public list.” Riddhi drew no immediate conclusion. “We need to know how many people could have accessed that number. Someone might have photographed a paper, obtained access to a form, or been in contact with you before.” “Who, then, is responsible for my private information?” Asma asked. “You have the right to ask the institution that collected it about the limits of its authorised use and the

safeguards in place," Riddhi answered. "But naming the person responsible must await the investigation."

Devika Sen, who was in charge of the external employment-assistance office, was distressed by the complaint. She showed the programme attendance register: twelve training meetings, three employment-information sessions and contacts with five schools and two local industries. "It isn't as though no work was done," she said. "I'm not claiming that," Riddhi agreed. "But how many of the students named here clearly consented to their information being used for the programme?" Devika opened a file containing a group sign-in sheet from inauguration day, some online acknowledgments and several separate applications. "The consent form changed at that time," she said. "We'll have to compare the two versions." Riddhi heard exhaustion in her voice. "I haven't come to erase the original record of your work," she said. "If the work was done, its genuine evidence ought to survive. And if improper payments or access are found, those should be identified separately too."

That evening Devika's young son was singing at home. She said to her husband, "Today a student asked me how her telephone number got outside. I had no answer." He smiled. "When you don't have an answer, look for the papers. That doesn't make you a criminal." "But the papers are in my office," Devika replied. "It's my responsibility to protect them." Sitting at the table, she reread the original appointment contract. The programme was intended to help students reach opportunities; the outside services company had been assigned limited work involving registration and payment processing. But an annexure used the term "partner implementing agency", whose name appeared in a separate file. That file ought to be in the cupboard inside the office's locked room. Devika looked at her key, which had a red thread tied to it. It opened only the outer door. She could not remember who held the key to the inner cupboard.

The next day Riddhi, Manasvi and Kusum sat together in the university library. Riddhi drew three circles on the table: student requests for counselling; institutional disciplinary orders; and the financial records of the employment scheme. "All three questions have met in one building," she said, "but that doesn't prove a single conspiracy." In the first circle Manasvi wrote, "Private: no name without permission." In the second Kusum wrote, "Copy of charge, chance to respond, reasoned order." In the third Riddhi entered, "Original contract, payment authorisation, history of access." Vivek Meghwal joined them. "People would instantly write a story from this picture," he said. "'Crores

embezzled in a locked room.'" Riddhi smiled. "That's why I've drawn the three circles first. Perhaps the room contains only a broken fan and old registers. If we find anything else, we'll say so on the strength of evidence."

Noor Jahan had come to Jodhpur in search of a new story. A student had asked her not to publish her name. Noor telephoned her editor Aniruddh. "A report on a mental-health crisis mustn't become an exhibition of names, photographs and examination marks," she said. "I'll ask the institution about its public arrangements." "All right," Aniruddh replied, "but will readers understand the situation without a name?" "It's possible to tell the story without exposing someone's identity. The locked room, the delay in appointment, the lack of an accessible route to assistance and the order to repair the situation are concrete enough." The editor agreed. At the university gate, however, a local reporter asked Noor, "Was any student's life in danger?" "I won't publish guesses about anyone's personal health," she replied. "For a student who needs immediate help, safety comes first. The news headline comes afterwards."

That day Mukul filed a complaint at the police cybercrime assistance centre. He was asked to attach the online payment reference number, the original message on his phone and a copy of the purported appointment offer. "Could you recognise the voice of the person who called?" an employee asked. "I think I could," Mukul said, "but I've never seen his face." The employee made clear that a claim to a particular identity and an actual account holder's role were different questions. "We'll request the banking trail for the payment," he said. "But money reaching a recipient account does not automatically prove the account holder's knowledge or criminal intention." Mukul took his copy of the complaint and went outside. He felt relief not because the money had been recovered, but because for the first time he had been allowed to describe the frightening experience in the right words.

When Mukul came out of the police post, Himmat was waiting at the gate. "I won't put your name on the student union's papers on my own account," Himmat said. "I made my complaint under my own name," Mukul replied with a laugh. "But that doesn't mean I attended your sit-in." They went for tea. Because of the disciplinary restriction Himmat could not use the library at night and was missing classes in the daytime. "Our papers ought to remain separate," Mukul said. "Your library door is closed, and my seven thousand five hundred rupees are held up. The connection is simply that the administration and the bank must be asked the right questions." Himmat looked at him in surprise. "You'd

make a better lawyer than I would." "I want a job," Mukul replied. "Training as a lawyer would mean another loan."

The following week the student welfare department opened a temporary help room. Inside, someone hung a small picture made from neem leaves; there were no colourful slogans. The notice gave definite appointment hours for a trained counsellor, the campus medical support centre and emergency contact numbers. On the first day Kusum sat outside so that students could enter without having to answer her questions. Payal went in with her three written questions in her pocket and spoke at length with Meera Jain. When she emerged, her difficulties had not magically vanished. She had received help with revising her study schedule, health advice concerning sleep and a time for regular follow-up appointments. "There's just one thing that feels good today," she told Kusum. "I have a written time telling me when the door will open again." Silently, Kusum put the slip for her next appointment into her hand.

That night in the village Payal's father was making a new table. While sawing a thin strip of wood, he received her call. "Father, I'm thinking about the examination for becoming a teacher too," Payal said. Motilal stopped working. "You're good at mathematics. Since when was teaching a small thing?" "People will say I abandoned the medical entrance examination to become a teacher." Her father laughed. "When I couldn't make a wooden cupboard, I learned to make doors. Do you know how many homes have received light through those doors?" From behind him Meenakshi said, "Don't give up your studies, but don't give up your whole life to keep just one dream alive." For the first time Payal heard her parents' words not as inadequate consolation, but as room being made for her own decision.

When Himmat finally received the formal particulars of the charge, he noticed that two dates on the letter did not agree. The security officer's report was dated the day of the sit-in, and the order barring him from the library had been issued that evening, yet an earlier date appeared at the top of the letter. He did not become agitated. At the secretariat an employee told him, "The draft was prepared earlier; final approval came later." In his written response Himmat asked for a clear distinction between the date of the draft and the effective decision, for accurate details of the time and place of any obstruction, and for suspension of the restriction until his side had been heard. He also wrote that, if the gathering had impeded an emergency exit or medical route, safety should be ensured at the next meeting. Reading the petition, Revati said,

“Acknowledging what is true and accepting guilt for what is unknown are not the same. Keep that distinction.”

At the disciplinary committee's first meeting, photographs were shown. In one Himmat was speaking to the security guard; in another someone behind him was picking up a paper. “Did you block the way?” asked committee chair Harishankar Vyas. “There was a crowd for a short while,” Himmat replied. “After the guard's instruction I told people to get up. I have two witnesses.” “A vehicle had to stop in the meantime,” the security officer said. Himmat did not deny it. “If anyone was inconvenienced, I'm sorry,” he said. “But asking for the counselling room to be opened is not itself misconduct.” The chair wrote a note. During the hearing a student representative asked why no one had given Himmat an opportunity to speak before imposing the immediate restriction. The secretary turned over the file. “An interim step for the safety of the building.” “Then the duration and the review should have been set down in writing,” the chair said. “They aren't here.”

The disciplinary committee delivered its decision the next day: the interim ban on evening library access was to be lifted pending further review; clear guidelines were to be issued on the location and timing of future gatherings and on routes that must remain unobstructed; and a reasoned determination of the individual allegation would follow a hearing. Himmat was pleased, but the letter's last line troubled him: “Avoid conduct likely to damage the institution's reputation.” “What does that mean?” he asked. “If I ask again for counselling services, will that damage its reputation?” “General advice shouldn't be turned into an allegation,” Vivek said. Revati replied, “Vague language can become the basis of an unjust penalty later. Ask the institution for written clarification. Use the available internal remedies before going to court.” “More papers,” Himmat said. “Yes,” Revati replied. “But this time the papers also mean the door to night-time study is open.”

A new difficulty arose alongside the counselling room's appointment register. Some employees casually spoke students' names in conversation: “So-and-so has gone in again.” On hearing this, Manasvi met the student welfare officer. “The date when someone seeks help is not a description of their character,” she said. The officer immediately instructed the staff on duty that names, particulars and reasons for appointments were to be available only to those authorised to provide the relevant service. Counsellor Meera Jain explained that confidentiality had limits in circumstances requiring action, but ordinary administrative curiosity did not permit private conversations to be made public. Payal was glad to hear of the decision, yet her fear of finding her

name on a notice meant she could not immediately place complete trust in it. Trust cannot be rebuilt on the same day it is broken.

While examining an old hostel attendance register, Kusum found something strange. Three weeks earlier the room next to the locked counselling room had been described as the “Employment Scheme Records Store”, although the building plan still called it the “Community Reading Room”. Once a security guard had told the students, “This room now belongs to the contracting company.” Kusum did not take that remark as an official statement. She went to the estate officer, who opened the original plan. “The university owns the room,” he said. “The outside company was given permission to enter on specified days to install equipment, not ownership.” “Then who has the key now?” Kusum asked. The officer opened a register containing three rows for keys issued and received. The final signature was indistinct. Kusum did not photograph the register; she submitted an application for an authorised copy.

Seeing Kusum's letter, Uma Rathore was inclined to order the room opened immediately. Devika Sen, however, pointed out that it contained outside technical equipment as well as university property, and that opening it abruptly might lead to a dispute over the original state of the records. Riddhi suggested, “First establish ownership, the contract and access rights. Let authorised university officers be present; prepare a sealed inventory; record when each device is turned on or off; and do not expose private student records.” “A locked room alone proves no crime inside it,” Uma said. “But making an inventory of the institution's property is my duty.” A date was fixed for an official inspection. Word spread: “The mysterious room is to be opened.” Noor wrote one word in her notebook: “Inspection.” She wanted no sensational headline.

Meanwhile the first information concerning the banking trail in Mukul's complaint arrived. The money had gone to a payment-collection platform; details of its subsequent settlement were to be provided in response to the investigator's written request. The platform's merchant details displayed the name “Sampark Suvidha”. Someone at once declared that this must be a secret name for “Sangati Financial Services”. Riddhi wrote the two words side by side: “Sampark” and “Sangati”. “Even their first letters are different,” she said. “A similarity of sound isn't proof of a connection. The payment platform, the merchant's actual registration and the ownership trail of the outside contracting company must be examined separately.” Mukul was disappointed. “Then what about my money?” he asked. The investigator replied, “We are requesting appropriate account records through

authorised channels. A separate process may be needed for repayment." No flush of immediate victory came to Mukul's face. He was learning that a sound investigation could sometimes be slow.

When Mukul returned home, his elder brother Ramesh Meena was entering the loan of seven thousand five hundred rupees in a ledger. "You've filed the report," Ramesh said. "Will the money come back?" "They don't have a definite date," Mukul answered. Ramesh shut the book. "You didn't get the job, and now there's the debt as well. I'm angry, but I don't know whom to be angry with." "I trusted too quickly; that was my mistake," Mukul replied. "But if someone took the money under a false identity, investigating that is a separate question." Ramesh nodded. "I earned that money through my labour. Listening to your question is part of that labour too." Hearing his brother say this, Mukul gazed for a long time at the edge of the ledger. More oppressive than the weight of the debt was the weight of the trust placed in him.

Payal's academic results also arrived around that time. She had scored below the required mark in one paper, yet she had prepared the best experimental report in her class in statistics. Chandana Ravidas, the head of the department, who also worked as a visiting teacher alongside her science-centre duties, read it. "You've stated the limits of the experiment clearly," she told Payal. "That's the mark of a good scientist." Payal smiled. "But writing like this won't get me marks in a competitive examination." "The two have different rules," Chandana replied. "Practise what you need for the competitive examination, but don't give up this care in your scientific thinking." Leaving the laboratory, Payal put the sheet with her low mark into her bag. For the first time she did not regard it as her entire identity.

The government guidance issued in January came up again at a university meeting. One member said that, since the central coaching guidelines had been published, any closure of a university assistance room was automatically a criminal offence. "Do not treat a document circulated to the states for consideration in regulating coaching institutions as equivalent to a penal order without examining the relevant law in force," Revati said calmly. "The university's own rules, contracts, ordinary administrative duties and the interests of students provide the concrete basis for this case." Manasvi added, "We don't need an inaccurate citation of the law in order to help students. Whether the university keeps the written promise of a service is serious enough." The committee accordingly recommended regular review of the counselling budget, although the delay in settling payments under the old contract remained unresolved.

Noor rewrote the opening paragraph of her story four times. Her first draft read, “Suspected Fraud in Marudhar's Locked Room.” The second said, “Unsafe Service in the Hostel.” The third: “Students Ask for Help; Office Searches for Answers.” At last she wrote that the university's counselling service had remained closed for a period, students had submitted written representations, the institution had established an alternative service and the reasons for the contract delay were being examined. The report gave neither Payal's name nor the names of other students who had sought counselling. The separate account of Himmat's disciplinary order included the university's written response. “There's less fire in this,” Aniruddh said after reading it. “Less fire doesn't mean less truth,” Noor replied. Aniruddh laughed. “Sometimes an editor needs to learn that too.”

In the first week of December the disciplinary committee issued its final reasoned order. Himmat was given written advice to take care at future gatherings in view of the temporary obstruction of the corridor. The earlier order imposing disproportionate restrictions on library access and hostel eligibility was withdrawn. It was expressly stated that the vague reference to “the institution's reputation” would not constitute the basis of a disciplinary charge. Himmat's friends applauded, but he said to Kusum, “I don't see this as some final victory. What paper can give back the seven nights when I couldn't study?” “There's no simple compensation for that,” Kusum replied. “But the written correction matters, so that the next student won't be subjected to the same order without a hearing.” Himmat opened his book. That night he went to the library, though for the first half-hour, instead of reading, he listened to the sound of the door opening.

After seeing the order Revati said, “You've obtained limited relief. That doesn't mean every case must be taken to the High Court. If a suitable remedy has been fully granted here, that is a meaningful resolution.” “What about the fraud against Mukul?” Himmat asked. “That's a separate police investigation,” Revati replied, “and the security of student information is a third, administrative issue.” She placed the papers in folders of different colours. “Why do you resist making them all one case?” Kusum asked. “Because after hearing one student's suffering we cannot put everything that raises suspicion of someone else into a single bag,” Revati said. “The suffering may be real, but its causes may take many forms.” For the first time Himmat understood that this distinction protected not only his own position but the rights of others as well.

On the morning appointed for the room's inspection, an unusual cold lay over the Marudhar campus. Cooking smoke rose from two hostel windows, and birds perched among the kikar bushes outside the library. The inspection committee included the university's estate officer, an information-systems employee, Devika Sen, a representative of student welfare and Madhav Lodha, the authorised representative of the contracting organisation. Riddhi's role was limited to research assistance and comparison of available documents. Uma Rathore made the boundaries clear: "This is not a police search. It is an administrative inspection of the university's own property and contractual records. Do not overstep anyone's private property or lawful rights." "Some of my company's equipment is here," Madhav said. "We need the licensing and configuration papers." The committee gave him a copy. Above the locked door the old sign saying "Counselling" still hung askew; beside it a new paper sign read "Data Room". Riddhi's eyes rested on the unspoken passage of time between those two names.

The estate officer first examined the outer lock, placed a dated photograph in the record and then opened the door according to the key-issue register. Inside stood two steel cupboards, an old desk, a tangle of cables and a computer filmed with dust. When the window was opened halfway, an old dry leaf blew in. "There's nothing here," an employee whispered. "Even 'nothing' is a conclusion to reach only after making the inventory," Riddhi said, looking at him. The first shelf held attendance registers for training sessions, signed by students who had actually attended. Devika breathed more easily. The second contained blank forms and drafts of expenditure for counselling sessions, but no private records of counselling conversations. Meera Jain's two months of unpaid invoices were found in a sealed envelope on the third shelf. At once the room testified both to the programme's existence and to the delay in providing its services.

As the technical employee prepared an external inventory of the computer, he noticed that a storage device was connected to it whose serial number did not match the contractual property register. "Perhaps it's a replacement device," Madhav said. "I'll check with our office." Devika searched for her signed purchase paper, but it carried another serial number. Uma did not rebuke her. "For now, write that the actual device and the registered serial number differ," she said. "The reason is a matter for inquiry." Riddhi asked, "Could an authorised specialist make a protected copy without disturbing the current state of the electronic records?" The information-systems employee replied that it would be improper to switch on the device without suitable permission, an access

log and a technical examination procedure. The committee recorded the device's existence, its connected state and the time of inspection. No unauthorised copying or inspection of private data was attempted.

Then a thin bundle was found beneath a cupboard. It contained a copy of an old letter, a schedule of payments to the outside company and reconciliation sheets for two months of 2024. The reconciliation sheets used numbers in place of students' names. Some entries were marked "Visitor Verification", some "Training Stipend", and others simply "Adjusted". Riddhi copied nothing beyond the reference numbers into her notebook. "The finance department will have to explain these payment categories," Devika said. "This page doesn't establish that any payment was actually made." Riddhi agreed. "One document may be a payment instruction, another an accounting adjustment, a third a completed bank transaction." Kusum stood behind them listening. She remembered her first fear of the locked room: no one had been concealed there in distress, but carelessness with papers might well have contributed to that distress.

Madhav Lodha grew uneasy on seeing an old file. "This is an interim list from a former outside counselling-services company," he said. "Its responsibilities were separate from those of our organisation." "On which page of the contract is permission for a subcontractor recorded?" Riddhi asked. Madhav continued turning the file's pages. "I'll find out. I won't answer from memory here," he said. Riddhi respected that answer. "If the document is located, we'll check its original date, approving authority and period of validity." Madhav had been thinking that journalists must already have decided he was guilty, but inside this room he was being given time to answer every question. He asked permission to call an officer of his company. "You have a right to legal representation and to verify facts," Uma said. "Before signing the present inspection list, you may record your objections."

The inspection took three hours. An inventory distinguished property belonging to the university, equipment claimed under the external contract, items whose ownership remained disputed and records to which access would be limited to authorised persons. Uma signed the original list; Madhav added his observations; Devika confirmed that she had been present. It was decided that further examination or copying of the technical equipment would require an authorised committee and written confirmation of contractual rights. Riddhi requested one separate instruction: "Until any further examination, the original records must not be removed, changed or destroyed without authority." Uma issued the direction as an order to preserve university records. It was not

presented as a police order for anyone's arrest. Kusum saw that the hardest part of opening a locked room was not turning the key, but giving each object inside its proper meaning.

That evening a copy of the reconciliation sheet reached Vinod Suthar's desk in the finance branch. He began comparing the monthly payment ledgers. Grants released in instalments, payments made by the university to the outside company and sanctions for student maintenance stipends were held in three separate registers. Vinod drew a red line across one page. It showed twenty payment instructions, but bank-execution confirmations were immediately available for only fourteen entries. "Where are the other six?" his senior officer asked. "At present we lack confirmation," Vinod replied. "Perhaps the instructions were cancelled, the payments made the following month, or the records kept in a different file. Without bank statements we cannot call this embezzlement." The senior officer looked at his notebook. "An answer like that is difficult to hear, but necessary," he said, and requested the associated papers for all six entries.

Riddhi returned to her research room that night. On the desk was an old government expenditure list from 2018, where she had first noticed the difference between an allocation and an actual payment. Before her lay the contract for the new 2024 programme, two versions of the student consent form and the numbered entries from the reconciliation sheets. She removed her guesses about five people's names and closed the file. On the first page of a new notebook she wrote, "Records preserved; meaning not yet determined." On the second: "Access rights; original source; period; beneficiary; bank confirmation." She left the third page blank. At its top she wrote a short question: "To what future account operations might a programme's student register be connected if a financial-services company has access to it?" She had no answer yet. In later years the question would carry her very far.

An interim letter in the investigation of Mukul's complaint reached the university. The investigator had asked only whether anyone had been authorised to circulate publicity, collect fees or contact third parties under the name "Marudhar Recruitment Facilitation"; who had access to the registered users' contact details; and whether the necessary electronic records for the period could be preserved. In his answer Arvind Pareek attached the terms of the official, free service and a list of the publicity materials available. He wrote that the person making the unverified demand for a fee had not been established to be an authorised representative of the institution. But neither did he make the absolute claim that no information could have left the campus. He requested

continued examination of the different levels of permission and any possible errors. Reading the answer, Mukul said, “This isn't my money, but at least they aren't saying I lied.”

The students' end-of-year gathering did not begin this time with rankings in a competition. Alia Parveen came from Kota, Chandana brought a failed specimen from one of her experiments, Kusum brought the new counselling timetable, and Payal brought two statistical charts. The first showed a distribution of marks; the second, inequalities in the learning facilities available to students. “Two students with the same marks may have very different access to books, light, health and family support at home,” Payal said. “Remember those differences when you compare them.” “And it doesn't follow that a difficult examination is unnecessary,” Alia added. “A fair examination and proper assistance are not opposites.” Chandana showed the students where her equipment had failed. “Measurements can be wrong; that is why we build means of checking them again,” she said. No prizes for first and second place were handed out in the hall that day. Instead, along one wall the students wrote what they wanted to learn next.

In the last week of the year Meenakshi came to Jodhpur to visit her daughter. She felt proud when she saw the imposing hostel building, but as soon as she saw the little desk in Payal's room, she opened a parcel of her sewing. “I've made you a cloth bag for your books,” she said. Payal laughed. “Mother, sometimes I still feel anxious at night,” she admitted. Meenakshi wanted to embrace her daughter, but Payal first showed her a sheet of paper: the time of her next counselling appointment, the hours set aside for examination practice, short periods of rest and the days on which she would call home. “I've made this myself,” she said. Looking at the paper, Meenakshi replied, “Then leave some room in it for your own feelings, along with the hours.” Payal was not entirely free of worry that night. But now she had a definite way of asking for help when a difficult day came.

On the last working day of the year, Uma Rathore reviewed the reports from every department. Counselling services had resumed, but approval for permanent funding remained outstanding. The vague restriction in Himmat's disciplinary letter had been removed, but a broader review of the university's rules for assemblies and discipline was continuing. Mukul's complaint about digital fraud was under police investigation; his money had not been recovered. Questions about permission to engage subcontractors under the financial-services contract and the limits on using student information remained to be examined. Instead of marking one report “Completed”, Uma wrote,

“Interim compliance; work remaining.” “This will make the university's achievements look smaller,” the secretary said. “Calling unfinished work complete doesn't finish it,” Uma replied. She affixed her seal.

Riddhi Bishnoi came one last time to the room that had been locked. A clear sign now marked its door: “Records Room: Authorised Entry”. The new counselling room next door had already opened. The inventory of its contents was safe; a decision on authorised examination of the digital device was pending; and the finance branch was seeking answers about the six entries for which bank confirmation was missing. Riddhi wrote the date in her notebook, then noticed a very small name in the corner of an old page: “Sangati”. She placed no mark suggesting a crime beside it. She kept the programme's consent forms, the trail of payments and the outer company's limits of access separate. The room in front of her had been unlocked, but the true meaning of a name remained enclosed within a question that would take a long time to answer.

At eight that evening Revati called. “Are the students safe?” was her first question. “Payal is receiving regular help,” Riddhi answered. “The assistance room is open. But the permanent arrangements still need review.” “And the disciplinary matter?” “Himmat can use the library again.” “Mukul's money?” “Still being investigated. It hasn't come back.” “And the records?” Riddhi was silent for a moment. Then she said, “The original ledgers and the equipment inventory have been secured. We haven't opened anything beyond our authority.” Revati's voice held fatigue and an unspoken satisfaction. “Good,” she said. “Help for those who need help; a hearing for those who need to be heard; verification for papers whose meaning is still in question. Never again turn those three things into a single accusation.”

Riddhi put down the phone and stood in the hostel veranda. The library glowed in the distance. Himmat was inside working through examination papers; Mukul had sent his brother information about his next job application; Payal had opened the first page of her next day's study. The university's stone walls ought not to remain indifferent to these three lives, Riddhi thought, as she lifted her bag. It held no illicitly obtained copies of records, only the receipt from an authorised inspection, a copy of a public contract and a list of unanswered questions. In the years to come many names would be added to that list, the meaning of many sums of money would be revealed or altered, and many innocent people would seek ways to clear their names. For now it was night. An old key to the locked room had been placed in a sealed university envelope; on the table in the open assistance room stood a full glass of water. Each object bore witness in its own way.

PART FIVE

The Reckoning of Twenty-Seven Years

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Chapter 33 — The New Law on Gambling

2025: Darbhanga, Jodhpur and Delhi

In the last week of Sawan, rainwater lay upon the roofs of Darbhanga's old market. Neelkanth Sah had lifted the shutter of his shop halfway and stepped inside when, even before the smell of spices reached him, he heard a sound from a mobile phone. Every few moments it mimicked the fall of a coin, followed by the clatter of a whole heap of coins. His son Amresh sat at the back of the shop. A short distance away, Ramautar Nat stood wringing the wet hem of his shirt. Neelkanth looked first at his son and then at Ramautar. 'Haven't you collected the goods today?' It was a question about business, but the answer was written across Ramautar's face in the shape of debt. 'I'll collect them when the wages still owed to me have been paid,' he said. Amresh turned the phone face down on the table. The ringing of coins ceased abruptly, as though a fist had closed around a handful of light and extinguished it.

Ramautar carried sacks for the small shops in the market. His weekly earnings paid the rent, bought sewing thread for his wife Chanda and met the school expenses of their daughter Bindiya. His eldest son Amit had once delivered goods for a distribution company, but after his contract ended he had taken to doing odd jobs on his bicycle. For three months there had been a game called 'Ranglahar' on his mobile, where after every defeat the screen displayed the words: 'Recover your previous loss next time.' Amit knew that sentence better than he knew the names of his creditors. He had hidden so much from his father that at one point he had even considered selling the copy of Bindiya's scholarship certificate kept in the family cupboard. Finding that the paper would fetch nothing, he had put it back, ashamed.

Cleaning his spectacles, Neelkanth asked, 'What wages are outstanding?' 'Don't ask me about wages,' Ramautar replied. 'Ask my son. Something like fifty thousand rupees has disappeared into his phone. I don't know how it went or where. Even money that didn't belong to this household has gone.' Neelkanth turned towards his son. 'Father,' Amresh said gently, 'not every game on a mobile is gambling. Some involve practice and competition.' 'I know that,' Neelkanth answered. 'But the fifty-thousand-rupee hole in Ramautar's household won't be filled by a certificate of skill.' Ramautar said nothing. For the first time, he felt that someone in the market was listening to his complaint without calling him a fool.

Neelkanth Sah had a court case from his own younger days. In 2000 the police, relying on a seized ledger, had accused him of conducting local betting. Over the years of litigation, some separate violations had been established, while wider allegations could not be proved because of weaknesses in the records. After that experience, Neelkanth had learned the limits of every name written on paper. 'In my time,' he told Ramautar, 'you could hear the dice rattling. Now a game has sounds, rules and an invisible ledger inside it. But one old principle hasn't changed: the person who suffered a loss must be heard, and evidence must be produced against whoever is accused.' Amresh grew uneasy at the mention of his father's old case. He was about to show him a photograph of a payment message Amit had sent, but Neelkanth stopped him. 'Let the original message stay on his phone. A photograph is only a beginning.'

That evening Chanda Devi listened to Ramautar without reproaching him. The blue thread she held at the point of her needle had caught against her finger. 'I'm not saying what Amit did was right,' she said. 'But what interest was charged on the new loan given to him in the name of recovering his loss? Did you read the small print?' Ramautar drew a paper from his pocket. Thirteen thousand rupees had been borrowed from a local moneylender; payment was due in four weeks, and the interest had been agreed only by word of mouth. Bindiya opened her exercise book and wrote: 'Thirteen thousand; lender; borrower; date.' Chanda watched her daughter. 'Before we save your father's money,' she said, 'we must save the ability to write such things down in this house.'

Amit came late for dinner. There was road dust on his clothes and the stifled sound of defeat in his eyes. 'I won't play again,' he said. Chanda did not offer him immediate belief. 'I've heard that promise so often I can no longer trust it on its own. Sit down and open the accounts. Don't hide a single page.' Amit took out the phone, showed his bank statement and began opening the game's register beside each payment. Some deposits were for eight hundred rupees, others for two thousand, and once for five thousand; one win of three thousand four hundred had been returned to his bank account. 'Deposits, winnings and fresh deposits—you can't add them all together and call the total a loss,' Bindiya said. Amit looked at her. Her voice demanded arithmetic, not punishment. After three hours it became clear that total deposits and total withdrawals did not match. In some places payments were marked successful, but the sums had never appeared in the game's balance.

That night, as Chanda closed her sewing box, she asked, 'Amit, when you decided to play again, what did you see at that moment?' Amit

lowered his eyes. 'After the first loss, I thought I could win it back in the next game. Then, when I won four thousand, I believed I really could. At moments I knew this wasn't a way of earning money, but whenever I went to close the phone, my mind said that if I stopped now the earlier loss would become permanent.' 'The loss was already there,' Chanda said. 'You simply hadn't accepted it.' Her husband Ramautar wanted to interrupt, but she stopped him with an upraised hand. 'Listen to him today. Tomorrow we'll go to the creditors, but tonight let us name the fear that has been living in our house.' Outside, the first fierce shower of rain began again.

That same week in Delhi, a young game designer named Medha Kumari was practising an electronic game with three adolescents. To win, the players had to build a bridge over a virtual river, working with limited materials, limited time and a shared strategy. When a little striped boat crossed safely to the far bank on the computer screen, all three students laughed and clasped one another's hands. There was a modest entry fee for the competition, and prizes came from the organiser's announced fund; nobody staked their own money in the hope of winning another person's. 'Everyone calls both things by the same name—games,' said Medha's colleague Tariq Ansari. 'But the accounts for ours are not the accounts of a game in which people put money at stake.' 'Which is why,' Medha answered, 'we have to explain the rules not only to our customers but to our families as well.'

Medha had come to Delhi from a Maithili-speaking village to study. Her father owned a small field; her mother worked as an assistant at a school. When designing games she repeatedly wanted to use Maithili words, but investors told her, 'Keep a rural language in it and you'll get fewer customers.' 'Then I'll put two languages into my game and find fewer customers,' she said with a laugh. 'But I won't take away a child's right to name a river.' Her team included an artist from Nagaland, a computer engineer from Rajasthan and two young players from Delhi. All of them had to be paid the following month. The debate over financial regulation, therefore, was not merely a philosophical question for them; it concerned office rent and the running of households.

A notice of an industry meeting appeared on Tariq's phone. Some companies offering money-based games were considering temporarily restricting their services. Young employees were afraid that every kind of digital game might be shut down at once. At the meeting Medha said, 'In our game there is no stake, only practice. But if the public discussion doesn't make that difference clear, children's learning games will come under suspicion too.' A company representative replied, 'And if customers

who put money on a game really do need trained talent, is their hard-earned skill worth nothing?' 'Respect for skill is one matter,' Medha answered, 'and putting money at risk is another. Neither citizens' rights nor families' losses can be understood through a single slogan.'

Returning from a meeting with a customer in Darbhanga, Amresh found Neelkanth opening an old chest in the shop. Inside the wooden box lay certified copies of the seizure register from 2000, old court receipts and a little red pencil. 'Why are you looking at these again?' Amresh asked. 'Seeing Ramautar's son's accounts yesterday reminded me of my first day in court,' Neelkanth replied. 'Back then my name was in a ledger, and everyone assumed every entry in it belonged to me. Later we learned that some entries were mine, some belonged to others, and some were incomplete. A single letter of a name in a digital ledger must not decide an entire life either.' Amresh saw the tremor in his father's hand. For the first time he understood that the story of the old case was, for Neelkanth, a lesson in truthfulness as well as a source of shame.

The next morning Amit came to Neelkanth's shop of his own accord. He had brought not his father but his sister Bindiya. 'I want to show you the original transactions on my phone,' he said. 'But the option to download the whole game register has been disabled.' 'I don't want anyone at the game's customer-service office threatening us in Father's name,' Bindiya said. 'I want to preserve the dates, the amounts, our complete bank statements and the company's official address.' Neelkanth advised them not to tamper with the phone. 'Before you make a written complaint, give the facts. State plainly what you yourself have lost, and leave what you don't know under that name—unknown.' Amit still looked dejected, but a little confidence had returned to his eyes.

In a Delhi newsroom Noor Jahan and Riddhi Bishnoi were working on different screens. Noor was collecting material on the early debate about a new online-gaming bill; Riddhi was examining public contracts for Marudhar University's employment-assistance programme. 'So many companies say in their advertising: "A game of skill, therefore no risk,"' Noor observed. 'Skill may affect the outcome,' Riddhi replied, 'but it doesn't automatically remove the risk of losing the customer's money. And don't write about a proposed new law as though it were an offence already in force.' Noor made a note. The distinctions most difficult to explain in journalism often had the least space in which to be printed. She had now begun to learn how to make that small space hold a difficult distinction.

Before Riddhi lay copies of public documents recovered from the locked records room at Marudhar. One student-consent form contained the phrase 'placement assistance', followed in smaller print by 'appropriate third-party contact'. Another contract used the word 'coordination' before the name of an outside financial service. Nothing in those papers proved the involvement of any online-gaming company. Yet a question arose in Riddhi's mind: if an educational institution supplied students' information to external services under vague lines of consent, who would control its subsequent use? She wrote down the question, not the answer. Her work that day was simply to record the document numbers, authorised sources and dates of students' complaints on separate sheets.

At Marudhar University in Jodhpur, Mukul Meena arrived at the office for the start of the new academic session. The seven thousand five hundred rupees at issue in his earlier employment-fraud complaint had still not been returned. His brother Ramesh Meena had taken on no new debt, but had reduced the household expenditure on books. In the computer room Mukul saw students reading an announcement for a new gaming competition. A colourful poster was also circulating on phones: 'Get selected, win fifty thousand!' When he looked for the full address, he could find no official organiser. 'Some students will forward that advertisement,' his classmate Himmat Ansari said. 'First I'll ask the university whether it's authorised.' 'I acquired the habit of asking first,' Mukul answered, 'only after it cost me dearly not to.'

That evening Payal Raigar was walking from the counselling room towards the library when Himmat showed her the poster. In the little image on the phone she noticed the words 'next payment' more readily than the word 'prize'. 'Not every game that charges an entry fee is wrong,' she said. 'But pay special attention when it promises that your previous loss will be recovered after you deposit more money.' 'How do you know that?' Mukul asked. 'I learned something like it when I was waiting for my examination results. Dates, marks, hope—people go on looking for a reason to try once more. But there is a line between the purpose of trying and helpless gambling.' Payal did not equate her own experience with a gambling disorder; she was speaking only of the difficult ways in which hope behaves.

At a small-industry gathering in Bengaluru, Medha and Tariq went to demonstrate their new game. A financier in the audience asked, 'You've put figures in the game that gleam like currency. Can players convert them into real money?' 'No,' Medha answered clearly. 'They are points indicating levels of learning, not coins that can be purchased to earn a

profit. Our fee is announced plainly; it isn't a wager.' 'Then the income will be limited,' said the distributor. Tariq smiled. 'An enterprise with limited earnings is still an enterprise. More than tempting every student with a win, we want them to go home having understood one bridge over a river.' Seated at the back, the artist Lisa Ao heard the name of her drawing spoken aloud for the first time: 'The Reckoning of the Sinking Bridge.'

When Ramautar's family made its accounts for the first half of 2025, a debt was due for repayment in twenty-three days. Amit had found another delivery job, but at night his phone kept calling him back. Chanda did not take the phone in her hand and switch it off. 'Destroy the phone and you'll destroy the work contacts, bank records and your sister's messages from school as well,' she said. The family agreed that Amit would write down his deposit limit, keep bank notifications separate from game payments and continue seeking reliable counselling. That night Amit's dream was not of a screen. He dreamed of putting the receipt for Bindiya's school fees back into its old place in the cupboard. Around the eighth of August the humidity in Delhi was so dense that sweat ran down the backs of rickshaw pullers waiting in the evening square. Among reporters waiting for news of Parliament, Noor met an elderly teacher who wanted to show her two of his grandson's mobile bills. 'I won't publish your private bills,' she said. 'First tell me what you want to say in the report.' 'When everyone argues about lakhs of rupees, my grandson's five thousand seems small. But because of that five thousand he couldn't pay his half-yearly school fees.' Noor separately asked permission to record his voice and whether his name needed to be printed. Journalism gave her no right to turn another person's grief into a certificate of proof.

On 20 August a bill concerning online gaming was introduced and passed in the Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha approved it the following day, and with the President's assent on 22 August it became an Act. Television channels suddenly began speaking a whole vocabulary at once: prohibition, permission, esports, industry, youth, loss. At her editorial desk Noor wrote four separate lines: 'online games in which money is staked in expectation of a prize'; 'social games without a stake'; 'esports subject to defined conditions'; 'date on which the Act comes into force'. After the last line she left an empty space. Section 1(3) provided that commencement would be fixed by government notification, and no such date had been announced in August 2025. She left that space blank deliberately.

That evening an anxious employee came to Medha's office. 'My mother heard on television that online games have been stopped, so she told me my job has stopped too. Are we all supposed to stay away from the office tomorrow?' Medha gave her a glass of water. 'The nature of our work will be the same tomorrow,' she replied. 'But confusion in the market may affect contracts. We'll explain the rules to customers in writing. If requirements under the law change when it comes into effect, we'll make the necessary changes. Confusion about legislation will not be an excuse to withhold anyone's wages now.' The employee's name was Veena Thapa. 'If your business doesn't involve gambling, why all this fear?' she asked. 'Because fear is a market too,' Medha said, 'and sometimes it runs faster than facts.'

That evening in Darbhanga, Ramautar's old radio was carrying a discussion about the law. One speaker said the government had stopped an industry that ruined young people; another said millions of livelihoods were in danger. 'Now that the new law has been passed, will our old money come back?' Chanda asked her son. Looking down, Amit replied, 'No, Ma. I've learned that the law has been enacted, but the date it takes effect will be fixed by an official notification. The money already lost will have to be pursued through a separate claim about the transactions.' 'And did you play today?' Chanda asked. 'No.' 'Yesterday?' Amit hesitated. 'Once I wanted to. Then I looked at the bank receipt and put the phone down.' Chanda resumed her sewing. She knew that the day a human being begins to change does not come stamped with the seal of a law.

Revati Jha was emerging from a legal discussion in Delhi when journalists called out to her: 'If a game requires skill, is a ban justified?' 'The Constitution protects freedom to carry on a business,' Revati replied, 'but it also raises the question of reasonable restrictions in the public interest. The presence of skill, customers' deposits, the expectation of prizes, social harm and the state's regulatory capacity are distinct facts. The final constitutional determination belongs to the courts. For now, the Act has been passed. Check separately when it comes into force and where any challenge stands.' One journalist promptly drafted a headline: 'Lawyer Says Ban Is Illegal.' On seeing the draft, Revati sent a courteous correction to the editor: 'I have not reached a conclusion on the constitutional validity of the law.' Noor gave the correction prominent space in the next report.

Riddhi was so deeply immersed in the university ledgers that the arguments on Delhi television seemed like voices reaching her from far away. But on one page she found two different amounts labelled 'training

fee' and 'competition contribution'. An esports demonstration was being proposed for the university's youth technology festival, and a company had offered to help organise it. 'Whether an entry fee for the festival is permissible will have to be considered under the university's rules,' said Vinod Suthar of the finance branch. 'If someone is staking money on a game, that is a different question.' 'And what about sponsorship from the organising company?' Riddhi asked. 'Sponsorship may be recorded as income in the accounts,' Vinod said, 'but it does not automatically entitle the institution to hand over students' information in exchange. We need to examine the contract.'

That day Medha arrived at Marudhar University to speak about digital teaching and games. Vivek Meghwal and Manasvi were seated among the students; Payal sat in the last row with her notebook open. Medha ran her bridge-building game on the screen. The water in the little stream rose, and the students had to construct a bridge from limited timber and rope. When one team lost, the screen did not say, 'Deposit more money next time.' Instead it read: 'Measure the strength of the soil on the bank again.' Payal burst out laughing. 'That's what our statistics teacher says!' she exclaimed. 'If games like these help children learn,' Manasvi asked, 'why should the fear of regulation touch them?' 'You can't banish fear merely by calling it false,' Medha answered. 'You need clear categories and the trust of customers.'

After the event Mukul showed Medha his phone. 'This message says I've been officially selected for the festival. Send three thousand now and a prize of twenty-five thousand is guaranteed. Is it connected with your event?' Medha examined the name and opened her company's official website. 'No. Our game promises no guaranteed win, and any event fee will be on the list published by its organiser. This isn't an official message from us.' Mukul took out a copy of his earlier complaint for seven thousand five hundred rupees. 'Once again someone is asking for trust after changing a name,' he said. Manasvi immediately thought of publicising the incident, but Riddhi stopped her. 'Preserve the sender's identifying details and the original message received by the student; don't make a guessed name public.' Experience had taught Mukul the value of such caution.

The university's disciplinary office called a short meeting about the message. Uma Rathore presided. 'Let's ban all advertisements for games,' said one member. Medha reopened her presentation. 'If you ban our educational experiments for children too, the very children whom this debate about regulation is meant to protect will lose a useful tool,' she said. Uma proposed a solution: 'Publish in writing the terms of each

official event, its organiser, contact details and the nature of its fees. Clearly identify outside advertising, and establish a route for complaints.' The order did not pronounce anyone criminally guilty. At Riddhi's request, the limits on the use of student data were set out separately. The administration's experience of the old locked room had taught it that even an open event could have invisible doors.

The repayment date arrived at Ramautar's house. The lender sent a photograph of Chanda's sewing machine with a message: 'If you don't pay, I'll take the machine.' In the phone's light Chanda looked at her hands, marked by fine threads and little needle wounds. 'I use this machine every day,' she told Ramautar. 'It isn't a coin won in somebody's game.' Ramautar went to Neelkanth. 'Preserve the principal amount of the debt, the written terms, the payments made and the threatening message,' Neelkanth advised. 'For necessary assistance, approach the local Legal Services Authority. But the family will also have to understand Amit's responsibility for his own decisions.' 'Will the law save us from what has already happened?' Ramautar asked. 'The law is a road along which justice may be sought,' Neelkanth said, 'not a magical reversal of the past.'

Seated at her sewing machine, Chanda mended Bindiya's old school uniform. 'Ma, can I ask the school for some help buying books?' Bindiya asked. 'Ask,' Chanda replied, 'but don't tell them your father's and brother's shame. Say you need books. That is enough.' 'I'll tell my teacher our family is in debt,' the girl said. 'If I keep it secret, how will she know whether I have a right to assistance?' Chanda laid her hand upon her daughter's head. 'Learn to speak the truth while protecting your dignity.' As she gave that lesson, a little of the bitterness inside her eased. The household's finances were still difficult; she now understood that adding falsehood to the accounts would only make them harder.

In the first week of September, news came from Delhi of petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Online Gaming Act. Questions concerning the transfer of some petitions had reached the Supreme Court. Placing the papers before her junior colleague Arunima, Revati said, 'This is national constitutional litigation. Don't add our client's name as a party to somebody else's national petition. What we need to understand is the legal debate arising in the reports: legislative competence, freedom to do business, public health and the proportionality of regulation.' 'Can a constitutional challenge be brought even though the law has not yet come into force?' Arunima asked. 'The existence of an enacted law and its date of commencement

are different matters,' Revati answered. 'The court will determine admissibility and any interim relief according to its own procedure.'

At an open discussion organised by an industry association, Vikram Rao, the representative of an established company, muttered, 'The government will close off every road.' Another representative spoke in defence of skill-based games. Medha listened and then said, 'My view is that we should count both the wages paid to a company's workers and the losses borne by its customers. How many people did the service reach, how many lost money, how many complaints were resolved? Without those facts, neither "complete freedom" nor "complete protection" has a clear meaning.' 'Then you don't understand business,' Vikram said sharply. 'I examine my company's payroll every day,' Medha replied. 'You're avoiding the question of making public the complete account of customers' losses.' For a moment the gathering fell silent.

Noor could have sensationalised the exchange. 'Industry Representative Conceals the Truth' would have drawn readers. Instead, she wrote that the open meeting had exposed differences over transparency, while the sources and limits of the available figures remained unclear. She reported no criminal allegation against Vikram's company. With the family's consent, she included an anonymous account of Ramautar's circumstances at the foot of the article: debt, repeated losses on a mobile phone and the need for counselling. Noor concluded that responding to consumer risk was not a matter of legal prohibition alone, but also of truthful information, financial education and genuine complaint resolution. 'You don't seem to have chosen a side,' said her editor Aniruddh. 'Listening to the injured party,' Noor replied, 'and calling every suspicion a crime are two different things.'

The day came for paying the rent on Medha's office in a Delhi suburb. Checking the bank balance, Veena Thapa said, 'Two customers have suspended their contracts. What about our wages for the next three months?' Medha opened the accounts. 'A large customer has delayed payment; another contract will have to be revised. I'll give the investor a written account. If any promise concerning an employee's pay has to change, the reason will be explained first.' 'Uncertainty in the market can also create a whole business in fear,' Tariq said, 'one that offers to review a company's game without properly examining it, under the guise of issuing warnings.' 'Let's teach trust rather than trade in fear,' Medha replied. 'Finish the Maithili version of our educational game.' A faint smile appeared on Veena's face. That day a transparent set of office accounts proved more useful to her than any court order.

At the university in Jodhpur, a student named Mohan Bairwa submitted a written complaint. In the name of scholarship assistance, he had been told to open a 'promotional games' account, for which copies of his identity documents and a bank one-time password were demanded. Mohan had not supplied the password, but he was frightened that his scholarship would be stopped. Uma Rathore issued a clear written statement: 'No such external gaming account is required for a university scholarship. Students may seek advice; personal credentials must not be given to an unauthorised party.' 'The language of the message resembles that in the older employment-fee complaint,' Riddhi said, 'but its source must be investigated separately.' Mohan's name was kept out of the public register.

Mukul and Mohan met outside the library. 'I've already lost seven thousand five hundred,' Mukul said. 'You saved your money. Does that mean your story is over?' 'I saved the money, but I couldn't sleep for two nights,' Mohan answered. 'I thought my future scholarship had slipped through my hands.' Mukul did not laugh. 'Fear has accounts of its own,' he said. 'It's just that nobody gives you a receipt.' Manasvi handed both students a copy of the university's written safety advisory. 'Let this reach every student,' she said. 'Then nobody will conceal their fear and pay a false fee.' Mukul looked again at the copy of his earlier complaint. He understood that even when the investigation of an individual fraud was unfinished, an institution could issue a warning in time.

When the evening sunlight had faded, Revati telephoned her father Shivnarayan Jha. He was sitting in the veranda of his home in Darbhanga. 'In that first betting case of yours,' she asked, 'what questions arose most often about the seized ledger?' 'Whether someone's work could be established from a name in a ledger; who was present at the seizure; when the name had been written; and what a dead person's name signified,' Shivnarayan replied. 'Now too, in electronic games, the account, the user, the service provider and the actual beneficiary may be different,' Revati said. The old advocate laughed softly. 'The medium changes, not the discipline of evidence. But remember this as well: a debtor's tears are not a section of law, and neither are those tears meaningless.' At the beginning of October, bamboo poles for Durga Puja decorations were being planted outside a bank branch in Darbhanga. Amit brought his account statement to the customer-service desk. He was uncertain about two payments: the money had been debited from his bank account, but the game screen showed no corresponding completed transaction. 'For now we can see that money left your account,' said Shailaja Thakur, a bank employee. 'Its subsequent settlement and the

merchant's acceptance are matters for separate records. If you authorised the payment yourself, it would be wrong to call it unauthorised. But submit a written complaint about the two disputed entries, and keep the reference numbers.' 'Does that mean the money will definitely come back?' Amit asked. 'It would be dishonest to say definitely,' Shailaja replied. 'The answer depends on the investigation, the applicable terms and what actually happened.'

An elderly woman sitting at Shailaja's desk was distressed because her pension ATM card had been retained by a machine. Amit first helped her obtain assistance and then filled in his own form. Outside the branch he saw young men moving briskly back and forth across the road. Someone was carrying electric cables to the Puja pavilion; someone else was fastening a volleyball net on the field. Suddenly he remembered his school's sports day, when the prize for winning had been a thin book. He had been able to laugh when he lost that day. In mobile gambling, he had turned defeat into a reason to borrow money. Never had the difference between the two kinds of play been clearer to him than in that scene.

At his shop Neelkanth was talking to an elderly moneylender. 'If Ramautar's son put the money in of his own free will,' the moneylender said, 'what sense is there in his father's complaint?' 'A person bears responsibility for a bad decision freely made,' Neelkanth replied. 'But complaints about misleading promises, false payment registers or threats are separate matters. Don't dispose of them all in one sentence.' 'You'll turn everyone into a lawyer!' the moneylender laughed. Neelkanth smiled. 'I don't want to make everyone a lawyer. I only want people who have lost their money to be able to read a document.' The sacks of spices in his shop were half empty now, but the weights written on their labels were unmistakable. He applied the same modest clarity to life's far larger accounts.

One afternoon the lender came to Ramautar's house. He did not take away the machine, but wanted to write a new amount on the loan paper. 'We'll account for the principal,' Chanda told him. 'Show us the written terms for the interest you're claiming.' Irritated, the lender said, 'So you've started studying the law now?' Chanda did not lower her eyes. 'No. I used to read numbers. Now I'm learning to read the value of my own sewing.' She drew Ramautar aside and prepared a written proposal: how many instalments, on which dates, and a separate notation of the disputed interest. The lender did not agree that day. But he could no longer simply change the slip in his own hand and walk away. Chanda

realised that asking for justice often begins with asking for an account in writing.

Meanwhile another difficulty arose at Medha and Tariq's Delhi office. The former employer of an employee named Sanjay Bisht had posted on its website that 'all digital games are unauthorised'. Customers began demanding refunds of advance fees for Medha's events. She did not send everyone the same reply. For cancelled events, refunds were assessed under the announced terms. For workshops that had already taken place, certificates were issued. Customers booked for future programmes were given the chance to make a decision in good time. Veena Thapa found the paperwork overwhelming. 'Financial trust is like the rules of a game,' Medha said. 'Everyone who pays, not only whoever loses, must understand it.' The employees worked late into the night, but this time the outcome of their clouded evening was not fresh confusion; it was a clear answer to every customer.

Some industry organisations began to hold public discussions on the constitutional questions before the Supreme Court. Medha prepared a written statement for her team. The first line read: 'Make the identification of stake-free educational, recreational and recognised competitive games clear.' The second: 'Publish reliable figures on the effects of money-based services and customers' losses.' The third: 'Hear the questions of a reasonable transition period and employees' livelihoods in regulation.' The fourth: 'Do not imagine criminal penalties applying before the prohibition has legally commenced.' Having read the four lines, Tariq asked, 'Whose side are you on?' 'I'm on the side of a future,' Medha replied, 'in which children can play without deception, families can open bank accounts without being ruined, and skilled young people can earn a living.'

Riddhi went to the deputy registrar of Marudhar University with a request for permission. For an impartial sample in her research, she wanted copies of some entries from the payment register relating to outside service companies. 'We cannot disclose students' private bank-account numbers,' the deputy registrar said. 'We can provide consolidated details of public university expenditure and copies of the relevant financial rules.' Riddhi accepted the response. 'I don't need anyone's private account just now,' she said. 'I want to see separately how much was sanctioned, how much was ordered for payment and how much was actually executed by the bank.' 'So you're not going to guess at five or seven disputed names?' the deputy registrar asked in surprise. 'A name written down on the basis of a guess could destroy an innocent student's future,' Riddhi answered.

In the finance branch, Vinod Suthar opened a page of twenty old entries for Riddhi's inquiry. Bank confirmation of execution was available for fourteen; dated replies had been sought from the bank for the remaining six. Meanwhile a response came from the accounting company: four instructions had been adjusted in the following month, one had been cancelled, and the number on one entry was incomplete. 'The reason for one entry is still undetermined,' Vinod told his senior officer. 'But it would be wrong to say that six sums of money have disappeared.' 'Write what is clear so far,' the officer answered. 'One outstanding entry does not prove every transaction innocent; nor does the first suspicion prove everything wrong.' Vinod added a new date to the file and awaited the next written confirmation.

In the evening Mukul's brother Ramesh Meena came to meet him in the hostel corridor. Opening his account, Ramesh showed him that the final instalment on the money he had advanced for Mukul's employment fee was nearly due. 'You aren't going to tell me to leave my studies and earn money, are you?' Mukul asked. Ramesh was silent for a long time. 'It hurts to lose that money,' he finally said. 'But if your education is broken off, we'll suffer the loss twice. Continue studying, and keep asking in writing where your complaint stands.' In his notebook Mukul wrote a question: 'Must a family's next opportunity be closed because of an earlier personal loss?' The question remained unanswered, but his brother's eyes continued to reassure him.

Elsewhere an anonymous envelope arrived at Noor's office. It contained photographs of some grant papers and a lurid sheet headed 'Lakhs Stolen from Marudhar Gaming Sponsorship'. Noor examined the pictures: half the government seal had been cut off, and the date could not be read. 'Print this and there'll be a storm of discussion,' Aniruddh said. Noor put a question mark against the word 'lakhs'. 'Nobody has supplied the original document, its connection to a bank-confirmed transaction or the response of the person being accused. First I'll find the source,' she said. When Riddhi answered the telephone, she said only that an authorised review of the university's records was continuing; she had no stolen photograph of anyone's personal banking information. Noor did not turn the sheet into a news story.

In the final week of October, Neelkanth's granddaughter Pihu went to the library in Darbhanga to see a demonstration of an educational game. The teacher Arunkant Jha had organised it, and Medha's company was participating online. Pihu was shown two channels of water and asked where a small embankment should be built. She remembered what her mother had taught her about draining rainwater. She changed the

direction she had chosen on the screen, and the water flowed onwards without damaging the village houses. Ramautar had brought his daughter Bindiya too. The two girls laughed even when they failed, because after every unsuccessful attempt the game asked them a question, not for money. Standing by the door, Neelkanth said, 'Look at the questions inside a game before naming what kind of game it is. Ask separately about the lure of winning.'

When the demonstration ended, Amit lingered at the back. Medha's voice was still coming from the screen. 'If you lose at this game,' she explained, 'you never have to pay money to play again.' Amit laughed, but there was self-reproach in the sound. Bindiya took his hand. 'Brother, you can teach us how to save ourselves after making a mistake.' 'How can I?' Amit asked. 'You can tell people the name of what trapped you. Not in front of everyone, only to someone who wants to hear.' Amit looked at his sister. Once he had thought that if his name became known he would be humiliated. Now he realised that sharing experience with discretion might save another young person's first deposit. He did not want to turn his pain into a market for sermons. He wanted to offer a quiet form of help.

When Neelkanth and Ramautar emerged from the library, marks left by the receding floodwater were visible on the lane walls. 'Neelkanth Babu, I've put my son back to work with the family,' Ramautar said. 'He still owes money. But he doesn't avoid looking me in the eye anymore.' 'During my old case, Amresh couldn't look straight at me for months,' Neelkanth replied. 'One day he asked, "Father, are you innocent or guilty?" I told him, "I shall accept responsibility for what has been proved, but I won't bear disgrace for what hasn't." You can't contain the whole meaning of a human life in one sentence.' For the first time Ramautar understood the pain attached to Neelkanth's name. He folded his hands in farewell and walked away.

At the beginning of November, a group of Marudhar students prepared an open letter. They asked the university to specify in writing the limits on sharing student information with outside employment-service companies, where the authorised programme's fee schedule was published, and what formal mechanism had been created to prevent misleading third-party advertising. Nobody was called a 'fraudster' in the letter. The students' representative Kusum explained that these were questions of administrative responsibility. 'If an individual fraud has occurred, the police will conduct their investigation,' she said. 'But we want to improve the university's consent forms and published notices in

any case.' Uma Rathore provided a written acknowledgement and announced a timetable for responses from the different departments.

At the meeting a parent submitted an anonymous letter. His daughter was not Payal but another student who wanted to continue her studies in peace. According to the letter, an outside website had demanded a bank one-time code on the pretext of 'mandatory identity verification for the competition', threatening to stop her scholarship if she refused. The parent wanted to protect his daughter from a public dispute. Riddhi checked the date recorded in the letter; it did not match the date of the university's authorised competition. 'We must establish who sent this message,' she said. 'But we cannot already conclude either that the student is at fault or that the university committed a crime.' An authorised employee preserved the original envelope and its receipt.

That week Revati Jha returned from an old civil hearing. What reached her from Patna was not notice of a new case but news that her father Shivnarayan's health had improved in Darbhanga. 'For years people have brought their names to you,' he said on the phone. 'Sometimes remember to keep an account of your own.' 'Of my own name?' Revati laughed. 'Of your time, your sleep, the times you eat. If a lawyer who defends rights doesn't hear the case of her own body, how long will she be able to defend the rights of others?' After putting down the phone, Revati looked at the clock. It was ten at night. She closed her file and went into the kitchen. No court record was made of that small scene, but in her inward life it was a useful order.

The next day a plain envelope arrived at her office. Neatly written on its face were the words: 'For Advocate Revati Jha: A Parent's Petition.' Inside was a letter of three pages. The first set out the financial crisis of Ramautar Nat's family in Darbhanga and the account of Amit's deposits and withdrawals in the digital game. The second mentioned Bindiya's school fees and the threat against Chanda's sewing machine. On the third, a parent's question was written in blue ink: 'If a new law has been enacted but has not yet come into force, under which law currently applicable, and through which available remedies, should an old customer's dispute be examined?' Revati underlined the end of that question. She understood that the letter was neither a manifesto for nor against the law, but a family's plea for immediate help.

A smaller paper accompanied the letter. It was a signed petition from a group of parents and students at Marudhar University. They wanted to know whether an institutional link existed between fee demands sent under the name 'Marudhar Placement Assistance', the external use of

students' mobile numbers, employment-counselling contracts and unauthorised advertisements for gaming competitions. References to Mukul Meena's and Mohan Bairwa's complaints appeared beneath the new petition. There was not an amount beside every name, and some parents had forbidden publication of their names to protect private information. Revati remembered Riddhi's earlier words: 'The record survives; its meaning has yet to be determined.' She placed the two papers in separate folders. There was no evidence that a single criminal case could properly be made out of one family's financial losses and the university's questions about information.

Revati first telephoned Ramautar. 'I have received your letter,' she said. 'Will the law save us?' he asked anxiously. 'We'll need to examine each transaction, the company's promises, the bank statements and the loan terms separately,' Revati replied. 'We must also establish the commencement status, at the relevant time, of the law passed in 2025. I won't promise an outcome yet, but I can send you a list of the records to put in order.' The whirr of a sewing machine could be heard behind Ramautar. Chanda came nearer to the phone. 'If my machine is safe, and my son has begun to tell the truth, that alone gives me so much courage,' she said. Revati smiled. 'We'll look for a legal answer with that courage beside us,' she replied.

She then called Riddhi Bishnoi. 'The Marudhar parents have written,' Revati said. 'Which records are available from authorised sources?' Riddhi gave her the details: the published provision of free student services; the contracts with outside companies; one vaguely worded form of consent; the gradual clarification of the status of nineteen of twenty payment instructions; and a single incomplete entry still awaiting bank confirmation. 'I do not have access to the private account information,' Riddhi said, 'and I will not obtain it without authorisation. If a future investigation involves several people, each account's actual role will need separate examination.' 'Has any connection with a gaming organisation been established?' Revati asked. 'No. There are only similarities in the wording of some misleading advertisements. That is not proof of a connection.'

When the call ended, Revati summoned her legal assistant Shashibhushan. He had already written: 'Immediate complaint under the new gaming law.' Revati struck the line through. 'The Act passed in August 2025 had not been brought into effect by notification at that time. If we ask for immediate criminal penalties under it, we'll send the victim's real problem down the wrong road. First examine the dates of the transactions, the bank's formal complaint procedure, the actual

status of any unauthorised deductions, the promises made in writing in the advertising and the lender's conduct.' 'Then is the debate over the bill of no use?' Shashibhushan asked. 'It is useful for understanding the public reasons for making the law,' Revati replied. 'But the debate, the enacted statute and an enforceable penalty are different events.' The assistant rewrote the first page.

That evening Sahar Bano, who ran a small learning class for children in Darbhanga, sent Noor a letter. 'Is it right to keep children away from every digital game,' she asked, 'or should we teach them what payment really means?' She described her classroom. One child from a poor family was excellent at arithmetic games but had no mobile at home; another's phone kept showing advertisements for games involving money, although the child had not yet paid anything. Sahar did not want to put both children on the same list of wrongdoers. Noor asked permission to quote a line of the letter in her article. 'You have my permission,' Sahar wrote, 'but do not use the children's names.' Sometimes sensitivity protected the truth through a small prohibition.

When Neelkanth heard of Revati's reply, he gave Ramautar a blank ledger from his shop. On the first page he wrote four words in his own hand: 'Debt'; 'Payment'; 'Refund'; 'Dispute'. 'Will this make my boy's playing right?' Ramautar asked. 'Not the playing,' Neelkanth answered. 'But it will make the accounts truthful. When the accounts are true, a person can face his difficulties with some certainty. The decision to change remains in his own hands.' Ramautar put the ledger in his cloth bag. Hands that had lifted thousands of sacks in his life now found a blank sheet of paper unusually heavy; yet in that weight there was something reassuring.

On the office wall hung a small photograph of Revati with Shivnarayan, taken in 2000. In it she was a young law student, a thin paper file in her hand and questions in her eyes. In 2025 two envelopes lay on her desk: one concerning a family's deposited money, the other the security of students' information. She slowly took out a third empty folder and wrote across it: 'Individual role—awaiting evidence.' She put no name inside. Evening was descending outside. Along the streets of Delhi mobile advertisements glimmered—on one side the triumph of skill, on the other the promise of instant money. Revati shut the window, but for a while the advertisements' light continued to fall upon the papers inside. The country that had begun arguing over the names in a seized ledger in 2000 was now searching for its next testimony in the invisible accounts behind a screen.

Chapter 34 — The Ledger of Five Hundred Names

Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Kharar and Mohali; December 2025–March 2026

On a cold evening in the month of Paush, the electricity flickered twice in a hostel at Marudhar University. The neem leaves in the courtyard shivered, and an old printing machine in the veranda turned its rollers with a succession of small sounds. Kamla Meghwal, a hostel assistant, tried to stop the paper emerging from the printer. The office had closed. How, then, were so many sheets still coming out? The first bore not the university emblem but the abbreviated name of an outside programme. The second carried serial numbers, the third names that looked like students' names, and the fourth the last four digits of bank accounts. By the time the machine stopped, most of the pages of a list numbered to five hundred had come out. Kamla felt neither excitement nor the pleasure of a mystery at the sight. She remembered how long Payal had remained silent in this very hostel for fear that papers concerning her counselling would become public. Kamla did not turn over every sheet to read it. She switched off the printer, checked the office lock, entered the time of receipt in her little duty register and telephoned an authorised university official.

When Kusum arrived, Kamla had spread a white sheet over the table and wrapped the papers inside it. 'There are so many names,' she whispered. 'There might even be people here who don't study at this university. But how am I to know?' 'Which is why nobody is going to pin these papers to the hostel noticeboard,' Kusum replied. She remembered the copy of a map in an old land dispute that had made someone believe their land was lost, though the original map had yet to be examined. Here, a single line on paper could affect a student's future. In the presence of a security guard Kusum made a sealed packet, recording the number of sheets, the identity of the printer, the time and the signatures of witnesses present. It was the first occasion in the hostel when so much care had been taken not to open a ledger but to keep it closed.

The next morning Riddhi Bishnoi sat in the university records room. December light entered through the window, but the envelope on the table seemed to have brought the night's cold inside. Payal's counselling room had reopened; Himmat's access to the library had been restored. Yet questions remained unanswered in the review of the outside employment-assistance contracts. 'The hostel printer is connected to our

server,' said Uma Rathore, the officer in charge. 'We should ask the technical branch for its activity logs.' Riddhi agreed, but added a condition. 'Don't show me anyone's private bank details without authorisation. First examine the source, who had access and why these sheets were printed.' Uma did not glare at her. She wrote in her notebook: 'List received and secured; use of personal details restricted.' That sentence did not stop the inquiry. It established the first limits within which it would proceed.

On the hostel's first floor Mukul Meena was taking down a shirt he had left to dry on the roof. The date for another instalment of his brother Ramesh's debt was approaching; the seven thousand five hundred rupees paid in the name of 'Marudhar Placement Assistance' had still not been recovered. He heard of the list not from the warden but through the students' whispers: 'Five hundred bank accounts have been caught.' At once a knot of fear formed in his stomach. It was not the possibility that his own name might appear on the list that frightened him. He feared that if all five hundred were called criminals, his genuine complaint would be lost in the uproar. He met Himmat Ansari on the stairs. 'Has anybody seen the names?' Mukul asked. 'I haven't,' Himmat replied. 'Those who have are authorised people. Our job is to tell students never to give out confidential banking codes and never to ruin somebody's reputation through rumour.' As Mukul went to call home, he decided he would not begin by telling Ramesh this news.

Riddhi's first questions concerned the machine, not the names. Rohit Chauhan, a technician, showed her the logs. An external attachment had been sent to the printer before midnight, but the sending account appeared as a general university service address. 'A great many authorised notices pass through this address,' Rohit said. 'We can't identify the actual author of the file from that alone.' 'Did this machine print the whole file?' Riddhi asked. 'We'll need to examine the sequence of the pages that came out. If paper jams, the printer may print some pages again.' The list had five hundred serial numbers, but counting the physical sheets did not establish that there were five hundred distinct entries. 'Then the report should say "an unverified list numbered to five hundred",' Kusum said, 'not "five hundred guilty accounts".' For the first time the university employees understood that sometimes an adjective could save a life.

That day Riddhi's mother Sharda Bishnoi asked, while cutting fruit, 'Your work has increased terribly, hasn't it?' Riddhi did not tell her the students' names. She said only that a file containing five hundred numbered lines had been found. 'Five hundred?' Sharda repeated. 'How

many households that must mean!' The number remained lodged in Riddhi's mind all night. Five hundred sheets had no eyes. But behind five hundred names might lie how many families, misspellings, resubmitted applications, people sharing a name, workers' loans and deserving students? On a blank page Riddhi made two columns: 'Entry' and 'Person'. When she was a child, her father had shown her a field measuring one ropani and the measure recorded on paper. Changing the measurement did not change the earth. Now she was afraid to apply that distinction to human beings, because it was a person, not the paper, who would pay for a mistake.

The university executive committee called an emergency meeting. Arvind Pareek, coordinator of the placement-assistance programme, laid the original contract before him. It stated that 'Sangati Financial Services Private Limited' would provide technical support for registration; it contained no order requiring students to pay a compulsory fee. The language on the second page, concerning what student data the service provider could access, was unclear. 'I signed the agreement to expand employment opportunities,' Arvind said. 'Some students really did receive training. Now I hear that outside messages demanded fees in our name.' 'Did you read the third amendment to the agreement?' Uma asked. Arvind lowered his head. 'It arrived by post. I looked only at the first two pages.' To Riddhi, the admission sounded not like a final finding of guilt but possible evidence of grave administrative negligence. 'We must also establish whether the amendment is genuine or was added later,' she said.

Himmat sat on the committee as a student representative. He asked on which day the terms under which the outside company would operate had been communicated to all students. Uma produced the published notice. It contained a link that had been inactive for months. 'When we complained,' Himmat said, 'we were told to read the rules. How were we supposed to read a page that wouldn't even open?' Arvind shifted back in his chair. Manasvi, a member of the student-welfare advisory group, asked, 'What effect will making all these lists public have on the privacy of students receiving counselling or scholarships?' 'We will not publish the list before verifying its actual source,' the committee chair replied. There was little excitement in the decision, but everyone gave it quiet assent.

By evening Kamla Meghwal had received several calls from strangers at the hostel. One voice asked, 'You've seen the five hundred accounts? Which bank?' Another said, 'I'm a journalist. Send me the list and the university will be saved.' Both times Kamla replied, 'I've handed it to the authorised office.' As soon as she put down the phone, she sat leaning

against the wall. Her son Vikram kept accounts for a small shop in town. 'Ma, someone might pay you if you give them the list,' he said. Kamla stood and went into the kitchen. 'My monthly wages arrive late,' she said, 'but does that mean I should sell another person's child's bank number?' Her question was an answer to the fear inside her as much as to her son. Vikram silently made her tea.

In the first week of January 2026 the initial limited report of an authorised technical review arrived. The list contained five hundred numbered lines. Some repeated the same student name; some carried old hostel-room numbers; some gave only the last digits of a phone number; in others, merely four bank-account digits appeared. Presenting her count, Riddhi repeatedly used one word: 'entry'. One person might have been counted twice, two different people might have the same name, an old school record might have been imported without consent. Each possibility required separate verification. Anuradha Sen, experienced in examining financial records, joined the inquiry as an authorised adviser to the university. She took one look at the first page and said, 'A list is not proof that an account has been operated. The word "bank" appears here, but the original records of when money entered or left are still missing.'

Anuradha had brought a little wooden board with her. She laid three white sheets on the table. On the first she wrote 'Name', on the second 'Account', and on the third 'Control'. 'These are not the same thing,' she explained to the students. 'In whose name was an account opened? Who authorised the incoming payment? Who had confidential access? Three different questions. Then there is a fourth: what was the money actually for?' 'And a fifth?' Riddhi asked with a smile. 'The limits of the investigating officer's legal authority to ask those questions. We won't breach bank confidentiality simply to satisfy our curiosity.' Kusum saw the scene not as a dazzling gathering of experts but as the university's first proper lesson in investigation. For the first time curiosity, rather than fear, appeared on the students' faces.

In a corner of the hostel Mohan Bairwa was looking through his old phone. He had not given the one-time bank password demanded by the unauthorised 'promotional gaming' message. Yet a week after receiving it another message had arrived, announcing a recruitment opportunity and bearing the name of the scholarship department. When Mohan asked at the university office, he was told, 'That isn't ours.' Only after his first fear subsided did he realise that protecting the password did not solve everything: the question of how his mobile number had gone outside remained. With his consent Riddhi included in the authorised review a

limited copy showing only the sender's identity and the time of the message. 'Is my name among the five hundred?' Mohan asked. 'It would not serve you for me to say yes or no today without checking,' Riddhi replied. 'We're establishing a procedure for verified information.'

At the first dawn of February, Sunita Paswan was opening an old wooden chest in her home in a working-class settlement of Ludhiana. It held Ramlakhan's wage slips, a signed list from 2009, copies of factory-attendance sheets regarded variously as false and genuine, and a letter bearing only the name 'Hardev Chauhan'. 'All those old papers will rot away one day, daughter,' her mother Vimla Paswan said, gathering the ball of wool on her cot. 'Better if we find out what they mean before they rot,' Sunita replied. Her father Ramlakhan could no longer work a full day, but still taught the neighbourhood children how to recognise the factory siren and the hour of midday. Riddhi called Sunita: on the edge of the unverified Marudhar student list appeared a service code reading 'North-Eastern Workers' Training Beneficiary'. 'What has that to do with our factory?' Sunita asked. 'At present there is only a resemblance in the words, no financial connection,' Riddhi answered. 'For my research, may I ask you the date of the old public contract?'

Sunita's brother Deepak, who worked at a tool shop after completing industrial training, listened as his sister spoke on the phone. 'Hardev's name again after ten years?' he said. Sunita nodded. 'And what if thousands of people share that name?' Deepak grew a little embarrassed. As a child he had been thrilled all day if he spotted matching names in his sister's ledgers. Now he understood the accounts in his own shop: if debts owed by two customers with the same name were added together by mistake, an innocent person's standing could be destroyed. Rather than send photographs of the papers, Sunita decided to write a letter asking Riddhi to obtain them through lawful channels. 'We'll compare them only when a certified copy is available of whatever was submitted at the earlier public hearing. An old photocopy kept in our house cannot become a university record.' Vimla took the tea off the stove. To her, her son's impatience and her daughter's caution were the two eyes of her family.

Sarabjit Kaur arrived at a Ludhiana bank branch before noon. A new junior employee, Gagandeep Kaur, was in training. Looking at a customer's slip, she said anxiously, 'Madam, the beneficiary's name is repeated in the payment register. Has another transaction been made from the same account?' Sarabjit examined the slip. 'A repeated name does not mean a repeated payment,' she replied. 'Check the transaction number, amount, date, cancellation instruction and actual entry

separately.' Gagandeep's mother did piecework weaving at home. Ever since she obtained her bank job, Gagandeep had felt that detecting every accounting irregularity was her first duty. Sarabjit did not dampen her enthusiasm. 'It's useful to raise a suspicion,' she said. 'But before letting suspicion become a stain upon an account holder's name, formulate the right question.' An official cyber-investigation request had also reached the branch that day, but Sarabjit could not yet tell whether it had anything to do with the Marudhar list.

After work Gagandeep boarded a neighbourhood bus. A shoulder bag held her training manual and a small packet of dried makhana sent by her mother from the village. An elderly fellow passenger asked, 'Daughter, when a message arrives on the mobile saying "account verification", does it come from the bank?' Gagandeep explained that banks did not demand secret codes or passwords in such messages. 'My pension isn't much,' the old woman said, 'but if even that disappears, how shall I buy my medicine?' The story of five hundred names, which had reached the branch in a murmur of gossip, suddenly acquired a face in Gagandeep's mind. She no longer saw banking accounts as mere columns of figures. She advised the woman to check through an authorised branch, and when she got home she asked her mother the same question. 'Don't explain passwords to me,' her mother replied. 'Explain the value of my wages.'

When the Marudhar committee referred the complaint about student information to the local police cyber unit, it did not hand over an open ledger of five hundred names. What it supplied was an authorised sealed copy, the receipt register, an initial report on the source and limited details consistent with the complainants' consent. 'Whose money was taken, where did it go, and who was given a false assurance?' asked Inspector Seema Chaudhary, the investigating officer. Mukul showed his receipt for seven thousand five hundred rupees. Mohan said nobody had obtained his one-time banking code, but a threat had been sent in the name of his scholarship. Seema recorded their statements separately. 'I mustn't be tempted to fit an entire society into a single complaint,' she said. 'Five hundred lines are a lead. Specific incidents will form the basis of allegations.' Riddhi kept those words in mind, but reminded them that even the police could not immediately be given complete private banking particulars without the appropriate authorised process.

That evening Seema's daughter sat at home with a ninth-class mathematics problem. It asked how the total count would be distorted if the same object were counted in three places. Closing her case file, Seema laughed. 'Ma, did you go to catch a criminal?' the girl asked. 'I'm trying

to find the person against whom there is specific evidence,' Seema replied. 'And at the same time to protect anyone whose name has been included by mistake from needless fear.' 'How many days will that take?' her daughter asked. Seema gave no answer. Office orders imposed time limits and court proceedings required formal records of action, but she knew that the mark of a mistaken identity might remain for years. Her daughter solved the sum. Seema placed a red tick upon the exercise book—an infinitely simpler tick than the one she would have to make so carefully beside a person's name in her own file.

The initial material included an old version of a website called 'Marudhar Placement Assistance'. It instructed students to pay a 'mandatory registration service contribution', whereas the university's official programme was free. Authorised requests went to separate sources for the domain's registration history, the creation of the promotional page and the merchant identity used to collect payments. A technical employee said one contact number on the site appeared to be associated with an advertising office in the Kharar area. Seema did not frame an allegation from the name of a place. 'Companies also do legitimate business from Kharar,' she said. 'Tell me who controlled the paper bearing that number and who made the promise.' Material from another inquiry showed a similar advertisement design linked to a training room in Mohali. Noor Jahan heard a proposal to report that information, but told her newsroom, 'The name of a place is not proof of a crime. Business identities and evidence must be verified separately.'

In a narrow lane in Kharar, a young man called Amandeep Sood was adding up his father's medical bills. He worked as a temporary coordinator at a small recruitment agency named 'Setuvahak Consultancy'. Its signboard advertised training opportunities in five states. Some placements had led to genuine appointment letters; elsewhere, applicants had received no reply. Amandeep insisted that his duties were not to design advertisements but to answer students' calls and scan the documents they were asked to provide. His colleague Tarun Sethi, who handled payment campaigns, maintained that all the agency's services were authorised. Yet one day Amandeep had seen 'guarantee fee' written in a line of the register and asked, 'Why is there a fee for a university programme that's supposed to be free?' 'This is a separate, optional private service,' Tarun had answered. The question had ended there. When the police notice arrived, Amandeep preserved his office emails and employment contract. He was afraid that amid new suspicions he himself might become incapable of answering the real questions.

On the third floor of a rented building owned by Sardar Harpal Singh in Mohali stood a small training room with three computers. Harpal rented rooms in the building to several companies at different times. When the police made an authorised inquiry in February, he produced the rent receipts, but said he did not know who had created which files on the computers. 'Receiving rent is not a crime,' Seema said. 'But if you have a register showing the rooms' actual use, give it to us.' Harpal's daughter Jasleen was startled by the exchange. She told her father that many names in the entry register were illegible, with nothing but mobile numbers in place of signatures. Harpal admitted that he had allowed such laxity for his staff's convenience. The investigator secured the original register. She had no reason to make every tenant in the building part of an alleged network. But one computer's rental dates coincided with the period in which the disputed advertising material had been created, and that required closer examination.

At the Jodhpur hostel, Payal was leaving after her weekly appointment with the university counsellor. In the corridor someone said her name too was on the 'five hundred names' list. She stopped. Her body began to remember the old fear of that room in Kota, but this time she went straight to the warden. 'Who can see my private counselling records?' she asked. The warden explained that the counselling records were held separately and securely, and there was no public process for confirming names on the financial list. 'But people are asking about me,' Payal said. 'I want the university to contradict these false rumours without exposing my private papers.' Manasvi supported the request. The next day a notice appeared: mere discussion of a name in a confidential list established neither guilt nor the fact that the person had received any particular service. Payal did not put the clipping in her cupboard. She pinned it to the hostel's common wall.

A student named Arjun travelled daily to the campus by bus from a nearby settlement. His bank account had been opened to receive his scholarship, and the bank's logo also appeared on a fee-collection poster outside the hostel. 'You're bound to be in the list of five hundred accounts,' a friend joked, 'you pay for things online every day.' Arjun did not laugh. That year the rainwater had drained off his father's fields at the wrong time, and the next scholarship instalment could help the family pay the interest on its debt. He wrote to Riddhi through the university's authorised student-contact channel: 'I want to verify the information concerning my name, but I don't support publication of the whole list.' Riddhi helped the university establish a procedure under which a person, after proper verification of identity, could see only their

own information, lodge an objection and request correction of an error—not inspect other people's details. 'This is the first step towards justice,' Kusum said of the modest arrangement, 'and it doesn't require climbing the steps of a court.'

Noor Jahan went to meet Kamla at the university's outer gate. Kamla grew uneasy at the sight of a journalist, remembering the strangers' calls. 'I'm not asking for the list,' Noor said plainly. 'If you aren't authorised to disclose it, there's no need to give it to me. I only want to know what you did when the papers began coming out of the machine.' Showing her duty register, Kamla explained that she had telephoned the office and recorded the time; she had not read the names. 'Didn't you feel curious when so many pages appeared?' Noor asked. 'I did,' Kamla answered. 'But curiosity gave me no right.' Noor's article thereafter centred not upon the five hundred names but upon the ethical decision of an unnamed cleaner. The headline read: 'The Duty Is to Protect the List, Not Conceal It.' The technical aspects were hard to explain to readers, but one sentence from Kamla gave that difficulty a human voice.

In mid-February, Riddhi and Anuradha prepared the university's internal report on the list's origins. It stated that the file with five hundred serial numbers had reached the printer through a third-party service account, but identification of the account's user required original system logs and the provider's response. Some student-record entries matched the authorised registration data of the placement-assistance programme; certain names showed variations in spelling; some lines had plainly been drawn from old applications since cancelled. None of those matches made a student a criminal. They did raise the possibility that information had left the institution. Whether the access limits in the contract had been exceeded remained subject to final technical examination. 'At least I now understand what we were asking wrongly,' Uma said after reading the report. 'We kept asking who the five hundred criminals were. We should have been asking who put the five hundred entries together, and why.'

A young man arrived at Inspector Seema's office with his mother. His name was Shailesh Kumawat, and he was a former student of Marudhar University. He produced page after page of documents relating to his appointment. 'I did get a job,' he said. 'The company even paid me two months' wages during training. People are saying the entire programme was a fraud. That wasn't my experience.' Seema recorded his statement. That day Naseema, who advised incoming students, asked him, 'Who issued your actual appointment letter—the university, an outside company or the organisation that employed you?' Shailesh showed them

the separate seals on all three papers. The distinctions were useful. Genuine training received by some did not make Mukul's complaint of financial loss false; the possibility of fraud did not make Shailesh's employment unreal. 'I need the testimony of successful students in this case as well,' Seema said, 'so that we can draw the line between the services delivered and any deception.'

A difficulty emerged with Mukul's evidence. When the payment message first arrived on his phone, he had saved only a screenshot. The original message was still on the device, but a software update in the meantime had changed the route by which older messages could be found. The technical examiner recorded the process for preserving the date, sender and attached link from the original data still available on the phone. 'A screenshot isn't necessarily false,' Seema said. 'But if the original source is available, it must be checked against that source first.' Revati explained over the telephone that the necessary certification of electronic records under the Indian evidence law, and the question of their source, had to be addressed from the investigation stage. How a copy tendered in court had been created, on whose device, under whose authority, and how its integrity had been maintained could all change the outcome later. For the first time Mukul realised that his phone was not merely an instrument of distress; it had become an important witness in its own right.

The cyber unit received an authorised response from the payment-collection provider. Mukul's seven thousand five hundred rupees had entered a settlement account through the merchant identity 'Sampark Suvidha'. Further authorised banking confirmation was needed to establish how much of that money had subsequently gone where. In the initial accounts one amount matched the declared rent of a training room, but that alone did not show that Mukul's payment had been justified. Meanwhile three more students arrived with written evidence of having paid different sums. Two parents had complained only of threatening messages; nothing had been debited from their accounts. Seema gave a specific direction for the file: 'Six payers; complaints of threats without payment to be recorded separately.' 'Should we put all of them in one FIR?' her assistant asked. 'Decide as the law requires, on the basis of the incidents, actors, places and proven connections,' Seema replied. 'Similar advertising words don't automatically make every incident the same offence.'

Tarun Sethi had lately been sitting late at the Kharar office. Instalments on his home weighed on him, and his father's old dispensary had closed. One day Amandeep Sood asked him, 'How does an

advertisement for the company's free training open onto a fee-payment page?' 'The contracts department will answer that,' Tarun replied. Amandeep showed him his appointment letter, which described his work as providing information to students, not collecting payments. 'I never told anyone on the phone that a fee was compulsory,' he said. 'Then resign, if that's what you want,' Tarun snapped. That night Amandeep made lawful copies for his own records of his emails and daily work notes, but took no unauthorised copies from the company's server. He knew that gathering documents unlawfully could cast doubt upon his own truth. 'I want to keep my job,' he told his father, 'but I won't give false testimony in order to do it.' For the first time his father saw more patience than fear in his eyes.

When Seema reached Kharar, she conducted an authorised inspection of an office with the assistance of the local police. In Tarun's presence the listed computers, drafts of payment-related advertisements and rent receipts were secured. The seizure register recorded every device's description, seal, the time and the names of those present. At that moment an employee whispered that some folders had been deleted from the office message archive the previous evening. Seema took a separate statement from the employee. Without digital examination she could not say whether the deleted folders had held old training materials or documents connected with the payment campaign. Tarun denied having ordered destruction of any evidence. She recorded his account too. Twilight had fallen by the time the inspection ended. Outside the office smoke rose from the fire of an elderly man selling roasted corn. The state border had changed, but everywhere the small shops that kept people alive lit their fires at their accustomed hour.

The team went to Harpal Singh's building in Mohali with such care that the students' private training files would not be taken away unnecessarily. One room displayed posters for sewing classes run by a women's self-help group; another had an old computer-training board; a third held boxes used for printing advertisements. 'My rent arrived late and I quarrelled about it,' Harpal said. 'Will everyone now say my building is a den of crime?' 'Finding evidence of a crime in a building and finding its owner guilty are different matters,' Seema replied. Jasleen brought her father an old receipt on which the tenant's contact name was written 'T. Sethi'. There was still no clear connection between receipt of that rent and Tarun's actual ownership or control. Seema recorded a copy of the original receipt and the relevant statements. At dinner that night, Harpal's family realised that keeping a proper receipt could sometimes protect a person's sleep.

The teachers' council in Jodhpur split into two groups. One argued that every outside service should be stopped immediately to protect students. The other said it would be unjust to shut down, without examination, training that had actually helped some poor students find work. 'Suspend the right to collect personal identifying information, remove the disputed fee campaign, but investigate legitimate academic work separately,' Uma proposed at a meeting. Arvind looked exhausted. He admitted that he had erred in failing to examine the accounts and terms of the earlier contract properly, but protested the notion that every university employee had joined in a fraud. 'We must correct administrative mistakes,' Kusum said. 'Where a person's criminal role is established by evidence, there must be a separate process. Students will not stay silent to protect the institution's image, but we will not call every teacher guilty in the name of protecting students either.' The meeting ended without unanimity. Nevertheless, the interim arrangement for information security was approved.

One evening Riddhi met Payal in the hostel garden. 'I used to think the university would never listen to me,' Payal said. 'Now everybody talks about the secret list, but whom can I talk to about my own life?' Riddhi closed her notebook. 'If you like, I can listen about your studies, your scholarship or the counselling arrangements. The bank list needn't be at the centre of what we talk about.' Payal told her the date of her next examination, then described a small disagreement with her mother. That night, for the first time, the two talked at length about ordinary life beyond the five hundred names. At the end Payal said, 'I don't want the bad days of my life to become a file number.' 'Nobody in this ledger—or in this life—is only a number,' Riddhi replied. Payal laughed. 'There you go again, quoting a line from some fat book you must be reading.'

A more concrete piece of evidence emerged a week later. The authorised-signature page of the original merchant agreement for the payment-collection service known as 'Sampark Suvidha' bore an indication of Tarun Sethi's name. Certified banking records showed that a limited settlement sum had reached an account associated with that merchant identity. But it remained to be tested who had actually signed, as distinct from whose name was indicated. Tarun maintained that his printed name had been placed on a paper prepared by a former employee and that the signature was not his. Seema sought a document examination. Meanwhile a complainant telephoned early in the morning: an unknown number had called the previous night telling the person to withdraw the police complaint. The caller was still

unidentified. Seema requested the original call details through authorised channels and made practical arrangements for the witness's safety. No conclusion was drawn that Tarun had ordered the threat.

Revati Jha sat by the old window of her Delhi office. Two separate files lay before her assistant Shashibhushan: Ramautar Nat's private consumer dispute over money lost in an online game, and the complaints about employment fees and misuse of information at Marudhar. 'They're both digital payments,' the assistant said. 'Couldn't we turn them into one case?' 'The form of payment is similar,' Revati answered, 'but the actors, events, legal relationships and evidence are different. People have brought us their losses; we cannot merge them into a single story for our own convenience.' She remembered the seized ledger in Darbhanga in 2000, when she had worked with her father. Then too, a broad police allegation had enclosed transactions of quite different kinds. Twenty-five years later the screen had changed, but the first principle of advocacy had not. Shashibhushan sent Ramautar a separate checklist for his consumer records; for Marudhar, Revati decided to ask Riddhi and Inspector Seema about the status of documents obtainable through lawful channels.

The lawyer's call reassured Riddhi. 'I have authorised institutional documents,' she said, 'not the banks' private original transaction records. The most dangerous thing about the five-hundred-name sheet is that public opinion has already turned it into five hundred criminals.' 'Then the first duty is to stop that conclusion,' Revati replied. 'The second is to find a genuine remedy for the person whose money was taken. The third is to give anyone whose account or name has been wrongly used a way to correct their information.' 'If the police arrest one person, what happens to all the other names?' Riddhi asked. 'The arrested person will go through the procedure relevant to their case. No provision automatically attaches to everyone else. Every ground for action must be written down separately.' After the call, Riddhi leaned back in her chair. She had been reading that list for months, but today, for the first time, she understood the order in which it might be possible to move beyond it.

In the first week of March an FIR was registered. The allegations centred upon false assurances of officially verified employment made to identified complainants, including Mukul, the collection of particular amounts and the related digital messages. The university's file of five hundred entries was recorded as possible material for the investigation, not as a list of automatically guilty account holders. Inspector Seema caused written reasons to be recorded identifying which evidence needed immediate preservation, who should receive notice to appear and against whom coercive action might be necessary. Having received a notice to

appear, Amandeep Sood came to the office with his lawyer and gave information about the instructions governing his digital work. He was not arrested. In Tarun Sethi's case, particular payment-authorisation records, disputed office messages and material raising concerns about alteration of evidence had been gathered. Seema set down this material and the separate question of the necessity of arrest in her written decision.

When Tarun was arrested, he was informed of the reasons and given an opportunity to contact a lawyer. His wife Ritika was silent for a long time when she first heard the news over the phone. Their two-year-old daughter Sona was drawing a house on coloured paper. Ritika left the child with a neighbour and went to the police station. 'Is he guilty?' she asked. 'An arrest is not a conviction,' Seema replied. 'Specific investigative reasons have been recorded; the court will examine their legality and whether further custody is needed.' 'Then where will you keep him tonight?' Ritika asked. The officer explained the prescribed procedure. Much of the legal vocabulary meant little to Ritika at that moment. All she knew was that she would have to invent another story for her daughter that night to explain her father's absence. Outside, she covered her face with the end of her dupatta, then remembered that Ritika herself was not merely a name; she was a life.

The following day Tarun was produced before the competent judicial magistrate. A ceiling fan turned audibly in the courtroom although the March afternoon outside was growing hot. Magistrate Meenal Bhati first examined the police's written reasons for arrest. The prosecutor submitted that the electronic origin of the payments, the actual status of the deleted folders and a link with another office needed examination, and that limited police custody was necessary. Defence counsel Sushma Beniwal argued, 'The computers have been seized, the customers' messages preserved, and my client did not abscond. The need for custody must be proved on independent grounds. A job title and a printed name are not proof of crime.' 'What particular investigative step cannot be completed without physical custody?' the magistrate asked. The prosecutor gave a limited account concerning examination of a device and the search for a related object, and presented the purpose in writing. The court's reasoned order permitted custody for a limited period, not for the broader duration requested. Guilt was not the issue under consideration at that hearing.

As Tarun was taken out of court, he saw his wife for a moment. Ritika wanted to ask, 'Why did you?' But there was little time before he had to meet his lawyer. She said only, 'Tell our daughter her father will write

soon.' Tarun lowered his head. Sushma explained to Ritika the limits of the court's order and the remedies available for bail, without promising a result. Ritika stood silent and then asked, 'And if he really has cheated someone?' 'Then justice must be done on the evidence,' Sushma answered. 'If part of the allegation is false, the evidence must determine that too. You are his wife, so your pain is real. But your pain alone cannot decide the case.' Ritika was not angered by the answer. For the first time she realised that a lawyer's truest consolation was not always a promise of victory.

Mukul was in the court corridor with his brother Ramesh. He did not need to testify that day, but wanted to see how respectfully the court treated the person against whom he had complained. 'If the accused gets such a full hearing, when will our seven thousand five hundred come back?' Ramesh asked. 'I ask that too,' Mukul replied. 'But if I were arrested on an empty accusation, I would want to be heard as well.' Ramesh remained preoccupied with the cost of his younger brother's education. 'You've studied enough to speak about very difficult things,' he said. 'We still don't have the money at home.' Mukul wrote the court date in a corner of his notebook. He knew that an explanation of legal principles did not make a family's financial troubles disappear. But abandoning proper procedure could carry those troubles into another home. He took his brother for tea. For a little while the trembling steam from their glasses held them both in the same warmth.

Back at the investigating office, Seema prepared a timetable in accordance with the conditions of the written order. She directed that the times of questions put to Tarun, the persons present and his answers be recorded systematically. Authorised requests for private banking records remained in progress. But she accepted no substantial basis for demanding the immediate freezing of all five hundred accounts. 'If we don't stop them at once, the money will disappear,' said her junior assistant Sandeep. 'Where there are particular suspicious transactions, risks and lawful authority, examine the need for urgent action separately,' Seema answered. 'But stopping the money a student receives for food through a scholarship, merely because that person's name appears in one of five hundred lines, cannot be called caution.' Sandeep fell silent. Seema added a page to the order file: 'State separately the grounds concerning each particular account and transaction.' Nobody yet understood the full importance of that page, but it contained the seed of the following month's dispute.

At the bank branch Gagandeep prepared a small appendix. The authorised documents available to her concerned only specified

transactions; not all five hundred accounts belonged to her branch. 'If a police letter comes, close every account,' one colleague said. 'We'll read what the letter actually says, examine the limits of the authority and respond appropriately to the risk,' Sarabjit replied. 'A bank must assist an investigation, but it must not cut off someone's livelihood beyond what an order permits.' In her notebook Gagandeep wrote: 'Freezing order; full status of account; legitimate source of income; review.' She thought of her mother's earnings from weaving at home. If a small account were frozen in error, medicine, rent and school fees would not stop falling due for an investigator's convenience. That evening she called her mother and asked whether she had been paid. 'I don't want the bank's conveniences from you,' her mother laughed. 'I want to hear my daughter's voice.'

Sunita did not travel from Ludhiana to Jodhpur. She devoted herself instead to obtaining certified records from the old labour dispute. Baldev Singh accompanied her to the labour office. Dust had darkened some pages in the file, but the date stamps in the register remained clear. An attendance entry under the name Hardev Chauhan continued until December of a year in which a fellow worker had said Hardev had not come to the factory for months. Sunita applied for a certified copy, and the employee gave her a date to collect it. 'Why remember Hardev's name now, after he's been missing for years?' Baldev asked. 'Not missing,' Sunita said, 'present in the register. Where he was in life, I don't know. That's the difference I'm trying to understand by obtaining the accounts.' When Ramlakhan later saw the paper, he said, 'There were two workers named Hardev at different factories in my time. Don't make a single face out of the name Hardev.' His daughter added that recollection to her notes.

While she waited for the certified copy, Riddhi looked again at the Marudhar list. Near the end of its five hundred lines was an entry reading 'H. Chauhan', beside the words 'former worker contact'. It had no complete bank identifier, only incomplete digits of a mobile number and an unclear period of service. Riddhi did not yet show the entry to Sunita. First she checked the field heading in the original system used to compile the list. Did 'former worker contact' describe a person's previous occupation, or was it an old category used by the software for training? A technical assistant said it could also be an old option on a form. 'Then it isn't proof of a person's identity,' Riddhi said. 'Not yet,' the assistant replied. She wrote those two words in her notebook. The admission did not prevent further work; it defined its limits.

Meanwhile Kusum organised an open programme at the university: 'Employment, Information and Students' Rights'. It was not a conference for the police to identify criminals. Shailesh, who had obtained a real job; Mukul, who had lost money; Mohan, who had protected his password; and Payal, who had raised concerns about data, spoke in turn. 'I won't disclose the story of my counselling from this platform,' Payal said. 'But every university service must have clear consent.' 'I got a job,' Shailesh said, 'but that gives me no right to dismiss another person's complaint.' 'Don't turn the message through which my money was taken into a joke against me,' Mukul said. Arvind and Uma Pareek sat down on the empty chairs at the front of the platform. 'I accept responsibility for improving the language of the contract,' Arvind said. His statement was not complete atonement, but for the first time students and administrators at the same table were listening to one another.

Noor Jahan's article appeared under the headline: 'Five Hundred Entries, Not Five Hundred Accused'. It printed no individual account identifiers. She discussed the limits of the court's order, set out both sides' statements as verified, and explicitly left unanswered questions unanswered. An angry reader wrote, 'With all this caution, the criminals will escape.' Noor did not publish a reply, but wrote in her private notebook: 'Printing false accusations does not strengthen a criminal investigation. The rights of victims and a fair trial for the accused are not opposites.' That day Sahar Bano telephoned. 'My children have read your article,' she said, 'and they're asking what the number beside a name means.' 'Tell them we mustn't permit a piece of paper to become a human being,' Noor answered. She remembered her earlier work in 2024 on electoral-funding records. Even then the boundary between transparency and humiliation had not been easy to draw.

In the last week of March Revati travelled to Darbhanga to visit her father. Shivnarayan Jha had grown old; his fingers trembled as he turned a book's pages, but his questions were as clear as ever. Revati briefly told him the story of the five hundred entries. 'In 2000, the seized ledger in Neelkanth's case contained a dead man's name,' he said. 'Do you remember?' 'I do,' Revati replied. 'Once more there is a distance between a name and a person.' 'What else has changed?' he asked. 'Now a ledger isn't in a person's pocket but among many servers. A copy can reach a thousand people in one night. Protecting it has become both harder and more necessary.' 'Then your first duty is the same,' her father said. 'Don't say more than the paper says.' Revati closed his book. Evening colour was spreading across the doorway.

After appearing in response to the investigator's notice, Amandeep Sood was permitted to return to Kharar, but the office where he worked seemed almost shut. Prescriptions from his father's dispensary lay scattered across the table. His younger sister Kritika came with her examination admit card. 'Brother, do you still have a job?' she asked. 'I don't know yet,' Amandeep replied. 'But I've said what I know, and I haven't invented what I don't know.' Kritika began checking the spelling of her own and her father's names on the admit card. Amandeep too had once made lists of students' names; correcting an old error in a name had been a small part of his job. Now he understood that safeguarding the correct spelling of someone's name was also a professional responsibility. He placed his appointment letter, payslips and the date of his statement to the investigators in an empty folder. He hoped his legitimate work would be distinguished from the suspicions gathering around him; the outcome of any future order remained uncertain.

In Ludhiana, Gagandeep Kaur helped an elderly woman worker sit down at the bank counter. Her name was Shanti Devi, and she had come to check the account into which her wages were paid. A message on her phone instructed her to attend a distant office for compulsory identity renewal. Checking through the bank's authorised system, Gagandeep found that no such instruction had come from the branch. She explained how to register Shanti's complaint and obtain an acknowledgement, but did not advise closing the account. Closing the account receiving her wages would double the difficulty. 'I used to think the key to my account was with the bank,' Shanti said. 'Now someone is trying to make another key inside my phone.' Gagandeep explained the safer practices to her. Sarabjit listened from behind the counter. She felt that in the coming days the bank's real test would be not merely to catch suspicious money but also to protect the lawful earnings of working people.

That evening Sunita telephoned Riddhi. The certified labour register had arrived, containing the old entry under the name 'Hardev Chauhan'. Riddhi looked once more at the ambiguous 'H. Chauhan' line in her authorised list. The initial of the name and a term relating to worker contact matched on both papers; the dates, full identity, banking route and actual control by any particular person did not. 'Your page and mine may belong to different histories,' Riddhi said. 'We'll compare their original sources through the proper legal procedure. We cannot yet say they refer to one man.' Sunita smiled. 'I don't want someone blamed on the strength of his name,' she said. 'And if any of our old unpaid wages travelled through someone's hands, I want evidence of that too.' At the end of the call each woman put her own papers into a separate envelope.

One thing, at least, was certain: the story spreading across twenty-seven years had reached the threshold of a new ledger. It contained five hundred serial numbers; the final judicial identity of not a single human being had yet been written there.

Chapter 35 — The Accounts Were Frozen

Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Kharar and Darbhanga; April–September 2026

On the last evening of Chaitra, the hot desert wind had not yet risen in Jodhpur, but the day's sunlight had heated the iron bars of the hostel's old windows. Arjun Meena got off a bus and went to the university's bank-assistance centre. In one hand he carried his scholarship sanction letter and a slip for his younger sister's school fees. The employee behind the window entered his account number into the computer, looked at the screen and called another employee over. 'Withdrawals have been stopped on your account,' he said. At first Arjun thought the machine was faulty. He had withdrawn three thousand rupees from this account before, and expected to do so again today. The employee showed him the screen a second time. The available balance was more than thirteen thousand rupees; the amount available for withdrawal was zero. The deadline printed on the fee slip in Arjun's hand suddenly ceased to be words and became the sound of a door closing.

An elderly teacher standing in the bank queue laid a hand on Arjun's back. 'Have you left some papers behind?' he asked. Arjun could not answer. Two years earlier, his father had sold the family's only goat and deposited the proceeds so that his son could continue studying without selling their sandy field. Now the restriction on his scholarship money was not merely an instruction from a bank; it raised the question of how the family would eat in the months ahead. The counter clerk looked at him with sympathy, but personal sympathy could not lift an order entered into a computer. He handed Arjun an application form. 'Ask in writing for the details of the office that imposed the restriction. The bank will give you whatever information it is permitted to disclose.' 'Have I committed a crime?' Arjun asked. 'There is no finding of guilt on this screen,' the employee replied.

That same morning, two women arrived together at Sunita Paswan's labour-assistance room in Ludhiana. The first was Shanti Devi, whose bank account held the money for her elderly husband's medicine. The other, Champa Devi, had received payment for sewing work the previous night, only to have her transaction rejected at the vegetable seller's that morning. Their troubles looked and sounded alike, but the reasons for opening their accounts, the banks involved and the grounds of the restrictions were different. Sunita seated them and brought them water. 'First write down the date of the restriction, the branch, the notice, the balance shown and the payments you need to make,' she said. Champa

brought out her torn register. 'If the money is there, why must the cooking fire go out?' Sunita had no immediate answer to her question.

At noon Sunita telephoned Sarabjit Kaur, a bank officer. Sarabjit explained that Champa's account had been restricted separately under the bank's internal identity-verification process, while a specified sum in Shanti's account had been placed on hold following a request connected with a cybercrime investigation in another state. 'Don't call these things by a single name,' Sarabjit said. 'Incomplete identity documentation, a lawful investigative hold and a court order concerning property follow three different routes.' 'For my people the consequence is the same,' Sunita replied. 'They cannot get their money. But the remedies are different, and I intend to understand them.' Sarabjit asked her to come to the branch with an authorised representative. She did not promise to show her the police's confidential file; she said only that the bank could explain the limits of its own instructions.

Gagandeep, a junior employee, placed a sheet of paper on Sarabjit's desk. A line divided two expressions on it: 'specific amount to be held' and 'entire account to be blocked'. 'Yesterday an email referred to the five hundred names,' Gagandeep said. 'Someone at the customer-service centre advised blocking every account.' Sarabjit pushed the paper back. 'The file with five hundred entries came from a university. It is not a list of five hundred bank accounts belonging to criminals. Who signed such a blanket instruction? Is there a specific description of the offence? What is the officer's jurisdiction? What is the bank's own duty?' For the first time, Gagandeep saw that prudence did not consist merely in imposing restrictions; it also meant protecting people against wrongful ones. Her mother still made shawls at home from discarded cloth. She knew the worth of every hundred rupees.

In Jodhpur, Riddhi Bishnoi was studying the receipt register for a sealed envelope at the hostel office, rather than opening the envelope itself. An authorised inquiry into the true source of the file containing five hundred numbered entries was underway. A new rumour had already spread across the university: 'The police have frozen all five hundred accounts.' Riddhi saw anxious messages from one or two students on her phone, but refused requests to publish the list. Himmat Ansari and Payal Raigar came to see her. 'Students are queuing at the banks,' Payal said. 'Even those whose accounts haven't been touched are frightened.' 'I'll state the facts within the limits of what I know,' Riddhi replied. 'Circulating a confidential list of names is no solution.' Then Arjun telephoned. There was more disbelief than anger in his voice. 'I couldn't pay my examination fee today.'

Arjun's home was not very far from Jodhpur, but the bus fare appeared as a separate item in the household's weekly accounts. His mother, Renu Meena, was turning millet spread out to dry on palash leaves when her son's call came. At first she was angry at the news from the bank. 'Did you let someone else use your account?' 'No,' Arjun said at once, and then fell silent. His mother heard the silence. 'Has anything come into it? Tell me the truth.' 'Last year I received an honorarium for helping with registration at an event. I thought it was an authorised training programme.' 'Then you kept the receipt for it, didn't you?' she asked. Nobody was scolding Arjun now. He had been given time to search the corners of his own memory.

On the Marudhar campus, Riddhi met Arjun not in a public corridor but in the student-assistance room. Naseema, the university's legal-aid coordinator, and Himmat, a student-union representative, were with them. Riddhi made it clear that she was neither a police officer nor an advocate; her authorised task was to gather institutional facts about the list's origins and the welfare of students. Arjun began by explaining that part of the balance in his account was scholarship money. 'Was there any other payment?' Naseema asked. Arjun shifted in his chair. 'Once I received four thousand two hundred rupees,' he said. 'A man from a company told me it was an honorarium for explaining registration to students.' The fan continued turning above them. That admission, by itself, established no offence. But for the first time a definite transaction emerged from behind the five hundred rows of names, one that could be investigated.

Rather than record Arjun's account in her private notebook, Riddhi prepared an institutional statement with his consent. It set out the date of the payment, its stated purpose, the employee who had given the verbal assurance and the number of students who had actually attended the programme. Arjun added something later. 'Two days after I received the honorarium, an unknown caller said there would be a second payment if I changed the name of a file. I refused.' 'Do you have the number?' Himmat asked. Arjun produced his old mobile phone. Its screen was cracked; the call log showed a time, but there was no audio recording of what had been said. 'What we've heard is your statement,' Naseema said. 'The existence of the call must be checked separately.'

In a room at the Kharar police station, Tarun Sethi was meeting his advocate, Sushma Kapoor. Following his arrest in March, the court had allowed a limited period of police custody; when that period ended, judicial custody had been ordered, and his bail application was still pending. 'Did you actually control the money that went out of your

account in the capacity of a settlement merchant?' Sushma asked. 'I never did anything without the company's approval,' Tarun answered. 'Then where are the original authorisations?' she asked. Tarun lowered his head. He maintained his innocence, but the bare assertion that he had been an employee did not resolve the factual difficulties in his bail application.

Sushma took out another copy of the bail petition. The prosecution material contained the merchant's identifying details, a company payment authorisation, written complaints from two victims and an incomplete message. The defence material contained Tarun's monthly salary slips, the organisation's official description of his duties, proof of residence for his wife Ritika, and an offer to provide documents required for the investigation. 'A bail hearing will not establish guilt,' Sushma said. 'But the judge must consider the concerns arising from the available material, the protection of witnesses, the possibility of interference with evidence and how your attendance can be secured.' 'If the bank account has been frozen, how can the court still hold me responsible for the work?' Tarun asked. 'Custody and an account restriction are two separate orders,' Sushma answered. 'One legal problem does not automatically settle another.'

Tarun's wife, Ritika, was now troubled by a payment withheld from her small sewing business. The account was not in Tarun's name; it belonged to Ritika. But the bank's compliance department had held up a customer's online payment for several days while it investigated a possible match with the disputed payment identifier used by the company. Thinking of the money owed for her little daughter Sona's books, Ritika went to the branch. An officer informed her in writing that her personal account did not appear on the police's specified list, but verification of the commercial payment provider remained incomplete. 'If my husband is being investigated, will the money I earn by sewing also be treated as criminal?' she asked. 'No,' the employee replied. 'But we need to examine the documents showing its source.' Ritika did not find complete justice in that answer, but she could at least see a definite way forward.

At the labour-assistance centre in Ludhiana, Sunita made three separate folders for bank papers that day. One contained a list of identity documents Champa needed to complete, another the notice concerning a disputed sum of one thousand three hundred and fifty rupees in Shanti's account, and the third a certified copy of an earlier order concerning wages owed to Ramlakhan. Losing patience, Baldev Singh said, 'Every scrap of paper has become a court paper. How are we supposed to live?' 'These three folders require three different remedies,' Sunita replied. 'Champa must complete her documents at the bank; the reason for the

limited hold on Shanti's money must be addressed in the authorised investigation; and the question of wages due to Babu is governed by the labour authority's order. If we put all of it in one application, nobody will benefit.' Baldev found the answer difficult, but he began separating the documents.

Shanti Devi had borrowed three hundred and fifty rupees to buy medicine for her husband. The bank told her that one thousand three hundred and fifty rupees was linked to a suspicious chain of transactions. Although the notice did not call for debits to be stopped on the entire account, the machine would not let her withdraw the remaining balance either. Sarabjit summoned the branch's technical officer. It emerged that the system offered two distinct options: 'hold a specified amount' and 'stop all withdrawals'. Faced with an ambiguous letter, an officer had selected the more severe option. Sarabjit did not immediately assign blame. She first examined the wording of the letter, when it had arrived, the branch's operating records and who had authority to review the action. 'If the instruction covers only a specific sum, why is the rest of the balance blocked?' Her question reached the security officer's office.

Harpreet Bains, the bank's regional compliance officer, joined a video meeting. Before him lay the government's 2026 guidance and summaries of recent judicial opinions. He explained that an investigation might require suspicious funds to be secured at once, but the bank also had to establish the source of the request, the particular alleged offence, the amount in dispute and whether the statutory process for informing the competent magistrate had been followed. 'I am not a judge reviewing the police's orders,' he said, 'but neither am I entitled to expand a vague instruction on my own authority and shut off every customer's money.' Sarabjit copied his carefully chosen words into her work register. For Gagandeep, this was no lecture on law. It concerned the money withheld from a customer who needed to buy medicine.

Far away in Kharar, Amandeep Sood's father sat with the old cash box from his dispensary open before him. Since the shop had closed, he had entered the cost of food, medicines and old debts in the same notebook. There was no legal restriction on the account into which Amandeep's wages had been paid, but the suspicions of other people seemed no less severe. A neighbour said, 'That Setuvahak boy supplied names for five hundred accounts.' Amandeep suppressed the urge to answer. He knew he had witnessed irregularities in some of the promotional files, but before leaving his job he had failed to record everything. At the bank, the staff had treated him respectfully. Yet in every transaction he felt he was having to defend his reputation. To be innocent on paper and to be

regarded as innocent in the minds of one's neighbours were different stories.

Amandeep's sister Kritika was preparing for her Class Twelve examinations. While studying at home, she would turn towards the window whenever a police vehicle passed outside. 'Brother, will they question me?' she asked. 'Keep studying. If an authorised officer asks, I'll tell them what I saw,' Amandeep replied. Kritika was working on percentages in her mathematics textbook. 'Out of the five hundred, how many people is there evidence against?' she asked. 'Who gave you that question?' 'The people in the village.' After a moment, Amandeep said, 'You can't calculate a percentage merely by looking at five hundred rows. First you have to establish how many actual people those rows refer to.' Even to give so simple an answer, he had to fight against a whole year's accumulated fear.

In Jodhpur, Naseema put a notice on the student-assistance centre's wall: 'Do not make personal account numbers public when submitting bank-account complaints.' The sheet explained how to ask a branch for written information, identified authorised grievance forums and gave the hours of the free legal-aid office. 'Will you just keep putting up notices?' someone asked sarcastically. 'Our scholarships are frozen.' 'That's why a written application has also been submitted in Arjun's case,' Naseema replied. 'But if we share everyone's account details without permission, we shall commit another injustice in the name of seeking a remedy.' Beneath the notice, Payal wrote a line in her own hand: 'Keep confidential counselling information separate from this application.' Writing those few words eased a little of the pain of her earlier experience.

That evening, Riddhi studied the two copies of Arjun's statement in her room. One concerned the scholarship register, the other the alleged registration honorarium. The scholarship approval was clear, but they had not yet obtained a complete copy of the letter stating the reason for the bank restriction. Riddhi telephoned Anuradha Sen. 'The payment of four thousand two hundred rupees can be investigated,' she said. 'But I do not know the basis for restricting the entire account, with its thirteen thousand rupees.' 'I won't draw a conclusion without the bank's confidential original records,' Anuradha replied. 'If Arjun has given a written statement, it can be submitted to the authorised investigators. The university can independently confirm whether his scholarship was lawfully sanctioned.' Riddhi wrote again in her notebook: 'Entitlement to assistance is not a finding about crime.'

In the second week of April, a notice stating 'Withdrawals Prohibited' reached a small utensil shop in Jodhpur. The shopkeeper, Yakub Ansari, was polishing an iron platter. On one side of his accounts stood customers who owed him money; on the other, the sums he owed a wholesaler. A student interested in repairing an old fan had once come to his shop and bought some materials through a private training portal. Later, the payment identifier used by that portal appeared in a sequence of transactions connected with a cybercrime complaint. The proceeds from the sale in Yakub's account were small, yet all withdrawals from his business account had been stopped. Customers continued to take away their utensils, while Yakub could not pay his wholesaler. Day by day, his wife Jamila saw the trust of another five or seven people slip away from the household accounts.

Yakub handed the shop keys to Jamila and went to Naseema's office. 'I cannot spend year after year fighting in court,' he said. Naseema first asked him for purchase and sales invoices, delivery receipts, bank statements and the branch notice. 'So many private documents?' Yakub asked nervously. 'Without them, whatever I say will not amount to evidence either,' Naseema answered. 'But the material will not be made public unnecessarily.' Two members of Jamila's sewing group came as well. They explained that if Yakub's shop closed, the community kitchen's supply of lamps and platters would suffer. This was not merely a question of one trader's profits; it concerned the countless small dependencies through which a city sustains itself.

In her Delhi office, Revati Jha was reading Yakub's written account when Shashibhushan took out the old file on Neelkanth Sah and placed it before her. 'In 2000 they sealed the shop because of the names in a ledger,' he said. Revati did not smile. 'Then there was a physical seizure at someone's home. Now a business can be brought to a halt on a mobile screen. But the question of rights is just as old.' She telephoned Yakub and made it clear that his case formed part of a specific police investigation; she could not promise an immediate order releasing every account. First they had to establish the proper jurisdiction, obtain the police's written communication and gather proof of the restrictions actually imposed. 'I need justice quickly,' Yakub replied, 'but I don't want false assurances.'

That week Inspector Seema Chaudhary received three different written replies from branches in three states. One bank had held only the amounts involved in a few specified transactions. Another had blocked all withdrawals on the strength of a general reference to an investigation. A third had confused the renewal of its customer's identity documents with a police investigative restriction. 'Look at what I actually wrote,'

Seema told her junior officer. 'What the banks understood may be something else.' Her original request had sought the financial trail of Mukul's payment of seven thousand five hundred rupees, the identification of certain recipients and additional records. It had contained no clear authorised order collectively freezing the five hundred entries. The question now was: at what stage had the message acquired a wider meaning?

Seema examined the dispatch register in her office. The preliminary list attached to one outgoing email had been labelled 'possibly connected'. In a summary prepared by the next office, the wording had become 'connected accounts'. They checked the timestamp to establish which assistant had drafted the summary. 'I thought the bank ought to be cautious,' junior officer Vinod Paliwal said nervously. Seema's voice was clear rather than harsh. 'Caution is not the same as restriction. The words you wrote may cause someone to go without food.' Vinod immediately asked to prepare a corrective letter. Seema instructed him to send it as an official correction to the original communication—but only after the entire chain of correspondence had been preserved.

After examining the documents, police legal adviser Sadhana Mathur said, 'Under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, there are powers to secure property connected with an offence, a duty to report to the magistrate, and separate procedures for attachment or restoration of property. Begin by establishing which order was actually invoked here. Squeezing two provisions of law onto the same sheet of paper does not enlarge anyone's powers.' Seema asked how the immediate irregularity should be remedied. 'If it remains necessary to secure a specific suspicious sum, record the reasons, put the judicial-oversight record in order, and seek a review of restrictions unnecessarily hanging over innocent people's additional funds. If a broader restraint is needed, follow the competent statutory procedure—not merely the fear displayed on a computer screen.'

Meanwhile the date for Tarun's bail hearing arrived. Ritika had left their daughter Sona with a neighbour before coming to the courthouse. In her written submissions Sushma Kapoor argued that most of the devices had already been seized, Tarun had a fixed address, and conditions could be imposed requiring him to attend the investigation and prohibiting contact with witnesses. The prosecution objected: one operator involved in the source of the files remained unavailable, and the chain of authority over the principal merchant identity used for payments had not been completed. Judge Meenal Bhati asked both sides for timestamps and evidence of the investigation's actual progress.

Tarun's family's poverty was a circumstance that could evoke the court's sympathy, but the evaluation of the allegations and evidence remained a separate task.

Reading out the order, the judge said that the court was not deciding guilt at this stage. The first phase of the investigation had concluded and important material was secured, though statements from some witnesses were still outstanding. Having weighed the specific reasons available, the court could grant Tarun bail subject to defined conditions: attendance on specified dates, no tampering with evidence, no pressure upon relevant witnesses and compliance with reporting requirements concerning travel. The prosecution retained the right to make a lawful application if fresh concrete material emerged. When Ritika heard the order, she struggled to hold back her tears. She did not feel that justice had been won. But her husband would be able to sit on his own bed again, and that much changed the burden of an evening.

When Tarun returned home, Sona ran to him and clung to his knees. Ritika was completing an unfinished turn of the wheel on her sewing machine. 'What about my bank account?' Tarun asked. 'Your bail hasn't lifted the bank restriction,' she said. 'And the verification of payments for my business is being handled separately.' There was no broad smile of victory on Tarun's face. He sat at his little table and began teaching his daughter to write the alphabet. Her hand trembled while forming the first letter. Tarun held her fingers and helped her complete it. He thought of the many links an order signed by one person must pass through before reaching the hands of another. This small exercise at home reminded him of the signatures he himself had once written.

Yakub's petition was listed for its first hearing in a Jodhpur court. Revati was available remotely, while local advocate Usha Pareek appeared in person. The petition's central requests were that the legal basis for the account restriction be disclosed, proof of lawful commercial transactions be examined, and an appropriate order be considered allowing use of funds other than the disputed amount. Counsel for the state argued that money moved quickly in a multistate investigation and that prematurely lifting a restriction could obstruct the inquiry. After hearing the advocates, the judicial magistrate first required production of the original communication, details of the investigative reference and a description of the restriction the bank had actually applied. Without examining the basis of the decision, the court observed, both granting relief and refusing it would be conjecture.

When the magistrate asked for copies of the application, another question arose. If the bank's restriction extended further than the original communication, who held the records showing when it had been imposed, by which employee and through which system entry? Usha Pareek said that the customer had been told only that there was a 'legal direction'; the detailed records were controlled by the bank. The judge ordered the authorised branch communication and the information that police had furnished to the court to be produced within a specified period. No conclusion was reached about the source of the disputed money. Outside, Yakub telephoned Jamila. 'The money wasn't released today,' he said. 'But now there'll be documents we can question, won't there?' she replied. For the first time, Yakub understood that working days must be counted even in the interval between the beginning of a hearing and an appropriate final order.

That day Noor Jatay sat down to write another report. Her earliest experience of journalism had taught her that a headline such as 'Five Hundred Accounts Frozen' would catch a reader's eye at once, but could also put the same stain on the faces of five hundred students. She changed it to 'The Investigative Letter, the Bank Restriction and Ordinary People's Accounts'. No final digits of account numbers, counselling details or scholarship names appeared in the published piece. With Yakub's consent she described the difficulties his business faced, but she also included the police's contrary position that particular funds needed to be protected during the investigation. 'There's less sensation in this headline,' her editor said. 'Sometimes a document's value lies in precisely that lack of sensation,' Noor replied.

Payal Raigar had been invited to speak at a school gathering on 'The Student's Mind and Public Accusation'. A student asked whether it was safe to remain friends with someone whose bank account had been frozen. 'The question began with a bank,' Payal replied, 'but you're proposing to decide the fate of a friendship without evidence of a crime. That is another kind of wound.' She spoke briefly and delicately about the psychological strain she had once suffered, without making her private medical details public. The students saw that confidentiality did not mean concealing the truth; it meant protecting a person from needless exposure. Arjun sat at the back. Not everyone was looking at him, yet he could hear the movement of his own heart within his ribs.

That evening Arjun's friend Omprakash came to see him near his home. Omprakash had once been a rival applicant on the waiting list for the university place sought by Ruhani. After the admission had been upheld under the rules, both had gone on with their studies. 'Do you

think I'm lying?' Arjun asked. 'I can't investigate your statement,' Omprakash replied. 'But that doesn't mean I should stop sitting beside you on the bus.' He opened his lunch tin and placed pickle on the rotis he had divided between them. They sat eating. Even when people on a village road did not understand the difficult language of law, sharing a roti could resemble an everyday act of justice. Arjun found no words for that thought, but carried it within him through the night.

Anuradha Sen was completing the classification of the five hundred rows in the course of her authorised examination. The list contained repeated names, old hostel-room codes and rows in which the last four digits of bank accounts appeared identical. Without full account identification, those similarities proved nothing. She made one column headed 'Proof of payment found', a second 'Service register only', a third 'Identity uncertain', and a fourth, still blank, 'Actual control'. 'Why is the last column empty?' Riddhi asked. 'Many accounts are in one person's name, while somebody else directs their transactions,' Anuradha explained. 'And in many other accounts, the appearance of a recipient's name is no proof of an unauthorised instruction. We need facts before we can fill in the blank.'

That night Inspector Seema called a meeting after receiving the authorised bank communication. As an institutional representative, Riddhi spoke only about the origins of the five-hundred-entry file; Anuradha attended for financial comparison within the scope of her authority. Seema first ordered that the unjustified generalisation be removed. The entry for Arjun's four thousand two hundred rupees lay on her desk too. The payment appeared to have come through a merchant settlement system, but its source one stage further back had not yet been confirmed by banking evidence. 'Call the student to give a statement,' Seema said. 'But don't assume that receiving money into his account means he knew of an offence.' A junior officer asked, 'Then shall we take his phone?' 'We'll decide after recording the necessity, authority and procedure,' Seema replied. 'We do not seize property merely to satisfy our curiosity.'

In Ludhiana, a revised instruction from the bank's technical department removed the restriction on Shanti Devi's remaining balance, while the disputed one thousand three hundred and fifty rupees stayed secured. Sarabjit seated her and explained the two figures on the screen. Shanti put on her spectacles and peered at them. 'Can I buy the medicine now?' she asked. 'Yes,' Gagandeep said, 'from the balance available after excluding the disputed amount.' Shanti took an old prescription from her cloth bag. She bought the medicine first, then set aside her travel fare

and added up what remained for the family's food. There was no declaration of victory on her face, only the pleasure of being able to live an ordinary day again. The investigation into the disputed sum continued. She carried both truths with her as she left the bank.

Champa Devi's problem was comparatively simple, yet resolving it consumed the equivalent of four days' wages in time. The bank had asked for a second identity document and evidence explaining the difference between her old and new addresses. Champa had moved to another rented house the previous year. Sunita explained how to update her Aadhaar details and follow the bank's authorised process, because Champa had been considering paying an unauthorised agent to 'correct' her identity information. After proper verification at the branch, her account began working again. 'How many people did I need—one student, one lawyer, one bank officer?' Champa asked. 'You shouldn't need so many people to exercise your right,' Sunita laughed. 'But why must the citizen bear the inconvenience when the system gets something wrong? That question remains.'

Ramlakhan Paswan's breathing was heavier than usual that day. Sunita took him to a government hospital and then brought him home. 'How much of your factory's justice is still outstanding?' her father asked. 'We've received some of the arrears,' she said. 'The claim for certain days of attendance is still being heard.' 'My name was in the register, yet I never received all my wages,' Ramlakhan said softly. 'And a Hardev's name remained there month after month. How will anyone find that man?' Sunita took his hand. 'I won't go after the wrong person merely because the names match,' she said. Ramlakhan smiled with difficulty. 'For a father, that promise is enough.' It seemed as though the metallic smell of the factory still rose from the old scars on his hand.

That night Sunita attached the certified labour register to her reply to Riddhi's letter. The list contained uncertainties concerning the older period of Hardev Chauhan's service. A former colleague had stated that he had not seen Hardev at the factory for many months in 2009. But a statement concerning an old absence was not by itself proof of wage fraud. Riddhi replied: 'Our file still contains no reliable match for the full name, date of birth, account identity or period of service of H. Chauhan. At present it is merely a repeated initial in a list.' Sunita was not disappointed. Years of experience had taught her that presenting incomplete evidence as complete would ultimately injure the worker.

At the beginning of Jyeshtha, Yakub's case came up for its second hearing. The bank's certified statement was now before the court. Two

thousand six hundred rupees had been identified as the amount in dispute, but the additional letter responsible for the debit restriction on the entire account contained nothing more specific than a general 'security request'. The investigating officer's revised reply stated that the material presently available related to the trail of those two thousand six hundred rupees; no specific reasons had been recorded to support a blanket restriction on the remaining lawful business receipts. Counsel for the state insisted that the power to investigate must be preserved. 'That power will remain,' Usha Pareek replied. 'But where will the rights of the man whose entire working capital has been shut away be recorded?'

The magistrate weighed the evidence at length in the order. While recognising the need to preserve the disputed money and the proper powers of investigation, the court directed the bank, in coordination with the authorised inquiry, to permit ordinary transactions against the undisputed balance in the account. If investigators later obtained additional facts on a proper statutory basis, they could seek a fresh order. The court also directed that the original communication, the sum involved and the office responsible be recorded before it. Yakub stood up when he heard the ruling, but Usha stopped him. 'The bank's system still has to implement it. We need written confirmation and a reconciliation of the remaining balance. Go only after you understand every word of the order.' Yakub obeyed. He could not slip the news of relief into his pocket as though it were cash.

When Yakub reached his shop, a woman from Jamila's sewing group was waiting. 'Will we be able to get the platters now?' she asked. 'I'll buy them once the bank confirms that I can,' Yakub replied. 'I'm producing evidence concerning the disputed two thousand six hundred rupees.' A bitter irony occurred to Jamila: their business had been paralysed for a month because of that single sum, and now simply setting it aside could allow life to resume. But she did not quarrel with her husband. She knew that a wholesaler might lose confidence even in an honest customer after four weeks of delay. She took out her old sewing receipts and scheduled the supplies for the following week. The family's victory would not be complete inside a courtroom; it would come with the first new sale at the shop.

In Uma's office, the university executive committee was considering a proposal to send a general security advisory concerning students' bank accounts. One member suggested that publishing all five hundred rows would let each student see their name and take precautions. 'And who will compensate a student who sees their own name and is instantly branded a criminal?' Manasvi asked. Three versions of the employment-

assistance contract lay before Arvind Pareek. 'I'll give a written account of whatever negligence was mine,' he said. 'But we must not put innocent students preparing for examinations on public display.' Uma secured the committee's decision: send specific information confidentially only to students concerned, issue a general cautionary message to everyone else, and preserve the original records securely for the authorised authorities.

Himmat Ansari organised an open meeting to hear students' questions, but at Riddhi's request no individual's banking details were read aloud. 'If my name is on the list but my account is working, can I stop worrying?' one student asked. 'A working account is not a final investigative finding,' Riddhi replied. 'But the appearance of a name on the list is not proof of a crime either. If you receive a personal complaint or notice, obtain the details in writing, seek legal assistance and preserve your records.' 'The bank told me my account was frozen but wouldn't explain why,' another student said. Naseema described how to request a written response from the branch. The meeting was trying to become a quiet lesson in citizens' rights instead of a collective exhibition of fear.

Riddhi's mother, Sharda Bishnoi, had gone to the village that week. It was time for the first turn of irrigation water in the fields. When Riddhi telephoned, Sharda asked, 'Has anything become clear about those five hundred people?' 'There is still no proof of five hundred accounts,' Riddhi said. 'Some of the entries have been verified.' Sitting on the embankment of her field, Sharda replied, 'If somebody measured the boundary of one field and used it to calculate the boundaries of a hundred, there'd be fighting all over the village. Your work sounds much the same.' The land of Marudhar from Riddhi's childhood rose before her eyes. Her father had shown her the old measurements, and there had been years of conflict over the path to Ramdev Mandal's well. A digital number and a line drawn in the earth demanded the same moral discipline: knowing where the true boundary lay.

In the first week of June, Arjun attended another authorised interview. Inspector Seema Chaudhary questioned him not as a person in custody but as a witness appearing in response to a written notice. Arjun brought the bank entry for his four-thousand-two-hundred-rupee credit, his training admission pass, a group photograph and the call log available on his phone. He had also brought proof of his father's income and the accounts of money sent to his mother, but Seema retained only the necessary documents. 'I don't need every page of your private life,' she said. When Arjun showed her the old workshop photograph, six students could be seen in it, whereas the payment register recorded honoraria for eight people. 'Who are the two other names?' Seema asked. 'I didn't see

them there,' Arjun replied. There was uncertainty in that answer, but uncertainty could not be converted into proof of guilt.

Seema took particular care to verify that one of the eight names did not refer to Mohan Bairwa, a student whom Riddhi had earlier identified. Mohan's name had been used in an unauthorised message, and students were linking unrelated incidents without reason. Another entry read 'R. Mehra'. Several people in the university's current student register matched that abbreviated name. 'Don't identify an account from an initial,' Anuradha said. Seema sent an authorised request to the bank for certified records if the original source trail of the honorarium was available. Confidential account information was to reach the investigating officer through lawful channels, not the university. Riddhi knew the limits of her role; that knowledge was part of the integrity of the investigation.

Meanwhile Sarabjit's branch received a communication, separate from Arjun's bank, clarifying the ambiguous wording of the police regional office's preliminary letter. Sarabjit showed Gagandeep that the correction was not meant simply to be read; it required a review of the measures already imposed. Each customer's documents were to be examined separately, so that unnecessary restrictions could be lifted or specific authorised reasons for retaining them could be recorded. 'What if a customer has suffered a loss because of the earlier mistake?' Gagandeep asked. 'There are prescribed grievance procedures,' Sarabjit answered. 'The bank has no right to conceal the facts or the period involved. But a compensation claim requires separate examination.' Looking up from the evidentiary papers, she met Gagandeep's eyes. 'Compliance is not the business of selling fear. It is the practice of accountability.'

When the undisputed balance of Yakub's account became available for withdrawal, the first payment he made was to his wholesaler. The man said only, 'Received,' over the telephone. To Yakub, the little word sounded sweeter than the long court order. His second payment went to his shop assistant, Qamaruddin, who had bought his child's schoolbooks on credit the week before. 'The delay wasn't my fault,' Yakub said, 'but you were the one who suffered.' 'If the account is frozen again,' Qamaruddin replied, 'just tell me first.' A process that had begun one day with a computer displaying 'zero' had affected relationships across so many households that no bank statement could ever contain a complete reckoning of it.

When the first rains of Ashadh fell on Ludhiana's factory settlement, the lane drains overflowed. Sunita hurried out of the assistance room to

save papers from the rain. Champa Devi's account was working again, and Shanti had regained access to money for her medicine. But wages for three other workers had not arrived in their accounts on time. The factory's new accountant said the bank was conducting a 'security check'. Sunita asked directly for the bank's letter. It emerged that none of the three accounts was under an investigative restriction; the company itself had failed to authorise the payroll in time. 'Don't hide your delay behind the bank's name,' she told the accountant. 'If the delay is the company's, the responsibility is the company's as well.' The accountant could offer no defiant reply; the real problem was that the manager responsible for approval was on leave. But that was no justification for workers' children going hungry.

Dharampal Khurana had grown old, but when Sunita's letter reached the factory's new management, he came to explain what he remembered. 'Back in 2009, I understood things differently by looking at the registers,' he said. 'Now people hear "machine error" and nobody accepts responsibility.' 'A machine doesn't feel pressure,' Sunita replied. 'A worker does. If wages weren't authorised on time, that is a failure of human judgment.' Dharampal fell silent for a while. Ramlakhan's wage dispute was still in his memory. He urged the manager to submit the lawful payroll without further delay. The outstanding wages were paid the following day, but Sunita's letter continued to demand an explanation of the true cause of the delay. A single day's relief did not settle an old question of rights.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha sat on the veranda of his house. Rainwater flowed from a broken drain in the courtyard towards the kitchen garden. Revati told him over the telephone that she had encountered five different bank-account disputes that year, each resting on a different legal basis. 'Do you remember that first ledger?' Shivnarayan asked. 'Neelkanth's? Yes. Murlidhar's name was still there after he died.' 'The name has travelled from paper into a machine,' her father said, 'but the judge's question remains the same: who is this written about, and why?' Revati did not launch into a long explanation of new statutory provisions. Looking at the small barriers built to control water in the courtyard of her childhood, she understood that the history of rights had been made through countless little checks and restraints, and through the need to know the proper limits of each.

When Revati arrived in Jodhpur for the hearing, Naseema came to meet her at the railway station. Revati asked whether the students' fear had lessened. 'Those whose accounts were never frozen are less frightened,' Naseema said. 'In the houses of those whose money is still

held, they count the passing time every night.' 'The days measured by a reasoned order of law are counted differently from the days measured by hunger,' Revati replied. She also had Mukul's claim for seven thousand five hundred rupees with her. Mukul pointed out that Tarun's release on bail had not returned his money. Revati did not oblige him to accept a settlement. She explained the course of his complaint, the possible evidentiary value of his documents and the separate lawful route for recovering funds. Mukul would not abandon his claim to the money he had earned.

In the court corridor, Revati met Ritika, who had brought documents showing the payments for her business. These formed part of a banking complaint separate from the bail case concerning her husband, Tarun. Revati did not accept Ritika as her own client; instead, she explained plainly that Ritika's interests and Mukul's might conflict, and that Ritika should obtain independent legal advice. The clarity of the response surprised her. 'Every lawyer treats my husband and me as one person,' she said. 'You belong to one family,' Revati replied, 'but you have separate accounts, separate work and separate rights.' Ritika subsequently consulted Sushma about the distinct complaint. There in the courthouse corridor came a small acknowledgement that a woman's identity could be separate from the accusations against her husband.

Anuradha Sen lawfully obtained a limited part of the bank's certified settlement records. They showed the credit of four thousand two hundred rupees to Arjun, other payments made on the same day and the identity of the merchant through which the funds had been deposited. But documents concerning the agreement behind that merchant remained incomplete. Anuradha presented Riddhi only with a summary she was authorised to share. 'The entry for R. Mehra and Arjun's payment bear the same date,' she said. 'That alone proves neither that the same person gave the instructions nor that anyone knew of a crime. The trail of the scholarship money is clear; it would be wrong to mix it with the questioned payment.' 'Then is it right to request release of Arjun's entire account?' Riddhi asked. 'The lawful forum will decide,' Anuradha said. 'But raise the question of his undisputed scholarship money separately.'

Arjun told his mother one more part of the truth. The representative who had offered him four thousand two hundred rupees had said that, besides payment for attending the training, there would be an additional reward based on how many other students he recruited. Arjun had given the names of two acquaintances, but he had not seen whether either had actually registered for training. 'Did they give you permission to use their names?' his mother asked. Arjun nodded: one had, but about the other he

was unsure. Renu remained quiet for a moment. 'You can say you received the money. But you must also answer whether you were right to use somebody else's name.' Arjun felt that before any court governed by written law, a stern court of conscience had already assembled in the room at home.

To prevent his fear from growing, Naseema arranged for Arjun to meet an independent, qualified advocate. Shalini Solanki first explained his rights and the significance of a statement he had given voluntarily. A court would determine the evidentiary value of what he said as a witness, she told him. He must not lie about his responsibilities, but neither should he extend an incomplete memory with guesses. If his legal position changed during the investigation, he would be entitled to appropriate assistance. 'If I repay the four thousand two hundred rupees, will every problem disappear?' Arjun asked. 'The proper disposal of the money is a separate procedure,' Shalini replied. 'The need to establish the truth does not end simply because a sum has been returned.'

On the second night of rain, Arjun found a coloured leaflet tucked inside an old textbook. It had been handed to him on the day of the training. 'Bring a friend, earn a reward,' it read, beside a small code he had scarcely noticed before. Two names had been pencilled on the back. He recognised one as a classmate's; he could not recall the other at all. He did not leave the leaflet at Riddhi's office, having been told that the original physical paper needed to be received under a proper inventory. The next morning, following his advocate's advice, he decided to present the original to the authorised investigating officer with an appropriate record of its receipt. It was the first decision in many days in which responsibility outweighed fear.

The following week, Arjun's advocate appeared at the hearing of his limited application for the release of lawful scholarship money. Counsel for the state said that the questionable source of the four-thousand-two-hundred-rupee payment still required authoritative confirmation. The advocate produced the scholarship approval, the tuition-fee deadline, details of additional lawful deposits and the total amount restrained. The court sought a clear reply from the bank identifying the current basis of the restriction and the position concerning the particular sum, and allowed Arjun to file documents explaining his immediate educational needs. There was no general order directing that 'all student accounts be released'. As Arjun left, he saw his name written on the court notice board beside a date. It was not the name of an accused, but of a person seeking relief. The distinction felt to him like the morning air.

By the end of Sawan, the bank's reply arrived. The original letter that had led to the hold on Arjun's account specified the payment trail of four thousand two hundred rupees, but the branch system had blocked every withdrawal. The investigating officer had supplied no new concrete reason why the entire account needed to remain restricted. Keeping within the limits of the documents, the court directed that the amount under consideration be secured and that Arjun be enabled to use the remaining lawful scholarship money and other specified undisputed funds. The order did not declare him innocent, nor did it establish the real significance of the four thousand two hundred rupees. But it gave him the opportunity to pay his examination fee. Outside the bank, he called his mother first. 'If you have the money, study,' Renu said. 'And don't shrink from answering the questions that are still open.'

Arjun's hands trembled on the day he filled in his examination form. Over the previous four months he had discovered two weak places in his own memory and judgment: accepting payment without written terms and failing to retain complete proof of another person's consent to the use of their name. Neither mistake automatically established criminal knowledge, but it would not be right to flee responsibility for his choices either. After submitting the form, he sat by the window of the bus home. The earth was wet from rain; in the distance a little girl with a red satchel walked to school. Arjun felt that education did not merely mean passing the next examination. It also meant having the courage to say clearly what one had failed to understand.

Mukul Meena had still not recovered all his seven thousand five hundred rupees. Inspector Seema had added two newly certified stages of the money trail to his complaint, but the final beneficiary's identity remained to be verified separately. 'Everyone at the university has got their accounts back,' Mukul told his brother Ramesh. 'Why haven't I got my money?' 'Not everyone has had their account released,' Ramesh replied. 'And freeing somebody else's innocent funds doesn't cancel your claim.' Mukul was angry at first, then grew quiet. When he met Riddhi, he said, 'I want people whose money is trapped to be able to get it out. But I also want the money I earned to come back.' 'Those two wishes do not contradict one another,' Riddhi answered. 'That is precisely why we must establish the true route of the money.'

At the investigating officer's office, Arjun finally gave a second statement. This time his advocate was present and the questions were specific. Arjun acknowledged that four thousand two hundred rupees had entered his personal account, that he had spent two thousand five hundred on educational fees and household needs, and that the rest had

remained in the bank. He had written two acquaintances' names on the training form, but did not know whether separate bank payments had subsequently been made in return for those names. 'Did anyone from the company ask you to prepare a false attendance sheet?' Seema asked. 'Once there was talk of changing a name,' Arjun replied. 'I refused. But when I first wrote down the other people's names, I hadn't read all the rules.'

Seema recorded every element of his answer separately: the admission that he had received money, the account of his expenditure, the verbal nature of the offer, the circumstances in which he supplied names, and his claim not to know the criminal origin of any funds. 'One admission doesn't answer every question,' she told her assistant. Arjun was asked what documents he had checked to confirm the authenticity of a programme advertised in the university's name. He had no clear answer. But he explained that he had trusted it because the event was held in an official college building. The inquiry continued into whether that building had simply been rented out or the university had actually approved the programme. No single part of Arjun's statement was made the sole basis for finding him guilty or clearing him.

That night Anuradha Sen examined a new schedule of wider payment settlements. Beneath the names of different companies, certain amounts appeared to have passed repeatedly through internal accounts. She could see how repeated entries might artificially inflate the aggregate sum. But even to correct the counting she needed original bank evidence, the actual beneficiaries and a chronology. In one column she saw the words 'foreign consultancy'. She did not attach anyone's name to them. 'Will something big come out of this?' Riddhi asked. 'A big number may emerge,' Anuradha answered, 'but not necessarily a finding of a big crime. First we must establish how many times the same rupee has been counted.' Riddhi drank the water set before her. The difficulty of reckoning human loss could not be overcome merely by enlarging the figures.

In Darbhanga, Revati wrote her final letter of the year to her father, Shivnarayan. She described the reopening of Yakub's shop, Shanti's restored access to money for medicine, Arjun's permission to pay his examination fee and the sum that Mukul had still not recovered. 'Babu,' she wrote, 'a court cannot take away every sorrow with a single order. But the right to ask why particular money has been withheld is no small thing in a person's life.' At the end she added one sentence: 'Arjun has acknowledged receiving the payment; whether he understood its significance remains an open question.' When she laid down her pen, thunder rolled outside. She could almost hear the dead man's name in

the first ledger of 2000 calling across the years to the five hundred entries of the present day. But she knew that between a call and proof lay a long road.

That night in the Jodhpur hostel, Payal switched off her light, Himmat locked the library's final door and Arjun opened his examination book. In an authorised room of the university, the list of five hundred names remained under seal. Beside it lay a fresh envelope containing a secured financial schedule, set aside separately under a lawful request from the special economic-offences investigation. On its cover were only a record number and the time of receipt, no words declaring anyone a criminal. In the morning, questions about the material's origin, repeated movement of funds and alleged beneficiaries would reach the competent special court. But for this night the hostel's most important truth was simply that Arjun had admitted receiving money in his account. Whether he knew of the wrongdoing or offence from which it might have come was still something the court would have to hear, investigate and weigh.

Chapter 36 — The Special Court's Hard Questions

Jodhpur, Mumbai, Darbhanga and Dubai; September–October 2026

Before seven in the morning, a cleaner was mopping the veranda of the special court in Jodhpur. A few drops of rain clung to an old brass nameplate. Near the outer gate, Rafiq the tea seller had put his kettle on the fire and written in chalk on a wooden board: 'Tea without sugar also available.' People's days began here even while the courthouse doors remained closed. That morning a thick envelope arrived in a government vehicle. It contained not the original list of five hundred numbered student entries, but an account of the origins of an authorised copy, certified letters from three banks and an extensive financial schedule. Tarachand, the clerk who received it, did not measure its weight in his hands. He checked the time of receipt and the letters on the seal before entering them in the register. Experience had taught him that the heaviest thing in a courtroom was often not a thick envelope, but the question it could not answer.

At the same hour, in the university hostel, Arjun Meena was reading a chapter of his examination textbook for the second time. After admitting the receipt of four thousand two hundred rupees, he had been allowed to pay his examination fee from his lawful scholarship money, but his peace of mind had not returned. The day before, a classmate had asked, 'Is your name before the special court too?' 'My details are under examination,' Arjun had replied. 'I'm not on the list of accused persons.' The classmate apologised the following day, but the question remained in the air. 'You did right to produce the documents,' his mother Renu told him on the phone. 'But don't abandon your examination.' Arjun took out the original leaflet kept beneath his bedding and read: 'Bring a friend, earn a reward.' Because of those few words, he had spent months searching his classmates' eyes for an unwanted judgment about who he was.

An official letter informed Riddhi Bishnoi that the court envelope had been dispatched. For two days Payal and Himmat had been recording the accounts of a student-assistance camp in her room. Payal made no claim that the reopening of the counselling room had fully restored her health, but she had acquired the courage to name the fears that came at night. 'Have you corrected the count in the book of five hundred names?' Himmat asked. 'What I have now are five hundred numbered entries,'

Riddhi answered. 'Some are duplicates, some incomplete names, some codes connected with services. We cannot even call them five hundred account holders on the strength of the list alone.' She drew three lines on a sheet of paper: 'Entry', 'Actual account', 'Control over that account'. 'The day we turn all three into one word,' she said, 'we needlessly diminish the life of an innocent person.'

Special Judge Sandhya Pareek sat in her chambers reviewing the related petitions. She had heard the names of Pramod Khanna and Faizan Ali in their older, separate money-laundering proceedings in Delhi, but those cases had not been judicially consolidated with the new Jodhpur prosecution. Here the underlying police case concerned allegations of fees taken in the name of employment and statements about the services actually supplied. One record showed two verified days of training; another contained a long list of promised sessions. Some parties said there had been deception from the outset; others maintained that a business had failed, which was not the same as a crime. The special court had to ask: if property had truly been obtained from a scheduled offence, at whose direction, under whose control and through what process had the money moved onwards? On the first page, the judge wrote in pencil: 'Suspicion, prima facie material and final proof—three different stages.'

Meanwhile, at the Sehgal trading house in Mumbai, Sudarshan Sehgal had grown old. On his desk lay an old wooden measuring rule from the warehouse, a chest of bills from thirty-five years and an unfinished letter. In 2005 Vikrant had told him that a signature and the account of goods actually delivered needed to be examined separately. The father still remembered those words. For years Vikrant had claimed to run a lawful consultancy in Dubai, travelling occasionally to Mumbai, while father and son spoke less and less about business on the telephone. That week Sudarshan saw 'Dubai-based Sehgal' in a local newspaper and felt his heart give a jolt. The full name was not printed, and the description of the work was vague. First he imagined his own son as the criminal, then felt anger at the incompleteness of the report. All day he defended his son in his mind because he was his father. By evening he realised that protecting one's son and assuming every one of his documents to be true were different things.

In Dubai, Vikrant Sehgal sat behind a curtain in an apartment overlooking the sea. Two countries showed different times on his screen. As the Indian courts were opening, the working day there was just beginning. Vikrant was a director of a financial consultancy, but the company's ownership documents had changed in part two years earlier.

Whether that change arose from lawful tax planning or from an attempt to conceal funds required examination of certified agreements. His advocate, Jayant Malhotra, sent questions on the subject regularly. This time the letter sought something new: original descriptions of consultancy work performed from 2024 to 2026, resolutions of the client companies' boards and the route of the clients' payments. Vikrant looked at a photograph of the old warehouse mark, 'S-19', on his table. He had changed the language of his documents since moving so far from his father, but the challenge of exercising caution had remained the same.

For Anuradha Sen, the figure of ₹2,000 crore could all too easily become a headline. In the schedule before her, five years of gross receipts, outgoings, transfers between accounts, reversed entries and foreign-currency conversions had all been added into a single final cell. On one side, the same five-lakh-rupee item appeared twelve times. Elsewhere, a crore had moved from one company to an associated company and then returned to the original account. 'It says two thousand crore here,' a new member of the investigative team said excitedly. Anuradha stopped him. 'It shows two thousand crore as the sum of the rows. How much is new money, how much came round again, how much is merely a book adjustment, and how much was obtained through crime? Each of those questions needs its own answer.' She rewrote the figures on four sheets, headed 'Gross entries', 'Net real flow', 'Identifiable property' and 'Possible connection to a scheduled offence'. The fourth sheet was still nearly empty.

Anuradha remembered an error from the beginning of her career. In her first job she had described money entering a bank as 'profit', although it was actually an advance paid by a customer. Her senior accountant had not reprimanded her publicly. He had merely asked, 'If one person deposits and withdraws his own money three times, does that create three separate earnings?' The embarrassment of that day had become her most valuable lesson. Now she explained the problem privately to the new employee. He fell silent, but gathered the courage to ask another question. 'Then where is the amount that the victims actually lost?' 'That is society's fundamental question,' Anuradha said. 'The gross flow of currency and the real losses of victims can be found in the same records, but they may follow entirely different paths.'

At her team meeting, investigating officer Neerja Rathore decided first that the file of five hundred university names must not be treated as a complete account of the alleged crime. Two stages in the trail of Mukul Meena's seven-thousand-five-hundred-rupee payment had been confirmed, but fresh banking evidence was required concerning the

ultimate beneficiary. Tarun Sethi was out on bail and obliged to comply with summons; the investigators did not presume to possess an automatic power to change the earlier bail order. Some trainees really had attended two or three classes. Whether they had been cheated or had merely received an incomplete service would require their individual statements and the terms of the advertisements. 'Shall we regard all the branches as one network?' an assistant asked. 'If there is a network, prove its connections,' Neerja answered. 'Presume it in advance and you will stop seeing whatever the evidence actually shows.'

Inspector Seema Chaudhary's original police case and Neerja's money-laundering investigation proceeded by separate legal routes, although two or three specified documents were shared under competent authority. Seema warned her constable that a police FIR was not itself a conviction for money laundering, nor could a financial schedule by itself prove that a training promise was fraudulent. One student witness said he had been taught computing for three months; another said no teacher came after the registration day. It would be wrong to enter 'no service' against both in the same register. Seema wrote 'Different branches, different periods' in the corner of her paper. The difficulty was that every statement required a date, every date an original register, and every original register someone who had kept it. Yet this was the very discipline that made a judicial inquiry worthy of respect.

As Revati Jha was leaving Darbhanga for Jodhpur, her father Shivnarayan gave her an old letter in the cool waiting room at the station. It dated from Neelkanth Sah's case in 2000. 'A dead person's name appears in the seized ledger,' it read, 'but that alone cannot turn a living person into a criminal.' 'Babu, the numbers have grown terribly large now,' Revati said after reading it. 'No matter how large the numbers grow,' Shivnarayan replied, 'the question does not change its size. The law must first explain what has been counted.' He asked whose case she would be taking. 'My role in Mukul's recovery claim is separate,' she said. 'At the special court I must advise on a limited application by an affected account holder, making sure the interests do not conflict.' Her father smiled. 'An advocate's first oath lies in that very caution.'

At the Ludhiana factory, Sunita Paswan carried the old wage registers in a document chest rather than leaving them out in the sunlight. A worker asked again, 'If Hardev Chauhan wasn't working here, how did his name appear?' 'All I can establish,' Sunita replied, 'is that fellow workers did not see him work on certain dates entered beside his name in the register. Whose signature it was, who received payment and which Hardev it referred to are still unclear.' The new financial schedule had

shown the initials 'H. Chauhan', but Sunita did not combine photographs of the two names and post them in an open group. Ramlakhan Paswan had grown frail with age; his left arm had begun to droop beneath his shoulder. 'Will you have to get caught up in the old accounts again?' he asked his daughter. 'If we don't open the accounts, somebody's name will remain in the wrong place,' Sunita replied. 'But you taught me that not every addition makes the truth.'

Noor Jatay was in the veranda on the first date listed for the special-court matter. Her bag held a notebook, tangled headphones and printed copies of two court orders. A television reporter thrust a camera towards her. 'So the two-thousand-crore foreign scam has been proved?' 'The court is about to hear arguments on preliminary material and procedure,' Noor said. 'That figure is the total in the prosecution's schedule, not an established amount of criminal proceeds.' The reporter made a face. Noor messaged her desk: 'Do not headline it "Two-Thousand-Crore Fraud". Write "Judicial Questions Over Repeated Entries".' Her editor worried about advertising at first, then asked, 'All right, but will anyone read it?' 'Anyone whose account has been frozen will read every word,' Noor replied.

The case was called. Authorised prosecution counsel Abhay Awasthi explained that the complaint described Vikrant Sehgal as an alleged beneficiary based abroad, but whether formal proceedings against him could be taken forward depended on the court's process. Soumitra Bansal, a local company director, appeared with his advocate Ira Saxena. Vikrant was absent; the court did not yet have complete proof that summons had been lawfully served upon him. 'Absence does not by itself establish guilt,' Judge Sandhya Pareek said. 'Service of summons and every subsequent step concerning attendance require separate grounds.' For a moment the assumptions circulating in the veranda were silenced. The prosecution put forward its documents, the defence sought the full sequence of records, and the court made clear that this was not the day for a final determination of guilt or innocence.

Abhay Awasthi laid a selected schedule on the wooden table. 'Your Honour,' he said, 'certain payments were received as training fees, then appeared as an adjustment through one local company, then another, and thereafter under the head of foreign consultancy. This continuing activity has been investigated. We ask for preliminary scrutiny of the complaint filed against the local accused who is present, and for directions under lawful procedure regarding the person who is absent.' The judge interrupted. 'Which authorised record establishes the scheduled offence that you describe as the possible source of these funds?'

Counsel produced the original police FIR, the particulars of the alleged deception and the present position of an ongoing investigation. 'Do not treat the outcome of an investigation that is still pending as though it has already happened,' the judge said. 'Set out the route of each alleged sum separately.'

Ira Saxena rose. 'My client, Soumitra Bansal, is the director of a local company,' she said. 'But the payment authorisation bearing his signature could also have been an adjustment of a lawful debt connected with services. The prosecution's schedule counts the movement of the same amount three times. And GST details and service reports have been filed for part of the foreign consultancy fees. We are not asking you to accept every one of those documents as true. We are asking that they not be declared false without examination.' 'A tax receipt for a payment made under an improper head does not automatically cleanse its actual source,' Abhay replied. Rather than indicating agreement with either side, the judge wrote a note: 'Tax receipt, existence of service, source of funds—separate examinations.' Suddenly the sound of the fan turning on the courtroom wall was the clearest sound of all.

In the outer corridor, Soumitra's wife Kavya arrived carrying a bag. Inside were medicine for her husband's blood pressure, a white handkerchief and a little drawing made by their eight-year-old daughter. Three differently coloured clouds floated above the house in the drawing. Kavya did not take it in to her husband; she knew that would be inappropriate while the court was in session. Seeing Revati, she asked, 'Is my husband nothing but an account to all of you?' 'No,' Revati replied courteously. 'But I am not your husband's lawyer. The papers will be examined by the proper authority. You should speak frankly with the advocate defending him.' Wiping her eyes, Kavya said, 'If somebody has lost money, that person has a family too. But my little girl should not have to hear all of this.' Revati remembered her words throughout the day.

Mukul Meena sat at the very back of the veranda. In his pocket lay the old bank receipt for seven thousand five hundred rupees, folded small. On the bus that morning he had heard a passenger say, 'They'll uncover two thousand crore in the special court today.' The larger the figure sounded, the smaller Mukul's receipt seemed. But one question from the judge stayed with him during the hearing: 'Into whose account did the original payment ultimately settle?' He wanted to ask whether there would ever be an answer about his seven thousand five hundred. He could not bring himself to speak in court without permission. Afterwards he told Riddhi, 'Nobody said whether my receipt was part of those two

thousand crore.' 'That requires a separate money trail and an order on your claim,' she replied. 'We won't let a large expression swallow your small piece of evidence.'

Anuradha did not walk up to the judge and present her schedule without the court's prior permission. She was available as a technical assistant to the authorised investigative team. In her arguments, Ira raised the difference between the analysis the prosecution had submitted and the original banking records. The court requested written clarification of the documents' provenance, the dates on which they were prepared and the availability of certified copies. 'A schedule generated by a computer is not itself a bank's original account,' Sandhya Pareek said. 'To reconcile the totals, repeated entries and final destinations shown in it, we need the appropriate persons and original material. Questions about admissibility and final significance will be decided at the proper stage.' This was no occasion for an oration. A four-line order was setting the limits of many families' expectations.

In Dubai, Vikrant received a call from Jayant Malhotra. 'At the first hearing, the court asked for proof of valid service of summons,' the lawyer said. 'If summons reach you, you must respond through the proper channel. Remaining absent without cause creates a separate risk. Before sending papers, check that the originals match the translations.' 'They must already be calling me a fugitive,' Vikrant said. 'Words printed in a newspaper and your procedural status before a court are not the same thing,' Jayant replied. 'First find out which order, if any, has actually been served on you. A single day spent abroad does not automatically make a person an absconder.' After the call, Vikrant opened his company's account register. Some project names beneath the heading 'Consultancy' were explicit; others appeared only as three-letter codes. Whether Vikrant knew why those codes had been used within his own company was not yet something the reader could know.

A young accountant named Farida had been reconciling monthly payments at Vikrant's office for two years. Her brother was studying engineering in India, and her salary paid for his hostel. In an old entry she noticed a reference to a company service report whose principal file had been moved into legacy storage during a change of information systems. 'Is the original service record secure?' she asked a senior officer. 'An internal review is underway. Don't send anything yet,' came the reply. Farida knew that sending anyone's confidential files outside the company without authorisation would be wrong. But the possibility that original records might be destroyed or disappear also posed an ethical problem in her work. She entered every notice concerning the change

into the authorised register, without creating a secret personal copy. To some she was merely an employee. To herself she was an indispensable custodian of the truth in the accounts.

The next day Neerja asked her team why the figure for foreign-labelled liabilities seemed so much larger than their original source. The first answer was simple arithmetic: if one crore entered a company, seventy-five lakh went out from it, and sixty lakh subsequently left a subsidiary, adding the three produced transactions totalling two crore thirty-five lakh. But the amount of fresh money entering from outside did not grow by adding the seventy-five and sixty lakh. The second answer was harder: in some entries the bank's value date differed from the accounting date. In a third group, currency-conversion rates created differences. 'Understanding this isn't an attempt to protect anyone,' Neerja told her assistant. 'It's how we establish the true limits of wrongdoing. If money was obtained through deception, show it as such. Don't turn the circulation of accounting entries into the amount of the offence.'

Not everyone in the prosecution liked such caution. 'The higher office will pay attention as soon as we write two thousand crore,' one officer said. 'A smaller sum will make the case look insignificant.' Neerja looked up. 'I don't want a case that looks big or small,' she answered. 'I want allegations that can be supported. We must establish both the loss actually suffered by people who paid fees and the role of anyone who genuinely concealed funds.' 'Then what do we tell the press?' the officer asked. 'That the investigation continues and specified claims are being examined. Nothing more. Don't present whatever can lawfully be released to the public as the whole truth.' Neerja knew that the political advantage of falsehood could be immense for an hour, while its effects on legal proceedings could last for years.

Sarabjit Kaur received a limited verification notice from a Mumbai bank. By now she was an experienced compliance officer; the queues during the 2016 demonetisation had taught her how human fear could find its way onto paper. This time her task was only to explain a group's internal settlement process, not publicly disclose confidential customer information. She told Anuradha through an authorised channel: 'The same sum can appear as an inflow and outflow in the statements of two banks. When preparing combined figures, identify transfers between internal accounts. And record separately the position of undisputed subsistence funds belonging to people whose accounts have been restricted.' 'Are all restrictions imposed for lawful reasons?' Anuradha asked. 'The legal ground stated in the papers is one question,' Sarabjit

replied. 'How widely the bank's software applied that ground is another. That's why Arjun's experience was important.'

In Ludhiana, Shanti Devi had begun to receive limited funds from the bank to buy medicine, but the debt incurred for her husband's treatment had not diminished. 'It feels as though everything follows money now,' Champa Devi told Sunita. 'Wages, studies, medicine, court cases.' 'Money is one part of a human life,' Sunita replied. 'But the breath of a person whose name is written on a document cannot be made out of somebody's numbers.' She opened a new register in the workers' assistance room: who was owed how much, who had obtained a written reason for a bank restriction, and who still needed to supply evidence. The old page for Hardev Chauhan went into that register not as a record of criminality but under 'Identity Unverified'. 'When will you ever have time to rest?' Ramlakhan asked his daughter. 'On the day everyone can ask these questions without having to come to me,' Sunita said.

Something small happened at Mukul's home that month. His sister Rani was building a cardboard bridge for the school science exhibition. She asked her father for five hundred rupees. He laughed. 'My son has lost seven and a half thousand, and my daughter is building a bridge with five hundred.' Mukul quietly gave her the money from the wages he had saved. 'When will the court return your money?' Rani asked. 'I don't know,' he said. He would not invent a date to reassure the child. He would pursue his claim without pouring his daily anger over Rani's bridge. When the bridge was finished that night, a strip of paper across its centre bore the words: 'A bridge holds when the load is shared.' Mukul felt that, while studying mathematics, his little sister had given him another question to carry.

One of Revati's limited applications concerned compliance with the earlier order releasing Arjun's undisputed scholarship funds. His status as an account holder did not automatically make him an accused in the special money-laundering case. Her colleague Shalini Solanki reconciled the court's jurisdictional details in writing. They agreed that specific financial-record questions properly before the special court should be raised there, without abandoning other competent forums for ordinary banking errors. 'It's easy to see a name on a list and drag its owner into every case,' Revati said. 'Getting that person out again is difficult.' 'That is why procedure provides for individual notice and a right to be heard,' Shalini replied. That night she wrote to Arjun: 'Your educational papers are secure. If a proper request for information concerning the investigation reaches you, cooperate lawfully. You are not obliged to answer rumours.'

Resisting the lure of a headline about 'two thousand crore', Noor Jatay sought permission to alter the names of three families in her report. Mukul consented to the publication of his experience on condition that his full bank-account number was not printed. Shanti Devi declined to appear on camera; the account of her medicine and the banking restriction was published anonymously. Kavya refused permission for her daughter's drawing to be reproduced. Noor began the article: 'A large financial schedule may contain real suffering, but not every row is a citizen's life, and no citizen is merely a row.' 'Too long,' the editor said. 'Shorten a story of justice and you may cut away the very space in which someone's continuing suffering belongs,' Noor answered. The newspaper finally gave her half a page, but its main headline did not exaggerate the amount.

Soumitra Bansal's advocate Ira Saxena was waiting for a certified letter from the bank. 'Why did you authorise this payment last year?' she asked her client. 'The materials had been delivered.' 'To whom?' 'To the service company.' 'Which students received the service?' Soumitra lowered his eyes. 'I was shown only a monthly report of the total sessions.' 'Then write the truth up to that point,' Ira said. 'Don't claim direct knowledge of something you never saw.' 'Will that weaken my defence?' Soumitra asked. 'Claiming that you verified a report you never checked is no defence,' Ira replied. 'It creates the foundation for another falsehood.' Soumitra thought of the picture his daughter had drawn, and for the first time saw the blank space on a document as somewhere he might write what he did not know.

At the same time, in Dubai, Farida emailed an inventory of the old service registers to the authorised head of the company. She stated clearly that one project marked 'work completed' had no accompanying final approval letter, while money for another had passed through three accounts before returning to the original customer. She made no finding of either crime or propriety. Vikrant received a copy of her message. His face changed colour. Calling Farida into his office, he asked, 'Why did you check all this now?' 'Because legal documents have been requested, and the records must be preserved before the old storage system is converted,' she replied. 'Don't you trust me?' Vikrant asked. 'Trust cannot replace the verification of accounts.' He did not dismiss her at once, but for two days he avoided meeting her eyes.

In the first week of October, the prosecution submitted a supplementary list in accordance with the court's order. On separate pages it set out the FIR for the alleged predicate offence, receipts for training fees, the names of seven service providers and certified extracts

from the original records of three banks. One error became obvious at once: the last four digits '7321' identified accounts at two different branches. The account through which Mukul's money had passed could be verified, but the customer holding the other account turned out to be a medicine seller who had received a wholly unrelated business payment. An early coloured diagram that had treated the two accounts as one had to be withdrawn. Neerja signed the correction herself. 'Won't that weaken the prosecution?' an assistant asked. 'A prosecution founded on a false diagram will get nowhere,' she replied. 'Now let us examine the strength of what remains.'

The medicine seller, Yakub Ansari, was more concerned with his trade; discussing other people's names did nothing to increase his earnings. Yet an incorrect match between account digits had brought a police questionnaire to him. He produced a certified statement from the bank and receipts for medicine sales. After an appropriate inquiry, Inspector Seema clarified the identity of the actual customer for that particular payment. 'Could one wrong digit have turned my business into a criminal business?' Yakub asked. 'An accusation should not stand on one wrong digit,' Seema replied. 'And if a suspicion has arisen, it is our responsibility to clear it through the records.' Leaving the room, Yakub hurried to meet his daughter's school bus. He knew little of the legal names for the relief he had received that day, only that his fear of the shop being padlocked had eased a little.

After his examination, Arjun sat with his friend Mohan Bairwa. Mohan's name had been used in an unauthorised message relating to the list of five hundred entries; he had not actually been identified as an accused person in the verified financial records. 'Will you have to speak in court?' Mohan asked. 'Nobody has told me that yet,' Arjun replied. 'I've given the authorised officer the original leaflet. I have the receipt.' Looking out of the window, Mohan said, 'They used to discuss who had taken money for admissions and who had managed to study. Now they ask whose account has been frozen.' 'A bank account cannot give you admission to a course,' Arjun replied. 'You still have to learn things outside the account.' They both laughed. Fear had not disappeared, but the laughter made a little room for lightness inside it.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha sat in his little garden at dusk. The trembling of his hands had increased, and opening Revati's latest letter took time. At the sight of Vikrant Sehgal's name, he recalled a question from the old Sehgal trading house. 'The movement of goods and the movement of papers,' he murmured, 'are not the same.' His granddaughter Preeti asked him what the hardest question in legal

practice was. 'Admitting what you haven't understood,' he answered. 'I can tell anyone I haven't understood something,' the child said, quite naturally. Shivnarayan laughed. What people in court had regarded twenty years earlier as a weakness of dignity, the child regarded as an ordinary part of learning. In old age, he did not consider so small a change an insignificant achievement.

In Jodhpur, Revati prepared a list from her documents showing the separate legal routes available to each affected citizen. Shanti's undisputed medicine money concerned compliance with a banking order; Arjun had already received limited permission to use his scholarship funds; recovery of Mukul's fees remained a separate complaint; Tarun's bail and the examination of the prosecution case proceeded on separate tracks; Soumitra's defence was in the hands of his own advocate; and the special court was examining whether summons had been validly served on Vikrant. 'If you turned all these files into a novel, how long would it be?' a colleague asked. 'A novel or a court case,' Revati replied, 'we mustn't bury one character's life beneath another character's alleged guilt. Keeping the accounts fair in that way is the hardest work of all.'

That day the special court held a brief hearing on the prosecution's supplementary report. Abhay Awasthi accepted that the initial financial schedule had shown ₹2,000 crore as gross flows; it would not be right to label every component of that total separately as criminal proceeds. He nevertheless argued that certain verified payment chains supplied substantial prima facie material concerning the source of registration fees, control among associated companies and the reality of services said to have been provided abroad. Ira Saxena replied that shared directors among group companies were not themselves proof of criminality. The significance of the account trails had to be established through written agreements, services actually performed and authorised payments. After hearing both sides, the judge asked, 'Is your reconciliation based on the banks' original records of deposits and receipts, or merely on the investigation team's internal schedule?' The prosecution's first answer was incomplete.

'Of the three sums said to originate in payments by actual students,' the judge asked, 'how many original receipts do you have and for whom?' Abhay consulted his colleagues. One payment matched Mukul's receipt, although a stage in the trail to its final destination remained obscure. In the second, there was evidence of two actual days of training; the lawful value of that part of the service was disputed. In the third, the debtor company claimed to have refunded the money, but the bank had not yet confirmed the repayment. 'Don't combine all three into one completed

fraud,' the judge said. 'Where an allegation may be provable, the route for proving it remains open. Where a fact is still disputed, write that it is disputed.' Those brief directions changed the course of the courtroom arguments considerably.

Outside, the reporters gathered again. One channel wanted someone to declare that 'the entire financial empire has collapsed'. Noor thought instead of Rani's bridge at the science exhibition—Mukul's sister had built it for five hundred rupees. A large number did not make a bridge; the load had to be distributed properly. But she did not publish the family's small domestic story without permission. In her article she wrote only that the court had required a distinction between the total value of transactions and specific criminal proceeds, and that lawful service of summons on the alleged beneficiary abroad was still subject to verification. 'So what percentage chance is there that the charges will be proved?' the editor asked. 'This isn't a game of percentages,' Noor replied. 'I won't say something about a person that the court has not said.'

Sudarshan Sehgal received a letter from Vikrant. His son wrote that the documents for two projects at his company were being reconciled, the preliminary figures might be incomplete, and his lawyer was dealing with the legal question of service of summons. Sudarshan asked in reply, 'Who actually received the services you say you provided?' 'Some projects were completed,' Vikrant said by telephone. 'Others are disputed.' 'And where was the money kept for work that wasn't delivered?' his father asked. His son fell silent. Sudarshan offered no further harsh words. 'I won't put out a leaflet proclaiming your innocence, or your guilt. Come home and show me all the papers.' 'My lawyer will tell me whether I can return to India,' Vikrant answered. This time his father did not call him a coward. He knew that when the law called a person, courage did not simply mean boarding a plane before understanding the summons.

Farida's account review uncovered another discrepancy. A report claimed sixty days of technical consultancy for an Indian client, while email in the same file approved only forty days' work. She could find no particulars for the remaining twenty days. Yet the bank had received a payment calculated for all sixty days. 'Wait for confirmation from the client,' the senior officer instructed. Farida entered the date in her work register, asked that the original data not be destroyed and prepared a list of material suitable for production through the prescribed legal channel. No court had summoned her, so she did not proclaim herself a witness before an Indian court on her own initiative. To her, confidence meant one thing: never write 'found' where a document had not been found.

At an investigative team meeting, Riddhi's university list came up again. Neerja made it clear that while the list contained five hundred serial numbers, it did not establish five hundred independent accounts belonging to individual beneficiaries. Some rows repeated names, some showed only four digits of an account number, and for most there was no evidence of actual control. 'What happened to the students' consent and personal information?' Riddhi asked. 'That question is not outside the scope of the inquiry,' Neerja replied. 'Where digital records are required, there must be lawful authority, restricted access and a documented history of their origins.' Anuradha said quietly, 'Counting names as accounts, counting accounts as criminals, then turning the supposed number of criminals into an amount of money laundered—four errors can fit into one line.' Everyone needed so simple a sentence before the genuinely difficult technical work could begin.

The old contact labelled 'H. Chauhan' resurfaced in the same schedule. Before requesting a copy of Sunita's certified wage register, Riddhi checked the limits of her institutional authority. They prepared a comparison of dates within the scope Sunita had authorised. Sixteen years separated the alleged working period of Hardev Chauhan in 2009 from the entry in the 2025 contact register; a shared surname was no proof of identity. 'Perhaps father and son?' an investigator suggested. 'Perhaps another person, perhaps only a code,' Anuradha replied immediately. 'You cannot link bank accounts by guessing a family tree.' 'Should we keep this page or discard it?' Riddhi asked. 'Preserve it with its provenance,' Neerja replied. 'Do not write any finding against a particular person upon it.' Nobody had the right to turn a name into a criminal in haste.

That evening, two students were quarrelling outside an identity-card shop on a Jodhpur street. 'It's a case involving five hundred names,' one said. 'All the students are anxious.' 'Not all of them,' the other replied. 'Those whose accounts have actually been blocked have suffered more.' Riddhi watched the argument but did not interrupt in the manner of a teacher. Crossing the street, she remembered the conflicts over rights of way and drainage in the early years of the Marudhar campus. People had spoken of 'land' as though it were a single thing, even though each family's route across it differed. A digital list, too, presented everyone with a single symbol while the real paths of connection had to be tested. By the time she reached her door, a pale first flush of autumn red had spread across the sky.

In mid-October a written order was read out in the special court. Sandhya Pareek said the court would examine the prosecution complaint

and accompanying authorised material only within the limits prescribed for this stage. It directed that the verified status of the scheduled offence, the particular sources of each sum alleged to be criminal proceeds, the ultimate routes of those sums and the roles of the people concerned be set out clearly. Separate proof was required that summons had been lawfully served at the foreign address; without such proof, no severe further step was taken against Vikrant for his absence on that date. The defence was to receive an appropriate opportunity to inspect the authorised copies available in Soumitra's case. The order neither declared the allegations futile nor finally accepted them as true. It established the rules by which they were to be tested.

On the total in the financial schedule, the court wrote specifically that the material supported describing it as 'alleged aggregate circulation', but that it would not yet be proper to call ₹2,000 crore either 'proved criminal proceeds' or 'the victims' total losses'. The judge pointed to several separate tests: original bank statements, elimination of internal transfers, calculation of exchange rates, the lawful and unlawful portions of registration fees, and services actually rendered by the companies. A revised reconciliation report was to be filed by the specified date. The order also allowed appropriate time without obstructing the investigation. It did not proclaim every company in the industry innocent or issue a universal direction to refund every student's money. The lawful route remained open for anyone seeking relief to approach the competent forum with an appropriate application and evidence.

As Abhay Awasthi emerged after hearing the order, a colleague remarked, 'So the court didn't trust our figure.' 'The court asked for verification instead of trust,' Abhay replied. 'That's exactly the prosecution's work.' At home he helped his daughter with her school mathematics. 'Papa, five plus five is ten, isn't it?' she asked. 'Yes.' 'And if I write the same five twice, do I suddenly have ten rupees?' Abhay looked at her. 'No,' he wrote. 'Counting the same money twice doesn't make more money.' In one line, the child had condensed what he had spent the day explaining in court. Abhay smiled, though his mind went back to the difficult journey that the money of real victims would have to make before it was returned.

Ira Saxena explained the order to Kavya. 'The allegations against your husband remain. They have neither been dismissed nor proved. The proceedings will continue.' 'Can he come home?' Kavya asked. 'Any existing conditions concerning attendance must be observed. An appropriate application concerning your family's needs can be considered separately.' Showing Ira the picture her daughter had drawn, Kavya said,

'Every day she asks whether the court has blamed our home or her father.' 'A household is not a judicial unit of criminal guilt,' Ira replied. 'The law examines a person's individual role. But I cannot deny the suffering the family endures.' For the first time Kavya thanked the advocate, although no final outcome she desired had yet been reached.

For Mukul the order had a very ordinary meaning. His seven thousand five hundred rupees had not yet been returned, but the investigation of the particular trail shown by his receipt was not over. On the bus home he telephoned his sister Rani. 'Did the court find your money?' she asked. 'No.' 'Then why did you go?' 'If I didn't go, my seven and a half thousand would disappear into a figure nobody had counted properly.' 'My bridge is still standing,' Rani said. 'Then send me a photograph.' Rani sent one: a river of blue paper flowed under the cardboard bridge, supported by separate brick-shaped pieces on either side. Mukul saved it on his phone —not as proof of money, but as evidence of his own patience.

Back at the office, Neerja Rathore divided the tasks arising from the order among her team. One group would verify the authorised position and chronology of the complaints concerning the original scheduled offence. A second would reconcile the bank trail of fees actually received. A third would seek lawful assistance in verifying the invoices, tax returns and service approvals relating to foreign consultancy. A fourth would examine the limits on the use of the confidential student list. She said pointedly, 'The families of accused persons, a student's caste, place of birth, language or residence abroad are not tests of criminality. Evidence must concern the individual.' Outside the window, leaves were falling from an old neem tree. No one argued. Each officer rose with a separate assignment, and instead of becoming a decisive slogan overnight, the figures turned into a defined list of work to be done.

Anuradha Sen did not draw a red line through the preliminary schedule labelled two thousand crore. She put a new heading over it: 'Reconciliation Outstanding'. Some sections contained repeated dates, others internal transfers, some exchange-rate differences and others book entries made for adjustments. One portion still appeared to represent real external receipts, whose connection with any particular offence required independent examination. 'Remove the misleading figures,' she told her colleague. 'But don't sweep away the money that still raises questions.' 'What will the final result be?' he asked. 'I won't guess tomorrow's answer today,' she replied. 'An accountant must leave room even for a final result that contradicts the conclusion she would have preferred.'

During the following week, preparations began to send foreign summons through lawful channels. Vikrant's advocate advised him not to trust calls from unauthorised intermediaries but to follow official notices and appropriate judicial directions. Vikrant read Farida's list. To determine whether the missing twenty days in a sixty-day report reflected a genuine dispute about work performed by the company abroad or deliberately inflated billing, he requested the original work order from the Indian client. The client replied that departmental staff had changed, some deliverables had been received, and proof of receipt for the rest was lacking. Vikrant did not turn that answer into the convenient statement 'all work completed'. He quietly forwarded the original message to Jayant and said, 'Prepare the legal response from what is actually here.' Whether he felt guilt or merely professional caution remained, for now, an unanswered question in the story.

In Mumbai, a copy of the letter reminded Sudarshan Sehgal of his son's childhood. When Vikrant was twelve, he had once counted the same crate three times in the warehouse and entered a total of 102 instead of 100. His father had told him, 'Looking at one crate twice doesn't make it two crates.' Vikrant had cried that day because he thought his father did not trust him. Sudarshan had taken him around the warehouse again. Now, so many years later, the father said on the telephone, 'Son, write down what is right. Don't use my name to protect what is wrong.' Vikrant remained silent at his end of the line for a long time. Then he asked, 'Babuji, you're not against me, are you?' 'If you make the truth your enemy,' Sudarshan replied, 'even a father will have nothing left with which to protect you.'

In Jodhpur, Arjun began waiting for his examination results. He did not tell the student sitting beside him that his account had been proved entirely clean; he knew the examination of the four-thousand-two-hundred-rupee payment was continuing. But when it became necessary, he showed his teacher a copy of the order permitting release of his lawful scholarship funds. Reading a line of it, the teacher asked, 'Won't your court matter interfere with your studies?' 'I'll attend whenever I'm called for the investigation,' Arjun said. 'For now I'm studying.' Payal was glad to see him absorbed in his books at the library. Only months earlier she herself had been afraid because the counselling room had been locked. Now she understood that institutional assistance was not a declaration of innocence; it was a necessary means of allowing ordinary life to go on.

Noor Jatay telephoned Sunita about her next article. 'What can you state with certainty about the Hardev Chauhan entry?' she asked. 'The name appears in the wage register, attendance on the relevant dates is

disputed, and the identity and working role of the person named still need investigation,' Sunita replied. 'I have no evidence that the "H. Chauhan" of 2025 is the same man.' Noor wrote down the whole answer. 'Will you write about the workers' wage arrears as well?' Sunita asked. 'Of course. People read because the identity of someone caught in a mystery is hidden, but it would be wrong to forget the person whose month's labour has been withheld.' Sunita looked at her register. The years kept changing; the meals cooked in a family's kitchen still depended on what was needed each day.

At half past six in the evening, Revati was reading a copy of an old High Court order. The following week she was due to appear in a separate writ matter concerning a bank-account restriction. The special court's new order was not the entire foundation of that case, but might be relevant to questions of compliance, proportionality and restrictions supported by reasons. She arranged her papers in two piles: 'Merits of the money-laundering prosecution' on one, 'Right to use innocent or undisputed funds' on the other. Keeping those piles apart was no simple task. Between them lay Arjun's fees, Shanti's medicine and Mukul's days of waiting. She took out the old letter her father had given her. The ink from 2000 had faded, but one sentence remained clear: 'Writing down a name does not, by itself, establish who a person is.'

That night, in the special court's secure room, the schedule still requiring reconciliation of ₹2,000 crore, the source register of five hundred numbered entries and the separate papers concerning three particular chains of banking transactions were put away. A court clerk checked the number on each envelope, examined the date of receipt and locked the cupboard. Outside, a young man pulling a handcart along the city road was counting his day's earnings. He knew nothing about the court case. In his daily accounts he simply took care not to count the same coin twice. Understanding the figures inside might require hundreds of thousands of pages, but the principle behind the young man's caution was the same. The difficult answer required at the next hearings concerned not the dazzling figure of two thousand crore on paper, but how much real money it contained and whose genuine rights were involved.

Revati looked into the darkness through a railway window. Far away, little lamps flickered beside a village pond. She tucked the date of the next hearing into her written notes and wrote on a blank page: 'Even after twenty-seven years, the court's first question is: whose name is this?' It seemed to her that the whole journey from the first veranda of the Darbhanga district court to the locked cupboard of the Jodhpur special

court was not one straight road, but a joining of many unfinished footpaths. Along them lay workers' wages, someone's medicine, examination fees and the many-page accounts of a company abroad. One person might be guilty, another innocent, while knowledge of a third remained incomplete. Revati capped her pen. The next question would be raised in the High Court: even when an investigation is necessary, how much of a person's life may the law hold in suspension?

Chapter 37 — Twenty-Seven Years in the High Court

Jodhpur and Darbhanga; October–December 2026

On a chilly October morning, Revati Jha was on her way to the High Court in Jodhpur. After stepping off the train, the city's air brought back her first journey there in 2001, when her father, Shivnarayan Jha, had stood for hours in a court office waiting for a map of the land in Marudhar. This time Revati carried no land map but a thick bank file. Arjun Meena's name appeared on its first page; on its last was an account of four thousand two hundred rupees. Between them lay hundreds of pages crowded with figures, signatures and official stamps, yet offering little direct answer to the question of why a student could not withdraw his legitimate scholarship money, or for how long he might be prevented from doing so.

As she climbed the steps of the old High Court building, she remembered something her father used to say: 'Guilt attached to a name is established not by the name but by evidence.' In 2000, before the magistrate at Darbhanga, the ledger belonging to Neelkanth Sah had contained the name of a dead man. People had been ready to draw conclusions about a crime from that name, although the identity of the person who made the entry, the date of the payment and the existence of its beneficiary were separate questions. Nearly twenty-seven years later, digital spreadsheets had taken the place of paper ledgers, and the last four digits of an unidentified account had replaced the dead man's name. Revati was not afraid that the court would refuse to answer. She was afraid that a beautifully arranged list would rob people of the patience to ask questions.

Arjun Meena sat with his advocate, Shalini Solanki, in a corner of the court compound. Over his shoulder hung the same satchel in which he carried his examination books. At the previous hearing, the principal amount of his scholarship had been made available for use. Yet an entry for four thousand two hundred rupees remained under suspicion, and the bank's system had taken several days to register the lifting of the wider restriction. The writ petition was not merely a request to release those four thousand two hundred rupees. Arjun wanted a written explanation of the general suspicion now attached to his name; he wanted to ensure that his lawful future payments would not be obstructed without cause,

and that personal information disclosed during the inquiry would not become material for university gossip.

'I have removed one word from the petition's first prayer,' Shalini said. 'We shall not ask the High Court to "declare him innocent" at this stage. What we seek here is a determination of the legality and scope of the existing orders, and an appropriate remedy.' Revati agreed. 'The object of the petition is not to write the prosecution's decision in advance. If the true source of the four thousand two hundred rupees has a credible connection with an offence, let that connection be investigated fairly. But the state cannot leave the boundaries between the scholarship, money received from home and this single entry uncertain indefinitely.' Arjun watched the two women. For the first time he understood that the firm language of an advocate did not always mean, 'We have won.'

The cause list described the matter as 'Arjun Meena v. State and Others'. Attached to it were a bank report, an affidavit by the investigating officer concerned and limited documents from the educational institution. Shanti Devi, Champa Devi and Ritika, who lived in another state, were not petitioners in this writ; their complaints and the judicial remedies appropriate to them were proceeding within their own jurisdiction. Revati was clear that it would be legally careless to ask one High Court to remove restrictions imposed in several states by a single order. Yet the news of those lives would not leave her mind. One person's medicine had stopped, another's instalment on a sewing machine; for Arjun the consequences were an examination form and the cost of a bus journey.

For the state, advocate Bhanu Pratap Mathur studied the investigation papers. His instructions said that the source of the four thousand two hundred rupees credited to the student's account might be connected, through an alleged deceptive training-fee arrangement, to the preliminary cybercrime investigation. Some entries in the wider money-laundering prosecution appeared to correspond with that information. But the parties to the two cases, the statutory orders governing them and the powers of their respective officers were not identical. Bhanu told his junior, 'Ask for the original order. Is this a police letter, or a written restriction imposed by the competent money-laundering authority? And how far did the bank's system go beyond the terms of the original communication?' The junior looked astonished. 'Sir, are we to ask these questions on behalf of the state?' 'Defending a falsehood on behalf of the state is nobody's duty,' Bhanu replied.

Riddhi Vishnoi had come to the corridor with a supporting document, with Arjun's permission, not as an authorised representative of the university. The inquiry into the list of five hundred serial entries was proceeding separately; its unverified names could not be annexed here. Riddhi's papers contained only the sanction for Arjun's scholarship, the dates on which the institution's fees were due, and a certified letter from the student-assistance centre. 'At the university,' she said, 'our students see four digits of a bank account and grow frightened before anyone has even checked the name. That fear is itself a form of injury. But I cannot turn it into a quantified claim before this court without evidence.' Revati thanked her.

Before the hearing, Revati opened in the court library a copy of the first note her father had made in 2000. In faded ink it carried four questions: against whom is the allegation, what is the fact, what is its source, and under what authority? Shivnarayan had later added a fifth: 'Upon which person does this act have an effect?' Water had erased parts of the page. Beside those questions Revati placed a new slip: 'On whose order was the account stopped? Under which law? For what amount? From what date? When is the review?' The legal vocabulary of twenty-seven years had changed; the questions capable of protecting a person from a mistaken name had scarcely changed at all.

When the case was first called, Shalini rose and Revati appeared with her. It was before a division bench of two judges: Justice Ila Rathore presided, with Justice Devansh Trivedi beside her, both studying the record. Justice Ila asked the first question. 'Is this petition directed against the disputed entry of four thousand two hundred rupees, or against the restriction once imposed upon the entire account? And how much is actually restricted now?' Shalini produced three bank replies, each bearing a different date. The first recorded a general prohibition on withdrawals; the second clarified that the restriction was limited to a sum; the third confirmed that scholarship withdrawals had resumed. Justice Devansh observed, 'Then this court must consider the question of past injury separately from that of present protection.'

Counsel for the state said that the payment into the student's personal account was under investigation for a possible connection with a deceptive incentive scheme run through a training programme. Justice Ila immediately asked, 'What record of the underlying offence forms the basis for this particular sum? Not public discussion. Show us an authorised document.' The state produced a certified extract from a registered complaint containing specific allegations concerning fees. Shalini did not deny that the complaint existed. Her question was which original

entries, duly authenticated, were available to connect the four thousand two hundred rupees received in Arjun's personal account with the alleged chain of fees. 'The existence of a complaint and its particular connection with this account are two different things,' the presiding judge said.

The first contradiction in the record concerned the date and scope of the bank's technical restriction. The investigating office's letter had in substance asked that a 'specified amount alleged to be involved' be secured, but the branch system initially prevented every debit from the account. The bank's compliance representative acknowledged that the branch had requested clarification from the centre; once a reply came, the restriction had been narrowed. 'Did the bank enlarge the scope of the investigating officer's written direction on its own, or was there a fresh order?' Justice Devansh asked. No certified copy of a new order was yet on record. The court directed the bank to submit a two-page affidavit setting out the facts; at that hearing, no one's possible negligence was treated as a proved offence.

Revati submitted, 'My Lords, when the screen of a subordinate system says "entire account blocked" while the written source instruction says "secure the specified amount", the citizen pays for the difference in the course of ordinary life. That cost is not imaginary. It appears as the last date for paying fees, money needed for medicines, rent falling due, or the turning wheel of daily wages. But we do not ask for an order stopping the investigation. We ask only that power remain within its lawful dimensions and that those who bear its weight receive an answer capable of being examined.'

'You speak of proportionality,' Justice Ila said. 'Suppose the investigating material shows several payments throughout the account to be suspicious. Would the court still have to accept a request for a limited restriction alone?' 'No,' Revati replied. 'In that event, broader protection of the funds might be possible, provided it rests on authenticated material, a competent authority and procedure prescribed by law. But when the state itself identifies the course of one specified sum, a separate justification may be demanded for immobilising all the lawful money on which a life depends. I am not asserting an absolute right; I am questioning whether the reasons fit the means.' The bench took note of her answer.

The judges made one further distinction explicit. Under the law for preventing money laundering, provisional attachment of property by a competent authority, or a restriction on an account during search and seizure, is governed by its own conditions and the procedure of the

adjudicating authority. The source of a bank notice and the remedy available in an ordinary cybercrime investigation may be different. Revati did not make the mistake of calling every notice a 'money-laundering order'. Justice Devansh directed the state to state clearly on affidavit whose authority had restricted Arjun's particular account, upon what written grounds, from which date, and before what forum the restriction could be reviewed. The imposing title of a case did not determine the proper course of law.

Outside, Payal called. Payal Raigar was speaking from a children's assembly at her school. Two pupils had made a picture showing a spacecraft on one side and a school bank-fee slip on the other. The children had asked why a country that took pride in scientific discovery grew so quickly impatient with a student's problem over a small sum of money. Revati handed the telephone to Shalini, who told Payal to seek permission before publishing the children's drawing and not to attach their names to a bank dispute. There was no reason to tie their dream of science to the post of a private allegation.

The court rose for its midday recess. Arjun had no appetite. Naseema gave him a lunch box brought from the university canteen. He ate one mouthful and stopped. 'What if there is no decision today?' he asked. Shalini answered, 'The court has put certain questions on record today. Requiring answers to those questions is also part of the proceedings. The inquiry into the four thousand two hundred rupees will continue, and no fresh order stopping your studies altogether has been placed before us.' Arjun opened his notebook. His next examination topic was 'The State and the Citizen'. The question printed across the top of the page seemed unusually sharp: 'Why is the power of the state limited?'

During recess, beneath a neem tree behind the court, clerks and advocates discussed matters arising from their separate files. In that shade Revati remembered the Andamans in 2004. After the tsunami, the Haldar family's papers had been swept away. The name of a dead father had been entered incorrectly on a relief list, delaying the rights of his living son. Then the grief had been the absence of documents; now the fear was that the real evidence would be buried beneath an excess of papers. In both situations, an office imposed its own conditions of truth upon someone who did not control the documents. Revati thought that a court's question needed to advance beyond 'Does a document exist?' to 'What fact does this document actually establish?'

At that same hour in Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan met Shanti Devi near the hospital's medicine-distribution window. The disputed one thousand

three hundred and fifty rupees remained secured in Shanti's account, while the rest of the balance had become available for withdrawal. Yet a pharmacy payment still produced the old failure message in the banking system. Sunita called Sarabjit Kaur at the bank. Sarabjit showed her that written confirmation and the correction of the system had occurred at different times. 'I understand now,' Sunita said. 'The law opens a door in one place and the machine keeps it closed in another. The patient's breath is trapped between them.' 'That is why the bank's duty is not simply to type an instruction,' Sarabjit replied. 'It must also check that the instruction has been implemented correctly.'

That evening Sunita bought medicine for her father, Ramlakhan Paswan. At the hospital entrance he recalled how, in 2009, several workers had lost their wages when their names were entered incorrectly in the factory's wage register. 'I could understand the calculation of what I was owed,' he said, 'but no one could explain why my name was wrong in their book.' 'Now the name is inside a machine,' Sunita answered, 'but the burden of the mistake still falls on people like us.' Her father tried to laugh. 'Even with machines, we shall have to keep a record of dates in our own handwriting.' Sunita closed the certified copy of the old wage register. That page contained an earlier entry for Hardev Chauhan, but it did not conclusively identify him with the H. Chauhan of 2025.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha was listening to a science report on the radio. A new experiment in space research was being described. His granddaughter Preeti told him over the telephone that her school was teaching them about Chandrayaan, satellites and telecommunications. He remembered a day in 2008 when the country had watched the launch of Chandrayaan-1 while he was going from office to office seeking verification of a poor family's documents. He told his granddaughter, 'The intelligence with which we measure the sky must not be separate from the intelligence with which we protect a human being's rights on earth.' 'Does the court study science too?' Preeti asked. 'Yes,' he said, 'but it uses science as evidence, not as a miracle.'

A restricted analytical note from Anuradha Sen reached Revati's office. Whether relevant portions could be supplied to the parties under the court's rules was one question; circulation of confidential investigative material through private messages was unacceptable. Anuradha had sent her note through an authorised channel. She wrote explicitly that the initial settlement route for the four thousand two hundred rupees paid to Arjun appeared in a batch alongside other payments made that day, but inclusion in the same batch did not make the owner or purpose of every

payment the same. Payment identifiers, original fee receipts, control over the accounts and the actual beneficiaries still had to be compared.

After reading the brief note, investigating officer Neerja Rathore told a colleague, 'Do not repeat here, on a smaller scale, the error we found in the two-thousand-crore table.' 'But the student admitted receiving the four thousand two hundred rupees, didn't he?' the colleague asked. 'Acknowledging receipt does not answer every question about use and knowledge,' Neerja said. 'Find out what he was told that day, what programme actually took place, who asked him to supply a name, and who controlled the account from which the money was paid. Examine each fact in its own right.' Such care took more of her department's time. But failing to give it that time could harm far more people.

On another sheet Anuradha again examined the heading of the large table bearing the figure of ₹2,000 crore. The original report had placed gross flows, transfers repeated within the company, returned payments and values altered by currency exchange rates into a single total. She told her colleague, 'A hundred rupees passing through three accounts can appear as three hundred in an aggregate-flow table. That is a different claim from saying three hundred rupees came from three separate victims. The latter requires a separate foundation of proof.' This arithmetic did not rule out criminality. Some payment chains still demanded serious investigation, particularly those in which the invoices for actual training services differed from the periods for which services had been approved.

Neerja directed her team to maintain three separate lists: the alleged original sources of proceeds of crime; the movements remaining after repeated transactions were discounted; and the evidence of any personal connection with Vikrant Sehgal. Vikrant was in Dubai. His absence was neither proof of guilt in itself nor a reason to dispense with a lawful summons against him. Records of decisions taken by Soumitra Bansal's company were also under separate examination. Anuradha's job was to test the figures, not to pronounce the accused guilty. Whether the officers had been prompted by Revati's writ or by an order of the special court was not a story that could be told simply: the two forums were dealing with different questions, moving forward through the same river of time.

By evening, Noor Jatay had reached the editorial office. A colleague had prepared the headline, 'Two Thousand Crore in the High Court Dock'. Noor struck it out. This writ was not a hearing on the merits of the entire two-thousand-crore prosecution. The real subject of the report

was the basis of a limited bank restriction and the account holder's remedy. She wrote that securing the disputed four thousand two hundred rupees in a student's account while making the other legitimate funds available was a separate procedure; comparing that sum with the gross flows under investigation in a wider financial case would mislead readers. 'Who will read a headline like that?' the editor asked. 'The person whose four thousand two hundred rupees are stuck will read it,' Noor replied. 'If nobody else does, that does not make the issue trivial.'

That night Riddhi met a small group of students in the university library. They had just returned from an open lecture on astrophysics. The scientist had explained that the light of a distant star passes through different media before reaching Earth, and the effects of each medium have to be accounted for if the source is to be identified. Arjun connected the idea with the hearings about financial flows, but Riddhi cautioned him: 'An analogy is useful for clarifying an idea, not as a substitute for evidence.' One student asked why science could correct a false result while a mistaken suspicion in court could continue for so long. 'Both fields require the courage to correct errors,' Riddhi said. 'And in people's lives, a correction made too late also carries a price.'

That night Arjun telephoned his mother, Renu Meena. The turn for watering the fields had changed, and Renu was sitting outside with a torch in her hand. Arjun told her that the court had not yet reached a final decision, but had heard the questions in detail. 'Will you get the four thousand two hundred back?' she asked. 'I don't know. The inquiry isn't over.' His mother was silent for a while. 'If you have taken the truth about your name to court and the court has listened, don't talk of giving up your studies again,' she said. Arjun closed his book. It did not seem to him that his mother failed to understand the law. She had understood the fundamental grammar of rights long before he did.

Three days later the respondent bank filed a fresh affidavit in the High Court. Annexed to it was a record of events in its system: receipt of the initial communication on a certain date; the automatic stoppage of all withdrawals that same day; the branch's request for clarification two days later; and confirmation, some weeks afterward, that the restriction had been confined to the specified sum. Reading the chronology, Shalini asked, 'On the day the branch sought clarification, why could it not give the account holder even a single line of information?' The bank's counsel answered that confidentiality of the investigation and system instructions had been considered. 'It would be proper to establish the actual limits of that confidentiality,' Shalini said. 'Writing the word "confidential" does not entitle anyone to shut down an entire life.'

This time the bank's regional officer appeared in person before the division bench. 'When a signal of suspicion triggers an automatic restriction in your system, which human being reviews it?' Justice Ila Rathore asked. The officer said that a risk-flagged file went to the compliance centre. 'Within what time?' she asked again. The officer described the periods prescribed by several routine procedures, but acknowledged that Arjun's particular case had exceeded the standard time. Justice Devansh said, 'We are not saying that such a system is inherently improper. But there must be a responsible person who can correct an automatic error. Otherwise the system becomes a room without a door.'

Shalini had produced evidence of her client's experience: the notification of the last date for paying his examination fee, the bank's rejected-withdrawal slip, the university's subsequent permission to pay by another means, and Arjun's written application. But she refused a proposal to annex a medical prescription. That prescription belonged to Shanti Devi's husband, who was not a party to this case. 'Another person's suffering may lend emotional force to our argument,' Shalini said, 'but we cannot put that person's private records before the court without the proper right to do so.' Revati saw more than a small legal courtesy in this decision. The privacy of a citizen was protected, and so was the integrity of the argument.

The state's fresh affidavit stated that the four thousand two hundred rupees had come in a payment batch issued by a training organisation, a batch said to contain some entries arising from deceptive referral incentives. 'You have identified the batch,' Shalini asked, 'but what independent fact shows that this student knew of a criminal purpose?' 'The question of knowledge remains under investigation,' Bhanu Pratap Mathur answered. 'The state does not claim that his guilt has been established.' 'That is the correct limit,' Justice Ila said. 'Today we must consider the possibility of investigation alongside the citizen's access to lawful funds. Labels such as accused, witness and suspicious account holder may change at different stages of an inquiry. At every stage, however, officers must use precise language.'

Revati examined the form of Arjun's statement. He had acknowledged receiving the four thousand two hundred rupees. He had been told it was an honorarium for participating in training, with a possible incentive for informing other students. He admitted giving some names, but said his knowledge of the institution's underlying expenditure, the allegedly unlawful fees and the intentions of the people involved was limited. Revati did not treat that statement as conclusive proof of innocence. Her

father had taught her that admitting one part of the truth did not automatically confirm the rest. Her submission was therefore simple: each element of the statement required its own evidence and its own proper legal conclusion.

Justice Devansh returned to the limits of the matter. 'The question of securing the particular four thousand two hundred rupees received in Arjun's account may remain subject to investigation. But can the state say at present that it is also necessary to stop his future scholarship payments or legitimate remittances from his family?' 'The directions currently available disclose no fresh basis for such a wide restriction,' Bhanu replied. The bank agreed that withdrawals against the unrestricted balance were operating. The court asked for the statement to be put plainly on record, because the difference between an assurance spoken in court and what appears on a bank screen is not a concern for readers; it is the account holder's problem.

That day another case was called in court, concerning payment for equipment at a medical clinic. There was no proved connection between it and this financial network. The judges proceeded with that case on its own terms. Sitting in the corridor, Revati saw that the whole country could never be contained within the boundaries of one lawsuit. A doctor in Jodhpur worried about testing a patient in time; workers in Ludhiana put aside money for monthly medicines; a boatman in the Andamans watched the weather forecast; and researchers in a laboratory in the capital kept repeated experiments distinct from accepted results. All these kinds of work, unrelated to crime, possessed stories complete in themselves.

At a small clinic in Jodhpur, Dr Nalini Beniwal was testing a new respiratory device. She remembered the years of Covid, when differences between orders on paper and beds actually available had affected so many lives. In 2020, oxygen supplies, training and the discipline of medical research had strengthened her faith, though they had also made her wary of false claims. A junior doctor showed her a report of a financial scam. 'Madam, it makes one distrust every digital system.' 'Giving up digital records is no answer,' Nalini said. 'The answer is to examine their sources, changes and the responsibility for them. If every figure were false, we could not even read a patient's report.'

At a literary gathering, the poet Fariha Parveen was reading an old poem about a woman labourer whose name had been entered incorrectly in an account. Some listeners immediately began treating it as a 'hint' about the financial inquiry of 2026. Fariha made herself clear. 'A poem

speaks of suffering shared across a time. A line of verse cannot establish the guilt of a particular person living today.' Noor Jatay attended closely to her words. The impulse to turn both accounting figures and poetic images into unjustified certainties was at work within the same society. Revati was not at the gathering, but later encountered the discussion in Noor's article.

In Mumbai, Sudarshan Sehgal was closing the books of his old warehouse. A few members of the family knew about the authorised letter Vikrant had sent from abroad, but neighbours outside were exchanging two kinds of news: some claimed the crime was proved, others said it was all political suspicion. Sudarshan rejected both claims. He wrote to his son that he must give his lawyer the genuine service approvals, amendments to invoices and records of company decisions. The family's reputation was no reason to conceal documents, and a public allegation did not become true of itself. His wife read the letter and asked only, 'If he comes home, will the family be allowed to question him?' 'A family's questions are not evidence in court,' Sudarshan replied, 'but a son must still answer them.'

In Dubai, Vikrant Sehgal was sitting with his legal adviser. The authorised process for serving a summons abroad was under way; neither the final status of service nor the prosecution's next step was yet certain. He refused an offer to have a file held back in exchange for an unauthorised arrangement. The adviser said that the difference between the company's sixty-day consulting invoice and forty days of approved service was important to the inquiry. Whether it arose from a clerical mistake, a disputed contract or an intentionally inflated invoice would have to be determined by the documents. 'I will say what I know,' Vikrant replied. 'I will not invent answers to what I don't know.' 'Remember one other thing,' the adviser said. 'Delaying over an officially served court summons is not a decision.'

Across the city, Soumitra Bansal's wife Kavya was helping their daughter with her homework. The child wanted to know whether everyone employed by a big company was a criminal. 'Working in an institution does not prove guilt,' Kavya said. 'Who did which act, and who helped whom, are separate questions.' Then the child asked when her father would come home. Kavya had no easy answer. The proceedings concerning Soumitra's attendance conditions, defence and investigation were still continuing. She told her daughter to open the next day's schoolbook. The silence in their house was not a judicial order, but the long shadow of legal uncertainty lay across it.

In early November a third listing of the matter came before the division bench. In a supplementary affidavit, the bank's compliance officer stated that the system had applied a general risk flag when the initial complete restriction was imposed; that flag had cast a wider net than the investigating office's direction concerning a particular amount. The bank also stated that withdrawals from the unrestricted balance were functioning after the correction. 'Was this mistake a single event in the past,' Justice Ila Rathore asked, 'or will the system shut down the entire account again when the next routine email arrives from the investigators?' The officer could not answer. He said a new control instruction had been proposed at the centre. 'We need written accountability for the gap between a proposed control and one that is actually operating,' the court said.

On the first page of her submissions that day, Revati had written 'Difficult Rights'. Justice Devansh asked what she meant by the phrase. 'The difficulty of a citizen's rights appears precisely when the state's task is also necessary,' Revati replied. 'If there were no reason to investigate, the question would be easy. Here there are complaints of fraud, claims concerning victims' money and flows through many layers of accounts. The state must preserve evidence. But that necessity does not confer a right to stop the ordinary life of a person whose funds are lawful, without particular reasons. So the difficult question is not whether to retain power or abolish it, but how to ensure that it is exercised within limits and made subject to effective review.'

In reply, Bhanu Pratap Mathur argued that it might be necessary for an investigation to prevent a suspicious payment from being transferred out of an account immediately; otherwise the proceeds of crime could be dispersed across many places. Revati accepted that much, but added that the word 'immediately' had a time dimension of its own. Information useful at a preliminary stage might require a fresh review if its effects continued through days, weeks and months. Bhanu said the state had a plan for providing the investigation's timetable. Justice Ila made it clear that the court would not ignore the real complexity of an investigation in fixing time limits, but neither would it accept inactivity of indefinite duration.

Arjun's advocate placed a small table before the court. The first row recorded the principal scholarship payment, the second legitimate money deposited by the family, and the third the disputed credit of four thousand two hundred rupees. In the adjoining columns stood the supporting documents for each source and the current withdrawal status. The table was not intended to prove an offence by adding amounts

together. 'Are these dates correct?' Justice Devansh asked. Shalini checked them against the original bank statement. In one entry the date of deposit differed from the bank's settlement date. She immediately drew the court's attention to the difference. 'When you point out an error even in a table favourable to your own case, we consider that a reason to trust you,' the judge said. 'A court needs verified figures, not immaculate ones.'

Revati trembled inwardly. Neelkanth Sah's old ledger of 2000 came back to her again. The court had then asked how faithfully the words and dates of an account corresponded with actual trade. One argument for the defence had later weakened when Neelkanth acknowledged some of the handwriting. After that admission Shivnarayan had withdrawn from his earlier sweeping denial. Revati had learned that an advocate's ethics consisted not only in putting forward truths favourable to a client, but also in giving their proper names to facts proved against the client's interest. That was why Arjun's admission that he had received the four thousand two hundred rupees had not been removed from the file that day.

After a long day in the High Court, Revati called Darbhanga. Preeti helped Shivnarayan hold the phone to his ear. 'Babuji,' Revati asked, 'in forty years of practice, did you ever see a case where the investigation was justified but the order went further than necessary?' 'Many,' her father answered slowly. 'And cases where a restraint was needed but a man tried to make evidence disappear in the name of defending himself. A judge's difficulty is to see the reality of both.' After a pause he added, 'Listen completely to the person for whom you argue. Do not cut short the state's case either. Justice will come after that.'

A memory of a gathering in 2012 rose in Revati's mind. Students had been protesting a ban on a magazine, and one speaker had declared that every state order was an enemy of the citizen. Shivnarayan had disagreed with that easy conclusion. Impartial intervention by the state, he had argued, could sometimes be necessary to protect a person; if evidence was destroyed, the victim's rights could also perish. The difficulty of constitutional life was to live with both fears. Today Revati could see the same problem in the sequence of banking directions: if money could vanish easily, victims might suffer; if an entire account could be stopped without limit, an ordinary citizen would suffer.

A meeting of the city's industry council was discussing compliance with digital-payment requirements. Yakub Ansari, a small utensils trader from Jodhpur, had also been invited because his earlier account restriction had been resolved following a limited order. He did not

deliver a speech. Instead he showed three receipts: a copy of the order, the bank's acknowledgement of it and the first proof that he could actually withdraw money. 'Four weeks passed between these three papers,' he said. 'For me those four weeks meant a shortage of wholesale stock.' 'Are you opposed to investigations?' a businessman asked. 'No,' Yakub replied. 'There is proof that the mistake concerning my name was corrected. I want other customers to be spared the same mistake.'

Yakub's example appeared in an article by Noor Jahan, but she explained that both the original amount restricted in his bank case and the remedy ordered by the court were independent of Arjun's dispute. Readers wanted the easy narrative of 'one financial scam'. Noor kept the jurisdiction and dates of every file in their proper places. For a journalist like her, such labour could not be measured by advertising statistics. Some readers called her an 'apologist for criminals', others a 'spokeswoman for the state'. She replied to neither accusation. In her next article she printed a correction: she had previously reported the date of a branch order incorrectly. Fidelity to the truth did not require membership in anybody's camp.

In the Andamans, Anish Haldar accepted a small letter from the postman at the boat landing. It contained a certified copy concerning the old dispute over registration of the family's rehabilitated land. Their journey through official documents, begun in 2004, had largely settled, but a small amendment to a government map was still outstanding. 'The day the sea washed away our house,' Anish told his son, 'we wondered whether even our name would survive. Now the name is right, but the boundary on the land is still to be settled.' 'Why does such a mistake reach a court?' the son asked. 'A law book may seem far away,' Anish replied, 'but to someone whose boundary is being moved, it is very near.'

At college Arjun was taking a mathematics examination. One question involved a simple equation describing the multilayered transfer of a small sum. He involuntarily remembered the financial investigation, then checked himself at once. An examination was not a financial chart of anyone's alleged crime. The teacher wanted knowledge in his answer book. Riddhi had said again and again that a student had a right to remain a student apart from the news of court cases. When the paper was over, Arjun walked towards the garden and spoke with his friend Mohan Bairwa about the weather and jobs. Mohan had still not forgotten the humiliation of seeing his name on an unauthorised list. For a moment neither spoke of law, and that silence seemed a rare happiness to them.

In the first week of December the final round of written submissions came before the division bench. Shalini brought her prayers together in three parts: that the precise extent of the current restriction on Arjun's account be placed on record; that no general prohibition be imposed on his lawful scholarship or new unrelated deposits without fresh statutory grounds; and that the investigation concerning the four thousand two hundred rupees be reviewed appropriately within a definite time. In addition, she sought information for Arjun about the competent complaints forum if he feared misuse of his personal data. 'We neither argue the merits of the ₹2,000-crore table here nor seek a conclusion about it,' Revati said. 'That question belongs in the prescribed proceedings before the special court and competent authorities.' Justice Ila appreciated the boundary they had drawn, but said the decision would be given in a written order.

For the state, Bhanu Pratap Mathur gave an important assurance: the state had issued no instruction that Arjun be treated as guilty of a university disciplinary offence merely because he had appeared for financial questioning. 'The university's internal inquiry may follow its own independent rules,' the court said, 'but has any officer passed confidential bank information to an unauthorised person?' The answer was that a separate inquiry into the source of the original unauthorised list was under way. The court did not immediately draw conclusions about any person. If Arjun made a specific written complaint, the relevant authority would deal with it through lawful procedure; this writ was not the forum for investigating all the facts concerning the unauthorised five-hundred-entry list.

Justice Devansh asked the state's advocate, 'Can the substance of the reasons recorded by your officer be communicated to the citizen concerned, while protecting confidential witnesses and those parts of the investigation that must remain secret?' Bhanu answered that disclosing some of the reasons might cause the course of the funds to be altered. The state was, however, considering arrangements to inform a person of the existence of the general order, the limits within which it applied and the competent complaints procedure. The court did not treat this as a complete answer. 'Confidentiality must be a legitimate reason, not a magic word,' Justice Ila said. 'The state will supply adequate authorised material to this court and make clear to the citizen what can be said without hampering the investigation.'

Two hours later the written interim order was read. At the outset, the court stated that this was a limited stage of the writ proceedings. The order did not declare the alleged source of Arjun's four thousand two

hundred rupees lawful or unlawful, did not find any accused person guilty or innocent, and did not obstruct the other proceedings before the special court. On the basis of the government affidavit, the bank's verified chronology and the limited documents available, the court was addressing only the present scope of the restriction and its review. This caution satisfied Revati. She knew how many people celebrated the first sentence of a judgment without possessing the patience to read its limits.

The order directed the bank not to reimpose the former general restriction on ordinary withdrawals of Arjun's undisputed lawful scholarship, verified family deposits and fresh unrelated payments from those sources, unless a competent authority made a new, specific order in accordance with law. At this interim stage the request to release the presently disputed four thousand two hundred rupees was not granted. Whether that amount still needed to be secured was left to the verified results of the investigation and the procedure governing the authority concerned. The bank was directed to give clear written notice of its compliance both to Arjun and to the authorised investigating officer. The order neither required public disclosure of the investigation's underlying evidence nor conferred unlimited rights to information through a general notice.

The state was directed to file, by the next date fixed, a short report identifying the statutory source of the original restraint letter, the present status of the connection alleged in respect of the disputed balance, and the administrative procedure for reviewing the restriction. The court said that the petitioner could, as necessary, pursue other remedies provided by law. The High Court's intervention did not mean that it was taking over all the functions assigned by statute to an adjudicating authority. The question of a lawful remedy for the actual educational hardship caused to Arjun by the bank's initial complete restriction was left open. The court would consider that aspect further after the respondents' replies were received.

One particular line of the order stated that technical implementation by a system did not lie beyond judicial accountability. Where the amount specified in an administrative letter differed from the scope of the restriction applied in the bank's operations, the competent officer might have to show why it happened, for how long and with what proof of correction. But that sentence did not automatically render every bank restriction unlawful. The actual circumstances of each account would have to be examined separately. To Revati this proportion was the soul of the judgment: money alleged to be proceeds of crime might remain

secured, but the decision of an opaque machine must not cast darkness, without cause, over an entire lawful human life.

When the hearing ended, Arjun asked, 'So have I won?' 'The limits of the money available for your studies, which was not in dispute, are now made explicit by the court's order,' Shalini replied. 'But the inquiry into the four thousand two hundred rupees remains. There will be a review afterward. It is too soon to speak of final victory or defeat.' Arjun did not smile. He understood the immediate importance of the order, but knew his mother would ask whether the four thousand two hundred rupees were still held. He would tell her yes. Then he would explain that the rest of his legitimate money was protected. The fine distinction between those two sentences had become the central lesson of his life over the past several months.

Revati stood on the court steps. Bhanu Pratap Mathur approached from behind. 'Not once did you ask for the state's power to investigate to be abolished,' he said. 'That made the argument clear.' 'And you did not try to conceal the bank's technical error,' Revati answered. 'The state's interest is larger than the defence of every decision made in one office.' Bhanu smiled. 'The public will find this conversation much too mild.' 'People need hard truths,' Revati said, 'not necessarily harsh voices.' They went in opposite directions. Such ordinary civility in a court corridor could grow into a rare public trust, but it was difficult to make it a newspaper headline.

In her chamber Justice Ila signed the last page of the order. A colleague asked whether it had been right for a division bench to devote so much time to a case involving such a small sum. 'The amount is small,' she replied, 'but the question is no small certificate. The language of one order can be misunderstood in a thousand bank branches, while one properly drawn limit can preserve a person's life. Yet we must also take care not to decide the whole investigation in this chamber under the pretext of relieving one student.' The colleague asked whether the question would reach a higher court. 'That depends on the remedies available and the dispute that actually remains,' she said, 'not on speculation about the future.'

That evening Anuradha Sen received a fresh authorised financial file. It contained consultancy charges, payments for publicity material, institutional training and the names of certain public-assistance organisations. An initial message claimed that ninety-five per cent of the alleged amount had been withdrawn in cash. Anuradha read the message and wrote clearly at the top of the file: 'Claim; source verification

pending.' She recognised a difficult distinction the inquiry would need to maintain: the actual services of genuine charitable bodies, lawful publicity expenditure, fictitious bills and allegedly sham organisations each required separate evidence. A percentage in a message did not establish the magnitude of a crime. The bank records of the cash withdrawals claimed, their beneficiaries, dates and conversions all remained to be checked.

Neerja Rathore called Anuradha. 'I have read the High Court's order,' she said. 'It does not halt our inquiry, but it makes the question of accountability clear.' 'Our reconciliation will also have to use fewer sweeping headings,' Anuradha replied. 'One misleading percentage can write a whole story of crime across society.' 'Retain what has an authorised source,' Neerja said. 'What has none must be called unknown, not zero.' For a while the two women were silent. Over the twenty-seven-year judicial journey, this had become an important ethical grammar: not calling the unknown either guilt or absolution at one's convenience.

In the Jodhpur hostel, Arjun put a copy of the order into his satchel. Mohan Bairwa came with his books. 'Shall we go to the library now?' he asked. 'Let's go,' Arjun replied. In the corridor a few students whispered as they saw them, but at an open meeting Himmat Ansari again reminded everyone that a name attached to an account was not evidence supporting a public accusation. That day Payal Raigar had mounted an exhibition of children's science drawings. In a corner of one picture appeared a small sentence: 'A sound bridge begins with a sound measurement.' Rani had sent a photograph of the paper bridge she had made. Seeing it, Arjun laughed freely for the first time.

In Ludhiana, after buying medicine for her father, Sunita wiped the table in the labour-assistance room. The undisputed money that Shanti Devi needed for subsistence was available; Champa's identification-document problem had been resolved; and Ritika's separate case about payments for her sewing work was still moving along its own banking route. Sunita wrapped her old wage register in cloth. She sent Noor a short message: 'Understand the context before printing anyone's name. My register of 2009 still does not prove the identity of H. Chauhan in 2025.' Noor replied, 'We shall retain that caution in the editorial record.' In an ordinary exchange of letters, far from rumours of crime, a citizen's dignity was being protected.

Mukul Meena opened a copy of his receipt for seven thousand five hundred rupees. The special court's searching questions had not in themselves returned his money, nor had the High Court's interim order

in Arjun's case. He was disappointed, but had kept the reference number of his complaint safe. 'You keep reading everybody's court orders,' his sister Rani said. 'Explain the slips to me a little more.' 'One order concerns four thousand two hundred rupees; my seven thousand five hundred is a different matter,' Mukul answered. 'They may have travelled through the same banking route, but they are not the name of the same loss.' Rani drew two separate circles in her mathematics notebook. Looking at the picture, Mukul realised that his sister's lesson was no less clear than the language of the court.

In Darbhanga a letter from Revati reached Shivnarayan. The envelope contained not a certified copy of the High Court's order but a clearly written account of its principal lines, along with a personal letter from his daughter. Revati wrote that from 2000 to 2026 she had witnessed many separate stories of names, records, hunger, relief, labour, scholarships, science and illness. Her question was not the complete answer to one criminal network. It was whether the law acknowledged its real effects upon the lives of vulnerable people. As he read, Shivnarayan took out his old ledger. On the first page were the four questions from Neelkanth Sah's time; on the fifth, 'Upon which person does it have an effect?' Beneath that fifth question, in a trembling hand, he wrote: 'Review in time.'

At a school in Jodhpur, a teacher ended a science lesson by asking the pupils when an image received from a satellite should be considered trustworthy. One child said, 'When the image is clear.' Another said, 'When the instrument is working properly.' On the blackboard the teacher wrote: time, source, verification, repetition of the test. Nobody connected the lesson to Arjun's writ. The children were learning a question from their syllabus. Yet far away Revati had been thinking of this very thing: in every world of evidence, one must ask about the instruments and methods behind what appears clear. The achievement of space exploration was one thing and a citizen's bank notice another; the discipline underlying both was equally built by human labour.

A law student asked Shalini Solanki whether it would be right to treat such an interim order in a textbook as the final rule governing a right. 'Look at the facts of this case,' she replied, 'the interim nature of the order, the law that applies and the limits of the relief requested. Relief for one student does not automatically mean relief for every account holder. A court decides upon the record before it. Different facts may produce different conclusions.' 'Then what is the meaning of twenty-seven years of experience?' the student asked. 'Perhaps this,' Shalini said. 'Learning

how carefully one must apply the same principles to different people's lives.'

An old ticket lay on Revati's desk. In 2000 her father had kept a bus ticket from a journey to the magistrate's court in Darbhanga. Years later he had given his daughter one torn corner of it. The fare was barely legible now; the name of that day's case was still clear. Revati did not place the ticket with the copy of the new order. One was a private memory, the other a public judicial record. Keeping the two apart even at the most difficult moments was among the achievements of her twenty-seven years in the profession.

Late that night, in her hotel room, Revati set down two possible paths on a sheet of paper. The first was the remaining statutory review of the particular restriction on Arjun's account, any remedy available before the competent tribunal or other forum, and the next hearing in the High Court. The second was that if proceedings in different cases genuinely gave rise to a wider constitutional dispute over statutory procedure, citizens' information and implementation by banks, the question might reach a higher court by the appropriate judicial route. Beside the second line she wrote in large letters: 'Not an automatic appeal; an actual dispute and lawful procedure are essential.' Such restraint diminished the drama of the story, but kept judicial life truthful.

When she opened the window, the dark silhouette of Mehrangarh Fort appeared in the distance. Revati placed her father's old file and her own new letter together. In twenty-seven years the journey had led from a ledger in Darbhanga to digital accounts across the country, yet no court could do justice to every name in a single day. Today the court had said this much: the reasons for an investigation must be clear, a restraint must stay within the limits of the law, and those whose lives it touched must have a way to seek review. This was not the final judgment. It was an open door. Just then the unknown percentage in Anuradha's new file flashed through her mind: who would pay the price of falsehood? The source of that new file had yet to be verified.

Chapter 38 — The Price of Falsehood

Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Darbhanga, Mumbai and Dubai; November–December 2026

On a November morning in Jodhpur, the cold was not severe enough to keep people under their blankets, but Rafiq's hands were certainly shaking as he made tea outside the courthouse. While the kettle boiled, a photograph flashed across his phone. It showed half a page of a financial record, with a red caption across the top: 'Ninety-Five Per Cent of the Money Disappears in Cash.' Beneath it was something resembling a news headline, without a journalist's name. Rafiq looked at the face of the paper and then at Tarachand, a clerk who had come for tea. 'Sir, can it be something as big as this?' Tarachand refused to touch the phone. 'Where are the first and last pages of the document you are looking at?' Rafiq laughed, but did not delete the image. By six that morning it had reached some fifty telephones. No one had authenticated the picture; the number of its shares was becoming the first successful transaction of the day.

At that very hour, in an authorised financial examination room, Anuradha Sen was noticing an inconsistency in a small word. Sealed copies of the original documents stood inside a glass cabinet. In an exported spreadsheet, a column was marked 'C/ADJ'; a local copy had expanded this to 'cash withdrawal'. But the principal system's glossary defined the letters as 'adjustment or cash-related accounting class', which could include corrections between accounts, adjustments of previous dues and actual cash transactions. 'From which document was this definition taken?' Anuradha asked her colleague Deven. Deven took out the system's original manual and showed it to her. 'The file sent to me didn't contain the full expression,' he said. 'Then who wrote "cash"?' The answer could not be produced by pressing a button. They would have to trace the document's journey.

The first stage of that journey was an internal draft prepared the previous day. A junior analyst had looked at a selection of twenty entries, found that nineteen were classified as 'C/ADJ', and written a brief note: 'Nineteen entries in the selected set share the same classification; original nature to be verified.' Four words disappeared from the draft. A table was cropped into an image. On the next telephone it became '95% withdrawn'. The ninety-five per cent was the arithmetic of nineteen out of twenty selected rows, not a percentage of the money in the entire network. Reading the page, Anuradha felt that the most frightening form of a number was not when the mathematics was wrong, but when

the mathematics was correct and the question was wrong. She wrote the first line of her report: '19/20 is the proportion of an accounting classification among records; it is not the value percentage of cash withdrawals.'

'If we clear up this confusion immediately,' Deven said, 'people will accuse us of siding with the defendants.' Anuradha rose and went to the window. Outside, a schoolchild was winding a muffler around his neck. 'There is only one side an investigation ought to take: the side of what can truthfully be said,' she replied. 'Correcting a misconception does not rule out the possibility of a real crime. And if a crime has occurred, reliable proof of it should not have to lean on the crutch of a falsehood.' She understood, too, that determining responsibility for the preliminary mistake did not mean sacrificing an innocent junior employee. Who had made the file, who had removed its context, and who had made it public were three different questions. Anuradha sent a request through the authorised legal channel to preserve evidence of its source.

The picture had been reaching Noor Jahan's newsroom since the night before. 'We'll be left behind,' editor Nikhil said. 'Every channel is saying ninety-five per cent.' 'A chorus of claims is not the original source of a news report,' Noor replied. She refused to print the picture as evidence and wrote across it in red pencil: 'Unverified; do not publish.' Nikhil showed her audience figures on another screen. Some websites had placed photographs of students beside Vikrant Sehgal's picture. 'Will your report carry photographs like these?' he asked. 'Why should we print an image as a conclusion of guilt when even the person's position in the allegations is unsettled? And the students' names, photographs without consent, the last four digits of their bank accounts—we shall publish none of those.' The editor sighed deeply. He found the difference between the speed of news and the permanence of a published falsehood difficult to bear.

Two days earlier, Mukul Meena had sent Noor a clear photograph of his old receipt. His seven thousand five hundred rupees had not been returned. 'When people read two thousand crore, do they even hear my seven thousand five hundred?' he had asked. Noor had heard his question through the telephone. She did not want a new frightening headline to bury that small, real suffering once again. She wrote back: 'I have checked your receipt, the transaction date and the present status of your complaint. I will not write that your money has been returned. And there is as yet no evidence for the sensational ninety-five-per-cent claim.' Mukul set down his telephone and went to fetch water for his sister Rani, who was coming home from school. A journalist's caution brought him

no immediate relief. But for once, at least, nobody had sent him congratulations on a victory he had never won.

On the outskirts of Ludhiana, a small organisation called the Saanjh-Sahara Public Service Trust helped women fill in forms in an abandoned room of an old primary health centre. Its work was entirely ordinary: explaining vaccination slips to labourers' families, helping them understand the language of widow-pension applications, bringing information about school-fee exemptions. The head of the trust, Zarina Begum, had lived in the community for forty years. Its most valuable possessions were four cupboards of files and the lock on the room's window. One day a fragmentary newspaper story said that 'assistance trusts are channels for publicity funds'. Two donors promptly stopped their monthly contributions. 'Which organisation? Which payment? Whose signature?' Zarina asked. The answer was a printed copy of a red headline from a website.

That day Sunita Paswan arrived at the trust carrying a form for medicines. Seeing the exhaustion in Zarina's eyes, she asked what was wrong. Zarina showed her the picture. 'Has your organisation been accused of anything?' Sunita asked. 'It isn't named,' Zarina said. 'But people see only one word: trust. Yesterday a mother from the neighbourhood behind us did not bring her child. People said it was dangerous to submit account documents here.' Sunita's old wage register lay in her bag. She knew that an error in a document could stop a labourer's wages; now an incomplete report was preventing people from receiving essential help. 'We can examine the receipts for assistance in order,' she said, 'but those who make accusations also bear a responsibility to provide evidence.'

Zarina sat down with the visitors' register, donation receipts and three months of service reports. Thirty-four families had received help in a single day, but publishing every name would be improper. Such disclosure would make illnesses, caste, widow pensions and private family difficulties public. Sunita suggested supplying the relevant documents in confidence to an authorised body for any prescribed examination, rather than opening the list of patients to a newspaper. 'Must we expose the privacy of our people to demonstrate the truth?' Zarina asked. 'No,' Sunita replied. 'The search for truth, too, has to respect dignity.' In that one sentence both women recognised that the price of falsehood was not only the pain of a wrongful allegation; it was also the needless expense of proving what was true.

On the Marudhar campus Riddhi Vishnoi pinned a short notice to the students' board: 'Do not circulate confidential lists, bank details or incomplete reports as verified facts.' A student wrote across it in red pen, 'Then the criminals will escape?' Riddhi did not erase the question. Underneath she wrote, 'No. Accusations unsupported by proper evidence injure both the innocent and the real victims.' Some students became angry, convinced that the university was suppressing the case. Himmat Ansari requested an open meeting, but asked that bank names and private lists not be read out. Riddhi agreed. The university's caution could become a form of protection only if it was accompanied by a right to ask questions.

Arjun Meena sat in the back row of the meeting. Under the High Court's limited order, the undisputed scholarship money in his account was available for use; the inquiry into the connection with four thousand two hundred rupees continued separately. One student stood up. 'Money came into your account. How can you claim to be clean?' Arjun hesitated before answering. 'I am not asking for a certificate that says "clean",' he said. 'I say that the money arrived, and my knowledge of it should be investigated. But that cannot turn every friend I have, every fee I pay and every day of my studies into a crime.' Silence spread suddenly through the room. Riddhi wondered who would teach the difficult language of innocence if universities taught only the language of examination marks.

When Arjun's mother Renu heard everything over the phone, she said, 'I don't want a beautiful answer from you. I want the truth. If you knew anything, say so.' Bowing his head, Arjun replied, 'Mother, I was told there would be an incentive for referring other students. I trusted that. I have given the officers that information. And I will not pretend to know what I did not understand.' Renu lowered the flame beneath her cooking pot. 'I am afraid that if you made one mistake, the name of your whole life will be changed,' she said. 'And I am afraid,' Arjun answered, 'that because of my fear another victim's truth might be hidden.' Their conversation was not part of any court record, but it allowed him to sleep more peacefully that night than on many nights before it.

In Dubai, Vikrant Sehgal was preparing a response to authorised records with Jayant Malhotra. The accountant Farida had compared the sixty-day consultancy project with an approval letter for forty days. The documents were incomplete on whether payment was genuinely due for the remaining twenty days of work. 'The newspapers say ninety-five per cent,' Vikrant said. 'One lie will make every bill of ours appear false.' 'Even if the news is wrong, that does not make the original bills

automatically correct,' Farida answered quietly. 'There is evidence for the forty days of work approved; the rest must be examined separately.' At first Vikrant was angry. Then he held back his signature from the letter. He wanted words that would defend him at once; Farida needed the courage to leave every unknown space in the accounts unfilled.

Jayant explained through the proper legal channel that the status of service of the overseas summons was still the subject of an independent procedure before the special court. 'A proper reply to a lawful court communication is essential,' he said, 'but answering a television headline with a tweet is no way to create evidence.' 'If I do not speak publicly, will the image of me remain one-sided?' Vikrant asked. 'Your public image matters,' Jayant replied, 'but it is not a substitute for the legal record. When documents are presented under proper authority, the opposing side can test them. Otherwise even your supporters cannot become witnesses in your place.' Farida stood listening between two clocks showing the time abroad. One was the clock of the news, the other of judicial procedure. Their hands did not move at the same speed.

Outside Jodhpur, in an agricultural produce market, a commission agent named Hariram Jakhar had been counting sacks of grain since dawn. His business was not large: storing the farmers' produce, weighing it, deducting the agreed commission upon sale and paying out the balance were his daily tasks. The previous year, a training group attached to an organisation had stayed for two days in an annex to his warehouse. Its members had taken farmers' details in order to teach them digital marketing, and a small payment for refreshments at a meeting had been made in Hariram's name. Now a leaked list carried the words 'H. Jakhar —publicity assistance', and another trader in the market called him a middleman in the affair. 'Is it a crime to give trainers a place to stay for two days?' Hariram asked. The trader had no answer; he had the same picture on another phone.

A farmer, Tejaram Gurjar, stood by his heap of pearl millet and listened. He had actually attended the first day of training. He had been shown how to check market prices on his mobile phone, but the promised facility for agricultural credit had never appeared. 'Let us speak of something else,' he said. 'They did come to teach us. That much is true. But they also said that after three months I would have direct access to customers. That never happened. If someone was paid for it, there should be an account.' 'The rent for my warehouse was paid on time,' Hariram replied. 'How am I to know whether the money came from training fees or someone's publicity budget?' 'Do not claim to know what you don't,' Tejaram answered. 'But do not turn our disappointed hopes into a

photograph of a successful programme.' Beside the scales in the market there were two voices of truth: some service had been delivered; some promises remained unfulfilled.

Hariram did not bank at Sarabjit Kaur's branch. Still, his own authorised bank representative explained how to obtain a statement bearing certified dates. Hariram requested a verified statement from the branch, not an incomplete screenshot from his mobile. It clearly showed a small payment for services in 2025, followed by payments for market fees and warehouse labour. One could not infer a vast money-laundering network from that ordinary business. But Hariram stopped when he tried to recognise the signature on the contract annexed to the payment entry. 'This is not my employee's signature,' he said. The branch officer immediately recorded: 'Signature disputed; examination of original or expert assessment required.' Hariram realised that his hope of innocence and the actual authenticity of the contract could both be tested at the same time.

At the evening meal, Tejaram's daughter Mansi asked, 'Babuji, why do people use farmers' photographs in publicity?' 'It is all right to show a picture,' he answered, 'but using my photograph without my permission to claim that every farmer has become rich is wrong.' Mansi showed him the title of an essay she was writing for school: 'The Village in Digital India'. She had written that checking market prices on a mobile phone was useful, but the paths to fields, water, loans and fair weighing still needed work by human hands. Her father read it and laughed. To a promoter in the city, the farmer was an image; to the farmer's daughter, he was the daily life of her family. The cost of falsehood often accumulated in that distance.

Anuradha's team separated the payments into three financial categories. First were payments supported by documents showing that services had actually been delivered, though the origins of those funds could still be examined. Second were cases with service letters but incomplete approvals of work, attendance evidence or authorised contracts. Third were publicity invoices for services the people at the supposed delivery site did not acknowledge receiving. A member of the team exclaimed, 'Then the third category proves false billing!' Anuradha stopped him. 'No. It establishes a contradiction. Obtain the other side's response, the original delivery notes, the stated purpose of the payment and the recipient's account. Suspicion is necessary; a verdict written in advance is not.' In the spreadsheet she replaced 'false' with 'service confirmation incomplete'. The distance between those expressions preserved room for judicial consideration in the future.

One name repeatedly appeared among the selected payments: a publicity group called Jandisha Media Coordination. It had provided a registered-office address. But an authorised team visiting the premises found a shared business centre where mail was received for many companies. Receiving mail at an address did not establish that a company had performed its work; the absence of permanent staff there did not itself prove a crime. The team requested the building's entry register and a lawful copy of the tenancy agreement. One invoice claimed that a 'Youth Skills Exhibition' had been organised at a local school. The headmistress said that no programme of that name was listed at her institution. Before making a sworn statement, however, she asked for time to examine the annual register again. 'Give her time,' Neerja Rathore said. 'Even sound evidence of absence must be established through verification.'

On the other hand, no documentary link with Jandisha had emerged to substantiate the general suspicion cast upon Saanjh-Sahara. Both used words such as 'assistance', 'community' and 'training', but common vocabulary did not mean common control. Zarina asked the trust's financial adviser to prepare a specific report. One page listed the sources of donations, the next its legitimate institutional expenditure, and the third its confidential method for verifying services. She wrote: 'I refuse unnecessary public disclosure not to evade investigation, but to protect the private lives of our beneficiaries.' Sunita made a small amendment: 'Also state your readiness to supply specified material through the proper procedure if a lawful authority requires it.' Zarina agreed. There was a difference between transparency and display. Treating the two as one word left both institutions and individuals exposed.

Noor Jahan spoke to the trust while preparing her report. Zarina gave permission for her own full name to be published, but not the names of women who had received help. 'Has any investigating office sent your organisation a notice?' Noor asked. 'No. We have had questions from donors, not an accusation from the government,' Zarina replied. Noor marked the distinction heavily in her notes. Journalism often wrote 'allegations have been made' when in fact the accusations were merely circulating on social media. She decided not to describe the trust as 'under investigation' without an official notice. Editor Nikhil was still looking for a headline, but had to admit that the report was made trustworthy by the very sentence he found so plain: 'No authorised allegation against this organisation has yet been shown.'

At an official investigation meeting, Neerja Rathore laid out different documents on five tables. On the first were original receipts for the

alleged training fees; on the second, outgoing movements from the accounts; on the third, consultancy contracts; on the fourth, approvals certifying services; and on the fifth, indications of each person's instructions or control. 'Do not turn someone whose name appears on the first table into the owner of the fifth,' she said. An officer asked whether every entry belonging to a company of which Soumitra Bansal was a director could be treated as proof of his personal knowledge. 'No,' Neerja replied. 'Look at signatures, minutes of meetings, authorised access, original messages, compliance and possible contradictions. A person's office may give rise to an initial question of responsibility; it is not the final answer.'

The team's technical specialist, Aparna Malik, was checking the history of an external pen-drive copy before forwarding it to court. It was not the bank's original server but an exported collection prepared in response to an authorised request. Under whose supervision the export had been made, on which device, whether the system dates were stable, and what possibility there had been of substitution after extraction were separate matters to be documented. Aparna recorded verification of the digital signatures and comparison of hash values under the authorised procedure, but said, 'A matching hash gives us evidence that this copy has not changed from the preserved copy. It does not establish that the source from which it was first exported contained no error.' Neerja wrote in her notebook: 'Integrity and factual truth are different.'

Part of the old file dated from 2023, another from 2025. 'How will the admissibility of this material be considered across the change in the law?' Aparna asked. The legal officer said that the applicable provisions governing proof of electronic records, the transition between procedures and the particular circumstances in which the record was being tendered all had to be examined. Section 63 of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, in force from 1 July 2024, might be relevant before the court. The form of the certificate, details of the device and the declaration of the relevant expert had to be prepared in accordance with law where applicable. Merely citing a section, however, did not prove truth. The officers agreed that an old event, a present case and the legal requirements of different forums must not be crowded onto one slip of paper.

After the queue of customers had cleared from the Ludhiana bank branch, Sarabjit Kaur conducted an internal training session for the compliance department. She showed three kinds of screens: an ordinary commercial account statement, the interface for complying with a competent order, and a certified export prepared for investigation. 'The time shown on a customer's screenshot and the value date in the bank's

original ledger may differ,' she explained. 'And a comment typed by an office employee does not finally determine the meaning of the underlying transaction.' 'If the screen has a red mark,' a new employee asked, 'does that mean the money is tainted?' 'A red mark may indicate a precaution or a restriction,' Sarabjit replied. 'When there are written grounds, examine their source. When there are none, do not fill the space with conjecture.' The day Shanti Devi had needed medicine was still fresh in her mind.

An answer came from the inquiry into the particular route followed by Mukul's receipt. His original seven thousand five hundred rupees had reached an account used to collect training fees. Several payments had been made out of that account, but it had not yet been possible to isolate with certainty which portion of Mukul's original money had ultimately gone to which person. The sentence would have been short in a news script. To Mukul it was the first realistic answer he had received. 'My money hasn't come back,' he told Rani, 'but at least they are now saying where it went first.' Rani opened her mathematics notebook. 'When we find the first bend in a river, we can look for the next,' she said. Mukul looked at the bridge she had drawn. 'Yes, but finding a bend doesn't mean you've seen where the river ends.' Rani wrote that under her picture.

Two days before the special court's next scheduled hearing, Anuradha Sen gave Neerja a draft report. It had separate sections for the 'gross circulation' across all the accounts and the 'distinct, identified initial external receipts'. In the first, the team was still testing how often the old ₹2,000-crore claim counted the same rupee more than once. The second showed certain specific receipts verified by banks, but the final examination of whether they were proceeds of crime remained outstanding. 'Can you treat this second section as the total loss?' Neerja asked. 'No,' Anuradha replied. 'A payment actually reaching an account is one fact. Its connection with an offence, the particular loss suffered by a victim and any personal benefit derived are three different findings. And I have not yet been able to verify some amounts as independent sources at all.'

One example was set aside in the report for the court. On a day in November 2025 a bank transfer of twelve lakh forty thousand rupees had been verified from a collection account to Jandisha. Later that day a further outgoing transfer of four lakh ten thousand rupees appeared from an associated company. The preliminary table had added both as fresh, separate money. Anuradha clarified that the second transfer might have consisted of funds received in the first, and should not therefore be

counted as another independent source. Within the twelve lakh forty thousand rupees, the amounts that had actually come from alleged training fees and those paid for legitimate services still needed to be distinguished source by source. The purpose of citing the figure was not to establish money laundering, but to identify the basis for the next examination of a particular, verified receipt.

In a second example, six lakh twenty-five thousand rupees had been paid from a separate institutional publicity budget. The bank confirmed the date of the outgoing payment and the recipient account. But the original instructions for the advertisement allegedly commissioned differed from the material actually published. The source of that payment might be connected with the same network of training fees, but it had not yet been completely separated as an independent receipt. Anuradha refused to add the two examples together under the heading 'Proceeds of Crime'. 'Adding two entries is easy,' she said. 'But unless we first establish whether the entries are independent, which payment produced which amount, and whether a scheduled offence is proved as the source here, that total would be seriously misleading.' Neerja retained those words in the report.

The investigation did uncover one genuine, relatively small cash withdrawal. A certified statement from an office showed a branch withdrawal of thirty-eight thousand rupees, for which a member of staff had submitted receipts for travel expenses. Those receipts had not been fully verified. Nevertheless the withdrawal itself was established within the limits of that fact. 'Then we can say that there was a cash withdrawal,' a colleague suggested. 'Yes. That much,' Anuradha replied. 'But this thirty-eight thousand will not give us "ninety-five per cent", and the mere existence of travel receipts does not establish that the cash was ultimately used lawfully.' Beside the line for thirty-eight thousand rupees there was a large expanse of empty paper. The ethics of research lay in the difficult art of allowing such empty spaces to remain empty.

An officer found an article from a local news portal among Jandisha's files for publicity material. Its headline read: 'Marudhar's Young People Prosper Through Skills'. There were photographs of students inside, but it was not clear whose permission had been obtained. The operator of the fee-collecting project described the article as proof that services had been delivered; the portal said the material had been supplied as an advertisement. 'Was paid promotion distinguished from journalism?' Neerja asked. An old email from the editor contained a request that the advertisement be labelled, but the published page had lost the mark. Readers could thus have mistaken it for independent reporting. Even so,

that error was not in itself an offence of money laundering; the payment, purpose and actual instructions behind the publicity required separate examination.

Noor Jahan read the old article and spoke to the portal's editor. 'Another member of staff uploaded it,' he said. 'The label at the start of the page was missing.' 'Did you publish a correction?' she asked. 'No. It was an old matter.' 'News becomes old,' Noor said, 'but the trust it creates survives.' Rather than reproduce the old advertisement in her own article, she wrote down questions of method: who was the sponsor, how did readers understand the published material, what service had the original bill covered, and how reliably could it be used in the investigation? For the first time, editor Nikhil proposed a headline himself: 'A Publicity Leaflet Is Not Proof of a Crime'. A tired smile crossed Noor's face. Such a headline sold less readily than noise, but it was less likely to deceive a reader.

On the day of the special-court hearing, Judge Sandhya Pareek took her seat at the usual hour. The court clerk, Tarachand, arranged three packets in order: the certified originals of the bank records, the account of the digital export's provenance, and Anuradha's analytical tables. Prosecutor Abhay Awasthi rose. 'May it please the court, we seek leave to file supplementary material.' 'Which of these documents comes from an original source,' Sandhya Pareek asked, 'which is a certified copy, and which is an interpretation prepared by an expert?' For the first time Abhay referred to three different lists. The court's question was not merely an exercise in better terminology. The lists would determine what the defence could properly challenge.

Ira Saxena rose for Soumitra Bansal. 'A claim that ninety-five per cent was withdrawn in cash has become public on the basis of an exported spreadsheet,' she said. 'Does the prosecution ask this court to accept that claim as part of its official case?' 'No,' Abhay answered. 'The origin of the public image is under inquiry; the revised report does not support that calculation.' Ira asked for the statement to be recorded in the order. 'The court acknowledges that the report filed does not support the sweeping claim,' Sandhya Pareek said. 'But misuse of the public image may be a question independent of the merits of this case. We are not now finding that any person deliberately spread false information.' Such clarity in the court's daily record was an act of courage. A mocking headline would have been easy to produce, but the judge did not choose that path.

'Although the report rejects the broad percentage,' Abhay continued, 'it sets out particular suspicious chains of payments.' 'Then keep that

argument free from the shadow of the other claim,' Sandhya Pareek said. 'What is the authorised status of the scheduled offence? What alleged criminal source is identified for the first receipt of twelve lakh forty thousand rupees? Who directed the subsequent transfer of four lakh ten thousand? What credible material contradicts the recipient organisation's claim to have provided services?' Abhay had a separate page number ready for each question. Some answers were immediately available; others required further lawful collection of original records. The court accepted the difference, but would not allow an incomplete answer to be recorded as a satisfactory one.

Ira produced a copy of a board resolution bearing Bansal's signature. It contained general approval for 'regional public-relations material'. 'This document shows a business reason for the payment,' she said. Abhay argued that the general resolution did not establish the particular advertising material, the services actually delivered or the ultimate beneficiary. The judge heard both sides. 'A general resolution is not final proof that an entire payment was lawful. But it would be equally improper to dismiss its existence as meaningless. Examine the original minutes book, attendance at the meeting and the authority of the person who implemented the decision. The accused's name on the board cannot replace the inquiry into what he actually knew.' Soumitra remained seated at the back. Relief and discomfort were both visible on his face; the case had not withdrawn from his life.

The special judge turned to the verification of sources for the electronic records. The certified copy of a bank communication had come through one channel, the exported file through another procedure, and the leaked image through a third, unknown route. 'Calling all three "digital evidence" is not enough,' she said. The court directed that the source, device, manner of creation, authorised certificate and expert particulars be organised in accordance with the applicable law of evidence. The parties would have an opportunity to be heard as to when, and on what grounds, objections to admissibility should be decided. The judge warned that even complete compliance with the formal requirements of certification did not automatically establish the truth of every business claim written inside a record. In a living courtroom, the doorway through which evidence entered and the weight it carried were two different stages.

Abhay submitted that some original devices remained under examination and that there should therefore be no final evaluation of all the material that day. Ira argued that the continuing inquiry must not replace the defence's lawful right to inspect the records. The judge

ordered the issues of necessary disclosure and a fair opportunity to respond to be addressed separately, with appropriate protection for sensitive personal information. 'Protect the students' privacy,' she said, 'but do not obstruct the legal route by which the defence may examine the basis of the accusations.' The court refused a request to read out in open session the original names from the list of five hundred serial entries. Casting the shadow of guilt across unknown individuals was not an essential condition of finding the truth.

At noon, during recess, Tarachand said to an advocate, 'Once people asked whether a paper was genuine. Now they ask about the file's hash and the history of its export.' 'Paper could tell lies too,' the advocate said with a laugh. Tarachand picked up an old register of official seals. 'My father worked in the tehsil office when Neelkanth Sah's case began,' he said. 'They told him to examine every seal on a document. But you cannot see the writer's mind by looking at the seal.' Just then a trainee clerk asked, 'Then why bother looking at the paper?' 'Because you cannot reach the second step without climbing the first,' Tarachand replied. 'But the first step is not the roof.' In the everyday work of the court, history was quietly making a home for itself.

Outside, a television reporter approached Mukul. 'Can you say that the claim about ninety-five per cent of the money being withdrawn in cash has turned out to be false?' he asked. 'As far as I understand it, that claim has not been established,' Mukul said. 'But my seven thousand five hundred rupees have still not come back.' The reporter moved the camera closer. 'Then whom do you hold guilty?' 'The law will consider each person against whom there is evidence, and the strength of that evidence,' Mukul said wearily. 'I want my complaint resolved.' The reporter's assistant remarked that the answer would not make the programme's 'punchy segment'. Mukul caught the bus home. For the first time he understood that a person could also draw a line around his dignity by giving an answer that was not interesting enough.

After the recess the prosecution produced a verified written response from the headmistress of a school. The annual register contained no record of the 'Youth Skills Exhibition' claimed by Jandisha. The headmistress had, however, added that if an outside organisation had held a private event on the grounds beyond the school buildings, separate records held by the municipality or the grounds manager would have to be checked. 'Then the assertion that the programme took place at the school is unsupported by the present record,' the judge said, 'but we cannot yet reach the wider conclusion that no event was held anywhere?' 'Yes,' Abhay answered. Ira agreed as well. The agreement was momentary

but valuable. When the parties agreed upon one fact, the walls of the courtroom did not collapse; rather, the real boundaries of their dispute became clearer.

The second packet contained an oddity of dates. The recorded creation time of a certificate claiming that 'training was completed' preceded the scheduled date of the programme itself. The prosecution saw this as an indication of falsity; the defence said that names might have been entered later into a template prepared beforehand. Technical specialist Aparna offered a preliminary observation: file metadata alone did not conclusively prove a person's fraud. Templates, time zones, the device's clock and the method of export required examination. 'Is this the original file?' the judge asked. 'No, an authorised copy,' came the reply. The court directed lawful examination of the original source. For the first time during the discussion, something genuinely severe appeared on the faces of people seated in the courtroom. Nobody had an easy answer to this particular contradiction.

Back at her office, Neerja Rathore told a junior officer, 'Correcting the falsehood in the news has not ended the investigation. On the contrary, it has required us to work harder on a specific payment.' 'With such limited evidence, our public impact may be smaller,' the officer said. 'My job is not to make an impact,' Neerja replied. 'Evidence that survives will withstand the court's questions; the rest will fall away. Tell the public accurately what may be disclosed, and protect what the investigation legitimately requires to remain confidential.' Just then she received a letter complaining that some students' private details had been leaked. She opened the envelope and entered it in a separate register. The questions of financial crime and unauthorised disclosure of information might be connected, but neither could take the place of evidence for the other.

Riddhi Vishnoi was preparing a list of the new fears that the leaked picture had stirred in the hostel. Himmat said five students wanted their identity cards replaced because their photographs were circulating in an unauthorised group. Riddhi discussed with university officers how complaints could be registered, relevant material preserved and unnecessary public naming avoided. She also made clear that the university had no unlimited power to search students' telephones by force. Sitting in the counselling room, Payal told a new student, 'Your fear is real, but don't answer a rumour by accusing another student.' 'Will all this ever end?' the child asked. 'Some inquiries will end,' Payal said. 'Some memories will last longer. We can help preserve a path between your studies and your rest.'

Zarina saw Noor Jahan's carefully written article in the newspaper. Its headline had not linked her organisation to crime without evidence. The report explained that genuine social-service organisations and publicity groups under investigation could not be classed together merely because both existed. The next day one donor telephoned to say that contributions would resume. Another remained silent. 'The correction is a page of news; the first rumour is on ten thousand phones,' Zarina told Sunita. 'I don't yet know whether anyone will account for that harm,' Sunita replied. 'But we shall not stop our daily work.' That day a young woman came to the centre to complete an application for maternity benefits. She knew neither 'ninety-five per cent' nor the name of the special court. She needed the box on the form in which she could indicate that her mother was alive. Zarina picked up her pen.

After Noor's article appeared, a message came from an anonymous number: 'You are protecting criminals.' Another number wrote, 'You are discrediting the government investigation.' The opposite accusations arrived on the same day. 'All my article says is that ninety-five per cent cash withdrawal has not been verified and certain specific routes are still under investigation,' Noor told her editor, Nikhil. 'Many readers want journalists to choose a final side in advance,' he replied. Noor picked up a copy of the old advertisement from her desk. 'But we are not publicity contractors,' she said. 'And if we find a mistake in one of our earlier articles, we'll correct that too.' She opened a corrections section on the next page: what had previously been reported, which new document had come to light, and what questions remained unanswered.

At Soumitra Bansal's home, Kavya was teaching their daughter. 'If Papa is in the newspaper, why does everybody ask questions about him at school?' the eight-year-old wanted to know. 'Because when people are frightened, they reach quickly for short sentences,' Kavya said. 'But there are allegations against Papa, and the court is still examining them.' 'What if Papa has done something wrong?' Kavya stopped. She could have said, 'Never.' But her husband had not explained to her what every signed page meant. 'Then the law will examine whatever evidence exists,' she answered. 'And you can love Papa while still asking questions about the truth.' The child closed her notebook. Kavya felt that a family was protected not by a false claim to know everything, but by preserving room for uncomfortable truth.

Sudarshan Sehgal received a letter from his son. Vikrant wrote that the original approvals for four consultancy projects were being supplied to an authorised advocate. Evidence for twenty days of work on one project had not yet been found. His father read the letter a second time. For the

first time his son had accepted the words 'not found' in an account of his affairs. He called and said, 'Keep looking for what you say hasn't been found. And if the work was never done, say so.' This time Vikrant did not argue. 'Once, in my old warehouse, the number of a full crate was put on an empty one,' his father said. 'I opened it and found it empty.' Vikrant did not smile. 'It wasn't hard to see an empty crate, Babuji,' he said. 'The difficult question concerns what you are not allowed to open.'

Farida was not present during that conversation. She was in the authorised records room, preparing an inventory of old correspondence so that, on receipt of a certified request, the proper person could identify the source. She came across an internal email stating that 'work approval sent', but its attachment would not open. She requested lawful recovery from the technical department without drawing any conclusion privately. Her brother telephoned. 'Didi, could you lose your job over this trouble?' 'Keeping the truth may put my job at risk,' Farida replied. 'Keeping a lie puts me at risk of no longer being able to look myself in the face.' Her brother had not expected an answer like that. 'Then be careful,' he said. 'That is exactly what I am doing,' she replied.

In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan Jha was reading an old court slip by the evening light. Revati called to say that the leaked percentage had found no foundation in the special court, although scrutiny of specific transactions had become more exacting. 'In 2000,' Shivnarayan said, 'everyone saw a dead person's name in a ledger and began by saying that the owner must have known about every crime. When the handwriting was examined, the matter broke into several parts. Even then, some allegations of crime remained.' 'One mistaken inference falling apart does not bring down every allegation,' Revati answered, 'just as one genuine entry does not prove every allegation.' Her father fell silent. At one end of the telephone, a father was hearing a mature answer to what he had taught his daughter twenty-five years before.

Revati had also received the next compliance report in Arjun's High Court writ. The bank had not reimposed a general restriction on his use of the undisputed scholarship money; the specific status of the four thousand two hundred rupees was being clarified in writing through the relevant procedure. But a message from the university said an old screenshot carrying Arjun's name was circulating again, changing the behaviour of some teachers towards him. 'Within the limits of its order, the court can clarify the question of money,' Revati told Shalini Solanki. 'But it cannot dispel gossip in the streets overnight.' 'Then legal remedies and social change must each do their work,' Shalini replied. 'We shall not add a general dispute about reputation to this particular writ without a

proper basis.' Revati agreed. A single court file could never be enough for every wound.

Shalini showed Revati a note made by a law student. It read: 'The special court's supplementary order automatically turned the High Court's interim order into a final judgment.' Revati took up a red pen and struck out the whole sentence. 'Two forums are concerned with different subjects, and therefore with different judicial outcomes,' she explained. 'The special court considers specific allegations concerning proceeds of crime and the direction of the evidence; Arjun's writ considers the lawful limits of the bank restriction and the remedies for it. Neither order establishes all the facts in the other case.' 'Then which forum can provide wider guidance?' the student asked. 'If a real dispute arises, with a lawful petition or appeal, jurisdiction and questions fit for hearing, a higher court may examine it,' Revati replied. 'A newspaper headline does not, by itself, send a question to the Supreme Court.'

In the first week of December, Special Judge Sandhya Pareek prepared a limited order on the supplementary documents. It recorded that the unauthorised public claim of 'ninety-five per cent cash withdrawals' was not supported by the authorised financial material submitted; the source of its circulation could be investigated separately and fairly. The prosecution was allowed an opportunity to clarify the sources of particular sums, original bank documents, verification of disputed service invoices and the roles of individual people. The defence retained an appropriate opportunity to inspect the record and raise objections. No sweeping declaration of innocence was made; nor was there any comprehensive finding of guilt. 'At this stage,' the court wrote, 'what is certain shall be presented as certain, what is disputed as disputed, and what is unknown as unknown.'

Hearing the order, Abhay Awasthi removed a red mark from the first page of his file. It was not a defeat; the prosecution's work had become narrower and more laborious. Ira Saxena explained to her client that eliminating one unsupported portion of a broad allegation did not remove the obligation to answer the specific questions that remained. 'If I give them every document, will I be released?' Soumitra asked quietly. 'The truth of the documents will be examined, and the judicial consequences will then follow under the applicable law,' Ira replied. 'No one can promise you the outcome in advance.' Soumitra touched the drawing made by his daughter, which he kept in his pocket. In court, the price of truth was not immediate freedom but disciplined accountability amid uncertainty.

Outside Sandhya Pareek's chamber, the tea seller Rafiq looked at his telephone again. A new picture was circulating: 'Questions Raised Over Ninety-Five-Per-Cent Claim'. One group had written, 'The whole case is false'; another, 'The crime is proved'. 'Sir, two versions again!' Rafiq told Tarachand. Tarachand took his tea. 'People add whatever they wish to what the judge did not say.' This time Rafiq did not forward the image. He thought of ordering the next day's newspaper so that he could read the full order. It was a very small change, but unlike the proclamation of a great campaign it was a real decision: one man withheld the pressure of his thumb.

When Mukul returned to the hostel on the evening bus, Rani showed him a new picture of her paper bridge. In the old drawing the river was a single line; now it divided into three branches. 'Why?' Mukul asked. 'The same water can follow three paths,' Rani said, 'but in a flood the houses along each one are submerged separately.' Mukul put a copy of his receipt into a fresh envelope. 'We still haven't found the whole path of my seven thousand five hundred rupees,' he said. 'Will you stop looking?' Rani asked. 'No. But I won't make grand claims about things for which I have no evidence.' Rani drew a little lamp beneath the bridge. There was no courtroom in her picture, only the longing to reach home.

Before boarding the night train at Jodhpur station, Revati opened a notebook. At the top she wrote: 'The Price of Falsehood'. Underneath came four lines: donations stopped by a rumour; a student frightened by a mistaken name; public trust unsettled by an unsupported percentage; and a real, particular payment whose examination might be drowned out by the noise of rumour. On the other side of the page she wrote that justice was not merely the removal of an undeserved stain from the innocent; it demanded the rigour to examine the actual losses suffered by victims as well. Such an answer was difficult because no story of anyone's complete victory had yet emerged. She reread her father's first five questions. Name, fact, source, authority and effect: falsehood could enter between any of the five. At every doorway truth needed fresh evidence.

Before the train departed, a message came from Shalini. The High Court had fixed the next date for the outstanding questions about the bank's compliance, while, after examining the available legal remedies, some parties were considering the appropriate judicial route for a wider constitutional question. Shalini wrote: 'There is no automatic appeal before the Supreme Court at present; a competent petition, a real dispute and the procedural requirements must all be examined.' Revati replied only, 'Right.' The train moved into the darkness. Far away, farmers were still watering their fields. No digital spreadsheet could make that scene

part of a crime. Yet where a real chain of crime had been established by evidence, the law could not absolve itself of the duty to follow its trail through names, money and power. The year 2027 had not yet begun. The courtroom door of the coming year was still far away, but the first question at that door was becoming clear: the state would investigate, the citizen would go on living—and who would determine the test of truth between them?

Chapter 39 — Before the Supreme Court

Delhi, Jodhpur, Darbhanga, Ludhiana, Mumbai and the Andamans; January–February 2027

On the first Monday of January 2027, the morning in Jodhpur was so cold that Rafiq, the tea seller at the station, held each cup between both hands. Discussion of the court's last order of the previous year had left the newspapers and settled into people's telephones, but the clock in Arjun Meena's hostel did not run to the newspapers' rhythm. His examinations were about to begin. He placed the bank's new statement, the receipt for his scholarship and a separate slip concerning the disputed entry of four thousand two hundred rupees in an envelope and went to Shalini Solanki's office. 'My mother says the amount is small, so why are there so many papers?' Arjun asked. Opening the envelope, Shalini replied, 'The size of a sum of money and the extent of the power to freeze it are not the same thing. Who was given that power, on what grounds, and for how long—that is a much larger question.' Outside, the city was busy with its ordinary trade; inside, a student was seeking written clarity so that he could live an ordinary day.

In compliance with the High Court's interim order, the bank had corrected its branch-level system. Withdrawals from the undisputed scholarship funds were going through, although the four thousand two hundred rupees remained secured, carrying a security-review flag. The state's fresh affidavit acknowledged this much: the initial investigation letter had referred to one particular entry, while the system had originally frozen the entire account; restoring access to the remaining money had corrected that discrepancy. The state, however, feared that certain phrases in the High Court's interim order might be construed by branches elsewhere as a general rule, weakening necessary safeguards in ongoing investigations. On this practical dispute the state's law department examined the possibility of review by a higher court. The bank prepared its own written position as well. The interests of the two institutions were not identical, even though newspapers called them both 'the government'.

Across the top of the file, Bhanu Pratap Mathur wrote, 'Possibility of special leave petition under Article 136; interim order; limited relief.' An associate officer exclaimed, 'Then we'll go straight to the Supreme Court and have the previous order set aside.' Mathur stopped writing. 'Going straight there means filing a petition. Whether it is heard and leave is granted lies within the Court's discretion. Disagreement with every word

of a High Court interim order does not create an appeal as of right to the Supreme Court.' He separated three pages of the order: one concerning the actual freeze, a second concerning the bank's compliance, and a third concerning the request for review. 'We must say precisely what question of law we are raising. Stopping a student's education is not a declared object of the state, and the disputed four thousand two hundred rupees have not been released at once, either. The Court may even ask whether the dispute is substantive or merely one of wording.'

In Darbhanga, Revati Jha sat with her father, Shivnarayan, on the first cold morning of Magh. Winter sunlight touched the pillars of the veranda. On the table lay, separately, an old ledger from 2000 and a printed bank statement from 2026. Turning an old page, Shivnarayan asked, 'Will you go to Delhi this time?' Revati replied, 'If the state properly files a special leave petition, we may have to respond. But going to Delhi will not automatically turn this case into a trial of every financial crime in the country.' Her father laughed. 'In twenty-seven years your papers have improved and your words have grown sharper. Has the first question changed?' 'No,' his daughter said. 'Whose order, concerning what fact, affecting which person—and now we must also ask how many people's days were affected by a digital order.'

In Shivnarayan's first courtroom, the ledger of Neelkanth Sah of Darbhanga had contained the name of a dead man. That name had imperilled three things at once: a family's home, a child's schooling and a trader's standing. At the end of four years of trial, misconduct concerning certain specific accounts had been proved, but not every allegation. Shivnarayan showed his daughter a battered copy of that order. 'On this page I crossed out one sentence: "The whole case is fabricated." That wasn't true. Some entries were genuine; some had been attributed to the wrong man. Defending someone does not mean defending a lie.' Revati touched the stains of old ink. Giving due weight to the state's need for a proper investigation at the forthcoming hearing would not violate her professional oath; it was part of that oath.

When the state's special leave petition reached the Registry of the Supreme Court in Delhi, no dramatic bell rang on the first day. The papers were checked for a certified copy of the High Court order, particulars relating to limitation, the correct addresses of the parties and the necessary annexures. There was a technical objection: a page in the index to the bank's latest compliance letter bore a different sequence number from the page in the petition's record. Mathur's team corrected the mistake. The matter was subsequently listed. A breathless headline called this unremarkable procedure 'Final Hearing in Money-

Laundering Case before Supreme Court'. Noor Jatay wrote plainly in her publication that this was a limited dispute over a bank freeze at the special-leave stage, not the trial of the underlying money-laundering allegations. The proper order of documents, too, is one of the first structures of judicial truth, though its value is less visible in the glare of a computer screen.

When the news reached Arjun's home, his mother was frightened. 'Why has the Delhi court called you? Will your name appear in the newspapers again?' Arjun explained that the parties had received lawful notice; whether he personally had to attend depended on legal advice and the Court's directions. He wanted to be present and understand the questions governing his life, but he could not miss two examination papers. Shalini suggested that he balance written consent, his preferences concerning privacy and the time he needed for study. Over the telephone Revati said, 'Hearing the words "Supreme Court" must not turn your life into another spectacle. Your private account number, school certificates and residential address will be used only to the extent necessary for the proceedings.' For the first time the student understood that even protecting one's name could require an explicit instruction.

In Ludhiana, Sunita Paswan pinned up a newspaper in her labour-assistance office. The name of the matter before the Court appeared in small print. A colleague asked, 'If Delhi decides this case, will Shanti Devi's account for her medicines open automatically too?' Sunita replied, 'Shanti's case arises from a different order in another state. Her access to undisputed money has already improved; the remaining inquiry will proceed in its own forum. If a court clarifies a principle, the lawful means of applying it must also be considered.' She brought out the wage register from 2009 and showed the workers the calculation of time for which they had not been paid. An elderly worker said that his overtime had disappeared because his name was absent from a document. Sunita realised that justice in a digital banking case and justice under an old wage register were different struggles. But both turned on a common question: was the institution prepared to acknowledge an error in its own records?

At the Marudhar hostel, Riddhi Vishnoi was writing her final research note on the list of five hundred student-linked accounts. Serial numbers, incomplete account identifiers and promotional accounts had repeatedly been mistaken for one another; the list could not, by itself, be converted into a register of criminals. She told her teacher Firdous Kaul that some readers were treating her research as decisive proof in the court proceedings. Firdous replied, 'A research question, consent to a survey,

the authority to conduct a criminal investigation and electronic material admissible in court are four different things. Your list can reveal a social risk; using it to brand people criminals would be an appropriation of your findings.' Riddhi removed 'Suspect Students' from the first page of her article and wrote instead 'Accounts Requiring Verification'. No one measured that change in applause. Yet it protected the dignity of many students.

In Mumbai, Anuradha Sen prepared a fresh copy of an authorised financial table. The claim circulated the previous December—that ninety-five per cent had been withdrawn in cash—had resulted from mistaking the classification marks on twenty selected entries for a percentage of the amount. Still under examination were a verified transfer of ₹12.40 lakh, a subsequent movement of ₹4.10 lakh, and their connection with certain service invoices. Anuradha marked each row in three different colours: original bank evidence available; the purpose of the service or benefit unverified; connection with proceeds of crime undetermined. 'Why divide it up in such detail,' her colleague Deven asked, 'when the court will demand a single conclusion?' Anuradha replied, 'Because fear of a large sum does not prove its criminal character. Even an accurately traced payment is not the final answer to whether it was lawful or who ultimately benefited.'

At a meeting of the special investigation team, Neerja Rathore made it clear that any prospective hearing in the Supreme Court would not replace the gathering of evidence in the underlying money-laundering prosecution. She allocated work among her team: authorised records of the scheduled offence, physical verification of services, lawful channels for obtaining foreign communications and separate schedules of each person's role. 'If the rules on freezing accounts are tightened, the investigation will be delayed,' said an officer. 'The law confers powers, not the convenience of working without records,' Neerja replied. 'Where urgent protection is needed, preserving adequate reasons and their sources in time is a skill of investigation.' She removed a newspaper cutting about the Sehgal family from one file and substituted a statement by a particular witness. A face in a news photograph did not prove guilt; nor did silence guarantee innocence.

In Dubai, Vikrant Sehgal sent his authorised advocate documents relating to four consultancy projects. Three had statements of work, payment stages and some letters of acceptance from clients. The preliminary report for twenty days' work on the fourth was still unavailable. His advocate wrote that an absent document did not automatically imply fraud, but it would be improper to claim that the

document was available. Vikrant telephoned his father. 'Will the Delhi hearing put an end to your case?' Sudarshan Sehgal asked. 'No,' his son answered. 'That concerns an account freeze. My case before the special court is separate.' His father said, 'Then put forward whatever is true in your defence. As for what you haven't got, look for it.' Across the sea, Vikrant's absence did not relieve him of lawful service of process or his obligations in the proceedings.

At Noor Jatay's newsroom an advertisement arrived one January afternoon: 'Supreme Court to Rule; Thousands of Accounts Will Be Unfrozen.' Nikhil, the editor, read it and said its wording had run far ahead of the law. 'In this matter leave has not yet been granted, let alone a final judgment delivered,' Noor said. 'The hearing has been scheduled: that is the news.' The advertisement was returned. In the next issue Noor set out five precise limits of the High Court's interim order: the undisputed funds; the disputed ₹4,200; the bank's technical extension of the restriction; the competent officer's authority; and remedies still pending consideration. She did not publish Arjun's telephone number or irrelevant details of his schooling. 'Won't the story sell fewer copies?' a trainee asked. 'The value of words that state the limits correctly lasts longer than the first hour's sales,' Noor replied.

Before leaving for Delhi, Revati read to her father an old letter from the Andamans, dated 2004. Certificates lost in the tsunami had caused the names of a dead father and a living son in Anish Haldar's family to be confused on the relief register. The office had said, 'Bring the original documents'; the sea had swallowed them. Years of patience, testimony and local verification had eventually corrected the identity. 'How did they create a way to correct the error then?' Shivnarayan asked. 'An official agreed to examine the facts,' Revati said, 'and a competent forum clarified the wording of an order.' Her father replied, 'Courts do not write every history. But they can give an order from which, beginning with one page, a person may write his life again.' Revati felt that Anish, though not a party to this hearing, offered a discipline of conscience to its legal argument.

In the Delhi winter, inspection of documents and checking of identity were ordinary procedures at the Supreme Court entrance. Revati arrived with Shalini; Arjun, who had finished his second examination paper, was coming on the night train. For the state were Bhanu Pratap Mathur and senior advocate Mridul Verma; the bank's counsel, Vedika Dixit, carried a clear technical statement. None brought the entire charge-sheet from the special court, only the relevant authorised extracts. The cause list placed the special leave petition before a bench comprising Justice

Mrinalini Deshmukh and Justice Ayan Raza. People outside wanted photographs, but the names and personal details inside the files belonged within the distinct safeguards of the courtroom.

Justice Deshmukh put the first question to counsel for the state. 'Against which order are you seeking special leave? The High Court merely directed that a previous comprehensive freeze should not recur in respect of undisputed funds; it did not end the protection of the four thousand two hundred rupees.' Mridul Verma rose and explained that the state's concern was the interpretation of a particular line, which might make branches elsewhere unnecessarily hesitant to act on urgent protective directions issued by competent investigators. Justice Raza asked, 'Is there evidence of such hesitation at a branch, or is this a prediction about the future?' Vedika produced copies of two actual communications from branches asking about the order's scope. Neither showed that a restriction had automatically ceased to operate. At the outset, the Court made clear that a possibility and an event that had occurred were not the same thing.

Shalini replied, 'My Lords, Arjun's petition seeks no universal ruling on every possible legal freeze. The original letter spoke only of securing a specified entry, but the bank's technical system blocked withdrawals from the entire account. The High Court asked for reasons for that disparity. Meanwhile the legitimate scholarship funds have become accessible and the disputed entry remains secured. If the state obtains a broader statutory order on the strength of fresh material, the interim order does not prevent it.' 'Then what do you want from the Supreme Court?' Justice Deshmukh asked. 'That the interim order's actual limits be maintained, that information and review available to the citizen have meaning, and that the obligation to investigate is not weakened,' Shalini answered. The Court listened without yet indicating agreement with either side.

When Revati was given an opportunity to speak, she did not begin with a grand constitutional pronouncement. 'There are five questions in this case,' she said. 'First, who possesses the power under law? Second, what specific reasons appear in the written order? Third, how much of that order does the bank actually implement through its machinery? Fourth, how are the affected person's undisputed livelihood funds and access to information protected? Fifth, which forum offers a timely review supported by reasons?' Justice Raza interrupted: 'Do you wish every account holder to see all confidential information gathered in an investigation?' 'No,' Revati answered. 'Statutory confidentiality and the limits of judicial examination remain. But a single invocation of

confidentiality cannot justify an indefinite, overbroad freeze, for an unknown period and without a remedy.'

In response, Mridul Verma described the complexities of investigating financial crimes at the highest level. Some transfers could cross national borders in a single night; an officer might have little time to preserve the sources of evidence. 'If every account holder is shown the entire trail,' he said, 'some beneficiaries may find ways to destroy evidence or move funds into new accounts.' Justice Deshmukh replied, 'The state's concern has a real foundation. But where, in your answer, has the distinction gone between "the entire trail" and "meaningful, appropriate information"? This Court is not asking investigators to disclose confidential sources publicly. The question is whether a power may remain without limits.' Voices did not rise during the exchange. The boundaries of the words simply became clearer.

Justice Raza turned to the bank's counsel, Vedika Dixit. 'When a branch was told to "secure a specified amount", why was a debit prohibition placed on the entire account?' Vedika presented a technical flowchart. In the bank's older system, the option labelled 'caution' chiefly operated at the level of the whole account; restricting a particular amount required an additional approval and human intervention. In Arjun's case, the branch had selected the first option and subsequently requested a correction. 'Can technical convenience become a new source of legal authority?' Justice Deshmukh asked. 'No, My Lady. The system is only a means of implementing directions,' Vedika said. 'Then the system's design, notification of errors and record of corrections cannot be separated from the bank's responsibility,' the judge replied. The Court did not accept that every technical mistake constituted a punishable offence. Yet an institution could not evade its duty to remedy the actual effects.

Mathur opened an authorised copy of the original investigation letter. It recorded the possibility that four thousand two hundred rupees had reached Arjun's account through an alleged training-fee payment chain. He himself rejected the practice of treating a preliminary allegation as an established finding. 'I am not saying here that this person's guilt has been proved,' he said. 'I am saying that a specific flow of funds is under examination and may therefore require lawful protection.' 'Very well,' Justice Raza replied. 'Now show us how the discrepancy between the officer's request and the bank's conduct was reviewed and recorded.' Mathur placed three letters bearing different dates before the bench. The Court could see that the real value of the argument lay not in the magnitude of the allegation but in the sequence of correspondence.

During the hearing Shalini read a short passage from an application sent by Arjun's mother. It said that the unavailability of scholarship money had prevented the student from paying the fee for an examination application, although the institution concerned subsequently extended the deadline and his studies were saved. Revati agreed that the loss caused by this difficulty, its remedy and the question of responsibility were matters that could be proved and tested in the appropriate forum; the amount of every possible loss could not be estimated and decided at this limited appellate stage. 'Then is the student's experience only an emotional statement?' Justice Deshmukh asked. 'Experience is a human fact,' Revati said. 'Its legal consequences require dates, documents and a causal connection. We must respect both without confusing them.' The Court permitted the student's application to be kept in a restricted portion of the record.

Justice Raza marked a page of the case file in red. 'Here the bank says the freeze followed a police letter. Another page inserts the name of an authority dealing with money laundering. Which power was actually exercised in this case?' Counsel for the state replied that the initial restriction on Arjun's particular account was linked to a written request in a police cybercrime investigation. The appearance of a similar name in the records of the broader money-laundering proceedings before the special court had caused confusion, but those records could not automatically be treated as the same statutory order. 'Then a clean separation is needed,' Justice Deshmukh said. 'Attachment, seizure, restraint and adjudicatory review under different Acts have their own conditions. A grand heading for an allegation cannot merge every species of power without those conditions.' The meaning of that sentence would have to be weighed in drafting the order.

During the adjournment Revati sat in the corridor and sent Shivnarayan a brief message: 'The Court is asking for the source of the technical freeze.' Her father replied, 'In Neelkanth's ledger they asked who had written the dead man's name. Has the question changed, or only its form?' 'Its form has changed; the examination of authority has deepened,' Revati wrote. She put away her phone and looked towards an elderly woman sitting in the corridor. The woman was waiting for her advocate in an unrelated pension matter. Yet in the faces of people seated on the court steps Revati saw a common obstacle: the state or another institution made the records by which the citizen was compelled to conduct a life. Raising a legal question about that inequality was not hostility towards institutions. It was a demand that they be answerable.

At noon Firdous Kaul arrived to clarify a written note submitted in her capacity as an authorised technical expert. The note concerned the architecture of the bank's system, not the morality or legality of the money alleged to be proceeds of crime in Arjun's account. 'How do we separate the authenticity of a computer report from the truth of an inference recorded in it?' Justice Deshmukh asked. Firdous answered, 'Identification of the source, stability of the device, sequence in which the record was generated, authorised extraction and the certification required by applicable law form one part. The actual meaning of the data —codes, exceptions, repeated entries and their relationship to facts—is another. Proving the first does not automatically establish the second.' The Court clarified that admissibility and evidentiary weight of electronic records would be decided under the law in the appropriate trial forum. Here it was considering technical confusion only as it affected the account freeze.

Firdous's reply reminded Revati of a science report from 2008. Watching Chandrayaan-1 launch, a little girl named Payal had asked how one could trust a picture taken so far away in the sky. Her teacher had answered: the instrument, the time, the measurement and independent confirmation. Revati thanked that child silently. Caution about evidence was not an objection to scientific achievement; it was the foundation of achievement. A financial investigation required the same technical discipline. That day, at a school in Jodhpur, a science teacher was teaching a new class about satellite orbits. He mentioned no court. He told the children that a beautiful picture was not enough; the method of measurement mattered. The country's scientific future was being made in an independent classroom, even if a faint echo of it could be heard in Revati's file.

Reading an authorised public account of the hearing from a distance, Neerja Rathore wrote a note. 'We must show the Court clearly why protecting the investigation is genuinely necessary,' she told a colleague. 'But a public document must not contain a witness's private address, the technical keys to encrypted communications or the full account number of an unidentified student. Producing material through an appropriate secure procedure in response to a competent judicial demand is another matter.' Her colleague asked whether that caution would reduce the defence's opportunity to answer the case. 'It is equally wrong to withhold relevant matters indefinitely from a person legally entitled to know the allegation against them,' Neerja said. 'Public access, the rights of parties and protection require distinct and proper arrangements.' Had that

discipline been observed earlier, rumours naming five hundred students might have spread less widely.

After the recess Mridul Verma returned to the Supreme Court's jurisdiction. 'The High Court has yet to decide the writ finally,' he acknowledged. 'The state's request is that no inconsistency should remain in the legal meaning of the interim arrangement.' Justice Raza asked, 'If we decline to entertain your special leave petition at this stage, can you seek modification or clarification from the High Court?' Mridul acknowledged that such a remedy was possible. Justice Deshmukh said, 'Article 136 is not a machine for automatically starting another lawsuit. We must see whether this particular record discloses a real issue of public importance for which limited clarification is necessary.' The parties realised that the grandeur of the Supreme Court's forum could itself demand a narrower argument.

On the next date, on the basis of the state's narrow question and the bank's actual systemic discrepancy, the Court granted special leave and decided to hear a limited appeal. The order expressly stated that granting leave did not mean declaring the High Court's factual findings incorrect. The Court would consider only the legal source of the freeze, the limits of its implementation, essential information and effective review. The underlying money-laundering prosecution, the alleged offence involving training fees, Vikrant Sehgal's position and the disputed service invoices would remain before the special court or other competent forums. The remaining prayers in the pending High Court writ did not automatically transfer to this appeal. Revati read the order closely. Some news outlets wrote, 'Supreme Court Admits Case; Decision on Guilt Near'. Noor's report carefully distinguished the grant of leave from the final decision on appeal.

Arjun reached Delhi at night. Shalini came to collect him at the station. He had two books in his bag, the sattu his mother had packed and his examination admit card. He had no wish to pose for a photograph at the court entrance. 'If people all over the country read about my case, will they recognise me?' he asked. 'Public judicial proceedings have their rules,' Shalini said, 'but unnecessary publication of private records can be challenged. We shall discuss appropriate protected presentation with the Court.' 'Will I have a chance to speak as well?' Arjun asked. 'Your account of the facts will reach the Court through affidavits and counsel's submissions. If the Court wants a personal explanation, the proper opportunity will be given. But your life is more than standing on a platform.'

The following morning Revati woke with memories of a family torn apart. Someone whose home had been lost in the violence of 2002 had had to have a school certificate issued again because the original burned. The sea had taken Anish's family papers in the 2004 tsunami. In 2009, Sunita's struggle with the wage register had concerned handwritten numbers, not machines. During the pandemic there had been questions about patient identities, access to medicine and the forms that helpless families were required to fill in. Now, in 2027, Arjun's bank identifier had brought a new dispute before a court. These were not all parts of one conspiracy. The true breadth of Revati's testimony over twenty-seven years lay in this: different sufferings in different times demanded equally verifiable facts and equal respect for human dignity.

Mukul Meena still kept the receipt for his ₹7,500 safe. On hearing of the Delhi proceedings he looked at the photographs with his sister Rani. 'Brother, will the Supreme Court return everyone's money?' she asked. 'My complaint for that amount is not before this Court for decision,' Mukul replied. 'It is examining the extent of the freeze on Arjun's account.' Rani drew three boxes on a blank page of her exercise book: 'Freeze', 'Investigation', 'Refund'. 'Aren't they all the same?' she asked. 'No. The legality of keeping money frozen is one matter; investigating an offence is another; the route to recovering a loss is a third.' Rani was still very young, but inside those three boxes she had made a simple classification for thousands of complicated stories about the country. Looking at his sister's notebook, Mukul felt a grown person's patience for the first time.

At the next full hearing in the Supreme Court, Vedika Dixit set out three possible stages of reform in the bank's procedure. First, verify the sender and authority of a lawful communication. Second, record the scope and duration of the freeze and the technical option used to apply the necessary restriction. Third, if anything is unclear, seek prompt clarification and, on receipt of a binding fresh order, make a documented correction. Justice Deshmukh asked, 'Are you inviting the Court to write a new universal banking policy, or are you proposing consistent performance of obligations already imposed by law?' 'We can improve our internal procedures,' Vedika replied, 'but the final interpretation of legal authority belongs to the courts. A bank official cannot, in place of an authorised order, decide on their own that a crime has occurred.' The Court regarded the answer as relevant, while keeping open questions about the proposed deadlines and the bank's actual ability to resolve complaints.

In a particular exchange Shalini raised the question of privacy. 'Limited information about Arjun's account reached an authorised office for the purposes of the investigation,' she said. 'But screenshots of five hundred student-linked accounts circulated in private message groups. Those two events have different legal sources and responsibilities. We do not ask this Court to identify who was responsible for an unknown leak. We do say that confidential information about account holders must not spread beyond the necessary procedures, and that this matters to the way such restraints are administered.' The state submitted that a separate complaint concerning the leak had been registered and its outcome was not yet known. 'Putting every document on display for the whole public is not the same as transparency in justice,' Justice Raza observed. 'Sometimes both the minimum necessary disclosure and fair access must be protected.' The open account of the hearing did not reproduce Arjun's full bank number.

Senior counsel for the state said that in some urgent situations advance notice to an affected person could frustrate an investigation. Revati did not reject the proposition out of hand. 'Some laws permit immediate protective action, and advance notice may sometimes be inappropriate,' she said. 'But it does not follow that fair notice or review at a suitable time after a reasoned decision can be postponed indefinitely. What detail may be disclosed, and what information remains within a statutory exception, depends on the actual order and the relevant Act.' Justice Deshmukh said the Court was not abolishing any statutory exception, but would not allow an exception to be enlarged without support until it swallowed the rule. The argument had moved away from an absolute declaration and into the context of law.

Revati returned in her submissions to an old word: 'review'. 'The state says a citizen can approach the proper forum,' she said. 'But if the citizen cannot discover from which authorised source the freeze originated, how can that forum be chosen? If the bank says “police”, the police say “system”, and the system says “central instruction”, how does the door to an effective remedy open?' 'Then do you want a court to supervise every application?' Justice Raza asked. 'No. Let the competent administrative or statutory forum do its work. The court should ensure that the citizen has an actual route to it, not a confusing list of addresses on paper.' The judges had two questions recorded under that distinction: the responsible office and the time for correction.

At the recess a junior government lawyer named Arun told Mathur that representing the state was difficult in cases touching private lives. Mathur answered from experience. 'In 2012 I advised in a dispute

involving a government school. The institution's first response was, “Every rule has been followed.” On examining the documents we found that a scholarship letter had gone to the wrong place. I wrote, “The administrative error should be corrected.” Only then did the state's actual case become credible. A government lawyer does not sit here to establish that every government computer is incapable of error.' 'And if an officer made a mistake in good faith?' Arun asked. 'The effect of a mistaken order may still need correction,' Mathur said. 'Personal culpability, institutional responsibility and remedy are three different questions.'

At a Delhi hospital, meanwhile, Dr Saira Ahmed was examining a young patient. The patient's family had encountered a new, ordinary problem with a digital payment, but it had no connection with Arjun's writ or the money-laundering inquiry. A member of the hospital's finance staff explained another accepted method of payment, and treatment was not interrupted. Saira told her team that medical decisions must rest on the patient's needs and consent; a temporary message from a machine was not a diagnosis. Her words entered no courtroom argument. Yet that day, in hospitals across the country, countless small decisions were preserving the continuity of human life. Running alongside a great constitutional debate, this independent discipline of care mattered too.

In the public gallery Arjun wrote legal terms in his notebook: interim order, special leave, statutory authority, undisputed funds. A man seated beside him was loudly reading from his phone that 'All Accounts Have Been Freed'. 'There hasn't been a judgment yet,' Arjun said quietly. The man did not recognise him. 'What's it to you?' he asked. 'I'm one of the account holders,' Arjun replied. 'Part of my money is under investigation and the rest of my scholarship is available for use. Because people don't understand that distinction, they both call me a criminal and congratulate me on getting every rupee back. Both are wrong.' The stranger read the headline again and lowered his voice. Sometimes a lesson from a court spreads not through a heavy treatise on logic but through a student's explanation of his own ordinary circumstances.

On the morning of the next hearing a short factual memorandum from Anuradha reached the state team. The four-page document was not a conclusion about the underlying money-laundering prosecution; it was an explanation of distinctions in financial language. 'Total Gross Transfers', 'Unique Original Deposits', 'Repeated Inter-Account Flows' and 'Proved Connection with Proceeds of Crime' were four separate headings. The much-publicised aggregate of two thousand crore rupees

might have been built by adding transfers repeated through several cycles. What sum, if any, actually constituted proceeds of crime could not be determined without independent examination of the scheduled offence and the sources of funds. The Court considered the document relevant only within a limited scope: it warned against imprecise meanings assigned to financial figures, but did not decide the treatment of Arjun's four thousand two hundred rupees automatically. Neerja's office stated in writing that questions of investigation and admissibility before the special court would remain governed by their own procedure.

'Why has the two-thousand-crore figure been brought in here?' Justice Deshmukh asked. 'The centre of this appeal is the scope of the freeze on a student's bank account.' Counsel for the state said that public discussion had mixed several documents together, and they hoped the Court would clarify the context. 'A court is not the editor of rumours,' Justice Raza replied. 'We shall consider facts relevant to the dispute before us. Noise surrounding a particular figure will not enlarge the scope of the judgment.' In her notes Revati wrote: 'The seriousness of a major allegation increases the need for investigation; it does not reduce the rights of a smaller citizen.' She was not composing a slogan. She wanted to understand the limits of her next submission. The Court declined to make factual findings on the two-thousand-crore figure, while expressly leaving the independent lawful course of the financial investigation intact.

At the same time, Soumitra Bansal was reading a fresh date notice from the special court in the office of his advocate, Ira Saxena. 'The Supreme Court is considering the restriction on Arjun's account,' Ira said. 'It is not hearing an appeal concerning your board decisions, service invoices or the verification of your signature. Please bring the information about the source of the original work-approval document that was requested in court yesterday.' Soumitra searched his papers for an absent annexure. He felt the private discomfort of knowing that the glitter of distant constitutional news could not defer his own responsibilities. Kavya, putting away their little girl's schoolbooks, said, 'Your answer to the truth will begin with the documents you possess, not with a newspaper headline.' Soumitra said nothing, but the next morning he sent a written request for the internal records.

In the special court Sandhya Pareek was reviewing the list of ordinary proceedings. The prosecution filed an update on efforts to obtain the source of an unavailable original service invoice. The defence sought verification of two independent records supporting the claim that the event had actually taken place. The judge recorded that the Supreme

Court's limited appellate arguments would determine neither this party's guilt nor the criminal nature of property or the identity of any ultimate beneficiary. The special court would continue to examine jurisdiction, admissibility of evidence and each person's role under law. On receiving a copy of the order, Neerja Rathore said only, 'The power to investigate remains; so does the duty to answer the particular facts identified.' Rafiq, the tea seller who was in court that day, did not immediately send anyone a photograph. He read two complete pages and told a customer in his shop only this: 'Nobody has been pronounced guilty here.'

In the final stage of argument before the Supreme Court, Revati lingered over her fifth question. 'Suppose the written order is technically correct,' she said, 'but the affected citizen cannot discover for months how to seek correction. The investigator is in one city, the bank branch in another, the digital portal in a third. The right retains its name, but its use has vanished.' Mridul Verma replied that different legal forms of investigation provided different applications and procedures for review. Revati accepted the importance of the distinction. 'Without identifying the proper forum, a discourse about rights is incomplete,' Justice Deshmukh said. 'But this Court cannot, without considering the relevant Acts, replace their different remedies with a single new court.' The bench asked the parties for a short chronology and a list of available forums for review.

In her final submission Shalini made an essential concession concerning the state's powers. 'If proceeds of crime have reached Arjun's account and that connection is established through lawful evidence,' she said, 'a competent authority may take a valid decision on the necessary protection under the applicable statute. But the mere possibility does not justify keeping the whole of a student's living funds frozen without distinct reasons. The state may reserve the right to investigate in the future; a citizen may demand an answer to the reasons governing his life today.' Justice Raza asked whether the Court should now decide compensation for the earlier technical error. 'No,' Shalini replied. 'In this limited appeal, that issue should remain for the appropriate forum with the necessary evidence.' Her restraint made the argument more, not less, credible.

In closing for the state, Mridul Verma likewise accepted a share of responsibility. 'The technical effect of the bank's initial comprehensive freeze was wider than the authorised communication,' he said. 'The state does not deny that fact in this particular event. We seek only to ensure that lawful means of urgent protection are not rendered ineffective by a general mechanical direction.' 'That agreement helps us see the dispute's

real dimensions,' Justice Deshmukh said. 'The Court seeks neither to declare every freeze unlawful nor to treat a technical lapse as the unavoidable price of authority.' Justice Raza added that responsibility would have to be established on the evidence because investigation, implementation by the bank and judicial review occupied three different institutional positions. The judges reserved judgment. Outside, the crowd wanted to announce the result according to its wishes, but the order had yet to be written.

In the week after judgment was reserved, Revati travelled from Delhi to Darbhanga. Shivnarayan now walked very slowly. She did not deliver a neatly rounded account of the courtroom debate. Instead she asked where he had kept the page with the first questions written about the old ledger. He opened a wooden chest. 'The first was: whose name? The second: whose handwriting? The third: at what time? The fourth: under what authority? And the fifth: whom does it affect?' 'In the Supreme Court,' Revati said, 'we added review beside the first four.' Shivnarayan smiled. 'Review is a good word. But don't tell someone who wants justice merely to look at a door. Explain how to find the proper key to open it.' Outside, a labourer was getting ready to take his account of daily wages to a local office. His day's justice lay here, in this city, not in Delhi.

In the Andamans, Anish Haldar was replacing an old rope on his boat when Revati's letter reached him. He was not a party to the hearing. Revati wrote that the long struggle to establish his family's identity after the 2004 tsunami had taught her the cost of errors in administrative records. Anish wrote back: 'The sea took our home, but afterwards the community taught me to build a boat again. The government papers were corrected late; only then did some of our rehabilitation rights become orderly. But my everyday life does not exist only in a court file.' The boy Anish had become a boat-owner himself. In the evenings he taught local children to read the patterns of the sea currents. Reading his letter, Revati understood that the lives bound up in these struggles would flow on after judicial decisions, too.

On the day judgment was pronounced, the courtroom was free of needless commotion. At the outset Justice Deshmukh stated that this was a limited appellate decision concerning certain legal implications of the High Court's interim order, the technical extension of the bank's restriction and effective review. The Court had granted special leave and heard the limited appeal. It did not have before it all the evidence of the underlying scheduled offence, the final facts of the money-laundering prosecution, or the separate authority governing each affected person's restriction. Its decision would therefore remain narrow. Revati noticed

that in the very opening lines the Court acknowledged the limits of its power. For readers who wanted every forum to deliver every kind of justice in a single day, the wording would be hard to bear; but that restraint was the basis of an order made according to law.

In its first principle the bench clarified that the statutory source of a restriction on a bank account, and the authority of the officer imposing it, must first be identified. Ordinary powers used in a cybercrime investigation, statutory attachment of particular property and the independent process of a special money-laundering prosecution were not automatically interchangeable. The second principle held that, when an authorised direction is implemented through a bank's technical system, its scope as to amount, duration, subject and necessary limitations should not be enlarged without sufficient statutory basis beyond what the order specifies. If the system initially imposes a wider restriction, a reliable record must be kept of why that happened, the steps taken to correct it and the dates involved. The Court did not take this to mean that lawful investigative urgency was to end. Where necessary, the competent authority could obtain a further appropriate order available under the applicable law.

The third principle required account holders, within the proper limits of authority and procedure, to receive enough meaningful information to understand the nature of a restraint and reach a competent remedy. Where legitimate investigation required particular details to remain protected, the scope of disclosure would depend on the statute concerned, judicial oversight and the conditions of protection; the word 'confidential' was no automatic licence for indefinite obscurity. The fourth principle recognised the actual effect on an affected person's undisputed money, verified livelihood and essential payments as relevant matters in a process of review. But the Court did not declare that every such sum would automatically be released in every circumstance. The fifth principle called on institutions to ensure legally proper reporting, a clear path for compliance and timely review supported by reasons—to the extent permitted by the relevant law.

In Arjun's particular case, the order found no need to disturb the essential protection afforded by the High Court's interim arrangement. The bank's corrected implementation allowed continued use of the undisputed scholarship funds. The disputed four thousand two hundred rupees would remain secured, subject to the applicable statutory investigation and proper review. If the state obtained fresh and credible material, it could apply to the competent statutory forum for appropriate relief. In the pending writ, the High Court would independently

examine the remaining facts, compliance, any remedy for previous hardship, and the parties' other prayers according to law. The Supreme Court stated plainly that its decision established neither the guilt nor the innocence of Vikrant Sehgal, Soumitra Bansal or anyone else. Proceedings before the special court, the rights of the defence and the prosecution's burden of proof remained protected within their proper statutory boundaries.

In a brief concurring observation, Justice Raza wrote that a prohibition appearing on a bank screen was a real restriction for the citizen. Neither the paper recording its authority, nor the machinery implementing it, nor the procedure for reviewing it relieved public institutions of the responsibility to explain themselves. But every technological error was not evidence of criminal intent, and every order concerning compliance was not a final determination of guilt. The observation warned against reading a lack of evidence as automatic victory for suspicion, or the state's apprehension as automatic proof of crime. After this limited concurrence Justice Deshmukh disposed of the appeal. The true significance of the decision was that, at the doorway between a citizen's life and the power of the state, responsibility should not remain unnamed.

Outside, among the crowd of journalists, the first question was shouted: 'Has the Supreme Court defeated the government or given victory to the student?' 'The Court has disposed of limited questions,' Revati answered. 'Arjun's current access to his undisputed scholarship funds is protected, while lawful investigation of the ₹4,200 continues. There are directions about the reasons for the bank's action, its scope and the clear route for review. No decision on guilt or innocence in the underlying financial prosecution has been made here.' Another reporter asked whether the alleged two-thousand-crore scam was now over. 'The Court has reached no such conclusion in this appeal,' Revati said. 'Gross transactions, repeated flows and sources alleged to be criminal are separate questions under investigation in another forum.' Noor Jatay published the meaning of these answers faithfully, though not every word was reproduced. Amid the shouting crowd, the journalist's duty to state the proper limits was far from over.

Coming out of court, Arjun telephoned his mother. 'Ma, the money that was opened up for my studies will remain available,' he said, 'and the inquiry into the four thousand two hundred will continue.' 'Then has your name been cleared?' his mother asked. After a moment he replied, 'The Court hasn't declared me a criminal here. But it hasn't issued me a general certificate of innocence either. Anyone who misunderstands can

read the order.' His mother was silent at the other end. Then she asked, 'When is your next examination paper?' Arjun laughed. 'The day after tomorrow.' There was no declaration of innocence inside that laughter, only the small right to recover his everyday routine. Revati heard it from a distance and understood that this was one real, limited result of a judicial journey lasting twenty-seven years.

When a copy of the decision reached the bank's internal training room, Sarabjit Kaur held a session with junior employees. A newly appointed worker asked, 'If we are simply told never to place a comprehensive freeze on anyone's account, won't that prevent mistakes?' 'A one-line rule like that would create another mistake,' Sarabjit said. 'If an authorised order lawfully requires comprehensive protection for stated reasons, it must be implemented. But if an order is limited to a specified amount, extending it for the convenience of a machine may be improper. First read the order, verify the authority, seek authorised clarification if there is doubt, and record the time of every correction.' The employee took notes. Sarabjit added, 'An account holder is not an exercise in your training manual. Their medicine, tuition fee and food may be tied to this account.' No newspaper found room for a photograph of that small training session. But the real testing of a judicial sentence began at this counter.

Elsewhere the courtroom of the special court was opening in Jodhpur; in Ludhiana, Sunita was obtaining signatures on a new wage register; in Marudhar, Riddhi was adding a note on confidentiality to her research; in the Andamans, Anish watched the sea and warned fishermen of a change in the wind. Mukul had not yet recovered his ₹7,500. Neerja's investigation was unfinished. Lawful questions arising from Vikrant's absence remained. In Darbhanga, Shivnarayan returned the old ledger to its wooden chest. Over the telephone he told Revati, 'The judgment was delivered today, but turning justice into work begins tomorrow.' Revati told him that she wanted to visit the old veranda of the district court again. There a new petitioner was waiting with papers in hand, and India's next testimony had yet to be written.

Chapter 40 — The District Court Veranda

Darbhanga, Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Bengaluru and the Andamans; March–April 2027

One morning in March 2027, sunlight spread across the old veranda of the Darbhanga district court in such a way that half of each pillar remained in light and the other half in darkness. Fine roots of grass showed between stone slabs laid years before. At one end of the veranda papers were fastened to the noticeboard; at the other were advocates' bags and water bottles, and by the gate the steam rising from Mohan's tea kettle. Revati Jha had not come to celebrate a victory. After hearing the Supreme Court's judgment in Delhi, her first wish had been to see how the words of a court reached the place where people wrote applications with their own hands. Her father, Shivnarayan Jha, walked slowly beside her. He stopped at the first pillar. 'In 2000 there was a broken bench here,' he said. 'The great question before the court then was who had written a name in an official seizure record. There are computers here today, but the bench still wobbles in the same way.' Before sitting down, Revati straightened the brick beneath one of its legs.

A young man stood in that veranda with his palm resting on a torn file. His name was Shyamnandan Mandal, and he worked in a small agricultural enterprise in Manigachhi that packed dried makhana. He had a dispute with the owner about unpaid wages, but today's application concerned another matter. Two conflicting dates of birth had caused the name of his late mother to be entered incorrectly in the revenue record relating to inheritance of land. A clerk told him to obtain the necessary proof and apply first to the relevant office for correction; merely arriving at the district court was not, in itself, an answer. Disappointed, the young man folded his file. 'Who told you this was the first forum to approach?' Revati asked. He showed her a message on his phone: 'Go to court; everything will be put right.' Shivnarayan did not smile at it. 'First find out who has the authority to make the decision you want,' he said.

Revati showed the young man the court's internal list, but did not at once tell him to draft a petition. 'Proof of succession and correction of a revenue entry are not invariably part of the same procedure,' she explained. 'First establish which of your rights has actually been affected, what written decision an officer has given, and which statutory remedy is available. Your wage claim is separate; don't join it to the land papers and create one indeterminate lawsuit.' 'Every place I was sent to told me to go somewhere else,' Shyamnandan said. Revati wrote the names of two offices on a sheet of paper and told him that assistance could be sought at

the local legal-services centre, where eligibility and the applicable procedure could be checked. She promised no outcome. For the first time the young man sat down to write the two questions separately, in his own words.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the veranda, Amresh, Neelkanth Sah's son, arrived carrying a small bag. Neelkanth's hair had thinned, and Amresh now managed the original family business. Recognising Revati, he said, 'You saw me here before, too, though I was still at school then. No newspaper asks about Father's old case after all these years. But whenever I seek new credit for the business, the old name comes up again.' Shivnarayan looked at him for a moment. The memory of the ledger seized in 2000 and the mixed verdict of 2004 opened easily in his mind. 'Whatever wrongdoing the court found proved must be read within that limit,' he said. 'What was not established should not be made into a debt of shame handed down from generation to generation.' Amresh asked whether any document could remove the social shadow of the past. 'Paper cannot rewrite all of history,' Revati replied, 'but an accurate copy of the judgment, its limits and your subsequent conduct can help challenge a false story.'

Neelkanth took a small book from his bag. He had had an account of the mistakes he had learnt from his business records written for young people in the village. The language was unvarnished, the pages few, with examples from bookkeeping scattered through them. 'For what I did in one part of my life I had to answer,' he said. 'For what I didn't do in another part, I had to go on answering every day. I don't want my son to live through a third part.' Shivnarayan accepted the book, but did not stand there and write a letter absolving Neelkanth of his earlier wrongdoing. The respect between them lay in neither man's attempt to conceal the uncomfortable part of his history. Revati felt that for a little while the whole twenty-seven-year journey had gathered in the shade of that pillar: the difference between proper accountability for an offence and an unjust stigma that outlived its occasion.

At that same morning hour in Darbhanga, Arjun Meena had four papers arranged on the desk in his Jodhpur hostel. The first was his current bank statement, the second a screenshot of the initial comprehensive freeze in 2026, the third the High Court's interim order, and the fourth a certified copy of the Supreme Court's limited judgment. 'The judges in Delhi have spoken now,' said his friend Tejpal. 'Why haven't you got the ₹4,200 back at once?' 'Where investigation is necessary, the Court hasn't made a final decision about every entry in the account,' Arjun replied. 'The undisputed scholarship funds are available.

For the disputed amount, I must put fresh documents concerning its original source before the prescribed review.' 'After so many turns, what's the benefit?' Tejpal asked. Closing his examination book, Arjun said, 'At least the bank no longer says the whole account is closed by one click and nobody is responsible.' His first task of the day was mathematics practice, not reading a court order.

At the bank's regional compliance office, Sarabjit Kaur opened the register created to track corrections in that case. Each application now had separate fields for the statutory source of authority, the technical extent of the restriction, the authorised investigative contact, the permissible scope of notice and the date of the next review. A young manager said the extra paperwork was slowing things down. 'Have you counted the ten days we used to spend merely finding out where to take a complaint about an unexplained freeze?' Sarabjit replied. 'The cost of correcting a wrongful restriction does not appear on the machine's screen. It appears in the affected family's expenses.' She told the officers that it would be a mistake to read the Supreme Court's decision as a new, uniform penal code applying to every bank. Each restraint had to be tested against the relevant law, the order and the actual facts. Arjun's was the first training example, but his confidential account number and personal contact details had been removed from the training material.

A new document was added to Arjun's application concerning the source of the payment of four thousand two hundred rupees. The college's authorised student-services office reported that on the relevant date a digital platform had been processing group refunds of hostel security deposits. But a letter issued by the institution was not conclusive by itself. On the investigating officer's directions, an authorised bank branch separately matched the identifiers of the original payment message, the immediately preceding account and the sequence of refund approvals. A colleague wanted to conclude quickly, 'If it's a deposit refund, it's clean.' Neerja Rathore said over the phone, 'Verify the claim made by the papers. State clearly whichever link in the payment trail has not been established. Evidence supporting a lawful payment and the question of knowledge of a crime do not lie on one and the same plane.' She knew how Arjun's life had been disrupted, but compassion did not make her wish to abandon the discipline of proof.

Arjun's family lived in a small town in Rajasthan. His mother, Jasoda, asked on the phone whether he was spending every day at the bank or getting on with his studies. He said he now inquired at the office only once a week; on the remaining days he went to the library. His mother laughed. 'I don't understand court papers, but I understand that you're

studying again.' His father, Shyamlal, looked at the receipt for the examination fee and asked whether there might be a remedy for the late fee caused by the earlier freeze. Arjun sent that question separately to Shalini Solanki. 'Where there has been actual loss,' she wrote, 'its proof, the causal connection and the available forum must be examined separately. Refund of the ₹4,200 and possible compensation for the delay are not automatic consequences of the same order.' There was less immediate comfort in that answer, but no false hope.

In the first week of April a written order came from the authorised reviewing body. Taken together, the verified payment particulars available, the institution's original refund register and the investigating team's factual note gave insufficient present grounds for maintaining the earlier protection over Arjun's specified ₹4,200. The order directed that the freeze on that limited amount be lifted. The possibility of lawful action on fresh facts in the future, if necessary, remained separately reserved. The bank implemented the order. When the money appeared as available on his new statement, Arjun did not send its photograph to his friends' group. He simply told his mother, 'The freeze on this entry has been lifted. That is the review of this amount, not a final certificate disposing of every case in which my name may appear.' 'So will you buy your books?' she asked. 'First I'll pay the laboratory fee,' Arjun replied, 'then buy the books.' Between those two acts his own future came back into slightly sharper focus.

Another family in Jodhpur found its circumstances unchanged by that progress. Mukul Meena had still not recovered the ₹7,500 he had lost. His claim was proceeding along a separate complaints route. He had been persuaded to pay the sum as a supposed employment-training fee, and the actual role of the holder of an intermediary account in the payment trail was still disputed. Building a new cardboard model of a bridge, his sister Rani took out her old exercise book and asked, 'Brother, brother, the bridge is built now—why hasn't the money crossed?' Mukul smiled. 'We have found the route from one bank to another. But we must still establish the responsibility of the people who held out the promise of a job and took the fee.' Rani wrote three words in her book: complaint, investigation, refund. Mukul asked her to add a fourth: time.

On Mukul's complaint, the authority concerned secured transaction trails across certain separate accounts. A service provider acknowledged in its records an incomplete order and a refund due of ₹3,000. After the prescribed examination and verification of the claim, the return of that part was authorised. Examination of the remaining ₹4,500 continued; the questions of an offender's responsibility, civil compensation and

criminal proceedings were independent. Back home, Mukul showed his mother the message about the ₹3,000. 'Shall we pay Rani's examination fee with this?' she asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'But I won't throw away the receipt for the rest.' For the first time he understood that partial relief did not mean the entire wrong had ended, and an incomplete claim did not make the first relief worthless. His silence did not turn into a complete celebration in a day; he went on with the work of entering the correct balance in his ledger.

In an ordinary exercise book Mukul's father wrote ₹7,500 and subtracted ₹3,000 beneath it. Against the remaining ₹4,500, he wrote not a question mark but a date. 'Father, have you spent all these years writing a date beside every unpaid amount?' Mukul asked. 'Writing a date doesn't bring the money back,' his father said. 'But it reminds me what I asked from whom and when. When the whole account is settled, I'll stop writing question marks.' Rani added another small pier to her model bridge. 'If one end of the bridge has a hole,' she said, 'not all the water flows through it.' They laughed, but Mukul understood that the language of legal procedure and the language of his sister's play were two ways of grasping the same scene. It did not mean every family had to become its own lawyer. It meant only that people need not abandon the true measure of their loss.

One April afternoon in the special court at Jodhpur, technical papers containing revised calculations were filed. Before Judge Sandhya Pareek sat Abhay Awasthi for the prosecution, Ira Saxena for the defence and technical experts appearing, with appropriate records, under the requisite legal permission. Anuradha Sen's financial reconciliation already had three columns. A fourth had now been added: 'Path back to the source of an entry'. One colleague thought it unnecessary. 'When we trace ₹12.40 lakh from one bank to another,' Anuradha said, 'we must also be able to say which account first received the money, what preceded that, and how much of the movement was merely an internal adjustment. Adding lakhs and crores of entries makes compelling news; a court needs the thread leading to the source.' For the first time the Court could see certain entries as distinct, identifiable transactions. But the remaining questions about their criminal source were not erased.

Presenting a bank's certified record of incoming funds, Abhay Awasthi said that ₹12.40 lakh had reached the account of a specified service company and that part of it had subsequently moved to another connected entity. He confined himself to saying that the flow was supported by authorised records. When the defence asked whether the amount came from fraudulent training fees or was legitimate payment

for services, Abhay spoke of the additional evidence needed to establish its original source. Ira drew from her file a list of on-site attendance, tax invoices and days of service. 'Payment has occurred,' she said, 'but its actual purpose is disputed. An overlap in the dates of two contracts belonging to the same company is not, in itself, a conclusion that the funds were criminal.' Sandhya Pareek recorded four separate lines of inquiry: existence of the payment, reality of the consideration, connection with the source offence and the accused's knowing role. A journalist standing in the corridor changed the screen on his phone twice in an attempt to note down the whole sentence.

In her filed progress report, Neerja Rathore made clear that the register of the underlying scheduled offence had not been merged with the records of the money-laundering prosecution. The first concerned complaints about training fees, alleged false promises, the supposed roles of different people and the consequences of those acts. The second examined, if property identifiable as proceeds of crime was found, which people could be connected, under the required legal standard, with alleged acts of concealment, possession, use or projection as untainted. Police Inspector Seema Chaudhary separately sent the certified status of statements made by two witnesses from her area. 'If the source crime remains obscure,' Neerja told her junior, 'the money-laundering narrative will not be sustained merely by the foreign names of companies. And the possibility of proving the source complaint does not, by itself, establish the mental state of every director.' The distinction did not make the inquiry faster, but it made it more dependable.

The figure '₹2,000 crore' appeared again on a page. The prosecution described it as the historical summary of the total circulation initially presented, not the final measure of alleged criminal funds. Anuradha supplied an example in her report: if the same original sum passed first into a parent company, then through an internal settlement, then to a service division, and back again as an adjustment by the parent company, adding every inflow and outflow would count it many times. Even after the repetitions were removed, the independent sources of some entries remained unclear; therefore reducing the large figure did not establish that all the remaining money was lawful. 'Can every deduction you made be identified?' Sandhya Pareek asked. 'Where the bank's original identifiers are complete, yes,' Anuradha answered. 'Where records are partial, we have marked the estimation.' The Court ordered that the uncertain portion be marked with written annotations, not merely different coloured pencil, since the meaning of a colour could change in a printed copy.

Soumitra Bansal sat with his advocate in the courtroom. He had some genuine receipts for services, but the underlying report for one of four acceptance letters was missing. 'At the meeting when you approved the payment, who told you the work had been completed?' Ira asked. Soumitra named an assistant, then said the man had since left the company. 'Then let the papers speak,' Ira said, 'and if a paper does not exist, admit what you do not know. Memory reconstructed afterwards will not fill an empty space in the record.' Soumitra had tucked inside his file a drawing his daughter had made of three clouds. Looking at it, he remembered Kavya's question at home: 'Where does responsibility begin for a decision you made without reading?' What frightened him most was not an imagined punishment, but the hour in which he would have to say what his signature had truly meant.

Sending her daughter to school, Kavya Bansal said that the child's examination paper was no certificate of her father's guilt merely because he was in court. An old photograph had been shared again in a school parents' group. Instead of threatening the group with legal action, Kavya politely asked the school to discourage discussion among children of allegations unrelated to their own families. The school agreed in writing that unrelated accusations would not be allowed to affect any child's education or safety. When Soumitra returned home that evening, his daughter asked, 'Did the court ask you the truth?' 'Some things are still being tested,' her father said. 'And I must say clearly what I know.' 'Then look at my drawing tomorrow,' she replied. To Soumitra that small, ordinary request was not relief but a responsibility: to remain present in life even after answering truthfully.

At the pre-trial stage in the special court, the documents and arguments concerning a junior bill-coordination employee were examined separately. Against that employee the record showed only a name in a compilation register and the fact of receipt of lawful wages. At this stage the necessary material connecting the person with a specific use of alleged proceeds of crime or a relevant process had not been produced. Applying the available procedural standard, the Court made a limited finding that there were insufficient grounds to frame a charge against that individual. Reasons were recorded; the scope of inquiry against other people did not automatically shrink. As they came out of court the employee's wife asked, 'Is everything over now?' 'This order concerns this charge at this stage,' the advocate said. 'Keep an authorised copy, and find out which lawful routes, if any, are appropriate.' The woman took out her child's school-fee notice. For her, the day's outcome meant the family

might close one chapter of temporary fear—not make declarations about every proceeding that the state might ever undertake.

In Soumitra's case the Court fixed the next procedure for a prima facie examination of certain specified allegations. Assessment of evidence, cross-examination and final judgment still lay ahead. The prosecution retained the obligation to produce relevant original documents, the defence its lawful opportunity to inspect them, and all parties their rights to object under the applicable law. In the corridor a young man from a news channel asked his colleague, 'Does framing a charge mean guilt has been proved?' Hearing him, Noor Jatay intervened only long enough to say, 'No. This stage has a different meaning. Read the date and the wording of the order.' Irritated, the young man said, 'Ordinary viewers won't understand such distinctions.' 'Then our job is to explain,' Noor answered, 'not to give ourselves permission to mislead them.' This time she did not turn a single figure or a face into a saleable symbol in her headline.

Vikrant Sehgal remained abroad. The status of papers sent through the authorised mutual-assistance arrangements and competent channels available for lawful service of summons was recorded separately before the court. Administrative confirmation had been received that documents reached the specified address; questions about the recipient's identity and whether service had been completed in accordance with law were still open to argument. Judge Sandhya Pareek did not infer guilt or draw harsh procedural conclusions merely from the words 'he is abroad'. Vikrant asked his advocate Jayant Malhotra, 'If I want to respond to an Indian court's order, what is the recognised method?' 'At this stage we must check the proper procedure and the Court's directions,' Jayant replied. 'Every email sent from an overseas office is not automatically equivalent to an appearance.' Vikrant ended the call and went into his accounts room. Some papers there were still unopened; he did not like the sight of them.

Farida had received the results of an authorised recovery of archived project emails at her office. A document approving forty days' service had been found. For the remaining twenty days there was a programme calendar and indications of travel expenses, but no complete letter of acceptance from the client. She wrote to her superior that what the available material supported should be described as supported; what it only suggested must not be turned into an established conclusion. 'If you're so cautious, the company's name will suffer,' her superior said. 'Will its name be saved by writing false things as true?' Farida answered. 'And will the company be saved by concealing what is true?' Her question

was no revolutionary proclamation. Her brother's hostel fee was due soon; fear for her job was real. Even so, she preserved the original data under the authorised records-retention policy and agreed to cooperate through prescribed channels with whatever was lawfully requested.

In Mumbai, Sudarshan Sehgal was having a room in an old warehouse closed. The mark 'S-19' could still be seen on a wooden crate there. He remembered an occasion when the invoice for an empty crate had been matched with the number for a full one. They had suffered a financial loss, but before declaring an employee a criminal he had needed to find out on which shift the wrong marking had been entered. His son's company's expansion now far exceeded that old mistake, and the public questions were harsher too. He wrote to Vikrant: 'The door of our home is open to you. But do not close the door of truth on the records the court asks for. Family love cannot change what is true.' After sending the letter, he handed the key to his grandson Ayaan, who was making a fresh inventory of the warehouse. What he wanted to pass between generations was not only wealth and trust, but the capacity to learn from mistakes.

One night, closing a report, Anuradha Sen looked at the light through a small window overlooking the corridor. Her colleague asked when a case with so many layers would ever end. 'One stage of the accounting work is complete,' she replied. 'The court still has its independent stages concerning sources, witnesses, the defence and final judicial findings. What I am able to say as an expert cannot be written as though it were the court's judgment.' 'Then what is the value of all your work?' her colleague asked again. Anuradha showed him a corrected table. One line of a repeated entry had been struck out, while the trail of the original sum remained visible. 'Its value is that a wrong number must not make anyone innocent, and a correct number must not become a shield concealing an offence that the evidence proves.' She switched off the desk lamp. There was no colour of victory on the paper, only the clear difficulty of a revised accounting.

That week Neerja Rathore registered an anonymous tip naming an alleged principal beneficiary. Much of its suspicion rested on the person's caste and community identity. She preserved the information in the receipt register but told a fellow officer that identity, city or community was not evidence of financial guilt. 'Bring someone under investigation where there is a particular transaction, a verifiable source and evidence of a knowing role,' she said. 'The weight of words in an anonymous message cannot justify an arrest.' 'What if the information is right?' the officer asked. 'Then evidence will verify it. And if it is false, why should we

destroy someone's life?' She retained the file for later scrutiny, not for a media release.

In Ludhiana, April heat had long since settled on the tin roofs of the factories. At the labour-assistance centre, Sunita Paswan had two kinds of exercise book open: one concerned a fresh application relating to a bank freeze, the other the accounts of unpaid wages stretching back to 2009. 'The Supreme Court has given its judgment,' her colleague Hina said. 'Shouldn't we go back to the old books now?' 'The judgment has come,' Sunita replied, 'but the process of applying it differs from case to case. And if we abandon the old wage accounts, what will we tell workers when they ask for their due? That we won in a great court but have no measurement for the wages here?' At that, Hina put a torn page back in its proper sequence in the old register. To Sunita a judicial achievement meant something only when it could be touched in the accounting of an ordinary day's work.

The bank sent Shanti Devi a fresh and clear notice concerning the access already arranged to undisputed funds for her medical expenses. Through an authorised channel it provided a limited explanation of why a particular entry remained under investigation; she no longer had to make repeated trips to the branch to use the rest of her money. Shanti went to buy medicine for her husband. When the pharmacist announced the bill, she opened her purse and asked, 'Will the payment go through this time, or will the machine refuse again?' The machine accepted it. No celebration that could be caught clearly in a photograph appeared in her eyes. She closed the bag of medicines securely. 'All I want,' she said, 'is for the medicine not to be interrupted next month either.' Listening, Sunita said, 'There is still work to be done between a payment succeeding once and trust that lasts.'

A formal reconciliation meeting was held between factory management and workers' representatives over the wage registers. Dharampal Khurana said it was impossible to complete every claim from the old years in a single leap. Records of shifts, contracts, overtime and retired employees were kept in different places. Sunita laid verified samples before him: entries with original signatures confirming attendance, entries supported only by wage receipts, and claims for which supporting material still had to be found. 'What reason is there to withhold payment where the record is clear?' she asked. Management accepted a written programme to pay the first verified group's undisputed arrears by the lawful process. Rights to pursue the remaining claims through the appropriate labour forum and discussions were preserved. The workers applauded, but Sunita reminded them that a timetable was

not the unpaid wages themselves. They must see whether the dates were honoured before deciding what the undertaking was worth.

Ramlakhan Paswan sat on the threshold of his home, looking at the receipt for the first verified instalment of arrears. His body no longer submitted to the pace of the old machines. 'When I put books in your hands,' he told Sunita, 'I said you must study so that you wouldn't be caught up in shift accounts like mine.' 'Father,' Sunita replied, 'I studied so that no one could silently change the accounts of your shifts.' From beside the stove Phoolkumari called, 'Enough law for now. Tomorrow morning someone must make the children's lunchboxes too.' They all laughed. Among the years of struggle that had torn the household about, that ordinary domestic instruction was a kind of happiness. Sunita knew that the struggle for rights was not meant to live only in wounded memories. Its aim was to preserve the ordinary hours of cooking, study and rest.

Maya shielded the old prescriptions for her husband, Ashok Mistri, and the hospital's receipt register from dust. After a formal application, part of the medical information left unclear during the 2021 pandemic had become available. Certain time entries contradicted one another, and the health institution had identified those discrepancies in a written explanation; the complete chain of reasons for the treatment still had not been opened to Maya. 'I'm not rushing to have compensation assessed just now,' she told Sunita. 'I want to know what happened on the last night.' Sunita told her that independent advice from an available medical expert and the possible legal route should be examined separately. Back at home Maya carefully put away the old drawing Ragini had made of a fan and the open sky. The records would not bring Ashok's body back to life; but demanding the truth from those records was not a betrayal of grief either.

At a government hospital training session, Dr Saira Ahmed told young nurses that an issue with digital payment or identification papers should not needlessly complicate lawful priorities in emergency treatment. In her experience, apart from the country's major judicial decisions, there were millions of small institutional questions. 'How should a hospital work if a patient's family's account remains frozen?' a nurse asked. 'We must consider medical need, assistance available under the rules, proper arrangements for fees and statutory duties together,' Saira replied. 'A doctor is not the bank's investigating officer.' On a patient's case sheet she explicitly recorded that treatment had been decided on medical grounds. The small signature defined the limits of responsibility, not an expansion of power.

At Sunita's assistance centre, Zarina arrived carrying a new donations register. Some donors had resumed their support after the previous year's unverified 'ninety-five per cent cash withdrawal' story spread suspicion over the institution; others still kept their distance. 'Even after a false allegation is shown to be wrong, trust returns at its own pace,' Zarina said. 'Will you publish the new register?' Sunita asked. 'We'll maintain the transparency required, but we won't disclose the private circumstances of the women receiving help,' Zarina replied. 'Accurate accounts of donations and the dignity of beneficiaries are not enemies.' The organisation published a summary of an independent audit, withholding confidential personal names. The farmers' health camps and assistance to newborn babies continued as usual. None of the organisation's service work was proof of a crime; questions concerning a separate sham group under investigation remained with their proper forum.

At Marudhar University in Jodhpur, Riddhi Vishnoi entered the hall for the final presentation of her research. The proposed display of a list with five hundred serial numbers had been replaced by anonymised sample categories. Before the presentation began, Firdous Kaul asked, 'Who authorised the source of your data? Which part is an authentic bank record, which is an administrative sample from the university, and which is an unauthorised list circulated in social publicity?' Riddhi explained the limits of each category in turn. 'All this caution makes the research title less dramatic,' a member of the examining committee observed. 'If I turn five hundred students into suspects to make a dramatic title,' Riddhi answered, 'that will not be research. It will be another injustice.' In her written report she clearly recorded the possibilities of erroneous counts, the limits on verifying unique accounts, and the absence of informed consent.

After the presentation Manasvi met Riddhi in the hostel. Years before, she had fought against unnecessary access to her personal identity information in the university's records. 'Once I thought the struggle was over when the correct name was entered,' Manasvi said. 'Then a new copy was made from the old register, and the same mistake came back. Where will you keep the confidential original of your five-hundred-entry list?' Riddhi explained that access-limited storage, rules on retention periods and the policies required at the end of the inquiry would operate under institutional authorisation. Unrelated information about students would not be accumulated on a personal laptop. Manasvi smiled. 'If that caution remains in writing, the next student won't have to fight all the way from the beginning.' Riddhi thought that a study's truest conclusion was often

found not in its tables but in the rights of the next person to use its findings.

At the back of an old file Firdous Kaul added a letter. Recommendations about administrative agreements governing student data, internal responsibilities compatible with privacy, access by outside service providers and the limits of correction had again been placed before the management committee. The committee accepted some immediate changes, reserving others for further review because of cost and technical infrastructure. It was no complete victory, but the paper had not disappeared into another unknown cupboard. 'I have no right to assume anything against a student because of language, caste, city or opinion,' Firdous told a young lecturer. 'Checking evidence is necessary. But an educational institution must also protect the possibilities of its students.' Outside, students stood in a queue for identity cards. Some had not read the Court's judgment; nevertheless the rules were affecting their lives.

In a Bengaluru laboratory, Avani Jha was studying a graph from a small experiment. Her family cherished the memory of Chandrayaan's success in 2023 like a festival, but the present work was to reduce the error rate of a new sensor. 'Four faulty results in a thousand tests—that's a small mistake,' a colleague said. 'We can call it small only because we've measured it,' Avani replied. 'If we don't know where the failure occurred, it will recur in the next instrument.' That month a short Maithili booklet on science had arrived at the school where her mother, Maitreyi, taught. A girl asked why village laboratories still had old equipment in a country that could reach the Moon. 'Achievement doesn't end questions,' Maitreyi said. 'It gives us the courage to ask new ones.' There was no shadow of a bank offence in this scientific story, only the independent difficulty of learning.

That evening Avani telephoned her father, Niranjan Jha, to tell him that testing of her new instrument was still in the preliminary stage. 'Will everything be right tomorrow?' he asked. She laughed. 'I'll say only as much as tomorrow's measurements allow. I won't decide the result beforehand.' At the other end of the house Maitreyi was correcting a pupil's drawing: a half-moon in a blue sky above a school roof. Hearing her mother's voice, Avani said, 'This time I'll hold a small science workshop for the village children. We won't hide experiments that fail.' When the call ended, she wrote a phrase in her research notebook: the limits of measurement. Far from the country's courts, that sentence in a laboratory was complete in its own work. It did not need the central judicial dispute to give it meaning.

In Darbhanga, the writer Anupama Jha was checking proofs for a new edition of her old book, The Body's Name, the Name's Body. Her publisher had suggested changing the title to include a reference to the news of 2027. Anupama refused. 'My characters of 2018 were born within their own time,' she said. 'Their suffering will not become more valuable if I attach today's court news to it. I'll write a new story about new questions, but I won't make the old one dance to the newspapers.' She wrote the first sentence of a fresh story: a woman was told at a government office that her name existed in the records, but there was no proof she was present. Her pen stopped. She understood that the story needed to begin not with the court but with the woman's own voice. She crossed out the sentence and wrote: 'I am here,' the woman said, while the clerk went on turning pages.

At the library, Saurabh Jha was preparing the catalogue entry for Anupama's new edition. He recorded the original publication year and the year of the new edition separately. 'Why write the name twice? It's the same book,' a junior employee said. 'Readers need to know which text appeared when,' Saurabh replied. 'Erase the history of revisions and you create confusion for future research.' On the next page his colleague Akshay was attaching a photograph of the torn cover of a rare Maithili volume. Neither had to appear in any courtroom now. Their earlier struggle for rights had become one part of their private lives, not their entire identity. In the evening the two closed the library door. Outside, the smell of mango blossom rose along the line of trees; no government index measured it.

On the Andaman shore, Anish Haldar was replacing planks on his boat while two boys learnt from him how to read the wind. The sea was never the same colour for long: deep, dark swells beneath turquoise water, small crests of white foam above. 'Grandfather, when you were little, did the sea take everything away?' one of the boys asked. Anish was quiet for a while. 'We lost a great deal of what was in our home,' he said. 'But people built homes again. When the papers were lost, it took years to prove our identities. This time I keep the boat's documents and the emergency plans in two separate, safe places.' 'Will those papers stop a storm?' the boy asked. 'No. But after the storm we need not lose our way in seeking our rights. Practising to save lives before a storm and seeking legal help afterwards serve different purposes.'

Anish wrote Revati a letter. There was less about the Delhi order in it than about the fishermen's new boat cooperative. He wrote that much of the struggle begun after the tsunami to repair incomplete rehabilitation papers had been resolved, while some questions of land boundaries and

inheritance remained pending in separate offices. But his daughter Nilima was learning marine ecology at school that year, and her grandmother was teaching her old ways of weaving fishing nets. 'I don't want my daughter to see me only as someone who survived a disaster,' Anish wrote. 'I want her to see a fisherman, a father and a man who studies the sea.' Revati did not put the letter away in a chest after reading it. She kept a copy in her notebook of memories, because its words showed her that a struggle for rights should never become the whole description of a person's life.

At the newsroom Noor Jatay gave a long article the title 'The Days After Judgment'. Editor Nikhil remarked that readers would not be able to take in at once a twenty-seven-year story spreading like a novel. 'Then we must not claim that one court has disposed of every case,' Noor replied. Her article clearly distinguished three stages: the Supreme Court's limited decision offering guidance on bank freezes; the fresh review, based on new evidence, of Arjun's particular amount; and the independent trial in the special court, where no final finding of guilt or innocence had been reached. She then treated separately Mukul's partial refund, Sunita's wage accounts and the institution's improvements in privacy. She published no complete private bank-account numbers, deleted an old screenshot that exposed a student's mistake, and asked two websites that had published false headlines to make corrections. Some did; others did not. The marks left by a falsehood could not be washed away in a day.

When Revati returned to the Darbhanga veranda, the later sunlight of Chait had shortened the shadows of the pillars. Shivnarayan had brought two bundles of papers with him that day. One contained copies of the ledger from 2000; the other, his professional notes from many years. 'Why so many papers?' Revati asked. 'I want accurate copies of the files suitable for preservation as public orders to be kept in the proper archives,' her father said, 'and private details not to be handed over to anyone without authority. I shall go, but let the wrong meaning of the papers not go on.' Revati said they would first prepare an inventory distinguishing private party correspondence from the public judgments of courts. Shivnarayan smiled. 'So now you're teaching me how to preserve records?' 'You taught me long ago,' his daughter said, laughing. 'Only the method has changed.'

Her father reminded her of an old day. In 2000, standing in the courthouse veranda, Revati had seen a young man's name in the seized ledger and asked, 'Is he guilty?' Shivnarayan had told her then that a name, handwriting and an actual person could not be treated as the same

without verification. Now, twenty-seven years later, after travelling among arguments in the courts of Delhi, Jodhpur and other places, Revati had sought new forms of the same question. 'I thought then that if I could read the paper I would find the truth,' she said. 'Now I understand that I must ask who created it, who saw it, when it was altered, whether the person concerned had a chance to reply, and what the consequence of the order was in that person's life.' Shivnarayan nodded. 'And now I am old,' he said. 'So I must ask you the answers to the new questions.' Between them there was no longer simply a teacher and a student, only an unfinished conversation between two generations.

Shyamnandan Mandal appeared again in the court veranda. This time he had brought not a message on his phone but a written letter from the office concerned. The letter identified documents missing from his application to correct the revenue entry, but did not explain which alternative forms of proof might be accepted. 'I have the old school register relating to my mother and testimony from her family,' he said. 'But the officer tells me verbally that this is not enough.' 'Have you shown them the written deficiency notice?' Revati asked. 'Has a decision been taken, or have they only asked for material?' The young man reread the letter. It was a request for clarification, not a final refusal. 'In your response, list the lawful evidence you do have,' Revati said. 'Ask what the rules permit as an alternative to what you cannot obtain. If an adverse order comes later, seek to learn, with reasons, what prescribed remedy exists.' 'I don't want to become a party's name in the news,' the young man said. 'I want my mother's name recorded correctly.'

That day, in a room inside the complex, a local legal-aid officer named Rekha Kumari was advising applicants on eligibility, necessary documents and the proper forum. Sometimes she directed people to the revenue office, sometimes to the competent labour forum, and sometimes explained the right way to apply to a court. Revati watched her at work. 'The Supreme Court has said so much,' one student asked. 'Why do we still have to come here?' 'To apply a higher court's decision to actual circumstances requires a competent institution, correct facts and time,' Rekha said. 'A supreme judgment does not prepare an application's records by itself.' An elderly woman asked whether her widow's pension problem would be heard immediately by the district court. Rekha explained the proper departmental remedy and, if necessary, the route to legal aid. There were no cameras outside the room. Yet here, for the first time, people left with a definite next step in their hands instead of an indistinct fear.

At noon a case concerning old land rights was being heard in a competent courtroom of the district court. The plaintiff argued that a line had been drawn incorrectly on the revenue map; the defendant relied on old possession and survey papers. The judge heard the parties, inquired into the availability of the necessary original register and fixed the next procedure within the limits of the evidence immediately before the court. Waiting in the veranda, Shyamnandan did not imagine his own problem would be settled there by chance. He decided to follow the route to the correct forum for his application the following week. This hearing was separate from Revati's Supreme Court case, but it showed the same discipline: the suffering of the person standing before you must be heard, yet no legal outcome should be granted without proper authority and evidence.

Shivnarayan's granddaughter Preeti came from school to see him in the veranda. Putting down her bag of books, she asked, 'Grandfather, have your twenty-seven years of courts come to an end? Can the book be shut now?' Shivnarayan laughed. 'My bag may have grown old,' he said, 'but the days of people who come here carrying papers are still going on.' 'I wrote an essay about justice at school,' Preeti said. 'The teacher said justice should be equal for everyone. But where there are too few teachers, how can the children receive an equal education?' Revati paused at the girl's question. Outside the rules of the courts lay inequalities in school resources, family labour and social opportunity. 'Equality does not always mean handing everyone the same page,' she said. 'It also asks how to give access to the person who lacks the means to read it.' 'Must we make an application for that too?' Preeti asked. 'Sometimes through the school committee, sometimes the administration, sometimes a court. First understand the problem properly and raise the question together,' Revati replied.

When the first gust of evening came, steam from Mohan the tea seller's kettle bent to one side. On the old bench in the veranda sat Shyamnandan, Amresh and a new elderly woman, each carrying different papers. Their documents did not resemble one another, so one combined order could not answer them all. Revati thought for a moment of how many people came to a courthouse believing it their final refuge, although the first resolution of many disputes might also be found in an educational institution, a bank, a labour forum, a revenue office, a village council, a hospital or a simple, attentive conversation. Yet when institutions withdrew from accountability, keeping the door of the court open remained an essential assurance of democracy. That doorway

did not mean drawing every dispute into the court's own jurisdiction, but protecting the path to the right forum.

In the court's record room, a newly appointed clerk named Sudhir was arranging the pages of an old register in their proper order. Another employee said that an electronic list was being prepared, so there was no further need for all this old paper. Sudhir showed him a yellowing page bearing the date of the first correction, while the digital copy retained only the later entry. 'You can see the correct name as it stands now,' he said. 'But sometimes a court needs to know where the earlier wrong name came from.' He preserved the page according to the rules governing original records and added a written note on the limitations of the digital copy. Sudhir's work was so quiet that no news story would come of it. Nevertheless an essential thread of judicial memory had been saved.

Revati closed her bag. 'After so many years of argument, what will you tell people?' Shivnarayan asked. She stopped in the shadow of a veranda pillar. 'Mukul has not yet recovered all his money. The special court's trial is still proceeding. Some homes have received relief, and some wounds have not healed. But Arjun is studying again. Sunita's colleagues can read accurate accounts of their shifts. Anish's boat is back in the water. Anupama is writing books in her own language.' Shivnarayan reached out to take the bag, but Revati lifted it herself. 'I will say this much: behind every name is a life actually lived.' Her father looked for a moment at the last step of the veranda. In that silence Revati remembered her days as a student of law.

As they were leaving, Shyamnandan stood up once more. In his hand he had crumpled the edge of his mother's old school certificate. Stopping Revati, he asked, 'Didi, what if I give them the right documents and they still won't listen to me?' She gave him a practical answer. 'Then ask for a written decision from the officer who has the duty to hear you. Examine the reasons. Within the remedies provided by law, choose an appeal, review or proper judicial route. If the evidence changes, don't conceal it. Don't invent what you haven't found. Having your case heard is not anyone's favour to you; it is a question of due process.' The young man put a new sheet on top of his file. On it he wrote: 'Mother's name; evidence available; next date.' He felt no need for any weightier words of law.

The clock hanging on the veranda wall was a little behind five. Voices inside the court gradually quieted. Dust from a broom rose into the light and settled again, while near the iron gate a few people were still asking for their next dates. Shivnarayan turned once to look at the pillar that

had stood there twenty-seven years before. He remembered the name of a dead person in the seized ledger. Revati remembered a computer's wrongful expansion of a restriction on a student's account. Shyamnandan, standing in the veranda, could see only his struggle to have his mother's name recorded correctly. That third memory was no less important than the others.

Holding her father's arm, Revati descended the steps. Thin clouds of Chait floated overhead, a bicycle bell rang on the road, and inside a clerk was posting the list for the following day. Not every court file had been closed; nor could it be. Some decisions had been written, some cases awaited appeal, and the correct meaning of some names was still being sought. Justice did not stand in that veranda like a finished statue. It was going home with people as the voice that asks questions, the demand for a written answer, the courage to correct a mistake and the difficult discipline of evidence. From a distance Shyamnandan's voice reached them: 'I'll come again tomorrow.' Revati looked back. The young man was smiling, his file tucked under his arm. The outcome of his future legal effort was unknown, but his question was clear now. The first page of the next testimony had opened.

BHARAT
2027

Twenty-Seven Years of Testimony

From a rain-soaked courthouse veranda in Darbhanga in July 2000 to the same veranda in April 2027, this novel follows twenty-seven years in the lives of ordinary people who come before the law.

Revati and her father, Shivnarayan Jha, learn to ask of every paper: who made it, who saw it, when was it altered, and what did the order do to a human life? Their cases travel through Darbhanga, Jodhpur, Ludhiana, Delhi and the Andaman Islands.

In forty chapters and five parts, courtroom and country change together, until the final reckoning.

Translated from the original Maithili by the author himself.

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