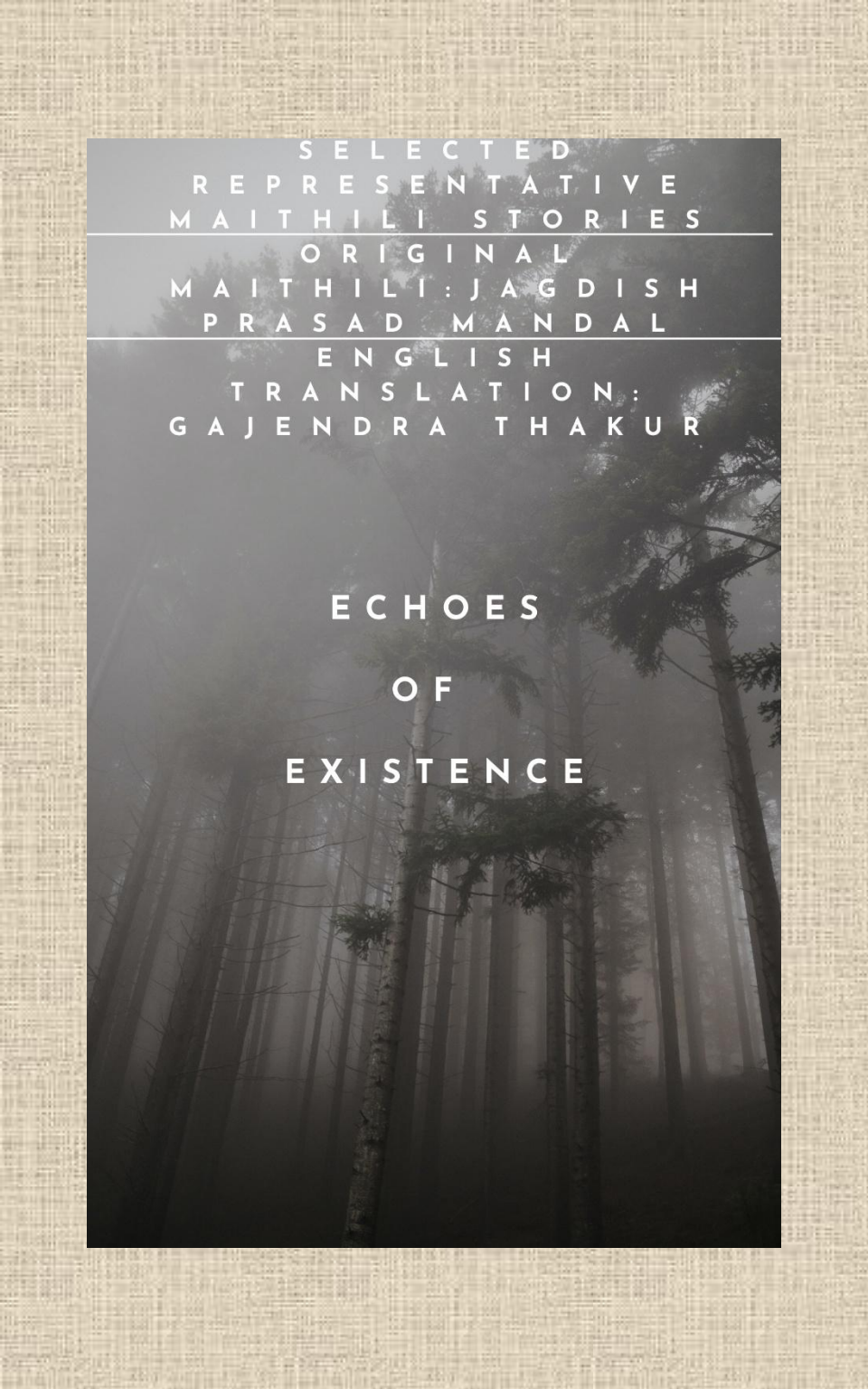




SELECTED
REPRESENTATIVE
MAITHILI STORIES

ORIGINAL
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GAJENDRA THAKUR

ECHOES
OF
EXISTENCE

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ECHOES OF EXISTENCE

*[Jagdish Prasad Mandal: Selected Representative
Maithili Stories]*

[English Translation: Gajendra Thakur]

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The Age of Competition

This is an age of competition. Wherever you look, wherever you go, competition pervades all. From one individual to another, from one nation to the entire world, everyone is caught in their race. There is competition between people, competition within families, between castes, among communities, and even among societies. The entire world seems to have turned into a vast arena of relentless contest.

Twice had Ramkishore appeared in the civil services examination, and both times he had failed. Now he sat alone by the doorway, lost in thought, burdened with the question—was he no longer suited to the times, or had time itself turned away from him? A graduate, he now reflected that the window for government employment was closing. His age had already crossed the permissible limit for most posts, and only the civil services remained, where one was allowed three attempts. Two had already failed. One chance remained, and even that, he felt, would likely end the same way.

If all three attempts fail, then the one remaining hope for a government job—especially a prestigious

administrative one—would vanish completely. What then would be left to do?

True, his family did own fifteen bighas of land. But even that—farming—stood on the brink of collapse. Agriculture lacked proper organisation, and for someone educated, it was considered almost laughable. The very foundation of the country's economy, agriculture, was now held in disdain by both the farmers who toiled the land and the rulers who governed it. What future could he see for himself in such a setting?

So deeply disheartened had Ramkishore become with his own life that even the idea of a future had begun to fade from his mind. He could neither see hope ahead nor find clarity in his present. When he tried to lift his gaze from himself toward society, he saw the same despair reflected there as well. And then, suddenly, a new thought emerged in his mind—a glimmer, a possibility. If he couldn't find clarity on his own, why not seek it from others?

But the moment his thoughts turned to others, disillusionment returned. For those others, the society around him was much the same—people who, instead of helping others grow, delighted in belittling them. They thought ill, spoke ill, and rejoiced in others' misfortunes. And if such had become the very temperament of society,

then from where could one even hope for goodness?

Suddenly, Ramkishore's gaze sharpened—his mind touched the finer edge of thought. A subtle realisation dawned upon him: though society is a collective body, not all within it are cut from the same cloth. It is true that many harbour malevolent tendencies, yet it would be unfair to say that everyone is the same. Yes, there are certainly people of wicked disposition, but there also exist those of virtuous nature. The difference lies in how they live.

Those who are noble lead restrained and balanced lives, preserving their dignity in silence. Whereas those of cruel nature, spending their days amid others, constantly disrupt the harmony around them with their erratic actions and corrosive thinking.

As Ramkishore reflected on this, his thoughts reached a boundary—beyond which stood the vision of the righteous, the good-hearted people.

And right then, the image of Gaurinath Master appeared before his eyes.

Gaurinath Master had once been a teacher at the high school. He had retired six years ago. His family was so well-settled that not a shadow of worry touched his mind. His dealings were composed, his household serene, and his life—a picture of order and peace.

Thinking about Gaurinath Master, Ramkishore felt a quiet certainty arise in his heart. He must visit the old teacher. He would speak his heart out—lay bare all the knots within—and listen in turn to the master's thoughts. He wanted to weigh those thoughts, to discern which were useful for his own life and which were not.

After all, he too was a graduate, not entirely unworthy of learning from a man who had never even stepped into a college himself.

Thus resolved, Ramkishore decided he would go to him that very evening—sit beside him, speak openly, and ask: "What should I do with my life now?"

And from the moment this decision settled in his heart, his mind grew attentive, beginning to unravel each tangled thread of his life one by one—carefully thinking through which matters were timely, and how best to present them.

The sun had set. By now, most of the tangled thoughts in Ramkishore's mind had begun to stir and take shape. A realisation struck him—his ideas so far had emerged solely from within, guided by his own experience, shaped by the thinking he had carried until now. But once he began speaking with Gaurinath Master, surely some of those thoughts would begin to unravel. Answers might emerge of their own accord, and new insights too—

unexpected, perhaps, but clear and useful—could come to light during the conversation.

Without saying anything to the rest of the family, Ramkishore turned to his wife and said,

“I’m going to Gaurinath Master’s home. We might talk for a while, so if I’m late, don’t worry.”

Just as calmly, his wife replied, “Don’t be out too long. It’s already dusk, so try to come back in time.”

Hearing this, Ramkishore left without another word, rising quietly from the doorstep.

Gaurinath Master had three sons and two daughters. The daughters were married and lived with their in-laws, but each had two children—a son and a daughter—whom Gaurinath had brought to live with him and whom he supported and sent to school. All four were now studying in high school.

The eldest son, Shobhit, still lived in the village and looked after the land, household affairs, and the various social and familial duties. The two younger sons lived away with their own families.

That evening, Gaurinath Master was sitting on the wide wooden platform at the entrance of his house, chatting with Shobhit. A thick, comfortable mat had been spread out, large enough for seven or eight people to sit with ease.

Ramkishore arrived just then and, folding his hands, said, "Pranam, Kaka."

Gaurinath Master looked up with warmth and replied, "Come, come, Ramkishore."

He gestured to the seat beside him, inviting him to sit. "How is your family doing, Ramkishore?" he asked gently. Ramkishore answered, "The family is doing well, but I am not."

A flicker of thought stirred in Gaurinath Master's mind—a subtle dissonance. Was Ramkishore now seeing himself as separate from his own family? But he didn't say anything aloud. Instead, he replied with measured calm, "A family is still a family. Not everyone in it is the same, nor is everyone's life painted in the same hue. Even within a family, there are shades and textures, all kinds of lives being lived."

Listening to Gaurinath Master's words, Ramkishore reflected within himself: the evening was slipping away, and slowly the night would take over. It would be wise to steer the conversation toward the real reason he had come—otherwise, time would run out and the central matter would remain untouched. With this in mind, Ramkishore said, "Kaka, I came here to discuss something serious."

Hearing this, Gaurinath Master replied, "Then why don't

you tell me what's troubling you?"

Ramkishore began slowly, "Kaka, nothing I've thought or planned so far in life has ever succeeded. Now I fear that if this continues, my entire life will end up wasted."

Gaurinath Master pondered silently. The moment, he thought, was just right. When a person is absorbed in their thoughts, no matter how insightful someone else's words may be, they are rarely accepted. But when one's thinking begins to falter—when failure breeds restlessness—then the mind opens up to others. Ramkishore, he realised, was in that very state now: ready to listen.

He said gently,

"Ramkishore, you are not alone in your failures. Know this—most people in the world are struggling in the same way. The key is to understand yourself properly. Only then can you take steps in the right direction, and only then will hope begin to return to life."

These words sparked something in Ramkishore's heart—a stirring of new thought. He asked, "But how will that happen, Kaka?"

Gaurinath Master replied, "Ramkishore, most people are trapped in a habit—they constantly compare themselves with others. In doing so, they end up desiring things they don't even truly need. The world is vast—there are

countless good people, and just as many not-so-good ones. People often fail to grasp who they are. What's needed is a deep, honest understanding of oneself. When you begin to truly know who you are—your actions, your purpose—only then can you move forward in a new direction. And with that journey begins self-awareness. Once self-awareness is awakened, concentration follows. And the more focused you are in your thoughts and learning, the stronger your inner consciousness becomes. That is the first step toward true success.”

These words sowed in Ramkishore's mind a seed of thought he had never known before. The body is like the earth, after all. Just as the kind of seed you plant determines the kind of tree that will grow, so too do thoughts shape the course of a person's life.

Ramkishore asked earnestly,

“Kaka, but how do I understand this?”

Gaurinath Master answered with calm assurance,

“Ramkishore, each day of life, and every moment within it, is divine. The important thing is to recognise it. Ask yourself: what did I spend my day doing? How much of it was spent doing something new? How much was spent in mundane tasks, and how much in acts of meaning and purpose? That very measure is the ladder to success. The more time you devote to meaningful work, the closer

you move to a fulfilling life.”

Letting out a deep sigh, Ramkishore asked, “But Kaka, how do I measure it? How will I know the difference?”

Gaurinath Master smiled gently, pleased with Ramkishore’s eagerness to understand.

He said,

“Ramkishore, when you begin to feel content with your work—when a sense of joy arises from within—you will know you are climbing the ladder of success. Every moment of our lives, we are either succeeding or failing, though not everyone can see it. But when you develop the wisdom to sense it—to recognise success and failure in each step—that is when you begin to truly understand your journey. Then you’ll start to see how much success today has brought you, and how much still eludes you.” Still unable to fully grasp the depth of his mentor’s words, Ramkishore said softly, “Kaka, could you explain that a bit more clearly?”

Gaurinath Master responded with calm conviction:

“Ramkishore, stop looking outward at the world all day, as you and others often do. Look at those who walk forward with their eyes on their path—they carry on with their journey. But those who fix their gaze on the sky, or on someone else’s way, often stumble and fall. Only when you walk while recognising and understanding

yourself will your steps be steady—neither stumbling nor hurt.”

“You already know,” he continued, “and everyone does, that within the human body dwell the mind, the intellect, the conscience, and the soul. When your actions and your thoughts are guided by these—when your focus stays attuned to them—you will begin to feel a sense of contentment. That contentment is true success. When you start living this way, your abilities will grow, and your inner joy will begin to blossom. Until that comes, there will always be a restless desire to receive something from someone else. But asking for things from others is not nearly as virtuous as being able to give.”

He paused briefly, then added, “Everyone knows—and so do you—that the bhajan says, ‘Bhikhari saari duniya, daata ek Ram’—‘The whole world is a beggar, only Ram is the giver.’ But who is this ‘Ram’? The Ram people imagine outside themselves is an illusion. Your soul is your Ram. And what is that soul? It is your righteous thoughts, your righteous deeds. That is your true self.”

Listening to these profound words, Ramkishore exhaled a long, deep breath. As he did, something within him shifted—as though a fog had lifted. Like the soft emergence of moonlight after a night of complete darkness, a new clarity began to illuminate his mind. He

felt himself gently getting lost in that light—within himself. On one side, a quiet fulfilment began to grow, and on the other, the realisation dawned: there is another world beyond the one he had known until now, and its inhabitants are of a different kind altogether.

Ramkishore whispered, “Kaka, it feels as though everything in my mind has dissolved... like the entire space within has emptied itself, completely.”

Gaurinath Master observed him in silence, reflecting: Ramkishore is not alone. Many in society carry minds filled with garbage—unworthy thoughts piled upon one another. Society itself spends its days scattering such refuse, and the unknowing, the unaware, embrace it, following blindly, becoming ever more directionless.

He thought further—we come to this world in human form, and yet we wait all our lives, hoping that “if God blesses me, I’ll receive this or that.” But what is that except delusion? Has God not already blessed us by giving us a human body and placing us on this earth?

At that moment, Ramkishore spoke again,

“Kaka, my mind seems to be caught in worry all day long. As soon as one concern fades, another one takes its place.”

Hearing Ramkishore’s concern, Gaurinath Master began to reflect silently. It became clear to him that

Ramkishore's predicament wasn't unique—such struggles defined the lives of most people. This, perhaps, was what one would call ordinary life. But then, there exists another dimension of living—a life beyond the ordinary, a special life, distinguished by clarity of purpose.

Becoming more contemplative, Gaurinath Master said, "Ramkishore, just as you spoke of 'chintā' (worry), there is also 'chintan' (contemplation)."

Ramkishore was familiar with both words, but he had never reflected on the difference between them. To him, they had always seemed interchangeable. But hearing them now from the Master's lips awakened a curiosity within. So, he asked, "Kaka, could you please explain the difference between 'chintā' and 'chintan'—clearly, in simple terms?"

Gaurinath Master replied, "Ramkishore, aimless thinking without purpose or planning is chintā—worry. But structured, goal-oriented thought—that is chintan—contemplation. When the mind is pulled along by chaotic and random thoughts, it becomes the breeding ground for anxiety. But when you think in alignment with a life-purpose, thoughtfully and intentionally, that is chintan." "But," he continued, "the same action can manifest either as worry or as contemplation—it all depends on the intent and clarity behind it."

Ramkishore still felt uncertain. "Kaka, can you explain it more clearly?"

Gaurinath Master smiled and said,

"You know the stories of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, don't you?"

Ramkishore nodded, "Yes, of course."

"Then first consider the Mahabharata, "the Master continued. "In the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, millions died. Arjuna, one of the Pandava warriors, killed thousands of soldiers."

Ramkishore said, "Yes, Arjuna killed so many."

Gaurinath Master said,

"You also know that if a person kills even one innocent being, they are bound for hell. So how did Arjuna, despite all the bloodshed, ascend to heaven? This is the subtle distinction between *chintā* and *chintan*. To understand when contemplation becomes worry, and when worry transforms into purposeful contemplation—that subtlety must be grasped."

A new light seemed to rise in Ramkishore's mind—like a lamp lit within the darkness, dispelling the sorrow that had long weighed him down. His heart bloomed, soft and vibrant, like the eyes of a lotus opening to light. He said eagerly,

"Kaka, you also mentioned the Ramayana?"

“Yes, “replied the Master.

“Ramkishore, Lord Ram’s greatest devotee was Hanuman. He, too, caused immense destruction in Lanka, killed countless demons. Yet no one sees him as a murderer. Why? That is the difference between mindless destruction and righteous action—that is chintan, not chintā. If you truly love your life, then try to understand yourself. A human being possesses even more potential than the gods. It is said that the gods long to be born as humans—for such is the divine power of this form.”

The Changing Course of Society

My elder brother, Raghuveer, was born in the year 1942. He is older than me by two months, and I, two months younger than him. Naturally, then, the state of society before that year is something I could never have witnessed with my own eyes. What I did not see, I will not speak of. I have only heard of those times from the mouths of others or read about them in books. Hence, my reflections shall begin not from the unseen past, but from the moment I opened my eyes to this world—from the time I began to observe and understand life around me.

Call it a blessing or a moment carved by history's own hands, but in the long course of human civilisation—and especially within our country—never before, nor even now, has such a vast multitude of people stood united in patriotic fervour. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the movement against British rule ignited a flame of freedom that engulfed the nation. How common men and women rose in rebellion, ready to embrace death in pursuit of independence, was not only extraordinary for India but unparalleled in the annals of world history.

Though the struggle had begun long before 1942, when that year arrived, it took on a new, thunderous intensity. It was as if the spirit of freedom surged through every heart—each citizen was ready to place not just their life, but everything they owned and believed in, on the altar of sacrifice. Village after village refused to cooperate with British authorities. As a result, thousands were imprisoned, many were exiled to the dreaded Cellular Jail, others were hanged, and countless families lost their homes, wealth, and livelihoods. Entire villages were reduced to ashes.

After returning from South Africa, Gandhiji travelled across the land, awakening a slumbering nation. He stirred such a consciousness among the people that not one, but lakhs stood tall, grasping the cause of freedom with both hands and carrying it forward with unwavering courage. By 1942, several political parties had already emerged, led by enlightened and dedicated patriots. Though their ideologies may have differed, their goal was singular and united: to overthrow British rule. This unity was the nation's true strength, and it was this strength that ultimately shattered the chains of colonial domination and restored governance to the hands of the Indian people.

The India that we see today was not the India of those

times. Back then, the country was ruled not only by the British but also by numerous kings, princes, and feudal landlords. Each ruled over their dominion as they pleased. But with the fall of British imperialism came the end of their reign as well.

The social order of our country has never been uniform—neither in the past, nor now. Each state and its people follow their customs, their own systems, their own ways of being. In the past, along with kings and landlords, there were religious heads and their sprawling monastic establishments—and even today, in one form or another, they remain. The people of this land have always been divided along lines of caste and creed—divisions so deep and contradictory that conflicts between castes and sects have continued to erupt from time to time, like tremors under a seemingly calm earth.

Today is Diwali—the day of both Kali and Lakshmi worship. Around seven in the morning, I reached Raghuveer Bhaiya's front porch. He was sitting there, sipping his tea, quietly calculating the days of his life. As he reflected, he realised he had reached the age of eighty-three. And the realisation slipped from his lips unprompted:

“In today's times, simply reaching the age of eighty-three is itself a success in life.”

He continued, "Look around—children barely ten or twelve years old are chewing intoxicants like 'Shikhar Parag', abandoning their studies, and wasting their days glued to mobile screens. What future can one hope for when this is the practice from such an early age?"

Just then, I approached his veranda. Seeing me, Bhaiya smiled and said, "How are you, Ravi?"

I replied, "All is well. Today is Diwali, so I came to offer you my heartfelt greetings."

He responded with warmth,

"You've come to offer your wishes—then you must take mine as well. Let's share our blessings. Come, have some tea first—then we'll chat."

Just then, his granddaughter Rohini arrived with a cup of tea, handed it to me, and slipped back into the courtyard. After a few sips, I said—

"Bhaiya, among the two of us—age-wise—there's probably no one left in the village now."

At my words, Bhaiya turned his gaze toward the village. He looked long and hard, but not a single familiar face came into view. He quietly responded, "Yes... no one remains."

As he spoke, I could sense he was reflecting internally—remembering that though he may not be a year older than me, he is a few months my senior. From our earliest

days, we had lived side by side in the same village, the same neighbourhood. But back then, education was neither well-structured nor well-regarded. No one placed much value on it, and so, we never truly studied.

As a memory from childhood stirred in his heart, Bhaiya looked off into the distance and said—

“Ravi, where has that world gone? That time, when we were children—what was it then, and what is it now? What are we even witnessing today?”

“You’re no child anymore either,” I said. “Just as Raghuv eer Bhaiya has reached the age of eighty-three, so have you.”

Then I added—

“Bhaiya, the world is ever-changing. There’s always some shift, some transformation unfolding over time. Don’t you remember how we used to pluck mangoes from the orchards?”

He nodded, a soft recognition lighting his face.

“Ravi,” he said, “this is the same Kamalpur village, where over half the land once belonged to the zamindari of Pahipatti. The remaining, smaller portion of land was shared by hundreds of families. Only three families had more than twenty bighas of land. The rest owned much less—fifteen bighas, maybe twelve, some ten or even less. And beyond them, there were more than half the

families who either had just a hut to call home or nothing at all. These people worked in others' fields, and once every year, after planting the paddy, they'd set off towards the east—Morong, Assam, Bengal—in search of labour. They'd spend three to four months cutting jute, planting paddy, toiling under other skies, and return with whatever little they earned. That money was used to arrange the weddings of their children or to manage the bare necessities of the household. This—this was the life of Kamalpur's people in those days."

Just as Raghuveer Bhaiya had a clear sense of life before the country's independence, so did I. I said, "Bhaiya, in those days, there wasn't even a single borewell in the village to irrigate the fields. Nor was there any hand pump to fetch drinking water. I still remember how the poor would sow ragi (madua) just above the waterline near the village ponds, carving small beds along the muddy banks to grow what they could. Kamalpur had eight ponds and some twenty-five or twenty-six wells, but most of them would dry up by the months of Baisakh and Jeth, leaving the village in a state of water crisis." As I spoke, something flickered in Bhaiya's memory. He interrupted gently—

"Ravi, that's not all. There were only a few lucky years when the rainfall was just right—not too much, not too

little. Otherwise, it was either a year-long drought or such torrential rain that the fields would drown. The lives of the villagers were constantly thrown into turmoil.”

As our conversation deepened, the memories of pre-independence life—of the days before 1947—began surfacing in waves. One such memory was the merciless confiscation of land from farmers. The moment it came to mind, I said— “Bhaiya, we must bow to Subhash Babu, and to the communist and socialist political parties that, after 1934, redirected the course of our freedom movement. You see, landlords used to auction off farmers’ lands simply because they failed to pay land taxes or rent—malguzari—for a couple of years. One or two years might go ignored, but by the third year, the land would be seized. The farmers lost their holdings, and the land passed into the landlords’ hands. It was the socialist movement that stood against this injustice. That movement grew until, finally, after 1947, it faded away.”

I was still reflecting on the injustice of land dispossession when Raghuveer Bhaiya’s voice stirred the air—

“Ravi, just as you’ve seen it, I too have witnessed the same. But memories fade, don’t they? What we once saw and heard, we sometimes forget. That’s why I remind you.”

Then he added— “You’ve seen how, in our village—Kamalpur—there’s very little high land and much low-lying land. Isn’t that so?”

I nodded, “Yes, Bhaiya—not just you and I, but everyone in the village sees it. And even those from other villages notice it.”

Finding his thoughts affirmed, Bhaiya continued— “High ground—the kind used to build homes, the residential land—is scarce, which is why the settlement here is tightly packed. Many castes have lived in our village, not just now but for generations. That’s why, unlike other villages, Kamalpur has no segregated hamlets, no divisions of caste into separate quarters. And what’s more, our village is richer in caste diversity than most. There are villages where only one caste lives; some may have two or three. But not here. We have upper castes—Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars—alongside backwards castes—Yadavs, Mandals, Mahtos, Kamatis, Rais—and then those labelled as Harijans—Paswans, Rams, Sadais. That’s just the Hindu population. Among Muslims, too, we have Jolaha, Dhuniya, Kujra, Sheikhs and more. I’ve seen villages that have no Muslims at all. And in Mithilanchal, there are even entire villages populated solely by Muslims, where not a single Hindu resides. But our village, Kamalpur, is not one of them. It is a village woven with

diversity.”

Having seen all this with my own eyes, I could not help but respond— “Yes, that’s exactly how it is.”

Raghuveer Bhaiya continued, “Just as we have many castes here, we also have many places of worship. You’ve surely seen them—two temples of Mahadev, one of Radha-Krishna, one for Lord Hanuman, and even a shrine to Dharamraja. And there is a mosque as well. Everyone worships peacefully in their place of faith.”

I replied— “Yes, Bhaiya, it’s not something new. I’ve been seeing this since the time I first became aware of the world.”

Agreeing with Raghuveer Bhaiya’s reflection, I offered my thoughts. But like a seasoned chess player anticipating the next move, he continued—

“Just as I have turned eighty-three or eighty-four, so have you. Tell me, Ravi—have you ever seen such tension between Hindus and Muslims as we see today?”

Had I seen such a time, I would have surely spoken of it. But I had not—so I replied, “No, Bhaiya, I’ve never seen such a thing.”

Then, making another precise move in thought, he asked— “And isn’t it true that whenever Hindu families faced hardships, they went to the mosque and offered their prayers, placed their hopes before Allah?”

This, too, I had witnessed.

“Yes, Bhaiya, “I said, “not just now, I’ve seen it all my life. Even today, it continues. Just as Hindu families make vows at the mosque, I’ve seen Muslims come to the banks of the pond during Chhath Puja with their baskets, offering reverence to Chhathi Maiya. Whether their wishes are fulfilled or not, only they know—but I’ve seen them place their offerings with my own eyes.”

Nodding in agreement, Bhaiya said, “Well, that speaks to festivals. But now, think about dress and attire. Haven’t you noticed how much our clothing customs have changed?”

Though I knew it, I hadn’t consciously thought of it in that moment, so I remained silent—lost in reflection. Observing my silence, he continued— “I’m not even speaking about other communities right now—just ours. Haven’t you always seen that in our village, Hindu men wore dhotis, and the women wore sarees? And likewise, among Muslims too, men wore dhotis and the women sarees as well?”

His words struck me—something awakened in my heart. He was right. Since the day I became aware of the world, this is what I have seen.

“Yes, Bhaiya, “I said, “we’ve seen this forever.”

He smiled and added, “Today, the times have changed.

Just as young Hindu men have begun wearing pants and shirts, Muslim men now wear pyjamas and lungis, and their women wear kurtis with pyjamas."

*I was seeing this very change around me, so I responded—
"Yes, Bhaiya, I see it too."*

Bhaiya took the thread further—

"When the country became independent and elections began after 1952, political workers started mobilising votes based on caste divisions. Over time, this turned into a rivalry. Castes began to see each other as enemies. And thus began the disintegration of our social fabric. Today, the situation has become so dire that people see one another as foes without any real reason. In villages where one caste holds a majority, it begins to dominate those of lesser numbers. Even temples and mosques have become flashpoints of conflict. Life has become a burden."

Listening to him and watching our society's unravelling, my heart too acknowledged this painful truth. Yet, this is the village where we live, where our ancestors have lived for generations. I asked— "Bhaiya, then what is to be done?"

He replied—

"Ravi, man is forgetting the essence of his humanity. That is why we must reawaken that essence—kindle love

and brotherhood between people. The moment we revive our human compassion, the day we place humanity at the centre of our thinking, every problem will begin to solve itself. And the society will once again move toward progress.”

A Sudden Turn of Thought

It was the second evening. Rohit Bhaiya sat on the veranda, reading from Bijak—Kabir's cryptic verses on the origin of the cosmos. His mobile lay beside him on the wooden cot, while the radio played softly on the tiled rooftop. It wasn't yet half past seven, so the airwaves were filled with a program on farming.

Suddenly, the phone rang.

Hearing the ringtone, Rohit Bhaiya closed the book and placed it face down on the cot. He picked up the phone and glanced at the number—unfamiliar. Thinking someone might have mistakenly acquired his contact, he set the phone aside. But just as he reached again for Bijak, the ringtone echoed once more.

He paused, set the book down again, and picked up the phone—same number.

A thought flickered—perhaps it's someone unknown, but with a genuine reason. After all, strangers do become acquaintances. And sometimes, those we once called familiar fade into unfamiliarity. What we call 'relationships' are often only as deep as the thoughts that bind or sever them. When thoughts clash, even the

known becomes unknowable. Thought, indeed, is the root of every bond.

Resigned, he answered the call— “Hello?”

A voice came instantly— “Pranam, Chachaji! This is Sheela speaking.”

The name caught him off guard. ‘Sheela’—the name didn’t ring a bell. Yet the respectful greeting, ‘Chachaji’, carried a certain closeness. Confused, he asked— “Sheela? Which Sheela?”

She replied warmly—

“Chachaji, I’m Anoop’s daughter.”

Hearing Anoop’s name, memories stirred. Of course, Anoop was from his village. But even so, Rohit Bhaiya had never directly spoken to Sheela. Yes, he had heard from his son, Manesar, that Sheela had begun to dabble in the world of literature. She had no formal degrees, no certificates, but a love for literature had led her to read, and now, even to write.

His memory sharpened.

“Ah, yes, now I vaguely remember. Tell me, what’s the matter?”

Sheela responded— “Chachaji, there’s a literary event happening in Bangalore. You’ve been invited—and so have I.”

Even without knowing much more, Rohit Bhaiya smiled

and said— “That’s wonderful! Truly, it’s a matter of pride for our village to have so many lovers of literature in one place. But tell me—how did the event end up in Bangalore?”

Although Rohit Bhaiya already had a clear understanding of the situation—he knew well that many young men from Mithila, driven by unemployment, had migrated to Bengaluru for work. These very youths had come together to form an organisation there called “Mithila Vikas Manch.” Every year, they hosted a grand three-day cultural event.

During this event, the Mithila diaspora in Bengaluru took leave from their workplaces and dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to the celebration and promotion of their language and literature. The program was well-organised, dignified, and inclusive.

They invited dozens of literary and music enthusiasts from Mithilanchal, taking full responsibility for their accommodation, travel expenses, food, and even sending them off with honour.

Even in culinary arrangements, their thoughtfulness was admirable. Over three days, they served—one day of pure traditional Mithila cuisine, one day of authentic local Bengaluru dishes, and one day of a blended menu representing both cultures. Guests often appreciated this

symbolic gesture, noting how people from one region living in another inevitably face differences—but when one's life and livelihood are tied to that new land, harmony between the two cultures becomes not just necessary, but beautiful.

Sheela said, "Chachaji, according to the schedule, we're expected to reach a day before the event begins."

Hearing this, Rohit Bhaiya reflected silently. It was indeed a long journey. Trains from Darbhanga to Bengaluru ran only three times a week. Reaching a day early made sense.

He said, "I haven't booked the ticket yet."

To this, Sheela replied, "That's why I called, Chachaji. I was hoping we could book our tickets together—and travel together as well."

Rohit Bhaiya responded— "Manesar is going too. I've already asked him to arrange the tickets. Let me speak to him first."

Sheela reassured him— "I already spoke to Manesar. He told me to confirm it with you first."

Rohit Bhaiya answered calmly—

"Since I've already told the organisers in Bengaluru that I'll be attending, I suppose there's no question—I must go."

Sheela said, "Then I'll speak to Manesar and get the

tickets done today itself.”

As he set the phone down, Rohit Bhaiya’s thoughts turned toward Sheela’s family.

Fifty years ago, there hadn’t just been differences between her father, Anoop, and Rohit Bhaiya—there had been an open rivalry, a conflict so intense that people in the village referred to it as a “buffalo battle”—a prolonged, embittered feud.

At the time that hostility began, Anoop must have been in his early forties, while Rohit Bhaiya was a mere twenty-two. He was still studying in college, while Anoop held considerable power—he was the head of their village’s Pirarpur Panchayat, and not just that—he was also the Block Chief of the wider Kusumpur Block, comprising twenty-eight panchayats.

Back then, the idea of timely elections was more myth than reality. Though elections were meant to be held every three or five years, in practice they could be delayed—sometimes for fifteen, even twenty years.

But then... all that now belonged to the past.

During the time Anoop served as the head of the Panchayat, the structure of village life was starkly different from what it is today. Society back then was still entangled in feudal threads. India had barely gained its independence, and the scars of colonial poverty ran

deep. Most village households could not afford to light their stoves even twice a day.

On one hand, there was the pride of newfound freedom; on the other, a crushing poverty engulfed the land.

Though India was hailed as a nation of farmers, the farmers themselves were bereft of tools, knowledge, and innovation. There were no modern techniques, no agricultural training. And nature too seemed ruthless—floods and droughts alternated with cruel regularity.

Sustainable irrigation was a dream, with agriculture entirely dependent on the whims of the monsoon. If one year brought torrential rains, floods would wash away entire harvests. If the rains failed, the parched earth would crack under drought.

Yes, there were rare years of perfect balance—when rainfall was just enough, and crops flourished beyond expectation.

In those days, fields were still measured using the traditional six-and-a-half hand long pole called a lagga—and they still are in some places. One lagga in length and one in breadth made a dhur, and twenty dhur made one kattha—then and now.

Though the official land surveys between 1880 and 1900 adopted units like decimal and acre, the rural customs remained tied to dhur-kattha.

If a farmer yielded one man of paddy in a kattha, it was considered a good harvest.

Grains were weighed in raw units like seer, adhaiya, and pasaeri—less precise, but accepted. These raw measures were larger than the standardised pukka measures by nearly one-and-a-half times. Yet in villages, only the raw units prevailed. Labourers were paid in raw seers, harvests were measured in them, and it was only much later that kilograms made their way into rural markets.

Even currency mirrored this pattern of change. Four paise made an aana, and sixteen aana made a rupee—that later transitioned into the decimal-based hundred paise system.

Traditional units like kanma, paowa, seer, and pasaeri once governed the rural economy.

But all that, as they say, is part of a bygone world.

Back then, with no tools and no technical knowledge, farming remained modest in yield. Compared to Japan—where per-acre yields were at least fifty to two hundred men, measured with precision—Indian agriculture lagged far behind. The same was true for Germany.

Then came the 1970s—the eighth decade of the 20th century—ushering in the Green Revolution. New, high-yield seeds were introduced—grains, fruits, and vegetables. Irrigation systems like boring wells and pump

sets reached the farmer's hand. Gates were constructed on the Kosi River, and canals were planned across both its eastern and western banks.

Yet, despite all the promise, many of these grand projects remained as incomplete as they were at conception.

It wasn't until the 1980s that India truly began to shed its dependence on foreign grain. Slowly, the Indian farmer became self-sufficient.

Still, poverty lingered.

Farmers and labourers across villages remained trapped under the weight of debt. Many poor villagers, tied to the soil, continued to migrate to places like Punjab and Calcutta in search of a livelihood.

At that time, village society still functioned under a feudal framework. People in every village—including this one—were divided by caste, as they still are today. Between these castes were intermediaries called *mainjan-dewan*, who would intervene in matters like marriages, funerals, and other social rituals.

Anoop, the *mukhiya* (head) of Pirarpur Panchayat, too, operated according to that feudal order. His governance was naturally tilted against the common people.

After completing his college education, when Rohit Bhaiya returned to the village and saw the plight of its people, a fire awakened within him. He realised that

unless the external landlords and the exploitative moneylenders were removed from the village, there could be no true reform.

But how could such a change come about?

The villagers themselves would have to rise and resist. But saying that is easy.

Breaking a system so deeply rooted—established, and protected by the powerful—is no simple task.

Rohit Bhaiya possessed inner strength, yes, but to unite every individual, make them aware, gather them under a common cause, and have them rise against their condition—this was no child's play.

Worse still, the state machinery itself supported the very system he sought to challenge. The mukhiya, the panchayat, the landlords, the moneylenders—they were all one.

Yet Rohit Bhaiya did not stop.

He went from home to home in Pirarpur, helping people understand their problems, encouraging them to seek solutions together. He began organising the villagers—step by step, voice by voice.

And as he advanced, those once scattered and lost began to stand beside him. Slowly, solutions began to emerge. Yes, there were conflicts too—clashes, lathi charges, even legal battles.

But this wasn't just Pirarpur. Back then, what is now the Madhubani district was part of Darbhanga. And Pirarpur was not alone—dozens of villages were rising against the same feudal oppression. A quiet revolution was unfolding.

After Rohit Bhaiya agreed to go, Sheela called Manesar, his son.

Manesar already had an idea. He asked—

“What did Babuji say?”

Sheela replied—

“Chachaji said that since he's already given his word to the Bangalore organisers, he must go. There's no question now.”

Manesar asked—

“Are you going alone, or will someone from your family accompany you?”

Sheela smiled—

“You think you're someone else? When you and your father are both going, what more do I need?”

Hearing this, Manesar thought to himself: It's a long journey. At the very least, eight days will be spent in travel. Sheela may be from the same village, but she belongs to a different household. It would be better, he thought, if one more person accompanied her.

As he suggested this, Sheela agreed.

Twelve hours before the literary program in Bangalore was set to begin, Rohit Bhaiya, Manesar, Sheela, and her younger brother arrived at the station. A car awaited them—arranged by the organisers.

All four were taken to a hotel, where comfortable accommodations and meals had been arranged.

There were still four hours before the event. In the quiet space before the gathering, Sheela turned to Rohit Bhaiya and said—

“Chachaji, as long as you’re with us, will you...?”

Her unfinished sentence held a quiet plea.

Rohit Bhaiya responded—

“As long as I am able, I will help in every way I can. But...”

Sheela pressed—

“But what?”

A thought crossed Rohit Bhaiya’s mind: the past between our two families was not one of friendship, but of enmity. He said—

“How do we erase the bitterness that existed between our families?”

Sheela answered with calm conviction—

“Chachaji, neither is my father alive, nor is that time. It is we who live in the present. We must change our

thoughts with the times. That, Chachaji, is your responsibility—and mine.”

An Independent Spirit

During the holidays of Shivaratri, Dinanath returned to his village. The moment he stepped into Motipur, he noticed a strange buzz reverberating through the air. Here and there, small groups of villagers had gathered, whispering in low voices. Sensing the murmur of unrest, a question arose in Dinanath's mind—perhaps something unusual had occurred. Yet, with no clarity, it felt as if his thoughts were fumbling in the dark, like someone searching blindly for a snake in a pitch-black house.

Reaching home, he turned to his mother and asked, “Ma, has something happened to someone?”

Dinanath was a college student, studying for his B.A. He lived in a hostel, returning to the village only during festivals or vacations.

His mother replied, “Baua, Ramanand's son and Bahadur's daughter ran away last night.”

Dinanath knew them both. They were college students like him—Dinanath studied at C.M. College in Darbhanga, while Harihar and Aparajita were enrolled at Janata College in Jhanjharpur. All three commuted to their respective colleges from their homes. Just as Dinanath

was in B.A., so too were Harihar and Aparajita.

They belonged to different castes. Though caste boundaries still lingered in society, certain occasions—like Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, and other festivities—brought people together. During such events, caste-based discrimination did not entirely vanish, but its intensity would fade. People worked in harmony. Yet when it came to funerals or marriage rituals, caste barriers would resurface with renewed strength.

Indeed, caste restrictions have historically defined marital alliances. Though recent social winds suggest that once individuals turn eighteen, they may choose their partners freely, even lawfully, caste continues to cast a shadow on these unions. Legal statutes exist, but social mindsets remain unchanged.

This was not a new phenomenon. In earlier times, too, powerful men often married women from weaker castes—and sometimes, even imposed their will forcefully. The difference lies in consent; some unions were mutual, while others occurred under coercion.

Harihar and Aparajita were both beyond eighteen, yet unaware of the brutal realities' caste prejudice could bring. Being college-goers, they had developed a sense of personal freedom, and with it, the belief in one's right to choose one's path. They decided to marry in court,

thereby ensuring legal protection and social legitimacy. Harihar belonged to a numerically dominant but socially and economically marginalised caste. Aparajita, on the other hand, came from a community in Motipur that enjoyed long-standing dominance—both in wealth and social stature.

By dawn, whispers had begun to spread through the village—Harihar and Aparajita had left home together during the night. No one in Aparajita's family had gone looking for her, for it was quite usual for her to visit Harihar's home, be it day or night. Both families and the villagers had grown accustomed to seeing them as classmates and companions.

As the sun rose, people from both castes started gathering. Harihar's community, which until recently saw itself as socially backwards and marginalised, had begun to experience a subtle awakening, ignited by external exposure. Just a few years ago, around 80 to 90 per cent of the families in Harihar's caste worked as landless labourers. Only a handful owned any land.

But over the past decade, as people from neighbouring villages ventured out for work, so did the people of Motipur. They sought jobs, earned money, and slowly their economic condition began to improve. Education grew, new homes were built, and with that came a

renewed sense of self-worth and awareness.

In terms of numbers, Harihar's community had now overtaken Aparajita's. Earlier, poverty had rendered them silent in societal affairs, but now, with external income and exposure, they were starting to assert their equal status within the village.

The old structure—where power rested with a few dominant castes and landlords despite their smaller numbers—had started crumbling after India's independence. A new wave of marginalised castes began rising, awakening from their historical suppression.

Hearing his mother's words, Dinanath remained silent. He did not reply, for he felt a deep sense of discomfort, even shame. Quietly, he walked away, thinking that if he now asked anyone anything about the matter, he might instantly be labelled a supporter of one group or the other. The village society had already fractured—both on caste lines and on ideological grounds.

Caste in the village followed a numeric order—like ranks: 1, 2, 3, and so on. The highest caste, followed by the slightly lower, and then lower still, had created a rigid hierarchy that divided society. Furthermore, religious communities added another layer of separation—some shared practices, some unique and distinct.

Dinanath's extended family came from a lineage of four

brothers. One of them was his father, Raghunath; the others had their branches. Together, the descendants now formed a household of over fifty people.

Wanting guidance from the most respected elder, Dinanath approached his granduncle, Rudradev Baba, who was now over eighty years old. Rudradev Baba was sitting by the door, sipping tea. Though his eyesight had weakened, he was not blind—he managed with spectacles.

Walking up respectfully, Dinanath said,

“Baba, I’m Dinanath, “

and touched his feet.

By traditional village decorum, Rudradev Baba did not ask him about tea or welcome. He simply gave him a blessing and asked—

“Baua, how is your education going?”

Dinanath said, “Baba, the way teaching used to happen in schools and colleges in your time—well, things have changed a lot now. But whatever it has become, let’s just call it progress.”

Rudradev Baba asked, “When did you come?”

Dinanath replied, “Baba, I arrived last night itself, but there were some errands to take care of, so I couldn’t come home right away. I left early this morning and reached home about an hour ago.”

Rudradev Baba nodded and said, “Son, study with full focus. You must see that it's the era of competition now—whoever works harder will find greater success.”

Dinanath responded, “As far as I know, I am studying sincerely. But only those who have influence seem to get good results. I don't have any such ‘reach’, so I can't expect much. If I manage to simply pass, that would be enough.”

Agreeing with his perspective, Rudradev said, “Yes, that's true. But don't ever lose your courage. And, what else is new?”

Dinanath said, “Everything's alright, Baba. But I've come to ask you something.”

Rudradev replied, “Go ahead. What is it that you want to ask?”

Dinanath: “This recent incident in the village—Harihar and Aparajita running away from home—what is your opinion on that?”

Instead of answering directly, Rudradev turned the question back to him—

“Son, what do you think about it?”

Dinanath said, “Baba, since both Harihar and Aparajita are now adults—over eighteen years of age—they have, under the law, the right to make choices about their own lives.”

He spoke with hints and suggestions, but his meaning was clear, and Rudradev Baba understood. Yet, his mind carried the long memory of society's traditional history, and so, rather than replying bluntly, he said—

“Son, what's happened between Harihar and Aparajita isn't anything new. Such things have happened in secret forever. But here's the difference—if a boy from an upper caste is involved with a girl from a lower caste, society turns a blind eye. But if it's the other way around—a lower caste boy and an upper caste girl—then it becomes a matter of prestige, and people are ready to commit the worst of crimes in the name of honour. Now, you tell me—what's the right path in such a situation?”

Dinanath, a straightforward young man still trying to make sense of society's twisted logic, said, “Baba, wouldn't it be better if society simply accepted their relationship?”

Rudradev Baba responded, “Your thought will only find space in society when free individuals are truly formed.” Hearing the phrase ‘free individuals’, Dinanath's curiosity deepened.

He asked, “How can that happen?”

Rudradev Baba said, “My child, when a baby is born, it isn't educated. As days pass, knowledge begins to seep in. A child, in its innocence, neither knows nature nor

society, nor its workings. The society you see today is moulded by some ideology or the other. Whether that ideology is noble or flawed, if we begin to discuss that now, we will drift away from the subject. So, let's leave that aside for another time."

Dinānāth said, "Yes, let's leave that discussion for later. Please speak only of the subject at hand now."

Rudradev Baba continued, "A child lives purely in the present. It has no memory of the past nor any vision of the future. Its knowledge is incomplete, confined to the moment. But as familial and social interactions grow, so does awareness of the past and imagination of the future. The child learns from its environment, from its circumstances, from others—be it teachers or peers.

The true goal of education should be to shape an independent personality. Sadly, this does not happen under our current systems."

Dinānāth: "How does one shape an independent personality?"

Rudradev Baba: "Every human has desires, interests. The senses respond to these and create urges. Without desire, no one acts. Just as hunger leads one to eat, and thirst compels one to drink, so too do interests and desires combine to form deep longings that stir action. These stirrings—this tendency—are the basis of independent

personality.

An independent personality can evaluate and decide whether to accept or reject these sensory and emotional demands. If the demand is justified, accept it. If not, reject it. The ability to reason thus, to discern—this is what creates an independent self. Education should aspire to build that.”

Dinānāth: “Please explain in simpler words, Baba.”

Rudradev Baba: “The first and foremost requirement for an independent personality is shakti—power. That is why, in our culture, power is worshipped. But this isn’t some external force—it is the latent strength within us, waiting to be awakened. The education today only stimulates the intellect; it offers ideas, but does not awaken power.”

Dinānāth: “Then how is that power awakened?”

Rudradev Baba:

“Through experience. Experience ignites awareness, and with awareness, power arises. In spiritual terms, it is called the awakening of prāṇa-shakti—the life-force. Once this develops, so too do the forces of desire, resolution, and concentration.

In the yogic view, there are three important centres in the body:

Prāṇa centre – at the tip of the nose

Vision centre – between the eyebrows, the seat of insight
Light centre – the core of discipline.”

Dinānāth: “Please explain more clearly, Baba.”

Hearing Dinānāth’s eager question, a wave of contentment spread through Rudradev Baba’s heart. He thought to himself—perhaps Dinānāth is seeking the very depth that every human must one day find. And once that path is recognised and walked upon, the shaping of the independent self truly begins.

He said, “My child, when your soul genuinely longs to live a meaningful life, life will show you the way. But it is no fairy tale. It is the raw reality of existence. One must struggle to carve a real life. Without struggle, an independent personality can never be born.

Yes, it is possible—but only where a person’s life direction has changed. Here, in our place, that hasn’t happened. Here, since forever, the life path has been obstructed—often by others. That’s why lives here remain without direction.”

Taking a deep breath, Dinānāth asked, “Then what should be done?”

Rudradev Baba smiled and said, “My child, the sages and seers—why do you think they left society to live in caves and forests? They couldn’t find that quest answered amidst society.

Anyway, it's time now to bathe and eat. Let us continue another day. After all, you've only come home for Shivratri holidays."

Path to World Peace

Returning from school, Adouria said to his mother, “Maa, I’ll go to Guru Kaka’s house early tomorrow morning.”

Hearing the name ‘Guru Kaka,’ Aparajita began to wonder in her mind—Who is this, Guru Kaka?

Noticing her uncertainty, Adouria added, “You don’t recognise Guru Kaka?”

Aparajita replied, “I can’t recall just now.”

He clarified, “The one who lives in Uttarwari Tola.”

As soon as she heard the name ‘Uttarwari Tola,’ memory stirred in Aparajita.

“Ah! Yes, now I remember.”

Meanwhile, Aparajita stepped onto the machaan (raised platform) near the garden, picked a fresh sajmain (seasonal herb), broke off about two seers of corn, and pulled out a dozen radishes. Removing their tops and leaves, she washed them and placed them neatly in a bag along with the corn.

At dawn, after completing his morning routine, Adouria came to his mother and said, “Maa, I’m going to Guru Kaka’s place. I have a question to ask him. If I return late, I won’t go to school. But if I come back on time,

I'll attend school too."

Hearing this, Aparajita simply nodded without saying a word.

As Adouria was about to leave for Guru Kaka's house, Aparajita said, "Son, take this sajmain and this bag of radish and corn with you, and give it to Guru Kaka."

Though slightly confused by her request, Adouria hesitated. But his mother gently explained again: "Son, whenever you go to someone older or wiser to learn something, you should take a small offering."

What had long eluded Adouria now became clear.

He suddenly remembered what his father, Sukdev, had once said: "Son, in our time—and even before—when teachers weren't paid, students would offer Shanichara—a coin and a small measure of rice."

Adouria had once asked, "But why give them rice and money?"

Sukdev had replied, "If you gain knowledge from someone, you must also give something in return. Purely borrowed wisdom loses its true essence."

Back then, Adouria had heard but not understood.

Today, after seeing his mother's actions, the meaning clicked in an instant.

With a sajmain in one hand and the sack of produce slung over his shoulder, he set off toward Guru Kaka's

home.

As soon as he reached the gate, he caught sight of Guru Kaka and greeted him: "Touching your feet, Kaka. I've come to ask you a question."

Guru Kaka, looking down, gave his blessings. But when he saw the sack hanging on the boy's shoulder and the herb in his hand, his gaze lifted.

A wave of memory washed over him—the ancient tradition:

When you seek knowledge from someone, offer something in gratitude.

Hadn't Dronacharya asked for Eklavya's thumb?

At the same time, another thought crossed Guru Kaka's mind—If one accepts something in exchange for teaching, isn't that akin to selling?

Knowledge is meant to be given freely—a sacred offering. Only when it is shared without expectation can its sanctity remain.

Otherwise, it becomes a mere transaction.

Guru Kaka was still tangled in his thoughts when Adouria walked across the courtyard and reached the eastern veranda. There, he placed the jhola containing maize and radish along with the offering (sajmain) and said to Guru Kaka's wife:

"Auntie, here's a sajmain, and in this bag, there's some

maize and radish. Please accept it."

Hearing Adouria's words, Sarojini guessed silently that perhaps her husband had sent him. Without responding aloud, she simply took the items and kept them aside.

Reaching the threshold again, Adouria respectfully touched Guru Kaka's feet. Though Guru Kaka recognised him vaguely as a boy from the southern lane, he couldn't quite recall his name or family. Just as the saint Ramānanda had once unknowingly greeted Kabir with "Boy, chant the name of Ram, "so did Guru Kaka, blessing the boy:

"Stay blessed, my child. May all be well with you."

With a gentle gesture, he invited him to sit in front. Adouria, sitting down, said softly: "Kaka, I have come to ask you a question."

Listening to the child's humble voice, Guru Kaka thought to himself, "I don't fully know this boy. How can I give a meaningful answer to his question if I don't understand his background? The world is full of both right and wrong—what if I misjudge the nature of the question and give a poor answer?"

He resolved to first understand who the child was and asked:

"What is your name, son?"

In the candid tone of a village lad, Adouria replied:

"Kaka, at school I'm called Adourilal, my friends call me Adouri, and at home, my parents call me Adouria."

Guru Kaka asked again: "And your father's name?"

"Sukdev," the boy replied.

The name 'Sukdev' rang a bell immediately. Guru Kaka is now remembered. Sukdev from the southern lane had once tended a cow for him. As long as the cow gave milk, Sukdev's visits were regular. But when the cow grew old and died, the visits stopped too.

Now fully aware of the boy's lineage, Guru Kaka said warmly:

"So, what is the question, Adouri?"

Adourilal replied, eyes gleaming with anticipation:

"Kaka, there is a special event in school the day after tomorrow. The Minister of Education is coming. All our teachers and students will participate. There will be a symposium on the topic 'World Peace'. Teachers will speak, and a few students have also been given five minutes to present their thoughts. I'm one of them. That's why I've come to you—to seek your guidance on what to say."

Hearing Adaurilal's question, Guru Kaka began to reflect silently—"While the great minds are still struggling with this matter, the donkey asks how deep the water is!" A question that continues to puzzle the greatest scholars

of the world; what could this child understand about it? Yet, a voice within countered— if the Brahman and the universe are infinite, does it mean a child's mind is unworthy of even attempting to grasp them? After all, even a child learns by listening—at school, at home, from elders and teachers alike...

Guru Kaka asked, "Son, which class are you in?"

Adaurilal replied, "Ninth standard."

Hearing this, Guru Kaka thought—What capacity does he have at this age? Yet surely, even a seed contains the essence of a towering tree. Listening is one thing, understanding is another. He may not fully grasp the depth of the topic, but he has certainly heard of it. Everyone knows that knowledge has two forms—verbal and practical. First comes verbal understanding; when it is applied, it transforms into experiential knowledge—the truest form of knowing.

Guru Kaka asked—

"Do you understand that 'World' and 'Peace' are two separate words?"

Adaurilal, ever the straightforward soul, nodded. Not only was he naturally innocent as a child, but he also belonged to a household untouched by deceit—simple, honest, and transparent in both thought and action. Trickery only enters where hunger and lust overrule satisfaction and

where business trumps integrity.

He answered—

"Guru Kaka, our teacher, said each student has to speak for five minutes on 'World Peace'. That's why I came to ask you what I should say."

Guru Kaka smiled inwardly. The boy had understood just what he had heard from the teacher. He wasn't expected to grasp that when individuals themselves are riddled with unrest, speaking of global peace is hardly child's play. But if the hope Adaurilal carries is disappointed, he may feel dejected.

Guru Kaka asked—

"Who all will attend the program?"

Adaurilal said—

"The Honourable Education Minister will be the chief guest. All eleven teachers and students from all four classes will be there."

Now Guru Kaka pondered how much could be said in five minutes—a time barely sufficient to sip tea or relieve oneself. He said—

"Adaurilal, every speech begins with greetings, then the main topic, and finally a conclusion. So first, how will you greet them?"

Adaurilal responded— "Guru Kaka, the teacher had us write it from the board."

"What did he have you write?" — asked Guru Kaka.

Adaurilal took out a folded note from his pocket and began to read—

"Respected Honourable Education Minister, Government of Bihar. Respected Principal, Respected Ravindra Babu, Khushilal Babu, Kedar Babu, Vimal Babu, Rudrachandra Babu, Singheshwar Babu, Shubhkant Babu, and the gathered students..."

Hearing this lengthy address, Guru Kaka sighed inwardly—four out of five minutes would vanish in greetings alone. He added, "Son, add one more line: 'In today's world, unrest is the root of all human problems. Without inner peace, world peace remains an illusion.'"

As Adaurilal wrote this down, Guru Kaka felt a sense of relief—but then reconsidered. He needed to explain the essence of 'world peace' orally, lest the boy's understanding remain superficial.

He asked again— "Adaurilal, are you done, or do you want to add more?"

Guru Kaka's conscience cautioned him—not to overload the child with words he couldn't comprehend. Otherwise, the audience might assume he had copied it or gotten someone else to write it. It was better to let the written portion be and convey the deeper meaning in speech.

Adaurilal had no sense of time—how much could be said

in five minutes, he didn't know. Still, he felt unsatisfied and said—

"Please add a little more, Kaka."

His eagerness brought satisfaction, not annoyance, to Guru Kaka. Had he been avoiding work, that would be different. But curiosity lived in him, and that was heartening.

Smiling, Guru Kaka said—

"Son, first listen carefully to what I'm going to say. Later, you can add as much as you feel fit."

This thought came from Guru Kaka's experience—let the boy's curiosity be answered in full, but only as much as he can understand. No need to push heavy philosophical thoughts when he isn't ready to absorb them.

"Tell me, Kaka, "— Adaurilal prompted.

Guru Kaka asked, "What is the world? What does 'world' mean to you?"

Adaurilal replied—

"The world means the universe."

Guru Kaka chuckled inwardly. The boy simply repeated what he had heard from teachers and read in books. He did not yet know that the world is a combination of three essential principles—Brahman (Pure Knowledge), Jiva (Soul), and Maya (Illusion). Brahman is bliss, Jiva is consciousness, and Maya is action. Together, they form

the cosmos.

Similarly, peace arises when knowledge transforms into trust—only then does it manifest in the heart. That peace, when expanded, becomes true serenity.

Guru Kaka said, "Adaurilal, you don't have a watch? Look at the wall clock and read the speech you've prepared. See whether it fits in five minutes or not."

Obediently, Adaurilal began to read. Being a child, he stumbled here and there, but by the time he finished his rehearsed script, five minutes had already passed.

The Sound of Silence

It had been three days since I returned from Biratnagar, and yet I hadn't been able to meet Fachair Kaka. A tinge of doubt crept into my mind—perhaps he wasn't in the village, or maybe he wasn't well. Upon inquiring, I found out that he was very much in the village and in perfect health, too.

Back when I lived in the village—some ten years ago, before I moved to Biratnagar—we used to spend hours together. Almost daily, we would sit for an hour or two, chatting about everything: from personal matters to family affairs, social issues, and the greater world beyond. Those memories remain alive within me, as vivid and warm as ever.

But ever since I shifted to Biratnagar, my visits to the village have dwindled—barely twenty-five or thirty days in a year, and that too for some specific purpose. Most of the time is consumed in the very errands that bring me here. As a result, very little time remains for conversations with Fachair Kaka. Still, I've always tried to carve out what little time I could, just to hear his voice, to let his presence refresh my soul.

Fachair Kaka is considered the most talkative man in the village. Mention any topic, and he will start speaking nonstop, without a comma or period, with such flow that you'd lose track of whether he's answering your question or simply sharing the musings of his mind. He might go on about events from his in-laws' house—repeating them again and again. What's more, he had this curious trait, or flaw perhaps, of launching into conversation even when no one asked.

Some folks say Fachair Kaka mumbles to himself. Others claim he talks mostly nonsense. People can say what they will, but I never believed that.

He must be eighteen to twenty years older than I am, and my heart tells me that with those extra years, he's seen and suffered far more of the world than I have, so why would he speak untruth?

In short, men like Fachair Kaka don't belong to just any village—certainly not a humble place like Kisanepur. People like him exist in the folds of larger, livelier worlds. In the village, he is addressed in many ways—some call him Fachair Kaka, others Fachair Bhai, some even Fachair Baba. Whether through kinship or courtesy, people address him according to their bond. But everyone, without exception, calls him Fachair.

Though his real name is Raudilal, just as scripture-

keepers are called Pandit, and teachers are addressed as Masterji, his reputation as an endless talker earned him the name Fachair since his days in the lower primary school.

The community may have their ways, but I have always called him Fachair Kaka.

Even after three days in the village, when I still hadn't met him, my heart stirred with a peculiar restlessness—like a bird fluttering without a sense of direction. So today, I decided—firmly and clearly—that I would meet him.

While thinking so, a thought flashed—once, we met almost daily, several times a day even. I would spend hours simply listening to him talk. But now, after nearly a year without a word exchanged, how long would such a meeting take?

I concluded it would be best to visit in the evening. By then, it would be time to eat, to rest—an hour when even he might recognise it's time to pause.

Thus, with a quiet finality, I decided—this evening, I will meet Fachair Kaka.

Fachair Kaka's house lies about five bighas away from mine. One blessing was the full moon casting its silvery glow over the earth, and the other—the electric lights had turned even night into day. And with that, an

unexpected comfort came too: the dense clump of pakhar trees that once haunted the path with rumours of ghosts had now been felled.

The path was now clear—no fear, no hindrance.

It was the second evening since I'd arrived. I set off to visit Fachair Kaka. I had barely walked ten steps when I noticed someone approaching from ahead. The face seemed familiar, though I couldn't place it at first.

The person called out, "When did you return to the village, Gangaram?"

The voice reached my ears, and I instantly recognised him—it was Rajendra Bhai. I replied— "Just the day before yesterday. And how are things on your side, Rajendra Bhai?"

Rajendra Bhai answered— "All is well. But where are you headed this late?"

I said— "On my way to meet Fachair Kaka. And everything is fine with your family, your home?"

He responded— "Well, what can I say about the village, Gangaram? The ragi bread that people had long forgotten—now there's a full-blown celebration in its name! Just as gentlemen like to append a respectful 'Shri' before their names, now even 'Mandua' (ragi) is reclaiming its seat of honour with a 'Shri' before it!"

His words made me chuckle inwardly.

That humble grain—once the staple of the poor—is now finding its way onto the plates of the elite!

*Still, I kept my amusement to myself and simply said—
“Brother, don’t they say in the village: ‘Follow your fancy, but say the wife said it!’”*

He laughed and replied, “Exactly! Everyone’s their own master now. Whatever comes to their mind, they do—and say it aloud too!

Anyway, leave all that. So, you’re still living in Biratnagar, aren’t you?”

I said— “Yes.”

Rajendra Bhai went on— “In the old days, folks used to trek to Biratnagar just to harvest rice or jute. Some worked as labourers or petty traders there. There were no vehicles, no proper roads. People walked barefoot, mile after mile.

And now? There are all kinds of transport. Labourers are flying in planes—to Europe, to America, to the Arab world.

And you? Still rooted in Biratnagar?”

I replied— “Brother, you know me well—I’m a deeply religious man. How could I abandon a land of piety and move to some foreign, godless place?

Biratnagar is no ordinary city—it is a sacred land.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And how so?”

I said—“Brother, you haven’t seen it, that’s why you doubt it. Go there and look around—you’ll find shrines at every turn. Even banyan trees have red cloth tied around them, with people offering flowers and seeking blessings.

On roadsides too, you’ll find humble stones placed and worshipped like deities—with petals, incense, and devotion.

Now tell me—should I leave such a sacred land and chase employment in alien lands?

Would that be righteous for me?”

Rajendra Bhai said nothing. I sensed a tinge of unease in his demeanour. Of course, he stood there politely—how could he have just said, “I don’t want to hear your thoughts”?

Instead, in hurried tones, he said—

“Gangaram, I have an errand to run right now. If I’m late, things may get messed up. You go on and meet Fachair Kaka, and I’ll take my leave. We’ll talk in detail tomorrow.”

With that, I walked ahead.

Fachair Kaka was standing right at the threshold of his house. I approached and greeted him—

“Kaka, I touch your feet.”

Without uttering a word, he nodded his head in blessing

and motioned silently with his eyes for me to sit down. Something in his manner made me wonder if his health—of body or mind—was not quite well. So, I asked—
“Kaka, are you feeling unwell?”

Fachair Kaka replied—

“For a long time—yes, the mind was restless. But now... all is well again.”

His words felt vague. I said—

“Kaka, I’m not quite understanding what you mean.”

Suddenly, his face took on a seriousness, and with a grave tone, he said—

“My boy, just as there is value in speech, there is also profound value in silence. Observe—when two self-realised seekers sit together, the tongue speaks little. Expression shifts to gestures and glances.

Actions of presence become more potent than spoken words.”

I still didn’t quite grasp his point. So, I asked again—

“Kaka, I’m sorry—I still don’t understand.”

Wishing to clarify, he asked me—

“Have you heard of Kabirdas?”

I replied—

“Yes. Just as Tulsidas and Surdas were devotees of Rama and Krishna in the Saguna tradition, Kabir and Malik Muhammad Jayasi were torchbearers of the Nirguna

path. Though Kabir was a pathfinder of knowledge, while Jayasi walked the path of love.”

Nodding, Kaka said—

“Yes, then listen to an incident from Kashi.”

The name ‘Kashi’ stirred something within. Why not—it has always been the citadel of the wise. There once existed a scholarly council there, consisting of five hundred sages, each a master of one discipline!

I asked, “What happened?”

He began—

“One day, Farid came to Kashi. He was a self-realised mystic. News of his arrival spread quickly.

Kabir too lived in Kashi.

Kabir’s disciples urged him— ‘Guru Maharaj, Farid has arrived. You must meet him.’

Kabir agreed.

As Farid walked down the path with his followers, Kabir and his disciples came and stood along the roadside.

Farid was already well aware of Kabir.

When the two mystics came face-to-face, Kabir, through a mere gesture of the eyes, invited Farid to stay.”

I was so enthralled by the tale that I blurted out—

“Wah! Wonderful!”

Kaka continued—

“For three days, Farid and Kabir sat in front of each

other. But not a single word passed between them.”

Kaka fell silent.

Seeing him so, I too rose and said—

“Kaka, the evening bells have rung in the Thakur Bari.

Let’s continue this conversation tomorrow.”

Kaka nodded—

“One last thing, before you go. We’ll speak more another day.

Until about a year or so ago, I had a disease—a disease of words.

I kept speaking—endlessly, needlessly.

But a good company opened my eyes to the truth of the self.

And now... now I understand the grace of silence.”

I asked—

“What does silence truly give us, Kaka?”

He replied—

“I’ll explain fully some other time. For now, just know this:

Silence amplifies your inner wisdom.

With that comes thoughtlessness, peace, and freedom from conflict.

The ego slowly dissolves... and your power becomes your protection.

That’s all—for today.”

Marking the Seventy-Eighth Independence Day

Just as I have no precise memory of my birth date, I find myself unable to recall the exact date of the nation's Independence Day either. And why would I? Just as every year, month, day, and even each fleeting moment flows in its rhythm, so too does life follow its current. It is in this flow that a person moves forward—sometimes forgetting, sometimes remembering the past—as they journey through life.

Life's path is far from brief; hence, forgetting much along the way is but natural. The same happened with me—I simply forgot. But if I say I alone forgot, that too would be untrue. Everyone forgets. If that weren't so, then why do we see, in every village and neighbourhood, that while a few live past eighty, most take the road to death long before that?

Now, tell me—despite knowing and witnessing all this, why do people devote their entire being to the pursuit of wealth? Is it that they forget about death? Or do they truly not understand that death is inevitable—that whoever is born must one day die?

Take any train or vehicle—the driver usually begins to slow down well before reaching the station. But man? As he approaches the end of his journey, he hardly slows

down. If anything, he hastens. If that weren't so, wouldn't he slow his mad race for accumulation?

Yes, of course, in the midst of all this are the many ailments that snatch away lives without regard for age, transforming life into death without warning. And then, life itself is so fragile—like a vessel made of unbaked clay, or a thread of raw cotton—one never knows when it might shatter or fray to nothingness.

Evening of August 14 – A Wait, A Realisation

On the evening of August 14, at around 6:45 PM, I switched on the radio. The power was out—the electricity line was cut—so the radio's sound was coming through crisp and clear. I heard the announcement: at 7 PM, Her Excellency, the Honourable President Mrs. Droupadi Murmu would deliver her message to the nation on the occasion of the seventy-eighth Independence Day.

Just then, the national anthem was playing—“Jana Gana Mana Adhināyaka Jaya He, Bhārata Bhāgya Vidhātā...”

The anthem stirred a deep joy within me, and alongside that joy came a wave of reflection. The history of the freedom movement began to play across my mind like the reel of a film.

As the anthem ended, I glanced at the clock. The hand had just struck seven. Like the stillness of the Pacific

Ocean, I tried to calm my mind, preparing myself to listen—eagerly and attentively—to the President's message.

I quieted my thoughts and sharpened my ears.

Alas! Just then, the electricity returned—and the radio began to buzz and hum. The distortion was such that I could hardly make out a single clear word. The President's speech was indeed being broadcast, but I could understand nothing.

Still, a part of me held on to hope—this is Bihar's electricity, I thought; it may vanish again just as quickly. If I couldn't catch everything, surely, I'd hear some part of it. So, I didn't turn off the radio, nor did I allow my mind to wander.

Hope remained alive—if not the full sixteen annas, at least twelve or fourteen, I might still hear. After all, this was the seventy-eighth Independence Day of the nation—a moment nearly equal to the span of a human life. The curiosity swelled within me even more.

But alas—whether fortune or misfortune—electricity fulfilled its entire "duty." The radio's noise persisted just as it had begun. The address to the nation came to an end, and I had heard nothing at all.

Though I missed the President's speech, something else stirred in me—a memory I had long forgotten: my

birthday.

July 5, 1947—just one month and ten days before India's independence. I was born in a colonised nation, under British rule, but raised in a free India, though among remnants of colonial influence.

A quiet joy welled up within me. Yet, when I looked back at my seventy-eight years of life, my heart scolded itself—so much of life gone by, and what have I done?

A couplet sprang to mind: "This life slipped by in empty illusions; Dark stains now mark my once-golden body."

No, I've committed no sin deserving of such a stain. Yet perhaps this too is a stain—the stain of a life frittered away in trivial pursuits. Suddenly, a sense of guilt began to settle in—

For seventy-eight years, I have eaten and drunk from this land—and in return, what have I offered?

Just like the line in the song—"A new life shall begin, only after the final pyre burns,"—a thought crossed my mind: the time that has passed is gone for good. No amount of regret can bring it back.

But surely, something can be done with the time that remains. It's not as though I'll die in the next six months or a year. I've seen people live for over a hundred years, even to a hundred and twenty-five.

If my fate is anything like theirs, then surely, I'll have

some time to serve my country. A sense of peace settled over me. Yet the peace brought with it a question—what can I do?

I have no medical knowledge to heal the sick, no engineering skill to create or operate machines. It felt like reaching a crossroad with no map—exhausted, directionless. Then, like a spark, a thought struck—Why not make full use of the understanding and insight I do possess? My heart agreed—yes, that's what I must do. Whatever service is possible through that, I shall count it as my offering. It was now 8 PM.

I reflected: I am connected to literature, so why not write a story this Independence Day—a tribute to our martyrs, a remembrance of the freedom struggle?

My heart was ready. But as I began to recall, my mind faltered. When did the struggle even begin? This nation had the misfortune of being ruled by foreigners for thousands of years.

Wave after wave of invaders came and ruled. I hadn't studied history deeply, and so my mind wandered. I remembered—India as we know it today never looked like this before. It was divided among hundreds of princely states, each with its governance and laws. I tried to organise my thoughts, but they resisted order. Eventually, I brought my focus to British rule. But even there, so

many battles! The British weren't instantly accepted as rulers.

They came as traders, then seized control through force. From North to South, East to West—they fought numerous wars, conquering kings and kingdoms. The vastness of the struggle overwhelmed me. I couldn't settle on a single thought—

The more I tried to straighten the threads, the more they entangled. Finally, I thought—India's oldest political party is the Congress, the one that led the freedom movement. But that too brought unease—when was Congress founded? I recalled—Gandhiji returned from South Africa after leading anti-racist campaigns. The Congress was founded in 1885 by a British civil servant, Allan Octavian Hume. But the Congress that eventually led the struggle was not what Hume had envisioned.

In 1952, what is now the Bharatiya Janata Party was born—formerly the Jan Sangh.

And suddenly, a thread began to form—a chronological sense. With that, I felt writing the story would no longer be so difficult.

As the narrative formed in my mind, other memories rose—

Countless patriots martyred, so many exiled to Kalapani, unimaginable numbers imprisoned, villages torched,

families destroyed—no count remained.

Bhagat Singh's execution came to mind— and after him, how many more laid down their lives? Once again, the mind grew clouded. The heart, once ready to write, drifted back into confusion. *Knotted Within—Sketching Freedom from a Fading Memory*. When the mind itself is tangled, how can one possibly write a story?

Lost in these very thoughts, my eight-year-old granddaughter came up and said—

“Baba, the roti is ready. Come eat.”

How could I explain to this innocent child that I was deep in thought, trying to write something, and couldn't eat just yet? I stayed quiet.

She repeated—

“If the roti gets cold, it'll be hard to chew, right?”

Reeta knew her Baba's teeth were gone, and that cold food would be tough to chew.

Just then, from the village Radha-Krishna temple—the Thakurwari—the evening bell rang.

It was nine o'clock, as it did every evening.

The sound nudged my thoughts of writing away. I got up and went to eat.

After eating, I lay down. Sleep began to overtake me.

I abandoned the idea of writing for the night.

Though the thought lingered, no words found the page.

At five in the morning, I awoke to the voices of schoolchildren marching along the village road, shouting slogans for Independence Day.

The echoes of their chants, combined with my half-finished thoughts from the night, stirred within me.

They shouted- "Long live the freedom of our country!"

"If you want to live, learn to fight; step by step, learn to die."

Those slogans awakened something deep inside.

Still lying on the bed, I resolved—first, I will write.

Without even washing up, I took out a pen and paper and sat down to write.

From the road, the chants continued—

"Long live Gandhi Baba!"

"Long live Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar, Subhash!"

The paper and pen were in front of me,

but those resounding slogans shook me so thoroughly that I couldn't decide where to begin the story.

Gradually, the procession faded into the distance, and the idea of the story began to take form in my mind.

It struck me—India is a vast land, and the freedom struggle spanned nearly forty-five years.

Thousands were martyred.

Thousands sent to Kalapani.

Millions imprisoned.

Villages burned, people made homeless—

How could I possibly contain all of that in a single story?

A wave of introspection rose within me.

In the end, I decided to focus on one thing—

In 1942, when freedom fighters from my village and the nearby ones rose together to dismantle the British regime in the Jhanjharpur Circle.

After 1939, the anti-British movement had turned stormy.

The spirit of patriotism had awakened in the people.

Private thoughts dissolved into national duty.

Villages across our region stood ready to fight, even die, for freedom.

At the Jhanjharpur railway station was the Circle Office of the Raj Darbhanga—

The central hub of British military activity.

Revolutionaries fixed a time for the protest.

At the appointed hour, processions emerged from every village.

Individual zeal, when strong, makes people offer their lives smilingly—

But when the collective spirit joins, the passion becomes unstoppable.

People, carrying sticks, shouting slogans against the British, reached Jhanjharpur and surrounded the Circle

Office from all sides.

Suddenly, the British forces panicked.

Faced with such a crowd, their few soldiers were confused and overwhelmed.

Voices of stick-wielding and angry chants grew louder and louder.

Finally, the military commander ordered open fire.

Bullets rained down.

Hundreds were struck by pellets and bullets.

Pooran Mandal and Panchanan Jha of Deep village were martyred on the spot.

Some were hit, others ran for their lives.

Within moments, more forces arrived from other military camps.

Soldiers spread across the villages.

They set fire to Deep village.

Looted household after household.

Villagers—men and women alike—took whatever cattle and belongings they could

and fled to neighbouring villages, hiding at the homes of friends and relatives.

Narsingh Mandal, too, was struck by a bullet in his arm.

The bullet had torn through the flesh so badly that it was hanging loose. Blood streamed down continuously; he tied it up with a gamcha (cloth towel) and somehow

managed to reach his maternal cousin-sister's home in Berma.

Just as the military patrol was active in Deep village, so too in Berma, there was a British patrol.

Though compared to Deep, the patrol there was less strict.

The village goldsmith, Nahrinis, removed the bullet lodged in Narsingh Mandal's arm,

and after some medication and treatment, he recovered.

At midnight on 14 August 1947, from the Red Fort in Delhi, the appointed Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru delivered the first address of independent India, and today marks the seventy-eighth celebration of that historic day.

In One's Own Hands

Returning from the Jhanjharpur market, Suraj Kaka placed the cloth bag in the courtyard, changed his clothes at the doorway, and sat down on the wooden cot. It was mid-Baisakh—around a quarter past eleven. The air was still, so still it seemed as if it had been scorched to ash by the searing sun. Not just the trees and shrubs, even the leaves of the peepal tree appeared motionless, drained of all strength.

Suraj Kaka felt thirsty, no doubt. But he held back the thirst with the force of contemplation. A thought crossed his mind—that drinking water in such heat may ignite an inner conflict between cold and heat, unsettling the body's balance and affecting various organs. So, better to cool down in the shade first and then, in due course, drink water. Thus, he resolved to resist the urge to drink immediately.

His eyes fell on the electric fan hanging near the door. For a moment, he thought of turning it on to cool his body quickly. But then another voice within countered—if the body can internalise the heat without any external aid, it's even better. So, he didn't switch on the fan.

Again, a thought arose—perhaps waving a palm-leaf fan would hasten the cooling. But he knew: once cooled, there would be bathing, eating, and drinking, and all that would push past noon. As a result, the rest of the day's tasks would drag on like a slow, meter-gauge train, halting at every station, delaying everything until even dinner would be late. Then how would he rise early next morning to take charge of a new day?

Just then, his wife Avani Kaki came to the doorway to check on him. Here, 'wife' doesn't merely signify a spouse, but the bearer of the household's responsibilities. In the few minutes Suraj Kaka spent sitting in the shade, the heat he had absorbed from the journey back from the market began to subside. That physical relief brought a sense of calm to the mind as well. And with it, a shift in thought—his gaze turned outward, toward the world. Turning back, Suraj Kaka exclaimed—

“Chandrama Maaye! What can I say! Something truly strange happened at the market today!”

Just as a writer sometimes crafts the title of a work with such charming grace that the reader becomes intrigued even before opening the book, similarly, Avani Kaki was startled and asked—

“What happened that was so unusual?”

Stretching the preface of the story a bit further, Suraj

Kaka began—

“I thought I'd leave the market by six-thirty, roam a bit in the cool breeze, and be home by ten. But that didn't happen.”

He stopped his words midway, which only deepened Avani Kaki's curiosity. Like an eager inquirer, she asked—

“So, what caused the delay?”

Gradually, Suraj Kaka's mind began to grow restless. The reasons were twofold: first, he had now been sitting in the shade for quite a while, and second, he had begun chatting with his wife, as though she were not just a companion, but a listener. He said—

“When I stepped out from the door to the street, it was already bustling with people.”

This ‘bustle’ was more than usual—an unusual crowd of passersby.

Avani Kaki remained silent upon hearing this, but her eyes met Suraj Kaka's with a thirst for answers. Seeing her gaze, he added—

“I'll leave aside what I saw on the way—because it'll all come flooding back when I'm bathing anyway.”

Hearing this, Avani Kaki became confused—on one hand, she wanted to hear the curious happenings at the market, and on the other, her husband seemed hesitant to even bathe. She sharpened her gaze again and looked straight

into his eyes. As their eyes met again, Suraj Kaka continued—

“Tomorrow is the Janaki Navami festival, so the market was jam-packed. Seeing the crowd, shopkeepers became alert, like how a doctor gets serious seeing a patient, or a shaman prepares upon sensing a spirit. That’s what happened.”

Avani Kaki understood part of what her husband said—like a partial eclipse. She asked—

“So, the shopkeepers became sly?”

Condensing all the scattered words into one, Suraj Kaka said—

“Sly? They simply raised the prices. That led to an argument with a customer, and before long, it turned into a shouting match.”

Avani Kaki responded—

“That’s typical, isn’t it?”

Suraj Kaka said—

“Not just that. Suddenly, shopkeepers began pulling back, and buyers, too, started dispersing. Where the quarrel began, crowds gathered. But at another spot, a full-blown fight broke out without any clear reason. Since the police station is nearby, a van arrived immediately, and the entire market scattered. The buyer who started the brawl fled, but the shopkeeper was caught. Watching that

whole ruckus consumed all my time. That's why I got delayed under this blazing sun."

Hearing all this, Avani Kaki was again unsure—should she send her husband to bathe now, or wait a bit? After all, she believed that pouring water on a heated head causes a jolt in the skull. So, without a word, she simply stood before him.

But, as it often happens after conflict, there arises a subtle urge to share, and so Suraj Kaka still wanted to talk. Seeing his wife silent, he thought perhaps he should narrate the entire market scene—rising prices, quarrels, the fight—just to feel that the time wasn't completely lost. But then he wondered—what loss had she suffered that recounting it would make up for? The loss was his; the impact, too, would be his alone. So what use was narration?

Yet another thought came—if he could share what he saw with his life partner, the mental weight would lighten. And though she hadn't seen it, hearing it might give her an understanding of the event. If she paid attention and reflected on it, she might even conclude—what should one do in such situations? After all, the world is vast, with over seven billion people, and everyone finds their way to live. Then shouldn't one, amid all adversity, seek whatever harmony can be found and move

forward?

Just as the central pillar of a house stands quietly, holding the entire structure together, so did Avani Kaki stand silently before Suraj Kaka. When one's face resembles that of the other in expression, speech becomes unnecessary—that's how she withheld her words. A quiet vacuum enveloped the two. Even in that stillness, Suraj Kaka sat, while Avani Kaki stood.

Just then, Chandrama appeared at the doorway. Seeing her parents wrapped in silence, she couldn't discern what had transpired—and when understanding is absent, suspicion takes root. The same happened with her.

Like an inexperienced boy who carelessly hurls a stone to pluck a mango from a tree, Chandrama blurted out—"Babu, it's already time for the bath. When will you bathe?"

In today's changing world, perhaps such questions should no longer be asked. But even now, there exist environments where, before noon—meaning before twelve—one is expected to have completed all the day's essential routines, especially meals. And yet... Life is made of twelve hours of day and twelve of night, and every action, from eating to resting, follows a rhythm. Chandrama, after all, is a college student. She's aware that parents are not just biological givers of life—they

are guides too. Hence, shouting or complaining can never be part of a child's rightful conduct. But yes, every child does have the right, based on their lived experience, to express their concerns or emotions in their way.

And parents understand—they know the family is theirs, that within it dwells a human being who must eventually connect with other humans in the village, in society. Such understanding had already begun to take shape within Chandrama's mind.

Suraj Kaka spoke with a soft conviction—

“Bau, you've become capable now—but still, I feel it's best to tell you directly.”

Like a deer hides the fragrance of its navel, Suraj Kaka had kept the fragrance of his thoughts hidden. Now, he drew the boundary of a prelude—creating an even deeper thirst in Chandrama's mind. She asked—

“Babu, you just said I've become capable. That blessing you gave, I received with reverence, but...?”

Hearing the gracious and sincere words of his worthy daughter, Suraj Kaka's heart softened further. He replied with gentle humility—

“Bau, here the word ‘Bau’ carries a special sentiment. In our culture, we use it to address both father and children. Parents often address their sons and daughters alike as ‘Bau’. My heart tells me to pour my heart into yours and

say—service is a sacred duty, and one's service lies within one's own hands.”

Hearing this, Chandrama felt as if she had been illuminated from all four directions. Her gaze widened, her mind awakened. Seeing her thus, Suraj Kaka's heart began to melt like spring water.

A sense of duty blossomed in him—as if a gentle melody of life was rising to the surface, urging him to plant all his delicate thoughts into Chandrama's soul. Suraj Kaka's mind held no guile—pure, like the still water of a lake, calm and sacred.

Yes, the time for bathing still lingered, but the flow of thought was purer, deeper than any lake water, like a sacred stream. These thoughts flowed over his mind, wordless, but intense.

At that moment, Chandrama softly said—

“Babuji, your thoughts are so beautiful... so deep...?”

Chandrama's thoughts were unfinished—like the moon on the fourteenth night, still missing its fullness. Observing her, Suraj Kaka spoke—

“Bau, you've been with me through your high school years. In just six months, you'll graduate from college. That thought brings a slight hesitation to my heart, but still...”

These paternal words pierced directly into Chandrama's

heart. She responded, with deep emotion—

“Babu, it is only you both—my mother and father—who can truly quench the thirst of my soul.”

Hearing the word "mata-pita" from her mouth, a realisation stirred in Suraj Kaka's mind: yes, we are husband and wife, mother and father—but that alone is not the whole world. Some parents have never set foot in a school, and yet their children pass college with flying colours. And then some parents are themselves educated, yet their children remain untouched by learning. In such spaces, the gulf between education and ignorance inevitably creates a gap—sometimes subtle, sometimes deep.

Until now, Suraj Kaka had carried himself as a father who fulfilled every responsibility. But education is a continuous stream. One may lead in one direction and yet trail behind in another—that is the rhythm of life. In such a world, it becomes essential to let one's children know the truths of one's own life so that they may understand the ordered flow of things.

He said—

“Bau, the virtues of a person should emerge naturally from their nature. One should always strive to be an authentic, natural human being.”

Just like an arrow once released from the bow does not

care for the winds or barriers in its path, but moves unerringly toward its target, so too did these words from a father pierce his daughter's heart. Her spirit blossomed. With a gentle smile, she said—

“Babuji, please explain a little more...”

Seeing this hunger in his daughter, Suraj Kaka opened the gates of his heart. Thoughts flowed like a pure stream—

“Bau, if a person lacks service, they cease to be human. And yet, service itself holds a vast, cosmic form.”

Hearing the words “cosmic form of service” from her father, a ripple stirred deep within Chandrama's heart. With keen curiosity, she asked— “Could you explain that further...?”

Moved by her thirst, Suraj Kaka said, “Child! There's service of the mind, service of the intellect, service of the soul—service exists on countless levels. To gather all these scattered fragments, to distil them, and to make them part of your life—that is what living truly means.” Suraj Kaka did not voice the next portion of his thoughts aloud, but in the flow of his speech, Chandrama understood it fully. Yet, observing that her father had neither bathed nor eaten yet, she gently reminded him— “Babuji! The current time—your time for bathing and eating—please complete that first. Later in the evening,

we'll sit together. And by 'sit together,' I mean—I will absorb your thoughts into my heart and transform them into action and duty."

Through the Mirror of Society

Jyoti came to her ancestral village from Mumbai with her family. Sixteen-year-old Jyoti perceived the village as engulfed in darkness. Here, 'darkness' did not refer to the phases of the moon—Shukla Paksha or Krishna Paksha—but rather to the unfamiliarity and strangeness that surrounded her. For her, the village was entirely new. The contrast between old and new was as stark as the difference between today and yesterday.

At sixteen, Jyoti was seeing her ancestral home and village life for the first time after a gap of twelve years. Though she had become thoroughly immersed in the hues of Mumbai, it wouldn't be right to say she had completely forgotten her roots. She still heard tales of the village and her lineage from her mother's mouth, but to her, they sounded like distant stories of the past, not a living philosophy to be embraced. Even so, she was aware—though more intellectually than practically—that ever since her forefathers had settled in Sheetalpur, their lives had unfolded there. Her father, Sinehanand, too, had spent twenty years in that very village. So it wasn't that the past had been completely erased. When such profound reflection—true 'chintan-manan'—shines so

vividly, it doesn't easily fade.

During his time at Darbhanga College, Sinehanand would often get cinema tickets at a student concession rate. He used to watch films up to eight times a month. Let this be clear—there were four cinema halls in Darbhanga back then. Located in the small market area, they screened popular films that came and went like the changing seasons. Whatever the buzz around them may have been, one thing was certain—Sinehanand never missed a film released in Darbhanga. And not just that, being a student of literature, he also read extensively—from tales of the kings of Satyayuga to the turbulent narratives of Kaliyuga.

At one point, a shift occurred in Sinehanand's thinking—his attention turned from the village toward the city, and this urge became so intense that he left for Mumbai without even informing his parents.

From his college days in Darbhanga, a desire had taken root in Sinehanand's heart—to become a film actor. He had dreamt many secret dreams, silently promising himself that if he ever made it as a film star, he would lift his entire family to fame and comfort. The world of cinema had many kinds of performers, but Sinehanand didn't wish to be just anyone—he wanted to be a lead actor.

Of course, Sinehanand had no real understanding of the labyrinthine world of cinema when he ventured into it. It was only after wandering for a year and exhausting all the money he had brought from home that the harsh reality of Mumbai's streets struck him. Once that awareness dawned, he began to remember his village and his parents with deep longing. It was like how, during a thunderstorm, one forgets the divine and remembers one's mother and father instead—that's how the realisation came upon him. But what use was such remorse now? Regret and recklessness—these too are part of human nature. Sinehanand began to feel bitter toward himself. His conscience whispered: "My parents trusted me blindly, never let me feel the absence of anything—and yet I betrayed them! If I had to come to Mumbai, couldn't I have at least asked?"

Indeed, parents are parents precisely because they don't label a child's mistake as wrongdoing. Instead, they say, "You are our flesh and blood—no matter which corner of the world you live in, may you live in peace and contentment."

Carried away by the current of his broken thoughts, Sinehanand felt a sharp jolt in his chest. That very moment, a firm resolve arose in his heart. He recalled how some people, even without financial privilege, had

reached the heights of success like the IAS and IPS—purely through the strength of intellect and wisdom, sustained by tutoring others. Imitation can indeed lead to learning.

Out of this inner resolve—or perhaps an unconscious yearning—Sinehanand silently concluded that becoming a film actor was no longer appropriate. But teaching, yes, that he could do. He was alone, not burdened by any major responsibility. Once he could sustain himself—earn enough to live—he would return to the village and, admitting his mistake, tell his parents that he erred by leaving without their consent. He wouldn't say he fled; he'd say he left intending to seek employment. After all, every parent wishes their children to shoulder their responsibilities and progress forward.

The desire that precedes resolve is what awakens one's strength—it directs the will toward action. And it is this readiness for action that transforms into the power of work, ultimately manifesting the desired results in the real world. Whatever it may be, Sinehanand planted the seed in his mind: everyone enters the world empty-handed and leaves the same. What lies between is life—bitter and sweet in equal measure.

Although the idea of tutoring had taken root, Sinehanand still had no real experience in teaching. But his mind was

already accustomed to self-questioning. He recalled how he had dropped out of his B.A. studies to chase the film dream. At the time, his logic was that many renowned actors had made it big without even completing high school. But now, broken and defeated, he reasoned that even if he couldn't teach college students, surely, he could guide high school students. At the very least, he could teach those up to the level of his education—B.A. With renewed belief in himself, he began to walk the path of tutoring children. And steadily, step by step, that journey on the road of karma led Sinehanand to now running a respectable coaching institute.

It was the third day of Jyoti's arrival in the village of Sheetalpur. In just two days, she had quietly made up her mind that she must first meet a man named Lakshman Bhai—a figure well-known in the village for his association with literature and art. Since Jyoti had adopted the urban tempo—the fast pace of city life—she no longer found it strange to venture out alone.

There's another point to note here: What exactly is the nature of urban life? What sameness and what grotesqueness unite the four metropolises? Unless one has seen and lived through it, is it fair to assume that all cities are painted in the same colour? That understanding, Jyoti believed, would only come from

direct experience.

These days, there's at least some convenience, some partial arrangement for vehicles and transport, even in remote villages. Partial, because just as monsoon rains affect the region, so do the rivers and streams. And what we refer to as the *sira*—meaning the upper regions—are mountain zones filled with stones. The waters here come from two sources: one, the melted snow—also known as glacial water—and the other, the monsoon rains. Both flow from north to south in such a way that they continuously reshape the geographical contour of the region year after year.

Be that as it may, Jyoti reached Lakshman Bhai's place in a shared auto. Lakshman Bhai had already heard of Sinehanand, but he had never really taken much interest in inquiring further. For the villagers, Sinehanand remains a stranger, an outsider. There's even an old saying around here— "*Gaamak fedar, Morangak dafedar*"—meaning someone who acts like an officer in a faraway land is of little relevance to his village.

Seeing Jyoti, Lakshman Bhai immediately understood inwardly that she must be Sinehanand's daughter.

Standing gracefully, Jyoti greeted Lakshman Bhai with one hand. Being an experienced man, Lakshman Bhai concluded at once that her poise alone revealed her

upbringing. People often say that Mithila is not only the spiritual teacher of the nation but of the entire world—not just as rhetoric, but as a living truth. Leave aside worldly complications; even within the country, when it comes to the art of food and hospitality, no state—except perhaps Bengal—has developed such a colourful palette of culinary expression. Nor have others achieved the level of artistry found here. Still, every community continues with the traditions they've inherited.

Yet something struck Lakshman Bhai—a thought. Here in Mithilanchal, the traditional form of greeting involves joining both hands and touching the elder's feet. This custom is still alive. The act of joining both hands is an expression of complete surrender in religious terms—a gesture where the line between devotee and deity vanishes. Foot-touching, too, has long symbolised this spiritual connection. But of course, times change, and customs evolve. Such evolution is, in fact, a form of artistry—adapting to the rhythm of the times.

Lakshman Bhai gestured toward the chair next to him, inviting Jyoti to sit. As soon as she sat down, she spoke: "Grandfather, except for the first four years of my life, this is the first time I've returned to the village in sixteen years."

Lakshman Bhai thought to himself that it would be

better to respond to this childlike sentiment with words appropriate to her age. He said:

“Well, it’s still something to be happy about—that even if late, you got to see the face of your village. As our elders used to say, even if one who was lost all day returns by evening, they aren’t lost after all.”

The environment of Mumbai had influenced Jyoti and her family. Without missing a beat, she responded to Lakshman Bhai’s thoughts:

“Grandfather, I’ve heard your name back in Mumbai. Today I’ve had the chance to meet you in person.”

Sensing the depth in Jyoti’s remark, Lakshman Bhai asked:

“How did you hear about me in Mumbai?”

Jyoti replied, “You write in Maithili. I can speak a little, but I can’t read or write it.”

Lakshman Bhai thanked her and said: “Well, even speaking is something. If you continue to speak the language, it will surely remain alive. But...”

As soon as she heard the word ‘but’, Jyoti interjected: “But what?”

Lakshman Bhai replied: “But the point is—even in the military and among the police forces, Bhojpuri has spread across the country, while our own language and cultural heritage remain confined. And who else but our people

will speak of its worth?"

While Jyoti sat with her ears attentive, it's hard to say how much of it she absorbed. She, like Lakshman Bhai, seemed immersed in her thoughts. And thoughts—they have their melodies, don't they? Just as the freshness of dawn differs from the melancholy hue of dusk.

Continuing her reflections, Jyoti said: "Grandfather, I have some questions about literature."

Hearing the phrase 'questions about literature', Lakshman Bhai was taken aback. Literature, after all, is the legacy of society. It belongs—wherever it exists—to the people of that linguistic and cultural region. Then again, he mused, perhaps it is not without reason that people say, "Every grain bears the name of its destined eater."

But suppressing the thoughts stirring in his mind, Lakshman Bhai said,

"Child! Wherever there is society, there will also be literature to guide it—watching over it from eyes to wings, so to say."

Now, Lakshman Bhai may have spoken this in the rhythm of his thoughts, but Jyoti heard it in hers. She asked,

"Eyes to wings, Grandpa? What does that mean?"

The depth hidden in Jyoti's simple question made

Lakshman Bhai's heart flutter. He felt within that just as each person carries their own life, so too do they bear their mind, thoughts, and sense of reason. Therefore, to make a hasty judgment about someone's life might be nothing more than childishness. Bringing clarity to the moment, he said,

"Dear one, could you restate your thoughts a little more clearly?"

The previous thread of conversation faded, and what surfaced was Jyoti's question—

"Literature is the mirror of society—how should I understand that?"

Hearing the seriousness in her voice, Lakshman Bhai's mind was suddenly stirred with a verse from the Gita: *Sarvadharmān parityajya...* —"Abandon all other dharmas..." In other words, if everything else is relinquished, what remains is the self alone. But then, his mind drifted inward once again, and his response took on a different shape—less philosophical, more conversational. He wished to keep the exchange grounded in the everyday.

Lakshman Bhai asked, "So, dear girl, are you still studying, or have you stopped?"

Jyoti answered, "I'm studying in college."

"And what does your father do?"

“He runs a coaching centre.”

“Do you own your house, or are you renting?”

Through fifteen years of hard work, Sinehanand had managed to build his own house and, along with ten other teachers, was running the coaching centre successfully, shouldering all the responsibilities himself. Jyoti replied,

“It’s our own house.”

Lakshman Bhai continued, “Do you help your father with his work?”

His question struck Jyoti’s conscience like a gentle blow, and she sensed it deeply. But after all, she wasn’t a child from some village—she had grown up in the city, in its sharp contrasts. She had seen how even villagers could spend hours watching a three- or four-hour cricket match. Composing her emotions with similar restraint, she answered,

“I don’t help at all.”

Lakshman Bhai asked, “You’re in college, right? Could you teach high school children?”

His words seemed to wound Jyoti, stirring a sense of restlessness within her. Yet she didn’t think it right to walk away without answering the question that had risen between them. So, she repeated,

“Grandfather, how should I understand that literature is

the mirror of society?”

Hearing her ask again, Lakshman Bhai silently acknowledged within himself that someone who hasn't moved beyond thought into action—hasn't entered the race of karma—how could they truly see society within literature, or literature within society? Collecting his thoughts, he responded,

“Child, this isn't a question of just today. Questions like these have been asked for generations, and almost everyone accepts that literature is the mirror of society.”

Jyoti was already feeling a little annoyed, and now, hearing this rather closed-off response from Lakshman Bhai, she got up suddenly and said,

“I'll be going now.”

One with Nature

As soon as the first-period class began, Bhuma's heart slipped into a strange melancholy. The reason for this ache was the weekly tutorial class. A tutorial class meant a space where teachers and students engaged in free-flowing conversation. My friend, anyone who has visited Jagannath must have witnessed the vastness of the ocean and the dance of its waves. Along with that, they might have seen where the Earth's boundary begins. One could say it's the point where the sea ends and the land begins.

Somehow, Bhuma managed to suppress her emotions till 2 p.m., but after that, she drifted into a daze. Skipping the next class, she left for home. Though her father, Dunyalaal Babu, was a professor at the same college, she didn't say a word to him and went straight to her room. She saw her mother in the hall but walked past silently and collapsed on her bed. Bhuma was so deeply absorbed in her thoughts, as though she had tasted the very nectar of life. Her mother, Suvratti, had noticed her daughter's condition but didn't say anything either. In their structured routines, no one really asked about anyone

anymore, and even when questions were due, they remained unspoken. Whether out of social conditioning or learned detachment, the impulse to inquire had faded. So, neither did Suvratti say anything, nor did Bhuma feel it appropriate to voice her inner turmoil.

A wounded heart doesn't always cry out—it often hides its beloved deep within. But this was something else. Here, Bhuma's love was different. It was the first impression of the first period, when her teacher, Subodhini, had opened her inner world and said in her very first interaction,

"When someone becomes 'prakritisth'—in tune with nature—they attain the essence of life, its elixir."

This isn't to say there was any flaw in knowledge. Knowledge is self-illuminating. Even a shard of glass, no matter how small, reveals its nature by its very properties. But this was different. When the offerings of the knowledge-ritual were distributed, philosophical knowledge was considered the highest, because through it, one could transcend the mundane and attain the ultimate truth—Brahma-jnana.

Ever since those words from the very first class had entered Bhuma's ears, her mind had been caught in their swirl, just like how the first drop of rain in the Swati constellation falls into the oyster's mouth and becomes

a pearl, or when it falls into bamboo it creates camphor, or into sugarcane to form nectar. Though her mind was anguished, her body didn't show any sign of pain. As Tulsidas once said, in Ram Rajya, all three forms of suffering—physical, divine, and material—were dissolved. Similarly, Bhuma kept wondering again and again: what did it truly mean to be 'prakritisth'? What kind of state was that?

At his regular hour, Dunyalaal Babu arrived home. Nothing in the household seemed out of place. As per his habit, he had his tea within half an hour and then settled down to reflect on the day's events. He was the sort of father who believed in asking his daughter what she had learned during the day. By this, he called out to Bhuma. When Dunyalaal Babu saw her dazed expression, he sensed that she was carrying some burden. But instead of probing directly, he thought it better to hear it from her mouth. So, with quiet attention, he turned to Bhuma and waited.

Revealing her inner anguish, Bhuma asked,

"Babuji, what does prakritisth mean?"

Hearing this priceless question from his daughter, Dunyalaal Babu began to travel inward, like one immersed in self-reflection. His mind wandered between emotional realms and philosophical thought. Don't misunderstand

the word “wandered”—it was a deep, meditative search. Trying to fathom the depths of his consciousness, he realised that it would be impossible to explain the world with just a single word. It would be better, he thought, to listen as much as possible to Bhuma’s understanding. The more she spoke, the lighter his burden would become. So, he gently said to her:

“Child, try to elaborate your question a little more.”

Hearing her father’s words, Bhuma was left speechless. The reason for her astonishment was that the very first sentence spoken by her teacher had struck her so deeply that she had absorbed nothing of what followed. Can it be said that Bhuma had shut her ears? No! She hadn’t closed her ears—her very faculty of comprehension had been overwhelmed, and she had lost all sense of direction.

On one hand was Bhuma’s silence, and on the other, observing that silence, Dunyalaal Babu thought to himself: just as the police prepare a charge sheet after carefully examining an event without necessarily understanding it completely, why shouldn’t he try to approach the subject himself? Being a professor of geography, Dunyalaal Babu cast his thoughts toward the earth. The word ‘nature’ was no stranger to him; he had used it countless times in speech. Nature was the world—

this entire world, along with all its elements. The earth, the oceans—all of it together formed nature.

As he followed this thought, a sense of depth began to rise within him. The moment he took a breath of realisation, another question suddenly surged forward: the world is made of earth and water—isn't it? And in that, the roots lie in soil and water...

Just like one feels for depth in water, so did Duniyalal Babu's thoughts begin to explore that inner depth. He stood grounded upon the earth. As he lifted his gaze in reflection, he perceived that there was more water than earth in the world. This shouldn't be misunderstood to mean that he began pondering why famines occur or why people suffer without water.

Had his thoughts been unclear, Duniyalal Babu would have been confused—but that wasn't the case. He knew that roughly 70%, or three-quarters, of the world is made up of water, while the remaining 30%, or about a quarter, is earth. At that point, his mind had concluded—like a cow tied to a peg—but just as an untamed cow bucks upon seeing a new peg, his thoughts too began to rebel. He now wondered: what if the meaning of nature that he understood was incomplete? If ancient sages and seers considered the human body itself as the universe, then what truly was this world?

First of all, he had never had any inclination toward other subjects beyond his own. And secondly, he was so frugal that ever since finishing college and beginning his job, he had never bought a single book for his reading. New books sent by publishers sat untouched on his desk.

Where silence settles, people often look around in hope of a third voice. Like someone walking backwards with mismatched steps, Dunyalaal Babu finally said, “Child, the thought you’ve been given by your teacher—ask her again.”

In today’s mobile age, sending messages by parrot or cloud like in olden times has become obsolete. Similarly, asking someone a question or seeking understanding has become much easier.

Holding her mobile phone, Bhuma gently overturned her father’s suggestion and said, “Babu, why don’t you ask her?”

Fulfilling his paternal role, Dunyalaal Babu replied, “Child, I won’t tell you how or where to ask a question right now. I’ll only say that asking your teacher would be the most appropriate thing to do. Yes, I’m right here, and I have ears—I’ll listen too.”

Bhuma then messaged her teacher, Subodhini:

“Madam, could you please explain prakritisth a bit more clearly? During the tutorial class at college, your words

stirred my mind so rapidly that I couldn't quite grasp what you meant."

Hearing her student's question over the phone didn't bother Subodhini at all. She had, in fact, often said during her lectures that in this age of mobile communication, if any part of her teaching felt unclear, students were free to reach out even via phone. She also knew that Bhuma was the daughter of a professor. So, respecting the boundary between family and college, she replied,

"Bhuma, your father is also a professor—you might understand better if you ask him."

A refined mind, when it receives a refined thought, naturally responds in kind. Bhuma said, "Madam, I did ask Babuji—and he told me to ask you."

When mature thoughts are exchanged, they spark mature emotions. Subodhini too felt this gentle stirring and replied:

"Bhuma, just as the world is composed of seventy per cent water and thirty per cent earth, so too is the human body—a balance of fluid and solid, of water and matter." Hearing her teacher's thought, Danyalaal Babu let out a deep breath. But he said nothing.

In the meantime, Subodhini continued, "Bhuma, that is what it means to be prakritisth. But do bring it up again

during the next tutorial class.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Madam,” Bhuma said as she set her phone gently back on the table.

Liberation

Brothers and friends!

Before I begin the story, I want to clarify a thought. The thought is: what exactly do we mean by a “children’s story”? Now, the question arises—should we first define the term ‘child’ and then reflect upon the nature of such stories?

Our ancestors divided human life into four stages, one of which was childhood. According to their worldview, life was considered to span a hundred years, and based on that, the first stage lasted twenty-five years. That was their perspective, and they lived according to it. But in today’s world, with the pace at which brilliance and success are emerging, I’m not claiming to know when exactly such success will bloom—but from the signs, it seems like people are ready to take off like mangoes that ripen prematurely and fall with a thud even before reaching twenty-five. Whatever happens, let it happen on its terms, but before telling a children’s story, shouldn’t we first define the limits of childhood?

This traditional understanding has come down to us. So,

I'm not saying that it's the final word or the ultimate truth. Nor am I claiming that intellect necessarily follows age—what about those who, after reaching sixty, can't even count to a hundred? And what of those engineers who stand firm on the earth at age twenty-five, while others, even past forty or fifty, remain childlike in their understanding? Then how can we conclusively define age boundaries? Even nature has its strange ways. Nature is just that—nature. Like Lord Shiva in deep meditation, who may, without warning, break into a cosmic dance—we cannot predict its whims. One man may be eight feet tall, another barely a foot and a half!

Ravindra is twenty-three years old. He is a researcher. He isn't married. Whether he has chosen not to marry or it's his father's wish—we'll understand when Ravindra enters the picture. After all, the world is what it is: on one hand, caste and communal tensions are spreading like webs, and on the other, demands for dowry have pushed the age of grooms beyond acceptable limits. Somewhere it's cash, somewhere it's caste, somewhere it's creed. Whatever it may be, Ravindra is one such researcher who has begun his study on his own initiative. He has reached an agreement with his father, Dayanand, regarding marriage. Dayanand believes in the first stage of life—the brahmacharya phase—and has prohibited his

son from marrying. But even he harbours the strong belief that life is, after all, life. One should live it freely. It's no child's play to live with ignorance. Just as the burden of raising children lies on parents, likewise, with time, the responsibility of caring for one's parents falls on the children. Only when sons and daughters reach the age and professional stability to build their own families can parents be considered free of their duties. Thus, Dayanand has drawn the line till the point of marriage and dowry. He still feels the debt of fatherhood upon his heart. Ravindra may or may not get the freedom he desires—but to Ravindra, freedom means shaping his own life without his father's interference.

Ravindra has been observing the social dynamics—what does companionship between husband and wife look like today? On one side are elite scientists, sociologists, doctors, and engineers, and on the other, their wives are completely illiterate. In such conditions, maintaining harmony in life becomes difficult.

Though harmony isn't impossible, it surely isn't as effortless as a wildflower. A wildflower may grow even near the edge of a cliff, and its pollen may travel from one country to another on the wind. But if the season isn't favourable, it may not bloom at all. That's a different matter. We see how both the naïve and the

aware among today's youth are swiftly transitioning from national to international identities. What can one say? Cricket is a global game now. You see constant matchups between countries. Who knows when someone might turn life itself into a game and begin playing it? Or become the toy, whisked away into the sky?

Not long ago, there wasn't a single mobile phone in many villages. And now? Forget just the village—every unit of a family, every individual within that unit, has a smartphone, even 7G models.

In village after village, games and players have already become matters of division. Some are blind fans of certain players, others of different ones. Some root fiercely for one nation, others for another. Everywhere, all the time, there's a game going on—and with it, inevitable wins and losses. Supporters of one team end up quarrelling with those of another, sometimes even resorting to physical altercations. It's fortunate that now, with quick systems of monetary penalty, these brawls are swiftly resolved. Otherwise, people have adopted such international personas that even in remote hamlets, global conflicts would be permanently simmering.

We see it clearly: on one hand, over eighty crore people in this country survive on minimal rations, lacking clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. On the other

hand, the same country is on the verge of becoming the third global superpower—or perhaps has already become one.

As Ravindra tried to move forward, even slightly, in the path of life, the naked face of society was laid bare before him. Of course, ‘naked’ here can have three meanings: first, the impartial or stripped-down truth; second, a face stripped of dignity; and third, a shameless or malicious face. Let us be clear—Ravindra saw the impartial face of society.

He saw his reflection in that mirror of truth. In a society where child marriage still thrives, here he was, twenty-three years old and still unmarried. What was to be said of that? Was he not in violation of societal expectations? Had he not become a guilty figure in the eyes of tradition? That’s another matter, of course—most parents wish to be free of their duty toward their children. And not just wish—they openly express it, like songs of dusk and dawn, pouring their hearts into pleas: “Oh God, when we cannot steer the course of our own lives—cannot bring them from beginning to end—then wouldn’t it be better to leave this world altogether?”

Shall we then say that seeing the world makes people envious, and seeing our own lives makes us renunciants? This, indeed, is the game of life—a world of attraction

and aversion, of love and hostility. From quarrels to reconciliations, from friendships to enmity—it is all here. But what does any of that mean to Ravindra?

As soon as he stepped outside the house, he felt reassured—the agreement he had made with his father had aligned well with the course of life.

Even back when Ravindra was studying for his B.A., the question of marriage had arisen—within his mind, within his parents', and the wider community. As those thoughts resurfaced now, Ravindra recalled once more that the world itself is woven between love and hatred—and so is he.

Love means affection, endearment, kinship. Hatred means enmity, opposition, the very poison of life. Love gives rise to vines of affection, and those vines, growing and twining, often evolve into deep emotional bonds. From love springs both attachment and, eventually, even renunciation.

Hatred, too, takes many forms. We see people harbouring jealousy and resentment for no reason—sometimes inwardly, expressed in action, doing real harm to others. Strangely enough, even love and hatred can reverse roles with time. Today's dear one may, due to some sudden upheaval—be it caste, religion, hierarchy, or profession—become one's most detested figure.

Who can guarantee that the one most beloved will not become the most despised? Look at the easterly and westerly winds: in summer, they feel soothing and welcome, but the same breezes in the bitter cold of January become unbearable.

And look further. Angulimala was once a bandit, living by theft and terror. But in the shelter of Lord Buddha, he became such a revered figure that even after 2,500 years, we remember his name—and we try to discipline our wayward children through stories drawn from his life.

The same goes for Valmiki. In his youth, he lived by robbery. And yet, he transformed and gave birth to the divine epic of Ram.

Now, you tell me—what more do you need to feel that longing for change?

Ravindra, young in both age and reflection, found himself entangled in this web of thought.

In the entangled web of thoughts, a faint flicker of light suddenly flared up within Ravindra's mind—like a mystic flame flashing out of nowhere. As it lit up, history itself stood before him. And it stood in a way that, though everyone talks about it casually, it still stuns the mind: our ancestors, the sages and seers, were said to have lived ten thousand years. Did they live that long, or do they still live today? That we have yet to see. Ravindra's

thoughts paused, and with them, so did the rhythm of his reasoning—and in that stillness, his consciousness rang out a new note.

A new idea emerged: even today, aspects of that ancient world live on—hunger and nakedness, wisdom and supreme knowledge, love and detachment—all co-exist in this society. And therefore, it becomes necessary to know oneself.

Just as there are many villages and many communities, so too does every village form a society, and every society contains a village. In such communities, the tradition of religious storytelling—Bhagavat Katha—continues, not just now, but from ancient times. These spiritual discourses run for seven days, fifteen days, or even a full month. Alongside them, Ramkatha, the Ramayana, and devotional songs and chants continue as well. If no one liked them, how would they have lasted this long? They've not only survived but grown stronger—on both sides.

One form of kirtan involves musical instruments and a lone lead performer, who stands and delivers discourses, while a chorus sings in response. The second type is communal chanting of the divine name, which takes place in temples or even in courtyards—sometimes lasting twenty-four hours a day, for three days, seven,

fifteen, or even a full month. In these gatherings, stories, singing, and devotion all intertwine. Let it not be misunderstood—life isn't just about producing children. Along with nurturing them, life also bestows the strength to celebrate a century.

With these stories and chants, various types of yajnas (sacred rituals) also take place, ranging from full-day events to month-long ones. And yet, one wonders: how is it that in a country with more temples than any other, with more worship and rituals than anywhere else, the number of fraudsters and criminals is also higher than in any other nation?

Suddenly, Ravindra's thoughts turned toward Jagdhari Kaka. He had heard of him through his father, who often said, "If there is any true speaker in the village, it is Jagdhari Kaka."

Jagdhari Kaka had bound his life to a point where the divisions between human beings disappear. Life, for him, was lived in dense concentration. And from that density, he had liberated himself—not only tracing the form and boundaries of his own life but learning to protect them. That, he believed, was life. That was liberation.

By age, Jagdhari Kaka had reached the final stage of life. But his spirit remained as vibrant as if he were still shaping his existence anew.

Ravindra arrived at Jagdhari Kaka's place. Seeing him approach, Jagdhari Kaka asked,

"Child, with age, my eyes have grown dim, so first introduce yourself—who are you, and what do you seek?"

Ravindra had never met Jagdhari Kaka before, so both were unfamiliar with each other. But Ravindra, being an inquisitive soul, was not offended by the elder's straightforward question. Calmly, he replied,

"Kaka, I was born in the same society as you. You may not know me because I've been away for schooling and college. I've completed my M.A. and now wish to pursue research."

Though Jagdhari Kaka lived a simple life, his mind was not simple-minded. He could sense life's crooked and straight paths with clarity. He looked at Ravindra carefully and thought, here is a young man eager to act; let him bathe in the Ganga himself before he sings praises to others about the cleansing waters.

Immersed in deep thought, Jagdhari Kaka said,

"Child, delivering Ramayana discourses is my livelihood. As you see, the Ram name is being plundered freely these days—everyone takes as much as suits them. But still, I see in you the face of a true worker for society, and that has sparked in me a boundless respect for you."

Just as a traveller, wearied by the scorching heat of

summer, finds relief under a shady tree and regains focus on his path, so too did Ravindra, gathering his thoughts, ask,

“Kaka, what is mukti—liberation?”

Smiling, Jagdhari Kaka replied,

“Child, it’s a beautiful question you’ve brought with you. There are seven billion people in this world, and all of them are still searching for the answer to that very question—what is mukti? But none have found it yet.”

Hearing this, Ravindra asked, “Then what is it?”

Jagdhari Kaka said, “To live life freely, without worry or fear—that is mukti. The one who embraces labour, walks the path of toil, will find it. As Kabir once said—

‘All things come from labour; without it, nothing is gained. Even ghee won’t rise from the pot unless you stir it.’”

Reverence

The high school in Simrahi village—not just known locally but respected across the entire district—is a school of merit. Just as the teachers are well-measured, so are the students. Here, ‘well-measured’ means according to need—neither too few nor too many. It’s not the kind of place where those managing it push their favourites into positions and ruin the very foundation of education. Nor is it the kind where, to accommodate their picks, they overburden the system with excess, turning everything into chaos and burdening the school financially.

Whatever may happen elsewhere, Simrahi High School’s management has no business with that. They only care as long as they bear the responsibility—as long as the weight rests on their shoulders, they must fulfil it like Shravan Kumar, with full devotion. Otherwise, not only would people begin to whisper and criticise, but one’s conscience would turn against them.

With a balanced system in place, even if not everything, most of the school’s activities naturally fall into harmony. In that very school—Simrahi’s High School—

Manmohan Babu is a teacher. Among the teaching staff, only one other teacher, besides Manmohan Babu, could be called a true companion—emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. The rest of the sixteen teachers are neither content in the stomach nor in the mind. The others are merely present, like oxen yoked together in the field, plodding along not out of will but out of necessity. So, when it comes to shared meals and feasts, no one objects—who would question someone collecting a small share at a feast?

While teaching, with sincere reverence for the students, Manmohan Babu once said aloud:

“Today’s world has lost all sense of reverence—neither do teachers have respect for their students, nor do students show reverence for their teachers.”

Simrahi High School has quite a wide reach—not just geographically, but socially too. It isn’t like the schools in cities where you find one every few blocks. Within a span of ten kos (around 30 kilometres), this is the only high school, so naturally, its catchment area is vast. Though one could argue that even city schools are full to capacity, that’s due to population density.

This high school runs four grades—8th through 11th—each with two sections.

Among the students listening attentively in class were

Mukund and Hareram. Just like all others, they heard Manmohan Babu's thoughts. But those words struck Mukund and Hareram especially hard—they both felt a jolt in their minds. Both were students in the 9th standard. Both belonged to the same village, the same neighbourhood. Naturally, their intellectual level also showed a certain harmony.

Can we say that all students of a class must think alike? Not necessarily. But the village and society certainly create shared impressions of honour and identity. How so? The social illnesses of the cities—like female foeticide—have undoubtedly begun to reach even rural homes. We now see uneven growth in boys and girls, even in the villages. This has not yet become a large-scale social issue, but at a personal level, it's turning into a silent problem across communities. The very structure of caste balance seems to be slowly eroding. That is, the moment a disparity in the number of boys and girls arises, the winds will begin to stir.

But let things take their course.

After school was over, that is, after half past four, something different happened. Unlike other days, when Mukund and Hareram usually left separately for home, today Mukund slowly walked toward Hareram, and Hareram too moved toward Mukund. The difference was

that, unlike the usual routine where everyone would quietly head home alone, today, something pulled them together.

Once they met, Mukund spoke first:

“Hare bhai, how did you feel about what Manmohan Babu taught us today?”

Even a child can understand when something is bitter or sweet—but when something is neither bitter nor sweet, how can one tell? There’s always a difference in interpretation. Moreover, the social environment affects people just as the atmosphere affects the physical world. When a spark of curiosity ignites in the realm of ideas, the emotional groundwork begins to form.

Hareram responded,

“Mukund bhai, Master Sahib speaks so fast, at such a pace, that although I hear most of it, I can’t grasp it well.”

When someone speaks within a vibrant atmosphere, and the listener, too, is alert and eager, then even without fully hearing, the words leave an impression. But here, Hareram, a ninth-grade student, seems to be lost midway. That kind of environment can only be created when focused thinking pushes solitude toward broader awareness. But that wasn’t the case here. So, to say Hareram is utterly ignorant would be wrong. Even cow

ding has its value—it may carry a distinct smell, but it is still the beloved companion of agricultural prosperity. So far, most village schoolchildren—in other words, students up to high school—have maintained a respectful relationship with their teachers. They are not like unruly city kids who puff smoke into their teacher's face while walking past them on the road. And of course, it isn't solely the children's fault—society shares that responsibility. Who creates the environment? We do. Some problems are personal, yes, but to say they don't exist socially would be false.

In these very villages, the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata are broadcast day and night over loudspeakers. Yet marriage has become such a complex institution in this society. This has led to a deterioration of social values. Now, someone might ask—what fault lies with the Ramayana or the Mahabharata? The fault lies in how we overlook key messages. From Sita's Swayamvar to Draupadi's disrobing—these events get erased from our conscious memory. Mahabharata doesn't contain just one questionable relationship; it contains many, ones we hesitate to even speak about, yet continue to replicate in action.

Such is society's irony. The same people who loudly claim, "Times have changed!" when it comes to demanding

dowry, are the ones who cling to Satyug-like ideals for everything else. In today's world, those ancient values need some reformation. Without adapting the past to the present, how will we make the past relevant again? Surely, there must be enough wisdom to realise that in today's circumstances, outdated and unworkable ideals must be set aside, while the rest must be adapted to fit the modern age.

Still, whatever stirred in the minds of both Mukund and Hareram felt right and meaningful for their lives. That is, both of them had built a respectful, behaviourally sound relationship with their teacher. So, when Manmohan Babu said,

"Neither do teachers revere students anymore, nor do students revere their teachers..."

they felt a sting.

Let us put aside the first half of that statement. A teacher builds their reputation through their character. But as for Mukund and Hareram, they certainly held genuine respect for Manmohan Babu. So, why not seek clarification?

Both of them thought—if we wait until we return home, many obstacles might get in the way of speaking to him. Why not just go now and ask Master Sahib directly? They were of the same age, shared the same thought,

and were struck by a common wave of energy—perhaps a surge of youthful vitality, or even a kind of chemical urgency in the body. Immediately, they set off.

Together, they caught up to Manmohan Babu at the doorstep of his house, approaching him from behind.

They were ninth-grade students, already famished and tired. As soon as they arrived, Mukund began,

“Sir, about what you said today—”

But before he could finish his sentence, Manmohan Babu interjected,

“Children, go wash your hands and feet at the well first. I, too, will change, wash up, then we’ll eat something, have tea, and after that, I’ll answer all your questions.”

Even the hope of a response can kindle the belief that something meaningful will happen. Just as Manmohan Babu had spoken to the two boys, Mukund and Hareram placed their books and notebooks on the study bench and went to wash their hands and feet at the village well. Meanwhile, Manmohan Babu’s wife, Vinita, upon seeing the three of them together, got busy preparing refreshments.

After changing his clothes, Manmohan Babu also washed his hands and feet at the well. Before taking a seat on the porch, he saw Vinita bringing snacks for all three and was visibly pleased. Vinita placed the food on the

bench and went to the next room to prepare tea.

While eating, Manmohan Babu said:

“Children, just as you two have spent the whole day at school, so have I, from ten in the morning till now. I’m as drained as you are. Whatever we do next, there will always be a space between one task and the next. That space is necessary—it’s called *karyotsarga*, the letting go of action—and it, too, has its rhythm.”

Just then, Vinita arrived with three cups of tea and stood in front of them with a touch of hesitation. The hesitation arose because of the student-teacher dynamic. Would it be appropriate to directly hand tea to the students? Would that cross a line? Manmohan Babu understood her internal dilemma and smiled as he said: “That old era is gone—when a man became emperor only after marrying 114,000 women. Today, a teacher and student should have a sibling-like relationship, one that allows them to recognise each other’s virtues and flaws and build a bridge of mutual understanding between them.”

Why would Vinita interject in such a conversation between guru and disciple? She quietly stepped away from the porch and went back to her household chores. Manmohan Babu turned to the boys and asked, “So, children, what was it that you came to ask?”

Mukund spoke:

"Sir, today you said in class that in today's world, neither do teachers feel reverence for their students, nor do students for their teachers."

Manmohan Babu replied:

"Children, all three of us are connected to Simrahi High School. But you know, there are many other high schools, as well as colleges and middle schools, across the country. Everywhere, there are teachers, and there are students. So, this is not a matter concerning just us—it's a collective concern. Remove from your mind the notion that I'm the only teacher and you two the only students. This is a broader question, and we must assess it carefully."

"In rural settings, especially in schools like ours, students, even up to the high school level, are still developing. One could call them children in terms of understanding. But remember, the seed of resolve lies within every human being. Especially in a fertile land like Mithila, where many great souls took to ascetic life before even reaching the age of fifteen. If it were just one or two, we could name them individually, but when it comes to mentioning some, one must also consider whom to leave out. As Tulsidas said— 'Who is great or small, to say so is a fault.'"

Mukund began to reflect deeply.

Meanwhile, Hareram asked:

“Sir, to know something and to truly know something—teachers know, and students know too. But what exactly is reverence? Could you explain that a little?”

The word “a little” caught Manmohan Babu’s attention. What did Hareram mean by that? Like a piece of bread that breaks wherever you pull it, the word “a little” could mean many things. Manmohan Babu thought: if this conversation is broken into bits, like it almost was at the door today, it might never continue properly again. Better to begin a solid discussion on reverence right now.

He said:

“Children, reverence means concentrated desire. When you have intense, focused desire toward something, it opens many doors of understanding in your behaviour.”

Hearing this, Hareram looked visibly startled. That is, he began to connect the dots from all directions. Sensing this growing awareness, Manmohan Babu deepened the conversation and said:

“When reverence becomes unstable, it begins to rely on symbols—and then transforms into *pratīti* (conviction).”

Hareram, now even more curious, asked:

“*Pratīti*?”

Manmohan Babu replied:

“Yes, *pratīti*. It means inner conviction, belief, or the

development of a quality into strength. The next step after *pratīti* is *ruchi*—interest. *Ruchi* then leads to *prīti*—affection. Once *pratīti* is established, *prīti* follows naturally.

“That’s enough for today. We’ll continue this conversation another day.”

Destiny and Human Endeavour

The time was just after sunset. Though darkness hadn't yet fully spread, the first watch of the night had already begun. It was a Sunday evening, and Gopal Babu, having completed the day's chores, was seated on the veranda bench near the entrance, sipping tea. He was utterly at ease. His wife, too, had no pending household urgencies to disturb him with her colourful flurry of needs and errands. She sat calmly in the courtyard-side veranda, drinking tea, silently reflecting upon the order of tasks: first, to clean and bring all the tea-making items like the kettle, cups, and strainer; then to arrange the ingredients—tea leaves, sugar, etc.; and finally, to fetch the glasses from the entrance and wash them thoroughly. However, midway through this train of thought, her mind shifted—*Suśīlā* decided it would be more practical to finish all the preparatory work in one go. Repeated tasks, she felt, not only waste time but also disturb the composure of both the doer and the thinker, much like fickle-minded politicians. One must not forget, though, that there exists a difference between thought-based decisions and action-based ones; they diverge, inevitably. With that realisation, *Suśīlā* arranged everything in such

a manner that, for the next round of tea, nothing would require searching again.

Having finished his tea and chewed some betel, Gopal Babu looked ahead, his gaze drifting outward toward the world. Suddenly, like a ripe mango thudding to the ground, a thought struck him—just as Munilal and Dhunilal were like sons to him, Vimal Babu was no less than a younger brother. That, indeed, formed the essence of family. And thus, sharing the philosophy of family life with them was not only useful but necessary and inevitable. Reaching the edge of his reflections, Gopal Babu internally resolved that whenever the three of them were together, this would be the first matter he would raise.

Once his mind had settled on the thought, another concern arose—what if, by then, he forgot what he wanted to say? He had no habit of maintaining notes like a college lecturer tutoring students at his residence. He was a teacher of literature—his pedagogy stemmed from the text before him, not from rote memory as in other subjects. So, how would he retain his thoughts till then? How could he possibly remember the philosophy of life he wished to share with them?

Looking behind him, Gopal Babu was reminded of his grandmother. To remember things, she used to tie knots

in her sari's end, but even then, amid the clutter of tasks, those very knots would be forgotten, their purpose lost. The work they were meant to remind her of would vanish midway. Hadn't Kabir Das also said—

"They fenced the field, but the fence devoured the field; Wonders abound in all three worlds, says Kabir—let someone behold it."

His thoughts grew restless. And how could they not? If the very message he wished to convey to Vimal Babu, Munilal, and Dhunilal were to slip from memory, how would he ever fulfil his inner intent? But then, his mind reassured him: until he meets them, he would go on repeating the message to himself at intervals—perhaps every three hours or so, the duration of one 'pehar'. That way, the thought would remain alive in his memory. He accepted this resolution as the best.

As Gopal Babu sat immersed, ruminating over this life philosophy, a new wave of thoughts stirred within him. His mind started running from one boundary to another. Thoughts, after all, are like mantras—they move from chaos to clarity, and from clarity to such calm that the eyes begin to glaze, and in that shimmering calm, slumber slips in quietly.

As fate would have it, all three—Vimal Babu, Munilal, and Dhunilal—arrived together at Gopal Babu's doorstep.

At the very sight of them together, Gopal Babu felt an immediate urge to share his thoughts with them even before tea was served. But in the same breath, he checked himself. Wouldn't that be hastiness—blurting something out without context or consideration? No thought carries true weight unless spoken in an atmosphere aligned with it.

Though Gopal Babu felt a constant inner restlessness—a pressing urge to plant the seeds of his reflections into the minds of the three young men—he remained absorbed in the rippling waves of his thoughts. And in the meantime, the tea ritual concluded; everyone had finished their cup.

Casting a glance at the others, Gopal Babu said, “Vimal Bhai, don't you think that since time immemorial, two streams of life philosophy have coexisted within our society?”

Though he had already spoken, as he turned inward in contemplation, it struck him—Vimal Babu might be ready to grasp such thoughts, but for Munilal and Dhunilal, this line of reasoning might be too weighty. His inner voice offered a gentler strategy: before presenting the core argument, why not first stir their emotional worlds—nurture the ground a little? Only then would his reflections be truly planted.

Even as Gopal Babu silently planned this, Vimal Babu posed a question:

“Have both these philosophies continued to move side by side through life?”

Gopal Babu replied,

“Yes.”

Although Munilal and Dhunilal sat between Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu, they failed to grasp the essence of the exchange. Their eyes widened and ears perked up in curiosity. Observing this, Gopal Babu thought—once ideas are presented with nuance, even a partial understanding will bloom, especially in receptive minds.

At that moment, Vimal Babu asked:

“Brother, even after all these years, are you still navigating life philosophy like these two boys here—childlike and exploratory?”

Gopal Babu began to reflect upon this light-hearted comment. On reflection, he realised: perhaps such remarks, uttered in jest but with warmth, actually help lay foundations. Once thoughts find a footing in someone's mind, they start prompting questions—and in questioning lies the refining, the clarification, and finally, the truth. This realisation calmed Gopal Babu's mind. With a sense of settled clarity, he resolved that rather than giving a lecture, it would be better to frame the

idea mathematically—more exact, more relatable.

He said,

“Vimal Babu, since you are a science teacher, you'll easily understand a mathematical approach. As for Munilal and Dhunilal—even if they grasp only a little, it will still be worthwhile. You and I together will become one from two, and once we are two, we'll be better able to explain and guide these two as well.”

“As long as trust hasn't firmly taken root, “he continued, “thoughts remain fragile. But once trust is formed, the quality of thought itself evolves. And isn't life itself a state of constant transformation? At times, the change is forced; at others, it comes from will.”

Vimal Babu replied with a soft smile, “Say it however it comes naturally to you, Bhai Sahab. You know well—I teach both arithmetic and geometry. I'm listening.”

Understanding the warmth in his tone, Gopal Babu said, “Then first, let us understand Fate and Endeavour.”

Hearing these new terms, Vimal Babu perked up. His ears sharpened like antennae.

Seeing his attentiveness, Gopal Babu elaborated:

“An individual and society are two distinct entities. But it is the individual who builds society. So even though they are two, they are essentially one. In the same way, the philosophies of Purushartha (Endeavour) and Niyati

(Fate) have been rushing like parallel streams through human society since ancient times.”

As Gopal Babu spoke, Vimal Babu removed his glasses, wiped his eyes with a handkerchief from his pocket, cleaned the lenses, and placed them back—his eyes now fixed on Gopal Babu’s, just as a person standing at the edge of self-realisation gazes at both identity and achievement. Vimal Babu said,

“I’ve understood both Endeavour and Fate. Munilal, have you understood this as well?”

Munilal replied,

“Sir, first you must know—we already revere you as our guru. If one true teacher can uplift a single life, surely two can elevate us through many lifetimes. So, there is no reason for doubt.”

Gopal Babu smiled and added,

“These two doctrines—Purusharthavad and Niyativad—are not merely ideological constructs; they have streamed through the very fabric of life, shaping its course over the ages.”

Listening to Gopal Babu’s thoughts, Vimal Babu found himself turning the ideas over and over in his mind, slowly churning their depths. Observing this quiet fermentation, Gopal Babu said,

“Vimal Bhai, for now, let’s pause our discussion on

Purusharthavada and Niyativada. Instead, focus more clearly on the framework of the individual and society.”

Vimal Babu’s thoughts widened, marvelling at the new terminologies that unfolded before him. And why wouldn’t they? Just like cows and buffaloes give milk both morning and evening, so too do thoughts hold within them both light and shadow—dawn and dusk. He said, “Bhai Sahab, I feel no hesitation or shame in speaking frankly with you. I can speak my life’s truths openly before you. Just as Munilal and Dhunilal are yet unfamiliar with life, so too am I. So, who else but you could guide us from ignorance to understanding?”

Reading the subtle emotion on Vimal Babu’s face, Gopal Babu felt a gentle tremor in his heart. He said,

“Vimal Bhai, let me first present a form of society.”

At the mention of society, Vimal Babu’s inner voice admitted—though he lived within it, though he called himself a social being, he barely understood what society truly was. But as the saying goes, “Whenever one awakens, it’s morning.” He replied,

“Whatever you feel is right, please proceed.”

Gopal Babu began,

“Let’s first acknowledge the forces that influence our values and thoughts. The majority of people in society, the great masses, are afflicted either by a sense of

superiority or inferiority.”

Vimal Babu understood this halfway—half-clear, half-clouded. But he resolved not to interrupt. Better to listen through the whole thing, he thought. Whatever remains unclear, I’ll ask afterwards. If not today, then tomorrow. And with that resolve, he directed his full attention, eyes and ears alert—not as if some divine power had suddenly entered his body, but with the quiet energy of receptivity. Sensing Vimal Babu’s eagerness, Gopal Babu continued, “Vimal Babu, it was during the Vedic age that both Purusharthavada (Doctrine of Human Endeavour) and Niyativada (Doctrine of Fate) were born. Many of the Vedic sages were Purusharthavadis, and many others, Niyativadis.”

Vimal Babu spontaneously exclaimed,

“Then both doctrines must have deep roots!”

Gopal Babu nodded,

“Indeed. Moving forward, in the early medieval period, we had Buddha and Mahavira. Both were not only thinkers of human effort, but practitioners as well. They grasped the essence of life and founded their philosophies on it. On the other hand, during the same era, Acharya Goshal of the Ajivika sect was a staunch determinist—a Niyativadi.”

Without much thought, Vimal Babu interjected,

“Even history seems to have confused us!”

Noticing Vimal Babu veering off, Gopal Babu carefully guided the conversation back:

“It has confused us, indeed. To this day, we haven’t clearly distinguished what constitutes history and what belongs to myth. And now, we even have the psychologists among us.”

At the mention of psychologists, Vimal Babu asked,

“Was Freud a psychologist, too?”

Gopal Babu replied,

“Yes, he was. And Russian psychologist Maslow even wrote that Freud and Darwin, being determinists, spread misguided ideas through society, so much so that people couldn’t progress.”

Vimal Babu, noting the complexity of psychological debates, decided it would be better not to get lost among the scholars. I should understand my philosophy of life first, he thought. He asked,

“How, then, should we form our philosophy of life?”

Recognising the energy in Vimal Babu’s question—the kind physicists call energy or body’s electric charge—Gopal Babu responded:

“Yes, indeed. Only through life philosophy can one truly live. But first, one must look within. The soul, after all, is what becomes divine. The first to realise this was a

great soul who uncovered a profound truth. He was the first to declare Purusharthavada.”

With half-raised lips, Vimal Babu asked,

“What declaration?”

Gopal Babu replied,

“Even today, a majority of people in our society live by reading their palm lines. Whatever is written in fate shall come to pass, they say—adding that we are people of the 21st century.”

Vimal Babu asked,

“Then how do we become people of the 21st century in truth?”

Gopal Babu smiled inwardly. Even now, Vimal Babu views life with playful simplicity, he thought. And then he said,

“Vimal Babu, the more awareness, reason, determination, and inner strength a person develops, the further ahead they will run in life. And those who lack these traits will remain behind—no matter the century they live in.”

A Dash of Joy

Even now—after fifty long years of life—Mahadev Bhai still hadn't figured out how or when a pinch of joy ever enters one's life.

Ah, the world! The world is a grand mosaic—of the ordinary, the bizarre, and the sublime. One kind of Lakshmi is Sulakshmi, the auspicious goddess of fortune, and the other—Kulakshmi, the one who brings misfortune—how can one say she doesn't exist? Perhaps the world doesn't make sense, but Mahadev Bhai at least knew his reality well enough to say: even a turmeric plant that bears venomous fruit does so from its very root. So, what if the same root bears turmeric as well as poison? Take any one man—or woman, for that matter—and observe how many forms they assume throughout a single day. In such a world, how could anyone claim to be one-dimensional? Science itself tells us that the human body holds billions of neurons, each a powerhouse in its own right. As Tulsidas once said,

*"Who is high, who is low—it's a sin to label so;
The wise discern truth by listening and reflecting."*

Even Tulsidas bowed his head and walked away, admitting the complexities of life: "There is no land for the farmer to till, no alms for the beggar, no labour for the labourer, no desk for the clerk. The one without livelihood begs from door to door— 'Brother, where should I go, what shall I do?'"

Yes, these words belong to Tulsidas—the poet who had only a threadbare cloth on his back—yet even he lamented the human plight. When such a man feels the pangs of despair, shouldn't we pause and ask—what is the root cause of such sorrow? And yes, we must also understand: the tiniest unit of energy, no matter how small, when compressed within the human frame, can become equally explosive.

Everyone knows it. Everyone acknowledges it. Some break mountains with chisels and hammers, while others gather the shattered stones and haul them away in sacks. That's the irony of it all. The one who demolishes doesn't devour, but the one who does nothing eats well. It's a twisted game—yet we live in the thick of it.

Let me tell you something from my own life. Every year, in the month of Kartik, there is a fifteen-day Bhagavat Katha (divine discourse) at the Hanuman temple. I've been a devoted follower of the pundit there for years. He recognises me, and I recognise him too. As a result,

whenever I prepare his tobacco mix, I become a benevolent devotee in his eyes. But tell me—doesn't the pundit feel the urge for tobacco just like everyone else? Of course, he does. And so, he begs for it, like any other beggar.

But let's leave the pundit aside for now. Bhagavat Katha itself is limitless. "Hari is infinite, and so is His tale." If you were to listen to every person's life story today, you'd have seven billion tales in an instant. Think about it: is it even possible to live a single day where you won't find at least one new story? Of course not. The world is a theatre of ever-blossoming flowers, and humanity's moods shift and change like the colours of a chameleon. And yet, despite knowing all this, despite living among these ever-shifting tales, there are places—yes, real places—where land, field, and agriculture once formed the soul of life. But now? People have forsaken all that. They sing the name of Ram, but their eyes remain shut to the soil beneath them.

Before the independence movement—that is, before the year 1947—as long as the landlords, the princely lords, and the feudal uncles held sway over the fields and farmlands, the life of the peasant in our region remained in a death-like grip. On one side, the natural calamities—floods and droughts—battered us year after year; on the

other, under foreign rule, there wasn't even a semblance of basic provisions. Imagine, just imagine, what the condition of our villages must have been back then. That memory still lives—faint yet alive.

But what does it matter now? This is a Bhagavat discourse after all. Still, one thought continues to buzz around the edge of my mind. That thought is: if I have never done any good for someone, at least let me not do them harm. That's enough for me. And because of that, even though society has ten gates of judgment, people still greet me with folded hands and acknowledge my ways. But the thorns of caste and religion have grown so wild that no one lets anyone else remain whole anymore. Just look—within a single family, three children are enrolled in three different schools. As long as they're at school, all is well. But the moment they return home, disputes erupt as if by ritual. This disease of division has infected one family after another.

People have even called me a wayward fellow. But I've shed them all from my mind. What's the point of aimless chatter, slandering women or families? How does that benefit society?

Just as during Durga Puja, every home opens its gates for guests, I too have carved out my path in society. I say it bluntly to everyone:

“Brother, I won’t take what you earn, nor should you take mine. Let’s live like human beings and foster understanding with one another—only then can society remain whole.”

But is that enough? My thoughts alone cannot shape the world. Everyone has their mind, their own set of beliefs. So, it all circles back to this: “If I am good, the world is good.”

As I said, I try to stay connected with everyone in the village. And the villagers—at least many of them—have begun to realise: why, without reason, should we get entangled in the traps of caste and religion, spewing curses or violence upon our neighbours? Just as they are masters of their minds, so am I.

Now tell me—if someone belongs to a different caste or community, and they cannot find a wedding procession or family among their kind, then what’s so wrong if we accept them into ours? Would it be a sin to create a new family with them in this very society? You may say, “They all eat the same food and drink the same water—caste has no place here.” Fine. Say that to yourself. But I ask you—if I too am part of this society, then when an unclaimed corpse is left to be torn apart by dogs and crows, isn’t it better to give that body a place—whether by fire, by burial, or by immersion in the sacred waters

of the Ganga or Kosi? Shouldn't we preserve dignity? Is that in society's interest, or against it?

Because of these actions, some call me a "lone monkey, "others brand me an "enemy of society." Everyone thinks they understand everything. But if I don't follow my inner convictions, how can I trust the very master of that mind?

Whatever the world may say, just as you see past, present, and future before you, so do I. That is my truth. As I speak, it has been seven days since the floodwaters engulfed our village. Every activity tied to the fields and farms has drowned in water. Even the grass collected for the cattle has been soaked or swept away. But by good fortune, some wheat husk and two sacks of fodder have survived. That has eased the worry for the two cows. You tell me—if green grass is not available, won't both the quality and quantity of milk decline? But in a moment like this, is it better to worry about quality and quantity, or to save the lives of the animals themselves?

After sipping my morning tea—I've stopped taking breakfast since the floods began, for reasons too many to explain here—I lit a bit of tobacco and set out with a four-pronged walking stick in hand, heading to Mahadev Bhai's place.

Now you might ask: Why carry a four-pronged stick if

the water on the road is barely two or three feet deep? But then you'd have to understand that every man or woman has only about three and a half hands' worth of reach. Sure, some might have five hands, and others just two and a half—but everyone has to manage within their measure. I've seen people with short arms wrap themselves in six-hand-long shawls and five-hand-wide blankets! So be it.

Walking stick in hand, I arrived at Mahadev Bhai's doorstep.

He was seated near the entrance, beside a little fire in the winter months, rolling tobacco leaves into beedis using dried leaves from nark trees. Still, I could see that his hands were only half-committed—his mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with his concerns. I spoke up lightly:

"Bhai, we'll talk about warming ourselves by the fire only once we survive this flood, eh?"

Trying to nudge him into conversation, I stepped closer. But whatever weight he carried in his mind was so consuming, he brushed off my remark without a word. By now, I had reached right up to him. Bowing slightly, I touched his feet and said:

"Bhai, I mark my attendance."

The look on Mahadev Bhai's face was one of deep sorrow,

as if life had snatched away something precious. Sitting down beside him, I watched his face, waiting to hear what he might say. At first glance, his eyes seemed vacant—but no, it was not vacancy; it was gravity.

Finally, he spoke:

“Motilal, what shall I tell you? Since morning, my heart’s been heavy.”

And with the earnestness of a man who speaks nothing but the truth, he said:

“Moti, most people still believe that a human life should span around a hundred years—a full century.”

In the way people often respond to deep reflections with shallow metaphors, I replied:

“Bhai Sahab, such ideas belonged to the rishis and sages. These days, it seems like more youth are dying than the elderly.”

Mahadev Bhai nodded, accepting my thought without contradiction.

“Moti, I won’t argue with that.”

Seeing him fall into a sombre quiet again, I asked gently:

“Bhai Sahab, your heart seems very burdened today?”

As if some nectarous arrow had struck his soul, something awakened inside him. He said:

“Moti, this morning when I woke up, a thought dropped into my heart—like a ripe mango falling from the tree

without being plucked.”

To be honest, I couldn't yet grasp the depth of his thought. Still, like a third fiddle playing softly in the background, I asked:

“What kind of thought, Bhai Sahab?”

Though I hadn't fully assessed his mood, I could see he was emotionally swirling like a dancing peacock in the rain. Joyfully, he said:

“Moti! Keshav! There are no words. As Tulsidas once wrote:

‘Kahi na jaayi, kaa kahiye. Dekhat tav rachna vichitra hari, samuji manahi rahiyai...’”

And with that, he fell silent.

I remembered having bought the Vinay Patrika in Janakpur once—Tulsidas's work after composing the Ramayana. Not the warrior Tulsidas of the epic, but the humble devotee of the later years. In that Patrika, I had read those very lines: “Keshav, what words can capture this? Your creation is so strange, it leaves one speechless—even within.” That line still lingers in my memory. But Mahadev Bhai—his mind seemed to be adrift since morning, and not just flying—it seemed to have flown and fallen somewhere far. Something in him had become like a wild green parrot—once close, now elusive. Like two beings who spend all day together, but

vanish into the dusk, only to speak again after reuniting, only then realising: There is creation in vision.

Yet even that realisation couldn't quite reach the edge of the thought he was trying to grasp. It fluttered just beyond both of us.

Just as the words "Mara, Mara" from the dacoit Ratnakar's lips led to his transformation into sage Valmiki, and just as the poet Vidyapati encountered Shiva in disguise as Ugna in the sacred groves, Mahadev Bhai, too—on this very morning, the moment he rose from his bed—was met by a vision. A vision of life. He saw, at last, a perspective on his existence.

Yes, that vision had come—but only after half of life had passed and the nearness of death had crept into his field of sight. The revelation was this: as is the vision, so is the creation. The world is creation, after all—and he, too, had his dwelling within it.

In this same creation, in this world, which is a vast and ongoing divine process, he too had a place, a dwelling. And in recognising his place, just as Ram had once seen Valmiki and Valmiki had seen Ram, Mahadev Bhai caught sight of the essence of his own life.

At the very moment this vision of life came to focus, a soft gleam lit up Mahadev Bhai's thoughts. He said, "Moti, when an object is defined by a single word, it's

easy to identify and understand it. But when that word slips like a leech—sometimes into a golden plate, sometimes into mud—it's not so easy to comprehend."

I couldn't entirely grasp the heat and pulse of Mahadev Bhai's insight. But I nodded anyway,

"Yes... Then it's not so easy to comprehend."

Whether he sensed my shallowness or not, I don't know—but he continued:

"Moti, this morning I realised that the word 'neta' (leader) is rooted in 'netradev'—the divine eye. And since then, I've felt like my soul has taken flight."

I gently asked,

"What do you mean, Bhai Sahab?"

He replied,

"Moti, do you know what the soul is?"

The question startled me. The answer lay far beyond my common sense—what did I know of grammar or metaphysics? But just as the ancient sages were known as śruti sages—those who heard rather than read—Mahadev Bhai went on:

"The soul is formless. It is that which receives the immense. But it doesn't only grasp the invisible essence of consciousness—it also connects with all the inner and outer elements of body, mind, and awareness. That's why in some interpretations, the soul is equated with breath.

In one word, let's just say: anything that relates to the soul, is the soul."

Honestly, I didn't understand it all. So, I tried to pivot the conversation.

"Bhai, what happened to Ramvan?"

The moment I asked that, it was as if the dawn itself rose within Mahadev Bhai's face. He said:

"Moti, forget the calculations of this world. Create your world, become a worldly man in your own way. Why chase after shadows? This earth that bore you—is it not yours too? Why not fashion your world, like Vishwamitra did?"

I sensed Mahadev Bhai might be drifting off into thought again, so I teased him back to the moment:

"Bhai, have you forgotten the tale of the man with three-and-a-half hands who made an elephant dance? Or do you still remember?"

Laughing, Mahadev Bhai replied:

"When the Kali Yuga began to descend, even the gods, elephants, and forest deer began to fall from their celestial places. It's said that near the sea, in the hill country of Tripura, there is a place called Uni-Kutti. When a crore of deities fled and hid from the flood, they scattered until dawn. And with the coming of daylight and fear of public shame, they stopped their flight and stayed put in that spot. That's how Uni-Kutti was

formed.”

I said,

“Bhai, leave the philosophy of the world aside. Shouldn’t we be thinking about how to escape this flood?”

Whatever Mahadev Bhai might have gained from this inner awakening, only he truly knows. But from the soft light on his face, I could sense joy within. I told him,

“Bhai, keep your happiness to yourself if you must—but don’t forget to pass around some prasadi from your joyful feast!”

Breathing deeply, in that long and honest way that only a man without guile can do, Mahadev Bhai said:

“After this vision of life came to me, one thing I’ve come to believe with certainty—

I have planted the tree of a pinch of joy within my own heart.”

Embodying the Spirit of Eklavya

I woke up a little late today—later than usual. My routine until now had always been to rise at least an hour before sunrise, to lead the livestock out of the house, sweep the courtyard and doorway, and then step out myself. In the village nowadays, there are at least a few families who've managed to set up private water and sanitation facilities—and I, too, am now one of them.

But five years ago, my mornings were different. I'd rise at dawn, feed the animals after letting them out, and then head off toward Manna Chaur—a vast eastern plain of our village with deep fields and several rain-dug hollows. Even in the months of Jeth and Aghani, those pits remained filled with water. That was my go-to direction for nature's call. Afterwards, I'd break off a jhaua branch to clean my teeth, return home, and proceed to sweep the thresholds of the house.

But since the past five years, that routine has changed. Sleeping late meant waking late. You might wonder—you, who are known to run life by the clock—why this lapse in time? Well, it's like a poorly maintained train: when the departure is delayed by a minute or two, it arrives at every station late, and by the time it reaches its final

stop, it's lagging severely behind schedule. That's exactly what happened with me today.

Last evening, my cousin (my mother's nephew) arrived. He's not only older but also so full of cleverness that even the deepest sleeper would have their rest snatched away in his presence. Now don't mistake this for the cheer-haran of the Mahabharata, nor the image of a wife lost in a game of dice. Nor should you imagine a wife who, though your ardhangini in principle, remains so distantly removed in daily deeds that the husband, like Arjuna, is ready to forfeit her in the gamble of fate.

Yes, every human being must preserve their independent thought—but not in a way where the household becomes a battlefield of misaligned wills. Think of Ram's monkey army reaching the shore of the sea, resolved to build a bridge. He entrusted the contract to Nal and Neel, who were themselves quite confident in their skill. But when the two began throwing stone after stone into the ocean, each block sank individually, failing to connect, failing to form a bridge.

Just like that—without mutual agreement, neither a household nor a society can progress. Be it a family or a village, harmony and collective rhythm are essential for keeping pace with time. Otherwise, how will time itself flow forward through them?

Just as in other countries, even in our own, there are households where the husband and wife belong to different political parties—and of course, their ideologies differ too. They openly oppose one another both in public and in private. This is, perhaps, the wildflower root of what we call personal freedom. But so, be it—what has it to do with us?

That evening, when Sushil Bhai arrived, a strange stillness passed through me. And how could it not? Even after crossing eighty-five years of age, not a single tooth of his had fallen, and no more than a quarter of his hair had turned grey. His face, just as radiant as it had been in youth. Even now, every year, he walks the entire 105 kilometres from Sultanganj to Baidyanath Dham on foot. Just seeing him swelled my heart. Had I followed in his footsteps all these years, wouldn't I, too, be gliding through the eighty-fifth year of life with laughter and ease?

Sushil Bhai had always been a lover of song and art. Though to some extent, we are all artists. Everyone, in some way or another, brings a touch of artistry to the refinement of life. During the days of his parents—my maternal uncle and aunt—the village of Beriyahi was in good condition. The Kosi River flowed to the east and the Kamla to the west, both far enough from the village

that the seasonal floods rarely reached it. Floods meant sand deposits, broken bunds, new channels carved by the current, and fresh paths created by gushing water—but Beriyahi was mostly free from such disturbances.

Under the stewardship of his father, Sushil Bhai's family owned twelve bighas of land, from which they maintained a modest life as middle-class farmers. Among three brothers, Sushil Bhai was the youngest. In those days, the villages brimmed with kirtan mandalis, folk dance troupes, and various cultural gatherings—many of which continue, though their vibrancy may have faded. But they remained public spaces of relationship and expression.

Sushil Bhai's childhood was pleasant. That goodness, of course, refers to that time—not to today. Back then, there were no mobile phones or flashy vehicles in the family. "Good" meant food for both meals, a shelter strong enough to guard against rain, cold, and heat, and clothing suitable to the season and preserving one's modesty. Sushil Bhai had access to all three.

Just as villages had kirtan mandalis and dance troupes, they also had wrestling arenas—akhara. But don't misunderstand akhara as a communal space. Though, yes, it was a space for ideas too. Children from the village would clear open fields or undergrowth with their hoes and make their akhara grounds. There, at dawn, they

would go and wrestle each other.

There were two kinds of matches. One would wrestle someone younger or weaker—this was called *lapatā'eb* (light grappling), and the other was to challenge someone stronger—this was *lapatā'eb* for proving one's strength.

Initially, Sushil Bhai, too, went to the *akhara* with his peers. But gradually, his mental energy overtook his physical strength. For three winters—from Kartik to Phagun—he continued to wrestle, but then he joined a *kirtan mandali* instead. Every evening, there would be devotional singing at the local Hanuman temple. Sushil Bhai began attending those sessions regularly.

Listening to the beat of the *dholak*, he would sit cross-legged and, with both hands, mimic the rhythm on his knees just like the *dholakia* played his instrument. In the course of work and activity, we all come to realise that one type of task leads to another—some as enablers, others as distractions. Similarly, after six months of syncing his knees to the *dholak*'s beat, a wave of melody awakened within Sushil Bhai, which even he could not suppress.

That is to say, as an instrument grips the soul of the musician, melody too rose within him—but it didn't seize him. Instead, he realised that this path might diminish

his inner dominion.

Among the three types of strength—physical, mental, and emotional—it is the strength of the mind that reigns supreme, and indeed, it is the most revered. The mind not only takes care of the body's vigilance, but it also nurtures the emotional landscape. Whether it is the dominance of the body or the surge of emotions, both are, in one way or another, influenced by the supremacy of the mind.

But none of this mattered to Sushil Bhai. All that concerned him was singing along with the other singers. Matching the rhythm of the dholak on his knees, however, was not his forte.

Just as students face their mid-term exams every six months to evaluate their inclinations, Sushil Bhai too underwent a similar test. And like all tests, his came in multiple shades—assessment and revelation. Slowly, his attachment to the beat of the dholak faded, and his sense of melody awakened. As a child, he didn't understand the intricacies of pitch and tune, so he sang loudly, out of tune.

The harmonium player's melody faltered under the strain, but in doing so, one voice began influencing the other. Gaurinath—the lead singer and harmonium player who usually led the chorus and occasionally looked back to

check whether the communal harmony, the Eklavyapan of the group, was intact—noticed this voice.

In traditional kirtans, the ensemble is divided into two groups: one that leads the singing and one that responds. When Gaurinath heard Sushil Bhai's voice—raw and powerful—he found it both jarring, like unripe rice being threshed too soon, and yet strangely promising, like a note that hadn't ripened but held colour enough to ripen later. That promise was what he saw—the colour of refinement.

Gaurinath asked,

“Boy, what's your name?”

Though he recognised Sushil Bhai's face, he didn't know his name. After all, name often follows work, and work, too, gains name in its time.

Sushil Bhai answered, “Sushil.”

He said it like any other child of his age. At seven years old, what more could he have said?

In today's world, there are children who, even at the age of seven, introduce themselves with a flourish of talent. But this was a story from seventy years ago. Even today, there are families whose circumstances remain just as they were fifty or sixty years ago.

Back then, in our village society—even seventy years ago—the local Hanuman temple welcomed everyone.

There was no caste discrimination. Things are different now; the social fabric has changed. In those days, kirtan mandalis performed with sincerity and devotional intent. Now, even that has become a form of business.

Still, Gaurinath knew the family Sushil Bhai belonged to. So instead of asking twice, he simply said:

“Boy, come to me tomorrow morning.”

Just as Lord Ram, wandering the forest, came upon his scattered family and kin, so too, a meeting was fated for Sushil Bhai. And perhaps because of that, unlike every other day, he awoke early the next morning. And why wouldn't he? The joy of anticipation can stir even the stillest mornings. This wasn't some fleeting excitement—it had been there all along, rippling quietly under the surface.

We all know that when Emperor Akbar once went out hunting and touring the rugged countryside, he camped in a stony, forested region. As he went about surveying the area, he came upon a boy named Birbal. The child, son of a widowed mother, used to gather dry twigs from the hills and sell them for a living. Something about the boy struck Akbar. He instructed his soldier,

“Call that boy to me later—I'll ask him the time.”

And so, it was. The soldier passed the word to the camp. Hearing of Akbar's court, the ten-year-old Birbal, wide-

eyed and thrilled, took the invitation to heart. He decided he would meet the emperor himself—without delay.

Between Akbar's royal camp and Birbal's home lay a hilly terrain, crisscrossed by several nashi—narrow streams, swifter than deep. Though the water wasn't much, the current always flowed steadily. When Birbal left home, he leapt across the stream just as Lord Hanuman had leapt across the ocean upon hearing Sita's name. Akbar witnessed this act with his own eyes.

The camp—Akbar's mobile court set up during his hunting expedition—was stationed nearby. Birbal reached and stood directly before Akbar, saying,

"I am Birbal. Why was I summoned?"

Hearing Birbal's question, Akbar replied,

"For no particular reason. Just like that."

Birbal responded without pause,

"Then I shall leave."

Akbar said,

"Go."

As Birbal left the court, he stepped into the stream and began crossing it carefully, placing one foot in front of the other. Seeing this, Akbar sent a soldier again to call him back. The moment Birbal heard the emperor's summons, he immediately jumped across the stream and came running back into the court.

Standing before Akbar once more, he was asked:

“Birbal, when you came, you leapt across the stream. But when you left, why did you walk through it, step by step?”

Birbal, the fearless child that he was, replied:

“Sire, when I heard you had called for me, I was so filled with excitement that I lost all sense of the stream. But when I turned back, that thrill had passed, and the joy in my heart had quieted.”

Akbar recognised Birbal’s sharp intellect that very moment—and appointed him his minister that same day. Now, it isn’t that such brilliance existed only in Birbal and nowhere else. Just as Gaurinath had called upon Sushil Bhai, Sushil Bhai too arrived at the appointed time, with eager punctuality.

Like a fatherly teacher, Gaurinath said to him,

“Son, right now, you’re like a potter’s kneaded clay. Before crafting anything, the potter prepares the clay with great care. That’s what you are now. So, stop imitating the dholak, and follow the harmonium instead—this will help you cultivate your voice.”

It was the perfect blend—his enthusiasm and encouragement from another. Sushil Bhai accepted it with cheerful willingness.

Later in the evening, Gaurinath said to him:

"Brother, wash your hands and feet later. First, have some tea and share a few words of good cheer."

Sushil Bhai, smiling, replied:

"Well said, Madhav. Those days are long gone when people waited until their hands and feet were cleaned before taking a seat. Back then, people walked everywhere—barefoot, no shoes, no sandals—their feet dust-covered and tired. Washing them was necessary. But now, things aren't quite the same."

Meanwhile, the tea arrived. We both began sipping from our cups and continued chatting.

I asked, "Bhai, how is your family doing?"

Like a man with no wealth who has no obsession over money, Sushil Bhai replied,

"Son, my parents never had my birth chart drawn up, so I can't say anything precise. But from experience, I know I've crossed eighty-five."

The tea had already lightened my mood, and now his thoughts stirred me too. In this time and age—when more young people are dying than the elderly—Sushil Bhai had passed the age of eighty-five and still spoke with no mention of death. I asked,

"Bhai, after living this long, what all have you done, seen, or heard? Tell me a little about that."

Hearing my question, Sushil Bhai paused, deep in

thought. After a short while, he said,

“Son, life is life—it sees the whole world like the sun does. But even so, I’ll share just two events from my life.”

Hearing this, I thought—why push him toward trivial chatter? Let him speak whatever stirs in his heart. So, I said,

“Very well.”

Sushil Bhai continued,

“During my father’s tenure as a village official, our village—Beriyahi—lay about three kos from the Kosi River and two kos from the Kamla. Back then, this distance kept the floods away, and the families thrived. That was the setting of my childhood. I developed a deep love for music. First, I spent three years wrestling with friends at the akhara. Later, I joined the village kirtan mandali. But my heart wasn’t fully in it. Though I learned to play the dholak and harmonium to some degree, eventually I took up a khajuri (folk instrument) and began wandering alone, singing nirgun bhajans and songs of the maharai (folk mystics). I still sing them today. Along with that, I narrate folktales and ancestral stories.”

I asked,

“What did you say about Kamla and Kosi?”

Shaking his head slightly, Sushil Bhai answered,

"The two rivers that once stayed at a distance eventually entered the village. Neither of them has any certainty—no telling when they'll change course or wash away entire banks. The village was devastated. We've all become ten-faced now. Until we stop fragmenting into many, how will our society awaken? But awaken we must—for we're part of this world too."

I asked,

"Are you content with your life?"

As if emotion had stirred a latent force within his mind, Sushil Bhai responded,

"Son, I don't see much worth in my own life. But even then—if I'm not content, then when will I be?"

Echoes of Emptiness

You could say it's the world's gaze—or perhaps my helplessness—but I live away from home, in another state. I work in transport in Bangalore. Of course, one thing has changed: if life in the village once passed by in scattered days across scattered years, in Bangalore, I count entire days—eight-hour shifts—while counting twenty-, fifty-, and hundred-rupee notes till my fingers ache from snapping.

They say only a woman can manage a household. But when I spend my days counting bundles of cash, then even if I skim a little here and there—say, six or seven thousand—who's to stop it from slipping into my pocket? When you're earning an extra one or two lakhs a month, is it not natural that your lifestyle follows the same gradient? If not, wouldn't that surplus become an insult to wealth itself? Am I not living in the same world as everyone else? Then how could my life not be extra in some way?

So, just as my eating and drinking evolved, did my clothing and my dwelling. Yes, I've built myself a proper home too.

Even while living in Bangalore, my heart constantly drifts back to the village. I remember how father used to gently lead me by the hand to school. How Sonia and I used to climb the latam tree to steal its berries. How, at night, we'd strap up homemade torches—by hollowing out a clump of mud, slicing it with a sickle, stringing it with rope, and placing a clay lamp in the centre—and sneak into the orchards to steal mangoes in the dark, guided only by firelight...

These memories play endlessly in the inner screen of my heart.

But just like Hansraj once tied up King Vanshraj's seven hundred bulls with a single knot and the crows flew away with it, I, too, have knotted my sea of longing into a little plastic pouch and flung it to the side of my life.

When both my uncle and aunt passed away, I didn't return to the village. There was no need—what would be the point in seeing their faces in death when I hadn't seen them alive? I didn't go. Instead, I gave a pre-prepared excuse to my cousin-brother, who accepted it and said,

"Look, son—death comes to everyone. It's natural. So, what if you couldn't return when your parents died? You had your work, didn't you?"

Even he granted me leave.

The reckoning with the village came when I crossed fifty and the four sons started bickering over money and property. The world is the world—but even a father must protect what he earns for his children, for the next seven generations. If you don't preserve your inheritance, what's the point of life?

And yet, sons can be reckless. Earning nothing on their own, they're ever ready to grab whatever the father gives. Whatever I earn and spend is my life, but what remains will, of course, be their share.

That, too, is social life.

In society, people are always talking about virtue and sin, heaven and hell, gods and goddesses. And that doesn't happen only in our village, Kisanpur. It happens in many others—Bhagpur, Vilaspur, Jogpur, and countless more.

In Kisanpur, people firmly believe that just as heaven is born, it also dies—slowly or swiftly. Just like a bank account. You deposit your virtue like savings, and keep withdrawing from it. And then comes a day when the account is empty. After that, if you go demanding your due, won't the bank's guard throw you out? Of course he will.

Heaven is like that.

Do good, and you earn your place there. But keep piling up the sins, and eventually the road to heaven closes.

*The gate to hell, on the other hand, grows wider.
So be it. Heaven or hell—only those who've been there
would know. What concern is that of ours?
All that matters is this: just as the world knows there
are many realms—Satlok, Vaikunthlok, Swarglok,
Narkalok, Saketlok, and so on—people live in whichever
they deserve, based on their karma.
You are now fifty years old. Your wife is two years
younger—forty-eight. All four sons are between sixteen
and twenty-six, and you had wished to educate them
well, to make them better than yourself. But staying in
Bangalore, where everything felt foreign and unrelatable,
they could never receive the kind of meaningful education
they had envisioned. One might argue—does Bangalore
lack schools and colleges that your sons remained
uneducated? But here, I am not speaking about mere
college degrees. The eldest three brothers have completed
their M.A., and the fourth is pursuing his master's after
graduating with honours. By education, I mean the
making of a good human being. And a good human being
is one whose intellect is awakened by knowledge, the
kind of knowledge that enlightens the eye of wisdom.
None of them acquired that. When that knowledge
awakens, one begins to reflect: it is not God who seeks
humans, but it is the human who seeks God—the one*

who gave meaning to divinity through discovery. How can one who lacks limbs walk around introducing himself to seven billion people?

All four sons, moulded by the environment of Bangalore, have shaped their lives in such a way that even things once counted in mere thousands now flourish in lakhs. We now see that medical education alone crosses fifty lakhs, and similar is the case with other streams of education. Brotherly love—love among blood brothers—how is it nurtured anymore? I am not invoking Kabir here, though he was not merely a seer like Valmiki but a creator too—hence he had his own Ram, his spirituality, and also his own Ram-Rajya. But in today's context, the bond among brothers seems to have reduced to a cold calculation, where both consider themselves equal claimants of their father's property—no longer companions in karma or dharma. This is the thought that's awakening in today's generation. I do not claim that this thought has awakened in a hundred per cent of the youth, but just as there exists a long distance of ninety-nine steps between the numbers one and a hundred, so too lies a deep divide between people in our society.

Suddenly, a kind of detachment took over me. Without a second thought, I began packing my clothes in a bag—I

would leave for the village today itself. My mind felt like it had already flown away, and my face began to reflect that same drift. While I was still adjusting the bag, my wife came near—not saying a word, just watching the bag with quiet eyes. She kept looking at it, as if sensing that whenever I went anywhere, I usually informed her. But today, I said nothing.

Just as I had grown detached from the family, I resolved not to even glance toward my wife—let me look at my life, not hers. When one becomes estranged from family or those emotionally close, one inevitably walks toward the path of renunciation. This realisation dawned upon me—that the house built over fifty years, brick by brick, with the labour of a lifetime, intended to relieve the coming generations of burden, is now being torn down by sons influenced by the glitter of modernity, desperate to repaint and reshape it. Isn't this, then, a mockery of the essence of life itself? No matter where I went—my mind kept racing away from the city, toward the village. It was May, and just this past March I had bought seven bags—each of a different colour. The old bags were all stuffed into a storeroom. In earlier days, even if I went somewhere just for a day, I would pack a large bag with a razor, clothes, a toothbrush, and food items, and the bag would be full. But not today. In a small bag, I packed

one set of lungis, one dhoti, and a vest with a towel. Once I was ready, I finally looked toward my wife. I wasn't going to leave like the Buddha, hiding my face from my wife. I spoke.

"I'm going to the village."

My wife appeared perplexed. She was confused because I had neither mentioned nor hinted at this sudden departure. Mithila isn't Bangalore, after all—where children are placed in the husband's lap and the wife walks out freely with a bag in hand. If a child urinates or defecates in his mother's lap, it's absorbed into the motherland—but the fatherland is still the fatherland, where certain decorum still holds.

She replied,

"You are a man of this house. I cannot join your thoughts entirely. If you wish to go to the village, who am I to say go or don't go?"

In her heart, my wife must have believed that he always stays out for a couple of days—this would be no different. Just a short trip to the village and back.

Hearing his wife's words, a sudden feeling stirred in his heart—he would reach the village today itself. With improved transport between Bangalore and Mithilanchal, the distance had effectively shrunk to just four hours. Leaving his lodging by three in the afternoon, he would

reach the village by seven or eight. The very thought of home soaked his heart in such warmth that he felt as if he were already entering the village boundary. His mind was restless—as though fluttering with the urge—but he knew he still had a few more hours to spend in his present lodging. A whirlpool of thoughts circled within him—what had brought him to Bangalore from his village, and what was he taking back with him now? He had spent thirty years of his youth in Bangalore. And what had he offered to the very motherland whose name echoed endlessly over loudspeakers, glorified in speeches and festivals? His mind tried to console itself—that the days gone by are just that, gone.

Such was his yearning for the village that the disarray of Bangalore life had completely faded from memory. All that remained in his heart was the image of village life. At the appropriate hour, he left the lodging and departed for the airport to catch his flight. In the family, only his wife knew he was leaving for the village. All four sons were still at the residence—how could they know otherwise?

Once seated on the flight, he was reminded of Lalit Kaka. Back when he lived in the village—thirty years ago—Lalit Kaka was already over sixty. The last time he met him, Kaka had said, “Baua Shyam, to this day I don’t

remember ever taking an injection for illness. Rarely have I even taken a pill.” A wave of shame washed over him—here he was, leaving behind his entire family in Bangalore, and yet the first person he thought to meet upon returning was none other than Lalit Kaka.

After reaching the village, he did not go straight to his own home. Though he had cousins still living there, his heart was set on visiting the man who had crossed ninety years and was still active. As for himself, barely past fifty, he often felt like life had become unbearable. So, it seemed only fitting that the first visit be to Lalit Kaka.

Lalit Kaka was sitting at the threshold of his home. The threshold of a Mithila home—if not a temple itself—can certainly be called a sanctum of hospitality. Upon seeing a guest, villagers consider it their great fortune and, even without formal introductions, welcome them with a cup of water. True, the atmosphere of today has grown toxic, but the village still holds fast to its roots.

As soon as he reached Lalit Kaka’s door, he bowed in respect and said,

“Kaka, I touch your feet. I’m Shyam.”

Though Kaka looked him over top to bottom for a moment, recognition dawned quickly, and he smiled in full.

"Baua Shyam, "he said, "First, go wash your hands and feet. Washing away the dust relieves travel fatigue. Somehow, we are still the same people of Mithila, aren't we? Just as milk churns to produce butter, so too have our heads been churned to become true Maithils."

Shyam kept quiet. Age had granted him enough wisdom to listen more and speak less. He replied,

"Yes, that's what we truly are."

At once, a sense of trust bloomed in Kaka's heart. Just then, his granddaughter, Sunitiya, arrived with tea. Both Kaka and Shyam had their share. Lalit Kaka still prepared his own betel leaves with great care—just as a cook seasons the meal to her liking, Kaka tailored his betel to taste. Even though not a single tooth remained in his mouth, his face was so vibrant and full that there was no visible sign of their absence.

While preparing the betel, Kaka asked,

"How do you like your paan, Shyam? Small or large?"

Shyam replied,

"Kaka, I don't eat paan."

Kaka chuckled and said,

"Ah, now you're a Bangalorean! No wonder you've forgotten Mithila's customs and your Maithil ways."

Though I felt like saying— "Kaka, these days people have so much free time that they can stand in line for hours

at a paan shop. And even if one prepares paan oneself, ten times a day, day and night combined—it still eats up two to three hours.” But I said nothing. I simply asked,

“Kaka, won’t you even ask once why I’ve come?”

It was as if a moral flame was suddenly kindled in Lalit Kaka. He replied,

“You’re quite the wise one, eh? Who even thinks this way—that a guest standing at the threshold should be asked why he has come? Is this the doorstep of a man or a woman, that such a question should be asked?”

Indeed, when a misstep occurs, and if an elder corrects it, one must humbly accept it. I said,

“Kaka, just as the folk songs say— ‘I came empty-handed, I will leave empty-handed’—so it is with me. When I became a young man, I looked around and saw the state of our village and society, how steeped we were in feudalism. The condition of most people reflected the same—lives full of deprivation. In those days, there was a lack of everything—food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. My life was no different. So, to improve my condition, I left the village and went to Bangalore.” But no sooner had I entered the boundaries of that thought than my voice dried up, and I fell silent. Seeing this, Lalit Kaka asked,

“Baua, why’ve you gone quiet? Were you the only one from the village who went to Bangalore? Or is this some metaphor, like calling a fish caught in a trap a freedom-seeker?”

A desire rose within me to spill my entire heart before Kaka—to tell him how the dreams I had spun, born of money and ambition, had all been shattered. That wherever the chain starts—from an individual to a family, a family to society, and from society to the world—only the power of labour carries it upward. And wherever labour is absent and idleness prevails, that chain crumbles. But I kept all that inside. I wanted to first listen to Kaka’s thoughts. My heart had already surrendered—admitted that even after passing ninety, Kaka’s way of thinking still flowed just as it had in his youth.

In today’s world, living to ninety is no trivial feat. But to live that long with intellectual sharpness—that alone makes life meaningful. Wanting to hear more of his thoughts, I said,

“Kaka, I’ll live in the village now.”

Lalit Kaka smiled and replied,

“You think you all can live in the village anymore?”

I asked,

“Why not, Kaka?”

He replied,

“Don’t you see? Villages of Mithila now rest on the trident of Lord Mahadev.”

I had heard many people speak of this metaphorically, but I had never truly grasped it. So, I asked,

“How so, Kaka?”

Kaka explained,

“Just as one end of the country is still run by feudal thoughts and practices, another end is driven by the needs of old capitalists—those whose businesses served former demands. And a third is driven by new capitalists, who, with new machines, want to shape new lives. You’ve seen the result yourself—how the Tatas and Birlas, once India’s biggest industrialists, have now fallen far behind. We and our society are caught in this same trident.”

Listening to Kaka’s thoughts, a feeling arose in me—why not offer him a proper congratulation for having lived through ten full decades with such clarity? So, I said,

“Kaka, congratulations on living a life so enduring and thoughtful.”

Nurturing One's Own

Rambatiya village square. It was already eight in the morning. Neelkanth Kaka had reached the square right on time, as per his daily routine. True, the tea shop at the square opened as early as 3 a.m., but the shops selling gold, silver, clothes and garments would only open at eight. Even though the school opened at ten, the square had already come alive in the early hours with the cooperation of the community.

Now you might ask—if the tea shop opens at 3 a.m., why does Neelkanth Kaka arrive at eight?

Neelkanth Kaka had his way of thinking and followed his rhythm, one that he strictly adhered to. His reasoning was this: those who drink taadi (palm wine) in the evening often develop a craving for tea around three in the morning—so they show up early. But regular tea drinkers don't necessarily head to the square just for a cup. People come to the tea shop not just to sip tea, but to converse with at least five others without even being formally invited. That's what draws them to the square. And since it's still the pre-dawn hour, no serious work is being done yet—so this is the hour of leisure. They drink

tea to quench their thirst, and once their minds are soothed, when else will they recount the tales of their lives, if not now?

This is a village square after all. As more and more shops open their shutters, so too increases the footfall, and with it, the flow of ideas. The square becomes a hub for all kinds of village news—and by news, we don't mean the mundane, everyday affairs, but the specific happenings worth discussion. By eight o'clock, the most colourful and varied bits of gossip from the entire village make their way to the square. That is why Neelkanth Kaka has fixed eight o'clock as his tea time.

Though you could call the village square an *adda* (a gossip joint) or a *tokanta* (casual hangout), the other shops are single-purpose, so the crowd there is limited to that purpose. One may still ask: when even the leper or the sick bedridden man insists on a morning tea in bed, why does an elderly man like Neelkanth Kaka go all the way to the square for it at eight?

No, the issue is something else entirely. He goes there not for tea, but to hear the news—the tea is merely an excuse. He knows well that a glass or cup of tea costing just a rupee or two lacks consistency. Tea is prepared in countless variations and sold accordingly. The moment you enter a tea stall, the seller asks, "Which tea do you

want?"

Still, let the world go where it will—Neelkanth Kaka remains unfazed. His concern lies only with his routine-bound life. He knows that in today's world, even the finest thing—if priced low—loses value in the market, while an inferior or even worthless product—if priced high—gains reputation. This is the power of marketing—it sweetens the bitter and sours the sweet. Such is the hallmark of the media age, and naturally, the media will reflect this.

While Neelkanth Kaka was sipping his tea at the square, a heated debate broke out between two men at the shop. One claimed that the tea shop was the creator of the village square, while the other argued that the tea shop was only an accessory to it... The discussion was quickly turning into an argument.

The exchange of thoughts—like the lathiya (lathi or stick) that never falls on the foot but always strikes the ground or a nearby surface—kept growing longer. Just as lathi finds its ally in the earth, conversations too need collaborators. And so, the chat between the two—Makhanlal and Singhaarlal—kept expanding. Makhanlal said:

"No village or settlement can be called a square or a junction until a tea shop opens there. So, the creator of

the village square is, indeed, the tea shop.”

Singhaarlal grew agitated. And rightly so—for until trade and exchange begin in every village, what value would a square or crossroads even hold? One mustn’t misunderstand—this is not to suggest that outsiders are the only ones looting villages of their assets, from livestock to jewellery.

Singhaarlal exclaimed,

“Is a makhana something that just floats on water and appears on the surface?”

Indeed, the debate was occurring between men who could filter coins out of water and then drown in the taste of toddy and liquor. Makhanlal spoke from his perspective, and Singhaarlal from his.

Seated to the side, Neelkanth Kaka listened quietly to both men, his mind filled with quiet joy. What delighted him was the thought that had bloomed inside him: from the swamps and marshes of Mithilanchal to the small lakes, seasonal pools, dried-up rivers—all these waterways had, over time, turned into stagnant ponds. With roads now built across villages, water stagnation had increased even more.

The issue was about makhana. The cultivation of makhana depends greatly on waterlogging. How suitable are the current water conditions? What were the earlier

techniques for cultivating it, and how effective are the newer methods that aim to grow it in more confined spaces? How profitable would it remain under those changes? Right now, very little.

It's not the time to discuss whether Andhra's shrimp and hilsa are better than our rohu and bhakur. That can come later. Why waste time now? Just like Malda mangoes, our rohu too tastes today as it did a thousand years ago.

Everything else has evolved with modern techniques; every product has entered its developed phase—yet we continue to sing in the same old refrain: “Sab sakhi sasur gel, hamra lel chait par gel” (“All my friends left for their in-laws’ homes, only I was left behind to face this spring alone”).

At the tea stall, a dozen kinds of news pour in from a dozen mouths. Makhanlal and Singhaarlal's heated debate was suddenly interrupted by Gulten, who shouted: “You think the tea stall is a joke? Shut your mouths, both of you. Do you think everyone came here to listen to just the two of you quarrel?”

Hearing Gulten's words, the two men fell silent. And why wouldn't they? Society is, after all, society. One offers thoughts, and others share theirs. From individuals to families to communities, that chain persists. Today's

condition demands that if one wishes to act with truth, each step must land on solid ground.

Just as the argument between Makhnarlal and Singhaarlal had finally settled, another voice rang out from in front of the tea stall. It was Mansukhlal, loudly calling to his son:

“Aren’t you going to school?”

The boy, Dularchan, replied:

“I’m not going to school. Buy me a mobile, and I’ll study at home in the village on my own.”

Neelkanth Kaka turned to Gulten and said,

“Gulten, step aside for a moment and explain clearly—what exactly is a galgool?”

A thought stirred in Gulten’s mind—why carry the weight of others’ arguments on my head? Better to bring both father and son to Neelkanth Kaka directly. And that’s just what he did.

Mansukhlal and his son stood before Neelkanth Kaka, while Gulten quietly stepped aside.

Neelkanth Kaka was silently pondering—should he first ask Mansukhlal or Dularchan? Before he could decide, Mansukhlal himself blurted out,

“Kaka! What can I say—this boy tricked me first thing in the morning.”

Hearing this, Neelkanth Kaka was again about to ask,

"How did he trick you?" but Mansukhlal went on without pause—

"Kaka, I fed him tea and biscuits. When I told the boy to go to school, he said, 'I don't have a notebook.' So, I brought him along and bought one right here at the square. And now he says, 'Buy me a mobile, I'll study at home!'"

Sensing the seriousness of the issue, Neelkanth Kaka felt within himself that neither staying silent nor speaking hastily would help. It was a matter between father and son. One was innocent; the other, aware and responsible. It was only right that the one with wisdom should gently guide the one without. Redirecting the course of his thoughts, Neelkanth Kaka finally spoke—

"Mansukh, he's a child, full of curiosity. Somehow or other, coax him into going to school."

Taking Neelkanth Kaka's words to heart, Mansukhlal led his son away toward home.

Gulten remarked,

"Kaka, what can I say? Whatever happens these days—nothing is surprising anymore!"

Without reacting verbally, Neelkanth Kaka sank deeper into thought. Should a child go to school or not? All at once, his mind rewound to that moment in time when government schools were crippled, and education was

redirected toward commercial interests. The social system weakened. From colleges to universities, disorder took root. Examinations were delayed for years. Certificates began to be sold and traded.

These thoughts burned so fiercely in Neelkanth Kaka's mind that he began speaking loudly, almost shouting—"Whether someone speaks their mind in society or stays silent, I too bear a responsibility toward social concerns—and so I must express my thoughts!"

Hearing the roar in Neelkanth Kaka's voice stirred a feeling inside—I must go to him. He was right at home, just beside the square. But then, another thought tugged from behind—Day after tomorrow is Sayrika's wedding. I must attend it. Poor girl—she's flying off to America right after.

But what if Neelkanth Kaka got me entangled in another long debate? Should I then go sit through arguments and court-like deliberations, or should I go witness Sayrika's wedding?

The mind wavered between going and staying when suddenly, Neelkanth Kaka fell silent. It was as though a thundering cloud had rolled across the sky—booming through the atmosphere only to dissolve into stillness. Just like that, everything went quiet again.

Life's Deeds, Life's Essence

The village of Udaipur, over seven hundred years old, has now grown into a settlement of nearly five hundred households. The forest and groves around the village may not have vanished entirely, but more than half have indeed disappeared. In this very village, Savurlal and Motilal—childhood companions—have lived their entire lives side by side.

The nature and appearance of villages have changed over time. The villagers have learned to manage their water supply, and rightly so. Geographically, the village lands have undergone changes—caused by floods, earthquakes, and other such natural events—that have led to uneven terrains. This is the visible surface of the earth, but beneath it, too, basin-like depressions have formed. Rain, after all, is nothing new—it has always been there, falling as it must. What happens now is that water from higher ground gathers in these low-lying areas, where it often remains for several months of the year.

The people of the village might not have had the foresight of Lakshminath Gosain, who could articulate the importance of water throughout the twelve months and all 365 days of the year. But still, an awareness did

arise within them. If the lowlands could be deepened just a bit more, then water would remain year-round, fulfilling essential needs. Thus, a pond was created in the village. Though initially, no proper lining was laid in it. That came later.

The forested areas around the village were rich in softwood trees. Such wood may have been useful for making furniture like chairs and tables, but for villagers who struggle daily to quell the fire in their bellies, their first concern was simply survival. So, the people of Udaipur gradually cleared the softwood trees and began planting fruit-bearing trees and bushes. Eventually, nearly one-fourth of the village land was transformed into orchards.

Inspired by neighbouring villages, the people of Udaipur also took up farming with renewed vigour. They raised livestock, too. They even continued the traditional craft of making earthenware vessels. One such vessel was the paatak—a circular clay container shaped like a trough. When fired properly and placed in storage, it would neither disintegrate nor let water seep through. In this way, the village built three wells and one community pond with a surrounding platform for all to use.

Just as society is divided into castes, it is further divided into sects. The village had more than fifteen different

castes, and within each caste, there were further sectarian divisions.

Even the scriptures we hold sacred are filled with conflicting ideas. Those who adhere to one line of thought often hurl abuses at those who follow another—just as caste groups sling slurs across caste lines, sects, too, are not immune to hostility. The result is evident: members of one sect often end up in fights, disputes, and even violence with those of another. But whatever continues to happen in the wider world, it means little to Savurlal and Motilal. Their concern was simply living a life of companionship.

It is true that when the ancestors of both families first settled in Udaipur, Motilal's family was under the influence of the Siddha sect, and Savurlal's family followed the Nath sect. Whatever their caste origins may have been before arriving in Udaipur, in this village, they were accepted as belonging to the same caste. Yet their sectarian affiliations remained different.

Just as Savurlal's ancestors were not heavily involved in agriculture, Motilal's ancestors too were not deeply engaged in farming. At that time, the village had plenty of vacant land, forests, and wild growth—so those who wished to settle and cultivate simply did so. There had been no official land survey yet, and hence, no

paperwork—no formal land records.

To date, three land surveys have taken place. The first, during Emperor Akbar's reign, was incomplete and patchy. The second, under British rule in 1903, had some degree of honesty. The third began, but was never completed—neither boundaries were finalised, nor was land redistribution achieved. Still, at least official government records now mention boundaries and plots. Since Savurlal's family was influenced by the Nath tradition and Motilal's by the Siddha, a subtle behavioural difference had crept into their lives. Consequently, Savurlal's family ended up forming stronger ties with more households in the village, whereas Motilal's family had fewer connections. But those were matters of the past—reflections of how those families once lived. Society's ideological landscape had already become varied and coloured by multiple streams of thought. Yet life goes on. And life in Mithila? There is no other place quite like it. Where else do people experience such richly distinct seasons—harsh winters, blazing summers, and everything in between? Some places in the world remain in the same state year-round—in weather, in crop cycles, in day-night balance—while others are halved and divided by time. Kumbhakarna is said to have slept for six months, but whether he slept during the day or night

remains uncertain. After all, Mithila is Mithila.

Mithila was not crowned as a civilizational pinnacle just yesterday. Be it in food, clothing, music, or daily living, the depth of understanding our people have is rare elsewhere. Even though Mithila, Bengal, and Assam all lie in the same geo-climatic zone—part of the Ganga-Brahmaputra plains—still, we consume the tilkor leaf with love, while people in Bengal and Assam call it a “wild green” or “jungle fruit” and avoid it altogether. And we’re not even discussing here the mystery of how one variety of tilkor has bitter leaves and the other, bitter fruits, though both come from the same family.

In this world, we understand that nothing is inherently poison—that is, nothing is automatically life-taking—and nothing is inherently nectar—that is, life-giving. Everything contains both. That which gives life can also take it. The only difference lies in the dose. We must discern for ourselves: how much of something is poison, and how much is nectar.

To understand the highest truths of the world is no small greatness. But is understanding the truth that easy? A single word can sprout a hundred meanings from a hundred mouths! Take dharma, for instance. If it leads to a life of fulfilment, then it is the righteous path, resulting in bliss so deep it offers fearlessness. But when

*dharm*a is used to instil fear— “This is sin, and you’ll go to hell if you do this”—then it becomes an instrument of control.

Brother, if we consider ourselves rational human beings, and cannot even understand our companions, then what can we expect to understand from another’s mouth? But this is not the time for all that. For now, let this suffice. Up until high school, there wasn’t a deep connection between Savurlal and Motilal—certainly not one that could be called a bond of true companionship. Their interactions were just like any two students from the same village: if they met on the road, they’d walk together, chatting on the way to school. If not, they’d go alone.

Here, I’m not speaking about someone like Kali Bhai (Kalikant Jha, I.P.S.), who used to say— “It takes me just fifteen minutes to reach school, and I’d rather not waste that time chatting. I’ll use those fifteen minutes to memorise five English words while walking, and by the time I reach school, I’ll have mastered them. I’ll repeat the same on the way back. That’s how you become an I.P.S.”

But if you go through life doing everything just for yourself, how then are you a social being? What separates man from beast? In both life and death, it is society

that fills the wedding procession and mourns the bier. Though they lived in the same village, the relationship between Savurlal and Motilal was no different from that shared by any other villagers. Now, I won't delve into the details of that high school, where in some places, meritorious students are given the front seats, and in others, students are seated forward or backwards based on caste. Whatever is done is done. It reflects the behaviour of those who do it—what did Savurlal or Motilal have to do with all that? Their only concern was this: if parents send their children to school, it is their duty to study. The real result of that is seen in the examination outcome. Can education be achieved solely through mobile phones? Perhaps the subjects can be learned, but what about the human experience of life? That only reveals itself through lived interpersonal relationships. Life is a dense forest, where not even a single step ahead is visible. To navigate it and emerge as a purposeful being is no child's play.

After passing with a second division, both of them—Savurlal and Motilal—bought bicycles, as the college was seven kilometres away. With that, the bond between them deepened. Their eyes and thoughts became as aligned as birds fluttering their wings at dawn. They both became the first in the village to lay eyes on a college.

It was another matter that the college opened in time for them—otherwise, they too would have remained like their elders: after passing middle school, Jhuthan Kaka became a village clerk, and Phusan Kaka began tutoring village children.

They both carried kerbira sticks, claiming authority, though one could question whether they even understood what a kerbira was. And even if they did, could they grasp its purpose? But that's village life for you—an ocean in itself. Don't assume by "ocean" I mean the Pacific or Red, or Black Sea. I only mean that just like a small village pond teeming with thousands of fish and creatures, each finding a space and living out life, so too is humanity, thriving with intellect and layered sensibility.

The newly opened college, now expanding into a broader institution, introduced tutorial classes to strengthen the teaching process. As these weekly sessions increased familiarity between teachers and students, they also brought Savurlal and Motilal closer. One was from the same village, the other from the same class and college. And when one student begins to walk a path, it's not always certain the other won't resist it—but resistance too is part of the journey.

Even so, remember Hazari Babu—Hazari Prasad Dwivedi,

the towering figure of Hindi literature—whose stream of life was transformed into a humanistic form by Rabindranath Tagore on the soil of Shantiniketan. Such transformational power does lie within humans.

As fate would have it, the tutorial class became that very opportunity for such shaping. The teacher became the facilitator; the two students took positions like opposing sides in a debate. Just as examining an object from both ends reveals its true form, so too their discussion revealed perspectives. Both were students of Hindi literature, and naturally, the topic arose: the language movement of the medieval period.

Savurlal was drawn to the literary power of language; Motilal was enchanted by song and poetic traditions. On the third day of the tutorial class, the two found themselves debating the border between the Bhakti kaal (devotional era) and Riti kaal (aesthetic era). Savurlal argued—how could Shringaar kaal (the era of romanticism) be born directly after Bhakti kaal, which emphasised renunciation and detachment?

Motilal, being influenced by Ramchandra Shukla, wholeheartedly accepted Riti Kaal (the ornate poetic era) as a natural successor to Bhakti Kaal (the devotional era). The medieval period had also become deeply sectarian. On one side, there was the decline of Vedic

social systems; on the other, figures like Buddha, Mahavira, and numerous Shankaracharyas had already descended upon the earth with their distinct doctrines. Within religious frameworks, many sects had taken deep root.

The influence of the Siddha, the Nath, and the contrasting ideologies of Nirguna (formless divinity) and Saguna (divinity with form) had all grown strong. Just as Tulsidas and Surdas represented the Saguna path, Kabir and Jayasi followed the Nirguna. Yet even within these streams, there were differences—one embraced the path of love, the other, of knowledge. Jayasi, walking the path of love, helped shape the Sufi tradition; Kabir, grounded in the concept of a formless Brahman, gave rise to the Nirguna sect.

Truth, after all, is truth.

A palm tree has no branches or leaves. But if you embellish it—adding branches and foliage—it naturally begins to show difference and distinction. Still, what did Savurlal or Motilal have to do with all that? They were not concerned with debates over the literary or linguistic history of the medieval age.

By chance, the name of George Grierson came up—a renowned linguist who once served as the S.D.O. (Sub-Divisional Officer) in the Madhubani Subdivision during

the 1880s. In his classifications, he mentioned "Jolaha Maithili."

During a tutorial class, Savurlal raised a question: Did Grierson refer to the language of the Jolaha caste when he said "Jolaha Maithili"? Or did he mean the dialect used in Kabir's works—often associated with Jolaha communities? The Jolaha caste is not unique to Mithila; it exists in many Indian states. Also, within Mithilanchal itself, linguistic variations exist from village to village. Was Grierson referring to this diversity when he named it so? Or was he drawing from the widespread Nirgun devotional songs and the Kabir tradition present across these villages? After all, many believe Kabir belonged to the Jolaha caste.

Udaipur had now, for the first time, produced two B.A. graduates. Much has been said of Mithila's scholarly communities, particularly in devotional music, but attention must also be paid to how the floodgates of education open or close in different villages.

After college, both Savurlal and Motilal made a pact—a lifelong friendship under one condition. The condition was this: no matter how the world treated them, they would never lie to each other nor commit any act that could harm the other.

This wasn't some tavern-born friendship formed during

a wedding feast and forgotten after the ceremony ended. This was not the kind of bond where one eats Lorik's ceremonial rice and claims lifelong loyalty. Eating rice and becoming a devotee is no child's game—it is not for the fickle.

Savurlal's family had always been community-oriented. Naturally, he adopted a social role and became deeply rooted. Motilal's family, however, was more influenced by the ways of their neighbours and gradually drifted toward government service and administrative ideals. Motilal, diligent by nature, benefitted from the reservation system and cleared the civil services examination.

In thirty-five years of government service, Motilal began to forget his own life—he began living for his job, not with it. Savurlal, on the other hand, structured his life around his true needs and adopted a community-based way of living. Motilal encountered many different kinds of societies—like raindrop bubbles, some small, some large—but none so lasting or rooted as the one Savurlal belonged to.

Just as a newly married girl from a distant land, though residing in her in-laws' house, always keeps the memories of her native village alive, eventually, time passes, and she forgets her parental home, blending into the customs of her new one. The same happened with Motilal in his

early days of service.

Motilal always believed in treating his job as just a job, all the while holding firmly to the idea of settling down in his birthplace, becoming a permanent resident of his native village. In the beginning, he served as the Block Development Officer (BDO), overseeing rural administration. During this period, he observed the hierarchy of governance from the bottom up—from peons and clerks in the office to the upper echelons of bureaucratic authority. But eventually, instead of reforming the system, he adjusted himself to it and became absorbed within its existing current.

Even while embedded in administrative structures, Motilal failed to grasp a simple truth: as long as a small group holds sway over the majority, the atmosphere of governance will remain toxic.

Then came the implementation of the 'Indira Awas Yojana'—a scheme to provide housing for the poor. Just as a person who wears a pyjama makes sure to dig a trench for relieving himself, similarly, those in administrative positions often create their trench for channelling bribes. At first, Motilal felt a twinge of guilt. But then, society is what it is. It influences the individual inevitably. Under its pressure, Motilal too began siphoning money from the housing scheme.

His love for the village still lingered. In an early stroke of nostalgia, he purchased a bigha of land back home. Within just two years of service, this land acquisition was completed—but society didn't view it with suspicion. After all, how many people understood the salary structure of various government positions? They couldn't assess whether one's income could reasonably sustain a family and allow for land purchases or not. And when ordinary government employees were building three-story concrete houses, accumulating bank balances, and buying land, then surely an officer of Motilal's rank had a certain standing to uphold.

Initially, Motilal had planned to live his life with the village at the centre of his being. But over time, that sentiment withered and faded. Slowly, his thoughts turned toward the city. During his long tenure, he worked in various district offices. But it was in the state capital—Ranchi—where he decided to settle permanently. After the passing of his parents, Motilal didn't sell the ancestral property, but he did let it deteriorate. What little property remained, he entrusted to someone else. In the beginning, he would occasionally visit the village, but even that stopped with time.

Life has two paths. Just as one leads toward wrongdoings, another leads toward virtue. I won't now

enter into philosophical discussions about karma, akarma, vikarma, or karma-sannyas. Let me only say this: Motilal never lacked money—not when it came to educating his children, not when it came to arranging the weddings of his daughters, not even for his living. His two daughters became engineers, married engineers, and shaped their lives accordingly. His two sons now serve in administrative roles as well.

After retirement, Motilal entered that stage of life where dependence on others becomes inevitable. That phase where one needs others, like in childhood and old age.

Having lived an unmoderated life, both he and his wife now had multiple illnesses. Whatever strength their bodies could have retained with age was now absent. They still had to run a household. Though financial abundance allowed them to keep a servant, and salaries could be paid generously, a servant can never replace the intimacy and responsibility of a family member.

Three years into retirement, Motilal found his thoughts drifting once again to the village life he had left behind. Motilal recalled those families where the elderly are still seen as majestic presences—where they not only walk through life with the grace of wisdom, but also recognise the value of that very wisdom. That's where the essence of life begins to emerge. Meaning, whether a family is

affluent, deprived, or somewhere in between, its foundation should be built on the bedrock of thought, not merely on material wealth.

True, in today's world, the economic plane holds undeniable importance. But wealth is only a means—not life itself. In thoughtful families, that means—wealth—is naturally woven into the fabric of life through productive labour, in such a way that monetary concerns rarely ever rise to crisis levels.

As these thoughts took root, Motilal found himself stirred by a sudden resolve: sell everything in Ranchi and return to the village.

After all, one could easily hire help in the village. And if a trustworthy family member were brought into the fold—appointed as the steward of one's property—they would, from their understanding, serve with genuine care. All at once, a flood of memories returned—the village is still that same village where the youngest of kin carry out the final rites of the eldest with heartfelt dignity.

Motilal's thoughts wandered further, now deep in his ancestral village. And within that emotional journey, one name returned—his childhood friend, Savurlal.

The memory of their oath sprang to mind—that neither would ever wrong the other. As that promise resurfaced, Motilal felt a deep and rare sense of contentment. His

inner restlessness turned to purpose.

Indeed, in this world, if one finds even a single true friend, then no obstacle—no loss—is insurmountable.

Calling out to his wife, Motilal said loudly:

“With flights now running, the distance between the city and village has shrunk. It’s no longer like before, when it took eighteen hours from Ranchi to the village. I’ll reach in an hour. I’m going home. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

His enthusiasm for the village did not stir even a grain of resistance in Bhawani’s heart. After all, he was returning the next day. Bhawani replied,

“What’s even left in the village? I’ve heard the fields have turned into wastelands. Where would we stay?”

Just as a reunion after fifty years erases the scars of separation, so too Motilal felt. He responded:

“There is still one friend in the village whose embrace will tell me I’ve come home.”

Bhawani said simply:

“Then go—and see for yourself.”

Motilal reached the village and went straight to Savurlal’s home. In our villages, some traditions still hold strong—before you are asked a single question, you are offered a vessel of water.

Savurlal wasn’t home. But Motilal knew the family. He settled himself into a chair set at the entrance. Just

then, Savurlal returned from somewhere. His face had aged, but his words rang with undimmed affection:

“Friend!”

“Yes, friend. I’ve come back to live here now,” said Motilal.

Hearing those words, Savurlal felt a quiet happiness stir within him. If a lost soul finds its way home by dusk, can it truly be called lost? he thought.

Savurlal said gently:

“This village—does it belong to any one person? It belongs to all. Everyone has a right to stay. After all, isn’t that what we live with—the truth that one’s deeds shape the meaning of one’s life?”

Truth Alone Triumphs

It is the thirteenth of August. In the village of Jagarathpur, Plus-Two classes had begun earlier this January. The headmaster, Govind Babu, suggested that the seventy-ninth Independence Day be celebrated with full festivity in the school grounds. His enthusiasm had a personal root: Govind Babu was the son of a freedom fighter.

He had taken charge of Jagarathpur Higher Secondary School as headmaster only after the Plus-Two section was introduced. Before this, he served as principal in a high school, but with his recent promotion, he was transferred to Jagarathpur.

The fifteenth of August was approaching. A meeting was called with all the teachers, thirty in number, and with the students, nearly five hundred. In that gathering, Govind Babu laid out his proposal. At dawn, teachers and students together would carry the tricolour and join the village procession that would last until eight o'clock. Afterwards, everyone would assemble in the school courtyard for the distribution of prasad. Then they would return home to bathe and take their meal, before coming

back to the school by ten. At that hour, a symposium would begin on the history of India's freedom, followed by cultural performances that would continue until five in the evening.

All the teachers were expected to speak, and alongside them, ten bright students were selected as speakers. In that chosen list appeared the name of Raman Kumar.

Raman Kumar was a student of the Plus-Two section, in the eleventh class, and he consistently stood first in his class. It was not only a matter of this year's result; since the eighth standard, he had always secured the top position. Raman Kumar was a student of science, sharp in intellect and diligent in effort.

Govind Babu had not yet announced the subjects for the speeches, but he had given one clear instruction: the order of speeches must not be such that every speaker repeated the same theme. Each speech must carry its freshness.

Until now, Raman Kumar had never spoken from a public platform. Hearing his name on the list made his heart tremble. At home, he confided in his uncle Manoj and his father Ramdhan:

"Day after tomorrow, on Independence Day, there will be a speech program in school, and I too have to speak. I have never spoken on a public stage before, and my heart

feels restless. Moreover, the Headmaster has said that no speaker should repeat another's subject. Every speech must hold something new."

Ramdhān, Raman Kumar's father, was the head of the family, though his life was bound to farming. Since the death of his father, Ramdhan had lived by the plough. He knew every skill in the fields, and along with skill, he carried such honesty that no quarrel had ever arisen between the two brothers in their shared household. Ramdhan was the elder, Manoj the younger.

Manoj was a man of society. His schooling had not gone very far, for he was only matriculate, yet he was both an honest social worker and a capable public speaker. There was another virtue in him as well: every day, he gave four hours to physical labour and two to mental work. From this balance, he earned enough to maintain his household—two children, his wife, and himself—without want. He had one principal firm in his heart: the work of today must be finished today. Yet, as in every life, fortune and misfortune would come uninvited.

When Raman Kumar spoke, his father Ramdhan remained quiet, but his uncle Manoj asked him,

"My child, what do you think yourself?"

With the innocence of a boy who speaks openly before his parents and elders, Raman Kumar said,

"Uncle, I have not read the full history of the freedom movement, but surely I can speak on a subject different from the other speakers."

Hearing this, Manoj began to reflect. What topic would be such that no one else would speak on it? All at once, the thought came to him: the national emblem on which the words Satyameva Jayate are inscribed. Why not suggest that to Raman?

He asked,

"My child, how much time will each speaker be given?"

Raman Kumar replied,

"Twenty minutes. The teachers have been given twenty-five minutes each, and the students twenty."

After hearing this, Manoj decided that if he prepared Raman for a half-hour speech, it would serve the purpose well. He thought to himself, the boy is still young and may forget some points, but that would not matter. He then said,

"My child, it would be best to write everything down. First, understand what you want to say, then put it in writing. And after writing, read it again and again."

Raman Kumar felt content with his uncle's advice. His heart was at peace because he knew that if a speech of half an hour was prepared, even if he forgot a few points, he would still be able to speak for twenty minutes.

Ramdhan, Raman's father, sat beside them, silent, though attentive. Raman brought paper and pen and made himself ready. Manoj then began to speak:

"My child, listen first to the meaning of our national emblem, *Satyameva Jayate*, and then write it down. *Satyameva Jayate* is the guiding motto of our nation. It means 'Truth alone triumphs.' To bring *Satyameva Jayate* onto the national emblem, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya played a decisive role.

The words themselves come from the *Mundaka Upanishad*, which is part of the *Rigveda*. There it is written:

'*Satyameva Jayate Nanritam, Satyena Pantha Vitato Devayanah.*

Yenakramanty Rishayo Hyaptakama, Yatra Tat Satya Sya Paramam Nidhanam.'

This means that truth and falsehood have, since the very beginning of Indian civilisation, been at the centre of religion and philosophy. In the *Ramayana*, the victory of Lord Rama over Ravana of Lanka is narrated, a triumph understood as the victory of truth over falsehood. Similarly, in the *Mahabharata*, the five Pandava brothers defeated the hundred Kauravas, who commanded an army of eighteen divisions. That too has always been seen as the triumph of truth.

Gandhiji once said that ‘truth’ is a profoundly pure yet deeply complex word. The word ‘Satya’ is made of only two and a half letters, as simple as the word ‘Prem’ or love, also of two and a half letters, yet to follow the path of truth is exceedingly difficult. He declared that truth is God, and God is truth. If the realisation of truth is the path of Jnana Yoga, then living truth in one’s actions is Karma Yoga, and to immerse oneself in the ocean of truth and taste its nectar is Bhakti Yoga.

In Indian literature, in films, and in folk traditions, the final proclamation has always been the victory of truth, and it continues to be so even today. From a sociological point of view, this sentence is not only a moral ideal, it also carries within it the deeper meanings of social structure, power relations, struggles, and debates.”

Uncle Manoj was speaking with steady clarity, while Raman Kumar listened with his ears keenly alert. In his mind, he was already planning: first, he would listen carefully, then write down each thought on paper, and later read it four or five times until much of it was half-remembered. He would also arrange the key points in order so that they might be recalled easily. The thought in his mind soon reached his lips:

“Uncle, please explain a little more slowly.”

Hearing this request, Manoj reflected inwardly. When

Raman would stand upon the stage, he must be able to present his thoughts in such a way that the audience, too, would feel that he had prepared thoroughly, that he had brought forward something truly useful for life.

Manoj then said:

“*Satyameva Jayate* means that truth is ultimately victorious, but when we look at it through the lens of society, we realise that this phrase is not merely a moral ideal. It also brings to light the deeper debates of social structure, of power relations, and human struggle.”

Raman Kumar interrupted:

“Uncle, please say it a little more clearly.”

Manoj paused for a moment, arranged his thoughts into simple threads, and continued:

“My child, truth cannot be considered something fixed, pure, or universally absolute. Truth is a concept continually shaped by society, moulded by power, by class, by caste, by gender, by religion, and by culture. The French thinker Michel Foucault has said that truth never exists in some impartial and universal form. It is always the product of power structures.”

Raman Kumar responded, “Uncle, explain it in even plainer words.”

Manoj replied,

“My child, those who hold power create their truth. They

spread that truth through channels of communication, through the media. And whoever dares to oppose that manufactured truth is subjected to various forms of suffering, while those in power pour all their energy into spreading their constructed version of truth.”

Raman Kumar exclaimed, “Then that means...!”

Uncle Manoj said,

“Yes, my child. In our society, in Indian society, class, caste, and gender inequalities exist in ways that may not be visible on the scale of the entire nation, but within our village and community, everyone can see them. It is before our very eyes that the definition of truth has always been determined from the perspective of the upper classes. The truths of the lives of Dalits, women, tribals, minorities, the poor and the downtrodden have been silenced, pushed outside the circle of debate. This was the case yesterday, and it remains the case even today. Is it not so? In such a situation, how can we accept Satyameva Jayate as merely a formal symbol? The real question then becomes: whose truth is it that triumphs?”

Raman Kumar, too, was thinking inwardly, though his thoughts were still unripe. He suppressed his ideas and simply asked,

“Then?”

Uncle Manoj understood what was stirring in the boy's mind. He explained,

"My child, when every person in a nation or a society receives equal opportunity and equal participation in power, then true development will happen—social as well as economic and intellectual. If that does not take place, then the line of division between people will continue, and the rule of the few will remain, whether it is foreign rule or our own."

Breathing out a long sigh, Raman Kumar said,

"Uncle, the program is the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow still lies in between. Let us stop here for today. I will think on my own as well, and afterwards, whatever I cannot understand, I will come to you and ask. I also wish to learn the next ideas from you."

Just as Raman Kumar had resolved in his heart to understand further, Uncle Manoj too resolved to share more.

At eight o'clock the next morning, as the first light spread across the fields, both were ready in mind. Manoj carried forward the thoughts he had prepared, and Raman Kumar came to him and said,

"Uncle, the next lesson..."

Seeing Raman Kumar's eagerness, Uncle Manoj felt a quiet joy within. He thought to himself that whenever a

child awakens to the desire for understanding, and if that desire is guided with clarity, the child will surely walk upon that path. And to walk upon the path is what it truly means to live a life.

Uncle Manoj began:

“My child, in Indian philosophy, truth has been regarded as the very form of Brahman. According to the Upanishads, truth is not merely a statement or practical conduct; it is synonymous with the Supreme, with Brahman itself. The Taittiriya Upanishad declares, ‘Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahma,’ which means that truth, knowledge, and infinitude together lead to the realisation of Brahman. In the spiritual sense, it has been said that only the Divine principle, the all-pervading essence of truth, ultimately triumphs. The sages, who have renounced all worldly desires, walk upon that path where the Supreme Truth resides.”

Raman Kumar could not fully grasp the idea, so he asked, “Uncle, please explain more simply.”

Responding to his curiosity, Uncle Manoj turned to the Bhagavad Gita for an example:

“My child, in the Gita, Krishna himself says, ‘Satyam, Shamah, Damah, Tapah, Shaucham...’ meaning truth, inner calm, discipline, austerity, and purity are the essential virtues for human upliftment. Its spiritual

message is this: if one seeks self-development, then truth must be woven into thought, into speech, and action.”

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Raman Kumar said,
“Now I understand, Uncle.”

Yet Manoj thought further. If he gave more examples, Raman would be able to comprehend the depth of the subject even better. He continued:

“In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, it is said, ‘Satyapratishtayam Kriya Phalashrayatvam,’ which means that when a yogi becomes established in truth, every word he utters comes to fruition. In other words, truth is a spiritual energy, attained through the practice of meditation. Therefore, we may say that Satyameva Jayate is not merely a slogan; it is also the conclusion of a philosophy of life.”

Hearing these words, Raman Kumar’s heart blossomed with delight. He said,

“Uncle, now I feel confident that I can speak not just for twenty minutes, but for twenty-five.”

Pleased at the fruit of his labour, Uncle Manoj added,

“My child, whatever the public stage may be, speak always by holding firmly to the truth of your subject. When you speak with truth, no matter what the style, your words will carry power and influence.”

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MAITHILI STORIES

ORIGINAL
MAITHILI: JAGDISH
PRASAD MANDAL

ENGLISH
TRANSLATION:
GAJENDRA THAKUR

ECHOES
OF
EXISTENCE