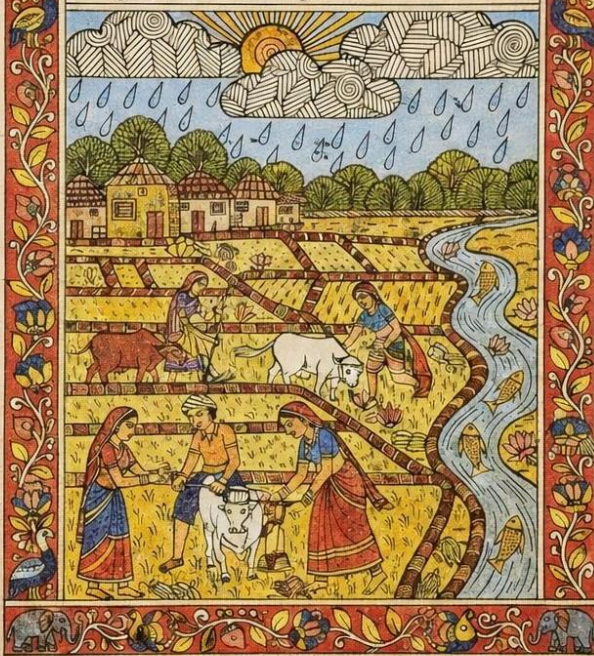


STRUGGLES OF LIFE

Original Maithli: Jagdish Prasad Mandal



English Translation: Gajendra Thakur

Struggles of Life

An English translation of the Maithili novel
“Jeevan-Sangharsh” [Original Maithili: Jagdish
Prasad Mandal; English Translation: Gajendra
Thakur]

Cover Designed by Aum Gajendra Thakur

ISBN Number : 978-93-5717-665-1

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"Struggles of Life" is the English translation of the Maithili novel "Jeevan-Sangharsh", a poignant portrayal of rural life of Mithila shaped by labour, tradition, and social responsibility. Set in a village community, the novel delves into how ordinary people confront poverty, gender injustice, and moral dilemmas within the rhythms of everyday life. The narrative emphasizes collective experience over individual heroism, revealing how festivals, beliefs, and social norms both support and constrain the community. The experiences, dignity, and resilience of women form the emotional heart of the novel. Marked by restraint and moral depth, "Struggles of Life" avoids idealization and presents rural society in all its complexity. This translation retains the cultural richness and ethical tone of the original and offers English readers a clear and thoughtful engagement with lived reality.

First Edition: 2026

Preface

Life in Struggle is not a novel that seeks to impress with dramatic twists or heroic individuals. Its ambition runs deeper, and its approach is more restrained. This is a work that listens attentively to ordinary lives—lives shaped by labour, scarcity, tradition, and moral tension—and allows their cumulative weight to speak for itself. What emerges is not a tale of isolated suffering, but a sustained meditation on how communities coexist with injustice, how endurance becomes second nature, and how ethical choice persists under pressure.

At the heart of the novel is a village, depicted not as mere backdrop but as a living moral organism. The village breathes through its seasons, rituals, conversations, silences, daily routines, and collective memories. It remembers violence, then learns to live alongside it. It responds to injustice first with outrage, then with caution, and ultimately with resignation. In this shift from reaction to accommodation lies the novel's most unsettling insight: social struggle does not always end in defeat, nor does it necessarily lead to transformation. More often, it calcifies into routine.

The rural world portrayed here is neither romanticized nor reduced to misery. It is layered, divided, and ethically complex. Economic hardship is constant, but it is not the only force shaping life. Land, caste, gender, age, and

reputation intersect to determine who speaks, who decides, who labours, and who bears the consequences. Poverty, in this novel, is not merely a lack of resources, it is a condition that constrains imagination, limits choices, erodes resistance, and slowly renders inequality ordinary.

One of the novel's defining features is its refusal to isolate injustice as a singular moment or dramatic event. When violence occurs, it is not positioned as a climax. Instead, it serves as a revelation, exposing the deeper structures that permit such acts and then allow them to be absorbed. The aftermath, not the incident, becomes the focus. How does a community articulate harm? How does it remember? How does it move forward without resolution? These questions linger throughout, shaping the novel's moral terrain.

Women occupy a central yet carefully nuanced position within this world. Their presence is structural, not symbolic. They sustain households, maintain routines, absorb emotional strain, and often serve as the quiet stabilizing force in times of crisis. Yet their authority is constrained, their suffering filtered through male narratives, and their voices frequently marginalized. The novel neither portrays women as passive victims nor elevates them into moral exemplars. Rather, it explores how dignity survives through endurance, how silence can be tactical, and how injustice endures when empathy substitutes for accountability.

The male world in *Life in Struggle* is similarly complex. Men are not portrayed as uniform oppressors or as uncomplicated heroes. They labour, worry, argue, hesitate, and compromise. Some express rage, others caution, and still others, exhaustion. Authority flows through elders, mediators, and informal leaders who prioritize social balance over direct confrontation. Their decisions are often framed as pragmatic and even necessary. Yet the novel quietly insists on asking what the cost of such practicality is. When order is maintained without justice, whose safety is being preserved and whose dignity is being deferred?

One of the novel's most distinctive qualities is its treatment of time. *Struggle* here is unhurried. It unfolds slowly, repetitively, and unevenly. Days blur together. Conversations recur with slight variations. Hopes surface briefly, only to recede again. This temporal rhythm mirrors lived reality more faithfully than conventional narrative pacing. It allows the reader to experience fatigue, uncertainty, and moral erosion not as climaxes but as ongoing processes.

The novel's ethical stance is marked by restraint. The author does not instruct, condemn, or offer resolution. Instead, he observes with seriousness and patience. Moral insight arises not from overt judgment but through the gradual accumulation of detail, gesture, silence, and consequence. The village's failure to act decisively is never cast as mere cowardice. It is portrayed as the result of fear, dependence, habit, and a deep-seated desire

for stability. This refusal to simplify gives the novel both intellectual depth and emotional credibility.

In translating *Jeevan-Sangharsh* into English as *Life in Struggle*, the aim has been to preserve both its ethical seriousness and cultural specificity. The task was not merely linguistic but interpretive. Rural idioms, social hierarchies, and patterns of thought carry meanings that resist easy equivalence. Wherever possible, the translation retains the texture of the original, including its measured pace, observational tone, and moral ambiguity, without simplifying its difficulties or contradictions.

This book does not offer comfort in the form of resolution. Instead, it creates space for reflection. It asks readers to consider how injustice survives not only through violence or domination but also through repetition, silence, and acceptance. It draws attention to the ordinary mechanisms by which suffering is managed rather than addressed. Above all, it insists that struggle is not always visible, loud, or transformative. Often, it is quiet, persistent, and deeply human.

Life in Struggle belongs to a tradition of literature that treats lived experience as a source of ethical insight. It does not seek to explain rural life from a distance or to elevate it into metaphor. It remains close, close to bodies at work, to minds under strain, to conversations that revolve around what cannot be openly spoken. In doing so, it offers readers not conclusions but an

invitation to look steadily at how societies endure, how they falter, and how the possibility of ethical awakening persists even when delayed.

This preface does not claim that the novel represents all of rural India or that its truths are universally applicable. What it offers is something more demanding and more valuable. It is a sustained engagement with a world in which struggle is ordinary, morality is negotiated rather than proclaimed, and dignity survives not through triumph but through the continuous act of living.

Readers are invited to enter this world with patience, attentiveness, and humility. The rewards may not be immediate, but they are lasting.

What follows is not a summary of events but a sustained critical analysis of the novel's structure. Each padav is examined as a moral and social development, illustrating how struggle evolves rather than finds resolution. The focus now shifts from orientation to interpretation.

At a deeper level, *Life in Struggle* bears the moral imprint of Jagdish Prasad Mandal, a writer whose literary journey has been shaped by long patience, ethical attentiveness, and a profound closeness to ordinary human suffering. Writing primarily in Maithili from within the lived landscapes of rural and semi-urban Mithila, Mandal has, since the early years of the twenty-first century, produced a body of work comprising more than 130 published books,

including novels, short stories, plays, essays, and literature for younger readers.

Yet this prolific output does not stem from urgency or conventional ambition. It emerges from endurance, a quiet commitment to remain with difficult realities without simplifying them. Mandal writes from the spaces where labour exhausts the body, where poverty constrains possibility, where caste and gender silently shape destiny, and where injustice persists long after outrage fades.

His narratives do not seek redemption through spectacle. Instead, they trust in repetition, silence, and moral fatigue as honest registers of lived experience. In *Life in Struggle*, this vision reaches one of its most poignant expressions: a work that does not promise change but refuses indifference; that offers no solutions but insists on remembrance; and that affirms, with quiet resolve, that even when justice is delayed and dignity wounded, the human conscience continues to endure, to question, and to struggle.

The first padav of *Jeevan-Sangharsh* establishes the novel's philosophical, social, and ethical framework. Jagdish Prasad Mandal deliberately avoids introducing an individual protagonist. Instead, the village itself emerges as a living, collective presence. This narrative choice reflects the author's core vision: the struggle depicted is not merely personal but deeply social, structural, and shared.

The opening scenes of Kali Puja preparations unfold amid suffocating heat, agricultural uncertainty, and uneven land conditions. These elements are not mere background; they expose the invisible hierarchies of rural life, where land elevation dictates productivity, belief systems, and economic stability. Religious festivals, often considered unifying, intensify labour, gossip, and social pressure, particularly for women, whose efforts sustain both household and ritual.

The padav reaches its moral crisis with the sexual assault of Kusumlal's daughter during Durga Puja in a neighbouring village. This event shatters the illusion of communal harmony and confronts the villagers with urgent questions of dignity, justice, and collective responsibility. Pavitra's raw grief and rage give voice to long-suppressed female anguish, while the villagers' growing anger illustrates how easily moral outrage can escalate into a desire for revenge.

Mandhan Baba serves as the ethical counterforce to such impulses. Through restraint, memory, and lived wisdom, he embodies the novel's belief that true honour cannot be preserved through violence. Instead, dignity arises from reflection, social accountability, and moral courage.

Thus, the first padav defines the novel's purpose: to explore how rural society responds when tradition, injustice, and conscience collide, and to show that the most profound struggle begins not with force, but with ethical awakening.

The second padav of Jeevan-Sangharsh shifts the

novel's focus from collective moral shock to a sustained social inquiry. While the first padav reveals the eruption of injustice and anger, the second examines its aftermath: silence, exhaustion, fear, and the slow moral reckoning that unfolds within everyday life. The village no longer moves as a single emotional unit. Instead, it fragments into households, conversations, and private struggles.

Here, the novelist deepens his exploration of poverty as a lived reality rather than a mere economic label. Characters such as Kusumlal, Pavitra, and their daughter retreat into a space of social vulnerability, where sympathy exists but practical justice remains absent. The community's earlier rage fades into uncertainty. Support becomes verbal, ritualistic, and cautious. Through this portrayal, Mandal reveals a central contradiction of rural society: while moral outrage may be collective, suffering is often endured alone.

Mandhan Baba's presence continues, though his authority now appears limited. Wisdom may calm immediate violence, but it cannot dismantle the deeper structures that sustain injustice. Other village figures—elders, neighbours, and intermediaries—begin to negotiate reputation, fear of retaliation, and the need to maintain social equilibrium. Justice becomes delayed, procedural, and emotionally diluted.

Women's presence remains crucial. Their labour, endurance, and quiet surveillance of social

behaviour underscore how patriarchy persists not through overt coercion but through normalization. The daughter's silence becomes more powerful than speech, revealing how dignity is internally preserved when society fails externally.

Through this padav, the novelist sharpens his deeper purpose. Jeevan-Sangharsh is not about dramatic resolution. It is about how injustice becomes routine, how conscience struggles against fear, and how true social change requires more than emotional unity. It demands structural courage.

The third padav of Jeevan-Sangharsh marks a decisive shift from moral tension to the terrain of everyday survival. Here, struggle is no longer triggered by a singular event but becomes a continuous condition that shapes work, relationships, and thought. The narrative expands its scope, introducing multiple households and characters to show how life continues under the weight of unresolved injustice.

Economic hardship now takes centre stage. Characters such as Dholba, Tetri, Jhunjhunawali, Fudna, Sitiya, Bhola, and Lalit represent diverse forms of labour, including bamboo work, petty trade, agriculture, and seasonal employment. Through them, the novelist illustrates how poverty disciplines both the body and the mind. Labor leaves little room for reflection, though reflection persists. Fatigue, hunger, and domestic

strain reveal how material scarcity quietly wears away human dignity.

Domestic life emerges as a central site of struggle. Marital conversations, minor disputes, and long silences expose entrenched gender imbalances. Women bear disproportionate burdens across productive, reproductive, and emotional domains, yet their endurance remains socially invisible. Unlike the open rage of the first padav, oppression here operates through routine and necessity. This is one of the novelist's most powerful insights: injustice often survives by appearing normal.

Education and aspiration begin to surface through characters like Anup and Professor Dayanand, suggesting the possibility of alternative futures. Yet these hopes remain fragile, constrained by economic limitations and social expectations. Hope exists, but it is cautious and incomplete.

In this padav, Mandal's purpose becomes more defined. He demonstrates that jeevan-sangharsh is not driven by isolated crises but by continuity, the ongoing negotiation between survival and self-respect. The third padav deepens the novel's realism, grounding moral questions within the rhythms of labour-bound life.

The fourth padav of Jeevan-Sangharsh, spread across five sub-sections (Ka, Kha, Ga, Gha, and Nga), presents a sustained and layered examination of rural life, where struggle ceases

to be episodic and becomes structural. Together, these sections shift the novel away from dramatic rupture toward the slow, persistent mechanics through which hardship is lived, absorbed, and normalized.

In Part Ka, the narrative anchors itself in the daily economy of survival. Routine labour, uncertain income, and constant domestic negotiation define existence. Characters such as Dholba, Tetri, Fudna, Sitiya, Bhola, Lalit, and Lalit's wife represent the working class, whose lives are shaped by weather, scarcity, and physical exhaustion. Poverty here is repetitive rather than spectacular. It gradually moulds temperament, relationships, and decision-making. Women emerge as stabilizing forces, translating endurance into action, though their labour remains socially invisible.

Part Kha moves outward into public spaces such as markets, shops, and informal exchanges, where social character is quietly revealed. Through these everyday transactions, the novelist exposes entrenched power inequalities. Money, credit, and access operate as instruments of silent control. Exploitation is not expressed through open cruelty but through routine behaviours masked by civility. Women are largely absent from these negotiations, though they bear their consequences. This highlights their structural exclusion from public decision-making.

In Part Ga, the novel turns inward to explore

psychological fatigue and moral weariness. Prolonged deprivation reshapes thought itself. Silence deepens, confidence erodes, and imagination narrows. People no longer ask what ought to be done, but instead focus on what can be endured. Women's endurance here takes the form of emotional labour, quietly absorbing tension and fear. Mandal suggests that such internalization of injustice is among the most dangerous consequences of inequality.

Part Gha returns to the collective sphere, now governed by caution rather than outrage. Elders, informal leaders, and public opinion prioritize order, balance, and reputation. Moral urgency gives way to managed silence. Power is maintained not through force but through consensus and fatigue. Women's pain is acknowledged, yet never permitted to shape decisions, revealing how patriarchy persists under the guise of protection.

Finally, Part Nga offers an ethical summation. Life resumes its routines. Injustice remains unresolved, but domesticated. Stability is preserved without accountability, and suffering fades into the background. Mandal closes the fourth padav with a sobering insight: *jeevan-sangharsh* endures not only through poverty and oppression, but also through society's ability to normalize them. When struggle becomes habitual, resistance risks turning into memory, and ethical awakening demands renewed courage to prevent that loss.

The fifth padav of Jeevan-Sangharsh deepens the novel's engagement with power, mediation, and moral compromise. At this stage, struggle is no longer confined to the economic or ethical sphere; it becomes explicitly political and social. The narrative shifts its attention to those who operate between the oppressed and the authorities, intermediaries who speak the language of help, negotiation, and adjustment.

Characters such as Raghunath, Devnath, Mangala, Ganeshi, Bhagatji, and Barsapaitiya represent various forms of local influence. They are neither outright villains nor moral exemplars. Instead, they embody a system in which survival often depends on accommodation. Through them, Mandal reveals how injustice is not confronted but managed. Solutions are proposed, but always within boundaries that protect the existing social order.

This padav exposes a crucial contradiction. Although the collective memory of injustice remains alive, meaningful action is repeatedly deferred. Meetings are held, advice is offered, and promises circulate, yet tangible outcomes remain elusive. Power speaks in measured tones. The language of reform replaces the urgency of justice.

Women's suffering remains largely unaddressed in these negotiations. Their presence is reduced to reference and symbolism, not active participation. This absence is deliberate. Mandal shows that patriarchal systems do not need to

silence women through overt force; they erase them through routine procedure.

The novelist's purpose in this section is precise. He demonstrates that struggle is prolonged not only by oppression, but also by compromise. When mediation replaces moral clarity, injustice continues undisturbed. The fifth padav thus reveals the mechanisms of social stagnation and prepares the ground for a deeper interrogation of leadership, responsibility, and the possibility of real change in the sections that follow.

- Gajendra Thakur

1.

Kartika's pitch-dark new-moon night.

The sun had turned savage, its heat as merciless as the midsummer blaze of Jeth, and on top of that came a suffocating, life-draining humidity. Sweat streamed down bodies like water after a rushed rinse. By ten in the morning, no one could raise their eyes toward the fields or groves; such was the ferocity of the heat. Yet, there was no relief indoors either. Sweat gathered at the forehead, collected at the tip of the nose, and dropped, one bead at a time. Clothes began to reek. Everywhere, tempers frayed and minds slipped into a restless irritation.

The eighth day marked Diwali, and along with it came the collective decision to perform Kali Puja. Both festivals coincided on the same new-moon night. Traditionally, Diwali had been celebrated a day earlier, but with the community's resolve to honour Kali Puja in full grandeur, it was agreed that lamps would be lit in every courtyard for all five days. With bathing rituals scheduled for the eighth, the preceding seven days were consumed by preparations. Courtyards were swept clean, woven screens straightened, heaps of straw and cow-dung cakes cleared away, thresholds and doorways repaired, and the paths leading up to each home reshaped. None of this was light work. Additionally, the roads used by visitors from neighbouring villages had to be repaired up to the village

boundaries. One small mercy: the oppressive heat had brought fieldwork to a halt. Had it not, everyone would have been pushed beyond endurance.

Since a grand Kali Puja was planned in the village, the workload was naturally immense. Even so, the enthusiasm was so great that heavy burdens felt light. Responsibility for managing goods and materials was largely handed over to the women. Everything was being done, and arrangements were in place, yet no one's face carried an easy smile. The reason lay in the paddy fields, where the village farmers stood divided.

The very structure of the land encouraged this division. There were very high fields, moderately high ones, low fields, and extremely low-lying tracts. Water and sunlight never affected them in the same way, and the impact on yields was immediate. As a result, the farmers, too, were split. Those who owned medium and high land found summer paddy cultivation of little use. But for those with low and very low fields, where water remained standing from the early monsoon through Aghan and Poush, winter paddy cultivation was the sensible choice. Alongside this practical division, there was also an ideological one. Even now, summer paddy was considered impure by many. As a mark of protest, some people chose to accept lower yields with a strange sense of satisfaction.

To this day, Banspura has never witnessed a

homa yajna or any grand Dussehra celebration. Because of this, people from neighbouring villages sometimes regard the residents of Banspura as irreligious. Yet the truth is that the village is made up of hardworking farmers and labourers. There is not a single company agent in the entire village, nor are there any thieves, bandits, or tricksters. But does that mean the people of Banspura neglect religious duties? They observe them with full devotion. Every year, Ram Navami is celebrated at the Mahavirji shrine with an ashtayam. Whether times are favourable or harsh, festivals face no interruption. Even if betel leaves are unavailable, people manage with just the stalks. Beyond this, there are individual feasts, the ritual of janar in Aghan, the worship of Salhes in Asin, and many such observances that continue unfailingly.

The oppressive heat has left everyone's mind restless, and yet a fresh sense of excitement has taken hold. From early morning until late at night, people are either engaged in one ritual task or another or absorbed in planning and thinking through the arrangements for worship. Activity at the village shrine has gathered pace. The courtyard around it is smoothed with fine clay twice each evening, and the village daughters-in-law and young girls make sure to present at least five earnest petitions. The ritual meal for the virgins will take place on the festival day itself. Until then, the air continues to fill with the fragrance of incense sticks and curling streams of scented smoke. How could it not spread? For the first time, a fair lasting five days is to be held

in the village. Colourful stalls will line the grounds, selling all kinds of goods. Everyone will buy according to their means and needs.

People's minds have become so absorbed in the fair that neither other work nor ordinary conversation feels appealing anymore. The burden of managing the household has once again fallen entirely on the women. Meanwhile, a different kind of ailment has quietly surfaced. This ailment is gossip, which has begun to circulate freely. There is no shortage of listeners, from the elderly to the very young. The gossip, too, comes in many colours. Some speak of Kali in terms of the changing times, while others joke crudely about placing a foot on Mahadev's chest. Just as farmers leave their own fields to plough the same fallow plot again and again on Basant Panchami, people keep returning to the same talk of Kali, over and over again.

Traditionally, Diwali has been observed a day earlier. Along with it, Godhan Puja, Bhardutiya, and the worship of the inkstand have taken place in one continuous sequence. On top of all this, there will now be a five-day Kali Puja fair. The village will sink into a constant din. Without sprinkling bleaching powder, how will the stench of urine ever fade? When two festivals overlap, the joy they bring is matched by the chaos of work they cause. To labour continuously for ten or twelve days is no easy task. Who will fall ill? Who will suffer from diarrhoea? There is no knowing. And in the midst of all this, children will run wild, stumbling and crashing about.

They will not listen to restraint. On top of that, they will insist on watching dance and spectacle all through the night.

Those who think ahead begin to feel an undercurrent of worry. Not just that, many other anxieties rise all at once in the mind. As it is, brothers and sisters living in Delhi and Calcutta have already been unable to come home for Diwali and Bhardutiya. Now there is also the village fair. If the call for worship goes out, who would be so unfortunate as to abandon Lakshmi Puja and return to the village? Even if the man himself were to leave, the women in the household, down to the very last corner, still keep two blades of sacred grass placed at the threshold. How could that man act otherwise? How proper would it be to abandon such a festival?

The village fair lifts everyone's mind like a sudden gust of wind. Because of this, no one's attention settles on what is good or bad. In the same way, no one pays heed to the seasonal fever of Kartika or to stomach ailments and diarrhoea. Everyone is beside themselves. Everyone is unsteady. Just as on the day of Phagua people dance through the village after drinking bhang, so now people from every household dance after work itself. As water from a sloping roof gathers speed while flowing through the courtyard and finally rushes into the pond, so individuals scatter and dissolve into the larger body of society.

Why, then, is Kali Puja being held in the village? Why should something that never happened all these years begin this very year? Why has the village so readily prepared to hang the heavy yoke of needless expense around its own neck? The reason lies close by. Just a kos away from Banspura, in Sisouni, Durga Puja has been celebrated for more than twenty-five years. People from all across the Charikoshi region go to Sisouni to witness the festival. Not only villagers from Banspura, but women from many surrounding villages come morning and evening to the Durga shrine. They arrange ritual meals for young girls and offer sacrificial goats as fulfilment of vows.

In the matter of sacrificial offerings, Sisouni has no equal in the entire district. Almost a month before Durga Puja begins, the trade of goat rearers gathers momentum. Along with this, theft and pilfering begin to rise everywhere at the same pace. Not only that, those who recite the sacred texts also begin their practice. In the village, the time of Durga Puja turns into a season of examinations. Those who complete the full recitation across many sittings are declared First Division with Distinction. Their income improves, and their diploma carries weight. Still, no matter how much anyone practises, it is generally believed—based on twenty years of experience—that only the chief priest will secure first place. That, too, is something. His voice may not be particularly sharp, yet his speed is such that one can barely catch the first word of a verse, let alone the last. Even so, he holds no

certificate of any kind. Whatever he has earned has come through sheer labour.

This time, an incident occurred at the Durga shrine in Sisouni. What happened was this: a young woman from Banspura, eighteen or twenty years old, who had been married the previous year and had lived in her in-laws' house for barely three months, was coaxed by three members of the Puja committee and taken to the storehouse. The fair was roaring with noise. Loudspeakers blaring dance music had driven sleep away across the entire Charikoshi region. The three men misbehaved with the girl. Helpless, she endured everything in silence. At four in the morning, they let her go. Throughout the fair, she did not utter a word. Covering her mouth and ears, she slipped out of the fair and walked straight toward the village road. As soon as she reached the boundary of her village, her chest tightened. With that tightening came choking sobs, and she began to cry uncontrollably.

Hearing the early-morning weeping, people from one or two villages stepped out of their courtyards and came onto the road to see what had happened. As she entered the hamlet, people began to ask questions all at once. She wanted to tell them what had happened to her, but no words would come out.

Seeing her daughter in tears, the mother, without asking a single question, beat her chest and cried. Clenching her fists with both hands, she said,

“What has happened, my child? I am your mother. If you do not tell me, whom will you tell?”

As the mother listened, word by word, to what her daughter managed to say, a fire began to burn inside her body. Listening on, she suddenly turned to her husband and said, “Just as the people of Sisouni have looted my daughter’s honour, so too shall a human sacrifice be demanded at Sisouni’s Durga shrine.”

Saying this, she pulled out the hanging axe kept inside the house, gathered her sari tightly around herself, and set off, hurling abuses at the people of Sisouni. Seeing his wife in this fearsome, dark aspect, the husband tied a cloth around his head, picked up a heavy stick, and moved forward, shouting curses. Like one gone mad, the mother screamed and abused them at the top of her voice, invoking Goddess Durga again and again as she poured out her curses. With every step she took forward, her rage rose higher and higher. On this side, like a fire smouldering beneath dry husk, flames spread quietly through the hearts of the villagers.

The first to move were the men of all seven lineages of the village, along with their women and children. Whoever came into their path was swept along, and the crowd surged toward the road to Sisouni. Seeing kin rise against kin, people of every hamlet and caste joined in and followed. The village began to churn. Whatever rose in a person’s mind burst out loudly, and they

set off toward Sisouni.

Those with foresight felt their hearts pound with fear that bloodshed between the two villages was inevitable. No one seemed capable of stopping it. Still, in an effort to prevent the fire from spreading, a few people stepped forward and tried to block the road. No one was willing to listen. It took both Kusumlals together to restrain the girl's parents, with four people holding each of them back. Kusumlal himself tried to calm things down, but Pavitra was not prepared to yield. Shaking herself free again and again and wrenching her arms out of their grasp, she pushed forward and shouted, "From the beginning of time, men have oppressed women, and they continue to do so even now. Who will stop this oppression? Men are all the same. Just as a bull cannot be taught to graze properly by another bull, only a man can teach a man his lesson. Today I will teach them."

As lightning flashes and thunder roars across the sky in the month of Bhadav, so from the midst of the crowd a torrent of multicoloured cries shot up into the air.

"Set Sisouni on fire and burn it like Lanka."

"They looted honour and dignity; we will set their village ablaze."

"Drag the criminals to the crossroads, spit on their faces, and burn them alive."

"Seize the daughters and daughters-in-law of

Sisouni and bring them here.”

Sparks of anger flew and burst like fireworks against the sky. Yet these cries remained scattered and individual, never forming a single collective voice. No one was ready to listen to anyone else, nor was anyone willing to restrain their own tongue. Even so, the sensible few did not abandon the road. Inside their own homes, they were already exhausted from stamping out fires with hands and feet.

The oldest man in the village was Mandhan Baba. Just as he had lived through ninety harsh winters of Magh, he had also seen and endured countless droughts, floods, cold waves, famines, and earthquakes. Seeing the villagers surge together in one mass, Mandhan Baba arrived, dragging his feet, a bamboo staff in his hand. A single glance from behind was enough for him to understand that violence between Sisouni and Banspura was now certain. Not even the creator himself could prevent it. Who would die and how many bones would be broken, there would be no counting.

As these thoughts churned within him, tears began to stream from both his eyes. His chest felt torn apart. A tightness seized him. The strength drained from his body. He burst into loud sobs. Like the waters of the Ganga at Gangotri, tears poured endlessly from his eyes. His mouth trembled, his chest shook violently, and Mandhan Baba lost all control of himself. Just as backflowing currents swirl within the main

stream of the Kosi, his thoughts began to spin wildly.

With a sudden effort, he rose and moved forward. Reaching the road ahead, he struck the ground with his staff to signal a halt. His mind found no steadiness. At times he saw, right before his eyes, the destruction of both villages. At other moments, he saw the rebirth of ancestral enmities stretching back generations. The incident of Juri Sheetal came back to him.

There had once been a fight over a she-buffalo between hunters from the Bela and Mainhi villages. It had turned into a brutal clash. Circumstances had favoured violence. The festival crowd had gone out hunting with sticks, spears, bows, and arrows in hand. There had been no shortage of people, nor of weapons. The issue itself had been grave. It was the death of a she-buffalo. But at its core lay the question of village honour. In the name of that honour, many skulls were cracked, many arms and legs broken, and one man from each side had been killed. No one had been in a state to restrain anyone else. Those who could fled in terror, shouting and wailing. Some carried the injured away for treatment. Who could say that something just like this might not happen again today?

Once more, Mandhan Baba felt the urge to stop everyone. But who would listen? His mind drifted into a strange state. Whenever he lifted his eyes, he saw that even the women, who had always kept their heads lowered, were now

raging like the possessed, saris tied tight, brandishing sticks. Everyone's mind was fixed on violence alone. How could such fury ever be brought down?

Yet, beneath it all, a strange satisfaction also stirred. The value of anything precious is always high. Caught in this tangle of thought, Mandhan Baba felt the weight of his responsibility press upon him. But in this roaring storm of madness, who would listen to the call of duty? Still, he grasped one end of his bamboo staff, raised the other, and signalled for calm, urging everyone to quieten down. No one listened. Everyone moved to their own rhythm, out of step and out of control. Every dog in the village that had been lying around bolted forward, barking furiously beneath the embankment. Small children, half-dressed and unwashed, cried out repeatedly and then sank down for a moment's rest.

Mandhan Baba felt it clearly now. What the ruffians of Sisouni had done to the girl from Banspura was a question bound to the honour of the village itself. To give one's life for honour is considered a man's duty. Who would call this wrong? To build and preserve one's own dignity, people are expected to fight and, if need be, die. If that sense is lost, there is no knowing when and by whom one's honour will be stolen. Like poisonous frogs breeding year after year in the monsoon, new scoundrels are born constantly, spreading from village to village. And yet, such characters have always existed within villages. Why was no one outraged then? In those

moments, people dismissed everything as foolish games played by reckless boys.

As these two lines of thought collided, an unexpected laugh escaped Mandhan Baba's mouth. But the grim faces of the villagers crushed that laughter instantly. He began to think about how people were ready to kill one another in one place in the name of honour, while elsewhere the same acts were waved away as childish play involving girls. Human reason was deeply strange. A man may constantly cast his eyes on another woman, yet the moment he sees his own wife speaking to someone else, he erupts in rage and becomes ready to do anything. Was this not exactly what was happening now?

When an incident is understood collectively as a matter of honour, then the protection of that honour becomes a collective responsibility. If it is to be treated as play, then treat it as play. If it is to be treated as honour, then guard it as honour. If you wish to treat it as both, then stop speaking of honour altogether.

His mind hardened with resolve. Striking the tip of his staff against the road, he declared, "If even one person takes a single step beyond this mark, he will lose his life right here. Otherwise, become calm at once. It is already time to bathe and eat. Meals are waiting in every house. Go back now. Eat and drink, and at four o'clock gather in front of the Brahma shrine and decide the way forward."

Accepting Mandhan Baba's words, the people

turned back toward their homes. The turmoil subsided at once. Yet the inner blaze did not die out. Just as water poured over a burning hearth dulls the flames but leaves the heat alive underneath, so it was with the fire in people's minds. They dispersed in small groups, but along the road, each carried anger with him.

Watching everyone drift back toward their houses, Mandhan Baba felt a measure of calm return to his heart. As he turned toward his own home, another thought rose within him. If the entire village was burning with such fury, what must Kusumlal and his wife be enduring? It would not do to leave them alone. He should go to them and offer words of strength.

Leaving the path to his own courtyard, Mandhan Baba went straight to Kusumlal's house. Kusumlal and his wife were drowning in an ocean of grief. Both were utterly desolate. There was no trace of hope anywhere. Their faces had lost all colour. Again and again, the same thought surged within them: life without honour was no life at all. Living or dying seemed equally unbearable.

Seeing the two of them, Mandhan Baba stood silently at the threshold like a stone image. Neither Kusumlal spoke, nor did the old man. A fear crossed his mind that Kusumlal might be holding him responsible for everything. Just as marriage is the final step of love, anger too can spill into blood. Who knew what bitter words might burst out?

Then another thought steadied him. He had come here to speak and to console. Gathering his resolve, he said, "Son Kusum, before me you are still a child. I have seen far more of this world's twists and turns than you. Steady your mind. What has happened cannot be undone. But what we do next, how we act, that must be understood. It is not as if everyone must rush to lose their lives at once. You are both parents. It is only right that you are in pain. But tell me, what did you see today? Did you see how boundless the sorrow of the entire village has become?"

Remove from your mind the thought that your honour is finished. The greatest enemy of the poor is their poverty. Poverty does not end with food and water alone. It spreads across every part of life. The chains of poverty bind everything, from abuse and humiliation to wealth and property, even to the honour of mothers and sisters. In such a condition, if someone manages to live with even a little happiness, that itself is a rare fortune."

"Son, the lock of poverty is heavier and far more rigid than any lock of iron. An iron lock has a single mouth and a single set of teeth. Turn the key once and it clicks open. The lock of poverty has many mouths and many teeth. Open one, and other clamps down. It does not merely latch on; it grips tighter than before. That is why human life is like a mango tree. Year after year it endures scorching sun, rain, floodwaters, stones, famine, and bitter cold. It grows strong through it all and then bears fruit that feeds not only human beings

but countless other creatures as well. Such is human life. The moment one is born into a poor household, one learns this truth. The eyes are made not only to see, but also to cry. The ears are made to hear abuse. The body is made to endure blows. The more light enters a poor person's eyes, the closer he moves toward an ocean of tears. And the nearer he comes to that ocean, the more those tears turn into an unending flow that pours without pause. Your pain has become the pain of society. Society is a kind of factory where everything is produced, from gods to outcasts. That is why honour does not come or go because someone says so. People earn it themselves, and they lose it themselves."

As Mandhan Baba spoke, Pavitra burst into loud sobs. Her voice broke again and again as she cried, "Baba, it is only because you are the elder of the village that we listened to you. Otherwise, we would not have returned without setting Sisouni on fire today. Ever since our daughter came back, she has not once lifted her face. Crying has swollen her eyes into two deep hollows. She keeps repeating the same thing. What is the point of living now? When honour is gone, with what face will she look at society?"

Hearing Pavitra, Mandhan Baba's heart was torn apart. Tears welled up in his eyes. Wiping them with both hands, he said, "Daughter, what you believe has been lost is not honour. It is force. Force does not vanish because of words spoken by the mouth. It has to be stopped by strength. Among the poor, that strength has not yet taken

shape. When it does, such force will stop on its own. For now, those who use force are powerful, so one must act with care and understanding. Tell me, which village in this region is free of such characters? The poor must first stand on their own feet. When they stand and become organised, there will be struggle, both against the oppressor and against those who act through force. Society changes through struggle. When society changes, everything changes. So do not grieve endlessly. Walk step by step in tune with society.”

Having said this, he took his leave. Mandhan Baba turned toward the path leading home, yet his feet would not move. Still, he forced himself forward. With the bamboo staff in hand, somehow, he reached his house, but the fire within his body had not died down. His thoughts became tangled. Looking at the vast distance between earth and mountains, he reflected that if a finger is cut, the pain is felt by the whole body. Until now, such an incident had been dismissed as mere foolish play between boys and girls. But today, it demanded to be brought onto the right path. For that reason, stopping the incident altogether did not seem right either.

Then another thought rose within him. This was an incident between two villages. Had it involved only one village, it might have felt somewhat lighter. But how serious must an event between two villages be considered? And yet, letting it pass was not proper either. Like a mountain stream that had been flowing downward for ages,

this had continued unchecked, and it needed to be stopped. If it was not stopped, it would be swept up in the whirlwind of global change and vanish into the sky.

But the form in which a response to the incident now seemed to be growing was even more destructive. Just as the people of this village were ready to kill and be killed to protect social honour, what would happen if the people of Sisouni also stood up in the name of their village's honour? There were many reasons why they might do so. The incident had taken place in a public space, yet the girl had come back and spoken in her village, and the villagers were believing her. Even if her account was true, it was not necessary that the people of Sisouni would accept it. How long could one village impose force upon another?

No clear path appeared before Mandhan Baba. An incident between two villages might still be restrained through deliberation. But if such incidents were not addressed, how long would the very idea of public space retain its meaning?

As he changed clothes on the raised veranda of his house, the thought struck him that such incidents were best prevented at the social level. His mind grew restless.

Should he go to the evening gathering or not? After all, it was he who had spoken. Then another thought came to him. Had he asked the entire village to sit together at four o'clock and

deliberate, or had he said that he himself would place his thoughts before them? When ten people work together, whether one wins or loses, there is no shame. He had ripened like a mango. Whether he remained or not was no longer so important. It was not even necessary that everyone should agree with his views. If they did not, the hurt in his heart would only deepen.

And besides, at its core this was a woman's matter. Men who had been committing such crimes for thousands of years would suddenly bow their heads and accept the truth? What if an incident from another village turned and spread into this one? Even now, society laughed off such characters as a joke.

Another thought rose in his mind. He himself was living by force now, otherwise he would have had a share in one village or another. So, should he withdraw from society altogether? If he did, who would come to cremate him after death? In truth, no one would come even to look. Even within one's own family, people know the lineage of film stars and sportsmen, yet they do not know their own ancestry. Such had villages become.

Whom should one speak to? Even the women had now begun to lash out, abusing men openly, saying that behaviour followed the nature of one's lineage. And then, who was to blame for lineage itself? Little boys had begun to consume drugs like sugar crystals. Who was responsible for that? In life, one witnessed such scenes, and

after death they would build a temple adorned with jewels.

In the midst of these thoughts, his granddaughter came and interrupted him.

“Shall we eat now, Baba? Won’t you bathe?”

Like a wounded snake, Baba replied, “I have no strength to go anywhere. Bring the food here. First, bring a pot of water. I’ll wash my hands and face.”

Just as a disturbed mind feels no desire for food, so it was with Mandhan Baba. Still, he forced himself to eat. After barely managing four mouthfuls and a tumbler of water, he said to his granddaughter, “The food won’t go down. Take it away.”

After washing his hands and face, Mandhan Baba lay down on the wooden cot. But as fever brings restlessness, he kept turning from side to side. As time slipped away, he rose, took his bamboo staff in hand, and set off toward the Brahma shrine.

From three o’clock onward, people began arriving at the shrine one after another. Even before four, the entire village had gathered. But something new happened that day. Until then, women had never taken part in any village council or public gathering. Today, they came in groups from every household.

No one had invited them. Yet when the time was

openly fixed for both men and women, courage stirred within them too. Once awakened, that courage tore through the curtain of habit. They stepped out of their homes carrying a mix of bitterness and resolve.

What had long lain buried like a seed beneath the soil suddenly sprouted. Looking around, they realized that from the past until now, women had been treated as nothing more than grazing grounds for men. And yet, they too possessed reason, judgment, hands, and feet. All that was needed was to awaken from sleep.

In the course of living, men had drained the life from women, leaving them dull and bloodless, like a body afflicted with jaundice.

Before marriage: an uneducated childhood.

Five days after marriage: widowhood marked by social disgrace.

Women had endured torment as severe as the punishment given to mass murderers.

But today, in Banspura, a new sun had risen.

Men and women arrived at the gathering but did not sit together. They formed two separate circles, one of men and the other of women.

With no discipline guiding the meeting, both groups began pouring out the bitterness that had been building inside them, and disorder soon spread on both sides. No one was willing to

listen. Everyone spoke at once, restless and agitated.

Yet, once the bitterness had been emptied, calm returned, like water settling in a pond.

Seated to one side, Mandhan Baba quietly read the pulse of society. He saw sweat streaming down faces despite the coolness of the evening, and from this he understood that the inner heat had not yet subsided. Thinking of resolving the problem in two ways, he stood and spoke, “Before you look at another’s wounds, look at your own. If you don’t, you will fall into a state where laughter replaces serious thought. Our most urgent task is to stop the wrongful practices spreading within the village. If we fail, the fire lit today will not stop at this village. It will spread to the next, and the next.

The fury you see today doesn’t belong to men alone. It burns just as fiercely within women. That is why these two gatherings must become one.”

As soon as Baba’s call for unity was heard, murmuring rose from both sides. Two opposing streams of thought collided. Several men, seeing the tension, stood up and began to leave.

But the women accepted Baba’s words. They broke apart their circle and joined the men’s, crying out boldly, “Baba, we stand behind you. Rise and give a decision.”

Hearing the women's voices, Mandhan Baba felt this was not a bodily cry but something deeper, an inner cry. It carried a longing for collective well-being. Such a voice could not be silenced, though it could still be guided.

With old age on one side and the fire of unrest burning in his mind on the other, Mandhan Baba trembled as he rose, gripping his staff, and spoke, "Children, before me, you are all still children. From the moment a child begins to be called a son or a daughter, difference begins to creep in. But I see you all as children, and so I say this: walk the path of your own welfare.

The incident, the problem that has brought us all together today, is not merely between two individuals. It lies between two communities. If it were only a matter between two people, it might be considered small. But to treat a conflict between two villages as small would be a grave mistake. Such matters grow and spread from one to many.

You say you will set Sisouni on fire, that you will kill, that you will dishonour. They will say the same. You will strike, and they will strike back. You will break skulls, and they will break yours. Right now, you believe that only you will kill and only they will be killed. But have you ever seen such a thing? In truth, on both sides people strike, and on both sides, people are struck."

Hearing Mandhan Baba's words, heads began to nod slowly. People looked at one another, then lowered their eyes. The seriousness of violence

began to stir in their minds. Still, the inner heat did not fully subside. Thoughts wrestled with one another. At times, the path of peace gained strength, while at other times, the road of riot and bloodshed rose again. The shifting of these thoughts was clearly visible on people's faces.

Reading their expressions, Baba rose once more and said, "You see it within the village itself. When someone gains even a little power, how does he behave toward one who is weaker, even if that person belongs to his own caste or his own kin?"

After a brief pause, Mandhan Baba spoke again, "At heart, our own village is hollow. You can see it for yourselves. Everyone is absorbed day and night in earning salt and bread. There is no respite from the demands of one's own stomach, and no concern at all for others or for society. People do not even understand what society is. For the sake of their own bellies, they resort to dishonesty, deceit, theft, and robbery.

The idea of standing together and working to shape society like a family does not exist in anyone's mind. Sisouni is no different in this regard, yet it stands a little ahead of us. At the very least, they come together to organise Durga Puja. For ten or fifteen days, people remain united in a shared effort. During that time, conversations take place, small quarrels accumulated over the year fade away, and collective strength grows. That is why major communal activities are necessary for social

progress.

As long as people's minds do not incline toward such collective work, how will society move forward? If you look at it this way, you will see that Sisouni stands just a little ahead of our village.

Beyond Sisouni, to the west, lies the village of Barharba. You can see that Durga Puja is held there as well, and there is even a high school for education. Beyond Barharba, further south, lies the village of Katharba.”

Katharba has a high school, a hospital, and once every year, everyone comes together to organise a four-day Kali Puja fair. The more public activities a village undertakes, the faster it moves forward. To lead a village forward does not mean merely establishing institutions or holding rituals. It means transforming conduct, thought, behaviour, customs, and ways of living.

As long as a village remains backward, it will continue to be plagued by widowhood, the exploitation of children, violence, and unrest. As long as people keep lying, spreading rumours, and fighting over trivial matters, their time will hold no value. When life itself becomes valueless, labour too loses its worth.

Labour, which is the essence of life and the true capital of human beings, scatters like dust and ash. Those who shape fate keep counting coins, while the earnings of the people are plundered, and their eyes remain forever filled with tears.

And if one's eyes are clouded with tears, how can one ever see the world clearly?"

Mandhan Baba was still speaking when murmuring began to ripple through the listeners. The noise did not sadden him. It made him glad. He felt that at last, the fallow land of people's minds was being ploughed and turned.

He looked slowly toward the men and then toward the women. Sitting among them, Joginder suddenly spoke out loudly, "Durga Puja will happen next year anyway, but Kali Puja is close at hand. So let us take a pledge today itself that we too will celebrate Kali Puja in our village."

At Joginder's words, everyone clapped and voiced their support. This very reaction became the seed of Kali Puja in the village.

It is true that the scorching heat had left both farmers and labourers in a pitiful state, but the incident in Sisouni stirred such excitement that everything else was forgotten. Fired with enthusiasm, even the labourers announced a contribution of fifty-one rupees each. Their zeal shook the farmers out of hesitation.

The question of honour now stood before everyone. Adding to this, those living away from the village exaggerated the matter further. It was as if, in an effort to suppress one grief, many medicines and remedies had appeared all at once. If one wished to walk alongside society, then

personal sorrow had to be set aside. Withdrawing from public work was not considered proper.

For years, the daughters and daughters-in-law of the village had gone to fairs in other villages. Now, honour had to be claimed here as well. Above all, a path toward revenge was beginning to take shape. If people from another village dishonoured ours, then we would dishonour theirs. Only then would people from other villages come to ours as equals.

Carried away by emotion, Prem Lal stood up and spoke loudly, "Brothers, our sisters and daughters go to fairs in other villages and face humiliation. Why does this happen? It happens because there is no such public activity in our own village. The day we begin such activities ourselves, people from other villages will feel a natural awe toward us. That awe will bring our village into the open and give it respect. Gosain Ji has said in the Ramayana that without fear, there can be no love."

Prem Lal fell silent, though the urge to speak still stirred within him. But finding no new thought rising and feeling it improper to repeat what had already been said, he remained seated.

As soon as Prem Lal sat down, murmuring broke out again. The noise grew so loud that it began to resemble the din of a wedding feast. Seeing the confusion, Anup stood up, gestured for silence, and spoke with intensity, "Look, nothing will come of all this noise. Do you know why the people of Sisouni carry themselves with such

arrogance? They spend ten thousand rupees on Durga Puja. That is what feeds their pride. We need to break that pride. So, we will spend fifty thousand rupees on Kali Puja.

If we do things half-heartedly and cut corners, they will not even acknowledge us. That is why we must beat the drum loudly and act with full resolve.”

“Form the Puja committee right now. There are still twenty or twenty-two days left before Kali Puja, but from this moment we must create an atmosphere that reaches beyond our village and into others. Include members from every hamlet and every caste in the committee. If we do not do that, needless suspicion will arise immediately. Not only that, once all castes are represented, the work itself will become easier. Everyone will contribute according to their skills and understanding.”

Anup’s proposal met with agreement from all sides. The committee began to take shape. Altogether, a committee of twenty-one members was formed, including five women. When all twenty-one stood up together, a radiant presence seemed to emerge. All were young. Each felt joy at stepping forward into the social sphere. One part of the gathering now consisted of committee members, the other of villagers, and the discussion moved forward.

To run the committee, office-bearers were required. At the very least, a president, a vice-

president, and a treasurer were needed. But who would become president? That was a serious question. Everyone began looking at one another's faces. No one had experience. Most of the committee members wished to be president, yet their lack of experience made them hesitate.

Seeing everyone silent, Raghunath proposed the name of his cousin, Devnath, for president. Devnath's family stood foremost in the village, both in matters of caste status and religious activity.

As soon as Devnath's name was proposed, most of the members stirred uneasily. No alternative name was immediately suggested in opposition, so Mangala proposed his own name.

With two names now on the table, a low hum spread through the gathering. In terms of wealth and caste status, Mangala stood below Devnath. Yet he was sharp in speech, upright in conduct, and a graduate as well. He understood matters clearly.

Both Devnath and Mangala had earned their bachelor's degrees around the same time. Mangala had been the more capable student, but Devnath's results had turned out better. The reason lay in the fact that Devnath had been shrewd and calculating from the very beginning.

On hearing Mangala's name, Devnath and Raghunath began exchanging glances and quiet signals. After a brief while, Raghunath spoke in a conciliatory tone, addressing Mangala,

“Brother, to me you are as dear as Devnath is. You two have been companions all along. My request is this. Let Devnath become the president, and you take the role of vice-president. Together, the work can move forward.”

Mangala’s mind was not focused merely on running a Puja committee. He also carried a deeper concern for taking society forward. From childhood, he had closely observed Devnath’s ways and conduct. Society, however, was like pond water. Even a small gust of wind raised ripples, and just as quickly, it could return to stillness.

One more memory kept circling in Mangala’s mind regarding Devnath. About four years earlier, there had been an incident involving a village girl. Mangala had once caught Devnath harassing her.

Returning from the market, Mangala had seen the girl burst into sobs upon noticing him. He stopped his bicycle and listened to her entire story. Rage overtook him. Without asking Devnath a single question, he had struck him across the face four or five times. Only then did his anger subside. Devnath, shaken with fear, had begun to tremble violently.

Mangala had said to him then, “You were my companion since childhood, so I am letting you go today. Otherwise, anyone who behaves like this with a daughter of the community deserves a lesson that lasts a lifetime.”

With folded hands, Devnath stood before Mangala like an accused man in court. The situation turned strange, and Mangala found himself torn. Anger and compassion pulled at him from opposite sides. At times, his mind drifted toward mercy; at other times, it surged back toward rage. Struggling with this unrest, he said, "I am letting this go because we have been companions until now. Otherwise... Now hold your ears and say that you will never repeat such a mistake with anyone again. Until a girl is married and sent to her husband's home, she is regarded as her parents' child. But the moment she enters her in-laws' house, she becomes the daughter of the village."

This thought kept circling in Mangala's mind.

Listening to Raghunath, Mangala replied, "Raghu, a major collective work is beginning in the village. But society itself lies scattered in fragments. What is needed is to gather each fragment carefully and bind them together. Until that happens, no public work can truly succeed. It will remain fragile.

You can see it yourselves. When there is a feast, people come from ten or fifteen kos away to eat, yet the family of the host often goes hungry. In such an unjust society, when will justice arrive, and who will bring it?

The social structure that stands today is unstable and uneven. Just as an unbalanced load can slip from one's head at any moment, society too remains at risk. That is why the burden must be

tied evenly, so that there is never a fear of it slipping away.

In collective work, every child of society must receive an equal share. No matter who is broken or ruined, the thought must be removed from their mind that this work belongs to someone else and not to them. We are direct participants, not mere spectators.

Some people's ancestors have always ploughed fields, they do so even today, and they will continue to do so in the future. If they do not plough, how will farming survive? Yet they are as much a part of society as those who study and write."

"Now that the entire village is seated here, all decisions related to the Puja should be taken openly, in front of everyone. Even today, we see in Sisouni that not everyone has access to the Durga shrine."

Hearing Mangala's words, everyone fell silent. A quiet turmoil began to stir within their minds. It was true that not everyone grasped everything he said, but whatever did settle shone like a spark struck from fire. The distance between practical life and real life had grown far too wide. Practical life would have to be drawn closer to real life. If that did not happen, the path ahead would remain tangled forever.

There was no shortage of people who spoke sensibly behind someone's back, yet very few

who dared to speak plainly to someone's face. There were many reasons for that.

Seeing the murmuring and whispering spread, Mangala understood. A thought rose in his mind, recalling the words of Buddha: the strings of a veena should neither be tightened so much that they snap, nor left so loose that no sound emerges.

Mangala said, "I withdraw my name from the post of president. Let Devnath be the president. But from now on, and for as long as the Puja preparations continue, all decisions related to the work must be taken within the committee."

On hearing Mangala, Devnath also stood up and spoke, "For the first time in my life, I have been given the opportunity to work for society, and that fills my heart with immense joy. All of us are inexperienced, so mistakes may happen without our even realising it. Those should be treated as lapses and corrected with care.

Since everyone is present now, the major decisions should be taken today itself. It is still daylight, and it will be better to remain within everyone's sight."

Hearing Devnath's words, voices rose from every mouth, "Very good, very good," and full support was given. The following decisions were taken.

The idols for the Puja would be made by the village artisans themselves. There are many

craftsmen in the wider world, but in ritual idols, it is not mere technique that matters. What is seen is the form of the deity. And if we ourselves declare the idols made by our own hands to be inferior, how will the village artist ever move forward? Therefore, the art that exists within the village must be encouraged collectively.

The Kali pavilion would be constructed by the village builders. Those who can build houses surely have the skill to build a pavilion as well. This would also ensure the participation and cooperation of a larger section of the village.

For entertainment, village artists would be given opportunities. Alongside them, performances from outside would be invited, ones that had never appeared in this region before. For the rituals, those traditional priests who truly loved worship and had long been associated with it would be given the opportunity.

Among those working for the village, those who performed well would be rewarded, and those who worked poorly would not be given responsibility again.

All five decisions were taken unanimously. The meeting was dispersed.

After eating, Mangala was laying out his bedding to sleep. It was nearing eleven at night. He spread a mat and shook out a coarse blanket with both hands. Just then, Joginder came to meet him. Hearing the sound of the blanket being snapped,

Joginder was startled. For a moment, he thought something ominous was happening. Nervously, he looked around in all directions. When he saw no one and heard nothing, his unease grew. In that restlessness, he called out to Mangala.

Mangala answered from inside the room and came out. Seeing Joginder, he said, "Come in. Come in, brother. Why have you come so late at night?"

The two of them sat on the veranda bench and began talking. Joginder said, "Brother, until today, I had never seen you in this light. But after hearing your thoughts this afternoon, my chest felt as wide as twelve arms. How wonderful it is when someone truly becomes an elder."

Hearing Joginder's words, Mangala replied, "Brother, it's already very late, and I have to rise early in the morning. Tell me, why have you come?"

"There is a specific reason I came now, so I came quietly. You can see it yourself. Until now, I have been living like a tremor within the village. I have neither a proper place to stay nor any real hope for living. But something remains."

"But what?" Mangala asked.

"But this much is true: even a crorepati has no standing in a village like this."

Hearing the word crorepati, Mangala spoke in surprise:

“Do you even know how much a crore is?”

“Yes. One hundred lakhs.”

“Where did you bring so much money from?”

“Leave that aside. Ever since I went to Delhi for work, piles of money began to come my way. At first, when I saw the tightly packed notes in sacks, it felt as if they were just printed paper. But after staying there for some time, I learned how to handle money. Now, earning a lakh in a single day no longer feels extraordinary. Still, that work left my mind restless.

Now, I have only one wish. I want to live in the village as a human being.”

“What are you trying to say to me?”

“For now, everyone is absorbed in the Puja preparations. After the Puja, give me some time. I have brought one lakh rupees. If any of our own people truly need it, I will give it without interest. They will only have to return the principal slowly.

And I am telling you this as well. Let there be no shortage in the Puja because of money.”

One voice within Mangala’s mind said that work often lags because of money, and that must not happen anymore. Then another thought followed: what if this dragged them into some robbery or crime?

Until now, he had considered Joginder an ordinary man, someone who had simply gone away for work. He had never known what Joginder actually did outside. But now, he seemed dangerous. Was he a smuggler? Was he involved in hawala dealings?

Caught in this confusion, Mangala asked, "How did you come by so much money?"

Hearing Mangala's question, Joginder grew alert and looked around in all directions. Seeing no one nearby, he lowered his voice and said, "Brother, the Seth I worked for was a very powerful businessman. He had thousands of servants. Alongside his visible business, he also ran secret dealings. He exchanged foreign currencies. People from many countries came to him, each with notes of different colours. Over time, I learned to recognise which country's people brought which kind of money.

The Seth trusted me completely. He kept me close to him at all times. From small errands to tea and betel, I was the one who brought everything. Late at night, a man would arrive in a vehicle and take away all the foreign currency collected during the day. There was no discussion, no counting in front of us. The amount was simply entered into a passbook. Whenever the Seth needed money, it was I who went to the bank and brought it for him."

Listening to Joginder, Mangala felt as if something inside him had suddenly cracked open. He interrupted:

“In a city like Delhi, do the C.I.D. and the police say nothing?”

Smiling faintly, Joginder replied, “Everyone is on a monthly arrangement.”

Listening to Joginder, a storm rose in Mangala’s mind. The moment he heard those words, it was as though dark clouds of despair wrapped tightly around his thoughts from all sides. He felt drained and defeated. A thought arose within him: for whom should one adorn and prepare oneself when the beloved is blind? In a country where governance is weak, who can protect its security except God himself?

Mangala was frightened deep within. Yet, steadying his unsettled mind, he asked, “Are you still with that Seth?”

Joginder replied, “For ten years, I stayed at the Seth’s place and saw everything from close quarters. After a while, I lost all respect for him, but I did not leave the job. I told him that my mother was unwell and that I needed some advance money for her treatment. All day long, he drank liquor. Whether any sense remained in him or not, who knows. How he managed such a huge business is beyond understanding. Then a thought arose in my mind. Just as he had cheated the whole world and amassed wealth, why should I not cheat him in return? I bought a strong sleeping medicine from a chemist and mixed it into his liquor bottle. At eight in the evening, when he asked for his drink, I gave him

that very bottle and told him that my village-bound vehicle was at four in the morning, so I would leave that night itself. He said, very good, and drank it. After that, I quickly went to the mistress of the house and informed her that I was leaving for my village. From there, I went straight to the police station and told everyone that I would be leaving that day. Everyone there knew me well. When I returned, I saw that the Seth was completely unconscious. I went, played cards, ate, and then returned. From under the pillow, I took out the key and opened the money room. My God, the entire room was filled with cash. I stuffed money into a medium-sized bag, locked the room again, and put the key back. I packed that bag of money along with some clothes into my Nepali rexine bag. At midnight, when the roads were empty, I took a tempo and went to my maternal uncle. My uncle is a very sharp man. He said that once money has come into hand, one should not delay. That is the same money.”

Listening to this, Mangala asked, “What is your plan now?”

Joginder replied, “My mind is set on this. I want ten kathas of land for a homestead and five bighas of fertile fields. I will fence the ten kathas of homestead land with a hedge. In the middle, on one and a half kathas, I will build a four-sided house with a courtyard. I will dig two kathas into a pond and rear fish in it. On another two kathas, I will plant fruit trees. For vegetables, there will be enough land for all seasons. I will also keep

space ahead for work, enterprise, and threshing.”

Listening to Joginder’s plans, a spark of hope rose in Mangala’s mind. He said, “You know there are Awadhi families in Bathnaha. They own a great deal of land. One of them works in a bank. He is single and lives a very simple life. He takes little interest in either his job or farming. All his fields are given out on sharecropping. He owns ten bighas of land in our village. If you wish, you can buy all ten bighas. The land has survived till now only because he wants to sell it in one piece. Otherwise, it would have been sold long ago. But I want to ask you one thing. The life you have lived until now has been completely opposite to mine. Tell me honestly, how long do you think the two of us can walk together on the same path?”

Mangala’s question left Joginder stunned. After a while, he spoke, “Mangala bhai, your doubt is absolutely justified. I know how to put on a convincing face before ten people. But I swear on oath that I myself am fed up with the life I have been living. All the time it feels as if, at any moment, I might be wandering on the road or suddenly end up behind bars. I know everyone—from street constables to high officers with influence—yet all of them are slaves to money. Sometimes when I fall asleep, I dream that policemen with guns in their hands have surrounded me from all sides, slapped handcuffs on me, and are taking me to jail. At other times, when I think while awake, it feels as if I am moving forward, and in the very next moment I

am slipping rapidly backward. There is never any peace.”

As he spoke, tears welled up in Joginder’s eyes. Seeing the pull of the world within him, Mangala’s heart began to soften. A thought arose in his mind: human beings possess an extraordinary power, the power to change suddenly. A bandit can become a saint, and a saint can turn into a bandit. That is why it is impossible to say anything definite about human nature. It is immeasurable.

Even so, this appeared to be a deep abyss. I have faith in my discipline, whereas his life has moved in the opposite direction. There may not be much difference in our ages, but our lives have gone in two entirely different directions.

Mangala then remembered something his mother used to say. His maternal home lay in Koshikanha. To the east, the Kosi River, and to the west, the Kamla River surrounded the village. The streams in between met one another. There was a bamboo grove in that village. One clump of bamboo stood in a deep hollow. The bamboos there were extremely tall and strong, some reaching forty hands in height.

Then suddenly, the streams swelled and a flood came. Along with their cattle and belongings, the entire village abandoned their homes and went to live with relatives. They would return after the flood season. In such circumstances, how could the motherland feel like heaven?

In that bamboo clump, the water rose ten or twelve hands high. From that height, it completely submerged the entire grove. Even those who had seen it with their own eyes could hardly believe it.

As the memory surfaced, Mangala thought that if a human being truly resolves to change the course of life, then it can indeed be changed. For the sake of family, people commit theft, robbery, dishonesty, every kind of wrongdoing. I am only trying to help a fallen man rise again. A quiet happiness welled up inside him. Smiling, he said, “Brother, the way you came to my door and spoke, it has become my duty to help you. But I must also remain faithful to the fact that I have never done any wrong till today.”

Mangala’s words were also heard by his father, Ganeshi. He had stepped out to relieve himself. Quickly finishing and hurrying over, he came and stood between the two and said, “Son, let me tell you an incident from thirty years ago. At that time, I was young. My moustache and beard had just begun to grow. Your grandfather and grandmother were still alive. It was the month of Kartik, just like now. Around three in the afternoon, your maternal grandfather arrived, panting and restless, with a bundle on his head.

As soon as he came in, he said to your mother, ‘Daughter, I am going to bathe in the Ganga. Many people from the village are going. I have told them that we will meet at the station. For now, I will rest a little, and you also get ready. I

have food and expenses with me, so there is no need to arrange anything.'

Hearing her father's words, your mother was stunned. Just the day before, the cow had calved. In such matters, she was very careful. Two thoughts collided in her mind. On one hand, there was the journey to bathe in the Ganga. On the other, the fear that if something happened to the cow, then nine months of effort would be lost.

Then there was another concern. Her father had come, leaving behind the village and household. There would be crowds and chaos in travelling by vehicle. What if they failed to meet somewhere, what would happen then? So, she fell silent.

In the meantime, your grandfather also arrived. After touching his feet, he too stood quietly to one side. Neither your mother spoke, nor did he. Your maternal grandfather had already said what he wanted, so he also remained quiet. Seeing all three of them silent, your mother finally said, 'Father, shall I wash your feet?'

He replied, 'No, no, do not wash my feet. There is very little time. The train time will pass.'

Trying to balance things, your mother then said, 'Father, there is no one else to stay back. You take Nanna along with you.'

My own mind wished to go as well, but I felt it was not right to interrupt, so I stayed silent. Still, during the recitation of the Bhagavat, I had once

heard a tale that the Ganga is such a mighty current that it can absorb the whole world—from human beings down to ants and insects—and yet its belly remains empty. I carried a curiosity to see that with my own eyes. So, I left with my maternal grandfather.”

“When the two of us entered the Ganga and began to bathe,” Ganeshi continued, “my grandfather cautioned me, ‘Grandson, say to the Ganga in your heart that from today you will not speak lies or deceit.’

Saying this, we both dipped under the water. Two years later, my father passed away. I became the support of the household. After his death, your grandmother too fell ill. But I had the strength and skill to work, so I never felt helpless in any task. I remained constantly engaged in managing my affairs. I never felt the need to lie. In the southern hamlet lived Sarup, who owned ten bighas of land. Yet he was a careless, idle man, known as Lallabua. All day he wandered here and there. When he began playing cards, he would continue until one or two in the morning. He was adept at misleading and deceiving the people of the village.

Not only that, he would create such knots and intrigues in village councils and arbitration meetings that they often ended in blows and bloodshed. He also worked as a middleman in the courts. Despite owning ten bighas of land, he would go for months without eating at home. He did no work himself, nor did he keep bullocks to

till his fields. Whoever was already trapped in disputes and troubles, he used their bullocks to cultivate his land, and it was from those very people that he survived by cheating and deceiving. Whatever he took from anyone, he never even spoke of returning.

One day he came to my place and said, ‘Ganesh, I hear you sell rice.’

I replied, ‘Yes.’

He said, ‘I need one maund of rice.’

I told him, ‘That can be done. I will send someone, or if you come yourself, you can take it.’

After weighing the rice, he said, ‘There is no need to press me for payment. I will pay you as soon as money comes into my hands.’

I said, ‘Very well.’

Six months passed. I neither pressed him nor did he pay. A year went by. The second year he did the same. The third year too. How could I lie and say I had no rice? For the sake of money, my own work was being swallowed. Seeing my labour being ruined, a thought arose in my mind: the earning is mine, and the eating is Lallabua’s. This is nothing less than open daylight robbery.

All right then, I thought. From now on, I will not give him anything when he asks. I will say there is none.

But then another thought rose in my mind. I had made a vow after stepping into the Ganga. How could I speak a lie?

I was caught in a strange dilemma. Defeated by it, I began to speak lies. Yet I did one thing deliberately. To those who were deceitful, I spoke deceit. To those who were not liars, I spoke the truth.

So, my son, I tell you this. You are young and capable. Take your steps with thought and reflection. Just as the world is vast—with great people, fields and plains, rivers and dust, mountains and plateaus, seas and much else—so too is humankind. From the same potter come both the water jar and the shard. To the eye, both look the same colour.”

2.

It was the day of the new moon. That evening, Diwali would be celebrated, and later in the night, Kali Puja was to be performed. The excitement that had surrounded the preparations had finally settled. The work, too, had reached its final stage. Everything stood ready, just like the last day before an examination after a year of study.

Until yesterday, the preparations had moved at full speed, each day carrying its own rhythm and urgency. But today was the final day, and it was necessary to carefully review and count every task. There was always the fear that something might have been left undone. Even a minor oversight could disrupt the worship. For this reason, a meeting of the Puja Committee was called at seven in the morning.

In just eight days, the entire atmosphere of the village had transformed. It felt like a bamboo shoot: thick and firm at the base, narrowing in the middle, and growing thinner and more flexible as it stretched upward. Banspura felt the same way. When the days of the puja were still distant, the workload was heavy and relentless. But as the day drew nearer, the burden gradually lightened.

Since yesterday, daughters and sisters of the village had begun arriving. Most had already sent word to their relatives, but Diwali had delayed

many of their journeys. The fear of leaving a house empty on Diwali lingered in many minds. People believed that an unattended home invited misfortune, and such anxieties only grew stronger with time.

For this reason, women with no close family in the village decided to arrive after Diwali, on the day of Bhardutiya. But those with elder relatives, such as sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law, or parents, began arriving a day earlier. After all, this was their maternal home. How long had it been since they last saw their parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, and the familiar faces of the village?

For some, whose parental homes were large and lively, visits happened every year or even two or three times a year. But for those with smaller, quieter families, where little work remained, it had been ten long years since they had seen the faces of their natal home.

It was a stroke of fortune for the village that Kali Puja had begun. Yet something rather unexpected occurred: more sisters-in-law arrived than daughters of the village. With their arrival, the village became noticeably livelier. From young boys to grey-haired elders, a quiet smile appeared on every face. And when sisters-in-law came from distant towns and cities, the colour of village life deepened even further.

The villagers' days of hardship had passed, and a time of comfort was returning. The eight days

that had just gone by were so busy that no one could recall when they had last eaten or slept. Now, with guests present, the villagers themselves could enjoy hospitality. Not just the men, even the women felt cheerful. The kitchen had come alive again. Good food, fine dishes, and continuous entertainment made happiness feel close at hand.

Even more reassuring was the fact that, throughout the fair, no one would need to borrow money or run to shopkeepers. All preparations had been completed two days earlier. Moneylenders had closed their ledgers. Still, the traders felt a slight sting from the loss of Diwali sales. However grand the fair might be, there would be no shortage of milk, curd, fish, or meat. Five days earlier, advances had already been paid to the milk agent as well as the fish and meat suppliers.

And this was Kali Puja, how could the worship be complete without sacrifice? The women of Banspura were hardly so inexperienced as to forget pledging a pair of goats.

This was the very first year of the puja. How could the rituals be performed without new clothes? And how could the children enjoy the fair without them? If that did not happen, would it not amount to disrespecting the goddess?

The place where the Kali pavilion was built was an open tract of eight to ten kathas of common land. Footpaths crossed the ground in every direction, worn smooth by countless footsteps. In

the northwestern corner, people had long discarded broken earthen pots and old household cloth. In the northeastern section, children used to relieve themselves. The southwestern part had pits dug by herdsman during grazing games, while in the southeastern corner, children had marked off spaces and built small shelters for games like kabaddi and gitti.

With the arrival of Kali Puja, the entire open ground was scraped, levelled, and made uniform. Given the scale of the fair being organised, even the available space began to feel a little cramped. Fortunately, the season had been dry, and the paddy in the surrounding fields had ripened early. After the harvest, villagers had already fed the stalks to their cattle. This cleared enough land, and space for the fair no longer felt insufficient.

More than fifteen bighas of field embankments were broken down and flattened to create a wide, open arena. Without this effort, how could a major theatrical troupe from Muzaffarpur have been accommodated? This was no ordinary group. From the musicians to the actors performing male roles, all were women. Even the music ensemble was composed entirely of women. Would people from neighbouring villages not flock to see such a spectacle? They certainly would. That alone required at least five bighas of viewing space, and that requirement had now been met.

In addition, the Raas troupe from Vrindavan was

also scheduled to perform. It was no less impressive than a full-scale drama. One performer outshone the next. With heavy-built bodies, thick beards, and flowing hair, the same actors danced and acted with equal intensity. There would be no shortage of spectators. Alongside male and female qawwali performances, the Maliniya dance of the Mahisothe community was also featured. One attraction followed another. How could the fair not turn grand and boisterous?

The members of the puja committee were pleased, yet one concern lingered in everyone's mind. How would such a massive fair be managed? No matter how sincerely the villagers worked, mischievous boys were bound to create trouble. Pickpockets would surely be active. That was inevitable. In fairs and markets, some disorder is always expected. Who could keep an eye on everyone? Who would listen to whom? And above all, the fair would continue late into the night.

The arrangement of shops was also an essential part of the fair. Two kinds of shops were planned: old and new. One section was designated as a new market for fresh goods, while another was set aside in the style of a traditional bazaar. For now, the shops were not yet fully set up, but as the fair approached, everything would fall into place.

The polish and sparkle of the new market had a charm of its own. There was such an abundance

of goods that one could hardly take it all in at a glance. The shopkeepers themselves seemed to glow with confidence. Bracelets of a kind never before seen in this region had arrived. Rows upon rows of bangle shops gleamed with colour and shine, enough to make the onlookers' eyes widen in wonder.

And why wouldn't they? Until now, bangles had always been sold by women. This time, men were selling them too. The shops were decorated both inside and out with eye-catching photographs that drew crowds effortlessly. It was hard to tell whether the figures in the pictures were real people or just images. But it hardly mattered. In addition to the visuals, powerful sound systems played songs so captivating that one could forget everything else while standing there.

Next to the bangle market stood the Chester stalls. These traders were no less elaborate in their display. Since the previous day, they had installed such promotional machines that it was difficult to distinguish between a human voice and a recorded one. Their advertising was sharp and persuasive. Along with selling the products, they demonstrated how to wear them as well. One felt a certain gratitude toward the designer who had created such versatile wear, suitable for bodies ranging from elephantine bulk to the slenderest frames. The designs were so appealing that shoppers had no reason to move from one stall to another. And for those with money, one piece was never enough, they bought in bundles.

Everything was fully automatic, even the pricing. The cost was modest, just eleven rupees, low enough to ensure brisk sales. The traders were clever enough to know in advance exactly how much would sell.

Beside the Chester stalls lay the toy market. What ingenuity on the part of the toy makers and those who had invested in such trade. Toys ranged in price from ten rupees to a thousand. The shops overflowed with toy guns, cannons, rockets, aeroplanes, and even bomb-shaped playthings. They looked real, though they were not. Yet they fired pellets, made noise, and even flew, just like the real thing.

Three Bombay-style salons for hair and beard grooming had also arrived. All three employed women barbers, dressed like men and styled with careful precision. They were faster than male barbers and sharper in conversation. While having one's beard trimmed, it was hard to tell whether the hands at work were rough or gentle. The hands appeared masculine, yet carried a softer, more confident touch.

Next to the salons stood the sari market. The saris were hung in striking arrangements. The word silk was boldly printed on the labels, yet the fabric rustled like cotton. There was no roughness to be felt. Each piece was smooth and finely finished. Such exquisite patola patterns were on display that one could hardly tell whether the material was Bhagalpuri silk or finely treated cotton. Plastic mannequins were

positioned so artfully, they seemed to beckon customers with a mere flick of the eyes.

There were rides and amusements everywhere. Giant swings, the well of death, helicopters, aeroplanes, toy trains, and four- and six-wheeled racing carts modelled on Delhi crossings, all spinning and roaring at once.

After exploring the new market, it felt only natural to wander through the old one. Here, someone had set up a thatched stall, another had erected a hut on wooden posts covered with plastic sheets. Some had hung tarpaulins, while others had simply spread-out clay pots, bowls, and household utensils on the ground. The shopkeepers were unmistakably rural folk. Ah, these were familiar faces.

The first stall belonged to the old man who sold rattles. He had been selling them for more than forty years. Age had bent him now, yet there he was. He and his wife sat on opposite sides, busily making rattles from palm leaves. Mats woven from date palm leaves were neatly displayed beside them.

“You look familiar, Rattle Uncle,” someone said.

“Yes, lad. I wear spectacles now, so you hesitated,” he replied. “Earlier I didn’t wear them. My eyes were fine back then. Two years ago, my eyesight worsened, and this year, during the lean season, I had them treated.”

But the woman who made the rattles looked closely and said, “Sonma, is that you? Ever since you went away to work in the cities, I haven’t seen you. Do you recognise me?”

“No.”

“Your mother’s village and my natal home are the same place. Yard by yard, we sell rattles and mats, that’s how we survive. Now, by God’s grace, everything is in place. We have two sons, daughters-in-law, and seven grandchildren. Both sons build houses; they work as masons and earn well. We even have a brick house of our own now. But the two of us have done only this work all our lives. At our age, taking up something new wouldn’t work. Our sons ask us to stop too, but sitting idle doesn’t feel right. So, as long as we live, we’ll keep working.

“Your mother has been fond of me since you were a child. Whenever I visit your home, she never lets me leave without feeding me. Tell her my stall is in the fair this year. How many children do you have?”

“Just one.”

“Take a rattle for the child.”

“No, Aunt. I can’t take it like that. I don’t have any money with me right now, and you’re here to sell. You probably haven’t sold much yet.”

“Oh, child, the Diwali blessing belongs to the one who gives. I would give it to my own

grandchild. This is my Diwali offering. Take it.”

The next stall belonged to Ramesar. He had iron tools and wooden implements on display: sickles, hoes, digging blades, plough parts, axes, chisels, knives, pincers, sieves, grinding boards, rolling pins, cutters, rasps, fodder sickles, wooden sandals, and even small three-wheeled carts for children.

Ramesar sat alone, cross-legged with one knee raised, smoking a beedi.

I said, “Ramesar, I heard you went off to Delhi too.”

He laughed, “Rubbish. Delhi is nothing but hot air. People say that whether you eat the laddoos of Delhi or not, your stomach still aches.

“When I saw everyone there wearing full trousers, shiny shirts, watches, radios, and those half-shaved hairstyles, my heart began to itch. I didn’t tell anyone in the village; I just left. I found work with people of my own caste. Three thousand rupees a month, food included. But the labour was so back-breaking that if I worked that hard here in the village, I’d earn more. So, I turned back and came home.”

“Ever since I heard that our own village would host a Kali Puja fair, I’ve been making all this stock,” he said. “Somehow or other, I’ve managed to gather goods worth four or five thousand rupees. These are not things that rot or

spoil.

“You people don’t seem to realise that in Delhi, everything runs on hundi money. I understood that within a month. When one has the skill to make one’s own goods, why should one work for others? Why not live as one’s own master through one’s own labour? You people take other people’s houses and wealth to be your own aspiration, but you forget that the rich enjoy themselves by squeezing the sweat of your labour. Now look, I’ve set up a small stall.”

We walked ahead. Oh, this looked like Bhaiya Raudiya’s tea stall.

“So, you’ve opened a stall yourself, Bhaiya?” I asked.

“Yes, lad. It’s a village fair. The crowd and noise shouldn’t burden the village alone. Instead of just roaming around, it’s better to earn a little and also help keep an eye on things.”

“Well done. Did you have your own utensils?”

“No. I spoke to Raghunath, and he gave me his old ones.”

“Raghunath’s shop has become quite a standard place now.”

“Yes. It was the earnings from the tea stall that married off his three daughters and helped him build a brick house.”

“Wonderful. Very fine indeed.”

Many small traders had not even built proper stalls. Since it was the month of Kartik, there was neither intense heat nor biting cold. Why spend unnecessarily on bamboo and thatch to build a shelter? Two bamboo posts were driven into the ground, a pole laid across the top, and bunches of bananas were hung from it for sale.

In the same way, for kachri, fried snacks, papad, and puffed treats, a clay stove was dug straight into the earth, and an iron pan placed on it. Puffed rice was stored in baskets and measured out with old tins. As for the moulds used to make jhillis, not everyone had them, so they simply made do without.

Traders from Jhanjharpur and Madhepur, ten or twelve of them, had arrived and completely transformed the bustle of the fair. The customers were familiar faces, and the traders were well-known too. Naturally, the best earnings would go to them. Both cash and credit would circulate freely. All the stalls were being set up in a single long row.

Near the pipal tree, a quarrel had broken out. We went to have a look. Oh, it was Dholba and his wife.

“Why are you both trembling like a pair of drums, Dholba Bhai, even before starting?” I asked.

Lowering his voice, Dholba said,

“Brother, just look at this woman. Whatever profit or loss others may make at the fair, for me, this is the season. Chhath is coming next. People from nearby villages will surely buy baskets, winnowing trays, sieves, and leaf plates. I have made my stock accordingly. But she says there are only thirty sieves and trays combined, eighteen baskets, and barely fifty leaf cones. You tell me, will a pinch of cumin in a camel’s mouth be of any use?”

I said, “Why quarrel over this now? Just go and make more.”

Dholba fell silent for a moment. Then his wife burst out sharply, “This man has no sense at all. He does not even realise how much work can be done in eight days. We have two small children who need looking after. He spends the whole day gathering bamboo, twine, and tools. This is not a market where we can simply take money and buy goods. Everything has to be made by hand.”

Dholba replied, “Can you not see that for half the month I do not even bathe because of work? Put your hand on your chest and tell me, do we eat fresh rice and curry even for a single day?

“When I go out at one or two in the afternoon, parched with hunger and thirst, to fetch bamboo, that day I either bathe late or not at all. I gulp down food in a hurry and immediately return to work. I do not even get time for bidis or tobacco. What people call rest, I have not known since the

first light of day ever touched my eyes.

“Do you think cutting bamboo, splitting it, and shaping it is easy? Sitting still and running a blade may seem simple to you. But you do not realise that rising and squatting again and again makes the thighs swell. To ease that strain, one has to do a bit of stretching. After all this labour, only then does the weaving begin.

“Even while seated, I keep making baskets and frames. It helps that I drink toddy. It keeps the mind steady and the mood fresh. That is why nothing goes wrong. Otherwise, who would have the strength to finish so many kinds of work in a single day?

“Fine then, set up the stall. Since you are setting it up anyway, make three bundles of leaf cones. The trays and baskets are of one kind, and divide the sieves into two bundles, one larger and one smaller. Give me five rupees so I can drink some toddy and come back.”

“It is scorching hot right now. If I give you money for toddy at this hour, do you think I want to invite abuse?” she snapped.

“Oh, listen to this woman. You feel no shame in speaking like this, even though I am the one who has taken the burden of the household upon himself. Friends and companions keep mocking me all the time.”

“All right, I will give you the money. But do not

ask again in the afternoon. If you are going, go. Just make sure you come back quickly. It is a fair. Will I manage the stall alone or look after the children as well?”

“That, I do understand. But there are ten other worries too. If something untoward happens, who will look after our well-being then?”

The news of the misconduct involving the girl from Banspura at the Durga shrine in Sisauni quietly spread to surrounding villages. Conversations began everywhere, though not all in the same tone. Most people condemned the incident. Some treated it as crude entertainment. A few dismissed it as a fashionable behaviour copied from elsewhere and chose to remain silent.

Despite these varied reactions, the people of Sisauni felt uneasy in the presence of those from Banspura. The fear that such an incident might happen again stirred deep anxiety among Sisauni's more thoughtful and educated residents.

Dayanand of Sisauni was a professor at Darbhanga College. To the villagers, he was simply a salaried man, but within the college, he was respected by both students and teachers. This year, instead of visiting the village for Durga Puja, Professor Dayanand had gone to Rameshwaram with friends. His wife and children, however, had come to the village. When he returned from Rameshwaram, they informed him of the incident.

On hearing the details, Professor Dayanand burned inwardly. He fell silent and began to think. What kind of spectacle was this, that such unrighteousness had taken place during a religious observance? How would people continue to hold reverence for religion after this? If such tendencies were to take root in sacred places, how long could those places remain sacred? How could any mother or sister step out of her home to visit a shrine for worship or evening prayers?

The more he reflected, the more troubling questions filled his mind. Yet time, once gone, could not be brought back. How could he now return to that village? What would people say? Many students from Banspura had studied under him and graduated. What would they think?

Still, it was possible to resist such incidents in the future. Sin, after all, could be washed away through atonement.

Meanwhile, an invitation card for the upcoming Kali Puja in Banspura had already arrived. Weighing everything carefully, Professor Dayanand recalled an old saying: if a frog dies in a well, people do not abandon the well water. They remove the carcass and find ways to cleanse the stench. The beginning of Kali Puja in Banspura itself was a reaction to what had happened in Sisauni. But what if, in response, another such incident was to happen there?

Three days before the Kali Puja was to begin,

Professor Dayanand returned to the village. Without concern for personal prestige or formalities, he contacted the educated and senior residents and spoke to them directly. Some already viewed the issue as a matter of the village's honour. Others understood only after careful explanation. Once clarity emerged, there was unanimous agreement that a village meeting should be held to find a resolution. With this consensus, courage grew within Dayanand to move forward.

As soon as that resolve settled in his mind, he entrusted the responsibility of organising the meeting to his college students. Two days passed. On the very morning the Kali Puja was to begin, a meeting was held at seven o'clock.

Even before seven, people had gathered at the Durga shrine. Ideologically, the village appeared divided into two camps. Each side came determined to defend its position. The three individuals directly involved in the incident, along with their fathers, did not attend the meeting. Their absence was not due to open defiance, but to shame. Since the time Professor Dayanand had returned from Darbhanga and initiated discussions on the incident, they had begun avoiding public appearances.

Yet the suppressed incident surfaced again. One group in the village, which could be described as inclined toward wrongdoing, had quietly prepared a plan to use force so that no path toward consensus would remain open. Opposing

them stood a large section of villagers who felt deep hatred toward such acts. Their thinking was unified. Behind that shared position lay many different strands of reasoning.

Some believed there was a habitual group of offenders within the village, always engaged in one misdeed or another. In everyday life, they abused and insulted one another, but when a critical moment arrived, they closed ranks. From that perspective, the incident was seen as a weapon through which this group could finally be exposed, cut down, and rendered powerless.

Others felt that just as the three individuals had committed violence in a secluded place, they should now be confronted and condemned openly at the heart of the community. At the same time, some took a different view. They argued that this was a human society, not an animal one. Therefore, the response must remain human as well. Even if building a just and humane society required a slow and complex process, that process must be put into action.

Lalba's way of thinking was entirely different from the rest. His reason was simple: the girl who had been subjected to abuse was his maternal cousin.

Lalba worked as a driver in Calcutta and had come to the village for Durga Puja. On the day the incident occurred, he knew nothing about it. But the moment he found out; a fire spread through his entire body. Inwardly, he had already

formed a plan. He wanted to show society how the crooked arrogance of the powerful could be crushed. What better opportunity could there be?

Yet one doubt kept troubling him. The entire initiative was being led by Uncle Dayanand. If Dayanand intervened at a crucial moment, all his plans might collapse. After much thought, Lalba reached a firm decision. Whatever happened, he would not let this go without retaliation, even if it meant spending the rest of his life in jail.

People from every neighbourhood of the village gathered at the meeting, setting aside personal groups and internal factions. Professor Dayanand stood up to speak, “The incident that occurred during this year’s Durga Puja is a grave stain on our society. No amount of condemnation can be enough. Some of you may feel that the girl was from another village. But thinking that way only reflects a regressive mindset. It is precisely such thinking that allows one ugly incident after another to continue while we remain mute spectators. That is why incidents like this must be stopped.”

At this point, the group that had been waiting to create disruption began shouting and trying to stir chaos. Seeing this, many others stood up and loudly opposed them. Lalba looked toward Professor Dayanand. Dayanand’s expression did not change, but his eyes, heavy with unshed tears, slowly drooped downward, like dark rain clouds hanging low in the sky.

In that instant, Lalba flashed forward like

lightning and charged.

He struck all three of them on his own, sending them reeling. By the time calm returned, their cheeks and faces were swollen. Yet Lalba's fury had not subsided. Just as a man who has drawn blood begins to thirst for more, the same fire surged within him. But people from all sides rushed in and dragged him aside by force.

Holding both his hands firmly, Daya Babu whispered to him, "If even a single son of society stands against injustice, hundreds more are born in the lap of Mother Earth. Steady your mind. And remember this: every problem in society cannot be solved through beatings alone, nor through village arbitration alone.

"There are two kinds of problems. One arises from a particular situation. The other is rooted in a larger system or structure of power. The problem we face today belongs to a flawed system. Such problems can be restrained by force, but if not addressed properly, they continue in one form or another and never truly die."

Hearing Professor Dayanand's words, Lalba said, "Uncle, I feel hesitant even speaking like this in front of you. Otherwise, I would have drunk their blood. Even if I had to spend the rest of my life in jail, even if I had to mount the gallows. What have we brought into this world, and what will we take away? If death is inevitable, then why not die fighting instead of

rotting away?”

At Lalba's words, Professor Dayanand smiled and replied, "People sing, 'There is no disgrace in dying in battle.' Even in the Mahabharata, Sage Vyasa says that only those who stand in the battlefield against injustice and offer their lives deserve the throne of Indra. What has happened, has happened rightly. Do not go any further now. If this incident brings correction, that is good. Otherwise, someone else will face the consequences. You stay here."

Saying this, Dayanand moved forward, lost in thought. He began to reflect that perhaps the study of society had not gone deep enough. The way emotions were turning could become uncontrollable at any moment. He quickly instructed everyone to return to their homes.

He gave the instruction, yet no one was ready to leave the field. Everyone stood firm. Even he found himself in a strange bind. His mind churned. How could he be the first to abandon the ground? Yet, if he remained, others would continue to stay as well.

He repeated himself, raising his voice once more, "We have all been living together as one community for a long time, and we must continue to do so. That is why we must learn to live in harmony. If anyone wrongs another, conflict is bound to arise. A quarrel within one family can easily become a quarrel of the entire village and eventually of society itself. The only way to prevent such disputes is to ensure that the

causes for them never arise in the first place.”

Saying this, Professor Dayanand turned and walked toward his home. Yet the crowd remained rooted in the field. His words, however, had begun to leave their mark. Similar incidents had happened before, and those old memories now began to stir in people’s minds.

Dayanand continued walking, yet kept glancing back again and again to ensure that no fresh scuffle had broken out. No one carried sticks or weapons, but bodies themselves can become weapons. He walked nearly five bighas ahead and then sat down by the path, pretending to answer the call of nature, while quietly observing. He saw no one raising a hand or even a foot. Slowly, those who had been beaten were the first to leave the field. Others followed, each taking their own path. Once he was sure tempers had cooled, he rose and left as well.

Upon reaching home, Professor Dayanand said to his wife, “I had planned to leave for Banspura by ten, but the meeting took longer than expected. I won’t bathe now. Just serve the food quickly. I’ll wash my hands and feet.”

Hearing this, his wife said nothing. She understood well that, for many days now, in the rush of responsibilities, he had not even found the time to bathe.

The drums had fallen silent. Guided by the Bhagats, the procession arrived at the Kali shrine

in Banspura. In the Bhagat's hands were a brass water pot and a jagarnathiya cane staff. Dalbah and Mantun carried a broad wicker basket filled with coins purchased from the Madhubani market. Inside it lay flowers, sacred rice, incense sticks, and a box of matches. A mridang hung from Niradhan's shoulder. Raviya and Sainiya held the cymbals. Somna carried a bamboo tray bearing mango leaves and seven dried strands of kusha grass. Across Budhba's shoulder rested a thick bamboo pole. Near its tip fluttered a blue flag, and about three cubits below it, a strip of cloth in the same hue was tied.

Together, they raised their voices, chanting in unison, "Victory to Mother Kali."

Members of the Puja Committee sat nearby, busy with accounts and calculations. Under the pavilion, Chhalgoriya was conducting the final inspection of the idol. As the ritual gestures of the Bhagats drew attention, people began to gather, one by one. The committee members paused their work and turned to watch.

On the veranda of the Kali pavilion, the Bhagat's companions set down their belongings and walked to the nearby pond to wash their hands and feet. Somna lifted the bamboo tray to fill it with consecrated water. The Bhagat kept the water pot in his hand.

After washing, they all returned and stood before the Kali pavilion, bowing one by one and touching the ground in reverence. Once the ritual salutations were complete, Niradhan raised the

mridang and began to play. Sainiya and Raviya followed, striking the cymbals in a steady rhythm. The Bhagat returned from the pond and took his place at the front of the pavilion, holding the water pot, lips moving softly as he began his invocation with closed eyes.

Slightly apart from the others, Budhba planted the ritual pole firmly into the ground before the shrine. Suddenly, as devotion surged through him, a voice rose aloud, calling out, “O Mother Kali...”

Just as every role had been assigned in advance, so it unfolded. The Bhagat stood upright, his body trembling. The Gosain had arrived. Dalibah stepped forward and stood before the Bhagat, holding the offering tray tightly in both hands. After a brief pause, the Bhagat took flowers and sacred rice from the basket. Facing north, he gathered them in his palms and cast them forcefully. He then took another handful, invoked the name of the Ganga, and threw them to the south. Four handfuls were cast in the four directions. The fifth he flung upward, crying out loudly, “O... O...”

As he spoke, he declared his presence in the name of Kali.

At the sound of Kali’s name, Dalibah spoke, “O Mother, will you grant us a word?”

The Bhagat replied, “The fortune of this place has awakened. Beneath it flows the living Ganga

herself. From now on, no witch or dark force will prevail in this village. Until today, the people lived in constant strife. Now they will dwell in peace. No harmful spell or affliction will touch anyone.”

Hearing this promise of prosperity, a fresh joy stirred in the hearts of all the members of the Puja Committee.

Devanath asked, “O Mother, what do you desire?”

The Bhagat, speaking in Kali’s voice, replied, “This place is mine. Today we have planted the sacred pole and built the platform. Daily worship shall be offered here, and wandering Gosains will also perform their rites. Whoever suffers from bodily affliction shall touch the offering tray. With flowers alone, they shall be healed.”

After planting the pole and preparing the platform, Budhba also set a tulsi sapling into the ground. The committee members watched in silence. Not a trace of doubt arose in anyone’s mind, for such sanctified sites existed elsewhere as well.

Smiling softly, Devanath asked again, “O Mother, grant us your identity.”

With sudden force, Kali spoke through the Bhagat, “Did you repay the life that was saved for you? When death held you in its grip, who preserved you? Once the danger passed, you forgot everything. Even now, you survive only

by the virtue of a woman. Your wife is righteous, and you are sinful. It is through her merit that you still live. Otherwise, your destruction would have come long ago.”

Hearing these words, Devanath’s mind returned sharply to the incident involving the girl. He offered no defence. Folding his hands quietly, he said, “O Mother, I may have forgotten, but you have reminded me.”

Shifting his gaze away from Devanath, the Bhagat turned to Joginder and spoke, “Did you fulfil the vow you once made? When your life was trapped in danger, how many times did you plead and promise? Even so, eleven twelfths of your fate have already been cut away. Only a quarter remains. That is why you must give charity and offerings without delay, and erase the rest.”

Joginder was struck by the memory of that night, the night he had escaped after stealing money from the Seth’s house. Folding his hands, he replied, “O Mother, it is true. I forgot. I will soon fulfil the vow I made to you.”

Trying to bring matters to a close, Dalibah intervened, “Today is the first day the Gosain has descended. No further work should be done now.”

At Dalibah’s words, the Bhagat turned to face north, raised both hands, and closed his eyes. Kali departed from his body. The Bhagat

returned to his ordinary state, like any other man. The cymbals and the mridang fell silent, and the cry of possession ceased. With a subtle gesture of his eyes, the Bhagat signalled to Dalibah that the task was complete.

Dalibah responded with a glance of assent.

“Yes.”

The members of the committee stepped away from the Bhagat and returned to their seats. Yet a new issue now stood before them. The question was whether a permanent shrine should be established, or whether the sacred pole should be uprooted and discarded.

Opposing views emerged immediately. Some supported the idea of establishing a gahwar, while others firmly objected. In the middle sat Mangal, unable to reach a conclusion. Within himself, he sensed that trouble had arrived at the wrong moment. If he objected, an auspicious undertaking might begin under an inauspicious sign. If he remained silent, the trouble would stand before them every day.

Mangal did not personally know the Bhagat, but he was aware of the Bagurbani Bhagat and the controversies surrounding him. A so-called healer who claimed to cure barrenness had recently been jailed. That Bhagat had served six months in prison and had been released only recently. Now, to protect the reputation of the Bagurbani gahwar, it seemed an effort was underway to awaken a new shrine.

But why had the Bhagat been imprisoned?

The Bagurbani Bhagat treated everything from ordinary headaches to pleas for childbirth. One day, a labourer arrived at the Bagurbani gahwar with his wife, seeking a cure for barrenness. It was a Friday, considered the most favourable of the three mendicant days. The offering tray had been lavishly prepared. Usually, women seeking remedies would come accompanied by elders or elderly women, so disputes never arose. But that day, the rough-mannered labourer came alone with his wife, a man so crude that even while working in Calcutta, he had never once entered a hospital.

After completing the ritual, the Bhagat told him, “Move away from the boundary of the gahwar.”

It was evening. Darkness had already settled. Suspicion stirred in the man’s mind. He refused to move. An argument broke out between the two. After the quarrel, the man stepped outside the gahwar and walked toward the outer hedge, but he remained alert, his eyes and ears strained. Inside the shrine, only the Bhagat and the woman remained.

Trembling with ritual intensity, the Bhagat first placed his hand on the woman’s body. Believing it to be part of the rite, the woman said nothing. But when the Bhagat told her to lie down before the ritual platform, she cried out loudly for her husband. Hearing her voice, the husband rushed in and struck the Bhagat directly.

The Bhagat, too, had a household of his own. How could he endure being beaten in his own space without resistance?

At the sound of the commotion, five or seven men arrived at once. All were either relatives or close associates of the Bhagat. Instead of calming the situation, they joined in and attacked the man who had raised the alarm. In the scuffle, the woman too was hit a few times. The man went to the police station and filed a complaint the following day. On the third day, the Bhagat was sent to jail.

Ever since Joginder had heard that a quarter of his fate still remained and could be erased through charity, his mind had been in constant turmoil. Again and again, the thought returned that the Bhagat had spoken the truth. On the night he had climbed onto the tempo with the stolen money, he had indeed made that vow. Throughout the journey, fear gripped him. The entire way, he had kept chanting, “Mother Kali, Mother Kali.”

When so many details matched, how could the matter of the remaining quarter be false? Charity did erase planetary afflictions, did it not?

Yet there were countless paths to charity. He said nothing aloud, but his thoughts wandered restlessly. Some people arranged feasts. Some built rest houses at pilgrimage sites. Others dug ponds and wells. Some established schools and colleges. Some built hospitals, while others gave grain and clothing in alms. There were so many

ways to give. What, then, should he do?

Another thought followed. All these years, he had made no true friends and had always acted on his own impulse. But now he had formed a friendship with Mangal. It was necessary to ask him.

All the members of the Puja Committee were present at the Kali site, for the next day's tasks were the most demanding of all. Shops were to be set up in some areas; in others, collections and subscriptions had to be arranged. Even so, Joginder pulled Mangal aside from the meeting. Taking him a little away, he asked quietly, "Brother, do you truly believe the Bhagat was right in saying that a quarter of my fate still remains?"

Mangal replied, "Do you yourself believe it?"

"Yes. How could I not? Does a Gosain ever descend without reason?"

Hearing Joginder's words, Mangal began to reflect inwardly. On one side, a bond of friendship had formed. On the other, a path toward hostility was quietly taking shape. Until now, he had always kept such exorcists and sorcerers at a distance. Even so, people's faith in them remained firm. There had been no need for this Bhagat to arrive uninvited, without discussion or consent.

The Gosain had spoken truly when he said the

course of events resembled the struggle between a snake and a shrew. If the Bhagat were driven away, he would create such an uproar that all worship would come to a halt. If he were not driven away, he would raise a grand spectacle by building a gahwar.

Caught in this tangle of thought, Mangal finally spoke to Joginder, "What do you yourself think?"

Joginder replied, "Brother, if I had to decide on my own, why would I ask you?"

Joginder's answer deepened Mangal's confusion. He fell silent for a moment, then said carefully, "Brother, how much charity do you wish to give? There are many places where it can be offered."

Joginder replied, "The places you mention are not immediately before us. What stands right in front of us, that is what must be done."

A fresh unease stirred within Mangal. Surely, Joginder would soon suggest building a brick shrine. If that were said directly, it would be impossible to oppose or support without consequences. Masking his anxiety, Mangal responded lightly, "A very fine thought. That is exactly what I was about to suggest."

After a brief pause, Joginder added, "I feel that all the widows and helpless women in the village should be given assistance."

At the mention of widows, a wave of relief washed over Mangal. Smiling, he said, “You have spoken wisely. But one must first understand what widows truly mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“In our land, there are two kinds of widows. One kind belongs to the government. The other belongs to society.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Government widows are those who receive every benefit the state provides. Social widows are those whom the government neither knows nor recognizes, and who themselves have no knowledge of the government. A few listed widows already have someone to support them. Whatever scheme the government announces for widows usually reaches only them.”

It is a strange game, played by both the state and widowhood. The same supported widows receive Indira housing grants. When floods or rains destroy homes, compensation reaches them. When crops are damaged by flooding, they receive those payments as well. Beyond this, they get old-age pensions and employment subsidies.

Therefore, if a means of survival can be created for the truly helpless widows of society, the one who does so will gain a reward far greater than through ordinary charity.

Offer your gratitude to those mothers and grandmothers who, even after seventy or eighty years of life, labour with all their strength in the scorching heat of Jyeshtha, the thorn-filled damp of Bhadon, and the piercing cold winds of Magh. Offer gratitude to that eighty-year-old mother who returns from the fields to the threshing ground, a load of rice, wheat, or maize on her head, humming songs as she walks with slow and steady steps.

Tell them this: for now, the fair fills the village with noise and bustle. But after it ends, ensure that each of them is given a means of livelihood. Work is not degrading if it suits the strength of the body. During these five days of the fair, provide them with daily necessities, a little cash, and one set of sari and blouse.

Yet there is another truth, one deeply tied to the heritage of Mithila. There are those who have lost all four supports of life and live under the crushing weight of sorrow, yet their self-respect remains so strong that they hesitate to accept charity.

That is why you must go first and bow at the feet of these mothers. Say to them, “Mother, you too are part of this family we call society, and so are we. It is the duty of those who earn to care for the elderly and the young within this family. What we offer you is not charity, but service.”

Then you will surely see them smile, accept it, and bless you from their hearts.

Mangal's words struck straight into Joginder's heart. The moment they entered, something within him shuddered. It felt as if the hearts of all those widows were pressing their way into his own, one after another. His mind softened, soaked through with emotion.

It was true that in the village where Joginder was born, there had always been widows, and there still were. Yet the image of widowhood that rose before him now was one he had never seen before.

With a trembling voice, he said to Mangal, "Brother, let us do as you've said, at once. Still, my heart is not at peace. After the fair ends, we will think more carefully and do something lasting."

Professor Dayanand set off for Banspura, riding straight ahead on his bicycle. As he crossed the village boundary, he noticed a schoolteacher standing in the middle of the road. The teacher, appointed as an education volunteer with a salary of fifteen hundred rupees, had placed his bicycle on its stand and was speaking on his mobile phone.

Dayanand said nothing. He thought to himself that it was already late, and if he spoke now and an argument followed, even more time would be lost. Still, his thoughts remained unsettled.

He began to reflect. These days, he lived near Darbhanga College in rented lodging. But when

he had completed his master's degree, he had neither a bicycle nor nearby accommodation. He used to walk a mile and a half each day to attend college. Now, village teachers worked in their own communities and travelled back and forth on motorcycles. A man earning a thousand rupees was shaping a life that appeared to cost three thousand.

Could he ask that teacher whether he understood the limits of his own life? If he didn't, what would he teach others? What would the children learn from him?

As these questions surfaced, Dayanand's mind became entangled. He reminded himself that, just as one must clear thorny bushes with both hands to make a path, he too must clear the clutter from his thoughts and focus fully on Banspura.

News of the meeting at Sisouni spread swiftly, like birds carrying tidings, reaching villages in all directions. At the meeting of the Kali Puja Committee in Banspura, Sisouni was already being discussed. The moment Professor Dayanand arrived, both Mangal and Devanath stood up, folded their hands, and greeted him. After returning the greeting, Mangal took hold of Dayanand's bicycle and leaned it against the side of the pavilion. Holding Dayanand gently by the hand, he led him into the meeting.

In the midst of the committee, as he contributed one hundred and one rupees toward the collection, Professor Dayanand asked calmly,

“How did the idea of Kali worship arise so suddenly in all your minds?”

There was a certain mystery hidden in Professor Dayanand’s question. That was why no one answered him directly. Everyone knew this was unfolding as a reaction to the Durga Puja held at Sisouni. What was meant to remain concealed stayed unspoken. Yet Dayanand’s question moved on a different plane. Durga Puja, after all, is a worship of power, a devotion that grows through collective organisation. Kali Puja, by contrast, is linked to time itself, to the sheer force of time.

The unspoken question was this: what role does time play in the accumulation of power?

Concealing these layered thoughts, Dayanand spoke aloud, “You have done something commendable. Acts like this give rise to a new social awareness, something every society needs.”

As the conversation continued between Professor Dayanand and the members of the Banspura Kali Puja Committee, Professor Kamalnath from the village of Barharba arrived on his motorcycle. Casting a quick, assessing glance at Dayanand from head to toe, Kamalnath said, “Dayababu, I had gone to your house looking for you.”

Without replying directly, Dayanand smiled and said, “Brother, let us stay here a little longer.

Then we will go together. My former students are organising the worship here.”

Both Devanath and Mangal had studied under Dayanand at college, which was why he held particular affection for them. Professor Kamalnath also took a seat and began listening to the discussion. After understanding the arrangements for the worship, Dayanand said to Mangal, “I had come only to get a sense of things. Tonight, however, I will return with my family to see it properly. I would have stayed longer, but Brother Kamal has arrived. You may not know him. He is my senior and mentor. I studied under him for four years. He retired from the college ten years ago. He is also my neighbour. His home is in Barharba.”

The arrival of Professor Dayanand and Professor Kamalnath lifted the spirits of both Devanath and Mangal many times over. A fresh joy seemed to take hold of them, as though new strength had begun to course through their bodies.

Professor Kamalnath contributed one hundred and twenty-one rupees to the collection. With folded hands and sincere warmth, Mangal urged both of them, “Gurudev, where will you go now? Please stay on. People will come to know that you have arrived.”

Hearing this, Professor Kamalnath replied with a gentle smile, “My son, until now you did not recognise us. Yet we all belong to the same neighbourhood. I pass through this village at least five times a month. Today’s coincidence

was fortunate. We met everyone at once. Not only was there a meeting, but also recognition and familiarity. Since we share the same surroundings, we must sit together and continue discussing ways to uplift all our villages. I may have grown old, but as long as there is life in me, I will walk alongside you.

“To move a village forward, two kinds of work are essential. First, to understand the basic needs of human life and fulfil them. Second, to examine the practices handed down to us, discard what is harmful, and adopt what is good. You have already taken up a significant task. Handle it with care. Everything else will reveal itself in time.”

Having said this, Kamalnath stepped aside with Dayanand and began speaking to him in a low voice. Dayanand asked, “You seem quite unsettled. Is there something in particular?”

Smiling faintly, Kamalnath replied, “That is for you to tell. Around half past nine, my nephew came and said there had been a meeting in your village. He said some people abused you there, and that blows were even exchanged. How much truth is there in this, and how far did matters go?”

Hearing Kamal Babu’s words, Dayanand was taken aback. He began to reflect inwardly. At the meeting, there had been no one from another village. So how had the news travelled so quickly? It occurred to him that all the villages in the area were closely connected. From kinship

ties and social visits to markets and daily movement, the links ran deep. Family matters rarely travelled far, but social events flew like birds from one village to the next. That was exactly what had happened.

Another thought followed. If something unpleasant had spread as a rumour, then the incident itself must have spread along with it. And if the incident had travelled, then some form of opposition must also have arisen in response. That was not a bad thing. On the contrary, it was good. To oppose injustice was to uphold righteousness.

Just as resistance to injustice in the Ramayana had infused new strength even into Bali, so too must something similar have occurred here. Amid injustice, courage would surely have grown. That, in itself, was no small gain for life.

Smiling gently, Professor Dayanand began recounting the Durga Puja incident and said, “In every village, there are ten or twenty rogues and idlers. They are always stirring up trouble in society. They drink toddy and liquor, abuse people without cause, leer at women, and pass obscene remarks. That is not all. They lie, mislead others, and even take up sticks to assert themselves. It becomes society’s duty to restrain such behaviour. I did exactly that.

“Had I not gone to Rameshwaram during Durga Puja, such an incident would never have occurred in the village. A place where people have lived peacefully for generations cannot

allow such acts to ignite unrest. If society does not remain peaceful, how can it move forward?

“With this in mind, we called a village meeting. Some friction arose during that gathering. Still, society deserves gratitude for standing united against wrongdoing. Those who commit such acts may be tools of a broken system, but they are not weak.”

Listening to Dayanand, Professor Kamalnath responded, “Look, there are many paths and many vehicles to reach a destination. But if the traveller keeps stopping to debate which one is better, how will he ever arrive?”

“It has been the misfortune of our region that we think deeply in the realm of ideas, yet grow lax when it comes to action. No idea becomes significant until it takes the form of action. Everyone tells their children not to do wrong, but when the child actually errs, they look the other way. How then will wrongdoing ever end?”

“Be that as it may, I am pleased by your conviction. The future will unfold in its own time. Come, let us go.”

With that, the two men rose to leave.

3.

As sleep lifted, a dull ache stirred in Dukhni's mind. Still lying in bed, she remembered that it was Diwali and that the Kali Puja fair would be held in the village. Her daughter came to mind. She had sent word to Shyama, asking her to arrive a day earlier with the children. Why hadn't she come yet? What could the poor girl do? There would be grain and water at home, but taking three children to a fair would need at least ten or twenty rupees. If she didn't already have the money, she would have to find a way to arrange it. Perhaps she hadn't planned ahead. Yes, yes, that must be it.

There was still the whole day ahead. She would arrive by evening, bringing rice for cooking and money for the fair, though she wouldn't bring firewood. And Dukhni herself had made no arrangements for that either. When would she do it now? She had thought that once Shyama arrived, the household chores would be manageable. But that hadn't happened. How much could one person do in a day? The house needed plastering, and the courtyard lay neglected. How could she manage it all alone? Should she fill mud in the courtyard, plaster the house, or go fetch firewood?

Seeing the long list of tasks, Dukhni felt overwhelmed. Uneasily, she rose from bed and went to inspect the courtyard. Since it was still early and the sun not yet harsh, filling it with

mud didn't seem urgent. With one task crossed off, her heart felt a little lighter. Standing there, she turned her attention to the veranda. Finding no cracks, she decided that plastering wasn't necessary. Sweeping away the dust left by the flood would be enough.

Her mind grew lighter still, and with that lightness came movement. She took a broom and swept the dust from the house and veranda, then swept the courtyard as well. Setting the broom aside, she picked up the earthen water pot and walked to the hand pump. After washing her face with the cool water, she filled the pot and returned to the courtyard. She drank a little, took out a pinch of tobacco, and decided she would eat one meal now and pack enough provisions for two more to take along. That was exactly what she did.

Earlier, Dukhni had never taken khaini; she used to smoke a hookah. But ever since the liquor shop in Labahda had shut down, even loose tobacco had become scarce. With the supply cut off, smoking had become expensive, and gradually, the habit faded.

Locking the house, Dukhni set out for the fields with a sickle resting on her shoulder. The lower half of the embankment was under cultivation, while the upper half remained a grove of trees. Standing beneath a sprawling mango tree, she began to search for dry twigs. Since the sun was already strong, she could spot firewood easily. The sight softened her heart with relief.

She loosened the knot in her pallu, took out a pinch of khaini, placed it in her mouth, and tied the cloth again. As the tobacco touched her tongue, another worry surfaced: where would she find straw to make a rope?

In earlier years, people used to cut reeds during Asin and Kartik. From those, she would save a couple of handfuls. They lasted through the year for making brooms, and ropes could be twisted from them too. But broom grass and jute fibre were not the same. What could a poor, defeated woman do? Hardly anyone kept goats anymore, and not a single stalk of broom grass remained. On top of that, the heat was so harsh that grazers, sneaking through, had cut the last of the reeds and even uprooted the reed beds. With what, then, would she make rope?

Without rope, how would she bundle the firewood? This village wasn't a town or a market where people kept ready-made bindings at home or bought rope when needed. Here, everything was tied quickly using handmade twists.

Her eyes moved about, searching for reeds. As she scanned the area, her gaze fell toward the Ganga embankment. She muttered to herself, "So that's why my mind felt restless for no reason. Near the pond by the house, reeds have been planted along the embankment. I'll take some from there."

As the tobacco dissolved in her mouth, she spat. The sight of a possible source of straw brought a moment of relief. But soon, another problem

struck her, without a wooden spindle, how would she twist the rope? The calm vanished, replaced by frustration. Speaking aloud in irritation, she said, “All these landholding Patua farmers have stopped growing jute. Let them twist rope themselves now. We’re poor anyway, with no fields of our own. But those with land have pulled up their jute plants too. They’ve turned cattle into contracts and debts. Now they buy plastic rope from the market. That rope will scrape their animals, peel their skin, invite flies, cause wounds, and bring death. Then they’ll understand what it means not to grow jute.”

As she went on muttering, Dukhni’s anger slowly ebbed. Even if she somehow managed to twist rope without a spindle, what would she strike the winnowing tray with at dawn? It was Lakshmi Day. If she failed to sound the tray and drive away poverty, would poverty leave on its own?

She began talking to herself again, “Am I the only one without a spindle, or does no one in the village have one?”

“What does it matter to me whether others do or not? Who drives away whose poverty anyway?”

“But if everyone somehow manages to arrange a spindle and I don’t, then all their poverty will flee, and only mine will remain.”

Placing both hands on her head, Dukhni sank into worry over the missing spindle. Gradually,

her sobs began to break through. Her heart grew heavy. Just as a finger throb when something heavy falls on it, her mind throbbed with grief over the absent spindle.

She began to wander the village lanes, scanning the ground. She walked once, carefully searching. No spindle appeared. She walked again. Still nothing. Her mind insisted that rope made without a spindle would be impure. How could such impure rope be offered before the deity? What would the deity think?

Then another thought surfaced. Poor people are always lacking something or the other, yet somehow, they keep going. The gods and ancestors do not come themselves to arrange the preparations for festivals and rituals.

Abandoning the search, her thoughts drifted to the Bhagavata she had once heard. As the memory came to her, she saw Krishna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, blowing his conch. But just as Vyasa began to explain its meaning, the urge for tobacco returned. She loosened the knot of her pallu, took out the khaini, and began to prepare it. She didn't hear the explanation at all. The message of the Bhagavata slipped away from her mind. Once again, her thoughts returned to the spindle.

Her gaze shifted from jute spindles to hemp and sunn fibres. As soon as she thought of them, she began to reproach herself inwardly for cursing the farmers unfairly. They had abandoned jute cultivation for the sake of traders. They laboured

hard and invested money, only for traders to slash prices and take the profits. It was just as well that they had stopped growing jute. Whatever rope or tethering she needed could be made from hemp and sunn just as easily.

But the traders themselves had learned no lesson. Just as they had once bled the farmers dry and hoarded wealth, plastic had now arrived and swallowed everything. Big factories roared on, relentlessly and indifferently, just like that.

At the thought of hemp fibre, a flicker of happiness rose in Dukhni's mind. She loosened the knot of her pallu and placed a pinch of tobacco in her mouth. Spindles made from hemp were thick and sturdy, far stronger than jute ones. They would serve well for striking the winnowing tray, too. She would beat it with force so that poverty would flee the very next day.

As hemp came to mind, her gaze turned toward Ghurana. On the field beside his embankment, there was plenty of hemp. It was fine and clean, though not as tough as jute fibre. Still, work got done with whatever one had. Ghurana's wife, after all, was generous. The moment someone asked, she would give more than was needed. She was nothing like Jaylal's daughter-in-law—sharp and grasping—who would snatch even what lay plainly before her. When it came to taking someone else's things, how sweet such women's mouths became, as if honey dripped from their tongues. May God see to it that such ways come to an end.

Cursing her own temper, Dukhni felt instant regret. Why had she spoken so harshly? After all, she too was a mother, and once had parents. A mother's or father's curse does not fall lightly on children. One reaps the fruit of one's own conduct. For twenty years, she had never spat carelessly. Fire and water—both—she treated with reverence and restraint.

As soon as fire and water crossed her thoughts, Shyama came to mind again. She had sent word, asking Dukhni to come a day early. Perhaps she thought, like others, that her mother was not alone. After all, she had a mother-in-law as large and formidable as an elephant. What worry would there be about household matters, then?

Another thought arose. It was Lakshmi Puja, after all. Everyone would be worshipping in their own homes. Perhaps that was why Shyama had not come. The urge for tobacco returned. She loosened the knot of her pallu and looked at what remained. It seemed no more than a single portion. Seeing it, she thought she might divide it into two. But with a broken tooth, much of it would be lost anyway. In the end, she took the single portion and placed it in her mouth.

As soon as the tobacco touched her tongue, her thoughts turned to her son. Remembering him, Dukhni began to reason with herself. If he did not stay away in distant lands, where would he earn? A rough estimate came to her mind. It must have been four or five months since he left. But four or five months felt too short. She tried to recall

more carefully, counting again in her head. Gradually, it returned to her. He had gone in the month of Asin. Yes, yes, in Asin. The household had been running normally then. She herself had offered oil and sweets at the pond before he left. Now it was Kartik. Wait, that meant it had been more than a year.

No, not the last Asin, because a grandson had been born after he left. That boy was running about now. Somehow, it must have been two years. She began counting on her fingers. Two years, plus another year, made three. The moment three years entered her mind, she was startled. Not a single coin sent back, not even one visit home. Yet a strange happiness surfaced. The boy must have grown sturdy and strong by now. Surely there would be no lack of food or comfort in his life. By now she might not even recognize him. He would have grown a beard and moustache. When he returned, she would arrange his marriage. It was not good for him to remain alone. What was a courtyard without children? People said children themselves were Lakshmi.

Lost in this warmth, Dukhni closed her eyes and began to see her scattered family gathered and flourishing. It felt like climbing into a boat on the pond, drifting gently, then stepping ashore on the embankment. But as she watched this vision, her thoughts shifted. A fear rose within her. What if the boy had already married there and never returned to the village? She had seen such things happen to so many others.

In an instant, the joy within her was drenched away. Her mind grew heavy with despair. Times had changed so much that one could not say anything to anyone anymore. No son or daughter remained bound to the family courtyard. Everyone did as they pleased. The moment boys found a wife elsewhere, they forgot their parents. Their hearts turned away.

Dukhni's eyes filled and overflowed. She wiped the tears with the edge of her sari. As she did, a thought rose within her: as long as her strength remained, she had never begged from anyone, nor would she ever do so. The day her strength failed; she would know. Life was like that. Who could say for certain that death would come only after strength faded? Death could come sooner. So why grieve in advance? If her son chose to drift away, let him drift.

Her thoughts moved from her son to her daughter. The moment her daughter came to mind, hope stirred within her. With that hope came a faint smile. May God grant even enemies' daughters like hers. She was Lakshmi herself. She did not change her clothes every day, nor did she dress grandly, yet she had never suffered for want of clothing. By her grace, there were three earthen hearths in the house. The son-in-law was equally devoted, carrying food and water on his own head and bringing it home.

As hope returned, Dukhni rose to gather firewood. Lifting her eyes, she searched the trees for dry branches. With the sun already strong, dry

twigs were easy to find. At the sight of them, her heart leapt with joy. Within her, the happiness of the village itself seemed to dance. This was still a village. In towns and markets, people were ruined by having to buy firewood. She remembered the fair at Singheshwar. In a single evening of cooking, ten rupees had vanished just on fuel. It had been manageable only because seven or eight people shared the cost. Otherwise, even firewood worth a rupee and a quarter would have been consumed by the stove alone.

Working steadily, Dukhni used her sickle to cut dry branches from two trees. Looking at the growing pile of firewood, she felt both relief and anxiety. Somehow, it would become more than five bundles. She would have to carry them back, one by one. The house was not close. Making five trips would take her well into the afternoon. But even if the labour was heavy, the firewood would last at least fifteen days.

Then another worry surfaced. What if Shyama arrived in the meantime and began looking around anxiously in the courtyard? How could she simply leave everything and go? Everyone would take what they could. Perhaps it would be best to tie all the firewood into bundles and carry one back first. She could then observe what was happening. If Shyama had not arrived, she would continue bringing the rest. And if she had arrived, would she even agree to wait? Together, the two of them could carry the loads in just two trips.

As her mind grew restless again, the urge for tobacco returned. Her eyes went to the knot of her pallu, and she remembered that the tobacco was already finished. Looking at the pile of firewood, she told herself that it was a sacred day. If she indulged in too much fretting and muttering, nothing would get done. There was already plenty of work waiting back home in the courtyard.

She rose to spread the firewood properly. Scanning the ground around the trees, she noticed a fallen hornet's nest in the middle. From the broken nest, hornets spilled out and scattered in all directions. At the sight of the winged insects, Dukhni was frightened. Oh heavens! These were the fierce kind. Two stings could be enough to take a life. Yet how could she simply abandon the work? One option was to lift the firewood with her sickle and throw it aside before spreading it. But the smaller hornets had already scattered everywhere. Summoning her courage, she pushed the nest aside and began laying out the firewood.

Then another thought struck her. The twigs were of two kinds, thick ones and thin ones. It would be better to separate them and tie the bundles accordingly. She began doing just that. As she kept spreading the twigs, a sudden cry escaped her mind. Oh no! What would she tie them with? There was no rope.

She stood, confused and helpless. If only she had thought of this earlier, she could have brought

rope from the courtyard. But it had not occurred to her. If she left everything as it was, someone would carry it off. She had already made so many trips and had eaten nothing. Yet the sight of the firewood filled her with quiet satisfaction. Somehow, it would last for at least fifteen days. If she could gather a little more over the next few days, the whole winter would be taken care of.

She looked toward the grazing paths, hoping to find someone. If she met anyone, she could borrow a sickle or at least cut hemp or sunn fibres to twist rope. But no one was in sight. Gathering her courage, she walked toward the banana grove. There too, the dried banana stalks could not be cut without a blade.

When she reached the grove, she saw that the owner had already cut the banana bunches, leaving behind the stems and stalks. At the sight of those fibres, a surge of joy rose in her heart. She brought back five or seven strands and tied the bundles. Five loads in all. She left four beneath the trees and carried one back toward the courtyard.

Reaching the courtyard, Dukhni thought she should cook something and eat first. Then another thought arose. If she became entangled in household chores, the firewood would be left lying out in the open. Hesitating between the two, she drank some water. Taking out tobacco from the house, she prepared it and then set out again. She carried all five bundles back. Her shoulders and neck were pulled tight like a yoke.

Pain spread through her body and arms. She did not wash her hands or feet. On the veranda, she lay down directly on the ground. Her exhausted body, worn to its limit, drifted into sleep almost at once.

Time slipped by. The shadow of the house moved two hand-lengths across the courtyard. From the doorway, Joginder called out, “Kaki, Kaki?”

Dukhni did not wake. Joginder stepped into the courtyard and saw her asleep on the ground. He called again, “Kaki, Kaki?”

Standing there, a thought rose in Joginder’s mind. He lived among the wealthy, surrounded by comforts, yet where did one ever see such deep sleep among them? Her stomach looked flat and hollow. Had she even eaten? Her feet were still dusty. She must have returned from work somewhere. If someone were to lift everything from the house at that moment, she would not even notice. What kind of world was this for people like her? It was like putting a sugar ant into chillies, it would die. That was natural. But could a chilli insect survive in sugar?

The strangeness of it all stirred within Joginder. Then the press of his own tasks pulled him back from such thoughts. He called out again, “Kaki, Kaki.” When she still did not wake, Joginder placed his cloth on the veranda and pressed Dukhni’s ankle gently. At the touch, her sleep broke. Without opening her eyes, she said, “Oh Shyama, why did you not come yesterday?”

Hearing Dukhni's voice, Joginder thought she must still be dreaming. Shaking her ankle gently, he called again, "Kaki, Kaki...?"

Dukhni opened her eyes and sat up. Panting slightly, she looked toward Joginder but said nothing. Joginder opened his bundle and placed a pair of saris, a petticoat, a blouse, and ten ten-rupee notes before her. Then he said, "Kaki, you have not even bathed yet today."

Just as someone's eyes light up at the sight of a fallen mango beneath a laden tree, Dukhni's face brightened. She said, "Son, there was no firewood, so I went out early to gather it. Looking after that took the whole morning. It became afternoon before I knew it. I have not eaten anything. I lay down to rest, and sleep overtook me."

Listening to her, Joginder said, "Kaki, you are exhausted now, so I will not delay you. After the worship is over, I will come back properly. We will talk at length, and I will help you start some kind of work as well. For now, I have given you clothes and money so that you can see the fair. I am leaving."

Joginder rose and took his leave. Left alone, Dukhni began calculating quietly. She would buy rice with half the money and keep the rest in hand. It was the season of fairs and gatherings; one never knew when a sudden expense might arise.

Then another thought came. Her daughter would arrive as well. She too would bring rice. After all, she brought it even on ordinary days, and this was a festival. Her two grandchildren would come too. How could she not put a couple of rupees into their hands? No matter how poor she was, she was still their grandmother.

Opening the sari, Dukhni examined it and muttered, "What use is such a sari for me? I am not a young bride who needs printed finery. It would have been better to give me a thick, sturdy cotton sari. I could wear it all year, no matter how much it was beaten and washed. And what use is this petticoat? I have grown old now. Even when I was young, I wore only a simple wrap. I never went begging for it, but once it has entered my house, whatever has been given is good. My daughter will come. I will take her old sari, and give this one to her."

Dukhni folded the sari, petticoat, and blouse, then began counting the money. Murmuring to herself, she said, "All ten-rupee notes. There are ten of them. Ten tens make a hundred."

She counted again, grouping them in pairs. Five pairs. A quiet happiness settled in her mind. Then, almost at once, another thought followed. It was a sacred festival day, and she had not played her part in it at all. People said, "Eat every day, celebrate on the festival." That was exactly how things had turned out. Since morning, she had been roaming among trees and fields, trampling through mud and dust. How could she

cook without bathing?

She looked toward the sun. Judging its position, she decided she would keep a fast today. By the time she bathed and began cooking, evening would already have fallen. In the evening, there would be Lakshmi Puja, or else she would have to start eating and drinking. And there were still so many things undone. She had not brought straw, nor found a spindle. Without those, how would she make rope? Oil lamps still had to be prepared. She would have to fetch oil too. The oil in the house had turned stale. How could she pour that into the lamps?

Seeing the work ahead, Dukhni felt overwhelmed again. All thoughts of the festival slipped away. Her gaze fell on her daughter, and the moment she thought of her, irritation rose. She muttered, “I sent word so clearly. Why did she not come?”

Dukhni stood, caught in confusion. Just then, a woman from the eastern embankment called out, “Kaki, Kaki. The son-in-law has asked you to come. He is sitting by the northern pond with both children and the motorcycle.”

At the sound of Shyama’s name, Dukhni sprang to her feet. She put the clothes away inside the house, tied the money into the edge of her sari, and set off. Three or four children tagged along behind her. When she reached them, Shyama rose at once and touched her feet. Half scolding, half worried, Dukhni said, “Oh girl, have you no

sense at all, coming loaded like this?”

Ignoring her mother's words, Shyama turned to the children and said, “Touch your grandmother's feet.”

At the sight of her granddaughter, Dukhni seemed to melt. All her worries slipped away. She took the money from her sari, placed one ten-rupee note into each child's hand, and then held out the remaining eighty rupees toward Shyama.

At the sight of the money, Shyama's heart stirred. It must have been sent by her brother. Smiling, she asked her mother, “Did my brother send this?”

At the mention of her son, Dukhni's mind turned restless again. Her gaze shifted toward him in thought, and anger rose. She said bitterly, “Who knows where that boy has wandered off to. There has not been a letter, not a scrap of news, not a single coin. Who knows if he has taken up with some woman over there and disappeared for good.”

Cutting her short, Shyama said gently, “Why do you speak like that? You are his mother. Speak with some steadiness.”

Hearing her daughter, Dukhni's thoughts moved away from her son and returned to Shyama. She asked,

“How did you manage to bring both the children

and the motorcycle?”

Smiling, Shyama replied, “He brought us here himself.”

At the mention of the son-in-law, Dukhni said, “Did he not even step into the house before turning back?”

“No, Mother, that is not it,” Shyama explained. “There is a fair in the village, and it is a festival day as well. He said that if he went home, he would get caught up there. You alone would not be able to manage all this work. He will come the day after tomorrow.”

Hearing “the day after tomorrow,” Dukhni’s heart settled. She lifted the younger child into her arms, motioned for the elder to walk ahead, and started back. They had gone only a short distance from the house when she saw two men approaching from the south. They wore full trousers and shirts, but she did not recognize them at first. One of them looked thinner, his face changed. He was coming from the direction of the courtyard, and both men were moving toward her.

As they drew near the house, the man stepped forward and said softly, “Mother.”

Dukhni heard the word, but it felt unfamiliar, strangely out of place. She gave no response. Shyama, however, recognized him at once and cried out, “It’s my brother!”

At the word “brother,” Dukhni too was startled. By then Bhukhna had come close and bent down, touching his mother’s feet. Dukhni stood stunned. Tears welled up in her eyes as she slowly looked him over, from his feet to his face.

Her heart melted. Holding her grandchild tight with her left arm and wiping her eyes with her right hand, she spoke through her emotion, “Oh my son, you have become strong now. I did not even recognize you. You were well enough when you left, weren’t you? Why did you come after so many days? What did you think, that no one was left at home? That I had died? If you did not earn money, so be it, but you could at least have come empty-handed. Now I myself have grown old and weak.”

As Bhukhna took the bundle from Shyama’s head, he said, “Sister, your head must be burning. Give it here.”

“No, no, why should you take it? The courtyard is not so far.”

But insisting gently, Bhukhna lifted the bundle from his sister’s head and placed it on his own. In a soft, shaken voice, Dukhni asked, “My son, you must have come hungry on the road.”

“No, Mother. We ate and drank along the way.”

“My son, did you go into the courtyard, or did you come straight along the road?”

“I put the bag down in the courtyard. The house

was locked, so I asked Tamoriya bhabhi. She told me you had gone ahead to bring your daughter.”

Hearing this, Dukhni’s irritation flared again. She scolded him, “Oh, you boy! If you went into the courtyard, did you touch the deity’s feet or not?”

“When I saw the house locked, I kept the bag on the veranda and came straight to look for you.”

“So, I had gone abroad, had I? You could have washed your hands and feet and bowed to the deity before leaving the courtyard. Was that beyond you? What if someone had stolen the bag by the time you reached me?”

“As soon as people saw me, children and villagers gathered around. With so many people there, who would steal the bag?”

Lowering her voice, Dukhni asked her daughter,

“Did you bring something for him to eat? Look at his face, how dry it has become.”

“Yes. I brought it specially for him. There are five dal puris.”

“Good, very good. I have not even bathed yet.”

“Why not? It is a festival day, and still, you did not bathe?”

“There was not a moment of rest,” Dukhni replied. “Since dawn I have been busy arranging

firewood. Carrying load after load drained me completely. I grew weak and collapsed. I neither cooked nor bathed. I lay down on the veranda just like that, and sleep overtook me. Joginder came and woke me. Otherwise, I would still be asleep. Look, evening is almost upon us, and till now neither rope has been prepared nor the lamps.”

As soon as they reached the courtyard, Dukhni said to Bhukhna, “Son, first wash your hands and feet and bow before the deity. Only then do anything else.”

Bhukhna did as she said. Shyama too went to the water pot, tilted the pitcher, let a thin stream fall over her feet, and then bowed before the deity on the veranda. All around the courtyard, women and children crowded together, murmuring among themselves. The younger children darted about, shouting and squealing.

Just then, Jugesra’s son crept up behind Raviya’s boy and gave him two hard punches on the back. Startled, Raviya’s son turned around and saw Shibua’s daughter nearby. Thinking she must be the one who had hit him, he cried out and struck her twice in return. The moment he hit her, Shibua’s daughter began wailing loudly.

Shibua’s wife, standing toward the western side, rushed over when she saw her daughter cry. She lifted the girl into her arms and demanded what had happened. The girl named Raviya’s son. Without pausing to think, Shibua’s wife grabbed the boy by the ear and slapped him hard. Just

then, Raviya's wife arrived.

Seeing her son, she demanded to know what had happened. With a pointed finger, the boy indicated Shibua's wife. The moment Raviya's wife saw her, she lunged forward, grabbed her by the hair, and spat in her face. The entire courtyard erupted into chaos.

On one side, the smaller children began to cry in fear. On the other, hearing the commotion, more and more people rushed in. Dukhni was stunned, unable to utter a word. As Shibua's wife hurled abuses, Raviya's wife answered back, each word sharper than the last. For this was the unspoken rule of women's quarrels: the one who carried the abuse further would be the one who prevailed.

Amid the courtyard chaos, Bhukhna and Shyama stepped in, each grabbing an arm, pushing and shoving the women apart, and sending them back toward their own courtyards. The children who had scattered in fear began drifting back. Women and children formed clusters again, taking sides.

Some supported Shibua's wife, others Raviya's. Together they calmed the quarrel, each side trying to prove itself blameless by blaming the other. Like ripples that rise when a stone is thrown into a pond and then slowly subside, the disturbance too settled.

For the moment, Dukhni's courtyard grew quiet. Outside it, however, along the road and in nearby corners, murmurs and whispers continued. It was

like a fire that has been doused with water. The flames are gone, yet the heat lingers. Everyone else moved away and calm returned, but inside Dukhni it felt as though a fire had suddenly been lit. Turning toward Shyama, she began speaking loudly, her voice sharp with anger.

“Did I call anyone to come and fight in my courtyard on a festival day? Is a festival only for one day, or does it last the whole year? Now there will be quarrels here all year long. And if someone ties a rope and fastens it behind the house, then you will see quarrels every single day of the year.”

Trying to stop her mother’s tirade, Shyama spoke softly, restraining her.

“Why do you break yourself like this for nothing? Who is there in your courtyard that there will be quarrels all year?”

At her daughter’s words, Dukhni drew a hard breath. The fire inside her still burned. Shyama went into the house, brought out bedding, spread it in the courtyard, and opened her bundle. She laid out a heap of rice, about three seers of khesari lentils, five dal puris, along with clothes for herself and the children. Of the five puris, she gave two to Bhukhna, and one each, broken and shared, to the two children. She set aside one for herself and one for her mother.

Opening the bag again, Bhukhna took out a bundle of money and handed it to his mother, saying, “Mother, this is what I earned and

brought back.”

At the sight of the money, both the mother and the sister exclaimed at once, “Cover it, hide it, cover it. People will see.”

After hiding the money, Bhukhna laid out two pairs of saris, blouses, and petticoats, along with shirts and trousers for both children. At the sight of the clothes, Dukhni stood astonished, her thoughts turning inward. Even if everything else crumbles, a son is still wealth. Her husband came to mind. God tests people in many ways. Silently bowing at her husband’s feet in her heart, Dukhni murmured, “It is for the hope of these two children that we wore ourselves out and let our youth slip away. A tree of contentment bears fruit.”

Seeing his mother’s wonder, Bhukhna took out a tin of biscuits and placed it in her hands, saying,

“Mother, these are butter biscuits. I brought them especially for you.”

Holding the tin, Dukhni turned it over and over, examining it. The eyes of both children and Shyama were fixed upon it. Then Bhukhna brought out two cakes of scented bathing soap, two bars of washing soap, and a small tin of coconut oil, placing them before her.

At the sight of all these things, Dukhni’s mind seemed to float. It felt as if she had risen into the sky, crossed straight from hell into heaven, or

perhaps was dreaming. Steadying herself, she said, "It is a festival day. Let everyone eat first and then go. I will not eat now. I have worked hard all day. In the evening, after lighting the lamps, I will eat."

Then another worry arose. The deity was seated in the courtyard, yet no preparations for the festival had been made. She had neither brought straw nor found a spindle to make rope. No lamps had been prepared. She had not even set aside clean cotton cloth to make wicks, nor bought oil from the shop. And now both son and daughter were here. How could she not cook two proper dishes? It was Lakshmi Puja, and after so many days her son had returned.

After eating the puris and drinking water, Shyama said to her mother, "Let us knead clay and make the lamps. You should not get caught up in shop errands. Otherwise, even the shop will not function once the shopkeeper gets busy with worship."

Hearing her daughter, Dukhni replied, "Oh girl, if we get entangled in shop running, when will we bring straw and a spindle to make rope?"

Seeing the rush of work, Bhukhna said to his mother, "You take up some other work. I will manage the shop."

Hearing her son, Dukhni replied, "That shopkeeper will cheat you, taking you for a simpleton."

Bhukhna smiled at his mother. A thought crossed his mind: I roam the city markets, and the village trader will cheat me? But he said nothing.

Stopping her mother, Shyama said, “Now whoever you go to for khar–san̐hi will give it. The time for worship has already arrived. Why did you not ask yesterday? Or at least earlier today, before noon? Now people will be gathering their things and returning home. Who will give you khar–san̐hi then?”

Hearing her daughter’s words, Dukhni grew disheartened. Her hope collapsed. She said, “I have grown old. Now no festival or sacred day seems to have a place for me.”

Seeing her mother’s broken hope, Shyama tried to steady her.

“Leave the khar–san̐hi. If that does not happen, what will be lost? We will tell Gosain Baba that circumstances turned against us. Even if not betel leaves, worship has still been done with the stalk.”

Trying to settle matters, Dukhni said, “Alright, let us leave the khar–san̐hi. You make earthen lamps from smooth clay. Knead the clay a little dry; otherwise, it will not dry now. The day has already dragged on. The sun has cooled. I have only just returned after finishing the shop work.”

Just then Bhukhna said, “Mother, you manage the courtyard work. I will take care of the shop.”

“Oh no,” she said, “you have come home after so long, in such an auspicious way. How can I send you to the shop? What will people say?”

“What will people say?”

“What will they not say! Immediately, they will start mocking that such is the misfortune of so-and-so’s house, that the son has just returned from the city and is sent off to buy groceries.”

“No one will say anything. Does anyone else have work besides their own to talk about? Talking is everyone’s business.”

“Buy salt worth one rupee. Two kinds of vegetables. For that, take cooking oil worth five rupees. Take cumin and black pepper worth eight annas, turmeric worth eight annas, and chillies worth eight annas. There are no potatoes at home, so take frying potatoes too. Buy two papads. Today is Lakshmi Puja, so bring fox nuts worth eight annas and sugar worth eight annas as well. And yes, the lamp will burn all night, so bring a little clay oil too.”

“Anything else?”

After a brief pause, Dukhni said, “People have stopped even offering incense smoke these days, so bring just one stick of incense.”

Shyama began crushing smooth clay with a wooden pestle to make earthen lamps. Bhukhna left for the shop. Dukhni’s mind grew restless. As unease rose, she said to her daughter,

“Buchchi, I will go to bathe now. Even the sunlight has begun to fade.”

“Take the sari your brother brought,” Shyama said.

At the mention of her son’s sari, Dukhni seemed to turn pale with emotion. Her mind began to whirl. The first sari bought by her son. Ever since her husband died, she had never been destined to wear a new sari. Still, her daughter had kept giving her, her own worn saris year after year, so she had never truly felt the lack of clothes.

Dukhni reached the government hand pump fixed by the roadside. As soon as she arrived, something struck her. Leaving the sari and water pot on the pump, she turned back at once and came into the courtyard, saying to her daughter, “Dai, something just came to mind. I had almost forgotten, so I came back to tell you.”

Startled, Shyama asked, “What did you remember?”

Dukhni said, “When the boy returns from the shop, tell him that in the coming monsoon the land nearby is for sale. It is just two kathas. He should buy it. I can manage with one house, but next year we must get him married. There will be children. Where will the little ones go to relieve themselves? As families grow, possessions grow too. Where will all that be kept?”

Shyama replied, “Alright then, go and bathe first.

When he returns from the shop, I will remind him.”

4. A

In all recorded memory, Banspura had never taken on the form that is now coming into view. Even so, some elderly and experienced villagers say that present-day Banspura is, in effect, a newly settled village. According to them, around sixty to seventy years ago, the Kosi entered the village. At that time, the earlier settlement had an entirely different shape. What is now the main habitation was once a bund, while the area where people once lived has since itself become a bund. Many traces of this past can still be found.

Even today, brass and copper utensils are discovered in places along the bund. The earlier settlement was rich in groves and trees, though it had far fewer families than it does now. When the Kosi flooded the area for the first time, people did not even believe the water was from the Kosi. A few experienced men, however, identified it by its colour. It was not thick, dark, mud-laden water like that of the Kamla. There was hardly any silt in it.

That year, the water came once and receded completely after ten or twelve days. It did not return. The flood that came the following year behaved like a small stream, carving a narrow channel straight through the middle of the village. Even then, the villagers did not realise that such a channel would form within the village itself. Everyone stayed on. Houses were built on

the higher ground of the bund; how could they not be? There was a deep ancestral attachment to the village, and the people still owned their land.

After six months, the channel dried up. However, cultivation and trees were left damaged and torn apart. Some families lost their livestock. Trees such as anarneba, dhatri, creepers, and jackfruit were uprooted. Two ponds and five wells were swallowed by the channel.

It was then that fear began to seep into people's minds. Their attachment to the village's soil and water slowly weakened. A life once anchored in trust started drifting towards uncertainty. Some families began to consider leaving and settling in another village.

Those who owned fields and farmland, however, were forced to place a stone upon their hearts and stay. In the third year, the flood arrived in its most terrifying form. The shapes of the village fields were erased, trees were destroyed, and human lives were thrown into danger. Beating their chests in despair, the villagers abandoned everything and fled. The Kosi began to flow directly through the village.

For thirty uninterrupted years, the Kosi continued to course across Banspura. The villagers scattered, becoming agricultural labourers in other villages. Wherever survival seemed possible, people went. Most moved towards Nepal. As long as one possesses capital, one remains a farmer or a trader. Once capital is destroyed, one is left empty-handed.

All of Banspura turned into migrant labour. The social relationships that had once defined life there before the Kosi arrived completely disintegrated. The old society collapsed. The people of Banspura forgot what happiness had once meant. Even the very idea of a motherland was erased from their lives. What, after all, is the difference between motherland and the world?

If the land of one's birth is called the motherland, then the motherland of those born in Banspura was destroyed, for they now live elsewhere. If Banspura were ever to awaken again, they might return to see it. But those who returned would be people born in other places. Then which land would be their motherland?

If the nation is considered the motherland, then nations themselves stand divided. When a country bears two names, how can it still be called a motherland? If none of these holds, and the earth on which one is born is taken as the motherland, then since all countries rest upon the same earth, why do we imagine the motherland to be so small? Why not consider the entire world as the motherland?

When the Kosi's channel shifted away and Banspura awakened again, its form had changed. The soft soil had turned wild and barren. In place of trees and groves, reeds, grasses, and scrub had spread. Still, recognising it as their ancestral village, people slowly began to return. There was no proof of land ownership, no records, no documents, and no fixed boundaries. Yet the

village would exist.

Just as in earlier times, when forests and scrub were cleared, settlements were formed, fertile land was created, and the government later fixed rents and granted land rights, Banspura too became a village once again.

Just as Banspura had once been swallowed by water, it later came to suffer from its absence. Not a single pond or well remained, nor did floodwater return. People stopped digging ponds and wells and began to meet their water needs through hand pumps. Farming came to depend entirely on rainfall. By bunding and enclosing low-lying land, people slowly began to restore ponds, where fish, fox nuts, and water chestnuts could once again be grown.

And in that same Banspura today, the excitement of Diwali and Kali Puja runs through people's veins. For visitors arriving from other villages, the villagers filled and repaired all the broken and eroded stretches along their boundaries, shaping them neatly into village paths. Wherever scrub and wild growth had existed, it was cut back and cleared. The government, too, deposited soil on embankments and roads, but like milk froth it sank away in the rains, leaving things as they were. This time, however, the villagers treated the work as their own responsibility and carried out proper repairs.

Not only embankments and roads, but every source of drinking water in the village was repaired. Even though people drink little water

during the months of Baisakh and Jeth, water is still essential. What surprised everyone most was how suddenly people came to recognise their shared responsibility.

Arrangements were made not only for water, but also for guests and visitors, even for those who arrived tired, lost, or disoriented. Those who had houses needed no concern, and even those who did not managed somehow. Large plastic sheets were brought, and makeshift shelters were raised like homes. Everyone's heart swelled with anticipation of how many guests might arrive. Extra straw bedding was bought and stored for sleeping. It was not purchased only for outsiders. After the festival, they themselves would sleep on it and use it to dry grain and food.

Those who came merely to see the fair might sleep, or they might spend their time wandering through it. But those who stayed awake all night at the fair would certainly sleep during the day.

Raghunath, too, deserved thanks. From rice, lentils, and vegetables to firewood and kindling, he had spread his trade so widely that no matter how many people came to buy or sell, his stock never ran dry. From a single fair alone, he would grow prosperous. After all, he had taken upon himself the entire responsibility of the worship. Then there was his daughter-in-law, whose speech was so sweet that even a lone customer would be persuaded to linger. The shop was always crowded. As the saying goes, when God gives, He gives by tearing open the roof.

Moreover, the shop was set up at home. Had it been placed inside the fairgrounds, it would have embarrassed the village community, for how could people openly buy rice and lentils in front of guests?

Yet something unexpected happened. Good heavens. So many guests descended upon the village that it seemed as though no one had any work of their own. Among them, women outnumbered men by three to one. And among the women, most were between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. Not merely of one fair's manner or bearing, but of four or five fairs' worth. How could something dangerous not stir in the village air?

These city women, after all, do not confine their glances only to the young and handsome. They take in the old and the aged as well. Just as when an unfamiliar bird comes to a village and everyone steps out to see it, so too do people look at these city birds. And if they did not, would that not seem improper? After all, why else would they have fashioned themselves in such a manner? Was it not to be seen? Had that not been the intention, why undertake such labour to create such plumage?

Human beings, after all, are human. Why else shape oneself into such airy sweetness? And once shaped so, if no one looks, what value does it hold? Its value lies precisely in being gazed at, in being examined from head to toe. Is desire absent from villages and the countryside? Of

course not. It is these city performers who taught village folk through cinema.

The human mind is strange. When one rises even a little above other, it feels as though one can see everything on the ground while no one can see oneself. Those on the ground feel the same about those above them. Yet the illusion belongs to both. If the one above sees the surface of the earth, the one below also sees the underside of whatever flies overhead.

As it neared four o'clock, the crowd of fairgoers surged towards the Kali shrine. The elderly, by contrast, remained within their homes and courtyards. From lighting lamps at sunset to making the ritual rounds, all such duties rested upon them. Those who had come from other villages bore no such responsibilities. They had come only to see the fair.

The most striking sight was that the fairgoers themselves had become the spectacle. With responsibility weighing on their shoulders, the members of the worship committee devoted themselves fully to supervision and arrangements. Every corner of the fair was kept under watch. Although the ritual worship was to begin late at night, preparations had to be completed well in advance. Worship could not begin on one side while supplies were still missing on the other. Everything required for the ritual had to be set in order beforehand. That was why the officiating priest and his assistants carefully matched, counted, and arranged each

ritual item one by one.

The true pleasure of the fair, of course, begins when the worship starts. Songs and performances commence only then. Even so, a half-made and uneven fair had already developed its own pull. The strangest thing was that the spectators themselves had turned theatrical. The atmosphere had grown so market-like that the distinction between boys and girls seemed to blur. Elderly men wiped their glasses, rubbed their eyes, and stared intently, trying to decide whether someone was a boy or a girl. Yet their eyes refused to cooperate. Everyone was swept along in their own current.

Just then, the sound of phatak, phatak rang out.

At the sharp cracking noise, every ear grew alert. Wherever people stood, they strained to locate its source. But the stalls and shops had been arranged in such a way that the sound did not travel directly. Those standing nearby heard it clearly and could even see the blows being exchanged. Some people ran outward, while others rushed towards the scene.

From the north, Devan came running, and from the west, Mangal arrived as well, cutting through the crowd. As soon as they reached the spot, they saw two young men, barely twenty to twenty-five years old, trading slaps and punches in front of Chester's stall. Witnessing the sudden fight, both Devan and Mangal froze.

At that moment, Joginder came rushing in,

waving both hands. He grabbed the two youths by their collars and flung them apart. The commotion subsided.

Devan asked one of the young men, “Son, this is a time of worship. Why did you start fighting?”

The young man Devan addressed had taken most of the blows. Before he could collect himself to speak, the other youth began talking. Joginder fixed his eyes on him and snapped, “You stay quiet. Let the one who was asked speak first.”

Joginder’s words, however, had no effect. Both sides were guests from other villages, which placed the committee members in a difficult position. Everyone found themselves caught in an awkward situation. Most of the boys and girls were outsiders, so there was little sense of restraint. The girls spoke sharply.

“What business do boys have coming to a brassiere stall? These are women’s goods.”

The boys were not ready to accept this. A third youth retorted, “Just because an item is used by women does not mean men have no need for it.”

“What need do men have?” one girl shot back.

“We have families too,” he replied, “and responsibilities come with them.”

Seeing the exchange between boys and girls turning into a spectacle, Devan intervened.

“Everyone calms down now. This will be settled after the fair. For now, watch the fair peacefully.”

It was sunset. The sun had not fully set, but having dipped low, it disappeared from sight. The village’s daughters, daughters-in-law, and elderly women set out carrying leaf trays filled with lamps, matches, incense sticks, and offerings of grain. They moved towards every sacred site in the village, as if bound by a quiet vow. Some went to the Dihbar shrine, others to the temple of Mahadev. Some headed for Dharmaraj’s sacred grove, while others went to Hanuman’s shrine.

The village had five old sacred sites. The sixth, the Kali shrine, had been built only recently. Earlier, the Thakurwari had been private, but after the death of the Mahant, it too became public. At every shrine, lamps were lit and incense offered, after which people returned to their courtyards to light lamps there as well, on grain stores, at wells, and beside hand pumps. Some used earthen lamps made by potters, while others lit lamps fashioned from medicine bottles.

The entire village came alive with light. Generators roared to life around the Kali shrine. Though darkness had fallen, the village looked as bright as day. During the day, clouds seemed to hover high above; at night, pressed down by darkness, they appeared to sink low over the village.

With the arrival of Diwali, the village slipped into a quieter rhythm. Women busied themselves

with cooking and household work. When they found time, the men drifted towards the fair. The attraction of the fair was such that no one felt like returning home early. Yet the songs and performances would continue through the night, and staying without food and drink was difficult, so people eventually found their way back to their homes and courtyards. At the Kali pavilion, the priests remained absorbed in preparations for the ritual worship.

A stage like those in the theatres of Muzaffarpur had been built. The people of this region had never seen such a stage before. As wide as it was, so too were the beautiful coloured curtains hung upon it. It was equally high, ensuring that no matter how many spectators there were, everyone could see. Lighting had been installed in an unusual manner, and the sound arrangements were just as elaborate. Compared to the Muzaffarpur stage, it stood a little below the Ras stage of Vrindavan, yet the difference between the two was clear. Where the Muzaffarpur stage displayed modernity, the Vrindavan stage reflected antiquity.

The qawwali stage did not appear as striking, but with separate male and female stages set close together, its appeal increased. The Maliniyan dance stage of Mahinsotha was the most modest of all. Only four or five low platforms had been joined together, four posts planted into the ground, and above them a green canvas with a single curtain hung. Despite its humble structure, the Maliniyan dancers carried a special

enthusiasm that could move the entire audience. Their hearts were full because simple decoration was enough. The originality they possessed was not to be found elsewhere, and the number of spectators they drew surpassed all others.

Just as in a market with many shops a buyer of gold and silver still goes to the jeweller, and a buyer of books goes to a bookshop, the same holds true for songs and performances.

By the time it neared nine o'clock, crowds of spectators had gathered densely in front of the stages. How could they not? There is always a difference between watching from nearby and watching from afar. The committee members had already decided that outsiders would be seated at the front. Villagers could watch standing behind if necessary. After all, outsiders had no obligation to return again and again, whereas for the villagers it was their own fair, and they would come back.

The performers had not even begun their make-up when spectators started whistling. How could they not? Had people come to watch, or merely to sit idle? At the very least, the musicians could have come on stage and tuned their instruments. Tuning alone would take an hour or more. Had people paid to attend, or had they come simply to let time slip away while the stage stood empty?

Members of the Jan Seva Dal moved back and forth, sometimes climbing onto the stage to calm the crowd, at other times trying to manage the

tangled mass of men and women.

Soon all four stages began to throb with music. The spectators' minds slowly dissolved into the rhythm. Some began humming softly to themselves. Some tapped the beat with their fingers on their thighs, others on their knees.

From the east, carried by an easterly breeze, a small cloud rose. As the wind stirred, the restless minds of the spectators began to settle. Gradually the wind grew stronger. Dark clouds thickened and stretched across the sky. One by one, the stars disappeared. As the clouds spread, the wind picked up speed.

At the Kali pavilion, the priests kept checking the clock, urging the ritual forward. The women began their devotional songs. Thunder spoke loudly from the clouds. The wind gathered the force of a storm. Fine droplets of rain began to fall.

Yet no one feared the rain. With the heat still lingering, everyone felt certain that these clouds held no real downpour. Besides, when fine drops fall during an auspicious occasion, they are taken as a blessing. Spirits remained high.

But as the droplets touched them, the spectators seated in front of the stages suddenly stood up. A sudden downpour broke loose. Lightning split the sky. With every flash, the thunder roared louder.

The villagers rushed towards their homes. The outsiders, however, were thrown into confusion. They were certain to be drenched now. But the storm showed no mercy. Defeated, they scrambled above and beneath the stages, desperately searching for shelter from the rain. When the engine failed, the generator operator shut down the generators. Darkness spread across the entire fair.

As the rain grew heavier, the storm seemed to dance, swelling into its full and terrifying form.

Across the fair, cries of “Help! Help!” began to rise. But neither the storm nor the rain was willing to listen. The wind struck with force, and the rain poured relentlessly for an hour and a quarter. The thatched roofs of the shops were torn away, goods were soaked through and scattered, and there was no one left to look out for anyone else. Everyone was busy trying to save their own life.

Just then, cries and wailing rose from one of the stages. So many people had climbed onto it that the supporting beams snapped and collapsed. Those who had been sitting beneath the stage were trapped under the wreckage. In the darkness, it was impossible to see who had been injured or how badly, but the air was filled with cries of pain and anguish. Six policemen were on duty. What could the poor men do, and whom could they blame? The members of the worship committee and the policemen worked together as best they could. Devan and Joginder remained on

their feet throughout the night.

After eating, Sajna said to his father, “Father, the fair lasts five days. Even if we miss one day, the desire to see it does not disappear. Leaving the house and courtyard completely unattended is not right either. People do not come only to watch the fair. Some come for mischief between boys and girls, others to steal. Who knows what intentions they carry? So, the two of us will go now. We will return at midnight and wake you. Then you can go.”

Duniyalal found his son’s reasoning sound and agreed inwardly. Hearing her husband and son, Tetri said, “I will not go at night. I will go in the early evening. I will offer my prayers to Kali Maharani and touch her feet.”

Hearing this, Sajna said nothing. He left to see the fair. After some time, Sajna’s wife, Sitiya, also went along with the women.

When the rainstorm began, Sajna ran. Still, by the time he reached near home, he was completely drenched. At the spot where water drained out of the courtyard, he stumbled at the threshold and fell backwards. His whole body hit the ground, injuring his knee. Even so, he stood up, washed the mud from his body with water, and entered the courtyard.

Until then, neither Duniyalal nor Tetri had gone to sleep. Seeing the rising wind, Tetri had already doused the hearth and the embers in the storage

shed before lying down. Judging the direction of the wind, Duniyalal said to his wife,

“The wind is such that even the whole house may not remain standing. And not a single post is timber anymore. All of them are bamboo. It was a grave mistake to replace only four posts. The bases of all the posts have rotted.”

Just then, the three old posts at the back cracked loudly and snapped. Only the new post remained standing. The north-eastern and eastern corners sagged, though they did not collapse.

Shivering with cold, Sajna came to the veranda and called out to his mother, “Ma, I’m soaked, and it’s cold. Could you give me a lungi and a shawl?”

From inside the house, his mother replied, “First wring the water out of your wet dhoti and wipe your whole-body dry. I will give you the lungi and the shawl.”

Sajna’s fingers had stiffened from the cold. Still, somehow, he twisted the water out of the cloth, took it off, and wiped his entire body. Tetri tried to light the lamp, but the matches had grown damp and would not strike. In the darkness, fumbling by touch, she handed him the lungi and shawl and said, “I would have lit the hearth, but even the matches will not burn. Only you have come back. Where are the others?”

“I did not see anyone anywhere. They must have been stranded somewhere because of the rain.”

Mother and son were still speaking when Rup Lal's house collapsed with a loud crack. Rup Lal was Duniyalal's younger brother, and he had been inside the house. Two or three nearby houses remained standing. The earthen walls on all four sides of Rup Lal's house gave way, but the central frame stayed upright. The two thatched panels of the roof snapped and folded inward, enclosing both sides.

Trapped beneath the wreckage, Rup Lal hovered between life and death. He shouted with all his strength, but amid the storm and the rain, no one could hear him. With rain lashing and winds howling, how could such a voice be distinguished?

After some time, Munesari, who lived in another house, heard the cries. As soon as she recognised the sound, she opened the door and stepped onto the veranda. In a flash of lightning, she saw that the house had collapsed. Shocked by the sight, she woke her son, and the two of them began shouting loudly.

Hearing Munesari's cries, Duniyalal said to Sajna, "Sajna, Rup Lal's house has collapsed. Run and see if anyone has been trapped."

Numb with cold, Sajna felt reluctant to step back into the rain. Yet what choice did he have? A struggle rose within him. On one side was the pull of blood, on the other a heart hardened by his aunt's past behaviour. But at such a moment, it was a matter of life and death. Friendship and

enmity belong to times when one is alive. Swallowing his feelings, Sajna tied up the loose end of his lungi and stepped out. The wind had eased, but the rain continued. Duniyalal and Tetri followed behind him.

Rup Lal's house on the southern side had collapsed. Sajna said to his aunt, "Aunty, bring a light and a sickle. Until we can see clearly, how can we do anything?"

Handing him the sickle, she replied, "Son, the torch was with Rup Lal."

Taking the sickle, Sajna called out loudly, "Uncle, could you give us some light from the torch?"

From inside the wreckage, Rup Lal's voice answered, "I had the torch tied to my head. It must have fallen under the beams."

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No, son."

"That's good. Don't worry. The wind has died down and the rain is thinning."

Trying to steady Sajna, Duniyalal said, "Son, don't rush."

Then, with a gesture of his hand, he said to his daughter-in-law,

"Light the lamp."

Munesari lit the lamp. As soon as there was light, Duniyalal and Sajna began clearing away the thatch. Pointing to a broken post that had fallen aside, Sajna said,

“Uncle, hold these two poles and brace them against the beams. That way the frame will not sway from side to side.”

All at once, Rup Lal braced both supports firmly against the beams. As soon as they were in place, a sense of relief spread through everyone. Duniyalal said to Sajna, “There is no need to clear the entire roof right now. Make a passage first, save the man, and then we will see.”

Using the sickle, Sajna cut three or four thatch ties and fashioned a narrow passage. As soon as it was ready, Rup Lal called out, “Son, there is room to get out now. Hold both beams firmly with both hands.”

As he emerged from the house, Rup Lal clutched Duniyalal’s feet and wept, “Brother, in this world one’s own people matter most. If the two of you had not been here tonight, I would have died inside that house.”

Offering reassurance, Duniyalal said, “Why speak as if everything has collapsed? One’s own people create their own world. You are my younger brother, after all. Society is vast, but the poor live by endurance. As long as fate has written grain and water for a man, he survives somehow. Steady your mind. What was meant to

happen has happened. Why are you trembling so?"

Yet Duniyalal's words did little to calm Rup Lal. His heart still quivered within him. The fear of being trapped again beneath a house would not leave him. Even the courtyard began to feel threatening, as if something might leap out at any moment. In a trembling voice, Rup Lal said, "Brother, if we lie down to sleep, another house may collapse."

Duniyalal understood that such fear follows a great fright. He spoke gently, "The house has already fallen. It will not collapse again. The ones still standing have strong frames and will not give way. And the storm has passed. Still, if you wish, come and sleep at my place. Ask your wife whether she wants to sleep at home or whether she is afraid too. If she is not, Sajna's mother can stay with her."

Hearing this, Rup Lal said, "Brother, my whole body is soaked and caked with mud. I must wash first."

In truth, everyone was smeared with mud. One by one, they went to the hand pump and washed themselves thoroughly. After returning from the pump, Munesari shut her house. Tetri stayed with her daughter and son, while Rup Lal went along with Duniyalal.

In the eastern house, Duniyalal had spread bedding directly on the floor. There was no cot. Sitting on the bedding, he took out a small

container of lime from near the pillow and handed it to Rup Lal, saying, “Have some tobacco first.”

As he placed lime on the cut end of the tobacco leaf, Rup Lal said, “Brother, today I was as good as dead. The way the house collapsed so violently, if I had not slipped off the bedding in time, I might not have died, but I would surely have been crippled. Yet by my parents’ virtue, not even a blade of sacred grass touched me. Otherwise, the world would have gone dark.”

Reflecting on his brother’s words, Duniyalal replied, “This body is like a clay pot made by a potter. Just as a fragile vessel shatter with the slightest knock, so too does the body. But people forget this and cling fiercely to life. If one truly understood that life has no fixed abode, why would anyone lie without reason or commit the worst of deeds? So, for as long as we live, we should earn honestly, fill our stomachs, and, as far as we can, do good for others. Doing good itself is righteousness, and the life that follows death is life as well.”

After moistening his mouth, Rup Lal asked, “Brother, say it once again. I did not quite grasp it properly.”

Hearing this, Duniyalal thought to himself that perhaps understanding was beginning to dawn within him. Often, when such moments strike, good thoughts rise in a person’s mind, only to fade again just as quickly.

Trying to make Rup Lal understand, Duniyalal said, "Son, if people truly grasped that this body has no permanent shelter, that one moment it is here and the next it is gone, then why would anyone wrong another without cause? And if one shaped one's conduct with that understanding, no one would harm anyone else. As it is, people are already weighed down by endless problems, and on top of that they keep creating one trouble after another. How can anyone ever live in peace?"

"Tell me, when the two of us brothers lived together from the very beginning, did you ever feel any burden? We earned together and wanted nothing more. Isn't that so? Then why did we separate? And once we did, if I said anything, your wife would say, 'Brother is trying to break the household.' That would lead to quarrels. In the end, it seemed better to swallow one's pride and remain silent. Even then, nothing was truly heard. Whatever your wife said would prevail. And this is not just between you and me. This is the fate of everyone."

Tetri was sleeping in the western room. With the eastern side exposed, the entire veranda and the front of the house rattled and creaked. Even so, Tetri scattered ash from the hearth, keeping the house dry and safe. Though she was the elder sister-in-law, she was soft-spoken. Munesari, younger though she was, had always been sharp-tongued and insistent. That was why, whenever there was any talk between the two sisters-in-law, Munesari would bristle.

But that night, like a snake retreating into its hole, Munesari's heart had straightened. It was as if all her heat had drained away. Just as a murderer's blood remains hot until the moment of execution, and only when he is led to the gallows does understanding dawn like the rising sun, so it was with Munesari that night. On Tetri's bedding, both mother and son slept together with her.

Hearing Duniyalal's words, Rup Lal fell silent. On one side, his brother's thoughts shook his heart. On the other, the grief of his collapsed house had not yet settled. After a while, nodding slowly, he said, "Yes, brother, what you have said is indeed true."

Seeing his brother weighed down by remorse, Duniyalal said, "Now tell me this. When the two of us lived together, did you ever feel the weight of a household? We were born into a poor family, after all. Yet how well the two brothers worked together, sharing labour and living in harmony. How much land do we truly have? Altogether, seven kathas on the embankment and the land around the house. Those who own entire bighas still find a thousand cracks opening in their walls every day, their minds in constant turmoil. And those who have nothing are already crushed by hardship."

Hearing Duniyalal's thoughts, Rup Lal's mind began to sway like a banana leaf in the wind. Many questions rose within him. In a helpless voice, he said, "We cannot even tell what is right

and what is wrong. Whatever we hear from people's mouths, that is what we accept as truth."

Seeing his brother's defeated spirit, Duniyalal's own mind turned inward. He wondered what he should say. On one side, brotherly affection weighed heavily on him. On the other, his thoughts were troubled by the conflicts among the women. Without speaking, his compassionate eyes studied Rup Lal closely.

In the western house, the two sisters-in-law lay down, one to the left and the other to the right. Between them lay Munesari's son, fast asleep. The storm and flood had shaken both their minds, driving sleep far away. Without intending to, a memory from her parental home surfaced in Munesari's mind. As it rose, she began to speak.

"Sister-in-law, in my parents' village, one family's house collapsed like this during a storm. The woman of the house was inside. The poor soul was badly injured. Her leg broke, and her head cracked open. She survived only because her skull was strong. The wound on her head healed, but her leg never did. She drags it even now. She lives in great suffering. With no fields or land of her own, she worked as a labourer. But after her body was broken, even her husband abandoned her. In the end, exhausted and defeated, the poor woman now begs for alms."

Hearing Munesari's account, compassion welled up in Tetri's heart. Fear deepened in both of them. Just as, after returning from a cremation ground, people enter the courtyard chanting,

“Ram-Ram, all is truth, this is everyone’s fate,” a memory from Tetri’s parental home returned to her. She said, “Once, a great flood came to my parents’ village. I had never seen anything like it before. It was time for the evening meal. Someone shouted that the flood was coming. I was cooking bread, and my mother had gone to cut grass. The bread was not yet done when the water reached the house. I climbed up from the hearth to the embankment and saw the flood advancing like sheets of silver. One by one, the inner houses began to collapse. Lootna was stuck on the embankment. He ran back and entered the house. In the rice store, money had been tied inside a cloth. As he reached in to take it out, the store collapsed on his body. The earthen walls had become soaked and loose. Lootna was trapped beneath it. He began shouting from under the debris. Before anyone could reach him, the entire house fell. The poor man struggled beneath it and died.”

Hearing Tetri’s story, Munesari grew even more terrified. Both sisters-in-law began to tremble. Sleep moved farther away. Driven by fear, they kept turning from one side to the other on their bedding, lying close together without speaking.

After some time, Munesari said softly, “Sister, I am afraid.”

Hearing this, Tetri replied, “Yes, dear, I am afraid too. Let us go to the eastern house. Even if we must die, let us die together.”

Saying this, Tetri sat up. Munesari began to wake her son, but the boy was already awake and sprang up at once. Tetri gathered the bedding in her arms, and Munesari lifted her son onto her hip as they made their way to the eastern veranda.

As soon as they arrived, Tetri called out loudly, "Please open the house."

From inside, Duniyalal asked, "Why? What has happened?"

"We are afraid in that house. We will all sleep in this house."

"There are only two brothers in this house. How will both of you sleep here?"

"In times of danger, people do not think of such things. First open the house."

Rup Lal pushed his bedding inside and closed the door. Placing the lamp near the threshold, Munesari spread out the bedding. Just then, Sajna's wife arrived in the courtyard as well, shivering like a soaked reed.

On one bedding, the two brothers, Duniyalal and Rup Lal, prepared to lie down. On another, the two sisters-in-law settled themselves, Tetri with the child. Duniyalal lay down with his head on the pillow, but the others remained sitting. The child soon fell asleep. Fear, however, would not leave Rup Lal's mind. He kept feeling that the house might collapse on his body again.

Once, there had been a great earthquake. It had lasted only two or three minutes, yet it brought down houses, trees, and entire settlements, crushing many people to death. For three days afterward, the earth had shaken again and again. The fear remained that though the great storm had passed, smaller ones might return. And who could say that a small one would not grow into something greater? That was why both men remained afraid.

Tetri felt sleepy, but she thought that the men were still awake, and how could she sleep herself? Besides, the lamp was still burning. How could it be put out? In times of danger, light itself becomes a source of strength.

Handing Duniyalal some tobacco, Rup Lal said, "Brother, today I understood what a true brother is."

Rising from the bedding, Duniyalal stepped into the courtyard, spat, and replied with a faint smile, "Then why did we separate? Tell me, are we not brothers of the same blood? When there is no unity even among brothers, what can be expected of others? Humans possess so much intelligence, yet this is our fate, that brother turns against brother. If this is how people are, what good can be expected from them? In that sense, cattle are better. They give milk and plough the fields."

Hearing Duniyalal's thoughts, Rup Lal stood up, spat in the courtyard, returned, and said, "Brother, you speak rightly. I am thinking of that

day when, after the marriage rites, you sent us off at the farewell. My own mother-in-law and the women of the neighbourhood came and sat nearby. It felt as though I were sitting like Krishna in Vrindavan, surrounded by gopis. One by one, the women began saying that your brother was very cunning. No matter how much he earned, he would not let his sister-in-law live in comfort. The two of you would earn together, and he would keep complaining. When his hands grew strong with money, he would separate the household. Right now, both of you are young and earning. If you do not build something now, when children are born and expenses rise, what will you do then? They said it would be better to separate immediately; otherwise, you would regret it later.”

Hearing Rup Lal’s words, Duniyalal burst into laughter. Laughing, he rose from the bedding, spat the tobacco from his mouth into the courtyard, returned, and said calmly, “If someone told you something and you accepted it, then where had your own judgement gone? Did you not see that the two brothers went out together to work, while your sister-in-law managed the courtyard and the household all day, arranging firewood and kindling? On top of that, she cut grass for the cattle, fed and watered them, cooked meals for labourers, and washed all the pots and utensils. Did you not see all this with your own eyes? Tell me then, what was the truth, and what did you accept merely by listening to women filling your ears?”

Lowering his head in remorse, Rup Lal nodded and murmured, “Yes, brother, that is indeed true.”

“What you saw with your own eyes seemed false to you, and what you merely heard, you accepted as truth. That is what is called falling into women’s intrigues. Like you, many others fall into such traps and end up cutting off the nose and ears of their entire lineage. Do you even understand what women cry and say when a daughter leaves her parental home for her husband’s house? They say that just as we cry for our parents’ home, we must make the household of our father-in-law cry as well. Do you not grasp even this much, that in this world one may gain everything, but never another true brother? For his brother, Lakshman gave up wife, family, and society, yet stayed by his brother’s side until the final moment. Today I came to help you. Had there been even a trace of malice in my heart, I would not have let you die in your own house. Otherwise, I could have pulled and pushed the beams onto your body. You might not have died, but your arms and legs would certainly have been broken.”

Letting out a long breath, Rup Lal wiped his moist eyes and said, “Brother, today it feels as though everyone has deceived me.”

“Listen carefully and take this to heart,” Duniyalal replied. “Just as human beings are the greatest creatures on this earth, capable of remarkable deeds, they are also deeply flawed.

You will see that those with even a little cunning forever cheat the earnings of the simple-minded and live comfortably. They do not merely consume wealth; they demean it. They treat their daughters-in-law and children with the same disregard they show to dogs and cats.”

“Brother,” Rup Lal said, “today it feels as though my father has not truly died, but is still alive.”

Seeing himself reflected in the role of a father, Duniyalal’s heart softened. He said,

“Son, time that has passed will not return. But as long as we are alive, the time that remains is still ours. Whether you give me credit or not, I know my own limits. I live by my own labour and sustain myself through my own effort. What need have I for another’s favour? I will not wrong anyone through my actions. If I cannot do good for someone, why should I do harm? The duty I have towards you, that alone I will fulfil.”

“Brother,” Rup Lal said quietly, “sleep has begun to weigh on my eyelids. The night has grown late. You should sleep too, and so should I.”

Munesari’s mind would not settle, no matter how much she turned from side to side. On one hand, she could see the path of her past life breaking apart. On the other, with no clear sense of a new path ahead, she felt utterly lost. Yet after hearing Duniyalal’s words, a faint glimmer of a path did begin to appear, bringing a quiet change within her. If only the women of her parental home had given her better guidance. That had not

happened.

Like wax, Munesari's heart began to soften. Still, she lacked the courage to speak. Just as the fragrance of night jasmine can leave even a venomous snake writhing in numb surrender, the same change began to unfold within her. Silently admitting her fault, she said to Tetri, "Sister, let me lie down and sleep now."

At her words, Tetri seemed to flare up. She replied, "Have you no shame at all, that you would sleep in a house where men are present? It is misfortune enough that God has placed us all in one house tonight. Put out the lamp so there is at least some modest cover, and then go to sleep."

Hearing the words "put out the lamp," Munesari's heart began to pound. In the light, one can still see. In the dark, who knows what might happen, or what might not. Even so, she rose and, with hesitation, extinguished the lamp.

4. B

Just a day before Diwali, Anup received an invitation to attend Kali Puja. His sister's in-laws, his own in-laws, and his maternal home all lay in the same direction. Although he was in a hurry, he decided to stop first at his sister's house to pass on the invitation and ask her to come as well. He would not stay long. From there, he planned to go on to his in-laws' home and spend the night, and in the morning, he would leave for his maternal home.

There was no one to see him off. Besides, his sister might feel that as long as their parents were alive, the parental home truly existed, but after their death, what claim did a brother and sister-in-law really have? She would not understand that Anup owned two buffaloes and spent his entire day exhausted from running after them. Even so, he visited her once or twice a year, and she visited him too. Still, the feeling might linger that he had forgotten her. That was why he chose to visit her first.

The next day, around ten or eleven in the morning, Anup returned to find that the buffalo pen had been broken and one buffalo was grazing freely. Already tired from his journey, the sight angered him. But the moment he remembered Lakshmi Puja, his heart filled with joy again. Calling out loudly, he herded the buffalo and led it toward an enclosure. Since there was no enclosure in his own village, he went to a

neighbouring one. There, he was told that the buffalo had just gone south with another buffalo. He set off for the next village, only to be told again that it had gone south.

As he went on, by four o'clock he saw, in a grove, a bull mounting a buffalo. The bull was heavy and powerful, with long, imposing horns. Fearing its aggression, the owner had tied it to a tree and stepped aside. The moment the bull noticed Anup's buffalo, it charged. Seeing this, Anup shouted loudly, tied his own buffalo to a tree, and climbed another tree himself. Meanwhile, the first owner untied his bull and fled. The bull rushed at Anup's buffalo and struck it three or four times in quick succession. Seeing the blows land cleanly, Anup's heart leapt with relief.

But the bull, now agitated, did not move away. It remained close to the buffalo, while the buffalo stood still. Anup feared that if the buffalo sat down, it would be crushed under the bull's weight and the mating would fail altogether.

Evening fell. It was the night of the new moon, and darkness deepened rapidly as dusk settled. Anup climbed down from the tree and sat quietly. In the thickening dark, fear rose in his mind. He was alone. How would he reach the village? And that bull was such a brute that it showed no sign of leaving. By ten at night, the wind picked up, and fine drops of rain began to fall. As soon as the rain started, the bull released the buffalo and moved off toward the village.

The wind and rain both grew stronger. It was pitch-dark, and the storm gathered force. With the buffalo, Anup set off toward the village. He had gone only a short distance when the storm intensified further. Before he could cover even half the way, the rain turned torrential and the wind fierce. Anup was trapped.

In that helplessness, he began to think he would not survive the night. Both he and the buffalo would perish in the open fields. Nothing was visible nearby. Not a single person was in sight, nor did he have any light of his own. How could he find his way through the fields? He was barely clothed, and what little he wore was already soaked. He was freezing.

It felt as though all hope of life had drained from him. His mind surrendered to the thought of death. If he himself would not live, what use was the buffalo? His chest tightened. But who would hear him cry out? Each flash of lightning filled him with fear that it might strike him. Suddenly, the wind died down. As it fell silent, a spark of hope arose, even though the heavy rain continued.

By the time he reached the village, the rain had stopped. Reaching home and trembling uncontrollably, Anup said to his wife in a shaking voice, "My hands and feet have gone numb. Please light the hearth."

Nasilal tied the buffalo. Bhuliya said to Anup, "By the time you change your clothes, I will arrange the fire."

Anup heard her words, but overcome by cold and numbness, he collapsed. His body shuddered violently, and his speech failed him. Crying out in distress, Bhuliya broke dry dung cakes into pieces, poured clay oil over them, struck a match, and lit the hearth. The fire blazed.

Bhuliya then said to Sunari, “Child, quickly crush four cloves of garlic in the mortar and bring some mustard oil. Warm it over the fire and massage his whole body.”

Hearing her mother’s words, Sunari took firm cloves from the bunch of garlic hanging on the wall and crushed them on the stone slab. She poured oil from the bottle into a small pan and set it to warm over the fire. All three of them, wife, son, and daughter, feared that Anup might have died from the intense cold. Yet, seeing that his breath was still moving, a fragile hope remained alive.

With the garlic oil, all three began rubbing his body, his chest on both sides and both arms. After five to seven minutes of rubbing, Anup opened his eyes and said, “The cold has eased a little.”

Hearing Anup speak, the three of them rubbed him even more urgently. Leaving his arms, Nasilal began rubbing his chest. As his body grew lighter, Anup spoke again, “The cold is gripping my chest. Make some tea. Until my insides warm up, the cold will not leave.”

Hearing her husband’s words, Bhuliya began

preparing tea. Tea leaves were available, but there was no sugar. At such a late hour and in such conditions, how could sugar be brought from the shop? Bhuliya said to her husband, "The tea leaves are there, but there is no sugar."

Hearing this, Anup replied, "If there is no sugar, make it with salt. At a time like this, where will we bring sugar from?"

Bhuliya began making the tea. Anup said to his son, "Son, wait a moment. I will change my dhoti."

Saying this, he got up, changed his dhoti, and put on a vest. By then, the tea was ready. Bhuliya strained it into a steel tumbler that held about two hundred and fifty millilitres and handed it to Anup. His body was so numbed by the cold, and his mouth so frozen, that the tea did not even feel hot. He drank it gulp by gulp, like water. By the time he had finished half the cup, warmth began to spread through his body.

As soon as his body warmed, a wave of fever surged through him. Even as he continued drinking the tea, the fever rose and the cold returned. Lying down on the bedding, he said to his son, "Son, I am feeling very cold. Bring out a quilt."

Wrapped in the quilt, Anup lay still. Yet instead of easing, the cold continued to intensify. He spoke again, "One quilt is not enough to fight this cold. Cover me with more."

When all three quilts in the house were placed over him, warmth slowly returned. As soon as it did, he said, “Son, my body is burning with fever.”

Hearing the word “fever,” Bhuliya said, “It has turned into chills and fever. At this hour of the night, how will we send for a doctor? These are such harsh times that one does not even know whether he would come.”

In a weary voice, Anup replied, “If my fate allows, I will live. If my receipt has already been cut, even a doctor cannot save me.”

Bhuliya said, “It would be better to sell the buffalo than risk your life for it.”

Still speaking with hope, Anup replied, “It is because of this very buffalo that we earn a few coins and manage our living. If we sell it, how will we survive? Life keeps bringing good and bad times like this. Should one abandon work because of that? Death has no fixed time. People fall and die even while walking. Then why uproot the buffalo?”

Just the previous year, a farmers’ meeting had been held in the village. Officials from the district agriculture department and the block office had also attended. It was the first such meeting the village had ever seen. For the first time, the suffering of farmers was closely observed. That day, the villagers felt a sense of participation in the government. Until then,

government had meant little more to them than rationed sugar and clay oil. Occasionally, wheat arrived during drought years as well. But the meeting reflected a changed approach.

Farmers were classified into four categories: marginal, small, medium, and large. Government support for all categories was discussed. For marginal farmers, a subsidy of one third, that is, thirty three percent, was announced. This one third assistance filled people with immense enthusiasm.

Support was proposed for every branch of agriculture, including animal husbandry, fish farming, vegetable cultivation, fruit growing, and improved varieties of rice, wheat, and other grains. With the one third, or thirty three percent, benefit, opportunities opened up for medium and large farmers as well, encouraging small enterprises and the rearing of cows and buffaloes.

A few days after the meeting, twelve Jersey cows arrived in the village by truck from Punjab and Haryana. From among them, Rajeser bought one black cow for ten thousand rupees. For four months, the cow yielded a steady eight kilos of milk each day. But after four months, one evening, the milk suddenly dried up.

As long as the cow continued to give eight kilos of milk, Rajeser and his wife worked with renewed energy and openness of heart. They had not cultivated fodder crops. There was neither cattle feed nor any shop selling nutritional

supplements in the area. Even so, following traditional practices, Rajeser fed the cow small quantities of maize husk and local fodder.

By the end of six months, the cow calved. Since it was a male calf, the number of cows did not increase. However, during the period the cow produced milk, affection for cattle certainly grew. Until then, there had not been a single cow in the village that produced more than a seer of milk.

Over time, the breed of village cows had steadily deteriorated. One major reason was that during death rituals, weak and inferior calves were deliberately branded and raised as bulls, gradually destroying the quality of the herd. After calving, the cow did not stand up again. Eight months passed, and Rajeser grew disheartened.

When he asked others for advice, some suggested giving castor oil, while others recommended feeding cauliflower stalks. Nothing worked. The cow did not rise. Exhausted and helpless, Rajeser finally contacted the livestock doctor in Madhepura. The doctor advised cleaning the uterus.

On the day of Diwali, Rajeser brought the cow to the Madhepura veterinary hospital. The doctor had gone to Bhagwanpur to attend to a sick buffalo. Rajeser tied the cow to a post, spread a sack on the hospital veranda, and lay down beside her.

After sunset, the doctor returned from Bhagwanpur. As soon as he entered his quarters, his wife said, "One man has been sitting here with his cow since afternoon without food or water. Please see to him first."

Hearing the word afternoon, the doctor was startled. Setting his bicycle aside, he said to his wife, "I got stuck with a very serious case and simply could not leave. But when the buffalo finally stood up after repeated pressure on its legs, I felt relieved. I told the owner it would survive. That is why I became so late. My body feels overheated. Give me a glass of water first and make some tea. I will change my clothes meanwhile."

After drinking the tea, the doctor went to Rajeser and, after examining the cow, said, "Since you have already waited this long, it will take another half an hour."

In a hopeful voice, Rajeser replied, "That is fine, Doctor. But there is festivity in the village, and it is a very dark night, so..."

The doctor secured the rope used to tie the cow, washed his hands with soap, and administered an injection. Handing over four doses of tablets, he said, "The work is done now. Do not return to the village tonight. Stay here and leave in the morning when it is light."

While paying the fee, Rajeser said, "Doctor Sahib, even if it has become late, the work is done. There is a fair and celebration in the

village, so I will go.”

The night was dark like a black quilt, and the cow herself was black and restless. In his heart, Rajeser feared that if the rope slipped from his hand, the cow would be lost. He tied the rope tightly around his wrist and set off, leading the cow ahead and following behind.

He had not gone far when a light rain began to fall and the wind slowly gathered strength. Soon, with the rising wind, a heavy downpour followed. By the time they reached home, both Rajeser and the cow were stiff with cold. The night deepened. The cow began stamping her legs, standing up and sitting down repeatedly, lowing again and again.

Such were the times that there was no courage left to return to the doctor. There was no livestock doctor in their village, nor in any nearby one. Defeated, the couple mixed castor oil with lamp oil, massaged the cow's entire body, and wrapped her in a coarse sack. After some time, they ground black pepper, mixed it with castor oil, and made the cow drink it through a bamboo tube.

But the cow's illness did not subside. Instead, it worsened slowly. At dawn, after letting out a loud cry, the cow died.

As soon as the cow died, both Rajeser and his wife began to weep. Hearing the cries at daybreak, the Dom couple came running. On

arriving, the Dom asked Rajeser, “Brother, what happened?”

Without replying, Rajeser continued to cry. When the Dom came closer, he saw the cow lying dead, all four legs stretched out. Covering his mouth with his palm, the Dom said, “Brother, calm yourself. Even when an earning son dies, people somehow gather patience. This is only a dumb animal.”

Hearing this, Rajeser said, “The pain of the cow’s death is not as great as the pain of the bank loan. On one side, the government claims to help people, and on the other, it tightens a noose around the neck. When I had not even bought the cow, they said one third would be given by the government and the remaining two parts would come as a loan from the bank. I thought the work would be easy. I never realised it was a trap around the neck.

“For relief, the bank officials said that if I brought documents from the middleman, the amount would be converted into a minor loan. Until those papers were submitted, full interest continued to run. I did not understand this then. I went and explained everything to the ration office clerk, and he agreed to go to that office. Later, I went myself as well. When we reached the office, they said five hundred rupees would be needed before they would issue the documents.

“Running around like this, more than a thousand rupees were spent. I could not pay the

instalments. When I went to settle the account at the bank, they said that six months' interest had already been added to the principal, and now interest would be charged on that too. And in the meantime, the cow died. Now what am I to do?"

4. C

Considering Diwali an auspicious day, Suratiya and his wife began setting up the brick kiln early in the morning. The thought of producing twenty thousand bricks filled their hearts with joy. They laid the kiln with solid bricks at the centre and arranged rows of bricks all around. Since the central bricks are thicker, they do not bake properly if placed along the sides.

The happiness of anticipated earnings had so completely swept over their minds that neither of them felt the strain of labour. Forgetting everything else, their hearts smiled again and again at the thought of income. Just as a crying child bursts into laughter when tickled, the same transformation overtook Suratiya and his wife. At last, the kiln was set.

It was the dry, sunlit season, the month of Kartik. In Kartik, there is neither the fear of fierce winds as in Chaitra and Baisakh nor of storms and rain. For this reason, they neither shaded the kiln from above nor covered its sides with mats. In the evening, after lighting the fire, Suratiya sat beside the kiln, gazing at it repeatedly, checking that nothing had been left unattended.

Phulesari went to prepare the meal. As she lit the stove and set it burning, a thought crossed her mind. Cooking elaborate dishes would take too long. It would be better to make khichdi and mashed potatoes. Daily wage labourers satisfy

their cravings with fried snacks, but today was a festival day after all. Yet festivals have no fixed rule or boundary. Those who have, eat every day. And those who must wait after eating, how will they arrange the next meal?

Once again, the thought arose that she should not decide alone and ought to ask her husband. Leaving the stove, Phulesari went to Suratiya and asked, “After all, today is Lakshmi’s day. Everyone prepares fried treats. What do you think?”

Suratiya was mentally calculating the value of twenty thousand bricks. Twelve thousand were of the thick central kind, worth twelve thousand rupees. Even if fifty cracked, the amount would still come close to twelve thousand. The remaining eight thousand were side bricks, valued at eight hundred rupees per thousand. Even if twenty-five or fifty turned out half-baked or broke, there would still be at least six thousand. One way or another, the total would surely reach seventeen or eighteen thousand.

He said, “We have grown old. Our noses are right here on our faces. Do we not understand even this much? We have set a kiln. Once the fire is lit, one must keep watch all night. During such vigilance, it is better to eat lightly than to overfill the stomach. Go, make khichdi and mashed potatoes.”

As her husband’s thinking matched her own, Phulesari’s heart danced with joy. Smiling, she

said, "But it is a festival day, after all."

"Go on, go on. For those who have, every day is Holi and Diwali. For those who do not, every day is an Ekadashi."

After eating, Phulesari put the children to sleep. It was around half past nine at night. As Suratiya sprinkled dried husk and lentil straw over the kiln, he said, "As red as the husk and lentils, so red will the kiln burn."

Saying this, he lit the fire. In the dry season, the flames flared up with a roar. Watching them rise, Suratiya said to his wife, "This time we will build capital from these bricks. We will hire two more workers. If somehow, we manage to fire ten kilns, the earnings will surely reach a lakh. Capital alone builds capital. We see it in the village. Even those who own ten bighas of land do not always eat well throughout the year. We are bare and simple folk. So, our sense and understanding must be sharper still."

Phulesari could not fully grasp her husband's words. How could a large thought fit into a small understanding? Yet between husband and wife there is no arguing as scholars do. Their exchange is more like a fortunate poet's verse, where the rhyme matters more than the subject itself. Whether there is substance or not, if the rhythm is right, it becomes poetry. Answering her husband, Phulesari said, "This time we will also lay bricks on our own house."

At the mention of "our own house," a thought

stirred in Suratiya's mind. Just as a house builder often has no house of his own, the same had been true for him. While he worked in Biratnagar, even keeping the household running had been difficult. But now, if earnings increased, he too would build a house for himself.

A light rain began to fall, and with it the wind rose. Looking toward the clouds, Suratiya muttered, "There are hardly any clouds, just a small patch. It will not rain. But the wind should not turn violent. If it does, one part will remain half-baked and the other will burn to ash."

The wind continued to strengthen, and the clouds kept spreading. From the east, dark masses gathered and thickened. As the rain intensified, so did the wind. In no time, a fierce storm and downpour arrived. Seeing the driving rain, Suratiya's hopes were shattered to dust. A month's labour, along with the festival, was ruined. With a broken heart, he said to his wife, "Everything has been destroyed."

Hearing this, Phulesari angrily blamed the villagers, saying, "All this is because of those foolish villagers. When the village arranged offerings for Kali Puja, they should first have beaten the drum, performed the ritual, and taken the goddess's consent. They did nothing of the sort and began the worship on their own. What loss is it to them? Who will compensate us?"

Hearing her raised voice, Suratiya scolded her, saying, "That is enough. Does anyone know

where the will of fate lies? Who has it in his hands to accuse another? Are we the only ones who have suffered loss? How many houses must have fallen, how many belongings must have been destroyed, or do you think it happened only to us?”

At this, Phulesari's anger shifted from the villagers to a neighbour. She began hurling abuses, saying, “There are such poisonous women who cannot bear another's good fortune. They have learnt to curse even after bearing sons, and it is another's neck that gets cut. Just as our kiln has been ruined, may calamity strike her family for seven generations as well.”

Beside Suratiya's house stood the dwelling of a woman known as Masomat, whom all the village women believed to be a witch. Phulesari hurled abuses at her again and again, pointing directly toward her house. Masomat too heard the curses, but since her name had not been spoken, she stayed alert. The moment her name was uttered, she would appear and reveal the venom she truly carried.

Seeing his wife's fury, Suratiya thought to himself that the loss had already occurred, and on top of that, a needless quarrel might now erupt. Was Masomat weaker than they were? She had more relatives, and her two sons were grown men. It was quite possible that they would come and start a fight. Then the festival would be ruined, and injury would be added to loss. Trying to calm his wife, he said, “What will happen?

Someone will always take the blame upon himself. Whatever God has written in our fate will surely happen. What He has not given cannot be forced into being by our own efforts. Then why burn with such anger? Loss has occurred, yes, but the bricks will crumble back into clay. We will shape them again into bricks, dry them, and fire another kiln. The ones that have not fully soaked can be dried again. We see this with farmers. They labour all year, and floods wash everything away. Do they die, or do they abandon farming? The same has happened to us. God has given us our limbs intact. Everything will come back again.”

Hearing her husband’s words, Phulesari’s mind grew calmer, though irritation still lingered. She said, “Even God is cruel. He knowingly troubles only the poor. And we too behave just the same. We do not observe a single fast, nor do we worship even for a day.”

Hearing this, Suratiya smiled and replied, “All right, enough now. Just as He has acted, you too have acted in the same way. Balance has been restored.”

After the fishermen’s cooperative was formed, some people gained influence, while others drifted away to Gopal Khatta. Although the entire pond had still not officially come under the society, those who joined never received compensation as pond owners. Instead, new water lords were born. In a single stroke, vast stretches of ponds came into the hands of a few

individuals. With that came the easy accumulation of capital. Alongside it began the plundering of the government treasury. The secretary of the society and the state machinery, working hand in hand, started looting the village's invaluable resources without restraint.

From the society, Fudna took one pond on lease, along with one private pond, at an annual rent of fifteen hundred rupees to raise fish. The embankment of the society's pond had collapsed and sunk badly due to long neglect. In contrast, the embankment of Ramdhan's private pond was firm, well-shaped, and intact.

At the very beginning of Aakhar, Fudna bought fingerlings from a trader who had brought them from the Ganga and released them into the leased pond. For the other pond, he procured fingerlings from the Tamuriya hatchery. The Ganga fingerlings were rohu, nain, and bhakur, while those from Tamuriya were silver carp. Silver carp grow to two or three kilos within a year, whereas rohu and nain grow more slowly, though bhakur multiply rapidly. Since all three species occupy different levels of water, they are stocked together.

At the start of Aakhar, steady rains fell and both ponds filled up. Watching the water rise and the fingerlings thrive, the hearts of Fudna and his wife fluttered with joy, as if God had turned away their sorrows. Somehow, the income was bound to cross twenty thousand rupees. Just as a farmer feels joy at a mango tree heavy with fruit, a field

yielding well, or a cow giving abundant milk, the same happiness filled Fudna and his wife. Drawn by this joy, they would sit at the pond's edge for hours, three times a day, watching the fry dart about. They scarcely felt like returning home.

Fudna's family had long been connected with fishing. Selling makhana and catching and selling fish had been their livelihood for generations. But after three consecutive years of drought, Fudna took the sacred thread. Such was his withdrawal from fishing that he even stopped eating fish. Earlier, the smell of fish had pleased him; now it made him nauseous. He joined the village kirtan group, began attending ashtayam and nawaha kirtans, and started organising communal feasts. Once possessed by rhythm, he learnt to play the harmonium and the drum with one hand. Gradually, while singing kirtan, he also learnt to perform on stage. He grew his beard and hair and began wearing a thin white shawl. Time favoured him, and a new occupation took shape.

Bookings for the kirtan group began to come in. The work was lighter, carried respect, provided good food, and the income improved as well. Yet his wife remained troubled and uneasy.

Just as Sitiya was skilful in managing the stocking of fish, she was equally sharp when it came to food. The village boys and women alike called Fudna a bagula bhagat, a heron-like ascetic. At home there was only a single plate and cup, from which both Fudna and Sitiya ate. One

thing, however, was certain. Fudna never forbade his wife from eating fish. He even noticed that fish regularly arrived from her parental home as gifts. If not often, then at least three or four times a month, it surely came.

Sitiya's father was a fish trader. He bought fish from pond owners and traders from Madhepur, added his margin, and travelled from village to village selling them. This brought him a good income. He had not bought fields or farmland, but he lived comfortably and had built a decent house.

One day, Fudna's brother-in-law Tuntunma arrived carrying two kilos of roe-filled rohu. Sitiya cut it into large, thick slices and began frying the fish.

The aroma made Fudna's mind sway like a restless kite. Just as an old illness awakens when its time comes, the same happened to him. He removed the sacred thread from his neck and, with a helpless smile, went to his wife and said, "Shall I bring two pieces and some roasted flattened rice?"

Hearing this, Sitiya replied with a hint of mockery, "Do you know how much loss we have borne in these three years? A person who eats rohu fish never loses eyesight. Even in old age, he sees clearly. How can I get up from the hearth right now? There is no flattened rice at home. Go and bring half a kilo from the shop. Till then, I will fry the roe."

Just as a thief's body fills with sudden energy when he sees money hanging within reach, the same surge came over Fudna. He pulled a ten-rupee note from his pocket and went to the shop. For seven rupees he bought half a kilo of flattened rice, returned, sat by the hearth, and said to his wife, "Then give me one piece."

Sitiya, too, carried the same desire within her. For no real reason, husband and wife had been pulling in opposite directions, and petty quarrels had become a constant habit. She served the fried roe and roasted rice to her husband. Just as joy comes when something long denied is finally obtained, the same pleasure filled Fudna as he ate the fish and rice.

Fudna went to his in-laws' house. There, on the earthen platform, he noticed a small circular fishing net, neatly folded and set aside. Seeing it, a thought arose in his mind. Left unused, the net would only rot away. It would be better to take it along. He asked his young brother-in-law to bring it down so he could have a look. Taking the net, he brought it back to the village. No one noticed, nor did he say a word to anyone. With the tool now in his possession, Fudna felt quietly pleased again and again.

From the third or fourth day onward, he began secretly catching fish from the ponds in the evenings. He ate some himself, and when there was a surplus, he sold it as well.

The pond owners gradually grew suspicious.

Eventually, one day, Fudna was caught. At the time, the pond owner said nothing and merely seized the net. The next morning, he convened a village council. There was little need for inquiry, as the net itself was proof. The elders made Fudna hold his ears and sit and stand twenty-five times, and imposed a fine of one hundred rupees. However, they returned the net to him.

When he reached home, his wife scolded him fiercely, to his face and behind his ears. Her words filled Fudna with deep shame. Holding his ears, he said, "From today onward, I will never do such a thing again."

Hearing this, Sitiya encouraged him and said, "Take this net and lease one or two ponds for fish farming. It will be our own work. We can eat as much as we like and also earn our living."

On the day of Diwali, heavy rain washed the fish out of the leased pond. Floodwater broke through the embankment and entered it. After the rain stopped, Fudna and his wife went to inspect the pond, holding a torch. Seeing the breach, Fudna felt faint. His speech failed him. He sat down on the embankment with both hands on his head.

Sitiya, holding the torch, went down the steps and searched carefully, but not a single fish came into view. Seeing nothing, she was completely shaken. She felt that everything had been swept away. Yet she also knew it was partly their own fault. They had not secured the embankment. Had they reinforced the opening firmly, like a solid barrier, this day might not have come. But

what was gone would not return.

She came back and stood silently beside her husband. Fudna remained lost in thought. People earn money and buy ornaments and jewellery for their wives, and here I am, such an ill-fated man, who has let even the little jewellery she had be washed away in water. Not only have the fish been lost, but with them, all hope has vanished.

Fudna remained silent. Seeing her husband in that state, Sitiya spoke, “By holding your head, the fish will not come back. Think now about what we should do next. Come, let us check the other pond as well, to see whether it too has been washed away or has survived.”

In his mind, Fudna felt it would not be right for him to speak. A woman understands jewellery better than even her own son. So, whatever she said, he should listen. Walking ahead with the torch in her hand, Sitiya led the way, while Fudna followed quietly behind her to inspect the second pond.

After circling the embankment on all sides, Sitiya smiled and said, “The income from the fry will not be much now. But if even one pond has survived, both ponds can be revived through it.”

Hearing her words, Fudna said, “At first, I felt that just as that pond was swept away, this one too would be lost. But God has protected one. There is enough fry here that one pond alone can make another flourish. The more scattered the

young ones are, the faster they grow.”

Sitiya’s mind lit up with a new thought. She began thinking quietly. Even if theirs had been breached, were they the only ones? Many others must have suffered the same loss. Now the society members and pond owners would not sit idle. They had enough capital to start approaching people. Another pond might come into their hands cheaply. When God decides to give, He gives by tearing open the roof.

She said, “We too made a mistake by not strengthening the mouth of the pond properly. Had it been secured; we would not have seen such a day. Tomorrow morning, we will bring five labourers and firmly seal the mouth. It is still the month of Kartik. There is plenty of time. By Baisakh and Jeth, the fish will be ready. Even if the pond fills only halfway, it will be enough.”

Listening to her, Fudna replied, “Since we have already invested this much, we might as well put in a little more. We will bring two maunds of lime and add that too. I have seen many people do it. It may not suit us entirely, but somehow let us manage this year. From next year onward, we will do it properly. A pond does not improve just by being dug. Whatever we do, we must do it well.”

4. D

As a member of the Kali Puja Committee, Bhola had been involved in preparations at the site since early morning. How could he not be? When a person rises from the family unit and embraces social responsibility as a personal duty, how can they turn away from it? Just as a living being is a fragment of the Absolute, so too is the individual an inseparable part of society.

Due to his responsibilities at the venue, Bhola did not return home even for a simple meal. He did not bathe either. He merely washed his hands and feet, swallowed a few bites of food, and once again prepared to leave. As he stepped out, he said to his wife, “I have no fixed refuge of my own, so take care of all the arrangements for offerings, supplies, and ritual needs yourself.”

When the floodwaters arrived, Bhola and Mangal stood before the Vrindavan Ras stage, anxiously watching for any sign of disaster. But the deluge came with such force that every careful thought dissolved in the face of its fury.

After helping manage the chaos at the stage, Bhola returned home and went to inspect the fields. Seeing the crops in ruins, despair overtook him. All hope of income vanished.

Bhola was a small farmer and also a modest trader. He cultivated barely fifteen kathas of

land, just enough to sustain his family. Yet he and his wife were so hardworking that they managed to run a household of seven with laughter and contentment. They had four children, all still young, the eldest being just twelve. Their son Baldev studied at the middle school and also helped with household chores.

The condition of the school was no better. In a school of five hundred students, there were only three teachers. One of them was deeply involved in political manoeuvring. Teaching and learning concerned him far less than his frequent visits to government offices and the corridors of power. He went there not only for public work but also to handle staff-related matters. In return, his income increased, and he enjoyed sitting among influential people, relishing the privilege of proximity to power. From the school, he required nothing more than a duly marked attendance record each month, which allowed him to draw his salary.

No one in society dared to speak against him. From the police station to the offices of lawyers and the courts, he had connections everywhere. Who, then, could raise their voice against such a man? Moreover, he was an active leader of the ruling political party.

Bhola was, in fact, pleased with the school's laxity. The reason was simple: Baldev had taken full responsibility for the cattle. Cutting fodder, feeding them, giving water, tending both house and yard, cleaning the shed, and lifting dung,

these duties rested firmly on Baldev's shoulders. Because of this, his father neither felt any pressure nor needed to worry.

But did that mean Baldev didn't study? He did. All day he toiled with the animals, but twelve hours of night still remained. As evening fell, Bhola would settle near his children and keep a watchful eye on them.

Baldev wasn't particularly sharp at his studies. How could he be, when the school itself was rotten at the core? When an institution suffers from decay, how active can a child's hands or mind truly become? Yet Baldev was not dull-witted either. With six hours of sincere study, some become engineers, doctors, lawyers, or professors. Then why shouldn't Baldev pass with three hours of effort? Year after year, he continued to move up in his classes. Bhola remained content, for the boy had grown up hearing his father say that agriculture was the noblest calling.

What, after all, is the difference between employment and servitude? If a person learns to earn a living with dignity, what more is truly needed? Just as in a monarchy the king's son becomes king, so in a democracy the minister's son becomes minister, and the officer's son becomes an officer. What else can one expect, if not this inherited advantage?

Despite owning only fifteen kathas of land, Bhola was regarded as one of the farmers of the

village. His farming methods were his own. During the monsoon, he cultivated paddy, and for the rest of the year, he grew vegetables. Even in the rainy months, vegetables were grown on five kathas, while paddy was planted on the remaining ten.

In his father's time, those ten kathas were first sown with rohani and marua seeds. After harvesting the marua, early paddy would be transplanted. But marua was never a reliable crop. One-year, excessive water drowned the seeds. Another year, too much rain destroyed them. Marua does not tolerate standing water. Yet when the timing is just right, the same ten kathas can yield ten maunds. Farmers hold marua in reverence because it is rarely attacked by pests or disease.

In most festivals, marua is considered an impure grain, yet during Jitiya, it becomes pure. Just as a maiden is revered at the time of marriage, while during the rite of chumaun a mother is regarded as impure, so too does the notion of purity shift. This blending of sacred and impure reflects the contradictions of human life. Just as the garments of a bride and groom are joined in matrimony along with their souls, Jitiya is observed with marua flatbread and greens, sometimes accompanied by fish. In other festivals, however, marua, greens, and fish are strictly avoided.

Paddy faced a similar fate. In years of drought, it withered; in years of excessive rain, it rotted. But when the timing was favourable, ten kathas could

yield ten maunds of grain.

Bhola's father considered grain farming a gamble, so he diversified into both cultivation and the seed trade. He prepared seeds of ramjhimni, jhimni, bhata, merichai, sajman, ghera, kadima, and various greens on his own. However, he didn't know how to produce cabbage seed. Cabbage heads and seeds weren't available in the local markets.

Once, at the Harihar Kshetra fair, he came across cabbage heads and seeds being sold at a shop from Hajipur. He sat with the shopkeeper to learn how cabbage seed was prepared. The shopkeeper explained the process to Raghuni—that is, Bhola's father—in detail. Recognizing the quality of the seeds, Raghuni purchased several varieties. After the transaction, the shopkeeper handed him five postcards printed with the name Lakshmi Seed Company and said, "Write the name and quantity of whatever seeds you need and send it. We'll parcel them from here."

This marked a new chapter in Raghuni's life. From that year on, he began working in the seed trade. Bhola, too, learned the craft from his father. In time, he also took up vegetable cultivation and entered the seed business.

Later, under the leadership of the agriculture minister and Prime Minister Shastri ji, a programme for the Green Revolution in agriculture was launched. The need for this programme arose from India's reliance on wheat

imports from the United States to feed its population. Even though the population then was not as large as it is today, people still struggled to fill their stomachs. In a country blessed with rich soil, abundant labour, and favourable seasons, it was a matter of deep shame that people should go hungry.

Recognising this harsh reality, Shastri ji and Jagjivan Babu gave the call of “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan.” But it was more than just a slogan. They formulated agricultural plans and implemented them in practice.

A new awakening took shape in Indian agriculture. Tractors became a common sight. Pumps and borewells replaced traditional irrigation methods. New tools reached the hands of farmers. Research on improved seeds accelerated. As the importance of agriculture rose, education advanced alongside it. The use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides became widespread to boost yields. As a result, agricultural production increased in ways that surprised many. Among farmers, a new consciousness was born.

Yet in a country like India, development did not occur uniformly, nor at the pace it should have. In states where both the government and farmers remained focused on agriculture, growth took root. But in regions where this attention was lacking, agriculture stagnated once again.

Mithila faced additional crises of its own, which not only slowed development but pushed it

backwards. The primary cause was the devastation caused by floods. The region is crisscrossed by numerous mountain streams that not only bring excess water but also erode farmland, cut new channels, and deposit sand over fertile soil. This destroys the land's productive capacity. When new channels form, villages and homes are swept away. Fields and pastures disappear. Therefore, controlling the destructive flow of these shifting streams becomes essential. Until that happens, stable and dependable farming will remain nothing more than a distant dream.

Fifty to sixty years ago, gates were installed on the Kosi bridge, and canal schemes were planned on both the eastern and western sides. Yet even today, these systems have not been used as they were originally intended. Governmental indifference has only made matters worse, leading to such disorder that large parts of the Kosi region continue to be ravaged every year.

Main canals were constructed on both sides of the Kosi, and from these, branch canals were extended, though not extensively. Cement and brick lining was also carried out in the main canals. However, because of the negligence and bad intent of builders and contractors, the work was of such poor quality that many canals collapsed or became filled with silt. When the main flow of water is obstructed, pressure builds up, and floods break through again and again, damaging the canal structures repeatedly. Repairs are undertaken every year, and every

year the damage returns.

Still, some benefits do reach the farmers. Wherever irrigation facilities are functional, the potential for a significant improvement in farmers' lives becomes visible. Yet, because of the inefficiency of the state machinery, the full benefit never reaches the ground.

Even the branch canals have not been completed. To make matters worse, the eastern embankment at Kusaha broke last year. The eastern region was devastated, and the entire canal system lost its effectiveness. As a result, the situation has now returned to what it once was.

The condition of borewell and pump schemes reflects the same failures seen in the Kosi canal projects. For small farmers, borewells were offered with a ninety percent subsidy, and pumps with a one-third subsidy. Yet the scheme remained limited in scope. As a result, irrigation reached only five to ten percent of village farmland.

What the farmers actually received were substandard borewell pipes sold at inflated prices and poor-quality pumps. Within two or three years, everything failed. Not a single borewell remained functional, nor did a single pump. However, the burden of bank loans remained firmly on the farmers' shoulders. The recovery of principal along with compound interest forced many to begin selling not just their cattle but also their fields and homes. Agricultural yields became irrelevant, as even land itself slipped out

of people's hands.

The farmer, who had once desperately yearned for water, found himself in the same situation again. The lack of water pushed agriculture further into decline. Those who invested their own money to purchase borewells and pumps became vulnerable to fertiliser and seed traders. Because of the poor quality of both, their farming suffered even more. One year the fertiliser worked, but the seeds failed. The next year the seeds were good, but the fertiliser was ineffective. With repeated losses, agriculture collapsed. People began migrating to Punjab, Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta, leaving behind deserted villages.

Looking back, it does not seem that Mithila's population has decreased. Yet there is a visible shortage of labour. The fertility of the soil has declined as well. Good earth has turned into sand. Perhaps not entirely, but at least half, or if not that, then a third, of the land's vitality has been lost.

Villages that were once granaries of grain now resemble the deserts of Rajasthan. Villages once adorned with trees now stand bare, like a woman stripped of her garments. Even what little remains suffers from water scarcity and a disordered supply of fertilisers and seeds. The entire village landscape now resembles the skeleton of a human body.

Despite everything, Bhola continues his

household life with calm assurance. He carries the dignity of a householder with pride. The reason is simple: although many of his neighbours lost everything, no one took his land. His fields still remained within the village. For farmers like Bhola, this became a rare opportunity. The sharecropping system that had existed until then began to undergo reform. Earlier, the tenant received only half of the produce, which kept him in a state of constant loss. Facing repeated failure in farming, many tenants abandoned sharecropping and turned to daily wage labour instead.

With changes in the sharecropping model, more workable arrangements began to emerge. In paddy cultivation, fifteen kilograms per katha became the landowner's fixed share, and the rest went to the tenant. The same method was applied to wheat, and vegetable cultivation followed a similar pattern.

Bhola is just one person. How much land can he possibly cultivate? Even so, he works one bigha of land as a sharecropper. In addition, he already owns fifteen kathas of his own. On that one bigha, he harvests summer paddy and immediately sows wheat. The wheat too matures early. After harvesting the wheat, he prepares the field and sows Pusa Baisakhi for fodder. This is his crop cycle. Throughout the year, he endures hardship, and he ensures that the landowner receives his fair share.

He has also made improvements in vegetable

farming. He no longer sources seed from Hajipur. Instead, he orders hybrid seed from reputed companies, cultivates vegetables himself, and also sells seed. This provides him with steady work and a better income.

In the village, during the Kali Puja fair season, Bhola sowed seed across fifteen plots. People in the area recognise the quality of Bhola's seed. Everyone knows it is different from that sold by ordinary traders. Even when his seed is superior, he sells it at a lower price than others. This time, however, misfortune struck. There was such heavy rainfall during the monsoon that the pods burst open, and the entire field became filled with soil and silt. Seeing the ruined seed, Bhola felt dizzy with shock. Still, he did not lose heart. He held on to hope, believing that only one season had been lost, and that he would sow again.

4. E

Seeing the shop falling apart, both husband and wife felt their hearts sink. Watching a whole year's labour reduced to ruin, Surji spoke sharply to her husband.

"The one who owns the monkey makes it dance. What madness got into your head that you opened a sweet shop? If someone from another caste takes up a confectioner's work, this is exactly what happens."

On one side, Lalit saw his capital slipping away. On the other, he had to endure his wife's bitter taunts. His mind began to waver. With restrained anger, he replied, "No work belongs to any caste. Whoever has the skill should do that work. Has ruin struck only us, or others as well?"

"Why shouldn't it strike others? The villagers acted foolishly. Without taking the word of Kali Maharani, how did they decide to organise the worship in the village? They should have called a priest first and completed the ritual properly. That was never done. They treated the goddess and Durga like a joke. That is why this happened."

Hearing his wife's words, Lalit fell silent.

Four years earlier, Lalit had gone to Biratnagar in search of employment. He found work at a sweet shop. At first, he did not know how to

prepare sweets, but gradually he learned to make a wide variety of sweets and many other items as well. After two years, a thought took root in his mind. Once all the skills had been acquired, why continue working as a hired hand? Why not open a refreshment and sweet shop in the village itself?

When he returned to the village and thought it over, Lalit realised that there was no sweet shop operating there. Now and then, someone bought sweets, but that alone could not sustain a shop. There was a tea stall, but he had seen for himself how it was constantly entangled in quarrels with customers over unpaid dues. Once again, the idea of returning to Biratnagar crossed his mind.

However, when he considered the condition of family's dependent on wage work there, his heart did not agree. Money might be sent home month after month, but the household lacked stability. The children did not attend school, and the wife had no steady work. If he stayed in the village, everything would settle into place. And after all, was there really a shortage of work in the village?

Then another thought arose. These days, even in villages, there were so many feasts and ceremonies that even modest work could bring in more income than life in a distant city. It was no longer like the past, when large gatherings were rare. Now even modest wedding parties were served puris and sweets, and funeral rites also included sweets. Thousands of rupees,

sometimes as much as fifteen hundred, were paid to those who prepared them. Weddings might be seasonal, but death rituals had no season at all.

There were other kinds of work too. On days when an order came in, the work could be done. Even if only twenty-five or fifty orders came in a year, the earnings would still amount to twenty-five or fifty thousand rupees. During festivals and busy times, the demand for sweets kept increasing.

This was only the beginning, which was why things seemed uncertain. But once the work started, it would grow on its own. People were no longer in the desperate condition they once had been. Earlier, many could not even afford a full meal, but that time had passed. As conditions improved, so would eating, drinking, and other daily activities.

And it was not as if every village had a confectioner. Once people recognised the quality of his work, they would come from neighbouring villages and place orders with him.

After thinking it all through, Lalit decided to stay in the village and build his own enterprise. As soon as the decision was made, he purchased moulds for making sweets along with the necessary utensils. Within five days, the auspicious wedding season of Phagun began.

It was a remarkable season. Such a rush had not been seen in years. There were fifteen or sixteen weddings a day. Even the elderly became active.

This was not like a government job, where the salary remained fixed regardless of how much work there was. When demand increased, a craftsman's income increased as well. Just as prices rise when goods are scarce and fall when they are plentiful, rates dropped when work was limited and rose when work was abundant. In the end, profit could not be judged by a single month alone.

Across sixteen auspicious wedding dates, Lalit earned twenty-four thousand rupees. Along with this came unplanned expenses on food, drink, and the purchase of a few necessary items. He remained busy for an entire month. Yet along with these earnings, he also discovered a new opportunity.

This happened when he went to fulfil the final wedding order. The women of the household were not at home. They had gone out to hire utensils for cooking and serving the wedding feast. During casual conversation, Lalit learned that the rental cost for utensils alone was two thousand rupees. He said nothing, but silently began to calculate. What he earned through two days of hard labour was being earned here simply through utensils. The idea took root in his mind.

When he added up the total cost of the utensils, it became clear that the more capital one invested, the larger the business could become. At present, he had neither the capital nor the space to store such items. Before anything else, he needed to build a house. Once the house was

ready, he could purchase enough utensils to serve at least one wedding party. After that, he could review the situation. As capital grew, the business could be expanded accordingly.

The thought of starting a new enterprise filled Lalit with happiness. As the feeling settled in, his attention turned towards lighting and generators. But tent and generator work required additional equipment. How could he manage all of that alone? Either he would have to do the skilled work himself or involve others. His thoughts began to circle restlessly.

Then another idea arose. Owning tents and generators required personal presence, but utensils did not. They could be counted, rented out, and returned without constant supervision.

Within a year, Lalit had established a second line of work. His income doubled. Seeing his efforts and earnings, people in the village began to say that his fortune had awakened. And why not? A sleeping destiny, that is, dormant intellect, does not awaken on its own. Unless stirred, it remains asleep.

Even after the second business took shape, Lalit found himself with some idle time. He began thinking about how to make good use of it. He did not own any farmland. Yet fortune favoured him again. A woman from the village fell seriously ill, and her poor family had to take her to Laheriasarai for treatment.

By then, Lalit's income was well known in the

village. Showing his helplessness, Makshudan came to Lalit and said, “Brother, we have fallen into a calamity. My mother is so ill that we must take her to Laheriasarai. The doctor in Tamoria doesn’t even have the machines to diagnose the illness. That’s why he said treatment is not possible without going to Laheriasarai.”

Hearing Makshudan’s words, Lalit replied, “Why are you telling me all this? If it’s a matter of the body, I’ll come with you right away.”

“No, brother Lalit, it’s not about arrangements. It’s about money.”

Pointing with his finger, Makshudan continued, “I’ll mortgage the ten kathas of land next to your house. Please arrange fifteen thousand rupees.”

Seeing Makshudan’s helplessness, a thought arose in Lalit’s mind: illness and the education of children often require help taken through loans or informal arrangements. Assistance given during such times is not just a financial transaction. It is a matter of shared social and household responsibility. He took out fifteen thousand rupees from his home and handed it over.

Taking the money, Makshudan asked, “Brother, shall we make a written document?”

At the mention of paperwork, Lalit was taken aback. He began to think quietly. Was this a commercial loan that required formal

documentation? For a simple mortgage, was there really any need for written papers?

Society may have become filled with deceit and manipulation, but it is still society. There are still people in the village who support others during difficult times—whether for children’s education, medical treatment, or the final rites of parents—without turning it into a legal contract. In such cases, is paperwork truly necessary?

If dishonesty had already entered his own mind, he would never have given the money. The land would remain in his possession either way. Would the community not understand this?

Even if dishonesty had increased in society, it is also true that some people today mistreat their own parents over matters of food and care. Honesty and dishonesty reside in the hearts of individuals. Seen from this perspective, how could Makshudan be called dishonest? He was sacrificing his own livelihood to ensure treatment for his mother. A man with such integrity did not need a written agreement.

Even today, many mortgages in the village are made without any paperwork. And if Makshudan ever failed to return the money, Lalit would still know within himself that he had acted in service to society. Besides, formal registration would cost money. Half of that expense would fall on Lalit, and the other half on Makshudan. In moments of crisis, even a single rupee carries the weight of a hundred thousand.

After careful thought, Lalit said, “Brother, you go and get your mother treated. There is no need for any written document.”

As soon as the money came into his hands, faith awakened in Makshudan’s heart. He felt certain that his mother would now receive the treatment she needed. Fortune, too, has its own alignments. When everything is meant to go well, no task becomes an obstacle. And when fate turns against us, even the simplest matters are filled with hindrances.

With ten kathas of land now in his possession, Lalit’s heart swelled with quiet satisfaction. Just then, Surji came and said, “If he asks for money again, give it to him again.”

Hearing his wife’s words, Lalit felt even more pleased. He asked, “Why?”

“You don’t really understand matters of land,” she replied. “If we keep giving little by little, and it turns into a large amount, only then should we think about getting something in writing.”

At her words, it felt as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over Lalit’s thoughts. Under his breath, he murmured,

“See the ways of this world. One house weeps while another sings.”

Then, aloud, he said, “When there’s something to understand, I’ll ask then. Go now and take care of the courtyard and household work.”

Surji went away, and Lalit began to think. Earlier, when he worked in the fields of others, he had always given their share without hesitation. But skill in labour alone does not keep a household running. To manage a home well, one must know not only how to work, but also what to cultivate, and when. Beyond that, it is essential to understand which crops are suited to which season. There were countless such questions, each requiring careful thought.

Once again, Lalit's mind turned toward the land. The field was beautiful, close to the house, and a borewell was situated right beside it. It made perfect sense to practise the kind of farming that would yield the greatest return.

A year has twelve months, and within those twelve months, the seasons keep changing. As the seasons shift, so too must the crops. It would be best to begin with summer paddy, which matures in four months. After harvesting the paddy, he could grow potatoes, which would be ready in three months. Once the potatoes were lifted, onions could be planted, which would mature by Baisakh. Even with limited land, the total yield would be significantly higher.

Alongside farming, there were other businesses to manage. He was a craftsman as well, and spare time was hard to come by.

When a fair was held in the village, Lalit set up a well-stocked sweet shop. However, due to heavy rain and flooding, the sweets he had prepared, along with other goods, were ruined.

Despite the losses, Lalit did not panic. He had not taken any loans to open the shop, so even though everything had been lost, he did not have a moneylender pressuring him for repayment. Throughout the night, he and his wife stayed busy salvaging whatever they could from the shop.

Just five days earlier, Lalit had planted Kufri Alankar potatoes on ten kathas of land. He had brought the seed from Samastipur. When he went to check on the field the next morning, he found knee-deep water standing over it. The sight filled him with despair. On one hand, the capital invested in the shop had been destroyed. On the other, the entire field was submerged. All the potatoes would rot beneath the soil. So much water had collected that the land would not be usable for at least a month. Replanting was out of the question.

Returning from the field, Lalit felt a heavy pressure in his stomach and chest. A thought struck him: six months of earnings had been wiped out. But then he composed himself. Would he also lose his life along with the losses? What had happened to others had happened to him too. Just as others endured their days, he would endure his. There was no sense in sinking into grief without reason.

5.

All through the night, just as the villagers stayed awake, so did the visitors attending the fair and those managing the stalls and shops. Yet everyone was astonished at themselves, as those accustomed to sleeping at night had worked harder than they ever did during the day.

It was pitch dark. There was neither light nor moon. Even the faintest glimmer of the new moon was swallowed by dense black clouds, intensifying the darkness. From the middle of the night, shopkeepers and performers began to flee. Although transport was scarce in the village, mobile phones existed. By dawn, vehicles had appeared from who knows where, and by morning, the entire area looked like a field trampled flat.

Villagers and outsiders alike felt relief simply for having survived. As they took stock of their belongings, some felt grateful, while others mourned their losses. Unable to comprehend the blow fate had dealt them, they cursed their luck in their own ways and remained quietly shaken.

The Vrindavan Ras troupe, the theatre group from Muzaffarpur, the male and female qawwali performers, and the Malini dance party from Mahinsotha had all taken half their payment in advance when the contract was finalized. Because of this, they felt no obligation to return to the committee. Without hesitation, they

packed up and left.

The reason was simple: the incident on stage had shaken them deeply. Once something like that happens, visits to the police station begin immediately. And once that starts, anyone involved can find themselves gasping for air. It was better to slip away quietly. If one survives, clothes can always be washed later with soap. For now, escape was the wisest choice.

Thinking along the same lines, traders reasoned that once their capital was lost, dragging themselves into courts and police stations would only deepen their losses. It was wiser to stay safe and earn again while life allowed it.

Outsiders might have been outsiders, but among the villagers, the fate of Devnath and Joginder weighed heavily. Whether the two had died during the night or merely collapsed remained unclear, yet the thought kept shaking Mangal from within.

All the guests who had arrived from faraway places felt as if they had come somewhere only to find themselves nowhere. This feeling was similar to the confusion of birds and sparrows perched on trees, suddenly caught in a storm of wind and rain. The guests felt the same helplessness. But whom could they speak to, and who would listen? People were busy straightening mats and coverings in their courtyards and homes.

Still, it was not like the scent that rises from sun-scorched earth when the first rain breaks the heat of Jeth. No one even noticed when winter suddenly arrived at the doorstep. Just as youth fills every limb of the body with beauty and draws attention to itself, in the same way, the earth, scorched and thirsty, drank a handful of water and regained its strength. Stretching out both arms in longing, she began to sing to her beloved through all the seasons.

The throats of drought-stricken farmers, parched with thirst, were satisfied the moment they drank water. Lifting their eyes again and again, they looked towards their beloved earth. The land, which until now had seemed close to death from thirst, had suddenly become so powerful that it breathed life into everything, from the force of new creation to even the most dried and burnt corners of existence.

Until now, the farmers of the village have remained divided in their approach to paddy cultivation. Among the many reasons for this division, two stand out clearly. The first lies in the structure of the land and the mindset of the farmer. The second lies in the contrast between inherited traditional farming practices and modern scientific methods.

Where agriculture passed down through generations has, in the absence of chemical fertilizers, proper irrigation, improved seeds, and modern techniques, continued to fall behind, the fundamental question remains. How is such

farming to be brought forward into progress?

What will feed a growing population is a question that must ultimately be faced by the owner of the land, that is, the farmer himself. Yet even farmers often understand their fields only through land records and official documents. In such circumstances, they are unable to grasp what truly needs to be done. Among the many reasons for this confusion, one stands out clearly. Whether it is propaganda, media campaigns, or sermons delivered from public platforms, none has yet presented the farmer in his true form. That reality must be placed honestly before the farmers themselves. Otherwise, as Tulsidas perceived nearly six hundred years ago, roughly twenty-five generations back, in his *Vinay Patrika*, “There is farming, yet no farmer.”

If farming itself collapses, how long can a trader’s business survive? Can trade continue to offer alms even to beggars? And if beggars themselves receive nothing, how long would Parvati remain with a beggar like Mahadev?

The question is not confined to agriculture alone. It is a question of life itself. In times such as these, unless one reshapes oneself according to changing conditions and walks in step with time, one continues to slip and stumble like a child learning to walk. Yet keeping pace with time is not child’s play. Even though human beings are the most evolved creatures on Earth, they remain separated from one another by vast distances.

Just as a forest contains everything—from towering trees to shrubs, from dense undergrowth to the grass clinging to soil—the human forest is equally varied. On one side are those standing at the furthest edge of ignorance, and on the other, those dreaming of living on the moon. Yet just as the forest makes space for all creatures, from the tiniest insect to the tiger, lion, and elephant, offering each food and shelter, human society too holds such diversity within itself.

Since ancient times, countless paths and ideas have existed. Those who placed the bond between man and woman within the domain of religion have themselves broken its codes and rewritten its rules. Others have followed them, and imitation has spread. From this, new ideas and new paths continue to emerge. Just as the ocean contains priceless gems along with ordinary shells and pebbles, society too carries all forms of existence.

Yet does that mean no one walks through dense thickets? Of course, they do. There are people who push through such thickets, where not even an inch of space remains, using both hands to force their way from one side to the other. Life today has become just as dense and tangled.

The question, then, is clear: should one walk forward with the chest held high, or turn one's back and retreat?

Unless one moves forward with confidence, how can one ever reach the tree of boundless peace?

And if that place is never reached, why distance oneself from food and grain at all? The certificate of success in life is earned only through arduous discipline, never through shortcuts. Until boundless peace is attained, how can one claim the certificate of a fulfilled life?

Clouds lingered, so the sun rose late from its bed. Yet did the birds forget how to fly across the sky? Awakening the priest, the drummer set off toward the village to perform Govardhan Puja. His heart was light with joy. And why not? Everyone would be going there, from the farmer who ploughs the fields to the one who tends the cattle. The income was substantial, but the labour was just as great.

For Govardhan Puja, some busied themselves preparing earthen figures, others arranged contracts and contributions. Some brought colours from shops and painted the ritual ground, while others gathered leaves, branches, and herbs of various hues to decorate it. Women moved briskly, making granaries of paddy and marua, alongside figures of Godhan Maharaj. Yet a quiet worry lingered. What if the drummer arrived too early? The poor man would have to wander the entire village or spend the whole day there just to fill his stomach. Some, exhausted after preparing threshing floors, sat together, sharing tea and paan.

Time had turned strangely. No one sounded the ritual bamboo fan at dawn. Perhaps poverty would not remain undisturbed for the whole year.

Yet even if it is driven away year after year by ritual sound, it seems to return. Just as Parashuram carried out repeated mass killings to eliminate the Kshatriyas, yet the Kshatriyas remained, perhaps this stubborn poverty also exists, refusing to disappear.

The havoc caused by wind and rain during Kali Puja did more than inflict damage. It raised serious questions before society. Just as building a house requires careful planning for every detail, so too must the household of society be managed with foresight and care.

Lifting his bicycle, Mangal set off to call a meeting of the Kali Puja Committee, going from one member's house to another. He reached Devnath's place first. Not seeing Devnath at the door, he called out loudly, "Devnath ji, oh Devnath ji?"

Hearing no response, not even from the crows, he called again, "Devnath ji, hey Devnath ji?"

At the sound of Devnath's name, his wife came out into the courtyard and said, "He left the house yesterday afternoon and has not returned since. He is still at the Kali shrine."

At the mention of the Kali shrine, Mangal started in surprise and said, "There is a meeting at the Kali shrine. That is exactly why I came. If he is there, I shall meet him. If he comes home, please tell him."

Saying this, Mangal went on to Joginder's house.

There too, there was no trace of him. After visiting twenty members without success, Mangal returned home, parked his bicycle, and set off for the Kali shrine.

One by one, eleven people gathered at the shrine. Conversation began. Jibach asked Mangal, “Why has Singheshwar not come?”

Hearing this, Mangal replied, “He was not at home. When I went there, his mother was there. When I asked, she said, ‘Late last night he was taken to the doctor here with his leg tied to a cot.’”

“What happened to Dukha Kaka?”

“She said he had also gone to watch the fair. When the storm and flood came, he tried to return home. On the way, his foot slipped into a ditch and he fell. His knee broke.”

At the words “his knee broke,” Jibach spoke with deep concern, “Oh my God. What cruelty. The poor man has no son, and his daughter lives at her in-laws’ home. His wife suffers from asthma. O Lord, you too are unjust. You keep piling sorrow upon the one who is already suffering, one blow after another. Had I known, I would have helped with the treatment costs. Singheshwar did the right thing. In moments like this, the son who stands up for society truly deserves a place among the finest sons of Mother India.”

Mangal replied, "Brother Jibach, I too am not very educated, because in schools and colleges people study only to pass examinations. The lesson of knowledge is learned only after one steps into life. What brother Singheshwar went to do is a demand of today's society. Such sons, who act at times like these, have been born from generation to generation. Such acts have always been placed at the heart of social service. That service, which once grew like a sandalwood tree from ancient times, flourishing and spreading fragrance, is now withering. Not only is it drying up, it is drying at such a pace that in a few days it will crumble and vanish."

Jibach listened to Mangal with both ears alert, eyes wide open, and mouth slightly agape. Just as tasting something delicious brings pleasure to the mind, hearing something meaningful makes the lips smile, stirs the heart, and awakens the eyes of discernment. Mangal's words affected Jibach in the same way. He said, "If only there were someone like an elder brother among us. Child, though we may be advanced in age, we have become like a banyan tree, trapped in the thorns and weeds of the very place where we were born. Work was done, but only according to routine and numbers. Now let us live life as a pillar of society. We are seated on the very spot that God Himself has struck down. What kind of ruler was our former king?"

Mangal replied, "He was a ruler who entered into the life of every single person. He maintained such a force of guards that, in keeping with the

times, no one could step out of line. His watchful eye was always upon all.”

“And what was his garden like?”

“No king in the world could match the garden he had. Some rulers may display their wealth, power, and following, but none could rival that.”

“What kinds of trees stood in that garden?”

“At the centre of the garden stood the tree of discernment. Beside it were the trees of mind and intellect. Nearby stood the tree of service, ever vigilant, watching over the garden’s enduring greenery.”

Listening to this, Bhuvan said, “Mangal, until yesterday we were engaged in social work. Whether good or bad, that phase has now come to an end. Now that the village lies in ruins, we must focus on that first. When the storm strikes, something or the other is shaken for everyone. Have you not seen Satna either?”

“Yes. The jamun tree by the roadside fell across the road. The road is blocked, so they went to cut and clear it.”

“Why has Nirdhan not come?”

“He has suffered an even greater blow. He owns four kathas of land where some paddy was grown. It is low-lying land, and the crop has collapsed. Because of Kali Puja, the ripe paddy was left standing in the field and was not

harvested. On one side it was dwarf paddy, and on the other, water from the higher fields drained into it. The crop has drowned. There is no outlet for the water. Early paddy can sometimes withstand such conditions, but summer paddy is far more vulnerable.”

“And why has Jholiya not come?”

“He has only one house, and even that has collapsed. Everything inside has been soaked. He is busy trying to salvage whatever he can.”

All at once, they spoke together, “Let those who are present think it through together. Those who have not come, we will speak to them later and understand their views.”

It was the decade of the sixties. A great upheaval took place among the farmers. Just as heavy rains, earthquakes, and storms erupt when conditions are right, a similar unrest arose among those deeply rooted in the land. On one side, the passion for freedom spread from village to village and drove the British away. On the other, people stepped forward to serve society. Patriotic soldiers were deployed in sufficient numbers across the country. Once the tree that had driven out the British stood firm before them, how could they not be ready to plant a second and a third tree as well?

Every living being in the world wishes to live in peace. Human beings, by nature, stand above all other creatures. How could they not understand that by attaining inner calm, one may become a

spiritual being? Who does not wish for the motherland to become more beautiful than heaven?

On one side, land had become the primary foundation of social prestige. On the other, with the end of kings and princely rule, the consequences of the abolition of revenue lordship began to appear clearly. With the collapse of royal authority, land began to be sold cheaply through receipts and informal transactions. Struggles over bakast land began in village after village. Across vast tracts, the sharecroppers' movement rose with the slogan, "Those who till the land are its rightful owners." The land demanded sacrifice for life itself, and that sacrifice was made. Laws on regulated sharecropping were framed and implemented. Wherever tenants came forward, they received recognised rights. Where they did not, the matter remains unresolved even today.

On common lands, registered institutions began to be established. Schools and hospitals were built. Public attention turned toward the fundamental problems of human life. From this arose a spirit of selfless service. From lower primary schools to middle and high schools, educational institutions began to appear. Small colleges were founded too. The government's focus shifted toward education, creating an environment conducive to learning.

Around the same time, the Bhoodan movement also emerged. Land donation came to be seen as

a moral duty, and land began to be donated. In village after village, Bhoodan committees were formed. Where these committees worked actively, land reached the landless. Where they did not, those areas became arenas of conflict. The goal of the Bhoodan movement was that one sixth of the nation's land should be distributed to the landless. Even today, the state has not found the strength to provide even four dismil of homestead land.

As villagers moved out in search of work, those who remained behind to practise farming found themselves presented with a rare opportunity. The nature of the land itself began to change. Land, once regarded as a symbol of prestige, was converted into monetary value. Agricultural yield started being assessed through the lens of bank interest rates. The old sharecropping system, which had earlier divided produce equally, began to loosen. New arrangements emerged, such as *mankhap*, *patta*, and *manhundā*. The division of produce shifted to fixed quantities, with fifteen kilograms of paddy per *katha* and ten to fifteen kilograms of wheat per *katha* becoming the norm.

With the construction of the Kosi canal and new roads, employment opportunities increased for labourers around crossroads and market centres. Compensation money also offered some support. Alongside the appointment of education facilitators, even the NHW programme provided limited assistance. As roads developed, transport-related occupations began to take

shape.

In Mithila, a new social category emerged: the farming class. Yet the domain of this class remained fragmented. The Green Revolution brought fortune to the land, to the fields themselves, though not to the extent it should have. Had prosperity arrived in full measure, Mithila might once again have regained its stature as a world teacher, as it once was. That potential remains unrealised.

Even today, few regions in the country have produced as many engineers, doctors, scientists, and literary figures as Mithila. The misfortune lies in the fact that these people have scattered across the world after leaving Mithila behind. This is not entirely by choice. There are no industries where engineers can work, no adequate healthcare institutions where doctors can fully apply their skills, no scientific research centres where scientists can demonstrate their brilliance, and no robust educational environment where writers can refine their literary talent.

Though Mithila lies within the Ganga–Brahmaputra plains, it is crisscrossed by countless rivers. These rivers are so destructive that they continually distort and devastate entire regions. Life here has grown so fragile that those who continue to stand and survive in Mithila deserve gratitude simply for remaining.

With the emergence of the farming class, the

rigid bonds of caste began to loosen. Many occupations, from agriculture to small-scale industries, which had once been confined within specific castes, broke free. No trade remained the exclusive domain of any single caste. Yet just as land submerged by the Kosi rises again as sandbanks, and over time people resettle there and rebuild villages, so too is renewed effort required now.

While the shift in caste-based occupations did weaken the old social order, political manipulation has emerged as a new problem that stands in the way of development. New obstacles of many kinds continue to arise. But does this mean Mithila have turned into a desert, incapable of producing people devoted to work and duty? Certainly not.

Not collectively, perhaps, but in scattered pockets, there are still farmers who, despite countless natural calamities, continue to shine like pillars of gold. No fixed boundary can be drawn for this achievement, for its reach is vast. Yet it cannot be denied that in some fields, paddy is produced in quantities capable of competing even with Japan. The same holds true for wheat, pulses, and fruits. Even today, thousands of trucks carrying mangoes leave the region. Vegetables from one area are sent to another. Thousands of trucks loaded with spices travel to different states. Milk from one region is sold in second and third regions far away.

The informal discussions that had long taken

place within society began to take formal shape with the arrival of Professor Daya Babu and former Professor Kamal Babu. As soon as Kamal Babu reached the Kali shrine, he said, “Until now, the history of our society and our villages has been slipping away. We must first reclaim it. For that, it is essential to buy a register and carry out the work in written form.”

Hearing Kamal Babu’s words, Mangal thought that a register should be brought from somewhere nearby. If that was not possible, then today’s proceedings could be noted on loose sheets of paper and later copied neatly into a register. The thought that kept dancing in his mind was this: both men, Daya Babu and Kamal Babu, would not stay for long, and how forcefully could they insist? If they did insist, one could simply say, “This village and this society are yours, run them in your own way.”

Yet the villagers were so entangled and confused that they spoke of religious duty, schooling, and service to parents, while spending the whole day in idle talk, wasting time, and tearing society apart. Society had become an arena of injustice. In such circumstances, could it be reformed merely by raising slogans of social justice?

Smiling faintly, Mangal said to Professor Daya Babu, “Sir, you have studied for four years, so you have the right to ask whatever you still do not understand. But an old man like me has no such right. Even so, you yourself give answers to all the questions that arise in my mind.”

As though he already knew what was in Mangal's heart, Kamal Babu began to mutter, "On hearing last night's events, my heart has shattered as if it struck a stone."

He wiped tears from his eyes and continued,

"But whom should we hold responsible? There are some at fault, and we too are among them. We can speak of that later. For now, let us say only this: it is not easy to stop the wheel of time. This was the turning of time itself. Therefore, atonement is necessary. Let everyone stand for two minutes and remember those who suffered losses. On the first page of the register, write a condolence resolution and then move the work forward."

After the condolence was observed and they sat down, Kamal Babu asked, "How many members did we originally form the committee with?"

"Twenty-one," someone replied.

"That seems right. How many are present now?"

"Eleven."

"And the others?"

"Two are missing, eleven are present, and eight are engaged in different urgent tasks."

"Hm. Last night's storm has shaken everyone."

Saying this, he paused, thinking, then spoke

again,

“Brother Mangal and younger brother Daya Babu, just as we are living our lives with contentment, we hope that you too will live well and create an even better path for the next generation.”

Kamal Babu was still speaking when Nengar and Bauka spoke together, “Daya Kaka has studied, and Mangal too has climbed the steps of college up to the rooms above. But we have spent our entire lives studying only in the class of the hoe, so...”

Laughing aloud as he rose to his feet, Professor Kamal Nath addressed the committee, “My congratulations to Nengar and Bauka. I congratulate you both for recognising your own limits. Brother Nengar and Brother Bauka, I offer this praise because you have grasped the root of a great social problem. In our society, a serious issue is that people do not wish to understand their own boundaries. Then how can they keep pace with time, which flows like sand along a riverbank? When one stands on watery sand, one is already aware that a misstep may cause sinking and drowning. In such a place, if someone carries a load of ten or twenty seers on their head, what would their movement be like? That is why, when constructing a grand building, the first thing examined is the brick itself. If that is not done, everything collapses like spinning tops on a broken surface.”

As Kamal Babu spoke, Nengar and Bauka looked into each other's eyes and began to smile. Lifting his gaze, he swept his eyes over everyone present. Some were grave, while others struggled to make sense of his words. Yet the laughter of the two spread through the gathering.

He was reminded of the Hooghly River. All the streams of his region flow from north to south, even though on the far side of the Ganga, the river flows from south to north. But the Hooghly, which meets the sea, flows in one direction for sixteen hours and in the opposite direction for eight. In the same way, the soul of the elder and the soul of those who studied in the class of the hoe had come together to form, like a Shivalinga, a new temple of the supreme spirit.

Smiling, Nengar and Bauka lowered their heads. Seeing Daya Babu and Mangal grow serious, Professor Kamal Nath spoke again,

“Last night's incident was painful. But it belongs to yesterday. Time has three movements: the past, the present, and what is to come. The time that has passed shows the path of the present and the future. In one sense, last night's incident has brought all of you to a boundary. It needs to be understood properly.”

Raising his eyes, Mangal asked, “Say it plainly, please.”

“Look, our society has many festivals and observances. Some are good, some are harmful. We must hold on to what is good. It is not that

religious work has, for the first time, faced an obstacle because of a single night. Even within families, we see that after all preparations for a ritual are complete, an unpleasant incident can occur, disrupting worship as well as eating and drinking. But what do we observe then?"

What we observe is this: ritual work is set aside, and people turn their attention to the immediate event. In the same way, you must reduce your grief by understanding it as a social matter, not merely as a ritual one. Social events such as Kali Puja and Durga Puja do take place in villages, but it is also true that they are not held everywhere. In some villages, they are celebrated, while in others, they are not. They are not essential for society or for the village itself. They exist for peace of mind.

At this moment, you are standing at a point where two paths diverge. The first question is whether this should be done again next year or not. Society's view will have to be considered. On this question, society itself is divided. Most people may feel that the village did not escape harm, and therefore it should not be done again. Yet there will be others who still wish for it to continue.

This leads to another question: if it does happen again next year, what then? And following that, a further question arises: was the resolution taken with full preparedness for the arrangements of worship?

In fact, two strands of thought emerge here. One is the collective resolve of society. The other is the intention or determination made at the moment a ritual process begins. That second resolve was absent. For this reason, the matter has become one for future reflection.

Another question follows. On a personal level, everyone observes rituals at home or privately, in their own way. Social observance may be necessary, but what form it should take is a question that deserves careful consideration. The kind of public fair that has existed until now, how suitable is it for today, for the present moment? This too requires reflection.

We have already said that the history of the village must be written. Until now, that history has sometimes revolved around kings and courts, luxury and indulgence, and sometimes around fields and farms, or entertainment. One king and queen enjoyed the pleasures of the throne, while everyone else stood on the steps below, holding one another back, pushing others aside, moving forward and backward at the same time. This has been our shared history.

Therefore, how to lead our society forward along a better path is your collective responsibility.

Yet the society we speak of is not truly a human society. It resembles an inherited burden. Just as an old beam helps support a house but causes endless trouble because of its weight—a fact well known to those who try to bind it in place—so too are people. On one side, they gather; on another,

they scatter. When they gather here, they scatter there. No blame lies with the poor fellow caught in this motion. One runs after bread, another after ownership. And what kind of ownership? We speak as if we were the Creator Himself, declaring, "You must obey my command." How splendid. But before becoming a creator, make your register public so that we too may record in our society's history how many ride in aeroplanes, how many in air-conditioned cars, and how many depend on the humble taxi of Charan Babu.

Just as in ancient times a village first took shape when one, then two, then three or four families arrived, and what we see today has grown dense and crowded, so too must we move forward without excessive anxiety, looking ahead rather than clinging to fear.

In the middle of the discussion, Bauka spoke up.

"Baba, the boys went to the embankment early this morning to catch fish. We should at least go and see whether they themselves have drowned or returned safely while chasing the fish."

Hearing Bauka, Baba burst into laughter and said, "Bauka, the greatest attainment in life is to find happiness. One who finds happiness has found God Himself. But what happiness truly means, I will not explain just yet. Even so, you are restless. In such a moment, it does not seem right to hold you back. Only remember this much: sorrow departs, and happiness arrives."

Lifting his eyes, Dayanand said with a gentle smile, “Brother, you spoke of writing history, but you did not say whether the earlier history has been understood or not.”

“Daya Babu, Hari is infinite, and the story of Hari is infinite. The time in which we are sitting now is not a time for sitting and deliberating. How many homes must have collapsed, how much livestock and property must have been destroyed, how many people must have broken arms or legs. In such a time, we cannot sit with folded hands and only reflect. Where you feel you can be of real use, go there and steady the shaken village. We are all neighbours. Time will change. However dense the clouds that rise from the sea may be, even they change slowly, little by little.

So, the final thing I will say is this: push life forward with hope, climb the mountain, and fling it into the open sky.”

