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LAHSAN

Original Maithili novel authored

by

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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An English Translation of the Maithili novel Lahsan

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The Birthmark, a Maithili novel by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, follows Mewalal from the drought-stricken fields of Mithila to the unsettling world of Calcutta. Forced by agricultural collapse and family hardship to leave his village, Mewalal carries with him the values of labour, self-reliance, memory and belonging. The city offers livelihood, friendship and material security, but it also exposes him to new habits, changing relationships and unfamiliar pressures and possibilities.

At the heart of the novel lies a deeper question: what remains of a person when land, work, family and trust begin to shift beneath his feet? Through Mewalal's long journey, Mandal explores migration not merely as movement from village to city, but as a transformation of identity. The shifting relationship among Mewalal, Radha and Sunil Pal brings questions of marriage, companionship, desire, betrayal and social judgement into sharp focus.

Its final movement turns a private bodily mark into a sign of recognition, memory and consequence. Rooted in the soil, speech and social life of Mithila, *The Birthmark* is both an intimate story and a reflection on dignity, change, memory and the fragile bonds by which people recognise one another.

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Dedication

To those who leave home so that home may endure;
who carry their ***mati-pani*** across distances in labour,
memory and speech;
and whose lives remind us that belonging survives not
only in the place one returns to,
but in the bonds one carries and the marks the body
bears.

Preface



The Birthmark, translated from Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel *Lahsan*, begins in a landscape of drought, but the drought is never merely a condition of weather. It enters the soil, the economy, the household, the memory of a family and the moral confidence of a man who has until then lived by the strength of his own labour. The geographical radius of Mewalal's world at the beginning of the novel is modest: a village in Mithila, fifteen *kathas* of inherited land, a mother, a wife, cattle, wells, crops and the ordinary obligations of rural life. The questions that arise from this world, however, are not modest. What happens to human dignity when the material basis of self-reliance begins to collapse? What becomes of belonging when livelihood demands migration? How are work, family, language, memory and identity altered when a person is compelled to leave one social world and enter another? Through Mewalal's life, Mandal allows these questions to grow naturally out of lived experience.

One of Mandal's distinctive strengths as a novelist lies in his movement from the smallest facts of everyday life towards a much wider field of reflection without abandoning the material reality from which the thought began. A pond is not merely a pond. When it dries, the change reaches cattle, crops, households and ultimately migration. A *khurpi* is not merely a tool. It belongs to a system of labour, practical

knowledge and survival. A railway platform becomes a meeting place of regions, languages, workers, performers and different ideas of society. Food, wells, fields, wages, festivals, markets and journeys repeatedly become points from which the narrative widens. Thought does not stand outside life as commentary upon it. It arises from work, circumstance, memory and conversation. Mandal's characters think because life gives them reasons to think.

This is particularly evident in the novel's understanding of knowledge. Subhavi, Mewalal's mother, has never received formal education, yet the narrative refuses to confuse lack of schooling with lack of understanding. Knowledge may come through books, but it may also be gathered through tending cattle, maintaining a household, reading the seasons, observing the soil, remembering earlier hardships and learning how people behave towards one another. Budhilal's practical intelligence belongs to the same world. He understands which crops suit particular conditions and how the abilities of different members of a household may be brought into balance. The remembered figure of Ayachi Mishra gives this idea a further dimension, connecting everyday self-reliance with Mithila's own intellectual and ethical inheritance. Formal learning is therefore not dismissed, but neither is it allowed a monopoly over knowledge. Mandal places educated knowledge beside lived knowledge and asks what each can contribute to the conduct of life.

The drought that drives Mewalal away from his village is consequently much more than a device for setting the plot in motion. It is an ecological event with economic, social and psychological consequences. Water withdraws, wells fail, trees dry, cattle decline, land loses value and debt continues to grow. What happens to the field reaches the kitchen; what happens to the kitchen reaches relationships; and what

happens to livelihood eventually alters the movement of people themselves. The novel places *roudi*, prolonged drought, beside *dahar*, destructive excess water, revealing the precarious position of an agricultural society that may suffer from either absence or abundance of the same element.

Alongside this ecological vulnerability, Mandal observes another transformation: the gradual movement from an agrarian order towards a machine-based and industrial one. Agriculture depends intimately upon water and season. Industry does not depend upon them in the same way. When farming weakens, the city may still offer work, and so labour begins to move towards the very places where livelihood appears more secure. The village loses people at the moment when it most needs their strength. The city gains workers because the countryside can no longer sustain them. Mewalal's journey to Calcutta thus belongs to a much wider human history of economic migration and displacement, though the novel never turns that history into an abstract argument. It remains embodied in hunger, jewellery sold for journey money, debt, railway fare, a small bag carried under the arm, uncertainty on a station platform and the anxiety of those who remain at home.

Labour is perhaps the most persistent moral language of Mewalal's life. In the village he is not merely an impoverished farmer. He is a cultivator who has organised his household around his own labour and whose sense of freedom comes partly from being able to determine the rhythm of his work. Calcutta changes that relationship. There he carries sacks, delivers water, pulls a hand-rickshaw and eventually enters regular industrial employment. Each form of labour gives him income, but each also alters his relation to time, authority and himself. Work performed according to one's own judgement and work performed under another person's direction do not

carry exactly the same experience of freedom. Regular employment brings greater material security, but industrial routine can also exhaust the body and narrow the space available for reflection and independent action.

Mandal does not romanticise agricultural hardship, nor does he present salaried employment as an uncomplicated fall from freedom. Mewalal's wages allow him to support his family, clear debts and acquire a degree of economic security that drought-stricken agriculture could no longer provide. The novel's concern is subtler. It asks what labour gives a human being in addition to income. Does work merely keep the body alive, or does the manner in which one works also shape self-respect, confidence and independence? Mewalal's changing occupations allow this question to remain alive throughout the novel.

For the same reason, Calcutta is never presented as the simple moral opposite of the village. The city is neither merely corrupt nor miraculously liberating. It offers livelihood, regular wages, companionship, medical care, new experience and access to a wider social world. It also brings routine, anonymity, unfamiliar language, new forms of dependence and new desires. The village, similarly, is neither an untouched paradise nor simply a site of deprivation. It possesses inherited knowledge, kinship, language, cultural memory and a deep sense of *mati-pani*. At the same time, it contains economic fragility, restrictive customs and limited opportunities. Mandal is at his most interesting when he refuses an easy opposition between tradition and modernity. Village and city do not merely confront one another; they enter one another through the people who move between them.

The expression *mati-pani*, literally 'soil and water', is

particularly important in understanding this dimension of the novel. Its meaning extends far beyond geography. It suggests the environment in which a person has been formed: language, habits, confidence, memory, food, social relationships and inherited ways of seeing the world. Mewalal carries one *mati-pani* into another. Radha does the same. Their experiences show that migration is not merely the movement of a body from one location to another. A person arrives carrying an entire social formation within the self, and the new environment gradually acts upon it.

Language therefore becomes part of the novel's understanding of power and belonging. Maithili, Bhojpuri and Bengali meet during Mewalal's journey and in Calcutta. The novel reflects upon *Mithilakshar* and the Bengali script and, more significantly, upon the confidence with which a community inhabits its own language. Radha's initial difficulty in understanding and speaking the language around her is not a minor inconvenience. It affects her ability to move independently through markets and public spaces. Antika Pal, by contrast, is educated, informed and at home upon her own linguistic and cultural ground. The difference between the two women is therefore not merely personal; it also emerges from education, environment and cultural confidence.

The episodes involving Bhikhari Thakur and Sumanlal deepen this exploration of language and culture. Folk theatre, song and performance appear not as decorative additions to the story but as forms of social memory and thought. Bhikhari Thakur is remembered both as an entertainer and as an artist concerned with social awakening. His travelling theatre crosses linguistic and regional boundaries, adapting itself to audiences without losing its own cultural foundation. Through such episodes Mandal's Mithila enters into conversation with Bhojpur, Bengal, Assam, Nepal and other regions. The local

world of the novel is therefore not enclosed within itself. It is continually meeting other worlds through migration, work, performance, language and memory.

Radha's transformation in Calcutta must also be understood within this wider movement of environment and experience. To read her only through the final language of betrayal would be to overlook the long process by which her inner life changes. She arrives from a village environment in which many possibilities of thought and social movement have remained limited. Antika Pal is educated, reads books and newspapers, goes to the market independently and understands the social world around her with greater confidence. Through companionship with Antika, through the city, cinema, markets, conversation and new patterns of domestic life, Radha encounters possibilities that had not formed part of her earlier experience.

With these new experiences come new desires and a new awareness of herself. The novel does not remove questions of responsibility from what follows, but neither does it present human conduct as though it occurred outside history, environment or circumstance. Marriage, companionship, loneliness, desire, trust and betrayal gradually become intertwined. Sunil Pal too has his history: friendship with Mewalal, the death of his wife, loneliness and his growing closeness to Radha. Mandal's treatment of these relationships is unsettling precisely because the conflict does not arise among complete strangers. It grows within friendship, hospitality and ordinary human dependence. The private household becomes another place in which larger changes in society are felt.

The title *Lahsan* gathers many of these questions into an intimate image. In this novel, *Lahsan* does not mean

garlic; it refers to a birthmark on Radha's body. At first it belongs to the privacy of the body and to intimate knowledge within marriage. As the narrative advances, however, the mark acquires a significance larger than its physical form. It becomes connected with memory, recognition, intimacy and identity. A sign hidden from the public world gradually acquires a public consequence. I have translated *Lahsan* as *The Birthmark* because the English title gives the reader immediate access to the literal object while leaving its deeper significance to unfold through the story itself.

Mandal's narrative form deserves equal attention. Readers accustomed to a tightly plot-driven novel may notice that the story frequently opens into reflections on agriculture, education, mythology, history, food, language, social custom or philosophy. It also pauses for proverbs, folk comparisons, memories and extended conversations. These movements are not detachable essays inserted into a story. They belong to the novel's way of representing a society in which experience, argument, story, proverb and memory often travel together. A discussion of *sattu* or *bagiya* can reveal fellowship among travellers. A railway conversation can become an enquiry into education and labour. A recollection of Bhikhari Thakur can open a question about art and social awakening. A discussion of irrigation can lead towards a reflection on the changing relationship between agricultural and machine civilisation.

This movement gives Mandal's prose something of the breadth and flexibility of an oral intellectual culture. An image may begin in a field, move through mythology, enter social history and return to the immediate problem of a household. His comparisons may draw upon cattle, crops, rivers, seasons, tools, epics, saints, markets or machines. The world through which his characters think is the same world

through which they work. To separate the philosophical passages completely from the narrative would therefore be to misunderstand how the novel creates meaning.

Translating such a work involves a particular responsibility. My aim has not been to make the Maithili world disappear into seamless English. Readability matters, but cultural presence matters equally. Certain expressions have therefore been retained in transliteration, among them *duragaman*, *roudi*, *dahar*, *mati-pani*, *katha*, *dharmashala*, *sattu*, *paan* and *naach party*. Their meanings are made clear through context, at first use where necessary, and in the Glossary. To replace every such term with an approximate English equivalent would sometimes remove the social history and cultural associations carried by the original. On the other hand, too much explanation within the narrative would interrupt its movement. The translation therefore seeks a balance between accessibility and cultural integrity.

The same principle has guided the treatment of proverbs, kinship terms, folk images, traditional measures and philosophical turns of speech. Mandal's prose often moves by association rather than by a narrowly linear argument. Where English can preserve that movement without unnecessary obscurity, I have tried to allow it to do so. Where literal translation would make an image lifeless or unintelligible, I have sought to preserve its force rather than merely its grammatical surface. Where the cultural word itself carries an irreplaceable part of the meaning, I have retained it. The English used throughout is British English, but the intention has never been to make Mithila sound as though it were originally conceived in English.

Translation, in such a case, is less an act of replacement

than an act of passage. The reader should be able to enter the original world with enough guidance to move within it, while still feeling that the world entered has its own language, history and texture. The smell of soil after rain, the anxiety of a failed well, the intimacy contained in a form of address, the social meaning of a ritual, the humour of a folk comparison and the weight carried by *mati-pani* cannot always be transferred word for word. They can, however, be allowed to remain present.

The Birthmark begins with soil and water, but it does not remain there. From soil and water it moves towards labour; from labour towards migration; from migration towards language, companionship and changing identity; and from identity towards the fragile bonds through which human beings recognise themselves and one another. Its village belongs unmistakably to Mithila and its urban world to Calcutta, but the questions raised by that movement are widely human. How does one remain oneself while circumstances alter the conditions of life? What happens to dignity when independence gives way to dependence? How much of home can be carried into another world? What survives when trust changes? And how do people understand one another when the meanings of work, marriage, friendship and belonging no longer remain fixed?

I hope that readers encountering Jagdish Prasad Mandal in English will not approach Mithila merely as a distant regional setting. Literature does not make different places identical, nor should it. Its greater possibility is to lead us deeply enough into one particular world that we begin to recognise, through its differences, questions present in other human worlds as well. Mandal's fiction begins in the village, but it does not end there. It carries the village into the wider world and brings the pressures of that wider world back into

the household, the field, the body and the mind. If this translation allows something of that movement, and something of the *mati-pani* from which it arises, to remain alive in English, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

- Gajendra Thakur

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1.



Two years after his wife's *duragaman*, the customary post-marriage ceremony after which a bride formally begins living in her husband's household, Mewalal suddenly saw the steadily moving cart of his family life come to a halt. The sight left him so despondent that it seemed as though the living, self-reliant life he had built for himself had simply vanished.

He did not feel the same need to discuss the matter with his wife as he did with his mother, Subhavi.

Watching life come apart, convictions crumble and social ties begin to break, Mewalal said to his mother-

“Ma, the life we have lived until now is dying. In a few days, it will be gone altogether.”

Subhavi had seen with her own eyes, and endured in her own life, much of what had happened to her family, her village and the surrounding countryside. Yet she could not quite grasp what her son meant when he said that life itself was dying. She had never been to school, but no one could have called her wholly ignorant either. Knowledge is everything to life. Those who read and write acquire knowledge through learning; those who have never entered a school gather it through family, work and the experience of living. Whatever the path, knowledge remains essential to life.

It is among the strongest powers within the human frame, showing life a road from the past towards the future and urging it to walk that road. The moment such understanding begins to guide the mind, the body too finds the will to act, and hands and feet begin to move towards a better life. Subhavi had spent her years weaving and holding together the relationships between parents and children, husband and wife. Now, in her son's household, she stood as both mother and mother-in-law. Why, then, should anything spoken by her own son leave a wound in her heart? Looking Mewalal straight in the eye, calm and unafraid, she asked-

“What did you say, son? Life is dying?”

Her question did not stir even the slightest bitterness in Mewalal. How could it? The life he was speaking of had unfolded before his mother's own eyes. She too had given herself wholly to the family. After all, man himself is God, and the family is God's temple. What room could there be for bitterness in such a place?

It was not as though Subhavi understood nothing of income and expenditure, production and consumption. She rose at dawn and first swept the courtyard. Then she cleaned the cattle yard, gathered the dung and litter, scraped and swept the ground, and shaped the dung into cakes for fuel. By the time the morning meal was due, she would eat something and set off to arrange grass and fodder for the cattle. She returned only after noon had passed. Even then, before bathing or eating herself, she would first ask her daughter-in-law-

“Have you all eaten?”

Taken by itself, the question might sound faintly ironic. Here it was nothing of the kind. Here it was the instinctive force of motherhood in Mithila. The moment her daughter-in-law looked towards her and answered with a small smile,

Subhavi seemed first to bathe inwardly in that smile. Only afterwards did she bathe in water and sit down to eat.

As fulfilment is the fruit of life, so food is the fruit of the day. And fruit, after all, is fruit. If a sour grape can be nourishing, why should a sweet Maldah mango not be? Of course it can. Let the other fruits take their places somewhere between the two. For the moment the play has begun with the sound 'a', and even *anar* and *amrud* have been left aside.

Bathing is enough to awaken hunger in almost anyone, but in a person who works hard the appetite returns with twice the force. Along with the hunger that follows bathing comes the hunger born of labour, and so such a person naturally develops a deeper love of food. Perhaps food itself finds its greatest satisfaction in surrendering itself to a strong stomach and a sturdy body made firm by work.

After eating, Subhavi treated rest almost as a sin and began preparing for the afternoon's labour. She gathered and checked the tools she would need outside. A *kharpi* was needed for cutting grass, and this was a time of *roudi*, when the fierce sun had already reduced the growth of grass. The work would therefore take longer than in ordinary times. The soil too had hardened, so the *kharpi* could not simply be taken out and used. Its blade had to be hammered and sharpened until its working edge was ready. Alongside this came the daily care of the cattle shed and the manure heap. From sunrise until the end of the day, Subhavi had lived as a devoted guardian of the household. How could one who had given herself so completely to the family turn against it, or allow thoughts of division to take root within her?

On fifteen *kathas* of land, Mewalal had built a life of self-reliance and had continued to live by his own labour. We live in Mithila, after all. Has Mithila's philosophy spread

across the world without having produced anything of its own? It has produced much, but one has to look for it. This is the land in which Ayachi Mishra was born, a man whose philosophy of life still offers a way of seeing our own. What was that philosophy? That a family might live upon a single *katha* of land and yet attain a fearless life enriched with human qualities. The moment fearlessness enters a human being, one begins to climb towards freedom and to acquire the strength that comes from being without fear. Do we not know that the royal court itself once came to Ayachi Mishra's door? The story may now belong to the pages of history, but its living force cannot simply be denied.

Mewalal's fifteen *kathas* had come to him as ancestral property. His father, Budhilal, had inherited those same fifteen *kathas* from his own father. Because Budhilal knew how to keep his household in order, his land was never put up for auction through failure to pay land revenue. Among the many ways in which family property had been lost in village society, unpaid land revenue had played no small part. It was our misfortune that for a long period we lived under foreign rule. Yet independence too had not come yesterday. Enough time had passed for a third generation of families to be nearing its end.

Today we stand upon the threshold of what is called a scientific age, a developed age. Science has invented enough to make many of the means of agriculture easier. Budhilal had supported his family through farming and cattle rearing. Farming required irrigation, and irrigation required water, yet Budhilal had created no artificial source of his own. Three months of the year belonged to the rains, and in those months some rain, little or much, would generally fall. Too much brought floods. A moderate monsoon brought neither destructive flooding nor complete *roudi*. In such a year the

seasons settled into balance, and favourable weather naturally brought a good harvest and some prosperity to those whose lives depended upon the fields.

Even if the year were divided roughly into three parts, one would find three seasons: winter, summer and the rains. Seen over three years, it might appear as though one year fell to drought, one to cold waves and one to the rains. That is only a simple division, however. One must also consider the virtues and dangers of each season, which is favourable and which is harmful. But that question may remain aside for the moment. What matters here is that Budhilal had depended entirely upon the rainfall given by God for his farming.

Budhilal was nevertheless a discerning householder. He knew which crop would prosper in what kind of weather and which would turn into a losing bargain. His special strength in running the family lay in understanding its balance. To understand a household is to understand both its members and their capacities. Budhilal possessed the practical wisdom to keep the two in harmony, and so he passed through the beginning and end of his life with a measure of ease and cheer.

When the yoke of the family cart came down from the previous generation onto Mewalal's shoulders, he began to look at the full cycle of the twelve months. The fifteen *kathas* inherited from his father lay together in one tract, land of middling fertility by village standards. Until then, the village's artificial sources of irrigation had been little more than ponds and wells. Rain was the natural source. The village had not yet seen hand pumps. Fields were irrigated through old lifting devices such as the *karin-dhosi* and the *upchha*. A few farmers dug wells in their fields to water seedbeds and crops during dry periods. Following their

example, Mewalal too began digging wells to provide water for his fields. Across his fifteen *kathas*, he would dig four such wells every year in Kartik and keep clearing them out month after month, facing the drought with whatever strength he possessed.

Mewalal had begun bearing the responsibilities of life at the age of fifteen and had continued to pull the yoke of the family through his own labour. His father had died when Mewalal was ten. For a time the household had moved forward largely on Subhavi's strength. Hers was a small family, though a household of four could not really be called very small. Family expenditure depends partly upon numbers, as everyone knows, but numbers alone do not determine it. A small household with few earners, several children, illness or elderly members may spend more than a larger one. A large family with fewer illnesses and little expenditure on children's education may sometimes spend less. But let that remain where it is.

When Subhavi's husband died, her eldest child, Mewalal, was ten. He had two younger sisters, one eight and the other six. Child marriage was still customary. Budhilal had arranged the elder daughter's marriage while he was alive, though her *duragaman* had been postponed. After arranging that marriage, Budhilal and Subhavi had also begun thinking of Mewalal's marriage. Budhilal died before it could be settled, and Mewalal's marriage too was delayed. In practical terms, Subhavi now had before her the elder daughter's *duragaman*, the younger daughter's marriage and *duragaman*, Mewalal's marriage, each almost a *yajna* in itself, and, along with them, the daily task of keeping all four members of the family alive.

The agrarian civilisation that had long shaped life in this

region began to change with the arrival of machines. Change did not mean that everything simply turned upside down. Rather, old arrangements were broken and joined in new ways, a process one might call transition. Along with the development of thought came forms of disintegration as well. One reason lay in the fact that farming needs water in a way machines do not. Rainwater gives life to the fields, whereas the world of machinery does not depend upon it in the same measure. A rainy season that is a blessing to agriculture may therefore become an obstruction to industry and trade.

Most of the country's population had long lived within an agrarian order. The spread of machinery disturbed that order. Village labour began moving towards the cities. As cities developed through that movement, villages lost the very human strength that had sustained them. Beliefs and habits of mind changed too. Once, when rain failed to come in time, people performed *havan* and *yajna* and turned to ritual healers and religious practices. Much of that had begun to fade. Machines, on the other hand, also began supplying water for cultivation and thus reduced some of the force of drought. Water that had once moved in scattered streams and channels took different forms with the coming of canals. Some changes were good, some harmful. Today we stand between a weakening agrarian civilisation and a rising machine civilisation. Should we not understand where we stand before looking ahead?

After Budhilal's death, the full burden of the household fell upon Subhavi. Yet in carrying it she was not alone. All four members of the family, Subhavi, her two daughters and her son, put their labour behind the household and kept its life-force alive. One advantage she had was that both son and daughters had been brought up with the habit and willingness to share the family's work. It was true that daughters generally

worked beside their mothers with a devotion that sons did not always match, but, as the saying goes, the fault lies both with the iron and with the blacksmith. No hard line could be drawn here, for behind such differences stood the inherited structure of the family itself, shaped over generations.

Subhavi married off both daughters and completed their *duragaman*. Relieved at last of those responsibilities, she lifted her eyes in gratitude towards Mother Ganga. She also arranged the marriage of her son, Mewalal. Even so, between mother and son it had never been clearly settled whether the headship of the household belonged to one person or was something they shared.

Everyone regarded the work of the household as their own and did whatever suited their strength and place within it. Subhavi never imagined that the whole burden had to be borne by her alone, nor did Mewalal think so. Mother and son each regarded the other as a guardian of the family. When Budhilal died and Mewalal sat weeping, it was Subhavi who wiped his tears and said-

“Son, only your father has died. I am still here for you as both mother and father. Why are you crying?”

Mewalal took those words as a blessing born of the strength of motherhood. He put greater force into his farming and tried to push life forward. His fifteen *kathas* of land lay together in one tract of middling quality. Having learnt how to irrigate it from wells, he borrowed money from the bank and installed a borewell and pump. Prosperity began to return to the household.

It was the third year of a five-year *roudi*. *Roudi* meant that the sky had given no rain, or, if it had, only a little. Drought was drought. Yet a *dahar* could be more terrible still. *Dahar* was rain swollen into flood, sometimes into

such a violent flood that it tore through level ground, cut new channels through entire villages, seized human settlements for its own course and went on flowing without pause. Water in such a form could even become an object of reverence. But there was no *dahar* now. There was only *roudi*.

To understand the body and belly of drought, one had first to reach the seed hidden at its heart. Crack that seed open and, in a flash, the twelve-year drought of King Janak's Mithila comes into view, the drought during which Janak himself had to take up the plough and from which Janaki, Sita, Mother of the World, emerged. That belonged to the age of Treta. Yet in the imaginative world of the tale, Valmiki had found that seed even before Treta and planted it in the earth, so that in that age Ram, wandering from forest to forest with Lakshman, might seek Sita, his other self, stolen by the deceitful Ravan, and destroy the line of her abductor.

Drought too has its smaller forms. Just as the immeasurable form of Mahadev is contemplated through small clay *lingas*, tens or scores of them sometimes gathered together and worshipped as one, so too there are many forms within the relationship between farmer and field. Between the smallest and the largest seed lie countless variations. Some crops require very little irrigation; others live by water. Yet even a crop that needs little water will wither if its thirst is not quenched at the proper time. That too is a form of being drought-stricken. In everyday speech, even a person who has walked or worked a little too long under a fierce sun and become exhausted may be said to have been scorched by the heat. But this was nothing so slight. This was the third year in the midst of five years of relentless drought, years in which there had been no proper rainfall at all.

Even so, Mewalal had continued to meet one obstacle

after another with hope intact. In the first year alone, eighty to ninety per cent of the crop had been lost. Whether the fields yielded or not, people still had to eat. Illness still had to be treated. A roof still had to be kept over one's head. All the basic needs of life remained and had to be met.

Mewalal owned only four mature trees, two *shisham* and two mango. Under the drought even those began to dry and weaken. How could trees remain lush and vigorous without the rainwater they drank from the earth?

In the first year, Mewalal sold one *shisham* and one mango tree and somehow kept the family standing. In the second year he did the same with the remaining two. But at the very beginning of the third year, seeing how rapidly his position was deteriorating, he began to take stock. Could the household that had survived until now continue like this, or would it break, collapse and disappear?

He had installed a borewell and pump, but that too had failed. As the groundwater sank deeper, the water-bearing layer from which the borewell drew had dried up, and the pump stopped yielding water. Nor was that all. The very face of the village was changing. A village once lush with trees and crops now looked almost lifeless. Green had given way to a sickly pallor.

As the trees dried, fortune smiled upon the timber trade. Trees worth a thousand rupees were being sold for a hundred or two. People found themselves caught between two grinding stones. Kabir had said it long ago: "Between the two millstones, nothing remains whole." Everyone, wherever they stood, was trapped.

On one side stood the interest on the bank loan, indifferent alike to drought and flood. On the other stood the daily expenses of a family of three. Mewalal was caught

between them. Even by the simplest reckoning, a person needed a thousand to fifteen hundred rupees a month merely to live. That accounted only for ordinary meals. There was breakfast, clothing, illness and a hundred other expenses besides. Farming had all but collapsed, and Mewalal could see no other way out.

There were two sides to the problem, and each seemed to suggest its own answer. As far as water in the village was concerned, the choices had narrowed almost to one. At the same time another belief had taken hold of people's minds: in towns and markets, work and means of livelihood could be found almost for the asking. The city offered far more ways of earning than the village. A thousand kinds of trade and labour had spread there, none of which existed at home.

And so another question arose. Were they simply to abandon the village, leave it helpless and forsaken? Or should they still think of it as ancestral soil, motherland, the land of Mithila, and try to do something for it? Were they to remain hanging where they had fruited, or did they still possess the strength to trail, spread and seek another direction like a living creeper? Whatever we are, wherever we are, perhaps it is enough to live somehow and call ourselves content. But is it?

We are farmers, creatures of a land shaped by *mati-pani*, soil and water. We ourselves are made of soil and water, and upon soil and water we live. Through the cycle of the year, water spends part of its time beneath the earth and part of it spread above the earth. For a while the soil seems to ride upon the breast of water; at another time the water rides upon the breast of the soil. During the rains and floods, water spreads over the land. Under drought and fierce sun, it retreats below and the soil rises dry above it. Yet both possess the power to create and the power to destroy. When they meet in

the right measure, life takes birth from their union and the beauty of the earth comes into flower.

Whether a village stands beautiful among trees or lies flooded, scorched, uprooted and ruined, life in some form will remain there: cattle, trees, people, birds and small creatures. Some creatures belong more to land, some more to water. Human beings too are shaped by such differences, and they may be seen not only in the work people do but in the ways they think. But let what exists remain where it is for the moment. We must return to the question before us.

Water dwells in the depths, air in the sky, and we live between them upon the earth. We need both. Just as we cannot live without water, we cannot live without air. The need is unquestionable. What we must ask is how to secure both in the right measure.

The richer a land is in trees, livestock and human life, the more abundant and beautiful it appears. The more barren it is, the more desolate it becomes. Whatever we plant in the earth, tree, crop or vegetable, draws strength from the soil through its roots and then spreads within the limits of its own nature to build a world of its own. It would therefore be wrong to say that a chilli plant has no desire to become as tall as a palm. The impulse to grow exists in both. Yet a body can spread only as far as the strength within it allows. One crop may keep itself alive by drawing moisture from roots only six inches deep; another may send its roots a full arm's length into the soil and drink from deeper reserves.

Mewalal had perhaps failed to understand himself, his village and the wider region with the depth of vision they demanded. That was one weakness in him. Yet it would be equally wrong to say that two years of drought had not driven his life several feet deeper into hardship. The drought had

struck not only individuals but society itself.

This was Mithilanchal. Not everyone could be an Ayachi Mishra. Yet who could say that even he had never faced drought, whether for a year, five years or twelve, or clouds torn open as though sacks of water had been emptied upon the earth? How, then, had he protected a land rich in trees, and how had he preserved it? Whatever Ayachi Mishra did, however much or little, one could not deny that he gave long life to the horse of his thought and sent it far into the future.

Phagun was passing and Chait was rising. Spring had taken hold of the season, but without its usual movement and ease. There was a strange lifelessness in the air. Holi was the day after tomorrow. Colours and *abir* would be thrown, the *dhampha* drums would sound, and *phagu* songs would be sung. But what kind of *phagu* would it be, and what sort of Holi dance? That would be seen the day after tomorrow.

Worn down by the burning heat, Mewalal said to Subhavi- “Ma, it has become difficult simply to stay alive.”

Subhavi could not fully grasp the state of mind from which the words had come. Bewildered, she fell silent.

Reading the helplessness on her face, Mewalal continued- “Ma, the farming is finished. We had four trees, two *shisham* and two mango. We sold them and somehow got through these years. What do we do now?”

Having asked what they were to do now, Mewalal fell silent and waited for whatever his mother might say.

How could a mother turn her face away from her son? Yet what answer did she have?

Subhavi said-

“Son, however it has come about, you are the man of

the house now. You must understand what the family needs.”

Her words left Mewalal stunned. After his father's death, had it not been his mother who had become the guardian of the household? Yet she had offered him none of the experience she must have gained. Perhaps she had forgotten it. Or perhaps, over fifty years, there had never been an upheaval of this scale, never a drought as severe as the present one. Perhaps that was the real reason. Whether five years had passed or fifty, new circumstances would always bring something never faced before.

Mewalal said-“Ma, I shall have to go away to earn. If we stay in the village, we shall all die here.”

There had been a time when the mere mention of a son's going away to earn would throw a mother into such grief that she would declare she would die before letting him leave. But the world had changed. Now a family without someone earning away from home could find even its kinship ties and marriage relations affected.

Seeing his mother fall silent, Mewalal turned towards his wife and asked- “What jewellery do we have in the house?”

His wife replied- “A silver neck-chain weighing about half a seer, and a pair of anklets.”

Hearing her answer, Mewalal made up his mind. He would have to leave the village and go elsewhere to earn.



Date: 10 November 2017

2.



Two and a half years of drought had passed. Not a single drop of rain had fallen from the sky. One might imagine King Janak of Mithila, in the midst of his legendary twelve-year drought, regarding two and a half rainless years as little more than a child's measure of calamity and remaining absorbed in contemplation. How much devastation even those two and a half years could cause was something only those who had lived upon this soil could truly judge. What could one Janak do? Should he look after Janakpur, or every village scorched by drought?

Watching the links of his family life break one after another, Mewalal had grown deeply unsettled. Whenever he looked back, the past appeared before him as a full, self-reliant life, almost smiling at him. Whenever his eyes turned towards the future, however, he saw only dense darkness. And the anguish of the present stood plainly before him. A thought rose within him: I am the man of the house. I held my wife's hand, walked around the sacred fire and water, and pledged myself to her for life. Ma is Ma. At one moment she will stand before me as the woman who gave me birth and raised me; at another, she will call me the man of the household and quietly strengthen me from behind.

Of the seven ponds in the village, three survived only in

name. They had lost their former shape and become muddy hollows and marshes. Layers of silt and sludge had gathered so thickly that cattle, birds and even an unwary person could sink into the mire. Nor was this the condition of one village alone. It stretched across the surrounding countryside, across the entire drought-stricken region. The other four ponds had dried up. Wherever a trace of moisture remained, green grass had slowly spread, but the earth had cracked so deeply that an unsuspecting animal, or even a careless person, could fall into the fissures.

Of the village's eighteen wells, twelve had changed beyond recognition. Of the six that remained, three were like exhausted cows or buffaloes, yielding only a few pitchers of water morning and evening before seeming to give up altogether. In the remaining three, the water had sunk so far that where one pull of the rope once brought up two pitchers, it now yielded barely one. Water was still there, yet drawing it had become a burden. And again, this was not the story of one village or one hamlet. It was the condition of the whole drought-stricken belt.

Once water withdraws, what value does soil have? None. With water beside it, soil is a creator; without water, it is little more than a mountain of dead earth and stone. Food-grain cultivation had completely collapsed. Vegetable crops too had disappeared. Keeping cows and buffaloes had become difficult, and their numbers had fallen to nearly a third of what they had once been, still declining day by day. Trees were in no better condition. More than half had dried up, and those that remained seemed to be clinging to life fitfully.

Caught between the breaking of his old life and the shape of the new one being forced upon him, Mewalal could not decide what he should do next. One thought remained

clear: if he went away, whatever work he found, he would have to do it, even if his heart rebelled. A person who works for himself follows his own judgement and finds a rhythm in his labour. But when one must work according to another man's judgement, the mind has to be subdued, even if it comes away scratched and bruised. Even a defeated performer eventually comes down from dreams of large notes to gathering small coins. Yet there is still a distance between losing upon a stage and losing one's life itself.

Questions rose and burst in Mewalal's mind like bubbles upon water. The freedom of action that had belonged to his self-directed life until now was disappearing. Yet the rise and fall brought by circumstances was there for all to see. What use was blaming kings or gods? At such moments a person leaves something behind and grasps something else. Something has to be held on to if life itself is to be kept alive. Yet helplessness unsettles the mind, making it rock like a small boat upon uncertain water.

The knowledge and practical wisdom by which Mewalal had lived until now would no longer be enough. The tools familiar to his hands would slip away, while he had no skill with the tools of the world ahead. He had little education. In the town, there was no certainty that a man like him would find even such humble office work as carrying water. People from villages were often hesitant in speech and unfamiliar with urban ways, while offices seemed almost naturally to belong to townsmen. Mewalal therefore saw little hope in that direction.

Then, in the midst of his despair, a small light appeared. Hope stirred, and with it came resolve. No sooner had resolve taken shape than possibilities began to stand before him. He thought: I came into this world with two hands, two feet and

two eyes. The eyes will see something, the hands will find something to do, and the feet will keep moving. One dresses according to the land one enters, and life somehow goes on.

Gathering courage, Mewalal did not pawn his wife's anklets. He sold them instead, trusting that once he began to earn, he would buy them back. Pawning jewellery offered no certainty. Neither the value of the principal nor the interest was firmly fixed. At least by selling it, one knew the value of the object in hand. And if one borrowed less money, there would be less interest to pay.

But all this was merely the drift and debris of a life still moving. The real task lay elsewhere: where life itself was dying, it had first to be lifted, nourished and made to stand again.

Mewalal placed the money before his mother and wife and said- "Until I begin earning and sending money from outside, this is for you. The anklets were not very heavy, so I have kept only enough for my fare and travelling expenses."

Whether one is speaking of household accounts or of some social custom, thoughts arise according to the state of the mind. Good or bad, whatever rises within us is carried along by the current of life. But when a traveller sees his boat breaking apart in a drowning current, he begins to believe that death is close, and the hopes within him slowly dissolve. Something similar was happening to Mewalal's mother and wife. Their eyes would rise towards him and almost at once fall back to the ground, as though each were looking down into the weight of her own life. Neither spoke. Neither could think of any assurance to offer the man of the house. Mewalal, meanwhile, could see the direction in which his life was moving. In the previous two years all four trees had been sold. Now the jewellery was going. The land that had fed the

family was slipping away as well. Even the land pledged against the loan for the borewell and pump was at risk. The fields had been scorched by drought, but the bank's capital had not withered with them.

Standing before them, Mewalal felt a sharp ache rise within him. What could he say to his mother? What could he promise his wife? Then another thought came to him. His mother's story had not ended with the past; his own life still stretched ahead, carrying the generation before him within it. His wife's story had scarcely had time to take shape, so how could it already be allowed to break? He was, after all, his mother's soldier. As long as he remained alive, the burden was his to carry. Filling his mother's faith with hope, he said-

“Ma, don't worry. The world is vast. God has given us hands and feet to work with. There are people with the same hands and feet who still live by begging, aren't there?”

Mewalal may have spoken only to strengthen their hearts, but the thought pierced Subhavi deeply. She said- “Son, if a person must spend his life begging, what is there in such a life to desire?”

The moment he heard her, Mewalal thought: Ma is Ma. How could she abandon what is good and turn her mind towards what is degrading? Even as he spoke, his own courage began to rise. He said- “Ma, tomorrow I shall catch the train and leave for Calcutta.”

The village began to recede from Mewalal's mind, and Calcutta began to draw near. How would his family manage without him? How would he travel such a great distance? Almost at once, however, his thoughts turned towards the railway. There were two possible connections. One was the broad-gauge Gorakhpur-Howrah route through Barauni. The other was the Patna-Howrah route, either through Mokama

and Kiul or through Jasidih and Asansol. To reach Barauni he first had to travel on the smaller-gauge line. The train through Nirmali and Jhanjharpur went as far as Samastipur, and from there another train continued to Barauni. Life itself was a journey by train. Just as one met many companions in a carriage, one also had to leave many companions behind in the village.

By ten in the morning Mewalal reached Barauni station. He learnt that the Gorakhpur-Howrah train was due in about an hour. There was enough time to eat something, and a little food would keep his stomach quiet during the next part of the journey.

The platforms were lined with all manner of things, food and drink, small articles of daily use, and objects of personal adornment. A large station naturally had large platforms. There were platforms for both the smaller-gauge and broad-gauge lines, and Mewalal had to cross from one to the other. The broad-gauge platforms were crowded, yet there was still enough room to walk about and buy things from the stalls.

After wandering across all three platforms of the smaller line, Mewalal's eyes settled upon roasted maize cobs. They were something new to him, and cheap as well. He thought he would eat two and keep two for the journey. One cob cost eight annas, so four could be had for two rupees. Maize sellers had their stalls here and there across the platforms, so there was no hurry. The train would take another hour to arrive, and he had time to fill. If these stalls stood on the smaller-line platforms, surely there would be similar ones on the broad-gauge side as well.

Flights of steps linked one platform to another. Just as the footbridge carried passengers from one side of the station

to the other, stairways descended to each platform. Mewalal had barely reached the bridge when a sudden commotion broke out below. Shopkeepers began shutting their stalls wherever they stood. The maize sellers poured water over their fires, while the tea sellers switched off their gas burners. Standing on the bridge, Mewalal looked down in bewilderment. The customers and passengers were still there. People continued to arrive and leave one by one. Why, then, had everything suddenly become so frantic? Curiosity seized him. Who would tell him what had happened, and whom should he ask?

Within ten minutes the stalls were closed, and the passengers, growing uneasy, had settled into whatever places they could find. As Mewalal crossed the platforms of the smaller line, everything seemed outwardly quiet, but the station was filling with police. Unlike many other travellers, Mewalal had no mountain of luggage to carry. He had only a small cloth bag tucked beneath his arm, rather like the bag carried by a *naga baba*, a naked ascetic. The resemblance ended there. Mewalal was fully dressed in a *dhoti* and *kurta*. His little bag contained only a sheet and another *dhoti*.

When he reached the broad-gauge platform and found every stall closed, he restrained his hunger. It was not quite mealtime yet. He would see what could be done when hunger truly came.

The police appeared to be divided into two groups. Some carried guns; others held cane batons. They moved about the platform in groups. The shopkeepers too, after closing their stalls, gathered in small circles and began talking among themselves. Passengers sat quietly beside their companions, looking around.

As he came down the stairs, one question kept circling in Mewalal's mind: why had such confusion broken out? The police were there to maintain order and were busy with their duty. They were unlikely to stop for conversation, and it would not be wise to question them. Perhaps they themselves did not know everything. The passengers were no better source. Most were outsiders. Whatever they knew would probably be something heard from somebody else, perhaps true, perhaps false. The shopkeepers, however, were local people. They might know what had happened. It would be better to ask them. If the station was in this condition, would the train come at all? Even if it came from outside, would it be allowed to leave the station? Mewalal's mind grew increasingly restless. As the old saying went, "Kanhaiya's wedding brings seventeen troubles." But what could one do except find a way through them?

Two maize sellers, a *paan* seller, a tea seller and four or five other small traders were sitting together talking. Seeing men who seemed closer to his own world, Mewalal went over and sat beside them. The incident was still fresh, so naturally they were discussing nothing else: the arrival of the police, the closing of the stalls and the passengers taking their places. Mewalal did not even need to frame a question. The very thing he wanted to know was already being discussed.

The *paan* seller said- "The workers at the factory in Barauni have locked the gates and gone on strike."

Hearing this, Mewalal wondered what a factory strike had to do with the railway. Why should the shops here be closed and passengers made to suffer for no reason?

The maize seller spoke next- "They did the right thing. For a whole year the workers were only promised higher wages, but nothing was increased. Brother, if a man works all

day and still cannot support his family properly, what other choice does he have?”

A third man said- “Until the workers reach an agreement with the factory owners, they too should keep their work stopped.”

The tea seller smiled and said- “You are absolutely right, brother. I have been running this tea stall on the station platform for three years now, but the life that truly felt like life was back in the village, among our own people.”

The maize seller nodded in agreement and said- “Why only you, brother? I haven't come here from some land of riches to set up a business. I too lived in my village, just as you did.”

At the mention of the village, something freshened in the tea seller's face. With renewed warmth, he said- “Brother, once in our village some young men decided to break an old custom. They tried to replace an impractical tradition with something more sensible. The new practice was better, yet the old custom still survives even today.”

The *paan* seller interrupted- “Brother, that was where the mistake lay. The rest of society did not accept what those young men began. We should not make the same mistake here. Until we hear directly from the factory workers themselves, we too should keep our shops closed.”

Just then a cry went up across the station- “The train for Howrah has reached the previous station. It will arrive shortly on Platform Number One.”

Mewalal rose and went to stand on his platform.



Date: 17 November 2017

3.



The news that the train had reached the previous station brought Mewalal the same relief it brought the other passengers. But only a short while later another whisper began to travel from ear to ear: the train had not arrived at all; someone had merely started a false rumour.

The passengers who had already folded their bedding and packed it into bags and suitcases lost heart and settled back into their places. Doubt began to grow in every mind. Would the train come at all? And even if it did, what if the striking workers stopped it at the station? Anxiety kept eating away at them. One worried about the leave he had taken from his office; another feared missing the next mail train. And this was Barauni, a station where scraps of paper, banana peels and heaps of maize cobs ordinarily seemed to lie everywhere one looked.

Alone on the platform, Mewalal would walk about for a while, then sit, then rise again, constantly looking towards the direction from which the train was expected. What certainty could there be about a train whose very arrival was uncertain? It might come at any moment, or it might not come at all. And if it did arrive only to be held back by the strikers in support of their demands, the trouble would only deepen. Yet almost at once another thought flashed through Mewalal's mind. If the dispute belonged to one factory, would it not have been

better to keep the conflict confined to that factory?

From the factory his thoughts turned back towards himself. He had left his wife at home with only a carefully measured amount of money, and he himself carried no more than what he had calculated for the journey. If the route remained blocked even for five days, hardship would strike at both ends. But what could he do now? Without tools, hands were helpless; without ground beneath them, even feet could go nowhere.

As life spun around him, Mewalal's mind too began to whirl. He thought that perhaps it was just as well that all the food stalls at the station had closed. He was not yet desperately hungry. Then another thought came: if working men could suspend their own livelihoods and even go hungry in the struggle for a better life, why could he not endure hunger for a while? If his wife faced want at home, she at least had the hope that her husband had gone away to earn. Once he began sending money, the first earnings could go towards settling debts. And surely the moneylenders too placed their hopes in men going away to earn. Had they not built their own mansions by squeezing three out of every one they lent to men already cornered by need?

His mind moved from those who lent to those who borrowed. The moment he thought of the borrower, his thoughts began to twist and tighten. He himself was travelling to an uncertain place in search of work. But his mother and wife had no such movement before them. They too would have to understand their own circumstances. Until they did, their situation would remain like the strange companionship of a radish and a brinjal, one buried in the earth while the other hung from the plant.

Then the news spread that the train was coming. A stir

ran through the passengers and the platform filled once again with cries about the train. Something inside Mewalal opened with relief. He reached for the ticket in the upper pocket of his *kurta*. He had bought it earlier, so it was safely there.

At that moment his eyes fell upon a familiar face. The man was not from his own village, but from a neighbouring one, and he too was travelling to Calcutta. Mewalal moved quickly towards him and asked-

“Brother, where are you going?”

Ravinath replied-

“Brother, what happens to you happens to me, and why only to you and me? The same fate has fallen upon many others. I am going to Calcutta. If we remain in the village through this drought, both we and our families are certain to be ruined. The drought has broken the farmer's hands and feet. A man may possess every limb and yet be as helpless as the dead when no other way remains. What hope of life is left then?”

Just then the long Gorakhpur-Howrah train reached the signal beyond the station.

Mewalal said-

“Brother, I too am going to Calcutta. I have only this one bag with me. What are you carrying?”

Ravinath replied-

“About the same.”

Seeing that he had found a companion travelling in much the same way, Mewalal asked-

“Brother, is this your first journey to Calcutta, or have you been there before?”

Ravinath smiled and said-

“Calcutta? I have travelled as far as Kerala and Karnataka.”

Mewalal said-

“Then you are well acquainted with the world outside the village. This is the first time I have ever left mine. I know nothing of places beyond it.”

Who does not enjoy hearing himself praised? Ravinath was no exception. He said-

“I have crossed Calcutta from one end to the other. I doubt whether even men who spent their whole lives working there, grew old there and died there knew the city as thoroughly as I do.”

There was something in Ravinath's confidence that began to restore a little taste for life in Mewalal. Yet at the same time he could see his own life breaking apart and the ideas by which he had lived falling away piece by piece. How could he fail to see it? He had lived a self-reliant life, disciplined by his own will, moving freely through the world like a cow grazing unhindered in the pastures of Vrindavan. Now that very life was being stripped of dignity. When the earth itself could no longer preserve its modesty, how long could those who lived upon it preserve theirs? Mewalal too had begun to feel the need for a companion. Drawing closer to Ravinath, he asked-

“Brother, what did you say? That you have crossed Calcutta from one end to the other?”

Waiting for a train can make time long, just as a night spent keeping watch beside a patient in hospital can feel endless. And if that night falls during the bitter cold of *Magh*, it becomes longer still. Ravinath too had found someone before whom he could unfold his own story on a crowded platform like Barauni. He said-

“On one side I have seen Rabindranath's Santiniketan. On another, I have seen Rahul Baba's place in Darjeeling. In a third direction I have seen the sandalwood groves of the Sundarbans, and in a fourth the border dividing Bengal into two. And that is not all. I have also taken the holy dip at Gangasagar during the *Sankranti* of *Paush*. Now you tell me, what is left of Calcutta that I have not seen?”

Still inexperienced in the world outside his village, Mewalal said-

“Brother, then you really are a man who has seen and known everything. If I stay with you, forget this world, I do not think I would lose my way even in the next.”

Hearing himself elevated from this world to the next by Mewalal's words, Ravinath's spirits rose still higher. He said-

“Brother, why stop at this world and the next? I can show you heaven and hell as well.”

The farther Ravinath carried his boasting, the stronger Mewalal's confidence became. And as confidence grew, a quiet happiness began to rise within him. Whenever joy appears in a grieving mind, or grief enters a joyful one, the current of thought is bound to turn. In turning, it often divides and begins to flow in two directions. When sorrow gives way to happiness, thought gains room to wander; when happiness dries into a desert, that freedom of thought begins to shrink. But Mewalal had no room for such wandering now. One question alone thundered within him: how could he save his crumbling family and keep its life alive? If he could do that much, he could think about the future when the future came.

Mewalal said-

“Brother, leave heaven and hell aside for the moment. Tell me, why did you travel about Calcutta so much?”

Just then another cry ran through the passengers. Something had gone wrong with the engine, people said, so the train would arrive at the station ten or fifteen minutes late.

The rumour travelled from mouth to mouth and ear to ear across the platform, but it caused not the slightest disturbance in Mewalal. The reason was simple: the train had already reached the signal. A man does not stop the whole journey of his life because of a mild cold or fever. Seasonal illnesses have their seasonal medicines, and the two go on side by side. People naturally trust what they have seen with their own eyes more than what they have merely heard. Even seeing, however, differs from person to person, because every eye has its own way of looking. There is also a difference between merely seeing something before one's eyes and seeing it while the mind is thinking about it. But none of that mattered now. What mattered was that, like the other passengers, both Mewalal and Ravinath could see the train and its engine standing near the signal.

Their minds had already accepted that just as some work lies in another person's hands, travel too may depend upon another person's feet. A little delay was therefore hardly a delay at all. A man arranges the work of his own hands and the movement of his own feet according to his own convenience, adding and subtracting as he goes. But once one has left home for a distant land in order to save one's life, what difference does it make whether the burden placed upon a corpse weighs eighty maunds or ninety? If a journey of ten hours became twelve, fourteen or even sixteen, what did it matter, provided the train eventually reached its destination? The sight of the train had therefore steadied everyone's mind.

Ravinath said-

“Brother, since you have asked, and since the two of us

are sitting here at ease, I shall tell you the whole story from the very beginning.”

Encouraging him to go on, Mewalal said-

“What difference is there between you and me? You have been uprooted and thrown about by circumstances, and so have I. Why create distinctions between us in your thoughts for no reason? Speak freely. After all, we are only sitting on a railway platform.”

At Mewalal's prompting, Ravinath began to speak slowly, gathering his words as he went-

“Mewa Bhai, my father owned twenty-five *bigas* of land, and it was that land which enabled him to educate me through college and see me pass my B.A. I never had to live like those students who pay for their studies by tutoring others, taking small jobs or selling off pieces of ancestral property. We were a prosperous family, and everything in our lives moved with the ease that prosperity brings.”

Mewalal exclaimed-

“Wonderful! That is what one calls a proper life, a family able to meet its needs as they arise.”

Sometimes, while eating, even the thickest and most nourishing mouthful can lodge in an old man's throat and become a choking lump. Mewalal's words affected Ravinath in much the same way. They seemed to catch inside him and hang heavily there. People may forget the comforts of days gone by, but pain has a way of remaining alive, hurting the mind each time it is touched. With that old hurt stirring again, Ravinath said-

“At the time I did not understand that I was making a grave mistake with my life.”

The words “a grave mistake with my life” startled

Mewalal. To him it sounded like an elephant losing its footing and crashing to the ground. If an elephant fell, who would have the strength to lift it and set it upright again? A mistake in life could be just as serious. Yet what had happened in the past was one thing; to stumble and fall in the present was another. Mewalal asked-

“What sort of mistake, brother?”

As though he had reached the very boundary between victory and defeat, Ravinath gathered together the thoughts of his past and said-

“Brother, I swallowed the whole thing in one gulp.”

Mewalal stared at him in puzzlement. Ravinath had said almost nothing, yet claimed to have swallowed everything. What exactly had he swallowed? He said-

“Brother, we have a long journey ahead of us. What is the hurry? Explain yourself clearly.”

No one easily forgets a happiness that has dried away, and still less does one forget a sorrow that has wounded the heart. Ravinath's mind seemed to rebuke him. Turning that rebuke upon himself, he said-

“Brother, whatever mistake I made in my life was not mine alone. My parents and society were also responsible. So it would not be fair to say that I went wrong entirely through my own fault. Some may find what I am saying wrong, because they believe that the splendour of a setting sun is renewed only by the rising sun. But at the *Triveni*, between the Ganga and the Yamuna, the slender hidden current of the Saraswati remains alive as well.”

As he spoke, Ravinath suddenly stopped, like a motor vehicle stranded by the roadside when its petrol runs out without warning. When a vehicle stops unexpectedly, its

passengers climb down and look around uneasily, wondering whether anyone has noticed and whether something serious has happened. Ravinath seemed to feel much the same embarrassment. But Mewalal sat before him, waiting to hear the rest, so he remained silent and allowed Ravinath time to gather the thread of his thoughts.

Seeing him quiet, Mewalal said-

“Ravi Bhai, you stopped so suddenly in the middle that I understood nothing at all.”

Mewalal's single question had two possible answers, like a road branching in two directions. Ravinath thought it better to make that clear first. He said-

“Brother, when a road divides in two, a man who is innocent on one path may appear guilty if judged from the other. He may be at fault, or he may not. So you tell me which road you want to hear about first.”

Ravinath's talk of guilt and innocence drew Mewalal so deeply into the matter that for a moment he forgot his own troubles and his family altogether. He said-

“The journey to Calcutta will take us a full day and a full night anyway. Why hurry? Tell both sides in whichever order you think best.”

Ravinath considered this. If he moved to the second path without first explaining the first, no one could save him from appearing guilty. He would seem entirely at fault. Besides, the two of them were now brothers of the road, leaving one village society behind and travelling towards another. If he entered another society, in another state and another city, already carrying the mark of blame, people there too might judge him without understanding the truth. That would hardly be surprising.

So Ravinath decided to begin with his earlier life, the part in which the mistake had first taken shape. He said-

“Brother, first hear the background. Society is partly responsible because it created, and still preserves, an atmosphere in which children from landowning families are deliberately turned away from their own way of life, from farming and the fields. If an educated man takes up a hoe, ploughs a field or cuts fodder for cows and buffaloes, why do people make a spectacle of him? Why do they laugh as though education and labour cannot live in the same person?”

The thought struck Mewalal deeply. Yet almost immediately he told himself that both of them were already leaving the village for the town. What could they change in the village now? He said-

“Brother, that is a question about society as a whole. We are not going away to become political leaders. Why should we get tangled in such matters? Tell me about the second part. What happened to you?”

Mewalal's reply lightened Ravinath's mind a little. If society itself was not entirely innocent, then surely a person living within that society could not be held entirely guilty either. His guilt had not vanished, but at least one third of it had been accounted for, enough, he joked inwardly, to earn a passing mark. There were three parties: society, his parents and himself. Society had now taken one share. Ravinath continued-

“Brother, there were four of us brothers and sisters, and I was the only son. My mother and father never allowed the burden of any real work to come near me. Somehow a strange illness entered their minds. Instead of turning me towards a life of work, they began to believe that the best life for me was one in which I did no physical work at all. But surely,

while parents are alive, a son should walk with them, work beside them and learn to become their support.”

Without thinking, Mewalal replied-

“Yes, that is how it should be.”

Just then the train waiting near the signal gave a whistle. Mewalal said-

“It looks as though the train will come in now.”

Still immersed in the world of his own thoughts, Ravinath said-

“Brother, why worry about the train? It will move from the signal, come to the platform and stop. The two of us are here together on the platform anyway.”

Mewalal said-

“You have only one part of your story left. You can finish it before the train comes. Keep pulling your own train and go on.”

The conversation between Mewalal and Ravinath had begun to draw the attention of the passengers nearby. Several were listening closely. That too was natural. In another person's conversation or argument, one often finds some piece of one's own life, some road one has travelled or some knot one has struggled to untie. If that were not so, why would people read the Ramayana or the Mahabharata? One is a story stretching from Ayodhya to Lanka; the other reaches from Vrindavan to Kurukshetra. But what use would either be to us if their meaning belonged only to the people living between those places? Ayodhya and Lanka are far from my village, and so are Vrindavan and Kurukshetra. If I have no time even to understand my own home and village, why should I listen to the stories of others?

And yet people do listen, because another person's story

may carry a truth about one's own life.

There had been a time when education was received beneath trees, in thatched rooms and within mud walls. The surroundings were modest, yet the learner often carried away an intimate knowledge of duty, conduct and human relationships. Now education was distributed in two-storeyed buildings beneath electric lights and fans. And still, the very person who spent day and night struggling for his family might know little of the condition of his own ageing parents. A child of five might see his mother and father so rarely that a teacher would almost have to point them out and say, "This is your father, and this is your mother." What meaning would motherhood or fatherhood retain in such a life? If thought itself loses the environment that nourishes it, what tailor in the world can stitch together such a tear?

Ravinath resumed-

"Brother, only the last five minutes of the play remain now. Think of this as the final scene. Until now we have been sitting together on the platform and talking. Once the train arrives, who knows where you will board and where I shall get on? But remember one thing beforehand. Wherever we board, we should take whatever seat we can find. And from time to time we should get down and look for each other. We are hardly the only two passengers. Look at the platform, it is already full."

Mewalal said-

"Brother, if this really is the final scene, then finish it quickly and bring down the curtain. Life too is a stage. In the end, every little prop, every curtain and sheet has to be gathered and packed away."

Ravinath smiled and said-

"Brother, my mind began to fly like the little paper toys

children send spinning into the sky with a thin stick fixed to their tails. My thoughts flew from Calcutta to Bangalore and Bombay, then onwards to Delhi and Amritsar.”

Mewalal said-

“Then you have travelled the whole country, east to west and north to south.”

Ravinath replied-

“Why doubt it? I left my fields behind and travelled all over the country looking for a job. But I never found work that suited my mind. At last, tired and defeated, I returned to my village and began to build my life there again. And that was when real prosperity returned.”

Letting out the ache that had been sitting inside him, Mewalal said-

“Brother, people may consider it a small property, but by my reckoning, until two years ago my fifteen *kathas* of land were enough to sustain a self-reliant family. And now...”

The word “now” had barely left his lips when his voice failed him.

Ravinath too fell silent.

For a while the two men sat facing one another, each trying, with whatever tenderness he could offer, to rub some of the darkness from the other's troubled heart.



Date: 25 November 2017

4.



The moment the engine entered the far end of Platform Number One, a sudden rush ran through the passengers. Everyone had his own worry and his own destination. Since this was a long-distance train, there were fewer passengers than on the crowded local services. The sixteen-coach train drew into the station. Its coaches were broadly divided into three classes. Six were of the more comfortable kind, with higher fares and better arrangements for sitting and sleeping. Five were sleeper coaches, in which daytime passengers could travel for a while, but after nine at night they had to make way for those holding sleeping berths. Then came the third class, the general traveller's class. The fare was low. Whoever found a place sat down, whoever did not remained standing, and some travelled clinging to the footboard if that was all the space they could get.

Ravinath knew his way around such journeys. He slipped two rupees into a porter's hand and secured himself a seat. Mewalal, still new to railway travel, stood for a while looking at the coaches in amazement. Seeing the crowd, he wondered: if a single train carries so many people, how many must be travelling when all the trains are counted together? Surely this many people could not be travelling every single day.

Almost every station between Gorakhpur and Barauni lay in the drought-stricken belt. Farmers and labourers were leaving their villages and turning towards towns and markets in search of work. After surveying the train from one end to the other, Mewalal told himself that even if he found no seat, he could at least travel standing. The platforms were still thick with police, so despite the crowd there was little shouting or quarrelling. He climbed aboard, edged his way forward and had just reached the end of a bench when a man beckoned to him and made room beside himself.

The moment he found a place to sit, Mewalal felt relieved. Now he could reach Calcutta in some comfort. Standing throughout such a crowded journey would have made his legs swell and his arms ache, but that worry was gone.

The train pulled out of Barauni. Some passengers settled into their places while others remained standing. Before long it reached the Simaria bridge. Mewalal sat quietly listening to the voices around him, but he could not always make out which speech belonged to which region. Bengali rose from one side, the speech of Chhapra from another, Bhojpuri from somewhere else, and Maithili too could be heard among them. Nor was it merely one or two people. A dozen or more passengers occupied the two facing benches.

Just as Mewalal was trying to guess from their speech which region each person came from, they too were studying him from the corners of their eyes, wondering where he belonged. He had neither a travelling companion nor anyone he knew, so he sat quietly, withdrawn into himself, his face and body held still like a stranger among strangers.

After some time, the elderly man who had made room for him, a man of perhaps sixty-five or seventy, asked-

“Son, where have you come from?”

The moment Mewalal heard his speech, he felt that the old man must belong to his own broader region. He replied-

“I have come from Madhubani district, and I am going to Calcutta.”

Just then someone raised a cry in praise of Mother Ganga and began singing a Bhojpuri song. One by one, the passengers on both benches began humming along.

Until then Mewalal had thought that everyone around him came from a different region. Now that impression began to soften. Perhaps, he thought, they were not so different after all.

Seeing him quiet, the old man introduced himself-

“Son, I am an old man now, but in my younger days I performed on Bhikhari Kaka's stage. My name is Sumanlal.”

The moment he heard the name Bhikhari Thakur, curiosity stirred sharply in Mewalal. Before his eyes flashed the figure he had once seen standing upon a stage. The memory brightened so vividly that a smile came to his face. Mewalal said-

“Bhikhari Baba had Saraswati herself dwelling upon his tongue.”

Hearing Bhikhari Thakur praised so warmly, Sumanlal's heart did not quite swell like the rivers in *Sawan* and *Bhadon*, but it certainly gathered sweetness like dew in *Kartik* and *Agahan*. Delighted, almost trembling with pleasure like frost in *Paush*, he asked-

“You saw Bhikhari Kaka perform on stage?”

Mewalal replied-

“I was still a student then, young enough to be a little immature. At that age, if I liked something, I praised it

beyond measure; if I disliked something, I either diminished it or said nothing at all.”

Before Mewalal had even finished, Sumanlal exclaimed-

“Wonderful! Wonderful!”

The praise startled Mewalal. What flower had suddenly fallen from his words that the old man should shower him with such admiration?

Something curious arose between Mewalal and Sumanlal, rather like a cat measuring itself against a tiger and the tiger, in turn, finding something of itself reflected in the cat. Sumanlal seemed to adorn himself in the reflected glory of the artist with whom he had once worked, while Mewalal, drawing upon what he had seen and understood, was becoming absorbed in the memory of a great man. Yet a doubt remained in Mewalal's mind. Was the old man applauding the way he spoke, or merely the name of Bhikhari Baba? Perhaps Sumanlal too had once seen Bhikhari Baba command a stage.

Then Mewalal gathered courage. Let it be as it may, he thought. I shall speak only of what I myself saw and heard. What is there to be ashamed of? Everyone in the world runs after some happiness of his own. Let them think I am doing the same. At the very least, this swift train journey will pass peacefully in conversation. Is that a small thing? He said-

“Once, when Bhikhari Baba came onto the stage, I could not understand what he had already said merely with his eyes, nor what powder of words he scattered from his mouth, because my friend and I were busy measuring his height and breadth in fathoms.”

The performance Mewalal was recalling was one in which Sumanlal himself had been part of Bhikhari Thakur's

troupe, working with the company and appearing on stage as one of its supporting performers. He had shared many stages with Bhikhari Thakur. Now, like a connoisseur searching through a hundred lengths of cloth before choosing the one piece that satisfies him, Sumanlal leaned forward with hungry ears, eager to hear how this stranger remembered that evening.

On the one hand, he still regarded himself as an old soldier of Bhikhari Thakur's travelling company. On the other, he could see in Mewalal's recollection something of a flower long dried yet not wholly bereft of fragrance. Unable to contain himself, he interrupted-

“And what did you discover from your measurements?”

Mewalal smiled and replied-

“Something beyond measure. When a man stands somewhere and looks around, he feels that he himself stands at the centre of the world. In much the same way, everyone measures another person according to his own eyes. You understand how much water a place holds only by seeing its depth and stillness.”

Sumanlal fell into thought as though he had suddenly stepped into a deep pit of reflection.

Meanwhile, some of the younger men in the group, who had either never seen Bhikhari Thakur at all or had seen him only in his final years, were listening with growing curiosity. One of them looked towards Mewalal and asked-

“Brother Sahib, how exactly did Saraswati dwell upon Bhikhari Baba's tongue?”

Mewalal replied-

“Son, Bhikhari Thakur was neither my brother nor my kinsman that I should exaggerate his virtues. Nor was he my

enemy that I should turn his good qualities into faults or remain silent about them. I am speaking only from what I felt and what experience taught me.”

Another young member of the troupe nudged the first and said-

“Brother, we are all going to Calcutta. Why are you so impatient? Sit quietly and listen. Let us hear what it means to say that Saraswati lived in Bhikhari Baba's speech.”

The young man's question made Sumanlal attentive as well. He knew that people had always seen Bhikhari Thakur through different eyes. Some regarded him as a social reformer, others merely as an entertainer who made crowds laugh and forget their worries. But everyone has his own way of looking, and the world offers each eye something different to see.

Bhikhari Thakur's *naach party* had twelve principal performers, and Sumanlal had been the thirteenth among them. He had performed with Bhikhari Thakur for nearly twenty years. He had joined the troupe when he was only twelve or thirteen. There was a family connection too, but more than that, Bhikhari Thakur's artistry and discipline had drawn him so deeply that the man had found a permanent dwelling in his heart.

As long as Bhikhari Thakur firmly believed that public performance could awaken society, he carried his plays from Bhojpur into Mithila and from Bengal as far as Assam. Much of the year was spent away from home, travelling from place to place. But as age advanced and he began to take stock of his life, another thought troubled him. What he had pursued as social awakening, many people had treated merely as a travelling show, something to amuse themselves with for an evening. If the very number by which one multiplies has no

value, what meaningful product can the calculation yield?

Bhikhari Thakur's gestures and physical vigour were gone now, but his spoken words still seemed to echo through the air. It was like a traveller who has crossed one vast sea and pauses upon the shore before attempting the next, measuring himself and wondering what strength of swimmer, what sort of boat and what kind of boatman will be needed for a sea so wide and deep. Only after such reckoning can one dare enter the water. Hanuman, of course, could leap from one shore to another, but to make such a leap one must possess the strength and discipline of Hanuman.

Having crossed one great sea of life, Bhikhari Thakur too had entered a period of self-reflection. When his thoughts turned towards his motherland, his birthplace, his mind stopped at a troubling frontier: what had truly changed? The village and society he had seen in childhood seemed much the same in youth and again in the later years of his life. Seventy years had passed since the flower of freedom had been placed in the country's hands, but how free had people truly become? That remained a question. Generation after generation had moved forward, yet where did they stand today?

Had each person first planted himself firmly within his own society, perhaps others, seeing and hearing him, might gradually have found a common direction. Society might not have travelled very far, but at least its face would have turned towards the road ahead, and *Rahu* and *Ketu* would not have blocked every attempt to move forward. Yet who could deny that behind every good deed there often stand ten forces ready to undo it?

Sumanlal's heart was particularly lively that day. He had been a member of Bhikhari Thakur's *naach party*, and now the old performers were travelling once again to fulfil an

invitation received the previous year. He felt as though Bhikhari Baba had left behind such a vast estate of invitations and memories that an entire year might pass in answering one call after another. Just as a farmer finds fresh work waiting every day throughout the year, these performers too could remain on the road until the following year before finding time to look properly upon their homes and wives again.

And if one was already travelling away from home to earn, why burden the mind with emptiness? The company carried memories of *Bidesia*, Raja Harishchandra, Raja Bharthari, Durvasa and Shringi Rishi, Bhishma Pitamah and Shravan Kumar. Among them were men who had performed all these roles, and the musicians too carried a deep satisfaction in their hearts, for each felt that somewhere within those stories lay a part of his own life.

A young performer of fourteen or fifteen said-

“We have talked until nearly noon, and I am hungry now. It would be better if we ate something first.”

Another immediately added-

“An empty stomach cannot sing the praises of Gopala.”

Their food arrangements were shared, so the man responsible for the provisions began opening the bags and bundles.

A third performer could not resist adding his own verse-

“Your Sur Baba sang sweetly and tunefully. But our Kabir Baba said it more plainly: ‘I found nothing in worship and devotion, nothing in books. Kabir says, listen, O saints, what I found was in bread.’”

Mewalal began thinking to himself. At Barauni he had planned to eat two roasted maize cobs and keep two for the journey. That had never happened. Now everyone around him

was going to eat together. Was he simply to sit there and watch them eat?

Almost at once, another thought rose in his mind. Had he failed to make proper arrangements, or had circumstances themselves turned against him? Everything had been moving so calmly and smoothly on the platform until the factory strike suddenly blew through like a violent wind and scattered every arrangement. What fault of his was there in that?

Until now Mewalal had been sitting quietly, watching and listening to everything around him. Sumanlal, in turn, had been observing Mewalal. From time to time a slight shadow crossed Mewalal's face. The reason was simple. Everyone around him would soon be eating, while he would have nothing of his own to put before himself. Sumanlal called out-

“It is still daytime. Better eat the maize *sattu* now. The barley *sattu* can be eaten later, even at night.”

The performer who played Bipata in the troupe said-

“Kaka, since we have *puris* as well, wouldn't it be better to eat those first?”

Another young performer, who had begun imitating Bipata's gait and manner in the hope of playing the role himself, said-

“Oil-fried *puri* soon goes stale. But water-cooked *puri* becomes tastier the longer it rests.”

Mewalal sat listening to the young men's speech and watching their gestures and expressions. But the words “water-cooked *puri*” left him completely puzzled. He knew what a *puri* fried in oil was, but what on earth was a water-cooked *puri*? He did not think it wise to ask one of these sharp-tongued young performers. After all, the young man played a comic role, and there was no knowing what answer

he might give. So Mewalal turned to Sumanlal and asked-

“Chachaji, what is this water-cooked *puri*?”

The question made Sumanlal smile inwardly. The thing was almost before Mewalal's eyes, yet he could not recognise it. He replied-

“Son, just as a *puri* is cooked in oil or ghee, another kind is cooked in water. In our part of the country, we call it *bagiya*.”

The moment he heard this, understanding burst upon Mewalal and he laughed aloud.

That is often how knowledge works. Something unfamiliar seems strange until it is suddenly recognised as a familiar thing seen from another angle. Mewalal began to think that *bagiya* was indeed made on much the same principle as *puri*. Just as lentils could be used to make *dal-puri*, they could also be used to make *dal-bagiya*. And just as jaggery went into sweets such as *thekua*, one could make *gur-bagiya* as well.

The maize *sattu* was mixed together in one place. In colour it could rival groundnut *sattu*, and in texture it was soft as a tuft of cotton. It might not have the same richness and strength-giving quality as groundnut *sattu*, but no one could call it poor food. Grain, after all, was grain, and food grain itself carried something almost sacred in it.

Seeing the *sattu* being mixed together gave Mewalal a little relief. At least, he thought, while it was being prepared and divided, no one would notice that he had brought nothing to eat. But what would he do once it was passed from hand to hand and everyone began eating? Almost immediately another thought came. These men were neither from his village nor from his household or community, so he had no natural right to ask them for food. They were passengers, just as he was.

They had come from Chhapra, whereas he had joined the train from much nearer. Surely hunger did not arrive later merely because one's home was closer.

As he built an embankment of patience around his hunger, Mewalal felt calmer. A faint smile returned to his face.

Seeing him smile, Sumanlal said-

“Son, while the food is being prepared, let me tell you something.”

The words “let me tell you something” immediately stirred Mewalal's curiosity. They had known each other for hardly an hour. What could have come into this old man's mind so soon? The *sattu* was still being mixed, not yet divided. Why not simply ask him? Mewalal said-

“What is it?”

Seeing the thirst of curiosity on Mewalal's face, Sumanlal replied-

“My life, and the strange play of life.”

That pleased Mewalal. The road would pass more easily, and he would also hear the story of another man's life. After all, it is often by listening to another life that one learns how to place one's own. Mewalal said-

“This is my first journey to Calcutta. But you have travelled this way many times. You know the route, and you know the rhythm of the journey as well.”

A hungry man rejoices at the sight of abundant food, a naked man at a store of clothes, and a homeless man at the sight of shelter. Sumanlal too had found both a companion and enough time for conversation, and happiness began bubbling within him. He said-

“Son, in this very body I am living my third life.”

The words puzzled Mewalal. Three lives in one body? He wanted to ask at once, but since this was their first meeting, he thought it unwise to appear too eager or intrusive. He said nothing. Only one corner of his mouth curved into a smile.

Seeing it, Sumanlal continued-

“Son, I joined Bhikhari Kaka when I was only ten or twelve. From Jaunpur through the regions in between, then through Bengal, Assam and Nepal, we travelled year after year like a mail train, performing almost throughout the year. Even after Bhikhari Kaka died, those of us who had danced and acted with him, together with some younger men, kept the troupe alive. As long as I had strength in my body, we travelled through those same regions and performed throughout the year.”

Hearing how long Sumanlal's life had been intertwined with Bhikhari Thakur's, Mewalal's own childhood memories stirred. He too had seen Bhikhari Thakur with his own eyes when the great performer was still middle-aged. Mewalal asked-

“What was so special about Bhikhari Baba that so many people loved him?”

Sumanlal thought to himself: whatever else I may be, I was Bhikhari Kaka's disciple. I must neither diminish my guru nor exaggerate him beyond the truth. He replied-

“Son, Bhikhari Kaka understood the speech and society of people from Bhojpur through Dhaka and Bengal, and as far as Assam and Nepal. That was why, though ours was one travelling troupe, he would alter a performance slightly according to the region. I tried hard to learn that art, but I never fully managed it. He had another great gift. In Bengal, he knew how to make Bhojpuri speak naturally to Bengali

ears, and in Bhojpur he could make Bengali speech feel at home among Bhojpuri people. I never acquired that kind of understanding.”

Seeing the weakness Sumanlal himself had admitted, Mewalal asked-

“But if you stayed with him for so many years, why did you never learn it?”

Sumanlal replied-

“Even in the greatest rush of work, Bhikhari Kaka often worked alone and, more importantly, thought for himself. I, on the other hand, heard even the news from newspapers through other people's mouths and did my work according to other people's instructions. How could that kind of vision ever grow in me?”

Once people find a path towards one another, formal distinctions about food lose their importance. The *sattu* was rolled into balls and passed around. No one stood on ceremony, and Mewalal did not refuse.



Date: 4 December 2017

5.



At eight the next morning, the train reached Howrah station. It was a vast station, long and broad. After getting down, Mewalal began looking around for Ravinath. The members of the *naach party* had also alighted. The waiting hall was crowded with people, just like the platforms.

Ravinath too had been looking for Mewalal and soon found him. Howrah station was nothing like the stations at Darbhanga or Madhubani. Back home, the waiting rooms remained crowded throughout the day, not only with passengers but with all sorts of people. Howrah was different. Whenever a train arrived or departed, the waiting hall and platforms filled almost instantly, and just as quickly emptied again. Like the stations at Darbhanga and Madhubani, Howrah too had its shops and stalls, but here the greater part of the crowd consisted of passengers constantly arriving and leaving.

Seeing Mewalal, Ravinath asked-

“Mewalal Bhai, what are you planning to do now?”

Mewalal had no settled plan. There was no particular person he intended to visit, nor anyone he had arranged to meet for work. All he knew was that Calcutta was a city of trade and employment, and surely he would find some kind of work there, whether it paid a monthly wage or by the day. So

he remained silent.

Hearing Ravinath's question, Sumanlal said-

“There is no need to rush. We have been battered about for twenty-five or thirty hours on the train. Let us first sit somewhere, wash, eat something, and then decide calmly what to do next.”

Sumanlal could afford that calmness. Mewalal could not. For one thing, there was the barrier of language. Most people around him spoke Bengali, and Mewalal had no familiarity with the language. Not understanding it, he would find it difficult even to ask someone a simple question. Ravinath and Sumanlal did not have that problem. Ravinath had been to Calcutta several times and knew something of the city's ways. Sumanlal knew it still better. For nearly fifty years he had travelled not only through Calcutta's markets but through villages and small towns across the region. He had met people of every sort and spoken with them in all manner of circumstances.

Moving away from the main stream of arriving and departing passengers, Sumanlal's companions spread a large sheet on the floor. Everyone placed his belongings around it and sat down. The station had facilities for relieving oneself, bathing and washing, so the men dispersed for a while to attend to themselves. Ravinath and Mewalal did the same.

After they had washed and bathed, the *bhandari* of Sumanlal's troupe, the man entrusted with the food provisions, took *sattu* from a bag and began mixing it. Sumanlal said to him-

“Son, everyone is hungry. And now that we have reached our destination, why carry food around unnecessarily? We are all here together, so prepare all of it.”

The question that had been troubling the *bhandari*

disappeared at once. He had been wondering whether he should prepare *sattu* for Mewalal and Ravinath as well. But once Sumanlal had told him to mix everything, the question of separate portions no longer arose.

From Barauni all the way to Howrah, Ravinath and Sumanlal had hardly spoken directly to one another. It was only here at Howrah, with Mewalal forming a link between them, that the three came together.

Ravinath sat down beside Mewalal near Sumanlal. As soon as they settled, Sumanlal asked Mewalal-

“I shall be going with the *naach party*. But you are on your own. Where will you go?”

The question sent a tide through Mewalal's mind. The drought had already defeated the life he had known, and now he had reached a city of trade and labour. Whatever work he found, he would do.

By now, however, he regarded Sumanlal as a man deeply experienced in life away from home, so he did not want to answer carelessly. He said-

“Now that I have reached the place, surely I shall find some work or other by which I can earn.”

Hearing the uncertainty in his answer, Sumanlal said-

“If you come with me, your food can be arranged for the time being. But you have come here after being battered by misfortune. In such a situation, it would not be right to settle merely for the certainty of a full stomach. You have a family to support. You cannot manage without earning.”

Mewalal's thoughts drifted towards what was right and what was not. Sumanlal spoke as though an assurance of food alone were too little. But for a man whose first problem was hunger itself, was even that not something worthwhile? If

hunger were no real problem, why would there be thousands upon thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of beggars in the world?

Steadying himself, Mewalal replied-

“Bhai Sahib, I am grateful that you have taken responsibility for feeding me. But in the circumstances in which I find myself, I have no way forward except through hard work. I shall remember your kindness. For now, let me go.”

Ravinath too reassured Sumanlal-

“Bhai Sahib, whether it is a factory or a field, an office or a school, wherever work is available, we shall certainly do it. So there is still hope.”

Mewalal left with Ravinath.

They had gone only a few steps when Sumanlal called from behind-

“If you get into any difficulty with anyone, tell them that you belong to Bhikhari Thakur's *naach party*.”

As soon as they came out of the station, Ravinath said-

“Mewa Bhai, we come from a land where people wield the plough and the hoe. We have no reason to be afraid of any kind of work.”

The words “not afraid of work” awakened a new fearlessness in Mewalal. Courage too has its own place and its own circumstances in which it grows. Neither fear nor fearlessness enters or leaves a person in a single day. Both develop gradually. Wherever a person's life is rooted, the sources of his fear and courage lie there as well. Throughout human history, fear has often been the stronger current. Taking countless forms, it has pressed upon vast numbers of people and taught them to remain afraid. The inherited habits

and ways of thinking of the past had not escaped it either. What exists, exists for as long as its time lasts, and what existed belonged to its own time. But they were now approaching the eighteenth year of the twenty-first century. Surely it could not be said that society had still not come of age. If people now exercised their own judgement and their own right to choose, was that asking too much?

Mewalal had lived all his life as a working man. He could not turn away from labour merely because fear had entered his mind. Human beings had always been of two broad kinds: those who worked and those who tried to live without labour. In a mind detached from labour, the desire for ever greater consumption kept growing, and from that desire arose many of the criminal tendencies spread across the world. But that was not Mewalal's condition. He was a man of labour. Labour, after all, teaches a person both honesty and self-reliance, and these were the true treasures stored in the strongbox of his mind. Mewalal possessed both. Yet it would be wrong to say that a new place, a new society and unfamiliar kinds of work did not cause some uneasiness within him.

Nor was it that Mewalal lacked faith in his ability to learn. People everywhere learn by watching others and then turn what they have learnt into experience of their own. Thinking along these lines, he and Ravinath came upon a tea stall. Mewalal watched the tea seller working over his kettle, blackened with soot, and something in him seemed to brighten. He said-

“Ravinath Bhai, to be afraid of work is to be afraid of life itself. If we become frightened, how shall we cross the battlefield of life? And if we cannot cross it, how shall we ever understand what is sin and what is virtue, what is

dharma and what is *adharma*?"

Mewalal's words seemed to awaken a fresh thought in Ravinath too. He had wandered far in search of a job, almost across the whole country, yet had never found a place where he truly belonged. He had approached every relative and acquaintance he knew, and all of them had promised to help him find employment. Yet nowhere had he found a life better than the one his family had enjoyed under his father's care. Still, given the way circumstances had developed, he did not blame anyone else. The fault, he felt, lay upon his own head. For as long as restlessness had driven him, he had wandered. Yet tomorrow's life could only be built upon the work one did today.

Ravinath's thoughts drifted until they suddenly struck an obstruction, as though the boat of life itself had come to a halt. Startled back into the present, he said-

"Mewa Bhai, whatever is to happen will happen. First let us drink tea to our hearts' content. We have brought our bodies this far and are ready to work like weavers at the loom. Surely Kabir Baba will not refuse to bring his warp and weft."

Mewalal and Ravinath sat down on the bench outside the tea stall. The moment he sat, Ravinath called to the shopkeeper-

"Shopkeeper Bhai, give us the kind of tea we drink back home in Mithila. At the stations on the way they charge the price of good tea and serve little more than hot water, so we did not drink any. We are thoroughly worn out. Make us a strong, rich tea with thick buffalo milk, properly boiled. Let us drink our fill. Whatever the price, we shall pay."

How could a Howrah tea seller remain silent after hearing that? He answered at once-

"In your village you may drink tea made with buffalo

milk. Here our milk comes from the ‘iron buffalo’, from a tin rather than the animal.”

Ravinath drew back slightly, then turned the joke around and asked-

“And if five paying customers walk into your shop this very moment, how will you serve them?”

As it happened, the tea seller too was a man of Mithila. He had come to Calcutta with a fellow villager and later opened this stall. An uncle of his had worked for the railway, and through that connection he had obtained a thirty-year lease on the tiny plot, hardly three-quarters of a *dhur*, on which the shop stood. His family ties with railway employees gave him one kind of support. The porters, handcart pullers and rickshaw men provided another. They all came to his stall for tea and, along with it, discussed the politics of India and the wider world. In time, the shopkeeper too had become something of a performer upon his own little stage. He said-

“We people have taken responsibility for the whole world upon our shoulders. My father always used to say, ‘Bring back whatever you can, pound it and eat it, and at daybreak set out again.’”

The shopkeeper's words pricked Ravinath too. He said-

“Shopkeeper Bhai, we are standing at your stall, and we are already battered men far from home. We have come here to arrange food for the mouths of our children, so I am not going to quarrel with you. But if you permit me, may I say something?”

The shopkeeper was naturally sociable and cheerful. He laughed and said-

“Brother, at this moment you are my customer, which means you have come to me as Lakshmi herself. I am not

such a foolish trader that I would drive away arriving Lakshmi merely by talking too much. My father used to say something else as well: ‘Stand in the marketplace wishing well to all, making neither anyone your special friend nor anyone your enemy.’”

As Mewalal listened to the exchange between Ravinath and the shopkeeper, his mind began to melt just as ghee or wax softens before heat. With a faint smile he added-

“When both of you are walking much the same road, why hesitate to speak openly?”

Ravinath seemed to receive support from every side. Calmly he said-

“Shopkeeper Bhai, you speak of what your father used to tell you. Do you think my father said anything different? The very things your father taught you were the things my father taught me as well.”

The experienced shopkeeper looked at him closely and said-

“If your father used to say the same things as mine, then perhaps...”

He stopped in mid-sentence, as though a sudden shiver had passed through him.

Ravinath felt as though something inside him had risen towards recognition. He said-

“Brother, the moment I came to your stall, I began to suspect something. It turns out that we are separated not by our roots but only by regions. Even when people belong to the same broad land, living in different parts brings small differences in speech, manners and ways of thinking. That is natural. Birds living in a region full of orchards and groves will not be quite the same as birds living where there are few

trees, in low-lying land repeatedly flooded and covered with water.”

The shopkeeper said-

“Well, whatever the differences may be, you have come here to earn. So first drink your tea. I shall give you something for breakfast as well. We cook the midday meal around half past two or three. By then you can go and look for work.”

Hearing the shopkeeper's assurance, Ravinath felt his confidence strengthen. He said-

“You must know of quite a few jobs around here.”

The shopkeeper asked-

“Are you educated?”

Ravinath replied-

“Yes. I have a B.A.”

With a gesture of his hand, the shopkeeper said-

“Then your work is as good as settled, without even having to move from here.”

Having said this, he fell silent.

Mewalal saw his own life like a tree torn up by the roots and swept away in a raging current. A self-reliant man who had lived by the strength of his own arms now watched his life drifting helplessly like an uprooted tree upon a swollen river. Should he admit defeat before the world and kill himself merely because he could not feed himself? No. Spiritual faith was part of his philosophy of life. Through the ages it had shown countless forms of life countless directions, and it would continue to do so. Could he simply declare it false? No. Never. Suicide was out of the question. He had left an ageing mother, a wife and a child behind in the village. If he did not himself search for a way through his helplessness, how much

could he hope to gain by waiting for others to find one for him? Be patient, he told his own heart. The world is vast and densely inhabited. Surely there must be a place in it for everyone.

There were only three people at the stall now: the shopkeeper, Mewalal and Ravinath. The shopkeeper said-

“First, both of you go to the man I am about to telephone. I shall tell him that I am sending the men I mentioned. Meet him face to face and talk things over. After all, he is a Bengali brother. He should not imagine that I began pressing him about the matter the very day he mentioned it. Some things happen at once; others take time. The poor man has shown me so much regard. If I cannot show him even that much respect in return, why should people keep calling someone ‘Gurudev’?”

The two men rose. The shopkeeper remained standing and added-

“Finish what you have to do there and come back. By then it will be time to eat. Have your meal here, and around four or five we shall send you to the *dharmashala* at Dharmatala. There are usually a few jobs to be found there. In a way, you can think of that *dharmashala* as belonging to our own people. Twenty-five or fifty men from the villages are staying there on any given day.”

As Mewalal and Ravinath set out to enquire about the work, Mewalal asked-

“Don't you have acquaintances of your own here?”

Ravinath answered with the ease of experience-

“Mewa Bhai, this is Calcutta, a city that stands upon industry and labour. I have put all those acquaintances aside. Why should I go to someone's lodging and give him reason to

think that I have come merely to eat at his expense? Food is so cheap here that many people eat both their meals at hotels. There is no need to put anyone in an awkward position.”

The self-reliant life that had always lived within Mewalal suddenly stirred. Almost under his breath he said-

“Every *dharma* has a path of its own. We ourselves break it, and we ourselves join it again. I have lived by the *dharma* of labour. How can I now seize it by the throat and kill it?”

Ravinath replied-

“Mewa Bhai, at least this much hope has arisen between us: one of us has already found the beginning of a way. I too believe that everyone in the world lives with the support of others, and yet no one can be another person's complete support. That is how people have gone on living, and that is how they will continue.”

Mewalal said-

“We have come here to work. If there is work, why should we not take it? The question of wages becomes a conflict where there are workers of the same kind doing the same labour. But if the situation is different, we shall have to judge accordingly. We are workers uprooted from our own soil. Before anything else, we need a patch of ground on which to plant our feet again.”

Ravinath said-

“Mewa Bhai, you have seen for yourself what value labour had in the place we come from and what value it has here. There are differences, certainly. But this is also a society of educated people and a great commercial city. For now, we should judge ourselves by how hard we can work and learn to adjust accordingly. If work is available and we run away from

it, that would be nothing but another madness of migration. We must not do that.”

Mewalal nodded and said-

“Ravinath, think of it this way. We have come so far to save our families from that drought-stricken land. Even if no one else here belongs to our region, there are at least two of us. What your future will be, or mine, only the future can tell. But for now, surely we can agree on one thing: somehow, first we must find a place to plant our feet.”

At the words “our region”, Ravinath's mind flew back to the village. The smell of the scorched earth seemed to enter him. He said-

“Mewa Bhai, Tetar Das Babaji used to say it rightly: ‘No one truly belongs to anyone.’”

The words struck Mewalal badly. His mind was already preparing itself like a fighter upon a battlefield. In battle one had to think like a fighter. Was this the time for Ravinath to speak of abandonment? He asked-

“What do you mean, Ravi?”

Ravinath smiled through his sadness and said-

“Brother, if something happens to either of us here, or to someone in our families back in the village, who will be there for whom? Yes, we have come here to put out the fire of hunger in those very families. But life is not only about filling the stomach.”

Mewalal stopped short, turned towards him and said-

“Ravi, when they discuss the salary, don't get entangled in too much bargaining.”

Ravinath replied-

“I will get the job only after someone else leaves the post. Then the real question will be whether I have experience

of the work.”

At the words “experience of the work”, Mewalal said-

“That is the great trap in jobs meant for educated people.”

Ravinath immediately began untangling that trap in his own mind. He said-

“First I shall settle the work and the salary. Then I shall tell them that I have not done this particular work before, so the responsibility for teaching it to me will be theirs.”

Without argument or obstruction, Ravinath got the job. He was to report for duty at half past eight the next morning.

The news lifted Ravinath's spirits, and it lifted Mewalal's as well, though for different reasons. Ravinath was pleased with the salary. Mewalal was pleased because, of two lost travellers, one had found a place to stand. Once one of them had found his bearings, the other no longer seemed quite so lost.

Ravinath said-

“Mewa Bhai, now at least there is hope that the two of us can live under one roof and manage our lives on my salary.”

Talking as they walked, the two returned to Bhushan's stall.

The moment Bhushan saw them, he said-

“You have been walking about and must be tired. Wash and bathe first. Everyone around the station is one of our own. There is nothing to feel shy about here.”

Mewalal replied-

“We bathed here this morning. There is no need to bathe again. We shall just wash our hands, feet and faces. That will

be enough.”

The three ate together at the stall. While they were eating, Bhushan said-

“The rickshaw pullers from Dharmatala often come to the station after dropping passengers. I shall put both of you on one of their rickshaws.”

And that was exactly what happened. Soon after they had finished eating, a rickshaw puller arrived to drop off a passenger. His name was Bachanu, and he already knew Bhushan. After leaving his passenger near the entrance to the waiting hall, Bachanu was about to turn homewards when he called out-

“Bhushan Bhai, how is business? Everything moving well?”

Bhushan replied-

“Yes, Bachanu Bhai. You keep counting your money, and leave the moving and running to us!”

Bachanu wheeled his rickshaw towards the stall and asked-

“How many guests have you got?”

Bhushan said-

“You know what has happened to our region over the last two years, don't you?”

Bachanu replied-

“Yes, I know. Which village are they from?”

Ravinath answered-

“Lachhmipur.”

The moment he heard the name, Bachanu exclaimed-

“Oh, Lachhmipur! My younger co-brother lives there. Our wives are sisters. Do you know Dukhiya?”

Ravinath replied-

“Of course I know him. A village is hardly Calcutta, where even a father and son might fail to know one another. Our houses are close together.”

Bachanu said-

“He is my younger co-brother.”

Ravinath replied-

“We have played together since childhood. He was very bright at his studies, but his parents were so poor that he could not study beyond the village school. He can read and write his name and address, of course. Things at home have improved a little now. I regard him like an elder brother, and he treats me with the same affection.”

Lachhmipur was the village of Bachanu's co-brother, and the kinship was close enough in village society that Bachanu could hardly lower the dignity of his household by failing to honour the guests. He said-

“Bhushan Bhai, today's earnings and all the little signs since morning had already told me that guests would arrive. They say if the left hand itches, you are about to travel somewhere, but sometimes even now my right hand starts itching when someone is about to come.”

Bhushan asked-

“How was today's earning?”

Bachanu replied-

“More than a quarter above the usual, though not quite half as much again.”

Bhushan said-

“Then two guests will hardly feel like a burden!”

Whether it was the warmth of a good day's earnings or

the inherited hospitality of his native soil that rose in Bachanu, only he could have said. But he answered with feeling-

“Bhushan Bhai, poverty has not eaten away our honour. How can a man forget his own dignity, or the dignity of the *mati-pani* that made him, while he is still alive? Let me tell you something from my father's time. One evening, a lost traveller came to our door after dark. My father was alive then. The moment the man arrived, Father said, ‘Wash your feet first.’ When he had done so, Father told him, ‘We are short of grain, but we still have water. If you can pass the night after drinking water, stay with us. At daybreak, when the sun is up, we shall help you go wherever you wish.’ I belong to that same household. I live in Dharmatala, eat at a roadside stall, spread my bedding and sleep with ten men like myself. But even I can arrange that much for a guest.”

Bhushan said-

“These two have come from the village carrying hope with them. One has already found a way to earn. Help the other find one too.”

Bachanu said-

“Yes, yes, come along. I am a man of the road, and work is scattered all along the road, so work is never far from my hands. Since you have reached Calcutta, it will do you good to look around as well.”

Listening to Bachanu, Mewalal felt something warm and moist gather within him. On one side he had seen a society so overgrown with thorns that brothers could reach the point of bullets, prison and even the gallows. On the other stood a stranger, concerned for him like a brother born of the same mother. One might call it a matter of the heart, or even of the stomach, but could one deny the larger truth? Whole

villages were being uprooted by natural calamities, by drought and flood. Yet could anyone say that human conduct itself was not uprooting people too? Every human being carried his own qualities and impulses, and through those very qualities people had gone on loving, quarrelling and fighting their way through life.

The rickshaw had gone only a little farther when Bachanu saw Baun Das at a roadside water tank, filling a bucket. He called out-

“Baun Bhaiya, these are guests from our part of the country!”

At the words “guests from our own region”, Baun Das looked up with a start. Whatever the reason for that sudden reaction might have been...

People affectionately called Baun Das “Baun Bhaiya”. His real name was Makhanlal. It was not merely men of his own generation who addressed him so. Children and old people alike called him Baun Bhaiya. The word *Bhaiya* had become attached to Baun Das almost like a title before or after a name, used by acquaintances and strangers alike.

Seeing people from a neighbouring village made Baun Das feel a little embarrassed. For thirty-five years he had earned his living by carrying buckets of water from house to house, up to the first, second and even third floors of buildings. The labour was hard, and what he earned depended upon how much of that labour his body could endure. In his youth, he had staked everything upon earning. For fifteen years he worked longer hours, carried water to more houses and earned as much as he could. But his own life remained confined within that same circle. He had made scarcely any change or improvement in the work itself. And so, even after crossing fifty, he was still living the same life.

Yet he had built a brick house in his village and acquired five *bighas* of land. He had married his daughter with proper celebration and educated both his sons up to matriculation. The family had stood up and moved forward on the strength of his earnings, but the life of the very man whose labour had given the family its momentum had itself remained motionless. Perhaps that was what made Baun Das feel ashamed. But a man who had lived for decades on the streets of Calcutta could hardly keep silent for long. He called out-

“Bachanu, stop the rickshaw. I still have water to deliver to three households. Once I finish, I shall come after you. Whatever is going to happen can happen a little sooner or later. First have some tea and *paan*, then go ahead. Which village are the guests from?”

Mewalal kept his eyes fixed on Baun Das and thought that perhaps there was joy in work itself. He guessed that Baun Das must be over fifty. How many years does a human being live? If a man has spent fifty years living according to his own chosen rhythm, what remains afterwards?

Just as Bachanu had stopped his work and stood there, Baun Das too had paused in his. Yet both knew that every task postponed now would remain behind and follow them later.

Bachanu said-

“Bhaiya, the three of us have only just had tea and *paan* at Bhushan's place. Leave that for now. We are on our way to the *dharmashala*.”

Baun Das returned to filling his buckets, and Bachanu set the rickshaw moving again.

A little farther on, Bachanu said-

“Brother, you seldom find a man with that kind of

courage and staying power. Wherever people live, quarrels with neighbours are bound to arise now and then. Here Baun Bhaiya stands behind people from our side like a mountain. The whole neighbourhood respects his influence. Because of him, we feel that although we are not in our village, we are at least living within a community.”

Neither Mewalal nor Ravinath knew anyone along the road. From the roadside, however, a man named Raghav spotted Bachanu and called out teasingly-

“Bachanu Kaka, why are you slipping past with your face half turned away? We aren't bushes by the roadside that you can pretend not to see!”

Hearing Raghav's voice, Bachanu stopped the rickshaw and defended himself-

“Raghav, when I have passengers aboard, wouldn't it be wrong to take my eyes off the road? That's why I didn't see you. How long before you get back to the lodging? We have guests of our own with us.”

Raghav replied-

“My work will be finished within an hour. Only twenty-five sacks of fifty kilos each are left. I'll stack them in the warehouse and come straight back.”

Raghav's words startled Mewalal. So this too was human life. His father had been right when he used to say, “A single day gives a man three different names.” Circumstance keeps changing a person's place, work and role, and somewhere among those changing names surely his own life too had its place. But he said nothing.

It was nearing sunset, the hour when the day's work began to close and the night's activities began to unfold. Bachanu stopped the rickshaw in front of the *dharmashala*.

Helping Mewalal and Ravinath down, he said-

“There is a water tank in front. Put your bags down. While you two wash your hands and feet, I shall spread the bedding.”

After spreading the bedding, Bachanu called to the tea seller by the roadside-

“Manohar, two guests have arrived. Bring us some tea.”

Manohar told his twelve-year-old son-

“Son, I may be away for a little while. Stay at the shop until I return.”

He placed four glasses of tea in a wire carrier and brought them over. By then Bachanu too had washed his hands and feet and had just sat down on the bedding with the two guests when Manohar approached Ravinath and asked-

“Which village are you from?”

Ravinath replied-

“Lachhmipur.”

Lachhmipur was the marital village of Manohar's younger sister. She had been married while still very young, and at that time Manohar too had lived in his village and used to visit Lachhmipur frequently. But he had now been in Calcutta for twenty years. He still went back to his own village whenever circumstances allowed, but in all those twenty years he had never managed to visit his sister's home even on the customary occasions when a brother visits his married sister. His extended family was large, so people continued travelling between the two villages, but for Manohar personally many faces in Lachhmipur had become unfamiliar.

Still, these were guests who had arrived where he lived. How could he simply say that he did not know them?

Composing himself, Manohar said-

“Bachanu Bhai, tonight's meal will be my responsibility. Lachhmipur is my younger sister's marital village.”

Then, looking at Ravinath, he added-

“Son, you may not recognise me properly. Jagesar is my brother-in-law.”

The moment Ravinath heard the name Jagesar, he said-

“Of course. Though your houses are in two different hamlets.”

The tea was finished. Manohar carried the four empty glasses back to his shop in the wire holder, then stopped at the *paan* shop and returned with four prepared betel leaves.

By then Basu had arrived. Basu worked in households around the neighbourhood, washing utensils and helping with kitchen work. The moment he came, he asked Ravinath-

“Which village are you from?”

Ravinath replied-

“Lachhmipur.”

At the name, Basu said-

“My maternal aunt and uncle live there. My uncle's name is Rooplal.”

Ravinath asked-

“Rooplal? The one whose house stands beside the western road?”

Basu replied-

“Yes.”

Ravinath said-

“We call him Kaka and your aunt Kaki. Their house is in another hamlet a little farther away, so we do not visit each

other very often.”

Bachanu interrupted-

“Basu, you can sort out the aunt-and-uncle connections later. First tell us whether you know of any work.”

Basu replied-

“Bachanu Bhaiya, before looking for work, shouldn't we first know what kind of work he wants to do? Work is not all of one kind. Some jobs demand more physical labour, others more mental effort.”

Ravinath said-

“My arrangements have been made. It is Mewa Bhai who still has no work.”

Mewalal said-

“Basu, once I have left everything in the village and brought only this body with me, I shall do whatever work this body can be put to.”

By seven o'clock nearly all twenty-five men who stayed at the *dharmashala* had returned. As soon as they gathered, cards began on one side and the evening's *kirtan* and *bhajan* began on the other. They kept a *dholak*, cymbals and a harmonium of their own. Those twenty-five men had formed something resembling a village society among themselves.

Songs and devotional music rose in different dialects and languages. On one side came the songs of Vidyapati, Chanda Jha and Madhupji. From another came Surdas in Braj. Elsewhere Tulsidas's Awadhi could be heard, while Bhikhari Thakur's Bhojpuri mingled with the melodies of Rabindra Sangeet. At the same time another sort of play was unfolding around the cards.

One group lost everything they had earned that day.

Another doubled its day's income, winning as much again as it had earned through work. Such was the game of life. Men who had earned in much the same way during the day became creditors and debtors by night. Two were now men with money to lend, while two others had become borrowers.

The earnings lost at cards included not only what the losers needed for their own food but also the money they had intended to send home. A salaried worker received thirty days' wages together at the end of the month. But a man earning by the day or by individual jobs had to add up each day's income little by little. So the two men who had lost borrowed an amount equal to what they had earned that day.

Yet hope remained alive in their minds. If tomorrow's cards fell in their favour, today's loss could be recovered. Why then should their faces become gloomy? And why should the winners rejoice too greatly in a single evening's gain? But would an ordinary manual worker or rickshaw puller think that far ahead? If tomorrow's game also went against him, he might become twice as deeply indebted, and his life would slip two steps backwards.

Just as every village contains people of many kinds, the *dharmashala* had developed its own varied little society. Eight or ten men sat together asking Mewalal and Ravinath about their villages, their families and the condition of people back home. In the course of these conversations, so many threads of kinship and social connection emerged that hardly a single man remained who had not discovered some social link with either Mewalal or Ravinath.

Changing one's place changes some customs and creates others. Yet the ties between village communities spread above and below the surface like dense creepers, crossing one another in ways people themselves often do not realise.

Everyone was exhausted after the day's labour, and Mewalal and Ravinath were no exception. When the time for the evening meal came, the men rose one after another and went to the roadside shops to eat.

At last Mewalal said-

“Brothers, just as we have families, everyone else has one too. None of us needs to be told how difficult it is to keep a family going. And these two years of drought have scorched our region and changed its very colour. When a man's source of income is burnt away, his face and his thoughts are bound to lose their colour as well.”

Dukhmochan nodded in agreement and said-

“Yes, that is true. But how can a man with intelligence and judgement simply accept defeat?”

Thinking of the sequence in which his own life had been collapsing, Mewalal replied-

“You all have bodies fit for labour, and so do I. Whatever work these hands and this body can do, I shall do.”

At that moment Sukdev said-

“Bachanu Bhai, I am going back to the village tomorrow, so my rickshaw will be standing idle. You know mine is a hand-pulled rickshaw, so it does not require much training.”

Bachanu said-

“Sukdev, Mewalal and Ravinath have been driven here by drought and hardship. When you reach the village, go to both their homes and enquire after their families. Give each household one hundred rupees as well. Before you leave, take two hundred from me.”

The words escaped from Mewalal's mouth with the heaviness of a man whose defeated life had begun to lose

heart-

“Now that I have come here to earn, I shall somehow keep my family going, borrowing when I must and repaying when I can. Just as all of you have stood beside me at this difficult hour, so for as long as we live together in one place, I too shall stand by you.”



Date: 30 December 2017

6.



At four in the morning, Mewalal woke with a start and sat up on his bedding. A dream had broken his sleep. In it, everyone else had already gone out to work while he alone remained asleep.

A dream, after all, is a dream. Everyone dreams, whether waking or sleeping, and into those dreams enter one's own thoughts and one's own sense of what may lie ahead. A scientist may be awakened by an idea for an invention, a doctor by a thought about research, a writer by some creative impulse, an artist by an image of his art. Such thoughts can rise even in sleep and wake a person as though demanding to be remembered. Something similar had happened to Mewalal. His dream too had its reason. He had left behind a drought-stricken village and family, abandoned the security of his ancestral property, and come to Calcutta with little more than faith in his own labour and whatever strength he possessed. The dream had sprung from that very hope.

Sitting on his bedding after waking, Mewalal began to think: so this is the play of the world. Some people die within while life is still in them, while others try to breathe life even into what is already dead. Am I afraid of labour, that I should submit to a life resembling imprisonment?

A man who had lived an independent, self-reliant life was now being forced towards the servitude of a defeated one.

But was Mewalal alone in this? Were there not whole villages, even whole countries, facing the same condition? Did one independent country not push another towards subjugation? Within village society, did one family not sometimes push another in the same direction? Was freedom good only when it belonged to oneself, and not when it belonged to others?

Seeing Mewalal sitting awake, Baun Bhaiya too rose and sat up. He said-

“Mewalal, this is the world in which we live. For thirty-five years I have carried buckets of water from lodging to lodging. But through that labour I have arranged enough for the next generation of my family that, if they wish to live as human beings and build an independent life for themselves, they can.”

Baun Bhaiya's words sent Mewalal's mind spinning. Thoughts of many colours rose within him, but rather than wandering elsewhere, his mind returned to the hard labour of his own past. It was as though drops from the rains of his own toil began falling within him, cooling his mind. And in that coolness, a new leaf of confidence opened. He asked-

“Baun Bhai, how do you take time off from this work when you want to go back to the village?”

Baun Bhaiya blended a gentle smile into his answer and said-

“Mewa Babu, hardly a day passes when one or two men do not arrive from the villages. I keep two sets of carrying poles and buckets. Anyone who comes looking for work has usually gathered enough courage to do whatever work he can find.”

Before Baun Bhaiya could continue, Mewalal said-

“Yes, of course they would come. What is there to say about the village? When fire has spread across the whole countryside, people are bound to flee and search for some place where they can plant their feet.”

When one current of life comes alongside another and joins it, the stream of work too begins to flow in much the same way. Baun Bhaiya continued-

“Mewa Babu, you people are young. If I can still carry this much weight in old age, why should you worry about life? Whenever someone arrives from the village, I treat him as one of my own and take him along with me. If five loads of water have to be delivered somewhere, I carry three and let him carry two.”

Mewalal exclaimed-

“Wonderful, Bhai! Wonderful!”

Building his argument upon the foundation of self-respect, Baun Bhaiya said-

“It benefits me too. Once a man earns enough to keep himself alive, why should he keep looking towards someone else's face for support? Whenever I go back to the village, I ask one of these men to take over my work. There are seven or eight of us doing this same kind of work.”

The sound of Mewalal and Baun Bhaiya talking began to wake others sleeping in the *dharmashala*. As each man opened his eyes, a slight embarrassment rose within him. Someone newly arrived from the village was already awake and talking, while he himself lay there as though ill.

One by one several men sat up and began listening. When Baun Bhaiya paused, Bachanu said-

“Baun Bhaiya, Mewalal is new here. It would be better to put him somewhere where several men work together.

Driving a rickshaw would not be a good beginning for someone new.”

Dukhmochan interrupted-

“Brother, this is Calcutta, not some barren little place. Work is scattered all over the roads!”

It was six in the morning now. The sun had risen. Birds, small creatures and human beings alike were beginning to move towards the work of their day.

Compared with village society, the everyday manners of urban and commercial society had moved somewhat ahead. In the village, even a pinch of *khaini* or a single *bidi* could still serve as hospitality. From one point of view, such a custom might appear amusing in a changing age. From another, it showed how social ties could be maintained with the smallest possible means. But that was another matter. There had once been a time when the fragrance of Mithila's *mati-pani* filled every vein of family and village life. Now influences from across the country, indeed from across the world, had entered even a single family and village, through climate, food and drink, clothing and dress, all the way to language and speech. Some degree of cultural strain was therefore inevitable. Why should it not be? It was worth thinking about.

Consider the environment of Calcutta. It lies in the great plains associated with the Ganga and Brahmaputra systems. From the north, from beyond Nepal and from the hills of Nepal itself, hundreds of rivers flow southwards. In that sense, the fertile lands of Bengal and Bihar share much in common. Because of its geographical position, Calcutta receives more rainfall than Mithila. But once we move beyond geography towards language and culture, we find something else. *Mithilakshar* and the Bengali script resemble each

other so closely that the differences lie in only a few letters. Yet can we place ourselves confidently beside Bengali literature? The affection Bengalis have for their language, do the people of Mithila possess the same attachment to Maithili?

One practical strength among Bengalis is that whether they are within their own state, another state or even another country, the moment two Bengali speakers recognise one another, they leave aside the other language and begin speaking their own. Their own language holds an essential place in education. Should we not then ask ourselves whether we too ought to reach a point where speaking another language even within our own families is no longer regarded as a matter of pride or pleasure?

Tea, *paan* and light refreshments had become part of the daily life of this urban society. As everyone prepared to leave for work, each man, according to the social bonds he had formed, placed something before Mewalal and Ravinath. Together they finished what had been offered, then each turned towards his day's work.

Ravinath had a long way to go and left first. While thinking about where Mewalal might be placed, Dukhmochan said-

“Son, I can see that you are young. But you are still inexperienced in the work done here. So do not begin with the heaviest labour. Start with something lighter.”

Inside, Mewalal thought: I have come here to work, so why should I distinguish between light and heavy? I left home to find water for a family burning in drought. In such a situation, what difference does it make whether the water lies in a shallow pond or at the bottom of a deep well?

But he kept the thought to himself and waited to understand why Dukhmochan had made the distinction.

Looking at Mewalal's expression, Dukhmochan realised that his advice had unsettled him. That was natural enough in someone new to the place. He explained-

“Mewa Babu, some of our men here work in household kitchens, cooking and washing utensils. Some carry water from house to house. Some pull hand-rickshaws. Others carry sacks. For you, carrying 100-kilogram sacks would be heavy work, and so would pulling a rickshaw.”

Dukhmochan's explanation made Mewalal pause. Yet the hunger to earn had risen so strongly within him that he still looked towards Dukhmochan with impatient eyes.

Dukhmochan continued-

“Son, you know nothing of the roads here yet, so how will you pull a rickshaw? And a man who has never handled a 100-kilogram sack will find it difficult even to balance one, let alone carry it.”

Mewalal's mind settled a little further. He said-

“Bhaiya, you are the people who know this place. It will be best if I do as you advise.”

Hearing the calmness return to his voice, Dukhmochan said-

“Son, gradually, by watching, listening and doing, you will come to understand everything yourself. Once you understand it, do whatever seems right to you and leave aside whatever does not.”

Dukhmochan's words made Mewalal think that whether one lived at home, away from home or in any corner of the world, the first thing a person arranged was a place to sit. Only afterwards did he think about a place to sleep.

Without saying anything more, Mewalal hung his small bag from a nail in the wall, just as the others had hung theirs,

and prepared himself for work.

Work was found for him. Along with Munilal, he was to carry twenty-five-kilogram sacks of goods from one warehouse to another and stack them neatly.

By evening, after a full day's labour, Mewalal received his wages. He already knew how much food at the hotel would cost. His mind also told him that depending upon others had been reasonable while he had no work. But once he had begun earning for himself, it was only proper that his life should stand upon his own earnings.

Back at the *dharmashala*, several men insisted that they would provide his evening meal.

Mewalal refused them all and said-

“Now that I too have begun earning like the rest of you, would it be right for me to eat at your expense? You too have families and children.”

Before the evening meal, as on other days, the *dholak* and cymbals began sounding in the *dharmashala*. Cards were played, while conversations ranged from village affairs to events across the country and the wider world. Though they lived under one roof in the *dharmashala* and shared broadly the same life as labouring men, they were divided into many smaller worlds. Some gambled away the money they had earned through labour. Others added gambling winnings to their day's wages. Still others sat with musical instruments singing *kirtan* and *bhajan*.

Every day events continued to occur across the world, some small, some great. There were people of every kind to see them and hear about them. A person could hardly put a lock upon his mouth or close his ears altogether. Talk would continue. Was this not the great spectacle of the world, in which everyone was both performer and spectator?

Feeling somewhat apart from everyone else, Mewalal spread out his bedding, folded an arm beneath his head and began looking into his own world. The others assumed he was simply exhausted after the day's labour. Why should he not be tired? They themselves were experienced and accustomed to the work, so without making any comment they continued with their own diversions.

Mewalal, however, was calculating the day's earnings in his mind.

He had carried and stacked one hundred sacks from one warehouse to another. The wages he had received for that single day equalled three days' wages in his village. In other words, what one man earned there in three days, or three men together in one day, he had earned here by himself. If he used one third of it for his own living expenses and sent two thirds to his family, then not one drought but a hundred droughts could be endured with a smile.

Suddenly he felt as though the strength in his arms had grown even greater than it had been back in the village.

Village and city were not merely two words. A village had come to mean one part of a rural region burdened by scarcity, while a market town suggested paved roads and brick houses. And Calcutta was not merely a city. It was one of the country's great metropolises, a city far ahead among cities.

What, then, was the geographical character of the villages they came from, the villages of Mithila? They too belonged to the great plains of the Ganga and Brahmaputra systems. The sea lay far away, but the mountains were close. Across the northern frontier, from the eastern hills near Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh to Kashmir in the west, stretched an immense mountain chain more than three thousand kilometres in length. The combined breadth of its

smaller and greater ranges extended for two hundred to two hundred and fifty kilometres in many places. Snow formed upon its high mountains, while rain falling across that vast region gathered and moved downwards. Hundreds of rivers, large and small, flowed from the mountain country. Some made their way through openings between the ranges, while places enclosed on all sides by hills became lakes.

The villages of Mithila, or more broadly of Bihar, lay upon many kinds of level alluvial soil. Through those plains countless rivers, large and small, flowed from north to south. The Ganga too rose in those northern mountains, but after descending from the hills and crossing the plains of Uttar Pradesh, it entered Bihar flowing broadly from west to east. Streams and channels across the region eventually met one another and joined the Ganga, which passed through Bihar, entered Bengal and finally reached the sea.

The monsoon that gathered over the Bay of Bengal moved northwards and westwards with the winds, bringing rain. The eastern regions received more rain because the moisture-bearing winds from the Bay were checked by mountains and forested hills. As the same monsoon moved westwards towards Mithila and beyond, the rainfall gradually grew thinner, becoming still lighter by the time it reached western Uttar Pradesh.

Between the rain itself and the fierce flooding of mountain rivers, the impact could be immense. Whole villages were cut apart, new channels were formed, and settlements were damaged by floodwaters. Agricultural life in Mithilanchal was affected almost every year by flood or drought. As a result, instead of moving forward, many villages were slipping backwards. Everything became difficult, human life, livestock and farming alike. People were

therefore being driven away. Villages were declining in every sense, and both Mithila's human resources and its natural wealth were being depleted.

That did not mean there had been no progress at all. There had been some movement forward. But even after the country gained independence, neither its people nor its development had reached the level one would expect of a free nation. Three generations had passed. Where did we stand now? That was something we had to look at for ourselves.

Lying on his bedding in a metropolis like Calcutta, Mewalal began comparing this world with his own life. His village offered almost a single path: farming. There, people depended largely upon agriculture, while flood and drought struck with great force and there were few other means of earning. Calcutta, by contrast, seemed to contain a hundred thousand kinds of livelihood.

When people in one place could remain surrounded by floodwaters for months, or suffer drought for six months, a year or even several years in succession, their lives and everyday activities were bound to differ from those of people living where work and livelihood took many forms.

A new confidence arose in Mewalal. If he could find some way of earning every day, life would become easier. He would therefore remain in Calcutta for the time being. And if he eventually saw that his family in the village was entirely dependent upon what he earned here, he would bring them to Calcutta as well. Wherever in the world a person might live, the current by which life moves must continue to flow.

It was nine o'clock. The conversations broke up, the *kirtan* and *bhajan* came to an end, and the card games too were put away. One by one, everyone rose and went out for the evening meal. Mewalal left his bedding spread where it

was and went out with Baun Bhaiya.

As soon as they stepped from the *dharmashala* onto the road, Mewalal asked-

“Baun Bhaiya, when a ruined and uprooted village moves forward and becomes a market or a town, people's lives rise many times over. Couldn't our villages develop in the same way?”

Baun Bhaiya replied-

“Calcutta too was once a place like our villages.”



Date: 15 February 2018

7.



Today marked the first day of Mewalal's fourth year in Calcutta. While pulling his hand-rickshaw, he happened to meet the manager of the Eveready Company. Mewalal had just dropped a passenger at his lodgings and was returning when the manager came out of his residence on his way towards the *dharmashala*. Seeing the empty rickshaw, he stopped Mewalal and climbed in.

After they had gone some distance, the manager studied Mewalal and thought that a man of such a strong, sturdy build could endure work at the factory furnace for a long time. He asked-

“How many hours a day do you pull the rickshaw?”

Mewalal replied-

“There is no fixed time. Some days I find a passenger as early as four in the morning, and on others I am still working at ten or eleven at night.”

Fitting his own thought into Mewalal's answer, the manager asked-

“If you were offered regular work, would you take it?”

Mewalal replied-

“Why not, if the wages are in keeping with what I earn from this work? I have come here prepared to labour with my whole body. If need be, I am ready to work like Kabir's

cotton-carder, beating away at the bow.”

Eveready Battery was a multinational company. It had built housing for its employees within its own premises. There was also a small market inside the campus, modest in size but sufficient for the ordinary needs of daily life. Electricity, roads and water were properly provided, and the company paid its employees better wages than many other firms.

The manager said-

“For eight hours of duty, we will pay you twice what you earn by working twelve or fourteen hours at this rickshaw.”

Mewalal had not yet seen the work, but he had already settled one principle in his mind. He had come to earn. Even if the work involved breaking stones, he would do it, and if it paid better, he would be all the more willing. He said-

“Yes, I will do it.”

Hearing that immediate assent, the manager felt that his move had worked well. He said-

“It isn't only a question of wages. There are several other benefits. The greatest is that when you retire from service, you will receive a pension. And if, before then, your son becomes old enough to work, the company will give him a job as well.”

Looking at both his past and his future, Mewalal asked-

“When can I start?”

The manager, now certain that the matter was settled, replied-

“If you come with me today, you can begin work tomorrow. Accommodation is provided too.”

Mewalal thought that in the present age a secure job had become as rare and precious as a golden bird. To release a

bird already caught in one's hand would be sheer foolishness. He began-

“I have been in Calcutta only a few years, so I haven't seen or understood everything here yet. And...”

Before he could finish, the manager interrupted-

“If you are worried about losing your way or getting confused, come with me. Collect whatever belongings you have.”

Mewalal asked-

“How long will your own work take?”

The manager replied-

“Only fifteen or twenty minutes. Let us go together. I shall finish my work and come to your lodging. You can return the rickshaw, settle the hire, collect your things, and then we shall take another rickshaw and leave.”

The arrangement appealed to Mewalal. He said-

“Very good.”

It was around two in the afternoon. The people Mewalal knew were all away from their lodgings at work. Only the shopkeepers remained at their stalls.

Mewalal packed all his belongings into his small bag and told the tea seller that he was leaving to work somewhere else. If anyone came looking for him, the shopkeeper was to tell them where he had gone.

With the manager, Mewalal reached the factory colony. Showing him a room, the manager said-

“Report for work tomorrow at eight.”

Having given him the time, the manager left.

Mewalal's quarters were on the third floor of a five-storey building. The room had all the basic facilities,

including water and electricity. Other people lived in the neighbouring rooms, but Mewalal knew none of them, so there was no question yet of visiting or conversation.

He placed his bag in the room and decided first to bathe. Afterwards he went out, bought something for a light meal and returned to eat in his room. When he had finished, he lay down on the cot. The moment he did so, his thoughts travelled back over the years that had passed.

The drought in his village and the surrounding countryside had ended the previous year. During his years in Calcutta, Mewalal had returned to the village four times, staying for about a month on each visit. In the meantime, a daughter had been born to him.

The self-reliant life he had once known depended upon his fifteen *kathas* of farmland. Farming that land required both labour and capital. Before anything else, however, it required a reliable supply of water. The borewell had already failed, and the irrigation pump, left unused for so long, had also become useless. Meanwhile, the principal and interest on the bank loan taken for the borewell and pump had grown to more than twice the original amount.

Mewalal thought: if I am to return to farming, I must first arrange water and repay the bank loan. If the debt is not cleared, even the land that remains will eventually be auctioned off. Whatever I have earned until now has somehow kept the family alive.

The drought had also broken the value of farmland in the village. Land that had once sold for thirty thousand rupees a *katha* had fallen to ten or twelve thousand. Even at that price there were more sellers than buyers. Those with salaried jobs who had migrated elsewhere had earned, built houses outside the village and effectively left the village behind.

What interest would they now have in its farmland?

There were also seasonal migrant workers who went to Punjab only for particular agricultural jobs, such as transplanting and harvesting paddy, and spent the rest of the year in the village. Some of them had no homestead land of their own, so plots suitable for building houses had become slightly more expensive. But the price of ordinary agricultural land out in the fields had fallen to less than half its former level.

At the same time, the value of money itself had declined. With both the purchasing power of money and the price of farmland falling, whatever capital village families had possessed had shrunk to perhaps a third or even a quarter of its earlier worth.

During his years in Calcutta, Mewalal had become accustomed to many kinds of work. At different times he had pulled rickshaws, carried sacks, delivered water from house to house and done most of the other kinds of labour commonly taken up by men from the villages.

Calcutta was a metropolis, and work of every kind existed there in abundance. Compared with several other great cities of the country, Calcutta was particularly suited to poor labourers. One reason was the relatively low cost of food. A person could survive in Calcutta on an amount that would scarcely be enough to manage life in many other large cities.

As long as Mewalal had lived in the village, he had been regarded as a respectable marginal farmer. With a practical, forward-looking approach to farming, he had organised his work in such a way that every member of the household had a suitable part to play and the family earned enough to maintain a decent life.

His mother and wife managed the work of the house and

courtyard and tended the two milch cows tied at the cattle post. The cows provided milk as well as enough dung to keep the fields fertile and ensure that the household never lacked fuel.

Mewalal was not the only farmer in the village who had lived in this way. There had been many others. But just as drought had brought his family down, it had brought down many other families as well.



Date: 18 February 2018

8.



Mewalal had now spent twenty-five uninterrupted years working at the Eveready battery factory. Since it was a multinational company, the pay was good, and every three years it had risen further with increases in dearness allowance. Only two years of service remained before his retirement.

During those twenty-five years, Mewalal had settled many matters concerning his family. He had paid off the loan taken for the borewell and pump. He sold the pump and gave his fields out on sharecropping. He also married off his daughter, who had settled in her husband's home and now had two children of her own.

Five years after Mewalal joined the company, his mother died. He performed her funeral rites properly and arranged a generous community feast. He had celebrated his daughter's wedding with equal splendour. Once his mother had died and his daughter had married, Mewalal's wife was left alone in the village. Mewalal lived in Calcutta while his wife remained by herself at home.

Three years after their daughter's marriage, husband and wife began to think seriously about their situation. There were only two of them left in the household, yet even they were living in two different places, one in the village and the other in Calcutta. Would it not be better for them to live together? They did exactly that. Mewalal brought his wife to Calcutta.

After their daughter, no second child had been born to them. Waiting and hoping, both husband and wife had crossed the age of fifty. They had consulted doctors many times and had even gone to *ojhas* and *gunis*, traditional healers, but in the end no second child came.

Mewalal had built a four-room brick house in the village, but once his wife came to live with him, the house had to remain locked. Once a year the two of them returned to the village and stayed for about a month. During that time they brought their daughter and grandchildren to stay with them, then two or three days before returning to Calcutta, sent the daughter back to her marital home.

Even now, however, both remained deeply attached to the village. That was why, unlike many salaried migrants, Mewalal neither built a house in Calcutta nor seriously considered settling there permanently. With his good salary, he had instead acquired another two *bighas* of land in the village.

After twenty years in the factory, illnesses associated with the heat and fumes of the furnace began to trouble him. The company had its own doctor, so whenever an employee fell ill, treatment was readily available. Yet such treatment often did little more than suppress the illness for the time being. Most of Mewalal's ailments could be kept under control, but the trouble with his ears would not go away. His hearing gradually weakened. He could no longer hear as clearly as before, though this caused no serious difficulty in the work he had been doing for years.

Good wages on one side and a small family on the other meant that Mewalal's quarters gradually filled with food, clothing and the comforts of urban life. While he had lived alone, he had occupied a small single-room quarter. Once his

wife joined him, he was allotted larger accommodation, with two living rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.

Beside the Eveready factory area stood a Bengali neighbourhood. Sunil Pal lived there in his own two-storey house and worked for the same company as an office clerk. A friendship developed between him and Mewalal. Sunil Pal visited Mewalal's quarters, and Mewalal visited his home in return. Sunil Pal was well educated, a graduate, whereas Mewalal had received only a modest education. Yet working in the same company brought the two men close.

Sunil Pal had two sons. Both had studied engineering and were employed in America, while Sunil Pal and his wife continued to live in Calcutta. One day the couple went to the market together. On the way, a truck struck his wife, killing her on the spot. She too had already crossed fifty. After her death, Sunil Pal was left alone.

The visits between Sunil Pal and Mewalal had begun soon after their friendship developed. Mithilanchal had its own customs of food and hospitality, its own festivals and observances, its *pabain-tihar*, and Bengal had its own as well. Bengal might not have quite as many observances as Mithila, but that did not mean it lacked them. The rituals attached to festivals, and the foods associated with them, differed in one way or another from region to region.

Festivals themselves follow the seasons, and food habits develop in much the same way. The climate of Mithila and that of Bengal are not identical. Those differences affect both food and agriculture. Crops follow climate. Where rainfall and flooding are greater and water remains in the fields, crops that thrive in wetter conditions become more common. Where rainfall is lighter, crops suited to drier and sunnier conditions are cultivated more widely. There are, of course, also crops

that grow with little water or almost none.

Because Mithila had more festivals and a greater variety of customary foods, more ritual occasions were observed in Mewalal's household. When he had lived alone, he had celebrated very few festivals in their full traditional form. Once his wife came to live with him, the observances became more elaborate.

Mewalal's friendship with Sunil Pal also had a practical advantage: he rarely faced any difficulty in matters connected with the office. A private company did not have quite the same layers of complication associated with government offices. Work was regular and wages were paid regularly, leaving less room for uncertainty. Human beings, after all, do not wish to live alone. They seek society and the company of others.

Economic circumstances also play their part in the way festivals are celebrated. Those with low incomes, unable even to meet everyday needs comfortably, may give up many observances. Those with greater means can celebrate them more fully. Although Mewalal was financially comfortable, while he lived alone there had been no one to organise the rituals properly, so his celebrations remained modest. Such changes naturally arise when life moves from village to city. A different way of living can make some traditional observances impractical, and they gradually fall away.

From the time Mewalal brought his wife to Calcutta, the number of festivals celebrated in his home increased. There were two reasons. First, his wife, having lived all her life in the village, knew the customs attached to every festival. Second, with her presence there was someone to arrange and perform them. The two of them were also relatively free of heavy family obligations, so they did not practise much

economy in food, entertainment or other household expenses.

The relationship between Mewalal and Sunil Pal grew steadily closer. After Mewalal's wife, Radha, came to live in Calcutta, the visits of Sunil Pal's wife, Antika Pal, also became more frequent. Two things in particular drew the two households together. Radha and Antika were both housewives with little responsibility beyond cooking and managing the home, and whenever need or circumstance arose, money too passed between the two families.

For much of the earlier period, this borrowing and lending had been largely one-sided. Sunil Pal had been maintaining a household and therefore faced expenses of many kinds, whereas Mewalal, while living alone, had fewer needs. With limited income and limited expenditure, Mewalal had found it relatively easy to manage. Each month he sent money to the village after receiving his salary. This was a private company, so there was none of the uncertainty in which wages might remain unpaid for six months or a year. On the morning of the last day of every month, the salary arrived regularly.

The friendship between Radha and Antika Pal deepened day by day. Both women were similarly free during working hours. Just as Mewalal worked an eight-hour shift, so did Sunil Pal. Apart from cooking and household tasks, neither woman had much else to occupy her time. Antika, however, went to the market and handled purchases herself, something Radha did not do. Antika was educated; Radha was not. Both were over fifty, but intellectually Antika was clearly more confident and experienced.

Whenever they were together, Antika naturally retained the stronger presence. She read books and newspapers and kept herself informed about the wider world, while Radha

possessed no such source of knowledge. There was another difference too. Antika had grown up in Bengal's own *matipani*, its soil, water and culture; Radha had not. As the old sense of the saying goes, even a chicken grows spirited upon its own soil. When the two women went out to the market, Radha often remained almost mute because she did not understand the local language. Whether speaking to shopkeepers or dealing with vehicles and people on the road, she had difficulty both expressing herself and understanding others.

The factory operated twenty-four hours a day, with workers and employees divided among three shifts. Mewalal and Sunil Pal, however, both worked the day shift. They therefore left their homes and returned at roughly the same time. During those hours, Radha and Antika had plenty of opportunity to sit together at home or go out into the city. They went to the cinema, the circus and the markets together. Their closeness steadily increased, and others began to think of them as intimate friends.

After coming to Calcutta, Radha changed with remarkable speed. Thoughts and desires that had remained suppressed throughout her earlier life began to surface and grow. Whether or not a person receives a suitable environment from childhood can create deep differences in later life. Even at an advanced age, one may continue to live amid tensions produced by very different habits of thought. Such a difference existed between Radha and Antika Pal. Radha had come from a village world that had offered her far fewer opportunities, and intellectually she remained far behind Antika.

As time passed, something awakened in Radha not only in her thinking but also in her awareness of her own body and

attractiveness. As her mind opened, her attraction towards both Antika Pal and Sunil Pal increased. At the root of this attraction was an awakening intellectual curiosity. Just as the growth of good tendencies may weaken harmful ones, the growth of harmful tendencies may diminish the good.

The power of a good disposition can be strong enough to keep harmful impulses at a distance, but only where it is prepared to withstand hardship and temptation. Where that strength is absent, one cannot say that darker impulses will never overpower the better ones and take possession of the heart.

As Radha's affection for Antika and Sunil Pal grew, her affection for Mewalal remained unchanged for a while, then gradually began to diminish. One reason lay in the change that had taken place within Mewalal himself. Before coming to Calcutta, while he was still a farmer in the village, he had lived a self-reliant life grounded in self-respect. After becoming an urban labourer, some part of that independence had faded.

The farming life he had known in the village broke apart when he became an industrial worker, and with it the field of his thought also changed. Once he entered regular employment in a multinational company, his life became confined within a narrower routine. Eight hours at the furnace exhausted not only his body but his mind. The working day demanded more than the eight hours of duty itself. Preparing to leave and reaching work took another hour and a half or two, and returning to his quarters consumed more time. Food too had to be arranged. Work and rest are bound together. When the body is denied sufficient rest, it suffers; once the body suffers, the mind too is affected. In time, both become weary.

Mewalal's life had become like that of cattle tethered to a post. The twenty-four hours of every day were so tightly bound to routine that the whole day and night disappeared merely in completing it. After his wife came to Calcutta, he did receive help with food, clothing and keeping the household in order. Yet when someone newly arrived from a village enters the world of the city, a hundred new wants emerge from the market around him.

Before Radha's arrival, Mewalal's quarters had been unmistakably a man's space, shaped by the habits of a man living alone. The surrounding urban world, from images of film heroines to the displays in fashionable tailoring shops, presented women through styles of dress designed to catch the admiring eye.

Once Radha arrived, the appearance of the quarters began to change. The household possessions Mewalal had kept for himself increased twofold, and perhaps even more. After Radha became close to Antika Pal, she began visiting her home and also saw the many fashionable shops of the city. New objects and new desires entered her life.

Sunil Pal made another powerful impression upon Radha. Whenever Mewalal suffered a serious illness, Sunil would stand beside Radha like a member of the family. He accompanied them to the doctor and, when necessary, remained with them day and night.

This was no longer an age in which marriage was imagined through the old heroic world of Sita and tests of valour. It was the age of cinema. If a college girl, caught in the rain, received shelter beneath a young man's umbrella, even so small an incident could be turned into a charming romantic scene, with a few exchanged words of "thank you" beginning something between them.

Just as certain *ojhas* and self-styled healers use charms and tricks to draw trusting people into their schemes and take away what they have earned, could one say with certainty that worldly lovers never employ charms of another kind? Could one say that Sunil Pal possessed none of the hundred subtle arts by which attraction is created and strengthened?

In Radha he had found a woman ten years younger than himself, a companion of precisely the kind his mind could welcome. A person may be mature in age, yet if intellectually inexperienced, may remain highly emotional. Such a person can easily be drawn by the magic of affection into another's emotional world. Yet the same affection can also find a place in the mind of a thoughtful person.

Sunil Pal had two sons and a daughter. His daughter, Baby Pal, was the eldest and therefore reached college before her brothers. Dowry and the exchange of wealth around marriage had by then become so deeply rooted in society that marriage without financial negotiation seemed difficult to many families.

Even within a society divided into many castes, the amount and direction of such exchanges varied. A young man of similar standing could command a very different marriage payment merely by belonging to another caste. A girl's appearance too could become part of the calculation. The amount might rise or fall, but it would be difficult to say that bargaining had disappeared.

There were still communities within the wider society where wealth or gifts passed from the groom's side to the bride's family, though such customs were less common. There was also a growing difference in outlook between Mithila and Bengali society. Young women in Bengali society had

acquired considerably more freedom in choosing their own course than women in Mithila. The distance between social practice and the law was also wide. Child marriage still existed in Mithila, and many matrimonial disputes involving under-age boys and girls reached the courts. Such problems required serious reflection from both society and government.

But let that remain where it was.

Sunil Pal's daughter, Baby Pal, studied commerce at college. Her curiosity about business, banking and financial affairs brought her close to the son of a businessman, and she married him without the heavy expense ordinarily associated with such marriages. The relationship between Sunil Pal and Mohan Seth's family remained cordial. The families continued to visit one another, and Baby Pal retained close ties with both her parental and marital homes.

Sunil Pal's sons, Rakesh and Ranjan, completed their engineering studies and went to America. Both married there and raised their children there as well.

When Sunil Pal was fifty-five, his wife died in the road accident and he was left alone. Afterwards he cast his line towards Radha, and the line caught. He brought Radha into his own home and began living with her as his wife. At their age he did not consider a formal *sindoor-daan* ceremony appropriate, so no such ceremony was performed. That did not mean Radha ceased to wear *sindoor*. Everyone understood the nature of their relationship. Even so, Sunil Pal kept Radha hidden away for six months.



Date: 22 February 2018

9.



Even after Radha had been away from his quarters for seven days, Mewalal did not at first entertain the kind of suspicion that the situation might naturally have aroused. There was a reason. On other occasions too, Radha had stayed at Sunil Pal's home for a day or two, sometimes even three or four days. If a faint doubt did rise in Mewalal's mind, he would reassure himself: Radha has not disappeared; she must be at my friend's house. Friendship, after all, is friendship. Just as a pinch of *sindoor* can bind a young woman from one place to a young man from another so firmly that they resolve not merely to wander through life together but actually do so, friendship too creates its own bond. And if two friends were to link their little fingers and bathe together in the Ganga, would that bond not become stronger still?

Still, in order to turn his doubtful mind into a trusting one, Mewalal had gone to Sunil Pal's house the very morning after Radha disappeared from the quarters. He found no trace of her there. But how could he have found her? Where the prey is weak and the hunter strong, the prey is easily caught; where the prey is alert and the hunter ineffective, how can it be seized? In practical social dealings, Mewalal's upbringing placed him behind Sunil Pal. Besides, Sunil Pal was on his own *mati-pani*, among his own people. How could Mewalal easily uncover anything there? There was another

circumstance in Sunil Pal's favour. Radha had disappeared from Mewalal's quarters only the previous day, whereas Sunil Pal had been without his wife for a year. His history of loneliness was already long.

The moment Mewalal arrived at his house, Sunil Pal welcomed him with open arms, led him into the sitting room, brought a glass of water from the tank with his own hands and immediately began arranging tea.

Mewalal thought to himself: is a human being some tiny needle used for stitching new clothes, so small that it might remain nearby and still escape notice? A person is a full-grown creature, three and a half cubits tall, with eyes and a face. Surely that much distinguishes a human being from an animal. Only the inexperienced think merely of two hands and two feet and forget the full, upright figure that must occupy space somewhere.

Sunil Pal brought two cups of tea and two biscuits, sat in the chair beside Mewalal and, hiding his satisfaction deep within himself, assumed the manner of a man offering counsel. Looking directly into Mewalal's eyes, he said- "Friend, what can I say? From the day I saw Baby's mother crushed beneath that truck, her body mangled on the road, my heart has never truly remained in this world. Sometimes I feel I should become a *babaji* and go away to Vrindavan. But the bonds of property are such that the moment people hear that so-and-so has renounced everything and become a holy man, the first thing they will seize is his house. Then, if one day I wish to return and see my own country and people, where will I stay? That is why I have held on to the house. Fortunately I still have my job, and after retirement I shall receive a pension. That should see me through whatever remains of my life."

Hearing Sunil Pal speak in this way, even the faint shoots of suspicion that had begun to rise within Mewalal broke away and disappeared. He said- “Friend, your salary is so good that even if you ate delicacies throughout the day, it would hardly be exhausted.”

Sunil Pal interrupted- “Friend, what can I tell you? A house without a wife is a haunted house. One may go on earning, but if there is no one to cook, how is one to eat?”

Sunil Pal's words pressed upon Mewalal's mind, though he pretended not to notice. The thought troubling him was simple: was a house without a wife a haunted house only for his friend Sunil Pal, and not for Mewalal himself?

Nodding, Mewalal said- “What can we do, friend? It is all God's play. We have to turn whichever way He turns us.”

Sunil Pal nodded in return and said- “Friend, old age itself is a burden hanging from the neck. Sons and daughters-in-law happily leave you to yourself, and then God loads the body with one illness after another. Still, we are human beings and somehow have to go on living. We may live defeated in spirit or wounded at heart, but that does not mean we should surrender the life within us.”

Mewalal said- “Friend, whatever happens anywhere in the world, what is that to us? Long live the company, long live its employees. I shall go now.”

He said he was leaving, but a hidden hope still remained within him. If Sunil Pal had concealed Radha somewhere in the house, perhaps she might appear for a moment at some window. So even while speaking and preparing to leave, Mewalal kept glancing sideways at the windows of the inner rooms.

The reason for that hope was simple. Whatever else might have happened, just as Radha was his wife, he too was

her husband. Even God, he thought, becomes entangled with His devotee through a bond of devotion. Otherwise, how immeasurable is the distance between God and devotee?

Just as Mewalal held on to hope, a faint anxiety kept surfacing within Sunil Pal. What if, while the two friends were sitting there talking, Radha suddenly opened the door of the inner room, came out before them and declared that she wished to leave with her husband? Then the prey would simply fly away.

Inside that inner room, Radha lay flat on her back upon the bed, thinking to herself that life was meant for comfort and enjoyment. Was she receiving less of that here than she had in her own household? Had Sunil Pal's wife still been alive, there might naturally have been occasional tension or friction between the two women. But both sons had settled with their families in America. Once people took root in American soil, how likely were they to return to the old home? This was no longer an age in which someone, for the sake of serving the nation, would throw his family into the fire and himself mount the gallows smiling in the strength of conviction. The age had changed. Now people looked upon a land like America as heaven itself.

From thoughts of America, Radha came back to the ground of her own life. Her husband too was becoming increasingly sickly. And here there were only two people. If anything happened to Sunil Pal, she could manage and care for him.

During their conversations, Sunil Pal had once joked with her- "Friend, there is really no difference between a husband and a friend."

That had been said as an idea, but in practice Sunil Pal had already established a physical relationship with Radha.

The story of Savitri and Satyavan had therefore faded from her mind. A country like America, regarded by many as a kind of earthly heaven, cannot be judged without understanding its ways and its history. In the same manner, nothing definite can be said about a human being without understanding the nature of the mind and its inclinations. Let whatever exists remain where it is.

When Radha looked towards her future, even if she could not see it clearly, she could make out enough through the haze to feel that remaining with Sunil Pal would be the better course.

Seven days passed. Mewalal still found no clue to Radha's whereabouts. His uneasiness had increased from the moment he visited Sunil Pal and was told- "Radha has not come here."

The reason was that Sunil Pal was the only person at whose home Radha regularly went and sometimes stayed. True, by then she had also begun doing her own shopping and had learnt to understand and speak some of the local language. Employees of the company and people in the nearby markets had also begun to recognise her.

Mewalal's anxiety grew steadily. Again and again he would tell himself that in all the years he had known Sunil Pal, the man had never lied to him. Why would he lie now? But another thought immediately followed. Apart from Sunil Pal's household, Radha had never spent nights anywhere else. If she had been struck by a vehicle and killed on the road, surely there would have been some commotion. Once she was identified, her body too would have been found.

His distress became so intense that he began losing interest even in his factory duties. He received repeated warnings at work.

Like a man who had lost his senses, Mewalal began asking everyone he encountered- “Have you seen Radha anywhere?”

Time and again he felt an urge to keep going back to Sunil Pal's house, but each time another thought stopped him. This was not his village, not his own *mati-pani*. It was another state, and more than that, another society. If a quarrel broke out between him and Sunil Pal, would not the local people support Sunil Pal rather than an outsider like him?

Struck by one blow after another, Mewalal began taking stock of what remained of his world. His mother was dead. His daughter had gone to her marital home. His wife had disappeared. How was he to live alone? Only two years remained before retirement. Then the job too would be gone. Once employment ended, his income would stop and he would have to leave the company quarters. Where would he live, and with whom?

Thinking of all this, Mewalal's heart began to weep. But whom could he tell? Who would wipe the tears from his eyes? Was Mewalal the only person in the world living through such a fate, or were there others like him?

Six months passed while he waited in this state of hope and uncertainty.

Then chance intervened. One day Sunil Pal was going to the market with Radha. Mewalal too was returning to his quarters along the same road. As their rickshaw came close, all three saw one another.

The sight of Radha with Sunil Pal struck Mewalal like a blow to the chest. His voice failed him and he could say nothing. Before him stood, on one side, the friend who had deceived him and, on the other, the wife who had deceived him. The moment Radha saw Mewalal, she turned her face

away towards Sunil Pal. Sunil Pal's tiger-like gaze fell upon Mewalal, and Mewalal's own eyes dropped at once, subdued like those of a cat before a tiger. No one spoke. Each continued along his or her own road.

Back at his quarters, Mewalal made up his mind. He had seen the two of them together with his own eyes. He would go to court. Perhaps he had no eyewitness who could testify on his behalf, but this was hardly a matter that concerned only the three of them. Whatever happened, he would seek justice.

As one part of his mind gathered courage for the legal battle, another was tormented by the sight of Radha's life still arranged throughout the quarters: saris, blouses and petticoats of many colours hanging from the pegs, the kitchen filled with the things she had chosen and arranged. His mind swung painfully between yes and no, right and wrong, defeat and victory. When a person stands caught between resolve and doubt, some hidden force suddenly seems to emerge, climb upon his back and push his mind in one direction.

Mewalal became so lost in thought that he felt no desire to cook, eat or sleep. Like a traveller wandering in darkness until earth and sky, east and west, north and south all disappear and even one's own hand can no longer be seen, Mewalal too found himself in a darkness that nevertheless forced him to confront the meaning of his journey.

A resolve arose within him: if there is no family, what meaning does life have? First thing in the morning he would go to the factory, submit an application for leave and then visit a lawyer. Whatever followed would follow. If one lawyer, entangled in the nets of caste or community, refused to help him, he would go to a second, a third, a fourth. Surely not every lawyer would be trapped in such considerations. There must be some who understood the dignity of their

profession, and such a lawyer would surely stand by him.

The next morning, after submitting his leave application, Mewalal went to the home of a lawyer in the neighbourhood. The lawyer and his wife were sitting on the outer veranda, drinking their morning tea, when Mewalal entered through the gate.

The lawyer turned towards his wife and whispered-

“An auspicious beginning to the day!”

As Mewalal reached the veranda, he greeted him-

“*Pranam*, Vakil Sahib. I have come hoping for your help.”

Without yet knowing what the matter was, the lawyer readily blessed and reassured him- “If helping you requires even the blood in this body, I shall give that too.”

Sitting down on a chair, Mewalal said- “I have no experience of the courts here. I am an outsider. I work at the furnace of a battery company.”

The lawyer's wife, Sudama, interrupted-

“Is that not what humanity means? A man who builds his life upon his own labour and walks forward on his own feet deserves hope above all. Now that you have come here, your purpose will surely be fulfilled.”

Having said this, Sudama immediately rose, prepared tea and placed a cup in Mewalal's hands.

As he took the tea, the sight of the lawyer and his wife sitting together returned to Mewalal's mind. His thoughts rushed painfully towards his own wife. But something had to be done, and a remedy could come only through action.

Mewalal told the lawyer everything.

At the end, the lawyer asked- “Can you give me any

private identifying mark on your wife's body?"

Mewalal replied- "Yes. There is a large red birthmark at the top of her right thigh, close to the groin."

The lawyer said- "Your wife will certainly be brought back to you."

At these words, the image of Radha's physical relationship with Sunil Pal began to recede from Mewalal's mind. What would be the point of going to court if, even after the court restored her to him, he continued to hold that image before himself? His mind turned to an old image of war between two kings. Whatever her age might be, a queen won in battle was still a queen to the victorious king. To the victorious king, even an ageing queen won in war becomes a maiden of twelve again.

After nearly twenty-one months of court proceedings, Radha was restored to Mewalal. But the Radha who returned was not the Radha who had once left.

Three months later, Mewalal's service also came to an end.

After retirement, Mewalal returned to the village with his wife. The company paid him a substantial lump sum, calculated at half a month's salary for each of twenty years of service; thereafter, for as long as he lived, his pension would continue.

Even before leaving Calcutta, Mewalal had made a plan. Since he was returning to the village after winning his case in a Calcutta court, why not mark that victory by feeding the community? He would no longer concern himself with farming. With the money he had, he would put his house properly in order and spend the rest of his life eating, drinking and remembering Ram Lalla in peace.

On the third day after reaching the village with his wife, Mewalal began speaking to the community about settling his household again and holding a feast, presenting his return before society as proof of what he regarded as his manhood.

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Date: 25 February 2018

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Glossary

Abir – Fine coloured powder traditionally scattered or applied during Holi and other festive occasions. In the novel it forms part of the Holi atmosphere of Mithila.

Anna – A former subdivision of the Indian rupee. Sixteen annas made one rupee. The expression survives in older and colloquial reckonings of money.

Baba / Babaji – Respectful or affectionate forms of address for an elderly man, saint, spiritual figure or revered person. *Babaji* may also refer to a renunciant or holy man.

Bagiya – A traditional preparation of Mithila, cooked in water rather than fried. In the novel it is playfully described as a kind of ‘water-cooked puri’. It may be prepared with fillings such as lentils or jaggery.

Bhai / Bhaiya / Kaka / Kaki / Chachaji / Babu / Sahib – Kinship-based or respectful forms of address widely used beyond literal family relationships. *Bhai* and *Bhaiya* mean brother; *Kaka* and *Chachaji* denote an uncle or older male; *Kaki* an aunt or older woman; *Babu* and *Sahib* may convey affection, courtesy or respect according to context.

Bhandari – The person responsible for storing, managing and distributing food and provisions for a travelling group or troupe.

Bhikhari Thakur – Celebrated Bhojpuri playwright, folk

performer and theatre figure. In the novel he is remembered through Sumanlal's long association with his travelling troupe, both as a great entertainer and as a figure of social awakening.

Bidesia – A celebrated work and performance tradition associated with Bhikhari Thakur, centred broadly on migration, separation and social life. It forms part of the remembered repertoire of the travelling troupe.

Bidi – A small, inexpensive hand-rolled tobacco cigarette. In the rural social world of the novel, even a bidi may serve as a modest gesture of hospitality.

Bigha – A traditional unit of land measurement used in Bihar and neighbouring regions. Its precise area varies by locality.

Dahar – A violent flood or great inundation caused by excessive rain, capable of cutting new channels through settled land. The novel repeatedly contrasts ***dahar***, destructive excess water, with ***roudi***, destructive lack of water.

Dal-bagiya – A form of ***bagiya*** prepared with a lentil filling.

Dal-puri – A ***puri*** prepared with a lentil filling.

Dhampha – A traditional drum or percussion instrument associated in the novel with Holi celebrations and the singing of ***phagu***.

Dharma / Adharma – ***Dharma*** denotes right conduct,

duty, moral order or the proper way of living according to context. *Adharma* is its opposite: conduct contrary to moral or rightful order.

Dharmashala – A communal rest house or inexpensive lodging place. In the Calcutta episodes it becomes a shared residence and social centre for migrant workers from the villages.

Dholak – A two-headed hand drum widely used in folk, devotional and festive music.

Dhoti / Kurta – Traditional South Asian garments. A *dhoti* is a long piece of cloth wrapped around the lower body; a *kurta* is a loose, usually knee-length or shorter upper garment.

Dhur – A small traditional unit of land measurement, smaller than a *katha*. Its precise size varies locally.

Duragaman – The customary post-marriage ceremony or stage after which a bride formally begins living in her husband's household. In the social setting of the novel, marriage and *duragaman* may take place at different times.

Guni – A traditional healer or practitioner of folk or ritual methods, often consulted along with an *ojha* for illness, infertility or other personal difficulties.

Gur-bagiya – A sweet form of *bagiya* prepared with *gur*, or jaggery.

Karin-dhosi / Upchha – Traditional devices or methods

used for lifting water for the irrigation of fields before modern pumps became common. The novel mentions them as older means of agricultural irrigation.

Katha – A traditional unit of land measurement widely used in Mithila and Bihar. Its exact area varies from region to region. Mewalal's inherited holding consists of fifteen ***kathas***.

Khaini – A form of chewing tobacco. In the village world of the novel, even a small pinch may function as a gesture of hospitality and social fellowship.

Khurpi – A small hand-held agricultural tool with a short blade, used for cutting grass, weeding and loosening soil.

Kirtan / Bhajan – Forms of devotional singing. ***Kirtan*** is often collective and may involve repeated or responsive singing, while ***bhajan*** is a devotional song. In the migrants' ***dharmashala***, both become part of evening communal life.

Lahsan – In the novel, ***Lahsan*** does not mean garlic. It denotes a distinctive birthmark. Radha has a large red birthmark at the top of her right thigh, close to the groin. This private bodily mark ultimately becomes the means of identifying her and gives the novel its title, ***The Birthmark***.

Maithili – The language of Mithila and the original language of the novel. It is central to the work's reflections on cultural belonging, language and regional identity.

Mati-pani – Literally 'soil and water'. Figuratively, it signifies one's native land, cultural formation, social

environment, rootedness and sense of belonging. It carries strong emotional force throughout the novel's migration episodes.

Maund – A traditional unit of weight. Traditionally, one maund consists of forty seers. The term occurs figuratively as well as materially in older rural usage.

Mithila / Mithilanchal – The cultural region forming the rural homeland of Mewalal and many other characters. Its language, agricultural life, kinship, customs and recurring experience of flood and drought shape the novel.

Mithilakshar – The traditional script historically associated with Maithili. The novel draws attention to its visual affinity with the Bengali script while reflecting upon language and cultural identity.

Naach Party – A travelling folk-theatre troupe combining acting, music, song and dance. Sumanlal's life is closely connected with the ***naach*** tradition of Bhikhari Thakur.

Naga Baba – A Hindu ascetic belonging to a tradition in which renunciation may include going unclothed or nearly unclothed. In the novel the expression occurs in a visual comparison with the small bag carried by Mewalal.

Ojha – A traditional ritual healer or practitioner consulted for illness and other personal difficulties, sometimes alongside a ***guni*** or a modern doctor.

Paan – A preparation centred on betel leaf, commonly chewed and frequently offered after meals or as a gesture of

hospitality and sociability.

Pabain-Tihar – Festivals, domestic rites and ritual observances, especially those woven into the seasonal and household life of Mithila. The novel links them with climate, food customs, family structure and economic circumstances.

Paropatta – The surrounding countryside or the wider cluster of villages around one's own village. In the novel it often expands an experience such as drought from a single village to the whole surrounding region.

Phagu – Traditional seasonal folk songs associated particularly with Phagun and the celebration of Holi.

Pranam – A respectful greeting or salutation, commonly offered to elders or persons deserving respect.

Puri – A small round bread traditionally deep-fried in oil or ghee. The novel humorously contrasts it with ***bagiya***, described as a kind of ‘water-cooked puri’.

Roudi – Prolonged drought or severe failure of rainfall, especially in its agricultural and social consequences. It is one of the central forces driving Mewalal and other villagers towards migration.

Sankranti – A traditional solar transition marking the movement of the sun from one zodiacal sign to another. Certain ***Sankrantis*** are observed as important seasonal or religious occasions; the novel refers to the Gangasagar pilgrimage around the winter ***Sankranti***.

Sattu – Flour made from roasted grain or pulses, eaten after being mixed or kneaded in various ways. The novel refers particularly to maize and barley ***sattu*** as practical food for travellers and labouring people.

Seer – A traditional unit of weight formerly common in South Asia. Its exact value could vary by place and period; in conventional British-Indian reckoning it was a little under one kilogram.

Shisham – A valuable hardwood tree common in northern India, also known as North Indian rosewood. Mewalal owns two ***shisham*** trees before drought forces him to sell them.

Sindoor – Red vermilion traditionally worn by a married Hindu woman, particularly in the parting of the hair, as a sign of marriage.

Sindoor-daan – The marriage rite in which the husband applies ***sindoor*** to the bride. The distinction between the formal rite and Radha's later continued wearing of ***sindoor*** becomes significant in her relationship with Sunil Pal.

Thekua – A traditional sweet preparation made principally from flour and jaggery and associated with the food culture of Bihar and Mithila. It appears when Mewalal reflects upon different forms of ***bagiya***.

Triveni – Literally ‘the three streams’; the sacred confluence associated with the Ganga, Yamuna and the traditionally understood hidden Saraswati. In the novel it also serves as a metaphor for an unseen but continuing current.

Traditional Month Names – The novel uses traditional month names to preserve the seasonal rhythm of rural life:

Magh – approximately January-February.

Phagun – approximately February-March; closely associated with spring and Holi.

Chait – approximately March-April.

Sawan – approximately July-August, associated with the monsoon.

Bhadon – approximately August-September, also within the rainy season.

Kartik – approximately October-November.

Agahan – approximately November-December.

Paush – approximately December-January.

The exact dates vary because the traditional calendar does not correspond precisely with the Gregorian calendar.

Notes

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